

Thanet Landlords' Focus Group

Working for landlords in partnership with Thanet District Council



Wednesday 7 December 2016

Council Chamber, Thanet District Council, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent, CT9 1XZ

Meeting notes

In attendance:

Landlord representatives

Teresa Bartlett (Chair)
Sara Wade
Diane Solly
Marion Money
Kiren Patel
Colin Mately
Susan Hodges
Keith Sharpe
Tom Tennant

Council representatives

Richard Hopkins (Housing Regeneration)
Louise Ritchings (Housing Regeneration)
Rebecca Gunn (Housing Options)
Victoria May (Housing Options)
Sue Price (EK Services)

Non-members

Nigel Pope

Apologies: Damien Cooke; Steve Morgan; Hugh Horton; Sally Brinson; Lynne Sutton.

1. Minutes of last meeting

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

2. Thanet Landlords' Focus Group – an introduction to the group

MM explained that the focus group was started back in 2008 in order to help build a better rapport between Thanet District Council and landlords that were operating within the district. Discussions at this time highlighted that there was a desire for landlords to be able to sit down with the council to vent frustrations and come up with solutions; and so the terms of reference were introduced.

The focus group has since been involved in many discussions around points such as selective licensing, the conservation area and many more. MM said it was the focus group that raised the idea of early bird discounts for selective licensing, which were introduced with the designation of the scheme in 2011. TB added that the group have an input in some decisions that the council have made, which has resulted in saving landlords money. It is hoped the group will continue to go from strength to strength.

3. Emerging pressures on housing

VM gave a presentation about the emerging pressures on housing. There seems to be a public perception of a plentiful supply of available housing in Thanet but unfortunately this is simply not the case anymore; there are 2168 households currently live on the housing register.

As of November 2015, the Housing Options Team had taken 805 homeless applications; this has increased since 2015, when 604 applications were taken for the entire year. In October 2013, a Landlord Liaison Service was established, to provide a proactive service to prevent homelessness. Since the service was introduced the team have prevented 203 households from becoming homeless, although this can be difficult when people approach at crisis point i.e. at court stage. Rough sleeping has also been a priority in 2016 with numbers on the rise both locally and nationally.

VM provided information on the Winter Shelter Project and The Homeless Aspire Project; an eight month project that is being led by the Homeless Forum. The project offers a nightly winter shelter in Thanet during the coldest months, enabling rough sleepers a safe place to sleep, washing facilities, food warmth and support from a number of organisations.

The Homeless Aspire Project, an engagement initiative, commenced on 15 September 2016, in line with the Homelessness Strategy 2014-2019. The project aims to provide progression pathways for homeless households in order to help move them towards tenancy, training and employment opportunities. The Homeless Aspire Project compliments the Winter Shelter Project; the aim is that between the two services there will be a positive impact on homeless households with complex needs.

A copy of the full presentation will be circulated with the minutes.

KS raised concerns around the large number of empty properties in Thanet. RH advised that the council are actively taking enforcement action to bring empty homes back in to use. The 'No Use Empty' scheme is offering interest free loans for developers and landlords to help them to bring properties back in to use; this will be expanding to offer 'No Use Empty' loans to owner occupiers in Cliftonville.

4. Housing benefit/council tax benefit update

SP confirmed that the benefit cap is slowly being rolled out, with 137 households now capped in Thanet. Surprisingly, this has led to only nine applications to the Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) fund, which could be a result of people not fully understanding the seriousness of the situation. SP suggested landlords and agents encourage those that have been affected to submit a DHP application. A DHP payment can help people to pay rent and essential bills whilst adjusting to the cap. VM added that the Landlord Liaison Service can be referred to if tenants are having difficulties with paying their rent. The fund will not be used to help people into a property that they will not be able to maintain; finding affordable housing is key.

5. Selective licensing update

LR informed the group that the team are currently focussing on the processing of application forms. Under the new scheme, applications have been received in respect of 770 dwellings; 449 of these have been issued and are now subject to licensing.

Unfortunately, staff shortages and high levels of applications have resulted in putting a hold on the pro-active routine inspection programme for a short time, although cases are still being followed up from the previous programme. The team are now looking to appoint three new members of staff and so once appointed the team will be back up and running fully and will be implementing a new inspection programme some time in 2017. The team have now inspected 1400 properties and so the programme for 2017 will be primarily focussing on those that have not yet had an inspection.

A renewal reminder programme is ongoing. All licence holders will receive a letter at least 10 weeks before their licence is due to expire reminding them that they must renew the licence. Licence holders can still benefit from the early renewal fee providing they submit a valid renewal application at least six weeks before the expiry date.

The team are currently working on a register of all gas safety certificates and electrical installation condition reports that have been submitted in compliance with the selective licence conditions. There are still a small number of licence holders that are refusing to comply with this condition. Failure to comply with licence conditions is an offence and so prosecution proceeding may be commenced in

relation to this. LR added that a landlord has recently been prosecuted and fined £3000 plus costs and victim surcharge for failing to licence their privately rented property.

MM asked to clarify the calculation of the application fees and how they are used for selective licensing. RH said the fees have been calculated based on the cost of administering the scheme.

6. Extending the scope of mandatory HMO licensing

RH gave a presentation on the Governments proposed changes to the mandatory licensing of HMO's. In October 2016, the government issued two papers: Extending Mandatory Licensing of HMOs – A Government Response Document and HMOs and Residential Property Licensing Reforms – Government Consultation. The consultation began on 18 October 2016 and will close on 13 December 2016. The proposal includes removing the storey rule, excluding flats in multiple occupation (FIMOs) if they are within a building comprised entirely of purpose built self-contained flats, adding minimum room sizes, compulsory DBS checks and for the waste condition to be mandatory.

The mandatory condition that has been proposed for minimum room sizes will mean it is an offence to let rooms smaller than 6.52m² to one person and smaller than 10.23m² for two persons. If introduced, the condition will remove the uncertainty caused by the UTT accepting HMO room sizes which were lower than the minimum room size under statutory overcrowding.

It is expected that an additional 174,000 HMOs will need to be licensed if the guidance is introduced; on average 535 HMOs per Local Authority. The council are currently doing research in to how many HMOs will be affected in Thanet.

A copy of the full presentation and the relevant consultation papers will be circulated with the minutes.

CM questioned the maximum permitted occupancy on a selective licence. He gave the example of three persons in a two bedroom property that allows for three persons only. If they have a baby then the licence holder is breaching their licence conditions. RH stated that with the original scheme each person of any age was counted as one person. However, now a baby up to 12 months old is not counted. This allows a one year period for the family to find more suitable accommodation and for the licence holder to avoid breaching their licence condition. RP added that she has seen a few cases where the landlord was unaware that the occupancy had changed, once they were made aware they began working with the LLO service. RH confirmed that in this case the council would be happy that the landlord is taking steps to rectify the situation.

7. Any other business

MM explained that from 01 December 2016, if you are claiming possession under Section 8 you must use the new form 3 that is now live on the website. The new form will mention immigration.

The group discussed the date for the annual Landlord Event 2017. It was agreed that the event will be held in September instead of June/July time. The group also requested the next two sessions to be open to landlords and agents that have an interest in the group.

End: 4.30pm

Summary of Actions:

Action	Timescale	Lead
Circulate dates for all focus group meetings in 2017	January 2017	Louise Ritchings

Circulate HMO licensing proposal documents	December 2016	Richard Hopkins
Circulate HMO Regulations document	December 2016	Richard Hopkins

Chair: Teresa Bartlett

Please direct any enquiries to:

Louise Ritchings

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