

Developing a
voluntary
accreditation
scheme for
private landlords

A guide to good practice

housing

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A guide to good practice



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May 2001

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MINISTERIAL FOREWORD



The government is committed to a healthy private rented sector. Raising the standards of good and well-intentioned landlords is an important part of our policy approach.

Many local authorities are already doing excellent work to support landlords – 40% have a landlord forum and over 50 authorities have an active landlord accreditation scheme. We want to see far more authorities taking the initiative to build good relationships with landlords and promote good practice in the private rented sector.

This guide has been prepared with the help of local authorities across the country, as well as landlord and tenant representatives. It gives practical detailed advice on how to set up a scheme and what the key features are, as well looking at what works and what does not in different local markets.

I commend the guide to you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which reads "Nick Raynsford". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Nick Raynsford
Minister for Housing

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The material presented in this guide was obtained from a number of sources as part of a research project undertaken for DETR by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS) at the University of Birmingham. The guide was prepared by Nigel Appleton, Kerry Revell and Philip Leather. A large number of organisations and individuals contributed to the study.

Firstly, we are grateful to representatives from a range of national bodies representing landlords, tenants, local authorities and other key interests for discussing approaches to closer working between landlords and local authorities and for pointing us in the direction of good practice. Thanks are also due to the local authority officers from each of the authorities operating a scheme for their help in providing details of their activities in this field. We are especially grateful to those who took part in the seven more detailed case studies from which many of the examples of good practice are drawn. After an initial draft of the guidance had been produced, a workshop was held to obtain feedback on its content from practitioners and landlords. Those contributing to this, included local authorities currently operating a scheme, those considering the introduction of one, representatives of housing advice agencies, and private landlords.

Finally, the study benefited throughout from the services of a Steering Group, whose members comprised Teresa Clay (DETR, Chair), Nick Beacock (Shelter's Campaign for Bedsit Rights), Sarah Fielder (DETR), Peter Hobbs (Local Government Association), Jeremy Hotchkiss (DETR), Terry McIntyre (DETR), Martin Moylan (Residential Landlords Association), Ron Powell (National Federation of Residential Landlords), and Merron Simpson (Chartered Institute of Housing). We are grateful for the group's guidance on contacts, areas of good practice, for detailed written comments at the various stages of the study, and for lively discussion at the group's meetings.

CHAPTER 1

Overview

Aim

The aim of this guidance is to describe good practice in establishing and running a voluntary accreditation scheme for privately rented accommodation. It has been prepared with help from a wide range of organisations operating accreditation schemes and with inputs from landlords and their representative bodies.

Background

After a long period of decline, the provision of accommodation to rent by private landlords has experienced a revival in recent years. The importance of the sector in meeting the accommodation requirements of a growing number of households is recognised by the government, local authorities, and other agencies concerned with meeting housing needs.

The Green Paper *Quality and Choice: A Decent Home For All*¹ published in 2000 contained proposals to promote a healthy private rented sector by taking steps to retain good and well intentioned landlords, and help them to raise their standards further. After taking into account responses to the Green Paper, the government re-affirmed its intention to promote the role of private renting in its Housing Policy Statement *The Way Forward for Housing*² published in December 2000.

Working with private landlords

In recent years a number of local authorities have begun to develop closer working relationships with individual private landlords and their representative bodies. For local authorities, and for other organisations such as universities seeking to secure good accommodation for their students, closer working enables them to provide support to landlords and to raise the standards of management and property condition in the sector for the benefit of existing and potential tenants. For landlords, it can provide better access to information on their obligations and rights in relation to tenants and help in dealing with any problems which arise with tenants and properties.

1 Quality and Choice: A decent home for all – The Housing Green Paper, DETR, April 2000, ISBN 1 85112 378 4, £10

2 Quality and Choice: A decent home for all – The way forward for housing, DETR, December 2000, ISBN 1 851124 63 2, £5

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In many areas, authorities and landlords meet regularly to discuss matters of mutual concern through a *landlord forum*. Sometimes these contacts develop further and the local authority provides a *liaison officer* as a point of contact with landlords. Increasingly however, local authorities, landlords, and where appropriate universities or colleges are coming together to set up a *voluntary accreditation scheme* for the private rented sector.

Voluntary accreditation schemes

Although there is no standard model, the key features of accreditation schemes are:

- They are voluntary – landlords agree to join rather than being obliged to, and are usually closely involved in establishing and running schemes.
- There is a set of standards relating to management and property condition to which accredited properties and landlords must adhere.
- The scheme is 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 information and advice, advertising of accredited properties, or grant aid with the cost of building work.

From a few pioneer schemes in the mid 1990s, interest in accreditation schemes has grown rapidly and over 50 are now in active operation. A great deal of valuable experience on the factors making schemes successful has now been accumulated.

Is accreditation appropriate everywhere?

Accreditation may not be necessary or appropriate everywhere. There are two essential pre-conditions:

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.

The scheme must be targeted at the right landlords and properties. Voluntary accreditation will not work across the whole private rented sector. The small minority of landlords who deliberately seek to avoid meeting their statutory obligations or providing a decent standard of management will require a different approach. Voluntary accreditation is most likely to work with well-intentioned landlords who see the benefits of receiving advice and practical help from the local authority, and who value the status, or the increased likelihood of attracting tenants, associated with being officially accredited.

