

Appendix One - Private Sector Housing

Update February 2021

1. In a normal 12 month period the service receives around 3500/4000 requests for service, serves up to 1500 legal notices, undertakes up to 2500 inspections and improves the homes of at least 4000 individuals. With COVID and the restricted ability to inspect properties the ability of the service to address conditions and standards has been limited. The service continued to support the wider COVID priorities within the Council including seconding officers to support the COVID response with colleagues in Environmental Health.
2. However, as a service we have continued to deliver the service given the various different restrictions faced due to COVID. In September 2020 we started the process of remobilisation of all services including the proactive inspections linked to licence compliance and ensuring all aspects of service delivery pre-COVID were recommenced.
3. Since March 2021 the service has received 2293 requests for service, despite COVID concerns and different ways of working the service still managed 1295 inspections, served 595 substantive notices not including licenses, removed 634 hazards by both formal and informal means and improved 174 properties benefiting 564 residents.

Leeds Rental Standard

4. As part of the support for landlords the Council continues to support the Leeds Rental Standard. This is a means by which the landlords can self-regulate, signing up to good property and management conditions and having a robust complaints and disciplinary process to ensure high standards. The scheme is administered by a board with representatives from the sector including the Council. The aim is to drive up standards and work with landlords to improve their businesses and the homes offered and allow good landlords to self-regulate their businesses allowing the Council to put resources into addressing poor and criminal landlords.
5. Currently there are 443 members who rent out approximately 5160 properties 40,000 bedspaces in the city. The main membership remains in the student market, and we continue to try and increase membership. The board continues to promote the scheme to increase membership.
6. To promote membership of the scheme, members are offered incentives to support their businesses. These include complaint resolution via the scheme not the Council, access to parking permits for residential areas, help and advice on issues affecting their business, discount on any licence application and waste concessions. Incentives are kept under review with the aim of helping to promote and grow the scheme. Recently the waste concession has been proposed an increased from 6 to 12 tonnes per annum to help landlords address waste from their properties and help to reduce the impact of rented properties in communities. This will be subject to approval via the Council's Executive Board in February.

Reactive

7. Currently the service is still trying to resolve requests remotely where possible, as per Government guidance which has been in place for most of the last 12 months, but with the appropriate risk assessments in place we are now visiting more and more properties where we can control the environment and keep all parties safe. This has now increased to allow a return to full provision of service delivery, with the restrictions of ensuring all parties remain safe and continually kept under review based as circumstances change.
8. The service has revised its first contact to try and improve outcomes. This has led to the creation of a new Duty Officer process with officers being more involved in the initial conversations to try and resolve the issues remotely and speedily without the need for more formal action.

Rogue Landlord Unit (RLU)

9. The Rogue Landlord Unit continues to work closely with partners, including amongst others, the Police, DWP and Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) to target criminal landlords who use the sector as part of their business models rather than simply poor or rogue landlords who just provide poor accommodation. The RLU is currently involved in several developing and ongoing multi agency operations in the city with the aim of detecting and disrupting organised crime. The working model that is being developed with partners, has contributed to over forty successful police raids across the city at addresses linked to cannabis farms and human trafficking. As a result of these operations approximately £5m worth of cannabis has been seized. The developing relationship with our partners has allowed for a greater sharing of intelligence and information. In turn, this has allowed us to focus our resources on addresses, individuals and companies based on intelligence. As a result, more of the visits and inspections have had a positive outcome.
10. Despite the issues and restrictions with COVID over the last 12 months the RLU have still managed 57 inspections, visited 51 properties to obtain intelligence and served 99 notices on targeted properties. The enforcement actions undertaken by the RLU have included closure of premises through emergency and prohibition orders and serving of notices requiring multiple works to be carried out at premises to address issues such as fire safety, electrical hazards, dampness, and heating provision.

