

SOCIAL LETTINGS AGENCIES IN THE WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL RESEARCH PRESENTATION WITH RECOMMENDATIONS

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM



The final and largest stakeholder event held as part of the WMSLA project programme was a Regional Research Presentation which took place on the 10th of March 2017 at the Library of Birmingham.

The aim of this event was to share our WMSLA research findings with regional stakeholders and for our research case study participants to both respond to these findings and to share their knowledge and experience of the strategic and operational issues around SLAs with a wider audience.

Places were reserved for those who had attended the 3 regional peer learning events as well as offered to a wider network of regional housing officers, councillors, charities, homelessness agencies, support and advice agencies, consultants and academics. There were over 50 delegates at the event representing a variety of bodies and organisations, as listed in Table 1 (page 2)



Audience at Regional Research Event, Library of Birmingham, March 10th 2017

The event began with our introduction to Social Lettings Agencies and overview of WMSLA Research in the current policy context, followed by a presentation of the Let to Birmingham Case Study. Thereafter, the audience heard positive initial responses from speakers from Let to Birmingham, Birmingham City Council Homelessness Hub and Birmingham City Council Commissioning Centre. Fuller responses are expected in the medium term.

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Responses to our recommendations from Birmingham City Council Commissioning Centre included:

- Continued appetite to engage with contractors who can provide access to the private rented sector
- PRS accommodation recognised as a vital part of housing supply and essential to helping to meet need
- New financial models are needed – policy environment has changed and models need to adapt
- Supported Housing Strategy to be developed to determine approach to exempt accommodation payments
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Regional Research Presentation - Organisations attending included:

- University of Birmingham
- Birmingham City Council
- LTB – Mears Group
- LTB – Let to Birmingham
- Crisis
- Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
- Solihull Community Housing
- City of Wolverhampton Council
- Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
- Nuneaton & Bedworth Council
- Lichfield District Council
- Bromsgrove & Redditch Council
- BVSC
- Birmingham & Solihull Women's Aid
- Wyre Forest District Council
- Money line BVSC
- Spring Housing
- Aspire supported Living CIC
- Homeless Link
- Grace & Favour
- West Midlands Police
- Trident Housing Association
- Telford Council
- Venn Group
- Stuart Palmer Associates Ltd
- Wolverhampton Homes
- CHHARRISONS
- St Basil's
- Birmingham City Council – PSS Core Services
- Worcester CAB
- Sifa Fireside
- Black Country HA
- Coventry City Council

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Let to Birmingham responding to recommendations

Birmingham City Council reflecting on the SLA partnership

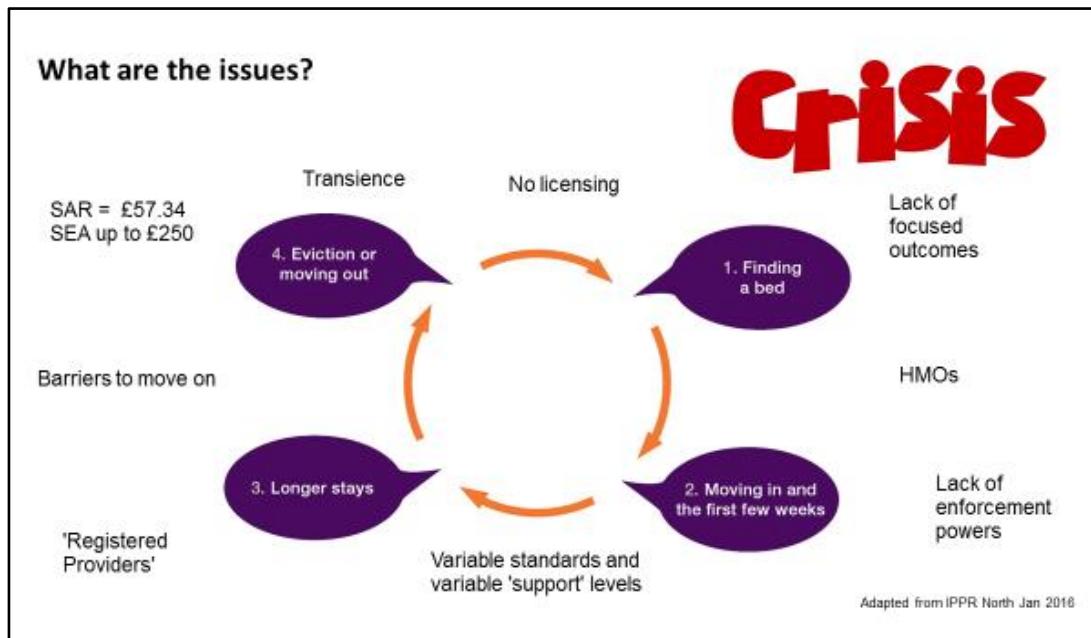


Moving on from Birmingham City Council and LtB we then explored approaches to SLAs and access schemes across the region, reflecting on the key themes that had emerged from the three stakeholder peer learning events and the regional research case studies.

Crisis Birmingham and the Spring Housing Association Exempt Accommodation project both presented some of the issues around social lettings and single homeless access in Birmingham and the Region.

For Crisis their focus was on the section of the homeless/vulnerably housed population that were seen to be under the radar as such, and therefore it was critical for Crisis to identify providers, and also share good practice and intelligence around third sector bodies, referring agencies, local authorities and tenants, and to prepare for the anticipated changes to supported housing funding from 2019.