The characteristics of the private rented market in a locality must also be taken into account. Where there is a high demand for private rented accommodation, landlords may see no reason to join unless there are very strong incentives, which will increase the demand on local authority resources to run a scheme. By contrast, in areas where supply and demand are more closely balanced, membership of an accreditation scheme may give a

real advantage in attracting tenants and landlord recruitment may be easier. In areas of very low demand that have attracted less good intentioned landlords, compulsory measures may be more appropriate than voluntary accreditation.

But even in areas where it might seem difficult to attract landlords, hard work, the involvement of good people, and the right package of incentives have made schemes successful, while in other areas where conditions were more favourable, schemes have faltered because they were not developed or run in the best way.

Hence the decision on whether it is appropriate or possible to develop a voluntary accreditation scheme is one that must be taken locally. Crucially, a decision must be made *in partnership with landlords themselves*.

But once a decision has been taken to go ahead, it is essential to do everything possible to ensure that the scheme is effective and successful in recruiting members, retaining their involvement, and in ensuring that good quality and well managed, accommodation is provided for tenants. As well as wasting time and resources for everyone involved, a weak scheme may do relations with private landlords and tenants, more harm than good.

Using this guidance

Part 1 of the guidance gives an overview of the development of a new accreditation scheme and works through the process from outset to launch and subsequent review. The remainder of this chapter:

- sets out the steps required to develop a new scheme;
- identifies ten key good practice tips;
- sets out the most important decisions which have to be taken about the nature of a scheme, once a decision has been taken in principle to go ahead.

Chapters 2-6 consider the process of developing, setting up, and then running an accreditation scheme from origins to initial implementation and beyond. Most existing schemes are run by local authorities, working in partnership with a wide range of other bodies, such as universities, colleges, and landlord representative bodies. Typically, local authorities have also taken the lead in developing schemes, especially at the outset, and have shouldered the main administrative responsibilities. The guidance is thus mainly targeted at local authorities as the initiators of action to develop a new scheme. However, it is intended that the material in the guide should still be of value to any of the potential stakeholders in a proposed accreditation scheme, all of whom have important inputs to make to the process of scheme development.

Part 2 of the guidance looks in more detail at some of the key features of an accreditation scheme. **Chapter 7** examines staffing and administration resources. **Chapter 8** looks at the processes of setting standards and at alternative options for ensuring they are met. **Chapter 9** considers the range of possible incentives to landlords to persuade them to join a scheme. **Chapter 10** looks at the information requirements for accreditation, and at ways of publicising and promoting schemes effectively.

Finally, **Chapter 11** sets out the next steps to take in developing a scheme and provides a list of contacts for help and further information.

Getting it right from the outset

Throughout the guidance, there is considerable emphasis on the early stages of scheme development, because experience has shown how far subsequent success is influenced by the early groundwork. It is assumed that most of those using the guidance will be at an early stage in the process of scheme development. If a scheme is set up to the satisfaction of all those involved, it is more likely to get off to a flying start and to continue to operate effectively. It is far harder to make changes to increase the attractiveness of a scheme or to re-launch it. The suspicions or doubts of potential members will have been aroused.

Wherever possible, examples have been provided to illustrate the points made, or to serve as a guide for the development of major elements of a scheme, such as standards. But these are obviously only illustrative. They should be considered in detail and adapted to suit local circumstances and take into account the views of local landlords and other key stakeholders.

