

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Agenda
Item No.

6

Report of Corporate Director for People
to
Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee
on
16th April 2015

Report prepared by: Andrew Fiske Housing Group Manager

South East Alliance of Landlords Agents (SEAL) – Progress Report

Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee – Executive Councillor: Councillor
Woodley

A Part 1 Public Agenda Item

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update Members on the progress of the partnership arrangements between the Council and SEAL and proposes a new way of working together in the future.
- 1.2 As Members will recall the Council entered into a formal agreement with SEAL to improve the management of properties in the Private Rented Sector (PRS) and to ensure that standards were increased and action taken against those bad landlords that operate in the Borough and wherever possible to get them to become SEAL members.
- 1.3 In some respects the formation of SEAL was a response by Letting Agents and Landlords to prove that they could improve standards without the need for the Council to introduce Selective Licensing as they felt that this would penalise the good landlords as well as the bad landlords. It was agreed that no decision would be made on Selective Licensing and the Council would review the position after SEAL had been in operation for at least 12 months.

2. Recommendation

That Members note the report and their views are sought on the future arrangements between the Council and SEAL

3. Background

- 3.1 In recent years the Private Rented Sector has expanded in the Borough as a result of the economic downturn as more people are choosing to rent rather than to become

owner occupiers. As a result this has meant that rents have increased due to the increase in demand and the shortage of supply.

3.2 In addition the Council is able to discharge our homelessness duties into the PRS too which has also increased the demand for properties within Local Housing Allowance (LHA) levels. London Boroughs are also looking to find properties outside of the capital to house their homeless cases and this is also having an impact on the local market. Finally the other factor is that PRS tenants are not moving and are staying in their homes longer so there are fewer properties becoming available as a result too.

3.3 Since the inception of SEAL the Council has been actively working with SEAL on a number of joint initiatives which are set out below:-

- SEAL Board – A SEAL Board has been established and successfully running with representation on the board from a number of private sector letting agents, private sector landlords, a residents' representative, as well as representation from the Council's Private Sector Housing, and Community Housing teams. The Board also has Member representation from the Council.
- SEAL Members have worked voluntarily to produce a recognised branding identity, which is now being successfully rolled out across the Borough. Being recognised as a Member of SEAL brings with it an acknowledgement that members are actively working to drive up property standards in the PRS. SEAL managed properties now total over 7,000 properties, membership total is 73, including 53 landlords, and 20 Agents.
- SEAL has produced an informative leaflet and membership documents which include a Member's Handbook explaining policies and procedures that members must agree to abide by. The documentation also aims to ensure that SEAL members proactively meet the Health & Safety Rating System (HHSRS) requirements, thus ensuring a safe and healthy living environment for tenants.
- SEAL Identification Sticker showing SEAL contact details and the Member's unique reference number. This is to be on display in the windows of every property managed under SEAL, reassuring the tenant on the professionalism of their landlord or agent.
- SEAL Code of Conduct developed in close conjunction with the Council, listing a practical way forward to help raise the standards of rented property and to better manage Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)
- A Tenant Information Pack is provided to every SEAL managed property containing helpful information about the area and renting. Members have embraced this and gone beyond the basic folder by producing further helpful information which Members have included in their own documentation to their tenants.
- Section 21 Notice Procedures – Where Council Officers work with the landlord or agent to advise and support landlords in respect of those tenants served notice to leave their homes in order to be able to educate and assist the tenant to keep and maintain their tenancy. As part of this procedure it has been agreed that SEAL Members will forward a copy of the S21 Notice to the Council's Housing Options Team as soon as it is issued thereby allowing more time for the Housing Options Team to work with the landlord and tenant to endeavour to prevent homelessness occurring.

- An informative website has been set up, which now needs to be developed further to provide the full Tenant Pack, as well as other relevant and helpful information for landlords, tenants and residents.
- Regular Property Inspections are proving to be very successful in providing more up to date Maintenance Schedules, and monitoring of unacceptable behaviour which is being addressed directly with those tenants more promptly and effectively.
- Street Blitz – in 2014 SEAL organised their first Street Blitz which was very successful in getting the local community involved in clearing up their local environment.

Future SEAL Initiatives

3.4 SEAL are looking to continue to grow their membership and are looking to become self-financing through increasing their subscriptions and possibly sponsorship. They are also planning to do another Street Blitz later this year and are planning to encourage landlords to install bin stores which will prevent rubbish from accumulating, particularly where there are Homes in Multiple Occupation (HMO's).

4. Corporate Implications

4.1 Contribution to Council's Vision & Corporate Priorities

SEAL's work in the Borough does contribute to several of the Council's corporate priorities particularly in terms of Clean, Healthy, and Safe as having better conditions in the private rented sector would meet all of these priorities.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 The Council previously providing some pump priming money to help set up SEAL which included some funding for a part time SEAL Administration post of 20 hours per week. Members will be aware of the difficult financial position for 2015/16 and there is no budget provision for this funding to continue in the current financial year.

6. Legal Implications

SEAL is a voluntary organisation and it is not considered that there are any legal implications to the Council. The Private Sector Housing Team continues to carry out its statutory enforcement duties parallel to SEAL.

7. People Implications

No staffing implications for the Council.

8. Property Implications

No Asset Management implications as the vast majority of SEAL's work relates to properties within the privately rented sector. SEAL does not relate to dwellings owned or managed by South Essex Homes.

9. Consultation

Extensive consultation took place when SEAL was established between August 2012 and January 2013.

10. Equalities and Diversity Implications

Any landlord or letting agent operating within the Borough of Southend may apply to join SEAL.

11. Risk Assessment

There are no major risks arising from this Report.

12. Value for Money

The Council's partnership with SEAL has been a very cost effective alternative to Selective Licensing.

13. Community Safety Implications

Through the good partnership working relationship between the Council and the SMAART team there has been a more effective response to incidents of anti-social behaviour. It is anticipated that by working closely together on improving the streetscene through initiatives such as the Street Blitz. In particular, all new tenants must sign up to an ASB Tenant Declaration which has been drafted in conjunction with SMAART so that tenants are well aware of what is not appropriate behaviour within the property.

14. Environmental Impact

None.

Background Papers

None

Appendices