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We are celebrating the LANDLORD ACCREDITATION SCHEME's First Anniversary!

The Landlords Accreditation Scheme (LAS) was successfully launched in October 2009. During the last year we have helped landlords through partnership working to find suitable tenants and to raise property and management standards in the Private Rented Sector.

At present we have 44 accredited members with a combined portfolio of 569 properties with another 22 applications in progress.

Some benefits of membership include;

- the status of being identified as a good landlord
- landlords being able to distance themselves from problem landlords
- the business advantage when advertising properties to let
- a liaison officer who can help landlords deal with any Council department
- access to training and development opportunities
- discounts on goods and services
- access to a bond guarantee scheme
- £50 discount per unit of accommodation on House in Multiple Occupation licence fees

Stockton Borough Council's Accredited Landlords have access to "FAST TRACKING" of Local Housing Allowance claims; - Accredited landlords are strongly encouraged to ask tenants to use the stickers provided with the accreditation welcome pack so that tenants are identified and their applications fast tracked. This is not only a benefit to you, it also helps promote the scheme in general and creates demand and awareness of the scheme with tenants.

Here is what some landlords have said about the process:

"I thought it was going to be burden but it ended up being for my benefit".

"Paul pointed out things that I wasn't even aware of and Paul does all the work for you".

"Could have a clearer website but happy with service"

Contact Paul Rodgers for more information and join us in making the private sector a valued partner of Stockton Borough Council.

01642 528533 / email

paul.rodgers@stockton.gov.uk or find more information on

www.stockton.gov.uk/privatelandlords

Date for your Calendar

January 24th 2011; 2pm till 6pm

Sub-Regional Landlords Fair hosted by: Stockton Borough Council, Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council, Darlington Borough Council, Hartlepool Borough Council and Middlesbrough Council

Venue: Norton Education Centre, Junction Road, Stockton-on-Tees TS20 1PR

Free admission and Free parking! Call for directions or further information:

01642 528533 or email paul.rodgers@stockton.gov.uk



Gas Safety

Landlords have specific legal responsibilities to their tenants when it comes to gas safety



If you are a landlord letting a property

equipped with gas appliances you need to understand and comply with the law relating to gas safety.

If you let a property, you must make sure that pipe work, appliances and flues are maintained in a safe condition.

You must have a gas safety every year. A Gas Safe registered engineer must carry out the safety check in your properties. You must give your tenants a copy of the gas safety certificate within 28 days of it being carried out or before they move in.

You are also required to show your tenants how they can turn off the gas supply in the event of a gas leak.

Remember, you must keep a record of each safety certificate for two years.

Visit the HSE website for more information about landlords' responsibility for gas safety. (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/gas/landlords/index.htm>)

CO Alarms for fixed combustion appliances

Carbon Monoxide is a gas you cannot see, smell or taste but, in sufficient quantities, it can cause permanent heart, lung or brain damage, or even kill! It is known as 'The Silent Killer'.

Carbon monoxide can be given off by any appliance, which burns a fossil fuel, such as gas, coal, oil or LPG (propane/butane). It will enter your home if your appliance is faulty, or if the room is not properly ventilated, or if the chimney or flue is blocked.

New Building Regulations came into force in October requiring carbon monoxide (CO) alarms where a new or replacement fixed solid fuel appliance is installed in a dwelling. Some fire protection specialists are calling for mandatory CO alarms in relation to gas appliances as the most common cause of a carbon monoxide leak is a faulty appliance or from one that has been incorrectly installed, regardless of the type or age of the appliance.

For more information see the new Building Regulations Approved Document J "*Combustion appliances and fuel storage systems*" on www.planningportal.gov.uk or for more detailed information and advice on carbon monoxide visit www.carbonmonoxidekills.com.

Landlords face £1,800 costs for irresponsible letting

TEESSIDE Magistrates recently awarded costs of £1,800 to Stockton Borough Council following a Closure Order for a Thornaby home last year.

The Order was made in September 2009 by Teesside Magistrates Court following allegations of persistent disorder, nuisance and anti-social behaviour at a property at 9 Cheltenham Avenue.

The Council's Anti Social Behaviour team had sought the Order following incidents including fighting, loud noise and frequent visitors in connection with drug dealing and prostitution. The move was a last resort after

the landlords had failed to cooperate with Council staff despite numerous attempts at positive intervention. The Order prevented tenant Pamela Nunn, then 52, from returning to the property, which landlords P & M Properties had to keep vacant for three months before they could re-let it. P & M Properties is owned by Paul Vokes, of Swainston Close, Wynyard, and Michael Burns, of Mount Stewart, Wynyard.