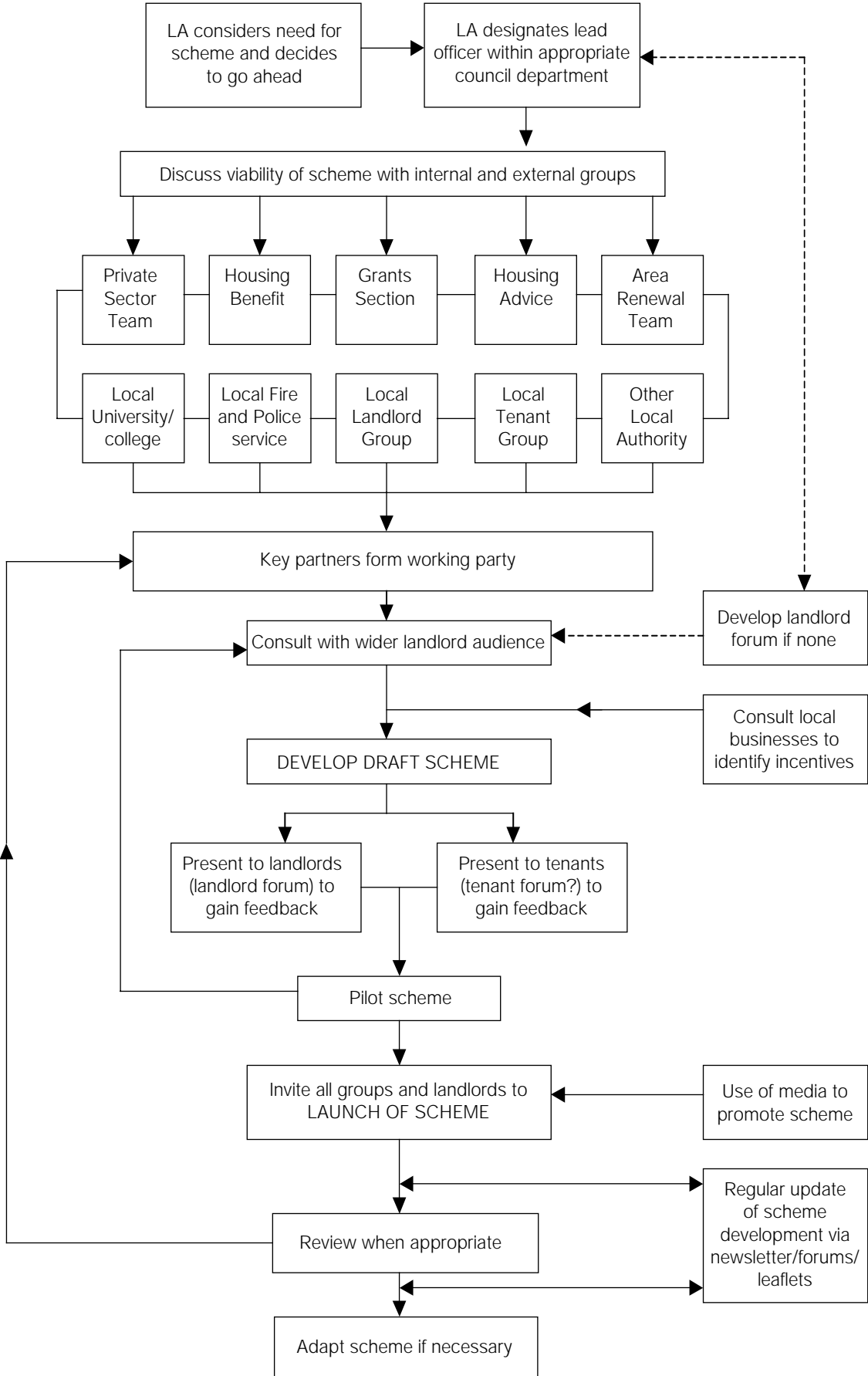
It is also essential to talk to others who have been involved in running a successful scheme. A guide such as this can only go so far by illustrating what works and cautioning against what does not. There is no substitute for committing time and resources to contacting other local authorities, universities or colleges, and landlord representative bodies by phone and where appropriate, visiting them to look at what they have achieved. Effort spent in getting things right at the outset will be repaid in terms of success once a scheme is operational. Chapter 11 provides a list of useful contacts to approach for further help and information.

Overview of good practice

The chart below summarises the process of developing an accreditation scheme for private rented sector housing which forms the basis for this guide. The main steps are:

- Recognising the need for a scheme and investigating its feasibility within the local authority (this assumes a local authority takes the first step but this stage could be in response to an external request to develop a scheme).
- Consulting with a wide range of external bodies, or better still, working in partnership with them to develop the main features of a scheme.
- Consulting with landlords generally about their views on accreditation and producing a draft scheme.
- Appointing staff to run the scheme, developing detailed procedures, and running the scheme on a pilot basis with friendly landlords to test these out.
- Launching the scheme and publicising it as actively as possible.
- Reviewing the scheme at intervals: quickly, in order to ensure it is on track and to make minor amendments if necessary; and after some time review its performance against objectives.

Developing an accreditation scheme



Ten key good practice points

Although there are many aspects to good practice which are discussed in this guide, there are ten key points which, if followed, will go a long way to ensuring success. These are summarised below, and developed further in the remainder of the guide.

Ten Key Good Practice Points	
1	<p>Gain political support at the outset</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to ensure internal support for scheme; to secure resources.
2	<p>Tie scheme in with corporate objectives and aims of other departments and outside bodies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to secure internal support; to help landlords in dealings with other departments or organisations.
3	<p>Get the right person to run the scheme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to have the internal and external authority to act; to have the skills to work with, not take action against, landlords; to ensure that sufficient staff are provided.
4	<p>Get local landlords on board from the outset – remember this is voluntary accreditation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> don't settle details internally and then attempt to impose them on landlords; keep landlords involved over time; listen to their views.
5	<p>Set clear and realistic standards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> be up front with landlords about what you want – don't raise standards by stealth; be prepared to negotiate on standards and their interpretation; decide on what is genuinely not negotiable; consider graded standards.
6	<p>Develop clear and simple procedures and information on them</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> provide clear information to potential recruits; follow the procedures consistently.
7	<p>Get the publicity right and persist with it – do not expect instant results</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> use written materials and every possible media opportunity to promote the scheme; get landlords involved in promotion if possible; launch the scheme and keep in it the public eye.
8	<p>Make sure that tenants know about the scheme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> target some publicity specifically on tenants; involve them or their representatives in scheme development.
9	<p>Get the incentives right</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> talk to landlords about what they want; be innovative and imaginative; keep the incentives coming.
10	<p>Monitor and review the scheme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> circumstances change – collect information on progress; identify if things aren't going well and act quickly to address the problems; get feedback from landlords and tenants as frequently as possible.

