



ISLINGTON

Islington Landlords' and Tenants' Forum

Monday 4th December 2006

MINUTES OF MEETING

1. INTRODUCTION

Councillor Terry Stacey, chair, introduced and welcomed speakers to the forum.

2. DUWAINE BROWN. PRINCIPAL REVENUES INSPECTION, TRACING & REGISTRATION MANAGER, LB ISLINGTON

Duwayne Brown talked about changes to the regulations governing rental property.

The Housing Act 2004 introduced a new definition for HMOs (Houses in Multiple Occupation) and a new HMO Licensing regime. Historically, an HMO type property would be attached to a band (Class C for Council Tax) and a single bill applied. Under the new HMO licensing requirements, such properties will now fall into two main categories: single dwellings, which are shared (shared houses) and self, contained units (conversions). Council Tax will now value each room/unit as separate, resulting in separate bills.

Further references could be found in the landlord's pack provided.

Questions and Answers

Q. Landlords have been encouraged to let rooms to three or four people but if such accommodation is no longer provided as costs are driven up, where will the tenants go?

A. The changes in legislation were introduced to promote better housing nationally. The regulations brought in reduce overcrowding and improve conditions for tenants. In the Council Tax view, however, there are no changes. We meet the landlord on site and determine the banding.

3. SUPPORTING PEOPLE, LB ISLINGTON

Ruby Noorani gave a short presentation on the current Supporting People programme.

The national programme was implemented in 2003 to help enable vulnerable people live independently. It is tenure neutral i.e. applies to any tenure. In the past, supported housing was not well supported and this programme provides new

funding. The DCLG (Department of Communities for Local Government) is responsible for local authorities implementing the programme.

Vulnerable people need help and skills to support themselves and the assistance provided to them will depend on their individual needs. The programme is wide ranging and offers the opportunity for greater independence and choice. For example, it provides help with cooking and filling in forms, practical help with repairs, as well as links to other groups and wider opportunities (to prevent social exclusion).

Brenda Nelson then gave a second short presentation.

The Directory of Services lists all services and can be found on the internet www.islington.gov.uk in Supporting People Directory. Some of the services are chargeable but this will be listed. Also listed are the facilities available e.g. language, disabled access and main contact information. There is also a feedback mechanism as the website is still evolving. Please see the website or refer to the leaflet for further information and details of the national directory across England.

Questions and Answers

Q. How does this service help/affect Landlords?

A. It's really for vulnerable people including tenants. It's a signposting resource, so as a landlord you could help.

Q. What type of accommodation do you require?

A. A type of accommodation is not required but it applies to a range of property types.

Q. Is there any financial help?

A. All help is through Support Services funded through Supporting People.

Q. Can landlords meet Council Officers, e.g. planning. Concern expressed that officers are not available.

A. Cllr Stacey said that at Contact Islington 222 Upper High Street there is normally a planning officer on call (duty officer). Cllr Stacey proposed to invite a planning officer to the next forum and will put this on the agenda.

Q. Can the talk be directly relevant to landlords?

A. The forum welcomes feedback on all presentations, and all present were encouraged to complete the evaluation form in the pack.

4. PETER FORDE, PROJECT MANAGER, LOCAL HOUSING ALLOWANCE (LHA) WANDSWORTH COUNCIL

Peter Forde talked about how welfare benefits will work in the future and the early experiences at Wandsworth.

Wandsworth Council ran a pilot scheme for the new regulations before the national roll out. The LHA (Local Housing Allowance) is part of wide ranging reform on the government agenda to make the system fairer. The LHA introduces several changes. One of the main changes is that rates are now set according to household size and not on the property lived in or how much the rent is. Further information on the changes could be found in the landlord packs provided.

The rates are set monthly and are published so they are available for all to see i.e. both landlords and tenants. The valuations are still based on the local market area, which can be large in some areas and smaller on others. Finally, the benefit (in most cases) is paid to tenant and not the landlord, but there are safeguards in place.

