

**PUBLIC FACING INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO ASSIST TENANTS IN THE
PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR.**

Report of the Director of Place Management

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1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To update members on a number of initiatives being delivered under the GM Good Landlords Scheme to improve the Private rented sector. The report will also update on what information is currently available on the Council website in relation to the Sector, and what new information is being added following a recent review.

2. HOUSING STANDARDS INTERVENTION IN THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

- 2.1 Back in early 2018, the Housing Standards Service was reviewed to identify how a more targeted approach could potentially increase the positive impact interventions have on the private rented sector.
- 2.2 The review considered how the team could enable Stockport tenants to access good quality information and support to enable them to assert their rights and how tougher action can be taken to effectively tackle poor landlords in the borough.
- 2.3 The review led to improved information and advice available on Council web pages to enable some tenants to resolve their own problems where possible, giving the Housing Standards Team time to focus on key cases.
- 2.4 The revised approach which was implemented in 2018 is still followed today and involves:
 - 2.4.1 Tenant Self Help - Improved information available for tenants to enable them to help themselves in some cases.
 - 2.4.2 Informal and Quick Case Management Complaints – A system where tenants cases that do not fall into the category above, are dealt with quickly and informally.
 - 2.4.3 Formal and Charge – More time to deal with the most difficult, worst cases by undertaking formal action, including the use of civil penalties to deal with Landlords who rent out properties in poor conditions.
- 2.5 Following the review:
 - 2.5.1 Visits to the Housing Standards 'Information for Tenants' web pages increased by 11%

- 2.5.2 Service requests reduced by 31.4 % indicating that some tenants are able to help themselves using the information on webpages.
- 2.5.3 Civil penalties amounting to £87,250 have been served on landlords providing sub-standard rental accommodation.

3. GM GOOD LANDLORDS SCHEME

- 3.1 The Private Rented Sector in Greater Manchester has grown significantly over recent decades. While the majority of private renters are happy with their homes and landlord, there are many who struggle to afford properties that are unsuitable or not up to standard.
- 3.2 The GM Housing Strategy committed the Combined Authority and its partners to making a positive difference to the lives of private tenants by tackling problems in the sector
- 3.3 The GM Good Landlord Scheme focusses on improving enforcement against bad standards and aims to deliver three key elements:
 - 3.4 - Work to make sure that tenants and landlords have access to up-to-date information and advice.
 - 3.5 - Strengthened and focussed enforcement capacity to help redress enforcement resource constraints.
 - 3.6 - Targeted capacity building for landlords and agents
- 3.7 The scheme is delivering a number of initiatives in order to tackle shortage of qualified housing enforcement officers, including a new apprenticeship/trainee programme and new on-the-job training, to upskill existing officers.
- 3.8 The Housing Standards team have an apprentice officer in post and one officer has undergone a yearlong qualification to upskill.
- 3.9 A further up-and-running project will support more Councils to make use of enhanced enforcement tools.
- 3.10 The final initiative will help tackle the need for improved information, advice and support for both landlords and tenants. This is still in the planning stages but the aim is for both tenants and landlords to have access to clear advice, feel supported and be clear on their responsibilities.

4. PUBLIC FACING INFORMATION FOR TENANTS

- 4.1 Information is available on the council web site for tenants of the private rented sector under the following headings:

4.1.1 Before you rent

This section gives advice to prospective tenants on what they should do prior to starting a tenancy, what their rights and responsibilities are, what a landlords responsibilities are and what the landlord must legally provide in the property prior to it being rented. Several links are available signposting tenants to useful resources.

4.1.2 Repairs

Information is available to advise tenants what to do if they are experiencing disrepair in their rented property and how to check who is responsible. The Housing Standard Teams procedure on how disrepair is dealt with is explained in full and there are links to online forms to enable tenants to make a complaint about their property and what information is needed for the team to undertake an investigation.

4.1.3 Damp and Mould

This section has been updated most recently following the tragedy in Rochdale. Detailed information is available advising what tenants should do if they experience damp and mould. Information on condensation mould caused by everyday activities is available along with links to some useful advice and information sheets, including one from the World Health Organisation.

There are links to online forms which enable tenants to make a complaint about their property where damp and mould may have been caused by a structural defect.

4.1.4 Illegal Eviction and Harassment

These pages explain what a landlords responsibilities are around eviction and harassment and what a tenant can do if they believe their landlord has acted unlawfully.

There are signposts to Shelters website, which contains a wealth of useful information. There are also links to online forms to report illegal eviction or harassment to the Housing Standards Team.

Due to the current state of the Private Rented Sector, increase in rents and the cost of living crisis, illegal evictions and harassment may increase as tenants struggle to pay their rent, with some landlords resorting to unlawful means to remove their tenants.

In order to assist tenants as this challenging time, additional information will be added to this section of the web pages, with more signposting to Citizens advice, Welfare Rights as well as links to Shelters 'Tenancy Checker' which assists tenants in establishing information about their tenancy and what their rights are.

4.1.5 Rent Increases / Struggling to pay rent

A new section is in the process of being uploaded onto the web site, which will advise tenants who need assistance with rent increases, cost of living support etc. A range of information will be added on financial assistance, rent increase advice, help with energy bills etc. There will be more signposting to Citizens Advice, Welfare Rights, Shelter, help with energy bills and advice on Discretionary Payments for rent.

The team are working with the Web Team to update this information.

4.1.6 Repair problems in affordable housing

This section contains advice for social housing tenants who may be experiencing issues with their property. Links to a template letter that is available for private

rented tenants is made available in this section for social housing tenants to use should they wish. A link is also provided to each Social Housing providers website.

4.1.7 Tenants rights

A new section is in the process of being uploaded onto the web site, which will incorporate a range of information detailing tenants rights., including information on the Tenants Fees Act.

The team are working with the Web Team to add this additional information.

5. ADDITIONAL PROPOSED CHANGES TO CURRENT WEB PAGES

- 5.1 There is a range of information currently available to landlords on the Council web pages. Following a recent review, some additional advice will be added into the 'Illegal Eviction and Harassment' section. This will clarify landlord responsibilities and ensure that when ending a tenancy, the landlord does so lawfully.

6. STOCKPORT HOMES

- 6.1 Stockport Homes website contains information focussing on advice to tenants facing possession action from private landlords. A range of short films for customers on support available is currently being added, including one on loss of private rented sector accommodation.
- 6.2 Housing Standards pages will be linked to Stockport Homes pages when all updates are complete.
- 6.3 In addition to the web-based advice, easily accessible face to face appointments, including outreach sessions at locations including Stockport Without Abuse and Disability Stockport are available.
- 6.4 Stockport Homes liaise closely with the Councils Housing Standards Team over issues of disrepair and illegal eviction, ensuring an effective combination of web-based advice, personal support and enforcement action is available where needed.

7. CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 The Housing Standards Team acknowledge that these are incredibly challenging times for tenants and that rents are rising faster than incomes. It is therefore important that both tenants and landlords are aware of their rights and responsibilities and the Council are providing good quality information to assist and support all parties.

8. Recommendations:

- 8.1 That the report and the work of the Housing Standards Team is noted.
- 8.2 The team welcome members views on any suggested further improvements to information made available to tenants and landlords in the Private Rented Sector.

8.3 For any further information contact Samantha McNichol at samantha.mcnichol@stockport.gov.uk or Kate Fitzsimons at kate.fitzsimons@stport.gov.uk

BACKGROUND PAPERS

There are none.