The important decisions

Within the overall process of setting up an accreditation scheme, there are a number of key decisions that need to be taken and these can be summarised as follows:

- **What is the scheme seeking to achieve?**
From a local authority viewpoint, this is the most important question in developing an accreditation scheme. To answer this in detail requires an understanding of the local private rented housing market and the major problems that arise in the sector. This will guide subsequent decisions on the areas, client groups and dwelling types to be covered, and the relationship of the scheme with other forms of action.
- **Who will run the scheme?**
Will it be run by the local authority, by a university or college if applicable, by an independent body set up for the purpose by the main stakeholders, or by landlords themselves?
- **What will it cover?**
The coverage of a scheme may be predetermined – for example if a university and the local authority are acting to improve conditions in student accommodation. Or this may be open for discussion – what areas can be covered, which landlords are being targeted, what type of property are to be involved? Will the scheme cover HMOs, and if so, which types?
- **What will the scheme standards cover, and what benchmarks will be used?**
Will there be one set of standards, or a grading system? This is a crucial area for negotiation between landlords and other stakeholders.
- **Will it accredit landlords, or their properties?**
A related issue to the question of standards. What is the appropriate balance between management and physical condition issues? Can landlords put some of their properties forward for a scheme, or must they submit all of them?
- **How will compliance with standards be determined?**
Will it be by full and frequent independent inspection, sample or random inspection, self certification by landlords, or a combination of these?
- **What incentives will be provided to persuade landlords to join?**
Accreditation schemes are voluntary, so it is up to those running the scheme to develop the right range of incentives, to attract landlords and properties into the scheme.

The best approach will depend on local circumstances, but this guidance reviews the arguments for different approaches based on the experience of those authorities which have successfully developed accreditation schemes.

PART 1

Developing a scheme



CHAPTER 2

Preparing the ground

First steps

The idea for an accreditation scheme may originate within a local authority, or from a group of landlords, or perhaps within a university or college. Each of these parties will wish to consider its own position before deciding to talk to others, in case it decides not to go ahead. But, the sooner that all the potential stakeholders are aware of a proposal and can become involved, the more likely they are to feel ownership and commitment and the greater the opportunity to ensure that a scheme meets everyone's minimum requirements.

Where a university is promoting the scheme, it may only be concerned with securing safe, affordable and appropriate accommodation for its students and with avoiding any adverse impact on the local community. The position will be similar for an NHS Trust looking to provide accommodation for staff. Where local landlords initiate the scheme, their objectives may be related to securing market advantage for the responsible and competent landlord and combating negative images of their role and activities.

The position for a local authority is more complex. It should consider its statutory responsibilities for meeting housing need, improving housing conditions, and ensuring that it meets its obligations in relation to management practices, tenancy conditions, and the administration of housing benefit. It should look at how a scheme fits in with broader objectives, for example, relating to regeneration policies. As local authorities commonly provide most of the resources for accreditation schemes, they must consider whether this fits in with other priorities. But it is best to keep advance internal discussions to a minimum, and to be prepared to modify proposals in the light of consultation with landlords.

Blyth Valley: involving landlords from the outset

In Blyth Valley, the authority felt that a voluntary accreditation scheme would provide them with access to good quality privately rented accommodation for non-priority homeless households. They realised that a voluntary scheme relied on the co-operation of landlords, so there would be no point in steam-rolling proposals through which a majority did not support. Ignoring landlords' views at an early stage would only store up problems later.

The process of scheme development thus involved landlords from the outset. There were several initial open meetings to discuss what the scheme might cover and how it could be run, after which 5-6 interested landlords and local authority officers worked for 18 months on the details. Local authority staff often made tentative proposals based on experience elsewhere. There was a budget to pay for room hire, refreshments and documentation for the working party. The Council also carried out a postal survey of landlords to test the emerging proposals.

The authority felt that this process, although time-consuming, gave a core of landlords real ownership of the scheme. Members of this group were subsequently invaluable in working with other landlords when the scheme was launched and afterwards. But more importantly their involvement ensured that administrative arrangements, standards and procedures were acceptable to landlords – a vital feature of any voluntary scheme.

Fitting in with other policies

■ HOUSING STRATEGY

A proposal for accreditation must clearly set the local housing strategy. The strategy should consider the scale and nature of private rented sector provision, housing conditions and management standards within the sector, the role which the sector serves, or could serve, in meeting housing need, as well as the range of other policy interventions available (for example, enforcement of housing legislation, compulsory registration, provision of grant aid). It must consider carefully the impact of accreditation on the sector and on provision for groups who are particularly dependent upon it, such as, young single people or students.

■ EMPTY PROPERTY INITIATIVES

Increasingly, local authorities have a strategy for bringing empty properties back into use, and a link between this, and an accreditation scheme, can be extremely productive. Often empty property is in the hands of people with little or no experience of managing rented property. Joining an accreditation scheme will give them access to advice and support and provide a benchmark for property conditions and management standards.

Derby City Council: the 'Rehab For Rent' scheme and empty homes strategy

Derby's accreditation scheme and empty property strategy operate together. Owners of empty properties within a designated area can obtain a grant to convert large properties to self-contained flats provided that works are completed to accreditation standards. This allows the council to confidently nominate non-priority homeless households to these properties.

The City Council has 100% nomination rights for a five-year period in cases where a renovation grant has been provided to bring properties up to the accreditation standard. An affordable rent is agreed for each accredited property. Landlords inform the Council's Housing Options Centre of a vacancy. Landlords have the opportunity to interview and refuse tenants. If the Housing Options Centre fails to fill the vacancy within 4 weeks the landlord is able to let the accommodation to the general market.

