



Sheffield Hallam University

ODPM Private Rented Sector Pilot Programme

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Focus

Engagement with
Private Landlords

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This is the first in a series of Quarterly Briefing Notes from the Sheffield Hallam Evaluation Team, designed to report on the progress made and the issues faced across the PRS Pilot Programme. Each note is based on evidence provided by the seven pilot projects. This Briefing Note reports on progress to July 2004. Subsequent Briefing Notes

will report on events over the previous quarter.

In each edition of the Briefing Note, '**HAPPENINGS**' reports on a range of PRS activities, highlighting important and interesting issues; and '**FOCUS**' draws together reported activities and issues on a specific topic. In this edition we focus on engagement with private landlords.

The evaluation of the ODPM programme to address problem private rented housing in areas of low demand is being undertaken by a team of researchers at the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University. The project's main objective is to evaluate the effectiveness of specific projects introduced to improve the provision and management of private rented housing in areas of low housing demand. The work is designed to assess achievements against overall programme objectives and to produce a toolkit of resources to tackle problem private rented housing for use by local authorities and other key agencies. For further information please contact Dr. Steve Green on 0114 225 2831 or stephen.green@shu.ac.uk.

HAPPENINGS

Activities and Issues across PRS Projects

1. Accreditation

Accreditation schemes are at various stages of implementation across the seven pilot projects, and individual target areas. Established schemes in Bolton, Gateshead, Hartlepool, Salford, Stoke and East Lancashire (Burnley and Pendle) have continued to enrol new members.

Schemes have been launched recently in East Lancashire (Blackburn and Rossendale). In Wakefield, West Yorkshire, accreditation was delayed in order to reach agreement with landlords on a code of standards.

Successes	Barriers and Challenges
<p>Accreditation has led to rising property standards.</p> <p>Membership to schemes continues to grow.</p> <p>Linkages and partnering arrangements with landlords and Landlord Associations have had positive effects for some projects.</p> <p>Further development of accreditation scheme incentives.</p> <p>Accredited landlord properties to be advertised in local authority 'Choice-based Lettings' magazine.</p> <p>Local authority restructuring co-locates accreditation and enforcement.</p>	<p>Voluntary schemes are failing to engage a significant number of landlords, particularly the most troublesome.</p> <p>Clearance and renewal strategies may conflict with accreditation efforts.</p> <p>Difficulties in recruiting staff.</p> <p>Landlords leaving schemes as control passes from the voluntary sector to local authority.</p>

2. Inspections and Enforcement

Inspections and Enforcement activity varies in approach across the projects. Project staff report the following trends.

- Approaches to enforcement differ. While some projects rely on negotiations with landlords to agree improvements (Salford, Stoke), others combine this with the use of legal enforcement notices (Gateshead, Bolton).
- The number of property inspections occurring varies across the projects, reflecting the scope of schemes, local situations and staffing resources.
- Inspections are carried out either in-house or with the assistance of established local authority teams. Salford has contracted inspections to a private firm of Environmental Health Officers who will work in partnership with the project.
- Identification of private properties in target areas is time-consuming and difficult to achieve. Strategies for improving information include letter drops, walk-by surveys, door-knocking, housing benefit data and RSL stock-lists (to eliminate social sector housing).
- Strategies vary between prioritising the properties and streets in greatest disrepair (e.g. West Yorkshire) and inspecting accredited landlords and properties, often linked to grant-aided work (e.g. Stoke and Gateshead).

Successes	Barriers and Challenges
<p>Use of legal notices has led to improvements. Use of negotiation and agreements has led to improvements.</p> <p>Inspections have increased information about the private rented sector.</p> <p>Co-operation and willingness of environmental health staff enables more inspections to be undertaken.</p>	<p>Identifying and inspecting is a resource intensive activity.</p> <p>Staff retention is problematic.</p> <p>Delay and inertia in some schemes has hampered inspection and enforcement targets.</p>

3. Resident Engagement

Resident Engagement activities take a range of forms. All projects have attended and hosted residents meetings and made use of newsletters and mail-outs. Some interesting activities by specific projects include:

- local surgeries for tenants, residents and landlords;
- links between residents' ASB complaints and the projects;
- dedicated advice leaflets, often targeted at Housing Advice Centres and other appropriate venues;
- dedicated enforcement officers establishing themselves within target areas; and

- community capacity and skills development activities.

Engagement with some local communities and with tenants in particular has been problematic for some projects. Initiatives such as tenants surveys aim to improve information about, and contact with, tenants (see 'Research Activity' section below). It is clear that projects have had successes in resident engagement, however there is less evidence of active participation by residents in objective setting and policy development.

