

ACCREDITATION

Annex A

- 1.** An accreditation scheme should aim to introduce an achievable minimum standard of housing in the Private Rented Sector (PRS) that applies to Landlords and their properties.
- 2.** The Council has had experience of a voluntary accreditation type scheme through its work with the York Code of Best Practice for Student Accommodation, which sets standards that tenants can expect their properties to meet and provides a market advantage to landlords who sign up to the scheme by being identified as renting properties that meet this standard.
- 3.** The intention is now to build upon this earlier experience via a more expansive accreditation scheme covering all of the PRS in the City. It is important that good landlords are recognised for, and get support and assistance in providing high standards of accommodation within York.
- 4.** While the majority of landlords are professional in their approach, there are some who do not fully understand the legal framework in the PRS and find themselves unwittingly breaking the law. Evidence from elsewhere in the country indicates that there will also be a small number of rogue landlords who wilfully exploit tenants for profit. High demand for rented accommodation and a lack of information for tenants can make it difficult to differentiate between a good landlord, an amateur or a potential rogue.
- 5.** The introduction of landlord accreditation in York, with clear minimum standards, would improve the choices people make about private renting, whilst at the same time improving the information and support available to amateur landlords to raise standards and help good, professional landlords differentiate themselves in this important, growing sector.
- 6.** Accreditation is a set of standards, or code of conduct, relating to the management and/or physical condition of privately rented accommodation. Landlords and/or agents who join a scheme and abide by the standards are 'accredited'. Accreditation schemes are voluntary and most schemes are run by local authorities, or by national organisations on their behalf.
- 7.** Although there is no standard model, the key features of an accreditation scheme are:-

- It is voluntary – landlords and/or agents agree to join rather than being obliged to, and are usually closely involved in establishing and running the scheme.
- It outlines a set of standards relating to management practice and/or property condition to which accredited properties and landlords and agents must adhere.
- It is usually administered by an independent body such as a local authority, a university, or one set up specifically for the task, which checks that the required standards are met.
- There are incentives to membership such as access to training, information and advice, advertising of accredited properties, or grant aid with the cost of building work etc.

8. Accreditation may not be necessary or appropriate everywhere. There must be a genuine commitment to co-operative working on both sides. Voluntary accreditation only works when a significant number of landlords support it. Where landlords are sceptical or undecided, work will be needed to promote the benefits and negotiate over the appropriate incentives. Unlike compulsory registration, landlords must be persuaded to join an accreditation scheme.

9. The main features that make a scheme successful are the promotion of the scheme amongst landlords and tenants; a significant amount of benefits on offer to members, in addition to market advantage; a low or no fee membership cost and the inclusion of letting and management agents in addition to landlords. The factors that provide barriers to effective operation are insufficient resources to start up, manage and promote the Scheme; excessive membership fees or additional costs; the setting of physical standards at too high a level and a lack of credibility.

10. An Accreditation Scheme should aim to:-

- Improve the quality of accommodation available in the PRS.
- Reduce the number of landlord/tenant disputes needing intervention by Council officers both in relation to property condition and tenancy issues.
- Provide advice and support to landlords and agents to encourage good quality, well-managed accommodation.

- Provide a channel for consultation between the Council and the PRS on strategic issues, with information exchanged through questionnaires, forums and newsletters.
- Provide opportunities to inform landlords and agents about legislative proposals, policy or administrative changes, and other matters that might affect them.
- Improve relations between the PRS and the Council.
- Encourage and assist landlords and agents to provide accommodation to the vulnerable and those seeking social housing.
- Assist in the prevention of homelessness.
- Set and promote acceptable standards through the award of a “kitemark” / logo.
- Ensure support by requiring the Council to ensure that they only discharge their duty of homelessness by offering housing in the PRS that meets these standards. Likewise University accommodation units and Student Unions should only recommend to students landlords/properties that meet these standards.
- Ensure that tenants and prospective tenants in the PRS are made aware of what the accreditation standard is and of their rights and responsibilities and of the responsibilities of their landlord.
- Provide effective monitoring to ensure private landlords continue to meet these standards.

•

11.The minimum standards outlined in any scheme should not be onerous for landlords to meet, nor do they need to constrain the Council’s ability to deal with particular local issues in the PRS; they simply have to offer a credible minimum that will lead to tangible improvements for private tenants.

12.Tenants will know that, by renting from an accredited landlord or agent, they can expect good standards, a responsive landlord and more piece of mind in their home.

13.The regulatory function of accreditation is made effective by (1) the vetting of landlords prior to their becoming accredited, and (2) a complaints investigation and disciplinary procedure that will result in landlords losing their accreditation if they do not comply with the Scheme.

14.A benefit to local authorities of increasing numbers of landlords self-regulating is that the Council can target their enforcement resources to

focus on those elements of the PRS who have chosen not to be involved in accreditation or who haven't joined one of the Landlord Associations who also provide standards by which their members operate. It can also assist local authorities with their strategic housing function by facilitating the provision of a good quality local PRS.

15.A potential disadvantage of accreditation is that, with the housing market and mortgage industry already in difficulty, its introduction adds an additional level of bureaucracy and costs which will serve to discourage new investment in the Sector, with a question of whether an accreditation scheme provides "real" benefit to any landlord in supporting their effort to let properties in such a currently buoyant market as York.

16.Landlords might be unwilling or unable to raise standards to achieve accreditation status, therefore it is proposed that any initial scheme focuses on easily attainable standards, such as the Decent Home Standard, and that, if considered necessary and achievable, these are then raised over time through the introduction of different levels of accreditation linked to such factors as the energy efficiency of properties.