■ CORPORATE OBJECTIVES AND POLICY CONNECTIONS

An accreditation scheme must be set within the context of broader local authority objectives and policies. As well as influencing the management and condition of housing, a scheme might contribute to:

- reducing crime and strengthening community safety;
- creating a sustainable healthy environment;
- meeting the community care needs of vulnerable people;
- building partnerships to provide effective services;
- tackling social exclusion.

Establishing the contribution which an accreditation scheme will make to broader objectives will strengthen political support, and reinforce the case for adequate resources.

West Dorset: Fitting into corporate objectives

Linking accreditation to broader corporate objectives ensures that schemes are more effective. It can also secure the political support within the authority necessary to ensure that adequate resources are made available. In West Dorset, accreditation was linked closely to the authority's empty property strategy, to the objectives of the housing strategy relating to the needs of young single people, to community care, and to anti-poverty programmes. Officers felt that these links had persuaded councillors to provide staff to develop and to operate the scheme. They had also enabled the authority to target capital funding for grants on private rented properties being considered for inclusion in the accreditation scheme.

By contrast, in another authority, a failure to replace staffing resources lost when an officer moved to another post, was attributed to a lack of corporate integration and strategic involvement.

Accreditation objectives

It is essential to have objectives that have been agreed by all the key stakeholders to guide the development of a scheme, and to set up systems for the collection of baseline data to measure its success. At the outset, there is a tendency to focus on the mechanisms and detailed content of the scheme, but it is better to work down to these from a shared view of what the scheme is seeking to achieve. Since membership of a scheme is voluntary, landlords' views must have a strong influence on objectives. The most common scheme objectives relate to securing good standards of condition and management, providing better information for landlords and tenants, and improving landlords' access to council services. Chapter 6 discusses the monitoring and review of scheme objectives.

Possible objectives for an accreditation scheme

- Improve the quality of accommodation available in the private rented sector.
- Increase the supply of good quality accommodation available in the area.
- Improve standards of management in privately rented accommodation.
- Help landlords to find responsible tenants.
- Develop joint approach to tackling anti-social behaviour.
- Provide advice and support to landlords in providing high quality, well managed accommodation.
- Improve the satisfaction of landlords with the services they receive from the local authority.
- Provide a channel for consultation between local authority and landlords on strategic issues.
- Provide opportunities to inform landlords about legislative proposals, policy or administrative changes, and other matters that may affect them.
- Enable landlords to obtain better access to information from local authority staff.
- Improve access for landlords to a range of council contacts and services.
- Reduce the number of landlord/tenant disputes needing intervention by council officers .
- Enable tenants to obtain information about and get access to better quality accommodation.

Ensuring a corporate approach

A number of local authority functions relate to private rented housing, including:

- providing housing advice;
- ensuring that legal requirements on condition and management standards are met;
- administering housing benefit;
- providing help to homeless people;
- tackling poor housing conditions;
- promoting community safety;
- exercising planning controls.

The benefits an accreditation scheme will bring to members should be clarified at an early stage. Again it is vital to negotiate a corporate approach to ensure that all the benefits offered to landlords can be delivered. Some significant benefits, such as information on housing benefits or improved access to benefit staff, need the co-operation of other departments and must be secured at an early stage.

Securing political support

The best way to secure corporate commitment and an adequate level of resources for accreditation is through political support. Any non-statutory initiative like accreditation needs strong support from members if the funding is to be secure.

Testing feasibility

A feasibility study or business plan can help to make the case for accreditation. It should set arguments for and against the scheme, and the steps and resources required to implement it. It should also assess the impact of the scheme and its potential on the full range of stakeholder. The box below sets out a possible structure for a feasibility study.

Issues for a feasibility study or business plan

- Rationale for scheme.
- Background in legislation/national and local policy.
- Statistics – tenure/stock condition/housing register.
- Numbers of landlords and properties within the intended area of operation.
- Models for accreditation schemes.
- Benefits and disadvantages for landlords, tenants and the local authority.
- Impacts on other authority/departmental policies and targets.
- Staffing and roles.
- Draft budget.
- Management and reporting arrangements.
- Proposed activity levels and outcome targets.
- Outcome of preliminary consultations (if applicable).
- Provisional implementation timetable.
- Publicity and recruitment plans.
- Recommendation for action.

CHAPTER 3

Talking to others

Once the potential for an accreditation scheme has been explored internally, it is essential to begin discussion as quickly as possible with a wide range of other stakeholders, and especially with landlords themselves.

Taking account of past relationships

No accreditation scheme can be set up in a vacuum. It is vital to take account of the past history of the relationships between the local authority, local landlords, tenants, and other key stakeholders. There may be a long-standing culture of antagonism between environmental health officers and landlords or suspicion of the whole local authority from both tenants and landlords. There may have been recent difficulties over housing benefit payments that have built up resentment.

It is essential to draw a line under past negative relationships and perceptions, and to work hard to create a collaborative ethos. This applies to all of the stakeholders. But the local authority will probably need to take the lead in developing better relationships.