Example of household calculation: Couple + two children under ten + a non-dependant mother: three bedrooms and two living rooms = five room property.

The Wandsworth experience has seen an increase in claimants following the introduction of LHA and therefore an increase in caseload. This would indicate it is working. Plus rent arrears have not materialised providing further evidence of its success. The LHA will be rolled out nationally in 2008. The methodology, some of which is still yet to be tested, will be published before then. Further information on informative web sites was listed in the landlord's pack.

Questions and Answers

Q. The example given above, say the couple leaves. How does that affect payments?

A. There is no difference with the LHA as to now.

Q. But that doesn't help the Landlord, if the couple and children leave. What resources are available to the landlord?

A. That is a landlord/tenant issue, not a LHA issue

Q. The value of a property is subject to change. How does the LHA work?

A. There is an annual mechanism for reviewing the rent, so the rent can be reassessed. In Wandsworth there hasn't been a great deal of movement.

Q. If someone moved out and the contract has been signed, can the tenants be removed?

A. If rent arrears accrue then you can pursue this.

Q. What does not take living rooms mean?

A. A valuation of a three bedroom property assumption there is a living room. There is also a shared room rate. The rent officer does a trawl and how the property is advertised is used as a basis. The focus is of number on bedrooms.

Q. The scenario of the couple with a grandmother, is there discretionary rent?

A. Yes, there is still discretionary rent and every council has its own although there will be a limited number of cases.

Q. Wandsworth and Richmond are linked but which if the areas are rich and poor?

A. There are rules on how the rent service is matched up, based on similarity. Islington may not be attached to another borough.

Q. How is three bedrooms, two-reception property classified?

A. The rent service has its determination – probably a three-bed property in this case.

Q. Some tenants find out how much they can claim and then find somewhere cheaper (smaller), can they keep the difference? (e.g. entitled to a three bed and move into a one bed)

A. Yes. However, overcrowding hasn't occurred and there is no evidence of LHA causing this type of problem. Plus if tenants are looking for points for rehousing and they make themselves statutorily overcrowded this may adversely affect their points. The Chair commented that the Wandsworth experience has provided a useful insight, but how will the reform affect LBI in the future made a final note? This topic will be programmed in for a future agenda.

5. MIKE SMITH, PARTNERSHIP LIAISON MANAGER, ISLINGTON BENEFIT TEAMS, LOCAL PENSION SERVICE & HOUSING BENEFIT JOINT WORKING

This is a new service with an integrated approach. The Islington Benefit Teams have been formed between the Pension Service, Islington Council and Age Concern Islington. The focus of the service is to improve access to services for customers over 60. It is hoped the service will be extended in the future to include under 60's as well. If a landlord can identify a tenant as having problems paying their rent then please refer to them – see leaflet for contact details. The service also provides signposting and referrals to other services.

Questions and Answers

Q. How is an appointment made?

A. There is a phone number in the booklet to make appointments, referrals or get advice.

6. IAN TAGG, PROCUREMENT AND DEVELOPMENT MANAGER, LB ISLINGTON

Ian Tagg gave an update on the empty property work.

Using information obtained from various sources including Council Tax records and the public, LBI had around 800 empty properties in March 2006, ie empty for six months or more. Since then, all 800 properties have been visited and the current number of empties is down to 571. This has been achieved by verifying information and encouraging owners to return properties back into use. The next stage of the strategy will be further encouragement using grants etc, joint working with council tax, validating data, creating a GIS (Geographical Information System) map of the borough showing the empty properties, and raising awareness of the problem. The public will be encouraged to report empty properties whilst owners given 'food for thought' using rent loss projections.

Questions and Answers

Q. Why are properties left empty?

A. There is no single reason; there is a multitude of reasons. But it is very anti-social and it is the Council's role to reduce numbers to improve environmental quality and assist with homelessness.

7. AOB

The next five dates for LLAS training have been organised (until May) - please refer to the packs. Finally, further information on the Councils Rent Deposit Scheme is to follow shortly.