

# Overview and Scrutiny Task Group - Private Rented Housing Inspection

**Thursday, 2 February 2012**

**Present:** Councillor Beverley Murray (Chair) and Harold Heaton, Steve Holgate, Hasina Khan, Paul Leadbetter and June Molyneaux

**Also in attendance:** Simon Clark (Head of Health, Environment and Neighbourhoods), Zoe Whiteside (Head of Housing), Kath Knowles (Housing Strategy Manager) and Carol Russell (Democratic Services Manager).

## **12.RHI.1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Alison Hansford.

## **12.RHI.2 DECLARATIONS OF ANY INTERESTS**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **12.RHI.3 PRIVATE RENTED HOUSING INSPECTION IN CHORLEY**

Simon Clark, Head of Health, Environment and Neighbourhoods and Kath Knowles, Housing Strategy Manager gave a joint presentation on the current arrangements in Chorley for the inspection of private rented housing including the formal role and powers of the Council.

The housing conditions survey identified that there was an estimated 4100 private rented houses in the borough – 10% of the housing stock. Around a third of the Borough's private rented property is located in the neighbourhood area of Chorley Town East.

Simon Clark provided information on the Council's responsibilities in relation to housing standards and the hazard scoring system introduced by the DCLGs Decency Standards for Housing and the Housing Act 2004. The Council can only take enforcement action against landlords where private rented housing has Category 1 hazards - hazards that can cause harm. It was estimated that 15% of all private rented dwellings had Category 1 hazards - but unless complaints were received from tenants there was no mechanism to identify and deal with them. Category 2 hazards eg lack of amenity and disrepair cannot be enforced by the Council and are down to the landlord to repair.

The service provided by the Council in inspecting private rented accommodation is a reactive one, responding to complaints. There is no statutory duty to inspect – except in relation to Houses in Multiple Occupation – of which there are only a handful in the Borough. Statistics were provided for the number of housing service requests received by the neighbourhoods team – averaging about 500 per year. Of those only 50 to 60 a year had resulted in inspections and around 10 to 15 a year in notices being served.

Kath Knowles presented information on the legal rights of both tenants and landlords. Private rented accommodation offers far less security of tenure compared to social housing with the landlord only being required to give a tenant

2 months notice to leave. There are a number of safeguards in place to protect and assist tenants including a tenancy Deposit Protection Scheme and the Council's Rental Bond Scheme.

The Council's housing and health, environment and neighbourhoods teams worked together to deal with issues around housing standards and repairs and illegal eviction and harassment. There is also a Private Landlords Forum meeting quarterly to support and advise private landlords.

There were a number of opportunities to enhance work done to improve housing standards for tenants in private rented housing, including a proactive inspection regime. However the resources needed to provide this were very high and were therefore more common in areas with a large private rented stock with poor housing conditions. Landlord accreditation schemes were also in place in some areas but they had limited impact as they predominantly attracted the better landlords.

During discussion the following key issues and concerns were raised by members:

1. Where are the estimated 4100 private rented properties in the borough located? This information is only held by the Council Tax team and disclosure is limited by data protection legislation.
2. Concerns that an estimated 15% of private rented housing stock has Category 1 hazards.
3. Some mechanism of inspection in addition to responding to complaints about housing standards is required in order for landlords to feel that poor housing standards may be challenged by the Council, with the real possibility of enforcement action.

**RESOLVED – That the following information be provided for the next meeting:**

**1. The Head of Governance be asked to advise on how information held by the Council on the location of private rented property could be shared to enable further inspection to be considered; and**

**2. That research be undertaken on the existence of Landlord Accreditation (or similar schemes) elsewhere in the north west and on any scrutiny reviews of private rented housing conditions which may have been undertaken nationally.**

#### **12.RHI.4 SCOPING THE REVIEW**

The Chair advised on the need to scope the review, to clarify what Members wanted to achieve from it. It was generally agreed that the key objective was to improve housing conditions within the private rented sector in Chorley Borough. The desired outcomes were to encourage private landlords to tackle poor housing standards in their properties and to ensure that the Council took action where problems were known to exist.

**RESOLVED – That based on Members discussion, the project outline for the review be drafted for consideration at the next meeting of the Task Group.**

**12.RHI.5 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

It was agreed that the next meeting would take place on Tuesday 21 February 2012 at 6.00pm in Committee Room 1.

Chair