



## West of England Landlord Panel

10 December 2008

### Minutes

#### **Present:**

Shane Dyke (NSC), Alan Tink (WLA), Lisa Perry (NSC), Julie Ann Smith (BALMA), Chris Kenrick (NLA), Tony Hardacre (NLA), Janet Redfern (NLA), Lesley Dove (NLA), David Brown (NLA), Katherine Shuttleworth (B&NES), Ian Potter (ARLA), Colin Martin (SGlos), Julie Norris (BCC), Dave Fontaine (BCC)

#### **In attendance:**

Rhona Hall – Liberata  
Paul Hill – Bristol City Council, Local Housing Allowance  
Judith Jeffrey – Home Choice West

#### **Apologies:**

Cathy Provenzano (BALMA), Richard Johnson (BCC), Olivia Donaghy (ARLA),

#### **1. Introductions**

The panel introduced themselves to the guest speakers who were present for the meeting. The panel asked to send very best wishes to Richard Johnson who is currently on sick leave.

#### **2. Minutes and matters arising**

The minutes were accepted.

#### **3. Local Housing Allowance update**

Rhona Hall from Liberata and Paul Hill from Bristol City Council addressed the panel to give an update on the current situation with the Local Housing Allowance (LHA).

In North Somerset, the implementation and take up of LHA has gone smoothly, the safe guard policy has been affective and there was a good effort to talk to landlords before implementation. There have also been follow up meetings to review the safe guard policy and no changes were thought necessary. N. Somerset operates a passport scheme to speed through homelessness cases.

In Bristol implementation went well, again helped by the publicity campaign. The Safe guard policy is going well, all applications are visited and progressed quickly. Only 11% of LHA cases are paid directly to the Landlord. A recent review found that the visits are drawing the correct decisions.

In November 08 48% of all claimants are on LHA, it is expected that in the next 12-18 months the majority will be on LHA, which is following national trends.

There has recently been a judicial review in London, the Heffernan case where the local reference rent has been challenged. Not sure at the moment if we will see changes to the broad market rental area. The Rent Service is currently under review and is now part of the Inland Revenue.

The LHA rates have often been more favourable than the previous rates under Housing Benefit (HB), therefore a situation has been occurring where individuals withdraw their entitlement to HB and after a one week break put in a new claim under LHA. This was the guidance from government and has been adopted practice nationally. However, Bristol have sought legal advice and identified that it is not necessary to have the one week gap. They are the only authority out of 408 who

currently allow this. The results of the judicial review is likely to clarify whether this practice is acceptable.

In South Glos and BANES – officers are assisting tenants to calculate how many weeks at the higher rate it will take to be worth losing the one week of entitlement; also many landlords are not pushing for the one week arrears to be repaid.

N Somerset – are following the original guidance and will await clarification, they do not wish to risk losing their subsidy which ultimately would be a loss to all council tax payers.

There is also a review of the practice which allows tenants to keep up to £15 per week if the rent is lower than LHA.

The benefits team will update us once any new guidance has been issued on these subjects. Thank you to the representatives for attending the meeting.

#### **4. Credit Crunch**

We are all aware of problems as a result of the current economic situation. It would be useful for the local authorities if landlords and agents could give an update on the current market and what they are experiencing in terms of rental demand, rents, etc. This is a summary of the main points discussed.

- Repossessions are increasing
- Landlords are experiencing problems with remortgaging, especially when fixed deals come to an end, or where they have HMO's on multiple assured shorthold tenancies
- Property prices are going down
- There is an excess of 1 + 2 bed flats available to let
- Concern whether the number of students will reduce as they may be unable to afford to go to University
- Equity in properties is reducing so difficult to obtain new mortgages
- People who can not sell are letting properties
- Rents have decreased slightly
- Landlords are picking up good deals if they have sufficient funds available at auctions
- No of house hunters is rising
- Lettings appear to be steady

It appears it is difficult to obtain an overall view as there are many differences and in some ways it is too early to see the real impact. Will discuss again at the next meeting.

#### **5. Rugg Review**

Julie Norris outlined a discussion paper which summarised the main points of the Rugg Review. We are expecting the government response to this in the form of a green paper in Spring 2009. It is probably best to wait until that is issued before we make a full consideration and response to the proposals.

#### **6. Fire Safety & RRO**

The local authorities have always worked closely with Avon Fire Brigade over the past years and had agreed standards. The Fire Safety Order legislation gave the Fire Authorities enforcement powers, whilst the Housing Act gave Local Authorities enforcement powers. This dual enforcement role could have proved problematic. However a protocol has been established which sets out which authority will take a lead enforcement role for which types of properties and an agreement on the standards required. This is now ready to be signed and implemented. We will then look to provide joint training for landlords on this area.

#### **7. Landlord Training**

There is a project underway to launch on-line training modules for landlords which would result in landlords obtaining a certificate on successful completion. The proposed cost of this is £50 with discounts for accredited landlords and deposit bond. However there is concern that given the current financial pressures that this may not be the appropriate time to launch this. There was a suggestion that landlords could be offered an introduction offer at a discounted rate.

#### **8. West of England website**

A joint website has been launched which covers all West of England authorities, it can be found at [www.privatehousinginformation.co.uk](http://www.privatehousinginformation.co.uk). It will act as an information resource for landlords and agents and will include licensing, fire safety, accreditation and all other joint ventures. It also contains information regarding the Landlord Panel.

## **9. Update from Bristol**

**a. HMO search unit** – This unit has recently been launched which will endeavour to track down unlicensed HMOs. There are three members of staff working on this for the next 12 months which has been funded from the fees from licensing. It is believed that there are potentially between 200 and 300 properties that should be licensed that currently are not.

The team are telephoning properties that are being advertised to let and using other sources of data to establish potential properties to investigate further. They will issue a warning, caution and ultimately prosecute where unlicensed properties are found. There is also a Finders Fee of £100 to be paid by the landlord where the team identify a property which should have had a license.

**b. Anti-social behaviour workshop** – this took place yesterday and there are plans to hold different workshops in the future.

## **10. Any other business**

Gerry Laws needs to be added to the invite list, to replace Mark Lewis.

We need a two hour slot for this meeting, so will attempt to start at 10.30 next time.

Chris Kenrick will no longer be attending the meeting on behalf of the National Landlords Association; we would all like to thank Chris for the valuable contribution he has made to the Panel over the last three years.

### **Subjects for next meeting:**

Rugg Review/Green Paper

Tenancy deposit protection

Credit crunch update

**Date of next meeting:** Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> March at 11:00am at The Lipscombe Centre, 8 Portland Square, Bristol BS2 8ST, please see map on next page.



We are here!

The easiest route in for now is from Junction 3 of the M32, which is here.

If you come off the M32 at Junction 3, turn right on the roundabout into Ashley Road. At the traffic lights at the junction turn left and at the next roundabout keep left into City Road. At the first set of traffic lights, turn left into Brigstocke Road. Carry on straight ahead and into Dean St. At the end of Dean Street is a Give Way sign and this leads into Portland Square. Its one way so first go straight ahead then turn right. On the corner at the end of this part of the Square is our building. Parking in Portland Square is pay and display and you should be able to park right outside.

To go back, all you need to do is go down the road at the side of the building (Pritchard Street), which leads back onto Newfoundland Street and the Newfoundland Way, which leads to the M32 again.