

Rent Smart Report January 2019 for Housing and New Homes Committee (notes by Cllr Tracey Hill)

The purpose of the Rent Smart partnership is to provide information and advice to people renting in Brighton and Hove. This is mainly done via the website (www.rentsmartbrightonhove.org) which gets dozens of visitors weekly. We are frequently contacted by renters and we signpost people to other organisations featured on the website including the partners and participants as well as bodies such as Shelter and resources such as the How to Rent Guide.

Rent Smart Conference 19th November 2018

This was the second of our annual conferences. We had around 70 people attend the half-day conference at Hove Town Hall. Feedback was generally positive, with some small suggestions for how things could be improved such as more time for questions.

The conferences are organised by the Rent Smart partners. Rent Smart is financed by its sponsors: The University of Brighton, University of Sussex, Brighton Housing Trust, Brighton and Hove City Council, Sussex Student Lettings, iHowz. Costs are small and mainly comprise the website hosting costs plus publicity and refreshments for the conference.

Keynote speaker - Rosie Walker, co-author of “The Rent Trap”

Eight things that have changed recently in the Private Rented Sector

1. Scotland has introduced no-fault evictions
2. Fitness for human habitation bill
3. Consultation on three-year tenancies
4. Letting fees bill
5. Shelter challenging “no DSS” on adverts
6. New database of rogue landlords
7. Rent repayment orders (Safer Renting)
8. Growing awareness amongst renters of their rights

Five things tenants should be aware of

- You should have a gas safety certificate
- You should have deposit protection
- Stay as long as possible when served a Section 21 notice (get advice)
- The landlord cannot enter your home without your permission
- The rent serves as a contract even if no written agreement has been signed

Breakout Sessions: ideas for future actions

Making the PRS easier to access

- A living wage as a minimum
- Ethical letting agency – one-stop shop
- Big political change – restructure demand and supply
- Make sure information gets out about Discretionary Housing Payments and who can benefit
- Affordability
- Guarantors
- Advice to renters
- Encourage people to take lodgers at reasonable rents
- Sparrerom.com etc – need more regulation
- Regulations for letting agents

Making it easier to maintain long-term successful tenancies

- Better communication up front about how long the place is available for
- Promote ways of linking tenants directly with landlords
- Rent increases should be tied to the cost of living
- Absent landlords – discourage it as no connection with city
- Get rid of Section 21 and bring in appropriate protections for landlords instead
- Provide landlords with alternatives to letting agents
- Standardise tenancy agreements (currently they range from 1-50 pages)
- Standardise responsibilities
- Mediation and better relationships

Improving landlord/agent/tenant relationships

- Regulation of agents
- Better customer service from agents
- Agents to get feedback from tenants
- Communicate what services exist in the city which might help, eg BHT/Southdown/BHCC etc
- Tenant forums – on the Rent Smart website?
- Ombudsman schemes – research what happens when agents don't fulfil their terms
- Provide more detailed information on the property for tenants

Actions agreed at our follow-up meeting on December 3rd

- Review letting agent fee research with a view to passing issues to Trading Standards. Consider coming back to letting agent fees after the ban comes

into force to check how it is working in practice and whether there are any loopholes

- Request blog posts about the Mediation Service and Discretionary Housing Payments
- Research guarantors and the various alternatives such as Housing Hands/ Canopy/ HomeGuarantee
- Approach Citizens Advice for an update on their very useful stats on what PRS issues they are dealing with
- Research into issues raised with letting agent redress schemes