

Guidance for local authorities on conducting research with private sector landlords

Introduction

- 1 This advice note has been produced by the project consultants as part of the support provided to Welsh local authorities under the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) Private Rented Sector Improvement Project undertaken during 2012/13.
- 2 The note is intended to provide advice to local authorities on conducting research (relatively quickly and at minimal cost) with private sector landlords as a means of developing a more comprehensive understanding of the sector locally.
3. The advice note is structured as follows:
 - background to the development of the advice note
 - making contact with landlords in your area
 - developing an on-line questionnaire
 - post-survey work with landlords

Background to the development of the advice note

- 4 During the autumn and winter of 2012 and the spring of 2013, as part of the WLGA Private Rented Sector Improvement Project, the project consultants visited each Welsh local authority and facilitated discussions amongst key officers and elected members. The purpose of these discussions was to identify how each local authority could improve the way it works with the private rented sector. The project was funded by the Welsh Government in the recognition that, in the future, local authorities will become more reliant on private rented landlords to ensure a sufficient supply of affordable housing to help meet the housing needs of their citizens and to assist in the discharge of statutory responsibilities to people who are homeless (which will be introduced when the Housing Bill is enacted – likely to be April 2015).
- 5 One theme which emerged consistently during discussions with authorities was the limited knowledge that the majority of local authorities had about the private rented sector in their areas. Most local authorities had some knowledge of the extent of the private rented sector in their areas, and good knowledge about the extent and condition of the sector where there are concentrations of privately rented properties and/or HMO's. However, most had fairly limited knowledge about the landlords in their area – who they are, the extent of their property portfolios, the markets they choose to work in, their future plans, their level of skills in respect of the management of the homes they own, and their willingness to work in partnership with the local authority.

- 6 If local authorities are going to be able to encourage landlords to work in partnership with them, they will need to engage with landlords to fill this knowledge gap, to find out what local authorities need to do to make partnership working attractive to landlords.
- 7 The purpose of this advice note is to provide guidance to local authorities on how to:
- make contact with landlords in a way which does not contravene the Data Protection Act
 - obtain relevant information from landlords via an online questionnaire

Making contact with landlords in your area

- 8 In most local authorities, information about private landlords is held by a number of teams on a number of different databases, e.g:
- Housing Benefit
 - Housing enforcement
 - Homelessness and housing advice
 - Building Control
 - Social Services
 - Planning
- 9 The provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998 explicitly preclude data controllers¹ sharing personal data held on databases, without the informed consent of the data subject². Therefore, (unless landlords are advised when they provided their personal data to the authority that the information would be shared, and given details of who it might be shared with, and for what purpose), personal data held on individual databases cannot be shared. In effect, this prevents the development of a corporate database of private landlords.
- 10 The project consultants have therefore recommended to many authorities that they adopt an information sharing agreement, where each team agrees to distribute corporate newsletters, briefings, etc. to landlords whose details are held on their team databases.
- 11 The project consultants have also recommended to several authorities that they include in a corporate newsletter for landlords an article about how the authority wants to make contact with landlords who operate in their area, and the reasons for this.

¹ A person who (either alone or jointly or in common with other persons) determines the purposes for which and the manner in which any personal data are, or are to be, processed.

² Section 237s(2) Housing Act 2004 allows the local housing authority to use any information obtained by the local authority for Housing Benefit and Council Tax purposes, in exercising of their powers under the Housing Act 2004. This covers powers in Part 1-4 of the Act, which is Enforcement of Housing Standards, all types of Licensing and all management orders.

- 12 We have suggested that the article includes a website link to an on-line questionnaire. As a means of boosting response rates, we have also suggested that authorities offer entry into a free prize draw for landlords who complete the questionnaire in full. It will be down to each authority to determine the prize, but £100 worth of vouchers might significantly increase the rate of response. A draft article is provided at Appendix 1.
- 13 We have suggested that the newsletter be e-mailed in pdf format to landlords, or sent in hard copy format where the authority does not have an e-mail address. Where the local authority has e-mail addresses, it might also want to consider an e-mail direct to landlords (with a hyperlink to the online questionnaire).
- 14 The authority should also ask local lettings agents, the Rent Officer Service, Landlord Accreditation Wales, the National Landlords Association, the Association of Residential Lettings Agents and the Residential Landlords Association to distribute the newsletter to local landlords they have contact with, to ensure it is circulated to the widest possible audience.