Selective Licensing – Beeston and Harehills

11. The Council designated Beeston and Harehills as areas subject to selective licensing. Both areas came into force as of the 6th January 2020. As of that date, all private landlords are required to have a licence (or applied for one) to operate their rental property. The licence is subject to a fee which will cover the cost of the scheme. The fee income cannot be used to support any other activity by the Council including the enforcement of Part 1 of the Housing Act 2004.
12. Since the commencement of the scheme the Council has received 6309 licence applications, 2488 for Beeston and 3810 for Harehills by December 2021. 377 applications have not progressed of which 377 due to non-payment of fees and 322 as they do not require a licence.

13. Of the applications received by December 2021 4530 licences have been issued, 1936 in Beeston and 2594 in Harehills, with a further 496 draft licences issued, 148 in Beeston and 348 in Harehills. There are still 514 outstanding applications to process, 113 in Beeston and 401 in Harehills.
14. It is estimated that there remains around 500/600 properties in both areas requiring a licence but potentially operating without one in breach of the designated scheme. Whilst not proactively looking for properties due to COVID and safe ways of working we have due to complaints or intelligence investigated 260 rented properties in both areas for operating without a licence. To operate without a licence is an absolute offence which may lead to prosecution or a civil penalty of up to £30k. Of the 260 properties investigated, 168 have resulted in formal action, mainly civil penalties in line with the Council's enforcement policy. A significant number are subject to appeal which we are awaiting dates from the tribunal for hearings.
15. Unfortunately, due to COVID restrictions and safe ways of working we have had to delay proactive visits to properties until the back end of the year. The delay is far from ideal as this has reduced the ability to start to address issues in the area but will now allow us to ensure compliance with the licence conditions, address any breaches, continue to target those landlords who fail to ensure that they hold a valid licence or ensure minimum property standards, support the good landlords and working with partners address individual and neighbourhood issues.
16. Proactive visits to properties has now commenced in both areas initially targeting the Beverley/Barton's in Beeston and the Nowells/Ashtons in Harehills. Both areas were in the lowest 1% based on the IMD data in 2015. As part of the approach all properties to be visited are written to and leafleted to promote the scheme as the reasons for the visits to the properties. Given the demographics of the areas we are aware of issues with language barriers and are working with colleagues in the Migration and Localities teams to produce material to target those hard to reach communities based on the lessons learnt during COVID. This includes working with community connectors, leaders, videos etc to try and ensure that the right message is provided, and we can help and support all in the area by crossing the threshold and dealing with issues facing some of our more deprived communities.

HMO's

17. The city continues to have a high level of licenced HMO's. Currently there are 2820 licensed properties in the city, mainly in the inner north west of the city and student market. The service has been restricted during COVID as it has not been able to undertake its normal proactive checking of licence conditions and investigations for non-compliance with Part 2 of the Housing Act 2004. However whenever possible it has continued to investigate those licensable properties which are operating without a licence and take the appropriate action. Proactive compliance check recommenced as part of the remobilisation of the service from October 2021.
18. From March to September 2022, we will have most of the renewal of licences coming into the service. This is due to the expiry of licences after the maximum 5 year period allowed for a licence. Most are due at this time due to the commencement of mandatory HMO licencing just over 15 years ago as part of the Housing Act 2004.

19. We anticipated 2000/2500 licences will need to be processed during this time. Currently we are developing a new online payment and renewal process for those wanting to renew prior to the expiry of their licences. The new licensing fee for the next five years (subject to review and any changing circumstances) was approved in December 2021 at £975 (first part £635 and the second part £340 or £190 if a member of the Leeds Rental Standard).
20. A significant number of HMO do not fall within the criteria for HMO licensing. In recent years the Council has seen an increase in smaller overdeveloped HMO's across the city. These tend to be occupied by some of the more vulnerable in our society. To target these properties the service has a proactive HMO team which targets such homes. These are targeted based on intelligence, complaints and referrals from partners. This has led to working in partnership to support vulnerable individuals found living in such properties, addressing issues of human trafficking and modern slavery and ensuring properties are prohibited from use until suitable for occupation.
21. Space is a real issue in these properties and the Council has worked with colleagues in Planning, Lord Best and others to try and address space standards in such homes. This has resulted in a number of successful cases which has set precedents for space standards in the private rented sector, and recent changes in the permitted development scheme to include space standards.
22. The Council has now published guidance for landlords on space and overcrowding which has been produced in consultation with national and local landlords' associations, and colleagues in Planning and Legal. In addition, Planning colleagues are currently developing and consulting on a Supplementary Planning Document for space standards which will also help to improve standards in the city.

