

MINUTES OF THE LANDLORDS' OPEN MEETING HELD ON
WEDNESDAY, 11 JANUARY 2006
BLUE BAR – UNION HOUSE, UEA

Those Present:

Anderson, Fiona		Hindle, John		Prewer, Elaine
Bell, Susan		Hindle, Joy		Reeve, Ivan
Brown, Caryll		Jackson, Martin		Smith, Alan
Brown, Richard		Kelly, Emma -	SU	Smith, David
Bye, Louise -	SU	Landley, Nigel		Smith, Patsy
Byford, Moyra		Lessiter, Matt		Sothisrihari, B
Byford, William		Lord, Hazel		Sothisrihari, K
Cook, Catherine		MacDonald, Douglas		Spencer, Ellen - NCC
Cox, Helen		MacDonald, Jane		Spiro, Jo - SU
Daly, Laurence -	UEA	Marjoram, Adrian		Stretton, Roger
Derham, Rupert		Morgan, Ian		Summers, David
Dowding, Wendy		O'Brien, Des -	SU	Sutton, Allan
Elsey, John –	B&P	Parkes, Penny		Waterfield, Paul
Eves, Trevor -	NC	Parry, Enid		Waterfield, Stephen
Green, Robin		Pearson, Dan -	SU	Webb, Bruce
Gudgin, Joanne		Pearson, Gertrude		Wellingham, Bernard
Hanington, David		Piper, Anita		Wellingham, Pat
Hastings, Victoria		Popely, Barry		Wing, Ruth - SU
Headden, Lydia -	SU	Popely, Diane		Woods, Kevin

Apologies: Paul Bailey, Jim Kelly, Rob Massey, Mrs Morfoot.

1. Welcome & Introductions – Jo Spiro – Manager – Student Support Services

The meeting commenced at 10H35 and a welcome was extended to all attendees by JS, who introduced herself as Manager of the Student Union Advice Centre, and therefore responsible for Home Run, part of the services offered. She informed attendees that copies of the Agenda, refreshments and the attendance sheets were at the rear of the room, and reminded people to sign this for recording purposes and that the July Minutes could be accessed via the website.

JS then introduced LB – Home Run Administrator, RW – Advice Worker, DO – Advice Worker, LH – Administrator taking the minutes, EK – Welfare Officer, DP – Academic Officer, PC Trevor Eves – Norfolk Constabulary, LD – UEA Accommodation, Ellen Spencer - Private Sector Housing, Norwich City Council and John Elsey – Brown and Payne, Electrical Contractors.

2. HMO Update – Ellen Spencer – Norwich City Council

ES informed the meeting that a new deadline had been set for Licensing HMOs and the Health and Safety rating system to 06.04.06. NCC expected to receive guidelines re. Licensing during week commencing 30.01.06, and after a few weeks to discuss how these can be applied, hoped to publish them for Landlords and organisations by the end of February on the website - address: www.norwich.gov.uk. A draft copy could be accessed on the ODPM website.

Guidance on Fire regulations had been updated in 1999, based on British Standards, which applied to all properties. For HMOs there were extra standards – i.e.: Smoke detectors should be mains-linked.

There was concern that if publication of standards was not until late February and the new law was effective early April, there would not be sufficient time to put things into practice. ES confirmed there would be a lead-in period.

Current classifications are:

Licensable HMO is 3 storeys or more **AND** occupied by 5 persons or more

and

an HMO is classified as 2 + people sharing a house and facilities who are not related to each other.

ES was asked if all properties would be inspected by the HMO team. She responded that as there were 3 people in the team it was impossible, but all licensed properties would be inspected once every 5 years, and obviously, if there was a complaint, they had a duty to inspect.

The cost of licensing was raised. ES responded that the government rules there be a cost for administration, but NCC would ensure this was kept to a minimum for landlords applying in order that they were not subsidising 'bad' landlords. NCC would also be charging a flat rate, not per unit.

There were no grants available to Landlords, although tenants could apply for Warm Front grants (with the landlords' permission), which included loft insulation, etc.. The amount awarded was dependant on the applicants' income and condition of property.

The Accreditation Scheme was raised, and JS reported she had discussed this with Russell O'Keefe at NCC who had not referred back yet.

The main aim was to provide good quality accommodation for the public sector.

JS thanked ES and went on to introduce Laurence Daly – UEA Accommodation Manager.

