

Thanet Landlords' Focus Group

Working for landlords in partnership with Thanet District Council



Wednesday 03 July 2019

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

Meeting notes

In attendance:

Landlord representatives

Teresa Dickinson (Chair)
Sara Wade
Hugh Horton
Colin Mately
Diane Solly
Nigel Pope
Simon Thompson

Council representatives

Louise Ritchings (Housing Licensing Officer)
Katy Laird (Housing Licensing Support Officer)
Stephen O'Shea (Senior Housing Improvement Officer)
Rachel May (Senior Housing Options Officer)
Rebecca Gunn (Landlord Liaison Officer)
Tom Davies (Empty Property Officer)

Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) representatives

Tony March (Partnership Manager)

Apologies

Damien Cooke, Marion Money, Matthew Goodbun, Sally Brinson, Keith Sharpe, Joanna Cornford

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. Attendance and resignations

NP is now attending the Focus Group meetings in his capacity as a landlord and ST will attend on behalf of Miles and Barr. TD has approached DC regarding his non attendance. His non-attendance this time was for family reasons. A suggestion was made to add Kelly (from Cooke and Co) in DC's place. MM is unfortunately ill. TD suggested that we see how we get on at the Landlord Event with take up before making a decision.

4. Universal Credit Update

TM advised that the unemployment count for those seeking full time work in Thanet at the end of April was 4773.

The new service run by the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), Help to Claim is underway. This is a service that helps some of the most vulnerable people with their benefit claims up to their first payday. The service helps with things like identification, housing issues, and direct debits. The CAB has helped 150 people in Thanet since April.

From 10 May there have been updates to journals in the Universal Credit system to help customers understand their payments better. There are two sections, one for entitlement and one for deductions which makes things much clearer to the customer.

Journey routes for people on legacy benefits will start in 2021 once testing is complete. Three million people will need to move across to Universal Credit. DS mentioned that the change over is the problem and that the initial payment isn't quick enough. TM advised that often getting the correct evidence is a problem which can cause delays. DS also mentioned that reassuring landlords is also problematic.

5. Landlord Liaison Service Update

RM advised the group that last year 600 households were prevented from being homeless. Since April this year the figure so far is 170.

There are two new Landlord Liaison Officers in the RISE team and there is a single point of contact in each Jobcentre. A lot of work has been done to get 44 homeless people into long term accommodation since August last year. They are working alongside drug and alcohol workers and individuals are only put forward when they are tenancy ready. Some have also been placed into work. RM asked if any landlords would like to work with the Thanet RISE Project team.

NP mentioned that there is a rough sleeper outside one of his properties at the moment. RM asked NP to email her with the details as the RISE team knows most of the rough sleepers in the area by description.

6. Empty Properties Update

TD advised the group that as of April last year, 140 units were brought back into use (previously 120). The aim for this year is 150. Enforcement action is sometimes taken. There are 830 active cases in Thanet. A total of 1200 properties have been vacant for more than six months. The council may need to take action where properties have been empty for more than 2 years and are in a bad state of repair.

As of April 2019, Council Tax will charge an additional 100% if a property is left empty for more than two years.

Action can also be taken for overgrown gardens as has been demonstrated by Bristol Council who successfully prosecuted an owner for antisocial behaviour for leaving the garden of their property so overgrown.

The No Use Empty Scheme is being run Kent wide. Kent County Council will provide an interest free loan of up to £25,000 to renovate empty properties. A significant amount of money has been loaned. A loan package of £25,000 per unit can be loaned, up to a maximum of £175,000 total, which would equate to seven plus dwellings. This applies to commercial as well as residential properties. The average time taken to process an application is 6-8 weeks. There may be delays if a mortgage is in place. The loan is repayable after three years if the property is rented out and after two years if the property is sold on.

Thanet is trialling an owner/occupier loan of up to £20,000 to renovate empty properties. This is repayable over 10 years if the owner remains in the property for at least 5 years. Five loans have already been applied for in the Margate Central and Cliftonville West area.

There are also VAT savings of up to 15 percent that can be claimed on materials used to renovate properties that have been empty for more than two years.

7. Private Sector Housing Update

SOS reported that 1692 dwellings now have a Selective Licence and that category 1 and 2 hazards had been identified during pre licensing inspections.

TDC has successfully prosecuted both a landlord and managing agent for failing to apply for a selective licence, each receiving a £1,000 fine. LR added that the matter had been ongoing for a long time with each party failing to respond to communications for approximately 1.5 years. DS felt that the fines were light and not much of a deterrent. SOS responded by advising that this happened before financial penalties were introduced. TDC will now determine the amount of financial penalty based on individual circumstances.

LR advised that the council will send several forms of communication to managing agents before considering the financial penalty route. If managing agents are struggling to get information from landlords, they should ensure that they evidence all contact made, but there should come a point when they consider disinstructing when landlords continually fail to comply.

8. Matters for discussion raised by:

(a) Nigel Pope

Would it be possible for someone to give us a review of the procedures now in place for prosecuting landlords/agents, etc., in terms of housing defects & selective licensing.

I noticed recently that one of our focus group members received a fine and how it came about.

NP's matter raised for discussion was covered by SOS during his Private Sector Housing Update in section 7.

(b) Teresa Dickinson

The number of Improvement Notices currently in circulation and the effectiveness of these.

SOS advised that Improvement Notices served in 2018/19 identified 157 Category 1 hazards. 121 of those have been rectified. TDC will consider prosecution or financial penalties for those that have not.

(c) Colin Mately

I would like to discuss "Overcrowding", Section 21s and the role played by Thanet Licensing Scheme.

CM had an inspection at one of his properties (10 dwellings), the main problem was overcrowding. The inspection identified 40 issues, most of which were minor, only three were serious issues.

SOS advised that the council is duty bound to mention issues, however minor they may be. TDC are more likely to take action regarding the major issues. He also advised that Improvement Notices do carry appeal rights.

Regarding overcrowding issues, SOS explained that TDC can, in some circumstances, provide a period of time under transitional arrangements to allow tenants to move on if occupancy levels have increased above the maximum allowed.

CM has had problems with children tampering with the fire protection system and one of his tenants started a fire which caused £10,000 worth of damage.

RM advised that the Landlord Liaison Officers (LLOs) can help with problem tenants and with the overcrowding issues. RM gave the Landlord Liaison Team email address for CM to give tenant details and work with him to get issues resolved.

9. Any Other Business

Landlords and managing agents were disappointed that TDC had turned down a proposal for stand holders to pay a fee at this year's Landlord Event. All attendees at the meeting that were intending to have a stall were prepared to pay. TD requested that this should be fed back and that it is discussed in more detail at the next meeting.

SW asked if there was any news on the abolishment of section 21s and whether it could be a topic at the Landlord Event. LR advised that a barrister and a representative from the NLA would be at the event who would hopefully be able to give any up to date information.

Next date to be confirmed

End : 4.30pm

Please direct any enquiries to:

Katy Laird

Housing Licensing Support Officer

Private Sector Housing, Housing and Planning, Thanet District Council, PO Box 9, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent, CT9 1XZ.

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