Leeds City Council's accreditation scheme

In Leeds there was a history of poor relationships between the authority and some local landlords, which culminated in a series of expensive, and time consuming court cases. Both sides decided that it was time to make a fresh start. The authority decided to focus its enforcement activity on the small minority of bad landlords and to try to work in partnership with the remainder. A voluntary accreditation scheme was developed in partnership with the main local landlords' associations. The scheme is based mainly on self-accreditation backed up by some inspections, and investigation of complaints. Landlords are strongly represented on the group steering the scheme and in the processes to deal with infringements of scheme conditions. 11,000 bedspaces are now covered by the scheme (14% of the city's private rented sector) and relations with landlords have improved beyond all recognition.

Working with landlords

Scheme involving landlords from the outset, fare better than those where the main features have been determined in advance and offered as a *fait accompli*.

It is crucial for local authorities, universities, and other stakeholders to understand the skills required, as a landlord, to succeed in the private rented sector and the constraints under which landlords operate. If they do not, they will quite simply fail to recruit enough landlords to make the scheme worthwhile. There is no point in a scheme which meets all of a local authority's requirements but which has few properties accredited. Similarly, landlords need help to understand the constraints which local authorities operate under and to appreciate what is not negotiable and why. A scheme that assumes the culture of one stakeholder, can be imposed on others, is doomed to fail.

Contacting tenants about a potential accreditation scheme

Consulting private tenants directly on any topic is difficult, partly because high turnover in the sector leads to difficulties in establishing representative bodies, and a low response to mechanisms, such as postal questionnaires. In the past, it has been very unusual for tenants to be consulted in advance about a proposed accreditation scheme, unless the area to be covered by the scheme is restricted, and consultation has been necessary for other reasons, such as the requirements of a Single Regeneration Budget bid. More usually, the views of tenants have been sought indirectly, through consultation with housing advisers or local housing lobbying groups. However, there is no reason why a local authority should not attempt to contact tenants directly, for example, by asking a housing benefit section to send out a questionnaire in association with a routine mailing to tenants. Focus group discussions or open meetings might be useful. Some specific groups such as students or health service staff may be reached directly or indirectly through their university or employer. Tenants' views could be particularly important in deciding what are the most important elements of standards, and on arrangements for dealing with problems or complaints.

Some tenants may fear that their involvement in accreditation scheme development of this kind will antagonise their landlord, so they should be given the opportunity to comment anonymously.

Identifying other potential partners

Universities or colleges have an interest in accreditation to improve housing for their students. Many existing schemes have been developed jointly by local authorities and universities, the latter, in some cases, having taken the lead in administration.

Unipol: a scheme run by a charitable trust

One of the best known and most successful accreditation schemes for students is run by Unipol, an independent charitable trust established by the higher education establishments in Leeds. As well as running an accreditation scheme for privately rented accommodation, Unipol provides accommodation for students itself, and training and advice for local authorities and universities elsewhere in the country. There is a high level of penetration of the local student accommodation market (about 75% of all lettings to students are covered). Unipol has pioneered the use of new technology in publicising accredited accommodation to students – those seeking accommodation can look at details of available accommodation on line at its main office or they can consult a website. The large number of lettings covered by the scheme, means that standards are enforced through self-accreditation by landlords, backed up by inspection in cases where complaints are received from students. The Unipol scheme runs in parallel with a scheme operated by the City Council that seeks to cover all privately rented accommodation in the city.

Derby City Council: working in partnership

Derby City Council has worked in partnership with Derby University since 1995 to establish a registered student landlord scheme. Local authority officers carry out the initial inspection that ensures that the registered property meets basic health and safety standards. To enable landlords to register their properties through the University Residential Services a copy of the Derby City Council certificate is required, along with the registration form. A further inspection is then required and undertaken by trained university staff to ensure that properties meet the specific requirements of a student tenant, such as a desk, wardrobe, and that décor is of a reasonable quality.

NHS Trusts may also be interested in accreditation of housing for their staff. Additional partners could include other local authority departments, such as social services departments, the police, the fire service, the rent officer, student unions as well as voluntary sector bodies offering either, general advice and support, such as Citizens' Advice Bureaux, or helping specific client groups, such as young people leaving care.

Working with neighbouring local authorities

Landlord portfolios are not restricted to individual local authority areas. In urban areas it will be essential to talk to neighbouring authorities during the development of a scheme. An existing scheme in a neighbouring area could act as a model. Although there may be good reasons for differences in the content of accreditation scheme standards between neighbouring authorities, the differences found in practice are often substantial and a major cause of landlord concern.

Greater Nottingham: joint working for the accreditation of student accommodation

An accreditation scheme covering student accommodation in the Greater Nottingham area has five local authority partners and six partner educational establishments. The scheme was set up originally by Nottingham and Broxtowe Councils, together with the educational establishments in their areas. As student numbers increased during the 1990s, the areas where students were seeking accommodation expanded beyond their boundaries so a number of neighbouring local authorities also became involved. The scheme now covers the Greater Nottingham area, with partners including:

- University of Nottingham
- Nottingham Trent University
- Broxtowe College
- Broxtowe Borough Council
- Nottingham City Council
- Rushcliffe Borough Council
- Erewash Borough Council
- New College, Nottingham
- South Nottingham College
- The Peoples College
- Gedling Borough Council

CHAPTER 4

Taking the idea forward

Development

■ SETTING UP A WORKING GROUP

A landlord forum can provide a way of floating the idea of accreditation with landlords. Failing this, ad hoc meetings should be set up with invited landlords to explain what is involved and seek their views. A sub-group of the forum or a steering committee, involving a smaller number of representative landlords, is the best way of taking the idea forward, as smaller groups tend to make more rapid progress.