3. UEA Residences Update – Laurence Daly – UEA Accommodation Manager

The building programme was continuing on schedule. Britten House, near Bluebell Road, would supply 150 rooms in the first section of works ready for November/December 2006. The remainder would be built after demolition of Waveney Terrace in July/August 2007. Suffolk Terrace, a Ziggurat, was due for re-furbishment and Norfolk Terrace would be re-furbished in 2007.

International Student numbers had reduced this year, which was the National trend, due to problems with visas, but Home student numbers had increased, which balanced out. At present there were 50 – 70 rooms empty (3,200 total), but more International students were arriving this week. Next year there was an initiative to recruit International students for one preparatory study year prior to undertaking their degree studies. With this in mind there may be slightly fewer rooms available on campus, and therefore more pressure on the private sector, but this should be clearer by July 2006.

University residences were exempt from licensing, but buildings and fire safety have to be upheld. There will be a new Code of Practice for Universities, maintaining good practices and standards.

At the end of planned alterations and building programmes there should be approximately 3500 rooms on campus – approximately 500 more than 2 years ago. LD noted that it had been 4 years since UEA had been able to house returning students. Rooms/buildings were not specifically assigned to any year/student group, but rotated. Under and Post Graduates were usually separated.

The number of rooms available on the Housing List for the March 2005 Housing Event was approximately 1200 – a significant increase since 2003. However, as the student population should continue to grow the extra 500 rooms at UEA should have little impact on the private sector.

LB would have vacant bed space figures available for the next meeting, but previously these had been:

July 2005 – 389,

July 2004 – 427,

July 2003 – 267.

4. Home Run – Louise Bye

Electrical body update – LB reported that LLs had contacted her regarding the possibility of providing certificates from organisations other than NICEIC, which had a monopoly on electrical installation and testing until Jan 2005 when it became mandatory to comply with Part P. New organisations currently registered with ODPM are BRE Certification Limited, British Standards Institution, ELECSA Limited, NAPIT Certification Limited and NICEIC Certification Services Limited. At present Home Run will only accept NICEIC certification, but will review accepting certificates from other organisations over the next 12 months.

Housing Event – 02.03.06 - Registered LLs should have all received letters informing them of this date and the deadline date for registration forms of 24.02.06. LB requested that if LLs had large portfolios they ensure these are sent to her in good time to guarantee registration. Non-receipt of forms was probably due to the fact that properties had been removed from the data-base, but LB could clarify if LLs contacted her.

Safety certificates – LB reported that occasionally LLs allow these to lapse – on one occasion 6-months for a gas certificate. This was unacceptable, and students in households with lapsed certification are now made aware of this fact – 27 properties in December.

A LL queried why the Housing Event was being staged earlier this year, as Jan/Feb was the time most LLs took their holidays, and could more notice be given of the actual date. JS reported that notification of the date had been as early as possible, all hinged on room availability, which could not be confirmed until early January. JS also responded that the event had been brought forward due to student pressure – closer to Easter many have study deadlines, several agencies publish lists at the end of January and although we do encourage students to wait for the HR list, many feel 6 weeks too long. EK re-iterated student preferences for an earlier event. JS felt that ideally this should be held in May, but the Student Union had to respond to students' requests.

A LL asked the end of term date – 07.04.06. JS stated this gave students 4 clear weeks from the HS to view properties.

JS reminded LLs to register **ALL** of their properties, even if they were already occupied.

5. Advice Worker – Jo Spiro

JS explained that Advice Workers were there principally to assist students with problems and 99% of the time LLs appreciated their mediation, with only a small number not happy with their involvement. Students contacted Advice Workers when they had difficulties they needed assistance with, therefore the AWs' involvement should be viewed positively as the end result was usually that the problem was sorted out satisfactorily for all.

In many properties rooms were different sizes, but the same rent was charged for all rooms, large and small alike. A few LLs differentiated rents with size of rooms, but many expected students to arrange this between themselves. JS requested that LLs take on this responsibility.

Although the AC does not specify a minimum size requirement for rooms a LL reported 6.5m² was the new bedroom size ruling.

There had been difficulties where LLs are related to tenants – unrelated tenants were confused about who to communicate with about problems and this caused friction and trouble.

LLs are responsible for noise and disturbance in their properties, and need to be honest if it is in a problem location when they advertise it – youth disturbance being the main problem in Norwich. If this type of problem is reported to AC, the information will be passed on to students.