Landlord Letting Scheme (LLS)

23. The service continues to support the homelessness prevention agenda and improve homes via the LLS. It allows individuals and families facing housing concerns to access the private rented sector and with close engagement with landlords, it provides support into taking those vulnerable tenants who may have found access to this market difficult. This has been achieved through a range of financial incentives, affordability assessments and both landlord and tenant support schemes to provide stable and sustainable homes. The service continues to work with colleagues in LHO through inspection of prospective properties to ensure that they meet suitability criteria, being safe and compliant and also support marketing campaigns to increase supply of private rented property from property owners, landlords and agents.
24. During the lockdown officers have continued to work with colleagues in LHO and the sector to provide homes for those in need. This has been critical to the support to rehouse those in the hotels due to COVID as well as others in need and helping to prevent homelessness by providing good quality privately rented accommodation to those in need. Since the start of March to December 2021, 334 properties have been sourced via the scheme providing much needed accommodation for those looking for a home.

Leeds Neighbourhood Approach (LNA)

25. The LNA has continued to proactively target properties in Holbeck as part of the Locality Approach adopted by the Council to target resources to the neighbourhoods most in need. By crossing the threshold of properties where the most vulnerable live, it has enabled the team to not only improve their homes, but also make a difference to their lives, through enabling partners who the team are working with to target their resources more intensely to those individuals who need them most making a bigger difference to their lives. Due to the nature of the work undertaken by the team and its partners, COVID has restricted activity, unfortunately including the closure of the pop-up hub which partners supported to provide a place for the community to access support for jobs, training, financial support, benefit checks, and help with their health needs.
26. The team have targeted over 1000 homes in the Holbeck area with 50 left to inspect. They are also focusing on returning long term empty homes back into use in three other areas (in addition to Holbeck) namely, Beeston, Armley and Harehills. Despite limitations due to COVID in the last 12 months, over 206 property inspections have taken place, 36 long term empty homes have been returned to use, 52 external inspections and 48 visits to homes have been carried out. 103 enforcement notices have been served including, improvement notices due to unsafe premises and notices exercising powers of entry.
27. Whilst the service will continue to support the work in Holbeck as it is a priority area this will be with a reduced presence. The resources within the LNA will in the future be utilised to support improving housing conditions with Beeston and Harehills as part of the wider approach to the areas over and above the licensing scheme itself adopting the same model of crossing the threshold and supporting tenants and landlords as part of the wider partnership approach. The resources from the LNA will deal with conditions and aspects of housing which cannot be covered by the selective licensing schemes, namely Part 1 of the Housing Act 2004, as well as working with partners to address individual needs as per the work in Holbeck.

Empty Homes

28. Addressing empty homes remains a priority for the Council and the service. Everyone is a potential home for someone and prevents the need to build a new one. Between 2012 and 2017 as part of the Core Planning Strategy the Council reduced the number of empty homes by 2000 to 3776. Since then, the Council has continued to work with partners in the Community Led Housing field and Empty Homes Doctor to maintain the level below this figure as of the end of each financial year. As of March 2021, the level of empty homes in the city was 3810, 34 over the 3776 target.
29. From the first lockdown the trend in empty homes has been continued to be monitored as it has increased above the expect trends pre-COVID. Whilst it appears most markets have fluctuated as pre-COVID and remained reasonable constant both the student and city centre markets have seen an increase in empty homes. This is not surprising given the home tutoring of students during the last 20 months and the lack of attractiveness of city centre living given the lockdown of amenities at various points in the last 20 months and the move towards a need for outdoor space for people's wellbeing. Both markets are expected to recover over the next 12 months.

