

First Council Private Landlords Conference takes place in Leeds

The first Leeds City Council Private Landlords Conference took place at the Carriageworks theatre on November 2011. It was organised by staff from the Council's Statutory Housing Service, with support from the Residential Landlords Association and Bury & Walkers Solicitors.

Leeds City Council invited sent more than 2000 invitations to landlords through a variety of methods. These included direct mailouts:-

- from our Benefits Service
- to Letting Agents
- to Housing Associations
- to Accredited Landlords
- via the National Landlords Association
- via the Residential Landlords Associations
- through releases to local media (BBC, Yorkshire Evening Post, trade press).

225 people expressed an interest in attending, with just over 150 attending on the day.

Workshop sessions

What happened in the workshops? Find out on Page 3



Aims of the Conference

- To discuss the key issues facing landlords and tenants today.
- To explore ways in which the Council and the private rented sector can work together to ensure people have access to good quality, affordable homes.
- To discuss the role that the private rented sector can help to meet local housing demand now in the future.
- To discuss the issue of empty properties, and how the private rented sector can help us deal with this issue.

Opening Presentations

The day began with a session that included presentations from a number of leading speakers



Councillor Peter Gruen: Leeds City Council Executive Board Member

Councillor Gruen welcomed attendees; gave an overview of the importance of the private rented sector and how LCC welcomes the opportunity of working with landlords in the city.



David Cox: National Policy Officer for the National Landlords Association

David gave an overview of the issues facing the private rented sector. He discussed how EU and national legislation was having an impact on the sector.



Chief Inspector Samantha Millar: Leeds Community Safety

The presentation looked at the issue of burglaries in Leeds; the effect of this type of crime on tenants in the social and private rented sector; some of the steps the Police and the Council are taking to deal with burglaries; and how landlords can help.

Workshop Sessions

There were three workshops. Each one took place three times, giving each delegate the opportunity to attend all of the workshops.

Welfare Reform & Benefit Changes

This session was led by Jane McManus from Leeds City Council's Benefit Service and looked at three areas

Housing Benefit Changes and Welfare Reform

- The programme for change
- Some of the detail of these changes
- The likely impact on tenants and landlords in the private rented sector

Looking Local

- How the digi-TV initiative is helping people to find new homes

Universal Credit Overview- presented by Andy Moody, Department for Work and Pensions

The aims of the Universal Credit system

- Broad impacts
- How it will work in the housing sector
- How it will be delivered

Energy Efficiency

The session was led by George Munson & Matt Bentley

It looked at

- Domestic buildings of Leeds - What buildings do we have? How are they looked upon?

- "Misconceptions" about older properties
- The benefits of older properties
- Planning constraints
- How can we sympathetically upgrade?
- Levels of intervention

The Private Rented Sector

Mark Ireland and Mike Brook from our Statutory Housing Service led this session.

The session looked at

- The issues facing private landlords and property owners in the city, and how we can work better with

landlords to deal with these issues.

- How do we improve the way we listen to the opinions of landlords in Leeds about their concerns and the needs of their business.
- How do we use what private landlords tell us in future housing strategies.

Plenary Session

The day concluded with a plenary sessions that included a question and answer session. The panel for this included

- Councillor Peter Gruen: Leeds City Council Executive Board Member
- Liz Cook: Leeds City Council Chief Officer Statutory Housing
- Richard Jones: Residential Landlords Association
- David Cox: National Landlords Association
- Chief Inspector Samantha Millar: Leeds Community Safety
- Steve Carey: Leeds City Council Revenue and Benefits Service

What you told us

We asked you to share your opinion with us about

- Your top priorities as landlords
- Your expectations of the Council as landlords in relation to the private rented sector
- To tell us about the challenges that you face as a landlord and across the private rented sector as a whole
- How we can improve the way we engage with you, and across the sector.

You provided us with a large number of responses to the workshops. Many of these focussed on issues affecting you personally or on your own business, which we would welcome discussing with you.

Welfare reform

- What effect will the changes have on landlords' businesses?
- What effect will the loss of direct payment have on arrears?
- Will the changes affect how landlords can find new tenants?

Regulation of the sector

- Many people who attended the conference said they were there as they recognise and accept the need to act as decent and responsible landlords.
- Many people felt that the Council needs to do more to deal with the more irresponsible and rogue landlords who
 - May break the law
 - Tarnish the reputation of the sector as a whole

More and better support for good landlords

Can the Council be creative in exploring ways to find funding to renovate and maintain properties

- More incentives for joining the Landlord Accreditation Scheme.

