

PRIVATE LANDLORDS NEWSLETTER

ISSUE NO: 12

STRATEGIC HOUSING SERVICES

NOVEMBER 2008

ENERGY PERFORMANCE CERTIFICATES (EPC'S)

What does this mean in practice?

The EPC provides prospective tenants with information about how energy efficient a property is that they are considering renting.

You need to provide an EPC whenever a home* in the social or private rented sector is let to a **new** tenant.

You must make the EPC available **free of charge** to prospective tenants at the earliest opportunity. This should be before any rental contract is entered into.

EPCs are valid for 10 years and can be reused as many times as required within that period. It is not necessary to commission a new EPC each time there is a change of tenant.

An EPC is not required for any property that was occupied before 1st October 2008 and which continues to be occupied after that date by the same tenant.

A landlord's guide to energy performance certificates can be downloaded from <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/957171.pdf>

* **An EPC is only required for a property which is self-contained. It is not required when a tenant rents a room and shares facilities, where each tenant has a separate contract with the landlord.**

LANDLORDS FOCUS GROUP

The Landlord's Focus Group is now up and running and is looking for new members, either private landlords or letting agents. The aim of the group is to ensure that private sector landlords, agents and other individuals have an active role in influencing the services within the sector. The group meets every 5 weeks and is currently assisting in developing an Accreditation Scheme and in organising the next Private Sector Landlords Event. For more information please contact Nick Griffiths on 01432 261588 or email ngriffiths1@herefordshire.gov.uk

BRINGING EMPTY PROPERTIES BACK INTO USE

Herefordshire Council is committed to tackling the challenge of empty properties in the County. The bringing of empty properties back into use is an essential part of the overall housing strategy to meet the accommodation needs of the people of Herefordshire.

The Council has produced a guide which sets out the various options that may be available to owners of empty properties to assist them in bringing the property back to a good standard of residential use. The Housing Needs and Development Team can provide advice and guidance, and in some instances financial assistance can be provided to bring a property up to a good lettable standard.

For more information contact The Housing Development Officer on 01432 261905 or email enablinggeneral@herefordshire.gov.uk

The Council also has an enforcement role in cases where properties continue to be left unoccupied or in a poor state of repair and the guide explains the actions that can be taken against the owners of these properties.

SEEKING LANDLORDS

As the credit crunch continues to impact on households in the UK, Herefordshire Council has been receiving a number of enquiries from working families who are struggling to manage their housing situation in the current economic climate.

Can you help? We are seeking landlords who would be keen to offer short and long-term stable housing options to families and single people in this situation. In return, the Council seek to guarantee the rental income, or provide rent-in-advance and a deposit, together with a variety of other incentives to enable successful outcomes for tenants and landlords alike.

To find out more about these new developments, contact Nick Griffiths on 01432 261588.

PRIVATE SECTOR LEASING SCHEME

Guaranteed rent for 2 years

The Herefordshire Council offers a 2 year lease to private sector landlords, which can be renewed further after the 2 year period. During the lease period the owner is guaranteed the monthly rent regardless of whether the property is occupied. A local Housing Association manages the properties on behalf of Herefordshire Council, taking responsibility for all tenancy management issues.

This scheme is aimed at properties in good lettable condition, that are in an area of housing need. Such properties would need to be within easy reach of Hereford City or one of the market towns.

Properties taken on under this scheme are used as temporary accommodation for families that are in urgent housing need.

After the lease has ended the property is returned to the owner in good condition, subject to fair wear and tear.

For further information contact The Housing Development Officer on 01432 261905 or email enablinggeneral@herefordshire.gov.uk

RENT/ DEPOSIT SCHEME

Herefordshire Council's rent/deposit scheme is intended to help people in need of housing who are unable to raise the rent in advance and/or the deposit the landlord may require to secure accommodation in the private sector.

If you are looking for tenants, or have prospective tenants that cannot afford the rent/deposit, please contact the Homelessness Prevention Team for further advice and assistance on 01432 261600 or email housing.enquiry@herefordshire.gov.uk

HOUSES IN MULTIPLE OCCUPATION (HMO) LICENSING UPDATE

In common with many other local authorities, Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) licence applications have failed to reach original estimates. An HMO is a property occupied by more than one household and more than two people, and will include accommodation such as bedsits, shared houses and some self contained flats. If a property within Herefordshire is an HMO, it is almost certain that the landlord or their agent will need a licence. Landlords should be aware that we are able to determine which houses are likely to require licensing from the information we already possess.

If the Council have to search landlords out, the cost of the licence may have to increase. Therefore a review of our HMO licence charging policy will take into consideration those landlords who do not declare their full portfolio of licensable properties.

