

Thanet Landlords' Focus Group

Working for landlords in partnership with Thanet District Council



Wednesday 14 June 2017

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

Meeting notes

In attendance:

Landlord representatives

Teresa Bartlett (Chair)
Sara Wade (Deputy Chair)
Nigel Pope
Hugh Horton
Diane Solly
Colin Mately
Tom Tennant

Council representatives

Bethan Jones (Senior Housing Licensing Officer)
Louise Ritchings (Housing Licensing Officer)
Rachel May (Senior Housing Options Officer)
Matthew Goodbun (Policy and Performance Officer)
Tom Davies (Empty Property Officer)
Angelica Mackins (Housing Licensing Support Officer)

Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) representative

Tony March (Partnership Manager)

Apologies: Kiran Patel; Sue Price; Marion Money; Damien Cooke;

Start: 2.00pm

1. Welcome and introduction

TD introduced himself as the newly appointed Empty Property Officer, and explained to members that his primary role is to ensure that empty properties across the district are brought back into use. TD also spoke of a new email address empty.homes@thanet.gov.uk, which can be used by members of the public to report any empty properties. This can be a general report of an empty property, or if a member of the public requires advice with regard to their own empty property.

It was also discussed that it would be useful for TD to provide an empty property report. It was agreed that this would be an agenda item for the Focus Group meeting in the New Year.

2. Election of Chair and Deputy Chair

In the absence of any volunteers, TB agreed to remain as Chair on the proviso that her work commitments would allow her to. In the event of TB stepping down as Chair, three months' notice will be provided.

SW proposed herself as Deputy Chair, which was agreed by members.

3. Minutes of last meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were accepted. RM requested her apologies for the previous meeting (24/03/2017) to be recorded in the minutes. LR requested all members to confirm that they are in agreement with two Focus Group meetings being held twice per year. All members agreed. It was agreed that any further amendment requests are to be sent to LR via email.

The agreed minutes will be published on the Thanet District Council (TDC) website in due course.

4. Universal Credit – discussion with Tony March (DWP)

Universal Credit (UC) full service roll out

Universal Credit (UC) full service is being rolled out in the Thanet area on 19 July 2017. At this stage this would only apply to new claimants or if there is a change of circumstance with regard to an existing claim. Households with three or more children will be exempt from UC at this stage, however the full service will roll out to such households in November 2018

UC is a monthly payment that replaces six means-tested benefits:

- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA);
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA);
- Working Tax Credit (WTC);
- Child Tax Credit (CTC);
- Income Support (IS); and
- Housing Benefit (HB)

UC will initially roll out to claimants residing in postcodes: CT9; CT10; CT11; and CT13. The remaining postcodes will roll out in September 2017. TM advised that once UC credit goes live, the local authorities will be closing down HB telephone helplines; the service centre for Thanet District is yet to be announced.

Introductory Meeting

TM is holding a UC introductory meeting at Cliftonville Community Centre, St Pauls Road, Margate, Kent, CT9 2BD on Wednesday 28th June 2017 from 10.00am – 12.00pm.

A number of members stated they were not aware and did not receive an invite to the meeting. However members who act as managing agents did receive an invite. TM stated he would look further into this matter. SW questioned why there is not one single database detailing all private landlords and managing agents in the district, to ensure all interested parties would receive relevant information.

Universal Credit on-line journal

TM spoke of how UC will be a digitalised service where all claims are to be made online – there is no paper form for claimants to complete.

SW asked how claimants without internet access will manage their applications. TM confirmed that if claimants do not have internet access, they can use the local library which will have a computer that can be used free of charge. Alternatively, the claimant can use computers at the local Jobcentre Plus office, where they can also receive support and face-to-face advice. Those claimants who are able to self-serve will be encouraged to do so.

