

Islington Landlords' Forum

Tuesday 29 March 2011

Islington Town Hall

Committee Room 1

MINUTES OF MEETING

1. Opening by Patrick Odling-Smee (Chair), Director of Housing, Islington Council

Patrick Odling-Smee welcomed all the landlords and speakers to the forum and introduced the agenda and speakers.

2. Jill Ellenby, Residential Environmental Health, Islington Council Renewal HMO licences & Grants changes 2011-12

Renewal of HMO licenses

Jill Ellenby reminded the forum that most HMO licences last for five years and landlords with licensed HMOs will need to re-apply at renewal time. The council will write to landlords before the expiry date and will include information about discounted fees for renewal and accredited landlords.

At renewal time, the council will visit the HMO to check amenities and conditions in the property. Landlords were reminded that the council has enforcement powers where standards are found to be unsatisfactory.

All information about HMO licensing/relicensing can be found on the council website: <http://www.islington.gov.uk/Housing/PrivateHousing/hmolicensing.asp>

Proposed grants changes

The grants budget for last year was £1.35m and this year it is £1m.

Key changes include:

- All grants are being reduced by approximately 15%.
- conditions for renovation grants between £11 000 and £ 30 0000 - If selling the property, there is an increase from 10 to 15 years to repay grant monies;
- Eco grants - The energy efficiency measures attracting grant monies have been reduced in extent and are available for insulation for solid wall and flat roofs only.

Contact grants.residential@islington.gov.uk

3. Sonia Watson, Housing Benefits, Islington Council Local Housing Allowance (LHA) Update

Landlords were advised that since the last forum there have been no changes to the LHA legislation. However, in this time the council has sent letters about the changes to housing benefit customers, the council website has been updated (with signposting) and there are posters with information. Letters have also been sent to landlords about the changes with details of where they can get more information and contact numbers.

Other key points raised:

- Work is being done with the Income Maximisation Team to help those families who are hardest hit.
- There are new caps and new rates. However, there is transitional protection of nine months for existing customers to allow them to address their housing needs or make new arrangements.
- There is a discretionary housing budget for *exceptional* circumstances with strict criteria for particular circumstances.
- A 'Shared Room Rate' circular was issued 29 March 2011. At the time of the forum it was not clear as to what the full impact will be and information will be put on the website (regarding changes next year).
- A specific new team of advisors has been recruited to target tenants affected and this will be up and running in the next few weeks.
- With the changes in the LHA rates, there are two separate arrangements to consider. Tenancy agreements exist between tenants and landlords and housing benefit arrangements are between the claimant and Housing Benefit. Therefore, both the tenant and the landlord will need to decide if their existing tenancy arrangements (including rent) need to be re-negotiated or whether the tenant moves on. In any event, tenants should be encouraged to speak to the newly appointed advisors. NB terms of a tenancy agreement (contract) can be shortened or varied within the law if both sides agree.
- If a current rent is lower than LHA it can't be unreasonably increased, even to a level still below the rate. Housing Benefit retains discretion regarding circumstances of any claim and all cases will be looked at and payments justified. E.g. what has changed/improved. Also any increase cannot be implemented within twelve months of the last assessment anniversary date (i.e. the anniversary of the date the claim was made). In summary, rents can be reviewed yearly and in line with the anniversary date.
- LHA is based on the number of rooms needed, not the actual number of rooms. So for example, if a family is squeezed in to a two bed property and require a four bed property, they will be entitled to an allowance for a four bed property.

For more information visit:

**www.islington.gov.uk/advice/counciltaxandhousingbenefits
www.islington.gov.uk/benefitschanges**

Email benefits.service@islington.gov.uk or for advice contact 020 7527 4990

4. Allan Elborough, Director, Settled Housing Solutions LHA calculator & HB Insurance policy

Allan Elborough gave a short presentation and slide show on the new LHA Impact – Cost Efficiencies Report and the LHA Calculator.

He promoted the LHA + HB Insurance Policy provided by Coversure, which claims to achieve significant efficiency savings for both landlords and local authorities.

Key features include a rent guarantee scheme, legal rates cover and contents insurance. Policies can be taken out at any time (but not after rent arrears) and simple checks will be carried out on the tenants.

The calculator works out the maximum rental income a landlord will be able to achieve if renting to HB claimants, in the present and imminent future. The cost of the calculator licence is £50 for landlords and a bit more for local authorities. This includes installation instructions, an operating manual and technical support. A web base version is available too.

Settled Housing Solutions run LHA Impact Seminars which are usually half a day.

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5. Peter Littlewood **Southern Landlords' Association, LHA from a landlords' perspective**

Peter Littlewood gave a slide presentation and handouts. He explained that the effect of the new LHA rates will be significant and landlords should be aware of these changes and plan ahead.

The shared room rate is changing from 25 to 35 years old which will mean a huge drop in rates for existing tenants between 25 and 35, as they will only be entitled to the HB rate for a room in a shared house..

How should landlords plan for these changes? Generally the new rates will apply at anniversary of the claim, with a nine month delay. So the first time will be 2 Jan onwards when the changes take affect. Landlords need to prepare/plan for this. E.g. What is their mix of housing benefit and non housing benefit tenants? What is the size of the properties being let?

Landlords can talk to the housing benefit office especially if they are paid direct or if they think the tenant is having problems (subject to permissions).

The probable future for 2013 was outlined which is likely to involve a simplified system.

- Local authorities are likely to be encouraged even more to use the private rented sector.
- The UK Energy Bill will mean landlords can take out energy efficiency 'Green Deal' loans to pay for energy efficiency improvements.
- There may be green deals funded by utility companies, who will 'loan' money to improve energy efficiency and recoup the money through the energy bill. The loan will stay with the property.
- Energy Performance Certificates – a new system to prevent very low energy rated properties from being let may be introduced (this was previously overcome but may come back)

SOUTHERN LANDLORDS' ASSOCIATION
The Cloisters, 31 Quarry Hill Road, Tonbridge, TN9 2RS

Membership costs £75.

For more information visit:

info@SouthernLandlords.Org / www.SothernLandlords.Org

Contact 0845 475 3583/ 0845 475 2483 (helpline)

6. Ian Tagg, Private Housing Partnerships, Islington Council 2010 Census

Ian Tagg, Procurement Manager for Islington Council, gave a brief talk about the current census in place of Irna van der Palen who was unable to attend. He asked the landlords to encourage their tenants to fill in their census forms and reminded everyone that the deadline is 6 May 2011. It is down to the tenant (not the landlord) to return completed forms and help is available including a help line.

He emphasised that the census is not just a people count; the return affects the distribution of money and a high return will assist everybody.

Telephone helpline: 0300 0201 101

Census website: www.census.gov.uk / www.census.gov.uk/2011accessibility

7. Close