Landlords themselves will decide how closely they then wish to be involved in scheme development. It is best to approach discussions with landlords with an open mind and to take their ideas on board as fully as possible, rather than developing a fully fledged model in advance. The more fully landlords take part in subsequent work to develop a scheme, or (if they wish the local authority to take the lead) are closely consulted at every stage, the stronger the likelihood of success.

At some point in the consultation, all target landlords should be written to individually, offering them an opportunity to comment and register interest in principle. Making contact may be difficult, but it should be possible to draw up a list of landlords from internal data sources such as planning, environmental health, housing benefit and housing renewal records. A meeting or a series of meetings should follow, at which the proposals can be presented, and a general discussion held.

■ SETTING A TIMETABLE

Although extensive consultation is desirable, it is important to set a target timetable to bring the initiative forward and into operation. The table below shows a possible timetable for a scheme enjoying a strong degree of support from all stakeholders. It starts at the point where a decision has been taken to investigate the feasibility of a scheme internally, as work, prior to this stage, is informal. The timetable allows two months to discuss and agree internal objectives, three months to develop the scheme and possible incentives, internally, three months to consult with stakeholders, a further two months to revise the proposals and secure stakeholder agreement, a month for formal approval, and three months to appoint staff for implementation, with three months to recruit initial members and run as a pilot. To reach this point will take around eighteen months.

Summary action plan and minimum time scale for developing and launching an accreditation scheme

Action	Month																													
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Agree objectives, designate lead officer to assess feasibility	■	■																												
Secure internal corporate and political support			■	■	■																									
Consider incentives and negotiate requirements to provide them			■	■	■																									
Consult with landlords, tenants and other stakeholders					■	■	■																							
Revise proposals and secure stakeholder agreement								■	■																					
Secure Committee approval to proceed										■																				
Appoint, induct and train officer to implement scheme											■	■	■																	
Pre-register interested landlords and operate on pilot basis															■	■	■													
Publicise scheme widely and hold public launch																		■												
Review scheme in light of early experience																					■									
Hold public recognition event to sustain momentum																					■									
Undertake formal review and begin to negotiate any changes																												■	■	■

Once the main stakeholders have agreed the broad features of a scheme, there should be no delay within the local authority on approval of funding and recruitment of staff. Nothing is worse than generating enthusiasm and commitment from stakeholders, which then is dissipated by unexplained delays. A firm commitment to funding for a reasonable minimum period (at least three years) should precede any moves to recruit staff or set other elements of the scheme, especially the accreditation of properties, in place.

■ APPOINTING STAFF

As soon as resources have been made available, staff should quickly be identified or if necessary recruited to take the scheme forward to implementation and beyond. It is essential to recognise that:

- The development of a new accreditation scheme is a time-consuming task requiring dedicated resources – if it is squeezed into an officer's existing duties, there could be delays which might jeopardise the whole initiative, especially if external partners pick up a hint that the scheme is not a priority.
- The skills required to work with landlords to develop and run a scheme are different from those required to operate a statutory scheme or take enforcement action. Developing an accreditation scheme successfully requires the ability to work in collaboration with landlords, to generate enthusiasm amongst them and others, and the capacity to mobilise the resources that will be needed to make a scheme work.
- As well as the time of a responsible officer or team to run the scheme, a high level of administrative backup will be required, both prior to launch to assist with publicity and recruitment, and on a continuing basis to keep the scheme going and to keep records up to date.

Chapter 7 looks at staffing and administration in more detail.

Moving to implementation

■ A PILOT PERIOD

Confidence is a major component in the success of a new scheme and this can only be built through experience. Operating a scheme initially on a pilot basis with a limited number of landlord members will build confidence and iron out problems with procedures. A pilot period allows difficulties to be identified and dealt with before the scheme moves into the wider public arena. Those who have worked through the pilot period can then be encouraged to recruit others. Having some 'champions' among both landlords and tenants will greatly enhance the prospects for the success of the scheme. Experience shows that landlords are the best recruiting agents for accreditation.

Reading: piloting a scheme

Reading's accreditation scheme was piloted within an SRB area. It was perceived as successful by landlords as well as local authority staff, but also enabled a range of difficulties to be identified and addressed before opening out the scheme to a wider audience. Details of the initial scheme were interpreted by landlords as meaning that they were required to take nominated tenants, (although this was not the intention), and this was a deterrent to many. When the local authority discovered this, the scheme details were revised to clarify the position and then extended across the whole local authority area, incorporating both student and general privately rented accommodation.

■ PUBLICITY

Routine mailings of material to landlords, for example in relation to housing benefit, should be used to publicise the scheme, but wider sources such as local newspapers are useful. Publicity in landlords' association newsletters is especially useful. Landlords can be encouraged to join the scheme not just by publicity material directed specifically at them, but also through wider sources. The planning and launch of an accreditation scheme should be publicised to the public at large whenever and wherever possible. This may be through press releases to local newspapers and broadcast media, and through talks to community groups and organisations. The distribution of leaflets through libraries, health centres and other similar locations will also help to make the scheme known to tenants.