Developing an online questionnaire

- 15 Setting up an account with an online survey provider is straightforward. Determining which survey provider to use is a little more tricky. There are many different providers, and you will want to select a provider which offers you the best options in terms of what you can use on their platform, e.g. the ability to:
- use corporate logos in the questionnaire
 - use skip logic (this is the ability to direct users to specific questions, dependent upon their responses to previous questions)
 - download the responses in excel format (this is useful as it enables you to either carry out further analysis of the data in Microsoft Excel or export it to another software package e.g. Access, to analyse the data further).

A useful guide to the design and use of free online surveys can be found by following the hyperlink below:

<http://knowhownonprofit.org/how-to/how-to-design-and-use-free-online-surveys>

- 16 Before you start it might be worthwhile establishing whether there is any expertise with in the Authority in the use of on-line surveys. It might be that an Officer who already has expertise could offer you help and support and you might be able to use a platform that the Authority has already purchased a licence for.
- 17 You might want to use the paid-for services provided by some online survey providers, as these provide the user with more tools, and can be purchased on a month by month

basis. It might be that the authority has already purchased a licence to use a specific platform.

- 18 When you have established an account, you will need to familiarise yourself with the survey tool. Once you have done this you will need to develop the questionnaire. By following the hyperlink below you can access an illustrative example of an online survey. It took approximately 45 minutes to develop the questions and a further 45 minutes to input them into the online survey package.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/QTylB6S>

- 19 The survey questions shown in this hyperlink are in Appendix 2. The survey results will provide you with the following information:

- landlord contact details to enable you to undertake further research work with them
- their portfolio's (number and types of properties they let)
- their target markets
- arrangements for managing their properties
- whether they let property to tenants in receipt of LHA

Post-survey work

- 20 When you have received responses to the online questionnaire, it is important that you use those contacts to gain a clearer understanding of the respondents' needs, aspirations and expectations. You will need to engage respondents in discussions to enable you to shape your policies and processes so that you are able to offer landlords packages that they find attractive and that will encourage them to work in partnership with the authority.
- 21 You will want initially to discount landlords whose main market is holiday lets, the executive market or middle income households. You are most likely to be able to secure a supply of good quality, affordable housing from landlords whose main market group is low income households, and whose properties are let at LHA rates or 15% more than LHA rates, for your area.
- 22 It is likely that the needs, expectations and aspirations of different types of landlords will vary, therefore respondents should be categorised by the size of their portfolios:
- owners of single properties
 - owners of less than 5 properties
 - owners of 5-10 properties
 - owners of 10 or more properties

23 Landlords can then be contacted by e-mail or phone to seek volunteers to participate in further research work. You could arrange to meet with groups of different types of landlords (as shown above), or undertake one to one interviews (either in person or by phone), or adopt a combination of these two approaches. If you are to obtain a high rate engagement, it will be important that you are flexible, and engage with landlords in the way that they prefer.

24 You will want to ask landlords questions about the following:

- their portfolio
 - how long they have owned and managed property for
 - areas properties are located in
 - reasons they have acquired property in the area
 - whether they are currently purchasing property
 - type and size of property
 - condition of property
- their expectations as a landlord
 - how long they intend to remain as landlords
 - how regularly they invest in the repair and maintenance of their properties
 - size of return they expect from their portfolio
 - whether they achieve the expected level of return
- challenges they face as a landlord
 - what are the biggest challenges they face as a landlord
 - how do they overcome these challenges
 - where do they go for support or assistance
- what types of advice and assistance they would like the Council to provide for them
 - advice about demand for rented accommodation
 - advice on where to invest
 - advice on the management of properties
 - information about services available in the Council and how to access them
 - support to assist them growth their businesses
 - tax advice and tax planning
 - other areas
- their engagement with the Council
 - their experience of dealing with the Council
 - what types of information would be of most assistance to them (impending legislation, information about services and finance availability, tax planning, HMO legislation, etc)
 - how they would prefer to receive this information (via landlord forums, newsletters, other)
 - their awareness of landlord forum meetings
 - whether they have attended meetings previously

- their views of the meetings
- how meetings could be improved
- when would be the best time of day for them to attend
- what would be the best location for meetings
- their willingness to work with the Council
 - what would make them more inclined to work in partnership with the Council
 - how willing would they be to house nominees from the Council
 - how willing would they be to accommodate people in receipt of Housing Benefit
 - how willing they would be to accept a paper based bond from the Council or another agency
 - how willing would they be to hand the management of their property over to the Council or a partner agency to manage on their behalf, in exchange for guaranteed rental return
 - whether the payment of a low interest loan would make them more inclined to work with the authority

25 You can then use the results of the survey and follow-on research work to engage more effectively with landlords and to develop offers to landlords who are willing to work in partnership with the authority.

