

APPENDIX 5 – Client Side Representatives

Private Rented Housing Sector Information - St. George's HUB

1. How does the private rented housing sector meet the needs of the clients you support?

We currently have 150 live profiles, since February 2017, which is when St. George's HUB started working specifically with vulnerable and isolated men in the City. Currently a third of our clients live in private sector tenancies of varying quality. The lack of social and affordable housing in the City means the private rented sector is the only realistic option. Experiences of private sector tenancies have been variable; traditionally there has been collusion between chaotic, challenging clients and somewhat unsavoury landlords. Historically this has led to both poor quality accommodation and unstable tenancies. Clearly intensive support is required and learning essential life-skills is paramount for client's to maintain a home. Our experience is that this is particularly relevant for private sector tenancies. Clients are vulnerable during the early, precarious stages of a tenancy when extra support is required.

2. What advice do you give your clients to help them be successful in accessing or living in the private sector?

The key advice we give to clients is to make them aware of their responsibilities, which are key to the roll-out of Universal Credit. Many of our clients have issues with substance misuse and/or mental health and were use to a culture where Housing Benefits paid directly to the landlord. A key element of our work is to give advice, support and guidance on money management and budgeting skills to enable them to take responsibility. Landlords understandably wish to receive their rent on time and failure to comply can lead to rent arrears and potentially eviction orders. This is clearly not satisfactory for either party. As a result some landlords do not work with tenants on benefits which is a problem for the City.

Our clients do not tend to be perceived as the most desirable of potential tenants, particularly if they have a chequered housing history or have underlying health issues, for instance. This can result in clients being offered sub-standard tenancies in a poor state of repair. Over the last 12 months we have sought to address the problems at its root cause and this has involved a changed mind-set of both landlord and tenants. We have sought to bring positive solutions, effective mediation has always at the core of our work. We encourage clients to make informed decisions from the outset when taking on a tenancy. There has been we strongly advise clients

to sign a proper tenancy agreement which make sure appropriate safeguards are in place. We have seen a number of clients forcefully evicted by people claiming to work on behalf of landlords without the appropriate papers being served. Often these clients are reluctant to complain for the fear of reprisals. Tenants under 35 are becoming less desirable tenants for landlords and this may be a problem for the City in the medium term.

3. Are you aware of the rent with confidence scheme?

We have been made aware of the scheme by colleagues at the local authority. Any regulation or quality standard can only be a positive for both landlords and clients, resulting in both superior quality accommodation and effective use of housing stock. A good quality tenancy has a monumental effect on the health and well-being of vulnerable and excluded people.

4. What effect has the national rent deposit scheme had on your clients?

The effects of the rent deposit scheme on our clients have been mixed. We have had a number of clients who have been successfully accepted for the scheme and it has played a major role in giving them housing stability. However we have also had a few clients who have had a less satisfactory experience, after being presented with a list of landlords who accept the rent deposit scheme by the local authority. Several of these landlords have stated that they are no longer on the scheme or had never participated.

5. What would you like to see done to improve the private rented housing sector?

For St. George's HUB the quality, affordability and accessibility of private rented sector housing is crucial. Many of our clients are a distance away from becoming employable, particularly if they have health or other multiple needs, but it is important for the City to avoid ghettos of poor quality private tenancies. The rent with confidence scheme has the potential to drive up standards across the City and may enable competition to improve the private sector rented stock locally. Our male clients, particularly in the middle age with substance issues, are seldom priority needs and as such invariably 'expect' poor accommodation. Changing this mind-set is essential. Increased regulation and identifying poor landlords and sub-standard accommodation is vital. A continued commitment to prosecuting 'slum' landlords can send out a message to the City and build on existing Partnerships between the local authority and the Voluntary Sector.

