1/07/2020



Minutes - Meeting of the Agents Liaison Group

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## Introductions – including guidance on using Teams during a meeting

The meeting organised in the form of an online conference took place on 1st June 2020 at 18:00.

### Participants:

**Agents and Partners:**

Tusvinder Bodhan (Taz) (partial attendance)

Owen Cosslett

Gaynor Cunningham

Mike Dawson

Terry Galloway

Luke Pritchet

Jakub Pietruszewski - Unipol

Linda Cobb - DASH

Giles Inman - EMPO

**Council representatives:**

Cllr Linda Woodings, Portfolio Holder

**David Walker,** Head of Safer Housing and ASB (meeting chair)

**David Hobbs**, Selective Licensing Manager

**Julie Liversidge**, Additional and Mandatory Licensing Manager

**Duncan Newbutt**, Safer Housing Manager

**Paul Greevy**, Homelessness Prevention & Assessment Manager

**Graham Demax**, Housing Partnership Manager

**Michelle Acar** (minutes and actions)

**Robert Skwierawski** (minutes and actions)

**Lisa Allison** (Communications)

### Apologies:

Emma White

## Welcome – the reason behind this group

* *David Walker* emphasised that the idea of the forum is to get the managing agents involved in the working with the council.
* *Councillor Linda Woodings* noted that online meetings have much better participation than traditional ones. By organising forums the council delivers its promise to get things done, to cooperate constructively with landlords and managing agents. The common aim is to improve housing standards and find solution to the problems like homelessness. Money from the government given in relation to the pandemic only covers less than half of additional costs, that is why the council has financial problems and is looking for additional savings.
* *Owen Cosslett* stated that chosen participants of the forum do not constitute adequate representation of letting market, he asked how many candidates there were and what the criteria of selection were. *Julie Liversidge* explained that the council tried to choose candidates who represent varied portfolios. The revision was also based on information presented in the applications. Two members of the group dropped out before the first meeting. *David Walker* asked to reps to suggest what kind of agents would be a good representation so that we can add them.
* *Mike Dawson* noticed that agents should be more pro-active in presenting ideas.
* *Jakub Pietruszewski* remarked that online meetings provide excellent opportunity for creating a democratic forum.
* *Lisa Allison* referring to an earlier issue said that there were altogether 55 applications for liaison groups, 14 of them from managing agents. The council chose 10 agents, 2 of them dropped out.

## What is expected? Rules of the groups

*David Walker* ensured that the idea of the forum is to have everyone’s voice heard. It is absolutely fine to have a disagreement about some issues. What is important is transparency and mutual respect.

*Linda Woodings* made it clear that forum is not a place for making individual complaints but for improving our procedures.

## Present issues for Managing Agents – how can we help you?

* *Owen Cosslett* stated frankly his dissatisfaction about dealing with the council. Day to day business is hard to do, there are many officers in the council but there is nothing like concrete help from a particular person if needed. It has been expressed that the system of licensing is too complicated, there are not good procedures so it doesn’t run smoothly when applying. Everything takes too much time. There should be a single point of contact, kind of customer service where you could arrange everything instead of dealing with many departments and people.
* *Luke Pritchet* said that the council does not recognise agents work for landlords. Agents can be partners for the council in implementation of regulations and raising housing standards, instead they are often a party to blame or demand from.
* *Mike Dawson* noticed that vast majority of his landlords have only one or two properties. They pay a mortgage on them, they pay insurance. Any additional costs are a serious burden. It cannot be that majority of good landlords must bear legislative costs of dealing with rough landlords.
* *David Walker* agreed that council needs to review some processes to avoid putting a burden on landlords whose tenants never experience problems.
* *Jakub Pietruszewski* said that he used to work in Leeds where a single property landlord market is typical and it is very similar to Nottingham. We can observe situation and tendencies in Leeds to implement similar solutions here. Jakub said that housing should not be treated in isolation to the surroundings. He suggested that the money from selective licensing should be also spent on street maintenance, dealing with antisocial behaviour.
* *David Hobbs* explained that selective licensing fees only cover administrative costs of running the scheme, costs of inspections and law implementation. Fees would not be able to pay for the improvements in a given area. However, housing team works closely with other departments and raises all the issues. These are dealt with using different funding.
* *Linda Woodings* explained that because of the lockdown the work of the street staff was stopped. Now it is being resumed. Every issue can be reported to the council.
* *Graham Demax* admitted that dealing with different council departments can be like dealing with separate institutions. Services should be linked.
* *David Walker* promised to change the situation and have “a journey of an agent” analysed.
* *Owen Cosslett* noticed that sometimes the actions of different departments are contradictory. Social workers demand help for particular tenants whereas other department may demand to close a property. He said that agents do not have their own liaison officer. It is the council that has technology to improve selective licensing process and link it with the work of different departments.
* *Gaynor Cunningham* noticed that accreditation benefits on HMO were lost recently …

While dealing with HMO licensing council officers provide individual help, the path way of dealing with things is clearer and simpler. It should be the same about selective licensing.

