

Thanet Landlords' Focus Group

Working for landlords in partnership with Thanet District Council



Wednesday 20 June 2018

Austen Room, Thanet District Council, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent, CT9 1XZ

Meeting notes

In attendance:

Landlord representatives

Teresa Dickinson (Chair)
Sara Wade (Deputy Chair)
Keith Sharpe
Marion Money
Nigel Pope
Diane Solly
Colin Mately
Kiren Patel

Council representatives

Louise Ritchings (Housing Licensing Officer)
Bethan Thistle (Senior Housing Licensing Officer)
Matthew Goodbun (Policy and Performance Officer)
Lola Leveridge (Operational Development Team Leader)
Rachel May (Senior Housing Options Officer)
David Whitehead (Landlord Liaison Officer)

Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) representatives

Tony March (Partnership Manager)

Apologies

Tom Tennant; Damien Cooke; Hugh Horton; Lynne Sutton; Sally Brinson.

Start: 2.00pm

1. Welcome and introduction
2. Minutes of last meeting

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed by the group and will be published on the Thanet District Council (TDC) website in due course.

3. Universal Credit

Roll out of Universal Credit

TM informed the group that the total number of Universal Credit (UC) claimants within Thanet is now at 6041; 1900 of these claims are people who are already working enough or have a disability which prevents them working. Nationally, there are approximately one million claimants in the UK with around 5000 new claims made on a daily basis. By December 2018, it is expected that every Job Centre in the UK will be on full UC service; with the national rollout expected to be completed by 2023.

Across Thanet, TM has been working closely with local partners and local authorities to ensure a better understanding of UC and how it works. The GOV.UK website has been updated to include information and support that is easily accessible to the user.

National Audit Office Report

On 15 June 2018, the National Audit Office published a report on UC, titled 'Rolling Out Universal Credit'. The report broadly criticises UC and questions the value for money it can deliver, however TM confirmed that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) disagrees with the findings in the report.

TM advised that much of the report describes historical issues with UC and fails to reflect UC as it is today; adding that UC is expected to deliver £8bn per year in economic benefits when fully rolled out.

Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA)

DS raised the point of the criteria for UC to be paid directly to a landlord. If a claimant would like the landlord to be paid directly but upon questioning states there are no issues, then it is likely this will not be agreed. TM reiterated the point that a claimant must meet the criteria, which can be found on GOV.UK, to be accepted for direct payments to the landlord. This process relies on the claimant being open and honest about any difficulties they have with managing their own finances. The claimants work coach will take into account all points discussed, including rent arrears, but the claimant would be required to provide evidence of this.

TM added that if a tenant on UC is in more than 2 months' rent arrears, the landlord can submit a 'landlord request for a managed payment or rent arrears deduction' (UC47 form). If managed payments are agreed then this will be reviewed regularly to assess whether the claimant is now capable of managing their own payments. The first review can take place anywhere between 3-21 months after the first payment is made directly to the landlord.

The group agreed that there are many landlords that feel reluctant to rent their properties to UC claimants as a direct result of the lack of secured direct payments. TB added that the disparity between the Local Housing Allowance and local rates is also affecting the desire to rent to UC claimants.

4. Landlord Liaison Service update

RM explained that the Housing Options team has increased following a recent recruitment drive; with a total of 5 Landlord Liaison Officers now within the team.

On the 4th June 2018, the team held tenancy training which was open to tenants who are at risk of homelessness. The theme of the training is ensuring tenants are paying their rent on time by providing relevant information and support around avoiding rent arrears. Any person that completes the training will be provided with a certificate of completion. The training is free to attend and is held around school hours.

NP suggested that managing agents could work alongside the training and sign up to engage with people that have successfully completed the training session.

5. Housing benefit/Council tax update

MG confirmed that there has been no change to Council Tax Support since the previous meeting; exceptional hardship payments continue to be available to assist working age claimants, who have been affected by the changes to the scheme, in previous years.