Cleveland Police were closely involved and had made several raids on the property in connection with alleged drugs offences. At an initial hearing in May, the Council said it



had spent £1,593.53 on work such as shuttering the property and monitoring it for breach of order, as well as court costs and legal fees.

At that time, the Council rejected a lesser offer of £500 because the costs could have been avoided had the owners co-operated and behaved as reasonable landlords.

Councillor Steve Nelson, Stockton Borough Council's Cabinet Member for Housing and Community Safety, said: "I am very pleased at this ruling because it underlines the need for landlords to act responsibly.

"These owners had not sought references for their tenants and were unco-operative prior to our application for the Closure Order.

"The Council has a successful Landlord Liaison Scheme which helps local landlords share information to make informed decisions about new tenants.

"Any landlord allocating a home to a problem tenant can cause disruption to a whole community. This scheme helps protect residents from nuisance or harassment at the hands of their neighbours.

"The clear message is that landlords and tenants alike have a duty to behave responsibly, or face the consequences."

To find out more about the Landlord Liaison Scheme for Stockton Borough, call (01642) 527620 or to report anti-social behaviour call (01642) 607943.

Housing Benefit changes

There are a lot of rumours circulating about proposed changes to the benefits systems. Here we provide current information and will keep landlords updated in future communications.

Although at the time of writing we are still awaiting details of the Coalition Governments plans for major reform of the benefits system, some very significant changes to housing benefit were announced in the Emergency budget earlier this year.

Most changes will be introduced in April or October next year, but some other changes – which require full legislative changes - are planned for 2013.

The changes will affect new claims or changes of address immediately following the date of introduction. Existing claims will be affected from their first "anniversary date" following the introduction.

If a change in circumstances affects the number of people in a household the changes will take effect immediately.

A brief summary of changes can be found below:-

April 2011

- Absolute caps on the amount of local housing allowance. These will not affect any current claims in Stockton.

- Removal of the 5 bedroom rate for Local Housing Allowance (LHA) - Maximum benefit will be restricted to the rate for 4 bedrooms. Approximately 30 families in Stockton will be affected by this change.
- Removal of the excess payment to tenants where the rent chargeable is less than the local housing allowance rate. At present about 40% of tenants receive some amount of "top up"
- Increase in the amount of non dependant deductions

October 2011

- LHA rates will be set at the 30th percentile of rents, rather than the 50th percentile as it is currently. This means that in future 30% of rents in an area will be affordable by people on housing benefit rather than the current 50%. Indicative rates for LHA based on the new rules are as follows (These amounts will be subject to change)

Rooms	50th Percentile	30th Percentile
Shared	£49.00	£43.50
1 bed	£92.05	£85.25
2 bed	£103.56	£94.82
3 bed	£120.82	£109.32
4 bed	£159.95	£149.59

Continued overleaf



- An additional bedroom will be allowed in the LHA rate for a resident carer, in certain circumstances
- Local Councils will be given additional discretionary funding to assist those in most need after the changes are introduced. However the additional annual

funding for Stockton will be approximately £45,000 and the estimated annual reduction in Local Housing Allowance payments is £1.668 million.

We will be producing more information for both landlords and tenants at a later date when the new regulations are approved.

DWP research report – Private Landlords and Local Housing Allowance

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has published the Research Report it commissioned from David Rhodes and Mark Bevan on Private Landlords and the Local Housing Allowance system of Housing Benefit. This report sets out the results of research on private landlords and letting agents having experience of letting to someone claiming Housing Benefit (HB) under the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rules. It forms part of a two-year review of the LHA system of HB carried out by the DWP following its national rollout in April 2008. The research focused on understanding experiences of and views on the LHA, from the perspective of the people and organisations involved in the supply of private rented accommodation.

The research found a wide range of views among landlords and letting agents on letting to HB tenants under the LHA system. Some aspects of the new system were widely seen as an improvement over the previous system of HB. Many of the criticisms were linked to the single issue of the HB ordinarily being paid directly to claimants, with no option for HB tenants to elect to have the benefit paid to their landlord. The potential for landlords to have difficulties in being able to devote the necessary time and effort to managing HB tenants under the LHA was considerable. The costs for landlords which could be associated with rent arrears was a pressing issue.

The advantages of the LHA were found to be:

- Transparency
- Removal of pre-tenancy determinations
- Quicker claims processing time

- Publication of LHA rates
- Improving communications with local councils



Disadvantages were found to be:

- Payment of HB directly to tenants
- HB payment cycles
- Management issues
- The eight week rent arrears provision
- The new safeguards

Examples of emerging good practice included:

- Enabling tenants to indicate on the claim form that they were concerned about their ability to pay their rent if the HB was paid directly to them. Following assessment by a council officer, the HB could be paid directly to the landlord under one of the safeguards.
- Prioritising accredited landlords and agents eg a fast-tracking system for accredited landlords with HB tenants in arrears under the eight week rent arrears provision.