JS stated that offered properties must be fully habitable by commencement of Tenancy Agreement, and LLs had to have realistic expectations regarding building, decorating and refurbishment times.

Some international students cannot access accommodation without a UK guarantor and most LLs will not accept an overseas guarantor. It was suggested that LLs could request a larger deposit – perhaps up to 3-months' rent, but it was argued that this may not cover damages and if a Joint and Severally Liable Agreement was in force it fell on the other students to cover costs, which was not fair. One LLs solution was to obtain quarterly payments in advance, inspect the property quarterly, thus keeping on top of things. Very few LLs had bad experiences. JS to research how other organisations operate.

One LL queried that this could all be construed as discriminatory, but JS reported if alternatives are offered to problems it would be difficult for someone to allege discrimination.

A LL asked how the UEA dealt with this problem. All students on campus are invoiced, and these have to be settled before they can progress with their studies. There are no deposits. Sufficient funds should be available as it is a visa requirement that students can support themselves. It was asked that if LLs experienced difficulties, could the UEA not do the same until settlement – suspend studies? JS stated that HR was part of the Student Union, not the UEA, and HR was a free service which had Minimum Standards to comply with. UEA had regulations for students but it was outside their jurisdiction to ensure rent was paid to the private sector. Students were adults and it was not relevant for UEA to become involved unless there was a major issue off campus. Agreements were made between the students and LLs direct. Non-payments were infrequent, and Joint and Severally Liable Tenancy Agreements should minimise this problem further.

6. Landlords' Issues

Electrical earthing requirements in bathrooms and showers – this 2004 ruling that the earth wire should be bonded was **not** retrospective and was only required for new or altered installations. One LL reported that her engineer would not pass the PIR unless remedial work was done on old wiring, and the regulation was open to interpretation by electricians. JE from B&P responded that NICEIC interpreted the regulation as - bonding was NOT essential on old wiring. However, it was agreed to err on the side of safety whenever possible with approximate costs being £65.00.

End of tenancy/Students' expectation to use deposit against last month's rent – The Student Union does not advise this. One LL reported that they visit properties one month prior to the end of any Tenancy Agreement, advising tenants of potential areas of damage deposit claim. If the damage deposit was used against rent and it transpired there was damage, the only avenue to claim monies was thought to be Small Claims Court, but JS advised the guarantor could also be contacted. The Advice Centre wanted good relationships for both tenants and LLs, and if students are in breach of their tenancy, advises them of this fact, but cannot insist on any action. AC can only advise/give options. It was requested that this matter be discussed at the Housing Event, but JS explained reluctance to do so as this could put the idea in mind and have a negative effect.

Inventory check, handing over of keys/official handover – LLs needed to stipulate expectations to tenants. The Academic Year ended on 16.06.06, but Congregation week was planned for week commencing 10.07.06.

Managing central heating – JS stated that this would be raised at the Housing Event, together with the importance of heat and ventilation. These subjects will also be discussed at Tenancy Agreement appointments.

A LL reported that she sent a poster to her properties prior to Christmas requesting that tenants leave heating on a low setting during the holidays to avoid frozen and burst pipes. Another e-mailed students, informing them that she would visit the property once per week during the winter holidays to check heating, etc.. Some insurance policies stipulate that LLs visit their properties during bad weather. If a LL entered a property to check it, JS suggested they leave a note for the tenants.

Another LL informed the meeting that frost thermostats could be fitted to boilers – which cut in and override all other settings.

A LL suggested that at the Housing Event it would be beneficial to advise students to discuss bills, how things work, with current tenants. JS informed the meeting that a figure of approximately £35/person/month to cover bills was used at the Advice Centre.

7. A O B

JS reported that Norwich City Council were keen to have their employees work on campus to process students' Council Tax exemption forms, but this needed further discussion with facility tutors before September 2006.

JS informed the meeting that advertising whole houses on the HR list would be suspended until the Housing Event 02.03.06 and requested LLs follow procedure.

The question of reduced rent for the summer months (holiday/non-term time) was raised. Most LLs charge full rent, which is acceptable providing there are no works at the property and the tenant has the keys and is able to live there if they choose to do so. If decorating or minor works are being carried out then a reduced rent applied and if major refurbishment is taking place then no rent should be charged.

JS thanked all for attending and the meeting ended at 12H35.

Date of next meeting in July to be confirmed.

JS/LTHH
26.01.06