Crisis capture key issues and barriers around Supported Exempt Accommodation



Spring Housing outlined the West Midlands landscape and Birmingham context in which they operate, and also described their offer to tenants which includes a 'rent relief' scheme to enable people in low paid and irregular employment to live in their properties which are high quality, fully furnished with tenancy sustainment support. Incentives to landlords include a guaranteed monthly income, management of voids and income collection, maintenance and servicing.

The final part of the event programme was a panel discussion with all the speakers responding to questions from the audience.



Panel Discussion around enabling SLAs

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The panel were also asked to individually identify one thing they would like to see happen to enable SLAs and PRS access schemes to succeed in the West Midlands, and their responses included:

- The opportunity to explore to involve LtB in Homelessness Trailblazer funded work on preventing homelessness within Birmingham.
- For organisations within Birmingham to harness knowledge to improve the exempt accommodation sector by Crisis and work together with Local Authorities and others in the city and region.
- To see a review of the level of Local Housing Allowance which has resulted in difficulties accessing properties.
- To see investment by local authorities and social investors in a fund to buy a stock of housing in the region to let to those in housing need. This could be a way to redirect funding, create a financial return and a means to raise standards.
- To work with Local Authorities to provide more opportunities within the housing market.

A number of questions were raised by the audience including how existing SLAs dealt with concerns around social inclusion, and what the options would be for potential clients with a debt history who may be excluded by lettings and nominations criteria. LtB described their tenancy criteria, which did not exclude people with a history of rent arrears, and also tried to uncover the reason behind debt issues, any evidence to support that reason and what support could thereafter be provided.

A discussion was provoked around whether SLAs could constitute a viable option to meeting general housing in the context of welfare caps and universal credit. Birmingham City Council conceded that benefit caps, which made the market unaffordable, were a challenging issue and that the flexibility of organisations in adapting the welfare cap for larger households in particular was very limited. LtB were working with a consultant to plan for the impact of these benefit caps which would adversely affect many of their tenants.

Spring Housing suggested that new build would also be affected by the benefit cap as fewer properties will be built that can house larger families on low incomes. They discussed their affordability assessment, rent relief fund and furnishing properties to address some of these issues.

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Another issue raised was about the impact of the Homelessness Reduction Bill. LtB confirmed they were working with providers and with individuals to prevent homelessness as part of their strategy. Crisis suggested that people have complex lives and therefore working with them to gain an understanding of realistic tenancy expectations before placing a them in properties would help prevent a cycle of homelessness.

There was a discussion about the phrase 'culture of waiting'. The research team clarified that the term had been used by City Council interviewees to capture the barriers they were finding in marketing LtB to housing applicants who often preferred to wait for a council offer of a secure lower rent property with the Right to Buy than to consider a good quality higher rent speedy offer from LtB. The team will consider carefully how this issue is presented in the report where they discuss how LtB compares to social housing from the tenant's perspective

After this engaging panel discussion Vicki Popplewell, on behalf of West Midlands Housing Officer Group (WMHOG), thanked members for coming and hoped they found the meeting useful. She said that WMHOG will be using the report over the next few months at regional and national level. A link to the reports and project webpage will be circulated to all participants. Vicki encouraged everyone to share information with each other.

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/social-policy/departments/social-policy-social-work/research/projects/2015/social-lettings-agencies.aspx>

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Recommendations

Our recommendations follow and are divided between incremental changes designed to build on the success of existing SLAs in the region, policy influencing recommendations designed to use the research in the report to influence central government and others, and tentative recommendations for future initiatives at regional level to be taken forward as part of the Combined Authority agenda.

A. INCREMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support existing SLAs where they are succeeding in procuring decent homes that tenants can afford with a degree of confidence about the future.
2. Explore the potential to expand existing schemes to cover more parts of the region, for example by contracts with an existing agency or franchising to give local service while saving on central overheads.
3. Continue to promote learning exchange across the region through WMHOG and emerging bodies such as the Combined Authority and Engage WM Housing.
4. Support the spread of policies such as Spring Housing's Rent Relief Fund (see Appendix A.3 cases study) to enable more people in work to live in SLA accommodation where rents are above LHA levels

B. USING THE REPORT TO INFLUENCE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

5. Make the case to Government for a more viable financial regime that can build on the HALD and exempt accommodation models to support interventions that bring PRS closer to a 'new social housing'. Build on CSJ 2016 recommendations for a **£40 million SLA capital fund** as a way to strengthen the 2017 Housing White Paper's proposal to '*consider whether SLAs could be an effective tool*'.
6. Make the case to Government based on the evidence of LHA/lower quartile rents gap in most parts of the region that we will never create a real alternative to social housing without a more supportive financial regime.
7. Address Key Policy Threats (Universal Credit, welfare benefit caps, Supporting People reductions) and Opportunities (White Paper, CSJ Report, Homelessness Reduction Bill, 2017 Green Paper on transfer of exempt accommodation funding in 2019) with positive alternatives to provide good quality secure homes in the region for people on low incomes.

C. POSSIBLE NEW REGIONAL INITIATIVES

8. Support the proposed Crisis Birmingham project on future policy and practice around the exempt accommodation sector in Birmingham and the West Midlands in preparation for the 2019 changes; potentially through a regional partnership e.g. with Engage WM Housing.
9. Manage the market – improve coordination with other statutory users of PRS (Social Services, Probation, Refugee programmes) across the region.
10. Consider promoting a regional initiative along the lines of the Trust for London's discussion of a pan-London of a sub-regional SLA for London to overcome some of the limitations encountered by individual borough SLAs.
11. Consider developing a more ambitious investment fund model like the Real Lettings Fund in Croydon to purchase and lease accommodation to meet homeless and other housing needs funded by social investors, LA investors and recycled LA user charges.