The claimants will have an online account/journal which they will access using a password. The online journal allows the claimant to manage their entire claim online, and when s/he logs in they will be able to:

- Contact their work coach via online journal;
- Check details of payments and full breakdown of benefits;
- Notify of a change of circumstances;
- Search for a job; and

- Check the to-do list (payment may be restricted if this is not completed)

How Universal Credit is paid

Claimants receive a single payment every month (in arrears) which is paid directly into their bank/building society account. After the claimant applies, it can take up to 5 or 6 weeks to receive the first UC payment. TM said that if landlords are concerned about receiving their rent payment, it is advisable that they engage with their tenants at the earliest opportunity, and familiarise themselves with the changes and look at how they can prepare themselves.

Universal Credit and the housing costs element

UC can include payments towards housing costs, however unlike the current arrangement where HB can be paid directly to the landlord; the tenant will have to arrange directly with the landlord to start paying their own rent each month from their UC payment. The housing cost element will be restricted to the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) for the area.

In order for a claimant to receive the housing costs element, s/he must hold a valid tenancy agreement – the housing element will not be paid without this. Concerns were raised by SW and RM with regard to those tenants whose assured shorthold tenancies (AST) have ended, and the tenancy has transferred to a periodic tenancy. RM asked TM if a periodic tenancy agreement would be considered acceptable. TM stated he would look into this matter further and will inform the group of the outcome

Data sharing

Under UC, all information is held and owned by the claimant via their online account and journal. The DWP will no longer own the information and therefore information regarding the claimant cannot be shared between the landlord and DWP. The only way a landlord will be able to communicate with the DWP will be if the claimant is present, and is able to provide their consent verbally. This would only apply for a one-off basis and written consent will not be acceptable.

TM stated that the purpose behind this is to empower the claimant and make them directly responsible for managing their own claim and payment. Claimants can share their online journal with their landlord, however they have no obligation to do so, and the landlord cannot 'demand' to see it – the information belongs only to the claimant, not the DWP.

Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA)

As with the legacy benefits, it is possible for landlords to apply for direct payments (APA), however there is strict criteria which must be met in order for an APA to be implemented, and only some people can have alternative payment arrangements.

SW spoke of potential issues with regard to the tenant being solely responsible for meeting their rent payment, with particular emphasis on the tenant falling into rent arrears. SW requested what support is available to landlords in such a situation.

TM stated that there will be no such provision within the DWP to provide support to landlords. This is because such a scheme would not be realistic or feasible, and furthermore the purpose of UC is to facilitate claimants to be responsible for managing their own budget and payments, as if they would if they were in full-time work.

TM stated that the DWP anticipate that 20% of claimants will struggle to self-serve, but there are measures in place to manage this. TM said that since the roll out, different districts have encountered different issues and that they are being dealt with as and when they arise.

TM advised that each claimant will be offered one-to-one budgeting advice to enable them to manage their money, and they will be well supported by their work coach where necessary. The DWP will offer additional support to any claimant who has a clear need for more intensive assistance.

UC47 Form

TM advised that in order for a landlord to request an APA the claimant must be in arrears with their rent of two months. The landlord can complete a UC47 form, which is available on GOV.UK.

Universal Credit guides

TM stated that there are a number of UC guides that may be of use to members. These can be found on GOV.UK:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-and-rented-housing--2>

TM also advised that useful videos can be found on You Tube under the DWP home page.

5. Housing Options update

RM advised that the Housing Options Team have recently appointed two new members, and the team is now fully staffed.

RM spoke of the ongoing strategy to raise awareness of the Landlord Liaison Service, and that further information can be found by contacting a Landlord Liaison Officer at LLO@thanet.gov.uk.

6. Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit update –

MG advised that from 1 April 2017 the amount that applicants will need to pay toward their Council Tax (CT) has increased from 5.5% to 10%, and that the amount of Council Tax Support (CTS) applicants can receive has been limited to the council tax charge of a Band D property in their area.

