

Practitioner article

Development of the Landlords' Forum in Perth & Kinross

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Development of the Landlords' Forum in Perth & Kinross

The Landlords' Forum in Perth & Kinross has successfully engaged landlords while building hard-won trust between the local authority, with its regulatory and enforcement obligations, and those working in the private rented sector in general. Martin Smith discusses the Forum's set up, development and the lessons learned from running it.

Background

The private rented sector in Perth & Kinross plays an increasingly important role in providing accommodation for many different types of households. In rural areas, it is a key contributor to the provision of much needed affordable rented housing as well as sustaining essential tied housing on estates and farms. With its ease of access, the tenure supports labour mobility and is often the tenure of first choice for young professionals. For many other households however, the private rented sector is often the only housing option available to them. This large group, often referred to as the intermediate market, includes many households who are price-excluded from owner-occupation but who have insufficient priority to be allocated social rented accommodation.

Housing quality in the private rented sector varies widely from very poor to highly desirable. Housing and tenancy management is also a variable commodity. There are many landlords who pride themselves in their professional approach to management and the quality of their properties. It seems however, that there are many others who fail to adequately maintain their properties or manage their properties in conscientious fashion. The latter group appears to have increased in recent years as the growth of the 'buy to let' market has created a new generation of investor landlords, many of whom lack the experience to properly manage their tenancies and properties.

The final report of the Housing Improvement Task Force (2003) (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2003/03/16686/19494>) provided a welcome boost to the status of the private rented sector. Whilst recognising the problems of poor condition and management that would have to be tackled, the commitment to a positive future for the sector was underscored by the statement:

'we want to see a thriving private rented sector providing well managed accommodation of acceptable quality for the diversity of types of tenants, who through choice or necessity, take up residence in the sector'.

The spirit of this statement is reflected in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 which recognises both the value of the private rented sector and the need for the local authorities to engage with private landlords in an effort to improve standards.

Local Housing Strategy

Perth & Kinross Council began formally working with private landlords and letting agents in 2003 through the process of developing the Local Housing Strategy (LHS). The *Census 2001* (<http://www.scrol.gov.uk/scrol/common/home.jsp>) revealed that 10.56 per cent of households in Perth & Kinross were accommodated in either furnished or unfurnished private-rented accommodation; this compared to just 6.71 per cent of households in Scotland as a whole. It was recognised at this time that the Council needed to do more to engage with the private sector, initially because the LHS demanded a holistic assessment and strategic response which took account of the housing system as a whole. We found at this time that we didn't really have a great deal of knowledge about the private sector and much of the information that was available related only to property conditions.

Whilst we only managed to tempt 5 landlords and letting agents to the initial meeting in December 2003, the enthusiasm of those who did attend was encouraging. The Landlords' Forum, as we know it now, evolved on the back of this enthusiasm from what was initially intended to be a consultation exercise.

Landlords' Forum formed

The first Landlords' Forum proper took place in March 2004 and was attended by the same five landlords and letting agents that had been involved in the LHS consultation. We invited John Blackwood of the Scottish Association of Landlords (SAL) to come along and speak about landlord accreditation and tell us how landlords' forums operated in other areas. In February 2004, Perth & Kinross Council, along with other Scottish Local Authorities, was invited by Communities Scotland to express an interest in participating in a programme of pilot landlord accreditation schemes. Unfortunately, despite having expressed strong interest, Perth & Kinross was not selected as one of the pilot areas.

Development

It is both interesting and encouraging to reflect on how the Landlords' Forum has developed in Perth & Kinross since the early days. We are currently on our third venue having moved from a meeting room in our main Council office to a larger meeting room at the local library and, more recently, to the theatre at the library. These changes of venue have been driven by increasing interest in the Forum amongst local landlords and letting agents; over 50 people attended our most recent Forum in February 2007. As well as changing to venues with a larger capacity, we now have the Landlords' Forum in the evening rather than during the day. This has made it more accessible for landlords and letting agents with busy schedules and has been particularly successful in attracting more 'part-time' landlords who often have full-time jobs that are not related to their landlord activities.

Keys to success

From our experience in Perth & Kinross, it seems that there are two key elements to running a successful Landlords' Forum. Firstly, it is important that the Forum is an interactive experience where people with a shared interest in the private-rented sector can meet and discuss issues relating to the sector. It is important to have some structure for the Forum in terms of an agenda but it is equally important to be able to go with the flow when a certain topic stimulates a lot of discussion or debate. Generally, people do not like being lectured to, especially about a subject where they already have a degree of knowledge. As a Council Officer facilitating a Landlords' Forum, it is important to remember that it is likely that a majority of attendees will know more about private renting than you do. If a Forum has gone well, we usually come away feeling that we've learned a thing or two.

The second key element to a successful Forum is that the agenda items should be driven by the attendees. I'm not suggesting that you run the Forum on the basis of an open-floor approach as this is risky; you may be met with a barrage of questions that you can't answer or perhaps by an uncomfortable silence. In Perth & Kinross, we use feedback forms to find out what landlords and letting agents think about the Forum. As well as asking for feedback on the Forum that they have just participated in, attendees are asked to suggest topics for future Forums. We take these suggestions on board and where possible, we aim to formulate the agenda for the next Forum from these suggestions. This seems to work well as it gives landlords and letting agents a sense of ownership of the event.

Topics

We have covered a fairly wide range of topics at recent forums and welcomed some excellent guest speakers both from within the Council or from appropriate external agencies. The following list gives an idea of the kind of topics we have covered:

- landlord accreditation
- landlord registration
- housing benefit
- resolving conflict - community mediation
- Housing (Scotland) Act 2006
- private sector leasing
- private landlord and letting agent training
- tackling anti-social behaviour

Whilst these have been the main agenda items at recent events, many other subjects arise through discussion and debate.

Training

It became clear at the Landlords' Forum in October 2006 that there was a strong demand from private landlords and letting agents for training on various subjects. As a result, we contacted the City of Edinburgh Council who have an established programme of private sector training events which are delivered by their Letwise team. Letwise were very helpful and we agreed to work together to deliver a series of Letwise training course in Perth & Kinross. These courses were delivered in February and March 2007 and covered the legal aspects and correct procedures associated with the setting up of private sector tenancy agreements and recovering possession of private rented properties.

The courses were very popular and were, in fact, over-subscribed. It was also encouraging to note from the positive feedback that all of the landlords and letting agents who attended had learned a lot and said that they would be changing their practices and procedures in view of what they had learned. The training was also attended by several members of our homelessness team who took the opportunity to enhance their knowledge of private sector tenancies and to network with local landlords and letting agents.

Conclusions

Facilitating a Landlords Forum is an excellent way of engaging with landlords and other professionals in the private-rented sector. If you are considering establishing a Forum or developing an existing Forum, try to make the event convenient for landlords and letting agents to attend and ensure that it is as interactive as possible. It is important to have fresh topics to discuss at each event in order to maintain the interest of all parties: as far as possible, these topics should be suggested by the landlords themselves. It can initially be difficult to overcome the barriers that seem to exist between local authorities with their regulatory and enforcement obligations and the private rented sector which is feeling increasingly targeted by all sorts of regulatory legislation. It may take some time to build trust but it is well worth the effort.

Further information

If you would like any further information about the Landlords' Forum at Perth & Kinross, please send an email to practicescotland@shelter.org.uk in the first instance.