

Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 29 June 2017

Attendance

Members of the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Ian Angus (Chair)
Cllr Mary Bateman
Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
Cllr Greg Brackenridge
Cllr Val Evans
Cllr Keith Inston
Cllr John Rowley
Cllr Caroline Siarkiewicz
Cllr Mak Singh

Employees

Christopher Hale
Ravi Phull
Helen Tambini
Anthony Walker
Neil White

Head of Housing
Senior Environmental Health Officer
Democratic Services Officer
Strategy Implementation and Monitoring Officer
Scrutiny Officer

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies**
Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Haynes and Gakhil.
- 2 **Declarations of interest**
Councillors Angus and Mak Singh declared interests in item 5 of the agenda as they were both landlords.

Councillor Phil Bateman declared an interest in item 5 as he was known to one of the witnesses, Mr Richard Hall of L & A Lettings.
- 3 **Minutes of the previous meeting**
Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 23 March 2017 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.
- 4 **Matters arising**
Councillor Brackenridge referred to the recent tragic events at the Grenfell Tower and suggested that the issue should be referred to Scrutiny Board, with a view to a potential Scrutiny Review.

Councillor Phil Bateman agreed and referred to the potential impact on the public's confidence. He suggested that emergency planning procedures should be reviewed, including the provision of temporary accommodation if an incident occurred.

Resolved that the issues of fire protection and emergency planning be referred to Scrutiny Board so that it can determine how to look at these issues.

5 **Private Rented Housing Sector**

The Chair referred to the housing crisis at both national and local levels and the duty of the Council to tackle homelessness under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. He referred to the importance of working in partnership and to the witnesses who had been invited to attend the meeting in four sessions.

Session One:

Estate Agents, Richard Hall (L & A Lettings) and Courtney Downing (Proactive Property)

Brief Introductions:

Richard Hall had an established business, set up over nine years ago, with over 300 properties in Wolverhampton, Walsall and surrounding areas.

Courtney Downing had recently set up his business and had five properties.

The witnesses were asked what did a good vetting scheme for both tenants and landlords include?

Richard Hall stated that word of mouth and personal contact was key, prospective tenants should be visited in current properties. Local authorities were also providing support; however, that varied depending on the authority.

Courtney Downing agreed that personal contact was vital and he actively encouraged communication with all his tenants and would continue to do so.

The witnesses were asked what incentives should there be in the Rent with Confidence scheme that would attract more estate agents to use it?

Richard Hall considered that the Rent with Confidence scheme would slowly identify the better landlords and drive up standards. The regeneration in the city centre would also encourage good landlords to the area. He stated that it was easy to identify poor landlords and in terms of references, no one came with a bad reference so personal judgements had to be made. He stated that it would be helpful to have more than one month's rent deposit and it would be helpful if the Council could facilitate such a scheme.

Courtney Downing suggested that additional information about the scheme and how everyone could help each other would be helpful. He stated that he had previously been unaware of what the Council was doing. He confirmed that accreditation and ratings were very important and it would be helpful to have support to find landlords with good properties.

The witnesses were asked if other local authorities that they dealt with had a better communication process with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) on Universal Credit and Direct Payment?

Richard Hall referred to the Walsall Steering Group which had a representative from the DWP and the National Landlords Association (NLA). He stated that it would be helpful to have a Steering Group at Wolverhampton again to build relationships.

Officers confirmed that there had previously been a Private Sector Forum and Steering Group; however, due to issues in respect of the direction of the Group it had been disbanded.

The witnesses were thanked for attending the meeting and participating in the session.

Session Two:

Landlords, Richard Hall (L & A Lettings) and Ranjit Uppal (UAS Properties)

Brief Introductions:

Ranjit Singh stated that he had set up his property business in 1993 with over 100 apartments across the city centre with over 280 tenants.

The witnesses were asked what would a good vetting scheme for tenants include?

Ranjit Singh stated that the Council had a good vetting scheme and he worked in close collaboration with the Homelessness Team. Fundamentally the Council was taking the correct approach; however, he felt that it was restricted, as the local housing allowance rates were so low and additional incentives were required to encourage letting agents.