6. Self-serve through digital update and website

LL asked the group if there were elements of the online service that could be improved; adding that from late summer 2018, landlords/agents can register for access to a personal pin number which will automatically populate change of circumstances forms for benefits with the landlords/agents details.

SW suggested that it would be useful if there was a system that allowed you to enter a pin, which would then list all of your properties in one place, to avoid having to repeatedly enter information when there are multiple changes to report. LL confirmed that the team are in the early stages of looking at a new database where a landlord/agent can find all of their current tenants' information in one place. There are no expected launch dates yet but the project is in the initial stages.

Any additional feedback or views on how the council tax page/forms on the TDC website can be improved can be passed to LL via the focus group email address.

7. Matters for discussion raised by Lynne Sutton

“Tenants Fee’s Bill “ this will have further effect on rising rents, small agents may not be able to recover from the loss so job loss will increase this could further lead to poorer quality property.

MM believes it will be agents that are most affected and stressed it is best practice to use an agent who has Client Money Protection and advised that the Government is introducing legislation to make it compulsory. NP added that it stands to reason that landlords must employ a professional service. TD said she does not feel that the introduction of the Tenants Fees Bill will result in poorer quality properties.

SW said it is very difficult to keep up to date with changes to legislation. NP agreed that it is challenging to give the most up to date advice and added that he has come across a number of solicitors who are not up to date with the changes. NP suggested workshops for landlord/agents that focus on the changes to legislation, as a beneficial service to offer.

8. Private Sector Housing update

Changes to Mandatory HMO Licensing

BT explained that as of 01 October 2018, there will be changes to mandatory HMO Licensing. The changes will see the removal of the storey rule, meaning that all properties with five or more persons, forming two or more households and sharing amenities will become licensable. Minimum room sizes will also be introduced; the minimum size for single rooms will be 6.51m². The minimum size for a double room will be 10.22m². There will be exemptions for flats in multiple occupation, which are in purpose built blocks that contain three or more flats, and there will be an introduction of a mandatory licence condition for the provision of waste disposal.

Initial investigations have shown that there are approximately 100 properties in Thanet that may be affected by the changes. Applications from those landlords that will be affected by the change can be accepted and processed prior to 01 October 2018.

MM added that as of 01 October 2018, section 21 notices will not be valid if a licensable HMO is not subject to a licence or a valid application. BT confirmed that the changes will be advertised as widely as possible to ensure landlords are aware of the new requirements.

Prosecutions

Thanet District Council has successfully prosecuted six landlords for a variety of housing related offences, resulting in over £32,000 in fines. The prosecutions related to a number of offences including, failing to apply for a selective licence, failing to submit a valid Gas Safety Certificate as required by the conditions of a selective licence, failing to comply with an Improvement Notice and failing to comply with HMO Management Regulations.

A Civil Penalties Policy is currently being drawn up; once introduced, the team will be able to pursue civil penalties, when an offence has been committed.

9. Landlord Event 2018

The 2018 Landlord Event has been confirmed for Wednesday 26 September and will be held at the Global Generation (Church) Limited in Margate. Confirmed presentations include Electrical Safety, No Use Empty Loans, Legal Advice for Landlords, Legislation Changes, an update from Housing Options and a Landlord Quiz.

LR asked for suggestions of organisations that may wish to have a stand at the event, to be passed on for consideration.

10. Any other business

RM announced that the Housing Options Team have been awarded £388,000 following a successful financial bid to help tackle rough sleeping in Thanet.

NP questioned the purpose of the group and how the information that is gained during the focus group meetings can be shared on a wider scale. It was confirmed that the purpose of the group is to bridge the gap between the local authority and landlords and agents operating in Thanet. Greater publicity through newspaper adverts and press releases was suggested as a useful tool to reach more landlords and agents.

SW added that the Housing Options newsletter that had previously been circulated was brilliant for providing updates and relevant information. If more of these newsletters were published then a link to the groups' page on the TDC website could be included.

Date of next meeting

2019 – Date to be confirmed

End: 4.30pm

Please direct any enquiries to:

Louise Ritchings

Housing Licensing Officer

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