MG stated that there is a minimum set income for self-employed applicants after one year of self-employment. TDC now use a minimum level of income to work out how much CTS an applicant can get, even if s/he earns less than this level of income.

MG said that there are Exceptional Hardship payments available to assist the most vulnerable working age CTS claimants, affected by the new changes to the scheme, and that these payments are awarded on a temporary basis

Discretionary Housing Payment Fund

MG stated that Discretionary Housing Payment fund has been increased for 2017-18. The central government contribution has increased from £373,290 to £424,684, giving an overall limit for 2017-18 of £1,061,710.

Information on all benefit changes for the financial year, is available on the TDC website as are a number of forms that can be submitted online. The following are available on the Housing Benefit or Council Tax webpages:

- Landlord and agents - report a change of tenant
- Council Tax Support online application form (for people who have applied for or are getting Universal Credit)

- Submit proof to support your claim
- Tell us about your change
- Apply for a DHP for help with rent in advance or rent deposit
- Sign up to get your HB and CTS notifications by email

7. Matters for discussion raised by:

Joanna Cornford

The only issue I have at the moment is the blanket treatment of Landlords when it comes to Council Tax (CT) and the lack of turnaround time allowed to landlords for general repairs. Paying CT whilst repainting and other minor repairs is punitive.

When I queried this with TDC it was explained the CT charges would generate jobs and accommodation from properties which had been left empty for some years. Clearly this is now an established process but it does not mean it cannot be revisited, as it stands it must require considerable work on the part of TDC to calculate all the interim days or sometimes just hours between tenants and does nothing for the standard of property available, poor standards being something I constantly hear about from the numerous people who contact me direct for accommodation.

It would be interesting to hear what other landlords have to say, or perhaps it is an already much discussed issue!

Historically this is a much discussed issue which has already gone to consultation. Consequently there are no changes to report.

8. Selective Licence Update

BHJ advised of the recent restructure and spoke of three new appointments, in respect of two Housing Licensing Support Officers (one who is an apprentice) and a Housing Licensing Officer. BHJ confirmed that now the Selective Licensing Team is fully staffed, the focus will be on carrying out routine inspections and ensuring that all properties that should hold a licence, do hold a licence.

9. Landlord Event

The Landlord event is to take place on 26 September 2017, 1.00pm – 5.30pm. LR ran through the Plan of Event, and advised that there will be a press release and an announcement on the TDC website nearer the time.

TB suggested for LR to send out an event program one month prior to the event, to all members, inviting ideas and suggestions for stands.

TB proposed that at the next TLFM meeting in January 2018, there is an agenda item in respect of discussing how to generate interest in paying for stands at the next Landlord Event, with the view to holding it at the Turner Contemporary. NP considered that landlords/agents would be more willing to pay for a stand at this venue, and in turn it would encourage a greater turn out.

10. Any other business

NP asked BHJ how many prosecutions have been successfully carried out since the Selective Licensing Scheme started. BHJ confirmed that the Council have successfully prosecuted 30 landlords in respect of Selective Licensing offences.

NP asked BHJ if all licensable properties have been inspected. BHJ stated that it has not been possible to inspect all properties, however now the team is fully staffed a program of inspections will be carried out. BHJ advised that the issue of access can hamper the Housing Licensing Officers attempts to inspect a property.

NP asked BHJ if licenses are transferrable. BHJ confirmed that licenses are not transferrable between licence holders as is dictated by The Housing Act 2004, and therefore if a property is sold, the new owner will need to make arrangements for a new licence application to be made.

Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting to be confirmed via email. It will be held in January 2018

End: 3.55pm

Summary of Actions:

Action	Timescale	Lead
TD to provide empty home report	January 2018	Tom Davies
TM to confirm if periodic tenancy agreements would be acceptable proof for a UC claim	August 2017	Tony March to inform Rachel May

Please direct any enquiries to:

Angelica Mackins

Housing Licensing Support Officer

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