

Housing Forum Meeting

31 January 2019, 2pm

Tower Hamlets Law Centre

Attendees

Shuhel Alom	Island Advice
Ali Halil	Citizens Advice Bureau
Martin Shankleman	Citizens Advice Bureau
Leslie Jaji	TV Edwards LLP
Hazel Saunders	Tower Hamlets Information and Advice for Deaf Residents
Christine Hopkirk	Alzheimers Society
Mark Baigent	Tower Hamlets Local Authority
Sadaf Mir	Tower Hamlets Law Centre
Alison Peacock	Tower Hamlets Law Centre

1. Flintons

- 1.1. The meeting opened with a discussion about the estate agent Flintons. Martin Shankleman (**MS**) requested an update on the action being taken against Flintons by Tower Hamlets council. The council previously said that they were “*investigating*”, though **MS** stated that nothing appears to have been done, despite a file going to the council’s legal team before Christmas. He explained that Flintons’ actions had been raised in previous Forum meetings.
- 1.2. Detailing the scope of the problem, **MS** explained that the Citizens Advice Bureau had received 47 complaints about Flintons. These complaints concerned: high-pressure sales techniques; payments being required to view properties; clients being shown a different property from the one advertised; and threatening behaviour towards clients. **MS** stated that the Citizens Advice Bureau had presented a file to the trading standards service at Tower Hamlets council. **MS** also stated that Flintons had not engaged with the Property Redress Scheme.
- 1.3. Sadaf Mir (**SM**) queried whether Trading Standards would be able to assist. **MS** explained that Trading Standards do not appear to get involved in civil cases unless they are very strong, indisputable cases.
- 1.4. **SM** stated that the Law Centre would follow up with Mark Lancaster at Tower Hamlets council to ask for details of the proposed legal action that is being considered.

2. Capital Letters

- 2.1. Mark Baigent (**MB**) arrived to discuss the new strategy launched by Tower Hamlets council to target homelessness and rough sleeping. **MB** explained that part of this strategy is participating in the Capital Letters programme. **MB** explained that Capital Letters:
 - 2.1.1. will be a not-for-profit company, owned by the councils who join the programme;
 - 2.1.2. aims to allow London boroughs to work together to improve the quality and length of time temporary accommodation is secured for applicants and rely less on pay per night

accommodation (which provide less security for families and which come at a high cost per night to the council);

2.1.3. to date has 13 councils committed to joining the programme, with the councils being more generally weighted to the east of London. The target is for all councils in London to sign up to the programme; and

2.1.4. aims to be starting in June 2019 but this is subject to completing the foundational work (i.e. seconding staff from the relevant councils, recruiting additional staff, creating IT systems, acquiring office space, and building relationships with landlords).

2.2. The programme has several expected benefits:

2.2.1. **MB** explained that currently, councils are competing against each other for suitable accommodation. As a result, when two or three boroughs are looking to rent the same property, the price to be paid is driven up. The Capital Letters programme will have a single procurement team that will identify properties and rent them from landlords. Given councils will not be competing with each other that should reduce risk of prices (rent, other incentives) being pushed up. **MB** noted that the programme will not remove incentive payments paid to private landlords entirely, given that other parties will also be looking to acquire the same properties and Capital Letters must remain competitive in the market.

2.2.2. The intention is that the programme will also improve the standard of temporary accommodation. One way to ensure the quality of the properties will be in the management of three-way agreements. Currently, some tenants have entered into agreements with the council and with an agent. When there are issues with the property, the tenants are often unsure who to report the disrepair to. **MB** explained that in the new programme, Capital Letters will take the place of the agent. In respect of repair obligations in general, **MB** stated that the repair responsibility will be negotiated between Capital Letters and the property owner.

2.2.3. The Capital Letters programme should reduce the occasions where London borough councils accommodate homeless individuals in other boroughs. The Capital Letters programme should streamline the system and identify cases by councils working collaboratively so applicants are more likely to be placed in their borough of choice.

2.2.4. Finally, **MB** also explained that the programme would help the councils reduce the statistics of the number of people recorded as living in temporary accommodation. However, if the family has a tenancy with Capital Letters, the local authority would not be their landlord and in terms of official reporting, they would not be recorded as homeless. Through Capital Letters the tenant would most likely be a tenant of Capital Letter.

2.3. The Ministry of Housing have agreed to fund the project up to £38 million in the next 3 years. The funding is performance-related and will be received subject to Capital Letters showing that progress has been made. To date, £500,000 has been received from the Ministry of Housing. **MB** explained that the funding will be used to employ staff, purchase IT equipment and make incentive payments to landlords. The programme will aim to procure approximately 20,000 properties but **MB** recognised that this may not be possible quickly, and that the number of properties would be market-dependent.

- 2.4. **SM** noted that the programme has been publicised as targeting people “*on the edge of homelessness*” and queried who the programme would help in practice. **MB** explained that the programme would be aiming to find accommodation for individuals before they are evicted; including from the point that they are given a section 21 notice. When asked about the potential use of the properties as to house single homeless applicants, **MB** stated that this may be inevitable under the Homelessness Reduction Act, but that at the beginning, the priority for the programme would be to accommodate families. **MB** states most likely properties procured to house single homeless people would be Houses in Multiple Occupation. Following a query from **SM** regarding about Housing First, **MB** confirmed that one Housing First pilot programme is in place in Tower Hamlets. **MB** stated that Tower Hamlets is very interested in the pilot programme and that they consider it to be the right approach but it is expensive. **MB** stated that the key contacts at Tower Hamlets council in relation to homelessness and rough sleeping are Rafiqul Hoque and Kath Dane.
- 2.5. The Capital Letters programme will aim to provide tenancies lasting at least two years. **MB** stated that the councils hoped for longer terms tenancies, though he could not rule out tenancies of 12 months. Capital Letters will seek to lease the property from the owner for 5-10 years and the property will be available to the homeless individual for the life of the lease (provided they continue to pay the rent). **MB** confirmed (in response to a query) that tenants will be evicted from the Capital Letter property if they accrue rent arrears (which they fail to address) and that the council will then take on the duty for the individual, if one exists. **MB** confirmed that tenancy sustainment officers would work with tenants to support them when needed to maintain the terms of the tenancy.
- 2.6. When asked about the effect of accepting a Capital Letters property out of the borough on an individual’s place on the housing waiting list, **MB** stated that the policy was under review. He recognised that if an individual faces removal from the waiting list, this will act as a disincentive to accept the offer of a property. Therefore, they are considering allowing the individual to stay on the waiting list for some period, maybe 2-3 years.
- 2.7. While discussing more broadly Tower Hamlets strategy to tackle homelessness, **MB** explained that Tower Hamlets were embarking on a programme of buying back council houses that were sold via the Right to Buy scheme. Further, the removal of the local authority borrowing cap, and the revenue flow from rent to councils via Capital Letters, also means that the council can use those funds to invest in procuring more properties or building more council houses.

