

Notes of the Regeneration and Neighbourhoods OSC
Infirmary Selective Landlord Licencing Consultation Task Group & site visit.
Wednesday 19th August 2015

Present: Cllrs Surve, Casey and Whittle.

Also Present: Cllr Jan-Virmani- Executive Member for Neighbourhoods, Housing and Customer Services, Sayyed Osman – Director of Housing, Localities and Prevention, Paul Hodges – Principle Housing Standards Officer, Peter Cooke - Service Lead Strategic Housing & Rebekah Mottershead – Scrutiny Support Officer

At the meeting of the Committee held on the 15th July 2015 Members received a presentation which provided them with an overview of the aims to achieve the effective licencing of privately rented properties in the Infirmary and Central Darwen areas of the borough.

It was agreed that it would be beneficial for Members to view the consultation proposal to re-designate the Infirmary area as a Selective Landlord Licencing (SLL) Scheme. It was also agreed that Members undertake a site visit to this area to discern how far the initial SLL pilot scheme had effectively improved the area, and how re-designation would ensure that standards in this neighbourhood continued to raise.

Subsequently a task group was held on the 19th August 2015 at which the Director of Housing, Localities and Prevention, together with Senior Housing Officers, provided Members with the full proposal for the Infirmary Selective Licencing designation, highlighting the key aims and objectives together with the potential challenges that the department would face in implementing and administering the scheme.

Consultation

Members were provided with a map outlining the suggested area for inclusion within the scheme, a copy of the full consultation proposal and a list of frequently asked questions & answers from landlords and residents. These documents have been published on the Council's website and can be accessed via the following link; <http://www.blackburn.gov.uk/Pages/selective-licensing-consultation.aspx>.

Members were provided with the statistics produced via the analysis of lessons learned from the areas pilot SLL scheme. The Service Lead Strategic Housing Officer advised that a steady decrease in the number of empty properties in the Infirmary area could be demonstrated over the 5 years this scheme was in operation. It was noted that whilst the number of vacant homes had fallen from 12% to 6%, this was still above the national average of 4%. Members were informed that in re-designating the area for SLL it was hoped that this figure would continue to decrease, thus creating a larger, more stable community.

It was reported that the number of privately rented houses in the Infirmary area had increased from 16.4% to 29.6%. The task group raised concerns that tenant turnover was particularly high in this area and questioned if regulations could be implemented

to impose a minimum term on tenancy agreements. Members were informed that whilst this could significantly reduce transience in the area, current legislation did not allow the department to enforce such a condition.

Officer's outlined the mandatory conditions that could be imposed upon a landlord. It was noted that whilst these conditions stated references must be taken, there was nothing to indicate by whom they should be provided, or that they had to be written; which somewhat counterbalanced the rationale for the undertaking of thorough reference checks. Members agreed that it would be beneficial to pursue avenues to bring about the revision of this legislation.

The task group was provided with a full list of discretionary conditions that the department were looking to implement to the licence. It was noted that the completion of regular, proactive, inspections was important to ensure landlords complied with the licencing conditions. Members were informed that if a landlord failed to comply, the department would impose sanctions upon them and could revoke their licence where they felt it appropriate, as the department wanted to take a harder line with any landlords breaching regulations.

Officers provided Members with the example that Landlords had been given 12 months from their licence being issued to submit a satisfactory electrical certificate. It was reported that 33 certificates were submitted stating the electrical wiring was unsatisfactory and a further 63 certificates where the property had been re-wired or where works had been carried out immediately prior to the certificate being submitted. Members noted that this indicated that the wiring in 96 properties (35%) was made safe as a result of the introduction of the licensing scheme.

Walkabout

The Director of Housing, Localities and Prevention guided Members around the Infirmary area, pointing out locations that had seen a vast improvement throughout the pilot SLL scheme and highlighting several areas that would further benefit from re-designation.

A discussion was held around environmental crime and its budgetary consequences, with the Director indicating that the majority of fly tipping instances arose as the result of missing bins or from the disposal of short term tenants' belongings (with fridges, mattresses being the most commonly dumped items).

In their walk around the area Members noted that the level of fly tipping had decreased for the most part, with many alleyways now being clear of all but one or two bin liners. Members found two alleyways where a fridge and a mattress had been dumped and questioned the procedure for removal of such goods. They were advised that a fly tipping crew would be dispatched to check for any evidence and then remove the items. It was reported that this process cost the Council a significant amount over the course of a financial year.

The Director indicated that it would be useful to explore as to whether it would be more cost effective to request that, in instances where there was one black bag, that the refuse crew removed it on collection day. Members discussed the pros and cons,

deliberating if this would encourage residents to keep the clean area clear of waste or if it would discourage behaviour change as a president would be set that incorrect disposal of waste would simply be cleared without any consequences.

Members questioned if mobile CCTV in known hotspots would help to prevent anti-social behaviour/environmental crime. The Director advised that such a tool could be beneficial but that the Council's RIPA (Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act) policy prevented the operation of CCTV for this purpose.

A number of vacant properties in varying degrees of disrepair were highlighted to Members. It was noted that a vast amount of gable end properties had damaged downspouts, meaning water regularly cascaded down the side of the properties and onto the footway, which caused damp to the house and was a potential danger to the public in adverse weather. The Director indicated that this would be the responsibility of the planning department, but they did not often have the resources to complete such property inspections on a regular basis.

The task group was informed that in light of efficiency measures being implemented throughout the Council, that data sharing and collaborative working between services was paramount to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of services, for example, the Environmental Crime team could be given the power to implement planning enforcement procedures on empty properties whilst out on their rounds.

It was reported that a tenancy handbook was to be created with the intention of it being issued to all new occupants at the start of their tenancy. It was advised that each pack would include general advice on rights and responsibilities of both the tenant and the landlord and a pack with specific information on the immediate area, i.e. environmental information, Dr's surgery details and of community solutions meeting details. Members were reminded that a task group meeting would be scheduled to view this handbook before the next meeting of the Committee.

In viewing the consultation proposals and through inspection of the area, Members were impressed with the improvement to the overall housing conditions and of the environment since their last site visit to the Infirmary area, and felt that to ensure that these positive outcomes continued it was important that the scheme was re-introduced to this area.

Next Steps

- For a task group & site visit to be arranged for Members to view the Central Darwen area of the borough to coincide with the start of the SLL consultation process.
- That a task group be arranged for the Committee to view the licencing handbook