The preference is always to work with landlords and to offer help and encouragement whenever possible and the efforts and interest of landlords who have already submitted their applications is appreciated. To avoid potential increases in cost and the risk of prosecution, landlords who need licensing for their houses, but have so far not applied, are encouraged to do so now. Contact the Private Sector Housing Team on 01432 260746 or email psh@herefordshire.gov.uk for an HMO licence application pack.

LANDLORDS AND TENANT ACCREDITATION SCHEME

The Private Sector Housing team and Landlords Focus Group are putting the final touches to a new accreditation scheme intended for landlords and tenants in Herefordshire.

The scheme will take into consideration physical condition of rented accommodation and require landlords to sign up to a code of practice. Although a proportion of properties will be inspected, the scheme is based on self-certification by the Landlord. The Landlord will also offer tenants the option of becoming an Accredited Tenant, signing them up to a code of conduct and giving them a competitive edge when renting in the future.

Assistance to landlords will be available to cover the full cost of improvements to meet security and energy efficiency standards. Free Energy Performance Certificates (EPC) will also be on offer for each property a landlord successfully accredits.

If you would like to be involved in the initial pilot of the scheme, please contact the Private Sector Housing team on 01432 260746 or email psh@herefordshire.gov.uk

ARE YOUR TENANTS IN ARREARS WITH THEIR RENT?

If your tenants are in arrears with their rent or are breaching other conditions of their tenancy, and despite your best efforts the situation has not been resolved, there are other options to consider before taking legal action. The Local Authority can offer general advice and assistance to you and your tenants to ensure that whenever possible, any problems are resolved so the tenancy can continue. For more information contact the Homelessness Prevention Team on 01432 261600 or email housing.enquiry@herefordshire.gov.uk

HOUSING / COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT SELF SERVICE

Herefordshire Council has launched a new interactive internet service to enable residents of Hereford to view electronically their council tax or business rates accounts, together with enabling claimants to access details of their housing or council tax benefit entitlement online.

The new 'self service' system, provided by the council's Benefits and Exchequer service, will also enable local landlords to have access to information about housing benefits payments they receive directly on behalf of tenants who are entitled to housing benefit.

Customers can also search for the council tax banding of their own property or check any other property within the county (useful if the house is on the market). To protect the security of information, access to the service can only be gained using their account number or claim number along with a password.

For more information log on to http://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/health/social_policy/2384.asp

DIGITAL SWITCH OVER FOR LANDLORDS

A dedicated website has been set up by Digital UK to provide advice to landlords about the switchover to digital TV. For more information go to www.digitaluk.co.uk/propertymanagers

NEW HOME FIRE SAFETY GUIDANCE

New national guidance for landlords, managing agents, tenants and enforcers, aimed at cutting the 300,000 fires in residential properties, which kill more than 300 people in the UK each year, has recently been released.

The guidance, Housing – Fire Safety, was developed by LACORS, the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) and the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH). The guidance provides advice on how to keep residential buildings safe from fire, explains how to carry out a fire risk assessment and includes a range of case studies.

The guidance adopts a risk based approach to fire safety that will satisfy both the Housing Act 2004 and the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. It includes guidance to landlords on how to carry out a fire risk assessment. The guidance applies to existing residential accommodation including single family houses, bedsits, shared houses and flats. It does not apply to new housing that is built to modern building regulations.

The guidance can be downloaded at www.lacors.gov.uk/lacors/upload/19175.pdf

FUEL FRENZY

ENERGY GRANTS FOR LANDLORDS/TENANTS

There appear to be no brakes to the fuel price increases over recent months

There are positive steps that can be taken to reduce the impact of fuel bills. Making your homes more energy efficient to retain heat is a sensible and cost effective way to keep fuel costs to a minimum.

There are a number of energy efficiency schemes available to landlords and tenants to do just this.

The company A1 Low Carbon Solutions have pulled in funding from Npower to provide households with a discount when they are changing their solid fuel or electric heating system to oil or gas central heating. Grant funding is available to all carrying out this fuel switch, but the most funding is offered to the over 70's or those in receipt of income or disability benefits where up to £1500 may be accessible. To find out more phone A1 Low Carbon Solutions on 01934 864220.

All households with occupants over 70 and/or in receipt of income or disability benefits can also apply for free cavity wall insulation and loft insulation where there is 60mm or less of existing loft insulation. There are two main schemes running in Herefordshire through which households can apply for this funding: Keep Herefordshire Warm 01743 277124 and Domestic and General Insulation 0800 013 2910.

