

**BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL**  
**SCRUTINY PANEL ON LETTING AGENTS**

**3.00pm 10 FEBRUARY 2011**

**ROOM 318**

**MINUTES**

**Present:** Councillor Elgood (Chair)

**Also in attendance:** Councillor Simpson

**Other Members present:**

**PART ONE**

**14. EVIDENCE FROM CLLR MARIA CAULFIELD, CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING**

- 14.1 In response to a question about regulation of letting agents, Cllr Caulfield told panel members that she would support a tighter regulatory regime. A particular issue was that agents sometimes acted as a barrier between tenants or their neighbours and landlords. For tenants, this could mean that repairs did not get carried out as quickly as they should, even in situations where the landlord might have been happy to make a speedy repair, since the landlord might not know that a problem existed. Similarly, for other local residents it might mean that they could not complain directly to landlords about tenants' behaviour etc. For landlords, this could mean that their property suffered long term damage because they were not alerted to problems that might have easily been fixed at an early stage.
- 14.2 In answer to a question on accreditation/a code of practice for letting agents, Cllr Caulfield told members that she was in favour of this idea in theory. Currently, customers have a good idea of the quality and reputation of estate agents, but little if any idea about letting agents, and more information could be of benefit here, particularly in terms of identifying untrustworthy 'fly by night' operators.
- 14.3 Cllr Caulfield told the panel that she supported Brighton Housing Trust's idea of setting up a 'social 'letting agent' for the city – i.e. a social enterprise which could supply high quality and relatively low cost letting agent services to city landlords. As well as ensuring that landlords and tenants were not exploited by their letting agent, this scheme could have the potential to reduce some rents, as landlords who were not required to pay excessive management fees might be able to reduce their rent charges. The council could support this initiative by directing landlords and prospective tenants to the service.
- 14.4 Cllr Caulfield also noted that a trusted social letting agent might be able to work with landlords to encourage them to accept tenants in receipt of housing benefit (HB),

(currently many landlords refuse to house HB recipients). Similarly, it can be very difficult to get landlords to accept tenants with limited resources to pay deposits etc, and a social letting agent might have a role to play here.

- 14.5 In response to a question about informing private sector tenants of their rights, Cllr Caulfield told the panel that it would be useful for tenants to have some 'tips' on renting: identifying good and bad practice. This could include information on long term lets, what services letting agents can reasonably charge for, details about the national deposit protection scheme, and advice on what constitutes an acceptable minimum standard of accommodation.
- 14.6 Cllr Caulfield told members that there was not a very significant role for the council in *enforcing* minimum property standards, as although Environmental Health did have the power to enforce a minimum lettable standard, this was set by law at a very low level. Cllr Caulfield noted that she would welcome greater national regulation in this area. There was a particular issue for Brighton & Hove here, as the very large local market for student accommodation tended to set a norm for private rented accommodation across the city. As student housing is often of a very low standard (essentially because many students will accept a poor standard of accommodation), this can act as a drag on standards across Brighton & Hove, a problem which might be mitigated by more robust minimum standards.
- 14.7 Cllr Caulfield also told members that it might be interesting to know how many long leases were actually offered to private renters in the city. Long leases can be advantageous to both tenants and landlords, but may run counter to the financial interests of letting agents (who charge fees for creating and renewing tenancies).
- 14.8 Members thanked Cllr Caulfield for taking the time to talk to them and promised to share their report recommendations with her.

The meeting concluded at 4.00pm

Signed

Chair

Dated this

day of