He confirmed that although he dealt with Council officers and agencies on a regular basis, he had no contact with local councillors.

He confirmed that he charged the local housing allowance and therefore most working people could afford the rent and consequently he had very few tenants claiming housing benefits. He expressed concern at the future changes under the Universal Credit scheme.

Richard Hall confirmed that over 75% of his tenants were working.

The witnesses were asked how the Council and its partners could help to get tenants into secure, safe accommodation for stable, long-term tenures?

Richard Hall confirmed that good tenants would never be evicted. If tenants started to get into arrears, then a payment plan would be set up to ensure that reasonable repayments could be made. It was essential to maintain a relationship with the tenant and to offer them support. That would also apply if there were problems with Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB). The ASB team was also aware of contact details and would be in touch if an issue had been raised.

Ranjit Singh referred to the considerable changes over recent years and that tenants were now staying in a property for much longer. He stated that ASB was very rare and applied more to Houses in Multiple Occupation.

The witnesses were asked if there was anything that the Council could do to help landlords?

Ranjit Singh requested that housing benefit payments should be paid directly to landlords and that the administration for Council payments to landlords be simplified.

Richard Hall asked that poor landlords were prosecuted and good landlords praised and promoted.

The witnesses were thanked for attending the meeting and participating in the session.

Session Three:

Citizens Advice (CAB), Helen Child, Chief Executive

The witness was asked what should deposit guarantee and rent guarantee schemes include and were there any examples of good schemes?

Helen Child stated that Shelter had some good guidance and there were examples of good practice in Scotland. Appropriate regulation and lending was required to ensure that reasonable and rational decisions were made. Existing financial service providers could be used.

The witness was asked if she knew of other authorities who had used the powers in the Housing and Planning Act 2016 to fund future enforcement action and how successful had they been?

Helen Child stated that this was new local authority legislation in relation to civil penalties and additional clarification would be required.

Housing Officers referred to the civil penalties under the Housing and Planning Act 2017 and the new statutory guidance for local housing authorities came into force on 6 April 2017. A report would be taken to the Council's Cabinet in September and the legislation would act as a foil to the Rent with Confidence scheme. The Council would continue to be proactive in dealing with landlords who failed to safeguard their tenants and in serious cases, such as health and safety failures a statutory notice could be served. The level of fines would vary, with some being substantial. Those fines would be retained and ring-fenced for the Public Sector Housing team.

The witness was asked how could we use an engagement forum that she had suggested to get landlords to voluntarily agree to better standards?

Helen Child noted that during the previous two sessions none of the witnesses had mentioned CAB. CAB offered debt advice and support and it would be helpful to ensure that landlords and estate and letting agents were aware of this so that they could pass on that information to their tenants. There also needed to be incentives and a willingness to work in partnership, as part of the Wolverhampton's Inclusion Board. She agreed that it would be helpful to have a forum of some kind to talk about key issues and future implications associated with the impact of Universal Credit. Currently some tenants were living in poor conditions, for example, being unable to

put on the heating as they could not afford to and consequently being forced to stay in bed to keep warm and it was a concern that that could get worse.

The witness was asked if there was anything that the Council could do to help the CAB?

Helen Child suggested that supporting landlords to get an Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA) in place would be beneficial.

Helen Child was thanked for attending the meeting and participating in the session.

Session Four:

Client Side Representatives, Fazia Bano (St Georges Housing), Sunny Dhadley (Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council) and Satvinder Goraya (Refugee and Migrant Centre)

Brief Introductions:

Fazia Bano stated that St Georges Housing provided a range of services and support for socially excluded men over 18 with the most complex needs who were extremely vulnerable.

Sunny Dhadley stated that he had been working in this sector for over 10 years. In 2015/16 the Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council had 1072 clients and made 5238 interventions. The three main issues were: welfare, employability and housing.