26 Once the details of the authority's offer to landlords has been approved by Council, it can be marketed directly to landlord using the methods identified in paragraph 14, and by sending details direct to landlords whose contact details you captured from the online survey.

27 It might also be beneficial for authorities to undertake a similar type of exercise with owners of empty properties, using an amended version of the on-line questionnaire.

Calling all landlords – Anywhere County Council needs you!

If you're a landlord who owns property in the Anywhere area, we need your help and we'll make it worth your while by offering you the chance to win (details of prize) in our free prize draw.

The private rented sector across Wales has grown significantly over the last decade and Anywhere is no different. More than x% of homes in Anywhere are privately rented and this is likely to continue to grow in the coming years. At the same time the proportion of homes in the social rented sector continues to reduce.

As a Council we want to work more closely with the private rented sector to provide good quality homes for people in housing need.

As a Council we are in the process of reviewing the way that we work with the private rented sector and to do this we need to improve our understanding of the private rented sector in the area. We have developed a brief online survey which we would like as many landlords as possible to complete. The survey asks about:

- the property you let
- arrangements for managing your property
- the markets you work in

In addition the survey asks for your contact details. This will enable us to provide you with more information about the way we are changing our approach to working with the private rented sector, what we can offer you as a landlord.

The survey takes about 2 minutes to complete and all respondents who complete the questionnaire in full will be entered into a free prize draw on the (date) to win (details of the prize).

To complete the survey click on the hyperlink below (hyperlink)

The name(s) of the winner of the free prize draw will be published in the next edition of (name of the landlord newsletter).

Draft online questionnaire

Thank you for following the link to access this survey.

The survey is being undertaken by Anywhere County Council's Housing Strategy Team. We are carrying out a survey of landlords who own and/or manage homes in the area, because:

- we want to know more about the nature of the businesses that make up the private rented sector in Anywhere (e.g. the number of properties you own and let, the types of households you let your homes to) to help us understand how we can work in partnership with you to provide good quality, affordable homes for people in the area
- we want to develop an accurate and reliable database of landlords who operate in the area to enable us to provide you with accurate and up to date information on issues that affect you in your role as a landlord.

The information you provide in your responses will be treated in the strictest confidence. Your contact details will form part of a corporate database which will be used to send you periodic information in the form of newsletters and e-briefings. It may also be used to contact you to undertake further research into the private rented sector in Anywhere. If you want more information on why we are carrying out this survey, you can contact Jane Smith on 012345678910.

The questionnaire will take you no more than 2 minutes to complete. If you complete the questionnaire in full, you will be entered into a free prize draw, for (details of the prize). The draw will take place on (date), and the winner's name will be published in the next edition of our landlords newsletter.

1 Start survey
Yes

About the Properties You Own and Let

- 2 How many properties in total do you own which are let to tenants?
(Options)
1
2 – 4
5 – 10
10 – 20
20 -30
30 – 40
50 + (please specify the exact number)
- 3 How many properties do you own which are let to tenants in the Anywhere Council area?
(Options)
1
2 – 4
5 – 10
10 – 20
20 -30
30 – 40
50 + (please specify the exact number)
- 4 How many of the following types of properties do you own and let to tenants in the Anywhere Council area?
(options)
Flats (insert numbers)
Houses (insert numbers)
Houses in multiple occupation (insert numbers)
- 5 What arrangements are in place for managing the properties?
(Options)
I manage the properties myself
I use a managing agent to manage the properties on my behalf
Other (please specify)
- 6 Do you have any qualifications or accreditation in relation to the management of housing?
(Options)
I am a member of RICS or CIH
I am an accredited landlord with Landlord Accreditation Wales
I am an accredited landlord with the local accreditation scheme
Other (please specify)
I have no qualifications or accreditation in the management of housing

Your Target Market

- 7 Who do you mainly let properties to?
(Options)
The holiday letting market
Executive lets (monthly rent approx £X – Council to insert figure)
Middle income lets (monthly rent approx £X – Council to insert figure)
Low income lets monthly rent approx £X – Council to insert figure marginally above LHA rate) (if the landlord selects this option they should be taken to question 8. All other responses should be taken to the end of the survey)

Letting your properties to people who receive Housing Benefit

- 8 Do you let to tenants who receive Housing Benefit to help them pay their rent?
Yes (Go to end of survey)
No (Go to question 9)
- 9 Please state the reasons why you do not let to tenants who receive Housing Benefit?
(Free text)

Your contact details

- 10 Name
(Free text)
- 11 Phone Number
(Freetext)
- 12 e-mail address
(Freetext)