Successes	Barriers and Challenges
<p>Positive feedback from engaged residents. Resident engagement had been easier to achieve in areas that have existing community and residents groups.</p> <p>Accreditation surgeries have extended residents' knowledge of projects and provided officers with a greater understanding of issues.</p>	<p>Engaging with private rented tenants challenging - limited number at residents meetings.</p> <p>Limited resources places a restriction on the level of resident engagement activity</p> <p>Resident engagement is time-consuming, and officers are drawn into problems outside their remit.</p>

4. Publicity

Publicity activities common to most projects include adverts and press releases to local media, newsletters, branded information packs and leaflets, letter-drops and accreditation scheme launch events. In addition, several projects use the following methods:

- attendance at Property Investor Fairs, auctions and student accommodation fairs;
- dedicated website for landlords, residents and tenants; and
- publicity to tenants via pro-active inspection activities.

Successes	Barriers and Challenges
<p>Branded information packs create a professional image, an identity for the project and a consistent message.</p> <p>Attendance at local and regional events is enhanced by the use of display boards/conference stands.</p> <p>Explicit antisocial behaviour objectives have increased local and media interest in the project.</p>	<p>Branded information is expensive to produce and disseminate.</p> <p>Difficult to assess the benefits from various publicity activities.</p> <p>Local press adverts/articles had limited success in attracting landlords to events.</p> <p>Incentives to tenants aimed at gaining access for inspections had limited success.</p>

5. Research Activity

Research activity is ongoing in many projects, although there are some reports of difficulties in gaining and utilising information about the private rented sector. Interesting research activities include:

- landlord surveys - including accredited landlords, members of landlords associations and landlords generally;
- tenant surveys;
- selective licensing - scoping work to establish the impact, process and costs on selective licensing;
- landlord consultation events; and
- use of data collected by others - e.g. house conditions surveys, land registry data.

Data gathering is reported as a particularly problematic issue by most projects. Projects are collecting data, but they raise a number of issues. Information is difficult to source and difficult to keep up-to-date due to high turnover, rapidly changing housing markets, and lack of data about private tenants and landlords. Data protection issues and differing formats have occasionally hampered information sharing between agencies and processes for tracking antisocial behaviour.

Successes	Barriers and Challenges
<p>Engaged landlords are keen to express views, experiences and identify priority areas.</p> <p>Research does lead to better targeted activities. Survey research is especially effective.</p> <p>Projects have benefited from enhanced local data gathering and analysis linked to other regeneration activities such as HMR Pathfinder and renewal areas.</p> <p>Smaller and clearly-defined target areas enable officers to gain 'on-the-ground' knowledge.</p>	<p>Data and information collection needs to be ongoing to determine emerging trends and inform action.</p> <p>Data protection of landlord and tenant information may be problematic.</p> <p>Projects need to adopt systematic monitoring practices.</p> <p>Adequate resource for research activity is an issue, where day-to-day running of projects takes priority.</p>

6. Staff Development and Training

There is evidence that projects have invested resources in staff development and training activities such as: antisocial behaviour, supervision, equality and diversity, Housing Health and Safety Rating System, Houses in Multiple Occupation and other aspects of housing legislation, tenancy relations and information technology. Some projects also report that staff have attended training events aimed at landlords.

Projects do not provide evidence of staff appraisal processes pitched against a strategic plan for skills requirements of a PRS team. Skills audits may help to build effective teams.

Successes	Barriers and Challenges
<p>Experienced and appropriately skilled teams are being created.</p> <p>Training courses have increased the skills of staff teams, increasing their ability to achieve objectives.</p> <p>Projects operating across several LAs are able to draw on wider expertise.</p>	<p>Staff retention is an issue, and some teams rely on secondments from other departments.</p> <p>Suitable training courses are not always available.</p> <p>Staff induction and integration competes with project delivery activities.</p>

7. Agency Working Practices

The first priority for many projects has been establishing teams, gathering information and launching accreditation schemes - tasks which may take considerable time. In some cases this has delayed the formation of links with other organisations beyond the local authority. In general, links with local authority departments have been made as part of

the process of accreditation, inspection and enforcement. Some projects have engaged with other agencies, often through a Steering Group. Some examples of good inter-departmental and inter-agency relationships are emerging. For example, Bolton has developed a number of successful linkages aimed at enhancing services for landlords.

8. Policy Change Effects

A number of policy change effects are reported. These include the following issues.