Communication & partnership working

- The Council needs to use new and better ways of communicating and engaging with landlords.
- The Council should be able to help landlords find information and guidance on regulations that will help them run their business.
- There was a willingness to engage in working as partners with the Council and Housing Providers across the sector
- Consultation need to be better and more meaningful.

Business risks

- There was some concern about how the following will affect landlords business in the current economic climate
 - Welfare reform
 - affordability of rents
 - the rise in student university fees and if this will lead to a reduction in the student population in Leeds.

HMO planning rules/Article 4

- Many landlords in the private rented sector oppose to the introduction of the Article 4 Direction as they feel that it will restrict the availability of shared accommodation at a time when other policies (Welfare Reform proposals) will lead to a greater demand.
- There is concern that the implementation of this policy will further reduce the flexibility of the housing stock.

Funding for improvements

- The difficulties of securing funds in the current lending climate

Energy efficiency

- Whilst there was consensus that better energy efficiency was welcomed there were concerns about implications of likely costs.

How we are responding to the issues you raised

Some of the issues that you have raised are beyond the scope of the Council.

Some of them affect us too, particularly the current economic climate and the likely changes in student numbers.

Welfare Reform

- We know that is an area of major concern for the majority of Landlords in the City.
- Our Revenue and Benefits Service are leading on this area of work. They are looking at the whole issue of welfare reform not just Housing Benefit and rent levels etc.
- The private rented sector is an area that we know is important and we are giving it special consideration.
- we will continue to work with DWP to promote effective liaison between private sector landlords and Universal Credit administration;
- We will continue to provide information targeted to tenants affected by the welfare reforms and keep landlords informed of relevant issues

Advice on finding funding for repairs and renovation

- In terms of lending by the banks, LCC is constantly looking to find new ways of financing initiatives across all our services including all housing sectors.
- We are currently thinking about how we can help and advise landlords and empty property owners to find funding. Particularly those who cannot obtain lending from high street sources.

Regulation of the sector

- We are reviewing how we work in different localities across Leeds. We want to work more closely with local landlords and people in communities.
- We are working more closely with services across the Council and being more proactive in dealing with landlords who let down the sector.
- We are also looking how we can improve the way we deal with rogue landlords when we receive a report from the public, or through our inspections and licensing.
- We will continue to communicate regularly, and work with you and your representatives to promote good practices.

Energy Efficiency

- We are updating our existing advice and guidance on how to improve energy efficiency in property.
- We are trying to find ways of including the private rented sector as part of our work on Green Deal to maximise benefit for the sector from the funding
- We have launched the 'Wrap Up Leeds' scheme. This will help to provide free insulation directly to landlords from January 2012. The scheme will benefit almost 15,000 homes across the City.
- We are discussing how to target those landlords who do not take up the offer of free insulation.

HMO Planning Rules/Article 4

The Council has decided that from February 2012 anybody who wants to convert a property into an HMO will require planning permission. These rules apply to most areas in Leeds.

- Our Development Department is leading on this area of work. The intention is to introduce measures to control the number and concentrations of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) across the city to help prevent unbalanced communities.
- The Council has held a series of consultation meetings about Article 4. We are going to hold further consultation with representatives in March 2012.
- We are looking for ways to make sure that the revised Planning Strategy includes appropriate safeguards to ensure equitable housing provision and a full range of housing options.

Communication

We know that we need to think about how communicate with you. We recognise the importance of keeping you abreast of changes. We understand that you have concerns about how some changes may affect your business, or how you find new tenants for your properties.

In the Housing Service we are looking at how all of our teams engage and communicate with people, and everybody who has contact with us. This includes landlords in the private rented sector . We are looking for new and better ways of keeping in touch, and improving the methods that we already use.

- We already have a mailing list of all landlords that we have contact with. This includes members of the Accreditation Scheme or landlords who hold a licence.
- We publish quarterly newsletters through the Accreditation Scheme.
- We hold quarterly landlord forums for members of our Accreditation Scheme.
- We are updating our website to make it more user-friendly and easier to find information, including policies, procedures and regulations.
- We are exploring the possibility of using SMS texts as a way of getting information to you.
- We want to work more closely with landlords in areas of the city through local focus groups