Satvinder Goraya stated that they had helped 1402 new clients to date this year. A high percentage of support related to housing. They had assisted over 700 asylum seekers. If any asylum seeker was granted refugee status, then they would only have 28 days to find accommodation and that was a short time bearing in mind immigration letters could take two weeks

The witnesses were asked what would a good quality tenancy agreement look like for landlords and tenants?

Sunny Dhadley referred to the stigma and discrimination endured by many who were unaware of their rights. It was important that people understood the terrible environment that many lived in, often with no security on short tenancies.

Fazia Bano stated that many people were so desperate they would take any housing. Previously there had been more support from efficient joined-up services; however, that was no longer the case. Advice was often ad-hoc and limited for the most vulnerable.

Satvinder Goraya stated that improvements could be made to improve tenancies as currently many would sign an agreement without understanding it. Often tenancy agreements were long and very complex and could be simplified.

The witnesses were asked what should a training package for landlords and one for tenants include?

Satvinder Goraya referred to the very good package run at Leicester, which included catalogues of landlords and training.

Fazia Bano stated that an element of mediation to build strong links between landlords and frontline staff to act as a 'bridge' would be advantageous. If tenants were not supported they would often find themselves living in certain areas because they have no choice and that led to 'ghettos' forming. They then became more isolated and socially excluded.

Sunny Dhadley referred to the importance of understanding the local environment and understanding different cultures and it was dependent on who you engaged with. He asked if there was a database of private landlords?

Officers confirmed that there were various databases; however, only 2-3% of the market was reached.

Satvinder Goraya referred to the introduction of Universal Credits in December and the uncertainty surrounding that for the most vulnerable. Considerable support was required at the start of a new tenancy to ensure that everything was in place and that put a strain on resources.

Sunny Dhadley confirmed that clients were referred to organisations including CAB. He had worked with 426 agencies this year. The third sector provided more holistic support. He referred to service user involvement and how that translated into tenancy involvement and how that feed back into the system.

Officers referred to the difficulty in contacting some landlords and groups of tenants. Under the Rent with Confidence scheme, frontline staff offer support to local tenants. Significant investment from public health was used to promote health and wellbeing in the city.

Sunny Dhadley mentioned that although in most cases individuals made contact because they were in difficulties, sometimes positive feedback was received and that should be publicised. He stated that it was important to recognise good practices and trends and to penalise poor landlords.

The witnesses were asked if they would like to become more involved with the Rent with Confidence Scheme?

All three witnesses agreed that they would like to become more involved.

The witnesses were thanked for attending the meeting and participating in the session.

Members of the Panel considered the comments received and discussed several issues that covered:

- Rebadging of the Rent with Confidence Scheme.
- The use of rent deposit and guarantee schemes.
- Alternative Payment Arrangements and Universal Credit.
- The reestablishment of an engagement forum.
- Building on the rating within the Rent with Confidence Scheme to make it clearer between good and bad landlords.
- Use Champions within excluded communities to help with housing issues.
- Advice package and training for landlords.

Resolved that:

the Cabinet Member for City Assets and Housing be requested to report to the Council's Cabinet within six months (with a briefing note to be made available to the Scrutiny Panel on current progress before its meeting on 28th September 2017) on how the Council could work with landlords, tenants and stakeholders to improve Private Sector Housing in Wolverhampton to include specific proposals on how to improve:

- (A) the Rent with Confidence Scheme through the introduction of an enhanced rent guarantee scheme, including covering rent in advance, and/or off-setting rent loss as well as training, support and vetting processes for landlords and tenants, to be drawn up in conjunction with the Private Sector Housing Forum referred to in (B) below;
- (B) engagement with the sector to include the setting up of a Private Sector Housing Forum, to comprise of councillor representatives, estate agents, landlords, tenants, client side representatives and community/charity groups such as Citizens Advice with the aim of the Forum to improve standards in the private rented housing sector; and
- (C) publicity of the Rent with Confidence Scheme to include a communications and marketing process and plan that enhances the scheme in a way that covers all parts of the city, to be drawn up in conjunction with the Private Sector Housing Forum referred to in (B) above.