

**North London Sub Region
Landlords' Forum
13 December 2007
The Arsenal Emirates Stadium**

MINUTES OF MEETING

1. Introduction.

Cllr Terry Stacy, Islington Executive member for Housing and Communities, welcomed all on behalf of Islington and the other local authorities in the North London Sub Region Partnership.

He explained that there were six sub regions in the North London Area and that the North London Sub Region was made up of Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Haringey, Islington and Westminster. He emphasised the importance of these partnerships in tackling issues together, share best practice and achieve efficiency savings. This is the first North London Sub Region Landlords' Forum.

2. Finding a Good Agent.
Ian Fletcher, British Property Federation.

Mr Fletcher highlighted the huge contribution the private sector makes in satisfying housing need. The British Property Federation is a representative and lobbying body for landlords and others involved in private sector property ownership and investment.

Letting Agents play a significant role in the private rental sector however there are no formal requirements necessary to become a letting agent. It is important that landlords choose the right agent as they can impact on several areas, such as the retention of tenants, court action and the finances of both landlords and tenants. However landlords have very few statutory rights as clients of letting agents.

There are no statutory regulation schemes for letting agents, but self regulation schemes exist such as:

- National Approved Letting Scheme. www.nalscheme.co.uk
- Association of Residential Letting Agents. www.arla.co.uk
- Royal Institute for Chartered Surveyors. www.rics.org
- National Association of Estate Agents. www.naea.co.uk

Members of a scheme must follow the agreed codes of practice of these bodies, such as operating a customer complaints procedure and holding professional indemnity insurance. Some schemes may require a member to hold a professional

qualification. There are also differences in the benefits offered by the schemes in such areas as their redress schemes and levels of compensation.

There have been many complaints received by the Ombudsman regarding Estate Agents and from 2008 all Estate Agents (not Letting Agents) will, by law, have to belong to a statutory ombudsman scheme.

In conclusion Mr Fletcher said that it was the individual decision of a landlord whether to use a letting agent but there were benefits to be gained from choosing the right one.

3. Warmth and Comfort Scheme. NLSR Improvement Grants. **Nic Evans, British Gas Area Contracts Manager**

The Warmth and Comfort Scheme aims to improve the homes of vulnerable residents who live in the North London Sub Region either as tenants or owner occupiers. To take advantage of these grants occupiers must be on a qualifying benefit and be in need of one of the measures offered. A survey is necessary to assess this need.

Measures offered are whole central heating systems, a boiler or part of a central heating system and insulation to lofts, wall cavities and draft proofing.

Landlords must give their written approval for the works. Landlords can identify tenants that may qualify for this scheme and it is hoped that the landlord would assist in access for surveys and for contractors to execute works.

All work is fully guaranteed and completed by professional trades people. Landlords were encouraged to make an appointment after the Forum or fill in a referral form. Alternatively the warmth and comfort scheme can be contacted on 0800 652 0782.

Mr Evans assured listeners that this scheme was much speedier in delivery than other similar schemes. Since the scheme started in October 2007 they have found that appointments for a survey are usually made within a few days of an inquiry and completion of works are within four to five weeks.

4. Tenancy Deposit Schemes. **Maryann Pearce. Tenancy Deposit Solutions Ltd and London** **Representative for National Landlords Association.**

In April 2007 the Government introduced mandatory Tenancy Deposit Protection on all deposits taken on Assured Shorthold Tenancies. This was to ensure that tenants get back the deposit that they are entitled to at the end of a tenancy.

There are two types of tenancy deposit protection:

- **Custodial** (or the default scheme). In this scheme the deposit is lodged with a scheme and at the end of the tenancy both landlord and tenant apply for its return.

- **Insurance Based.** Where the landlord holds the deposit, but pays an insurance premium.

Alternative Dispute Resolution is provided by all schemes to resolve disputes that may arise at the end of a tenancy, which is quicker and cheaper than going through the courts, but is not compulsorily and courts may still be used.

Tenancy Deposit Solutions Ltd is an insurance based scheme operated under Government contract. Under this scheme a landlord notifies the Scheme that it is holding a deposit and that it should be protected. At the end of a tenancy if a tenant is dissatisfied with the amount of deposit returned they can raise a dispute with the scheme. The disputed money is then held by the scheme until the dispute is resolved either by Alternative Dispute Resolution, court action or mutual consent.

This scheme is the only one that is designed for landlords to hold deposits and a fee is charged to protect each deposit collected.

Tenancy Deposit Solutions offer a two stage dispute resolution service. The first stage offers advice and information to the tenant and if this is unsuccessful they can take it to the second stage and make it a formal dispute where each party provides written evidence which is referred for adjudication.

If landlords do not protect deposits they are breaking the law and are unable to take section 21 action to evict tenants. However deposits taken before 16 April 2007 do not need to be protected.

For further information regarding the legislation the Government can be contacted at tenancy.deposits@communities.gsi.gov.uk. Tenancy Deposits Solutions' website is www.mydeposits.co.uk.

5. Local Housing Allowance. **Steve Peters. The Rent Service.**

From 7 April 2008 there will be a major change in calculating Housing Benefit for private sector tenants when The Local Housing Allowance comes into operation.

In calculating the Local Housing Allowance, each borough is divided into a number of Broad Rental Market Areas by the rent service. The Broad Rental Market Areas are geographical areas that vary in size and are set having regard to such issues as access and standards of health, education facilities, recreation, travel facilities and the variety and types of residential premises.

The Local Housing Allowance is a flat rate for each Broad Rental Market Area, based on household size, location and size of property. The Local Housing Allowance is calculated from current lettings data and landlords are urged to provide up to date information to the Rent Service regarding rentals so that it can base its figures on accurate and up to date information.

The Broad Rental Market Areas and Local Housing Allowance for an area may be accessed via a website so landlords and tenants will know the rates before issuing or signing a tenancy.

The other major change is that rent will be paid direct to a household rather than the landlord and in discussions afterwards landlords expressed concern about this.

For more information please visit the website www.therentservice.gov.uk or the DWP at www.dwp.gov.uk .

6. Empty Properties. **Fergal McEntee. North London Sub Region.**

The North London Sub Region has been allocated £3.375 million to tackle empty properties in their area. They do this through advice, grants and enforcement. A short video was shown about empty properties which stated that in every square kilometre of London there are approximately 35 empty properties.

Grants are available to owner occupiers, first time buyers, and landlords and in some boroughs for flats above shops. To qualify for a grant a property must be empty for at least six months and there must be intent to rent it out through one of the Councils' approved schemes. The amount of grant available depends on the individual borough, though the North London Sub Region contributes £11,000 per dwelling.

Mr McEntee went through examples of different scenarios where properties were eligible for a grant and gave examples of the calculations that are made to assess the amount of grant available.

With regards to enforcement actions available to the council they are: Compulsory Purchase Orders, Enforced Sales, and Empty Dwelling Management Orders. It was stressed that councils would only use these powers as a last resort, when all other action to try and bring a property back into use has failed.

Landlords and residents were urged to contact their local authority for specific grant details and let them know of any long term empty properties. In addition, owners or members of the public can visit www.nlep.co.uk or telephone 0800 953 6305 regarding empty properties.

7. Close.

Cllr Terry Stacy thanked everybody for attending this first North London Sub Region Landlords Forum. He urged people to visit the stalls and gave a special thanks to Irna van der Palen and her team who organised the event.