- Departmental restructuring has affected projects in Salford and Gateshead, slowing progress while changes are made.
- The introduction of selective licensing is reported as a major policy change that may potentially affect projects. Salford (in partnership with Manchester) report their intention to implement licensing as soon as is practicable. Other projects may also be 'early-adopters' of selective licensing.
- Most projects are being affected to some extent by clearance and renewal activity. Such activities include street-scaping, improving exterior of houses, alley-gating, demolition, new build, environmental works, group repair schemes and refurbishments.

9. Housing Market Issues

A number of projects report rising housing markets, characterised by rising house prices and high numbers of transactions. There are no reports of falling house prices in any of the areas. How housing markets are perceived to change over time and whether landlords alter their investment strategies will be picked-up in later briefing reports.

10. Anti-social Behaviour and Crime

Relatively little activity is reported around ASB and crime. Information held by projects about the level of ASB appears to be general observations and perceptions about the kinds of problems associated with specific areas, rather than systematic

data on incidents and trends. Projects report increasing levels of street robbery and arson, youth disorder, street drinking, burglary, and car-related crime. In some projects procedures to tackle ASB are being developed and operationalised.

11. Future Activities

The following table shows where projects intend to focus activities in the future.

Future Activities Identified by Projects							
	Bolton	East Lancashire	Gateshead	Hartlepool	Salford	Stoke	West Yorkshire
Extension of accreditation scheme	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Extend benefits of scheme	✓	✓					✓
Establish new team members			✓		✓		
Increased number of inspections	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Increased enforcement action				✓	✓		
Plans for licensing					✓		
Tenant questionnaire						✓	
Work around antisocial behaviour				✓			
Set up tenant accreditation scheme							✓

Establishing and extending accreditation schemes as a mechanism for building relationships with private landlords and addressing property conditions features in the future phase of all pilot projects. Building private rented sector teams and increasing inspections and enforcement activities supports this development. Work to address antisocial behaviour issues and engage with tenants is receiving less attention.

FOCUS

Engagement with Private Landlords

In mid 2004, engaging with private landlords seemed to preoccupy most projects. Both problems and successes were reported: with project profiling and publicity; with the development of accreditation schemes; with inspections; and with the responsiveness of other services. These and other issues are detailed throughout this briefing.

Engaging with any stakeholder involves a cluster of activities. The chart below displays examples of good news and bad news on private landlord engagement reported in this round as pilots experiment with "what works". Let us know if other activities need to be included.

Good News	Activity	Bad News
<p>Wider and more professional promotion of project and Private Landlord Association is improving access to landlords via open evenings, events, newsletters</p> <p>Web site up and running</p> <p>Address given to Private Landlord Association AGM</p>	<p>Raising awareness amongst and of private landlords</p>	<p>Poor landlord response to attending meeting from newsletter advertising – improved with follow up letter.</p> <p>Only 2 landlords attend local public meeting about property improvements.</p> <p>Poorly received presentation to landlords results in relations having to be rebuilt</p>
<p>Landlords represented on project steering groups in each local authority area</p> <p>Landlord Forum convened to discuss perceived problems in wider context</p>	<p>Working with landlords</p>	<p>Concerns by some landlords about breach of Data Protection Act</p> <p>Project Steering Groups dominated by some landlords</p>
<p>Survey of landlords and tenants</p> <p>Local authority provides dedicated phone line for landlords for Housing Benefit</p>	<p>Understanding landlord interests and concerns</p>	<p>Increased activity by speculative/ buy to let landlords in some areas</p>
<p>Agreement with PLA that all members' properties are accredited within 12 months</p>	<p>Private Landlord Association</p>	<p>Low property accreditation level (45%) amongst members of Landlord Association</p>
<p>Alignment of accreditation scheme with neighbouring authorities</p>	<p>Accreditation Schemes</p>	<p>Landlords leave the scheme when it becomes local authority run and managed</p>
<p>Accredited properties marketed and let through Local Authority property shop</p> <p>Proposal to accredit managing agents as associate members of PLA in exchange for promoting scheme to their landlords</p>	<p>Relationships with other LA services and agencies</p>	<p>Different priorities/ consideration given to private landlords by other services hinder relationship building</p>
<p>Notices threatening legal action successful in gaining access and improvements to properties</p>	<p>Property inspections</p>	<p>400 letters plus door knocking gives access to only 5 properties in one area</p>
<p>Cross tenure ASB group developing Private Landlord protocol</p> <p>PLA agree to develop an ASB protocol</p>	<p>Addressing ASB</p>	<p>ASB complaints not recorded separately from property complaints</p>

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