The Landlords Energy Savings Allowance (L.E.S.A) gives you the opportunity to invest into your property by installing cavity, loft or solid wall insulation, which at the same time provides a deduction for income tax purposes of up to a maximum of £1500 spent per building. L.E.S.A is available to all landlords of domestic properties and buildings of multiple occupation.

The Warm Front grant helps private tenants on income and/or disability related benefits with heating and insulation measures. To find out more phone 0800 316 2814.

For those interested in renewable energy measures, the Central Government Grant, Low Carbon Buildings Programme has been offering discounts off solar thermal, wind energy, bio energy and hydro electric power. Phone 0800 915 0990 for more information.

If you need any guidance with regards to domestic sustainable energy issues, the Energy Efficiency Advice Centre give expert, free and impartial advice on 0800 512 012 or phone the Council's Energy Efficiency Section on 01432 260398.

YARNOLD AND O'MAHONY'S HOUSE DOCTOR SURGERY



Tired of asking the same housing question and not getting a straight answer? Never fear, our resident House Doctors Yarnold and O'Mahony are here in a new regular question and answer column to answer all your housing queries.

In this edition, they tackle some questions that have previously been asked by landlords.

Q. What is the Housing Health and Safety Rating System?

A. The Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) was introduced by the Housing Act 2004 and effectively replaces what was known as the fitness standard. HHSRS is a method of risk assessment that focuses on particular hazards and therefore places emphasis directly on the risk to health and safety in a residential property. Risks are assessed on the basis of the likelihood of an occurrence that could cause harm and the probable severity of the outcome, if it did happen.

The HHSRS assesses 29 categories of housing hazard, including factors which were not covered or covered adequately by the fitness standard. It provides a rating for each hazard and does not provide a rating for the dwelling as a whole or, in the case of multiply occupied dwellings, for the building as a whole. The hazards that can be assessed are those associated with or arising from damp and mould, excess heat and cold, asbestos, biocides, carbon monoxide, lead, radiation, uncombusted fuel, volatile organic compounds, crowding and space, intruders, lighting, noise, hygiene, food safety, water supply, falls, electrical, fire, hot surfaces, entrapment, explosions, ergonomics, and structural collapse.

Action taken by the local authority is based on a three stage consideration; the hazard rating (determined by HHSRS), whether the authority has a duty or power to act (dependant on the level of risk), and the authority's judgement as to the most appropriate course of action to deal with the hazard. Although the HHSRS assessment is based on the risk to the potential occupant who is most vulnerable to the hazard, local authorities can take account of the vulnerability of the actual occupant in deciding the best course of action.

In most cases the local authority will be able to informally assist landlords overcome the problem and implement appropriate measures.

Q. I have been asked to provide an electrical certificate with my HMO licence application pack. What is this and what do I need to be aware of?

A. A landlord safety certificate or periodic inspection report is an inspection and test report on an electrical system to BS7671. The latest edition of BS:7671 (IEE Wiring Regulations 17th Edition) was published in January 2008. These inspections are the electrical installation equivalent of a car MOT. The IEE Wiring Regulations recommend that periodic inspection reports be carried out at least every five years for rented accommodation. The tests and visual inspections are performed to a set standard and reported in a standard form. The inspection and test are an in-depth analysis of an electrical system that includes physical examination of cables, fixtures, how the installation was installed and full meter testing of all cablework using specialised test equipment between the fusebox and final current using equipment in a circuit. All testing is done to the latest standards so it ensures that installations are updated and upgraded as regulations change.

Check if there are any numbered recommendations listed within the report. If there are any items headed '1' (requires urgent attention), or '2' (requires improvement) then these items must be rectified before the electrical installation can be considered to be in a safe and satisfactory condition. Evidence of this can be by receipt of an invoice for the cost of the remedial works or provision of a revised certificate confirming that the installation is now satisfactory. Also ensure that your electrical contractor includes their professional qualification serial number on the certificate and that they are competent. You can check competency of electrical engineers by reference to www.competentperson.co.uk

Q. I'm worried that every time my property is inspected, I will be asked to provide completely different fire safety measures. What is being done to improve consistency of approach by Private Sector Housing staff and the Fire and Rescue Service?

A. The new Fire Safety Guidance developed by LACORS, the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) and the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) will assist councils and fire and rescue authorities who enforce fire safety legislation in residential accommodation to adopt a more consistent risk-based approach on a national level. Although the guidance will not remove the need for enforcement at times, landlords can now find out in one document what they need to do to comply with the law – see page 3 'New Home Fire Safety Guidance'.

If you have any questions for the next newsletter please contact the Housing Needs & Development Team on 01432 260269 or email enablingeneral@herefordshire.gov.uk