* *David Walker* stated that the council is a regulator, not an enemy. He admitted that officers should not label anybody as a rough landlord; we need to re-set the relationship.
* *Terry Galloway* said that the council should change the perception, should demonstrate that positive things happen. There should be better cooperation with community support. Some duties should be shared.
* *Paul Greevy* suggested organisational shift. Contact centre should put a client straight to a responsible officer. There should be accountability for who deals with particular things. Customer journey should be direct. In this way frustration and complaints will be reduced.
* *Owen C.* noticed that it is the tenant who pays costs of inefficient system
* *David Hobbs* admitted that the council does not know well enough the agents work experience. The process must be made easier and more efficient.
* *Owen C* said that there must be direct way of getting to particular departments otherwise plenty of time is wasted. Sometimes he had 3 different officers dealing with cases in one property. There should be a single point of contact.

## How the groups will work? What each party hopes to get from these meetings?

*Luke Pritchet* expressed a wish that agents should be recognised as there to help. He gave an example of spending significant amount of time on educating landlords how to act. This is for the benefit of the council.

*Mike Dawson* described three areas for improvement

1. Reduction of administrative burdens. Exaggerated administration is not manageable for landlords
2. Reduction of fees. High costs of licences bear very big implications for landlords turning some of them away from renting. As a consequence there are fewer properties available
3. Unification of service. Council departments are too specialised. It should be enough to deal with one officer, maximum 2, in order to arrange things

In response to the above *David Hobbs* said that the council already started changing the process into a simpler one. There is a list of issues to be modified. DBS checks and insurance certificates have already been stripped out.

*Graham Demax* added (through the chat option) that the council officers need a better understanding of the agent business. Why not an action to have a virtual training event where an agent explains the business?

*Jakub Pietruszewski* suggested that applications should not be filled up every time for a property but submitted online.

## Coronavirus – effects on Managing Agents and the council

* *Linda Woodings* mentioned that a survey has been sent to landlords. The results will be published soon.
* *Luke Pritchet* said that the agents had already been prepared to arrange many things electronically, the lockdown just gave a push to do it faster. There is a problem how to verify some information, e.g. rent reduction requests. Some students wanted to have rent reduced or suspended on the basis of their classes being cancelled. We tried to explain that it cannot be a reason for ceasing payments.
* *Owen C* added that the pandemic is used as an excuse not to pay rent, however commercial tenants do have real problems.
* *Mike Dawson* said that it has also been impossible to inspect properties.

It has been stated that currently there is a big demand for properties and not much being offered on the market. As a result vulnerable people are rejected because landlords prefer to choose tenants who do not require social help. (No DSS tenants)

* *Jakub P* sent a link through the chat about information and advice on Coronavirus in Student Accommodation <https://www.nationalcode.org/news/information-and-advice-on-coronavirus-in-student-accommodation-for-housing-suppliers> He also said that UNIPOL as a charity is a focal point of students enquires.
* *Giles Inman* proposed (through the chat) that a platform where agents can feed into future local regulatory proposals should be found. He also noticed that we need to set the expectation around student ASB with long term residents.
* *Luke Pritchet* added (through the chat) that we have already seen that students want to move in over the summer rather than at the start of the academic year.

## Communications

*Lisa Allison* said that the minutes of today’s meeting and the action points will be presented in the newsletter and sent to members directly. She encouraged participants to keep in touch by email correspondence in between the meetings and to send any queries and items for discussion at the next meeting to *Robert Skwierawski*. She requested active communication with landlords and bringing forward any queries from them.

## GDPR – how people can contact representatives

*Lisa Allison* said that emails will constitute contact details for the members of the group and other parties collaborating with us.

There will be The Teams Thread left open to enable communication as well.

Privacy Notice will be sent to all members to see what they are agreeing to when it comes to distribution of the contact details. Each agent will also be asked to sign a GDPR consent form to allow the council to share their contact details with other agents and landlords.

## AOB

* *Councillor Linda Woodings* confirmed she will be present at the next meeting.
* *Owen C* noted that the council should prevent movement of agents away from the social housing especially that there is a strong demand for such accommodation.
* *Linda Woodings* said that currently there are 8877 people on a waiting list for a council house. Renting sector must be used to accommodate for this.
* *Giles Inman* noticed that there must be an opportunity for the individual agents to feed into proposed legislation. So far the council have not listened to businesses. More engagement is necessary especially in planning, prevention of antisocial behaviour, eviction processes. There should be officers providing guidance and support for the agents.
* *David Walker* said that there is a spike in household antisocial behaviour because people stay long time inside. There are growing disrepair issues.
* Owen Cosslett said that the council should provide help with HMO properties, suggest how improvements can be made rather than issuing letters with demands.
* Terry Galloway suggested that inspection of students’ properties should be coordinated, currently there are separate activities paid for by universities and separate council controls.

*Counsellor Linda Woodings* thanked everybody for the participation in the meeting and declared that the council’s future decisions will be based on cooperation. She asked to provide feedback.