Suggestions put forward by respondents to the report for improvements to LHA included:

- Reducing to 4 weeks the time before a claim could be suspended and payment redirected to landlords.
- The first HB payment being made directly to the landlord or agent rather than the tenant.
- The last HB payment being made directly to the landlord or agent
- Where claimants do not have a bank account, enabling direct payments to the landlord or agent.



Empty Properties

Private Sector Housing's Empty Property Team has secured an interim Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) on a property in Thornaby after the owner continually refused to carry out renovation works, which led to the house being targeted by vandals and a magnet for anti-social behaviour.

The order allows the Council to take over the management of the privately owned property, which has been empty for more than 6 months, to carry out any renovation works with a view to returning it back into use and of a decent standard where it can be occupied again.

Further discussions will take place with the owner to encourage its renovation but if this is not successful, Empty Property Team can make a final EDMO and take steps to ensure it is occupied for up to seven years before returning it to the owner.

Across the Borough 2,099 private properties are empty, with 1,116 of these being empty for more than 6 months - an issue the Council is working hard to address.

In the first instance the Empty Property Team always tries to work informally with owners. Once the Team receives an enquiry, they will visit the property and carry out a risk assessment.

During the initial informal stage the Team works with owners to encourage them to bring their property back into use. This can be through providing details of investors who may wish to buy them, information on estate agents who may offer reduced rates, provide advice on how to sell properties or rent them out.

If this approach is not successful and an owner does not return a property to use, Stockton Council has a range of powers to return a property to occupation.

For any empty property enquiries please contact emptyproperty@stockton.gov.uk, telephone 01642 527797.



Thieves Target Empty Properties for Metal

High metal prices means that Stockton is seeing high volumes of all types of metal thefts from properties, particularly burglaries of void properties where boilers, copper piping and radiators are being stolen.

This is not a victimless crime as some people perceive it to be. The Police and partner agencies are taking action to stamp out the problem, and are doing as much as possible to prevent and bring offenders to justice.

You can help by:

- Securing all your void properties preferably with shutters, as soon as practically possible once vacated.
- Removing boilers, radiators etc.
- Marking your property with products similar to SmartWater.

- Advertise your security actions by displaying posters available from the Police.

Alternately you should make every effort to make the property look occupied with internal timers on lights and radios. Make regular visits to remove any mail and ensure the gardens and surrounds to the properties are maintained.

Crime reduction advice is available at no cost from Stockton Police Crime Reduction officers on 01642 302271 or 01642 302371





Tenant issues? Contact us before things go too far!

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's enhanced Housing Options service is a housing advice and homelessness prevention service. They provide a wide range of advice and assistance to help people find accommodation, sustain tenancies and avoid eviction.

If you have a tenant that is not conducting their tenancy satisfactorily, an alternative to bringing the tenancy to an end could be to take advantage of the support that the enhanced Housing Options service may be able to arrange and provide.

With the tenant's consent, we may be able to work with them to address the difficulties they are facing in managing the tenancy. Depending on the tenant's circumstances, there are different interventions that can be used and support that can be put into place. Whilst acknowledging that we will be acting on the tenant's behalf, we understand that a good outcome for the tenant must necessarily go hand-in-hand with a positive outcome for the landlord.

The enhanced Housing Options service can also work with and advise private landlords in a number of ways. For example, we may be able to assist buy-to-let landlords of tenanted properties who may be experiencing mortgage repayment difficulties.

The sooner you or your tenant contacts us the more options there will be available.

The enhanced Housing Options service can be contacted by visiting us at:

Stratford House, 11-12 Ramsgate, Stockton-on-Tees;
telephoning 01642 528389;

e-mailing housing.options@stockton.gov.uk

More information is available on the Council's website at:

www.stockton.gov.uk/citizenservices/housing/housingadvice



If you would like this information in any other language or format for example large print or audio please contact the Private Sector Housing Team.
Tel.: 01642 527797

Email: privatesectorhousing@stockton.gov.uk

اگر آپ کو اس معلومات کو کسی اور زبان میں یا کسی اور فارمیٹ میں (مثلاً بڑے پرنٹ یا آڈیو) حاصل کرنا چاہتا ہے تو براہ کرم براہ کرم پرائیویٹ سیکٹر ہاؤسنگ ٹیم سے رابطہ کریں۔
01 542 527797 Private Sector Housing Team

Urdu

Si vous souhaitez obtenir ces informations dans d'autres langues ou sous un autre format, par exemple, en gros caractères / version audio, veuillez contacter Private Sector Housing Team au n° 01642 527797

