

Practitioner article

Edinburgh Landlord Accreditation

Written by Heather Kirkland, Edinburgh Landlord
Accreditation Coordinator, City of Edinburgh Council

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Edinburgh Landlord Accreditation

Heather Kirkland describes the work of Edinburgh Landlord Accreditation, and explains how the scheme is helping to improve standards in the private rented sector both in the capital and how accreditation could improve standards in private renting across Scotland.

Introduction

Edinburgh Landlord Accreditation provides recognition to landlords and letting agents who take a responsible approach to renting out their properties. It offers tenants a systematic way of identifying landlords and letting agents who meet the Code of Standards, so helping them to access better standards of accommodation and avoid problems in the future. In the event that their landlord fails to reach the required standard, ELA also offers tenants a route to redress through its complaints and resolution process.

Background

In March 2003, the Housing Improvement Task Force proposed introducing landlord accreditation as a means of improving the private rented market. While many landlords do provide safe and good quality accommodation to their tenants, poor housing remains concentrated in the private rented market. Like many industries, the private rented market is facing the challenge of modernisation and of improving customer services and is under increased public scrutiny.

In response to the Housing Improvement Task Force report, Communities Scotland established National Core Standards and Good Practice for the development of accreditation schemes.

Four pilot accreditation schemes were then set up, in Edinburgh, Dumfries and Galloway, South Ayrshire and Dundee. Communities Scotland provided funding and monitored the progress of the four pilots.

About Edinburgh Landlord Accreditation (ELA)

Edinburgh Landlord Accreditation (ELA) was established on 1 May 2005. It is a joint initiative between the Scottish Association of Landlords (SAL) and the City of Edinburgh Council to raise standards and recognise good practice in the private rented market. It allows tenants to identify landlords and letting agents who meet the criteria set out in the scheme's Code of Standards.

Aims of ELA

ELA was set up with the following aims:

- to establish and promote credible standards in private renting which are accepted and widely recognised by both the industry and consumer alike
- to provide a coherent, industry-led response to the need to improve the reputation and standards of the private rented market
- to promote a more effective partnership between the industry, public bodies and consumer groups
- to ensure landlords have access to advice and help to improve standards
- to ensure accreditation is understood and widely recognised by current and future customers.

Consultation

ELA was developed in consultation with a Project Board made up of landlords and letting agents who managed property portfolios of varying sizes. We also held a seminar with a wider group involving landlords, agents, university welfare services and consumer interest groups. These discussions produced the scheme's Code of Standards and Policy and Procedures.

How ELA works

ELA relies on self-certification by landlords and letting agents and encompasses all private rented property in the Edinburgh area. Private landlords and letting agents agree to meet the Code of Standards set out by the accreditation scheme.

ELA is responsible for deciding whether or not to accept an application, and may consider any evidence that suggests that a landlord does not comply with the Code when they apply. The accreditation scheme may inspect a sample of properties and interview tenants at any point, to ensure that landlords are complying with the Code of Standards. Landlords may be removed from accreditation if they fail to meet the requirements of the Code of Standards.

Code of Standards

The Code of Standards is based on property and tenancy management, and includes a mixture of current legislation and good practice. The standards cover 10 categories and are based on Communities Scotland's National Framework for Accreditation and Good Practice for private landlords.

The standards include undertakings by landlords on:

- communication with tenants
- equality issues, complaints and disputes
- management of the tenancy
- minimum property condition
- structure and fabric
- repairs and maintenance
- facilities and fittings
- furnishings and white goods
- heating insulation and energy efficiency
- health and safety and home security features.

Breaches of the Code of Standards

If a landlord or letting agent is found to be in breach of the Code of Standards, they will be asked if further information is available or if they agree to remedy the breach.

The main types of breaches of the Code of Standards fall into two categories: persistent problems or minor breaches and serious management problems.

Following investigation of a complaint where reasonable recommendations to rectify an apparent breach have been made, the landlord or letting agent must comply with the scheme's recommendations.

Current incentives for landlords and agents

There are many incentives to encourage landlords and agents to sign up to the scheme.

- ELA offers the marketing advantage of being recognised as a landlord or letting agent who maintains good standards.
- Members can use the ELA logo on stationery, signboards and adverts.
- ELA is free to join.
- ELA offers free advertising on its website.
- University Welfare Services recommend students use an ELA landlord or agent and do not allow non-accredited landlords and agents to advertise in their publications.
- Hydro Electric offers discounted energy efficient appliances.
- Letsure offers 10 per cent off tenant referencing.
- Endsleigh Insurance offers 10 per cent off landlords' insurance.
- Chiene & Tait offer a free financial consultation.

- TC Young offer a free half hour consultation on any aspect of law.

Lessons learned

Several key lessons have been learned as a result of Edinburgh participating in Communities Scotland's voluntary accreditation pilot.

- ELA immediately understood the importance of building up a good working relationship with the Scottish Association of Landlords (SAL), local landlords and letting agents and key stakeholders within the sector.
- Due to the scale and nature of the sector in Edinburgh, ELA recognised in the early stages of development that letting agents would be key players in accessing a large number of landlords and properties, particularly where landlords no longer reside locally. As a result, ELA demonstrated how the National Core Standards could be applicable to letting agents and the properties they represent. In this respect, Edinburgh set the example from which the other Communities Scotland pilots followed.
- From the outset, ELA implemented a clear business planning framework, in which goals and targets have been set and achieved. This approach has ensured that funding sources have been identified and are available in order for the scheme to succeed. ELA, the City of Edinburgh Council and SAL are committed to continually promoting accreditation in the long term.
- ELA has shown the most progressive attitude towards providing private tenants information on accreditation by undertaking innovative methods of marketing.

Conclusion

Edinburgh Landlord Accreditation was the first of the pilot schemes to become fully operational and has been the most successful in terms of numbers thus far. By encouraging landlords and letting agents to adhere to a Code of Standards and offering tenants confidence that their landlord is professional and reputable, the scheme is doing much to raise standards in the private rented sector and improve housing conditions in Edinburgh.

Further information

You can find out more about Edinburgh Landlord Accreditation at the official website: www.edinburghlandlordaccreditation.co.uk.

If you would like any further information, please send an email to practicescotland@shelter.org.uk in the first instance.