

Urban Living Neighbourhood Pathfinder – Private Rented Sector Research Case Study

BACKGROUND

Urban Living is one of nine Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder areas in the UK set up and funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The Pathfinder covers substantial areas within Birmingham City Council and Sandwell MBC. The Pathfinder aims to improve neighbourhoods where problems of low-demand housing are most acute. M·E·L Research were commissioned to undertake an extensive piece of research into the Private Rented Sector (PRS) in Urban Living's area within Sandwell and Birmingham. This required us researching both private sector landlords and residential lettings agents.



Private sector landlords were already known to be an extreme example of a 'difficult to reach' respondent. Local authorities find it challenging enough keeping track of the size of their private rental markets let alone encouraging them to engage in research.

The majority of landlords are typically suspicious of public service consultation since there is a perceived ambiguity in the prevailing system – the emerging, strategic recognition that the PRS can be a key player in strengthening local housing markets on one hand; versus the role of local authorities as regulators with a remit to monitor and improve housing standards particularly for the most vulnerable in society.

METHODOLOGY

Given this backdrop we faced the challenge of encouraging landlords to take part in a quantitative survey. Moreover, we wanted to maximise the use of the budget by following up with responding landlords in a more in-depth, qualitative way.

The survey was commissioned to measure the size and nature of the local PRS markets and show any trends over time; we also wanted to test knowledge and awareness of recent and existing PRS policy and regulation impacting this sector and the support available. To maximise Urban Living's return on investment in this research, we also had to ensure that insights were meaningful and actionable to two major stakeholders – Birmingham City Council and Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council.



Self completion questionnaires were distributed to landlords in 2008 and 2009. These were complimented with telephone interviews with landlords and lettings agents. Qualitative workshops and 'triad' depth interviews with a sub-sample of participating respondents were then used to gain more insight into the drivers and needs within this market.

OUTCOMES

Interestingly, over one third of respondents confirmed that they would like to see things done to encourage or help them expand their business. A follow up piece of innovative work was undertaken to unpick the key skills that are required to become a 'successful' landlord; a collaborative working group with landlords was then formed to develop ideas around business support measures that could be implemented by stakeholders locally.

One of the overarching recommendations coming out of the programme of work has been the formation of a 'PRS Development Group' wherein landlords, letting agents, business support agencies, and local authorities, would be present on an equal footing with the prime goal of building a strong and sustainable PRS within the UL and wider sub-regional housing market.

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