Mandarin

Si vous souhaitez obtenir ces informations dans d'autres langues ou sous un autre format, par exemple, en gros caractères / version audio, veuillez contacter Private Sector Housing Team au n° 01642 527797

French

ئەگەر تۆھمەت بۇ مەلۇماتنى باشقا تىلدا ياكى باشقا شەكىلدە (مەسىلەن چوڭ خەت ياكى ئاۋدىو) ئالغۇسىز، ئىشەنچلىك سېتىش ئۇچۇرىغا ئېرىشەلەيسىز. ئىشەنچلىك سېتىش ئۇچۇرىغا ئېرىشەلەيسىز. ئىشەنچلىك سېتىش ئۇچۇرىغا ئېرىشەلەيسىز.
01642 527797 Private Sector Housing Team

Kurdish

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01642 527797 Private Sector Housing Team

Punjabi

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01642 527797 Private Sector Housing Team

Arabic

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01642 527797 Private Sector Housing Team

Farsi



UK Landlords lose £12m a year in deposit disputes

The UK's private sector landlords are losing an estimated £12 million a year in tenancy deposit disputes.

The Residential Landlords Association has now launched a new service that will settle arguments for good. The majority of the 23,500 disputes that went to adjudication last year involved the condition of contents and furnishings. Tenants claim they were damaged when they moved in. Landlords say they weren't.

The majority of landlords couldn't prove it though - so, in 92 per cent of cases, tenants won cases worth an average £733 each. RLA members can pick up a special discount deal on an inventory service that records the condition of contents on a high definition DVD as well as providing a written descriptive version.

RLA marketing director, Andy Burton, said: "Landlords fail to realise that, in a dispute, they are now responsible for

providing convincing evidence on the condition of items in the property at the start of the tenancy.

"There is no better way than a well documented video inventory - and this service has been specially developed in consultation with industry professionals. They include experienced television and video TV production specialists, police experts in crime evidence and deposit scheme arbitrators themselves.

"The result is a very precise record of contents and condition that is beyond dispute. Going online should save a lot of money for landlords who, in the past, have not paid enough attention to preparing a proper inventory . and have paid the price as a result.

"So far not one case, supported by a video, has gone to arbitration - because tenants who are being less than honest realise from the start that they are up against indisputable evidence."

www.rla.org.uk/videoinventory

Private Rented Tenants Charter

A new Private Rented Tenants Charter has been developed by the Private Sector Housing Division to keep tenants better informed.

Tenants who contact the service for assistance will be given anticipated time scales for each stage of the enquiry as

well as timescales for landlords to complete any works.

For further information on the charter, contact the Private Sector Housing Division on 01642 527797 or email privatesectorhousing@stockton.gov.uk



Landlords' Associations News

Do Not Become the Victim of Property Fraud

Landlords are a common target for property fraud. Last Friday, Stewart Rice, the tenant of a multimillion pound property in central London, was jailed for three years after he attempted to sell his landlord's house to property developers. The sale went through but Rice was caught as he tried to transfer £850,000 to an account in Dubai.

According to the Land Registry, fraudsters aim either to acquire title to the land through a forged transfer or to impersonate the owner. That is why they target properties they know are rented out and where the owner's contact details is the property address.

In light of recent events, the NLA is providing these simple guidelines to make sure that none of its members become the victims of fraud.

- **Register your title.** If you have not registered your property with the Land Registry, do so. Registering your property will give you greater security of title. Also, if you do register and then become the victim of fraud, you may be eligible for compensation from the Land Registry.
- **Keep your contact details up to date.** When renting out a property you should register a correspondence address which is

different to the property address - an "address for service". The best address for service would be your home address but make sure that you update the Land Registry if you move house.

- **Consider multiple "addresses for service".** To further prevent fraud, the Land Registry allows you to have up to three addresses for service. So rather than just putting your own home address down, think about also providing them with your email address and you could always add your solicitor as the third.
- **Put a restriction on your title.** If you think you are particularly at risk of fraud, you might want to consider applying for the entry of a restriction on your title. This means that the Land Registry will then not register anything on the property (for example a sale or a new mortgage) unless a solicitor or other professional has certified they have checked your identity.

Following these guidelines will significantly reduce your risk of becoming the victim of property fraud. For more information, see the Land Registry Public Guide 17: How to safeguard against property fraud at the Land Registry <http://www1.landregistry.gov.uk/propertyfraud/>

Not sure who to contact?

You can now e-mail your queries to landlords@stockton.gov.uk and we will forward your e-mail to the correct department.

You can also access the private landlords homepage on Stockton Council's web site, which gives up to date information and contact details for useful departments, at www.stockton.gov.uk/privatelandlords