■ THE LAUNCH

Unless there are good reasons, the launch of a scheme should be marked by a specific event. At a minimum this could be a press conference, to which all the main stakeholders should make a contribution.

It is much better to hold a special event, such as a combined presentation and lunch, at which the scheme is launched, and the commitment of the various stakeholders and participants can be demonstrated. The participation of senior local authority officers and members is essential to show their backing for the scheme, but their involvement should be balanced by presentations from landlords and tenants. If consultation and scheme development have been thorough and inclusive, there should be no difficulty in finding representatives to speak in support of the scheme, both at the launch itself, and in any subsequent media opportunities.

■ ACCREDITATION PACK

After the launch, recruitment of landlords begins in earnest, and it is essential to have prepared the ground for this thoroughly. A pack of materials is needed to send out in response to initial enquiries. This should provide details of the scheme, such as standards and procedures, and showing clearly what to do next. Chapter 10 looks at the content of packs and other publicity material in more detail. Ideally, the distribution of packs should be recorded, to monitor those who return an application and those who do not. Where a landlord expresses an interest in the scheme but does not apply, it may be worth a follow-up phone call or letter to try to find out why.

■ ACCREDITATION FEES

There are no clear legal powers to enable a local authority to make a charge to a landlord for voluntary accreditation. Although ultimately a matter for the courts, legal advice from DETR is that a local authority making such a charge would be acting 'ultra vires'.

CHAPTER 5

Keeping the scheme going

Developing contacts with landlords

The initial publicity given to the scheme and the launch event should generate some enquiries and contacts. Staff running a scheme should also contact local media, voluntary and community groups, especially those with regular newsletters or mailings, as well as registered social landlords, and all the local advice and support organisations working with groups who make significant use of privately rented accommodation. Copies of promotional leaflets will help them to publicise the scheme. Further media publicity will also encourage landlords to contact the local authority for information.

It is essential to translate the burst of initial interest from landlords into full involvement in the scheme. The keys to this, apart from a well-managed launch, are clear application procedures and the right incentives.

Lancaster: getting the first contact right

Officers in Lancaster believe that the first point of telephone contact with a landlord is crucial and aim to provide an informal but clear explanation of the scheme there and then. They do not seek to obtain many details of accommodation from landlords at this stage, as this might put people off. They do however attempt to obtain general information about the types of letting provided. This enables them to tailor an application pack, which, (if the enquirer wishes) is subsequently sent out. Each pack includes the appropriate set of scheme standards for the type of accommodation, and other appropriate modifications. The material supplied in the application pack includes:

- a clear statement of the aims of the scheme,
- the range of benefits on offer to landlords and other arguments to support membership,
- a list of landlord obligations and the standards to be achieved,
- a step-by-step guide to procedures.

The next steps (if any) are for the landlord to take, and no pressure or follow-up action is felt to be appropriate. The aim is to appear helpful and efficient, but also informal and non-threatening in order to encourage landlords to take the application process further.

Making the scheme known to tenants

The purpose of contacting potential tenants is to make them aware of the scheme, to encourage them to use accredited properties and landlords, make them aware of the standards expected and provide them with opportunities to make contact.

Although there may have been some consultation with tenants or groups representing them during the development of a scheme, there is a continuing need to make the scheme known to tenants and potential tenants. This is difficult, but information can also be sent to accredited properties, and landlords will be willing to pass on materials to their tenants. Voluntary or community groups may provide a route to contact with other tenants, in properties not within the accreditation scheme.

General publicity, such as leaflets and posters in the offices of advice agencies, doctors' surgeries, libraries and other sources can be supplemented by general publicity through the media.

Bath and North East Somerset: promoting a scheme to tenants

Bath and North East Somerset have produced a leaflet entitled *Tenants in Accredited Properties – How to care for your accommodation*. This outlines the scheme, and includes sections on 'What landlords expect from tenants', 'What tenants can expect of their landlord', and 'What neighbours expect of tenants'. It is the responsibility of landlords to distribute this leaflet to tenants, although it is also available from the council and at housing advice services.

Reading: consultation with tenants

Reading Borough Council consults tenant(s) of properties where the landlord is seeking accreditation, offering them an indication of the management standards which they can expect. A letter briefly explaining the requirements of the scheme, a questionnaire and equal opportunities monitoring form are included in this correspondence. Confidentiality of the information supplied by the tenant is stressed.

Likewise, Hackney Property Accreditation Scheme consults tenant(s) prior to awarding accreditation via a postal questionnaire. Information on the aims of the scheme is provided and a tick-box style questionnaire asks the following questions:

1. Is the above named person/agent the person to whom you pay your rent?
2. How good is your landlord at dealing with items of disrepair reported?
3. How would you describe the condition of the property in which you live?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your landlord?

On-going publicity and public recognition events

Publicity may fall off after the initial launch so steps are needed to renew it regularly. Milestones such as the anniversary of the launch of the scheme, or the registration of the fiftieth, hundredth or five hundredth landlord or property, should be marked with publicity in local media. Some schemes have held public recognition events both to gain publicity and reward landlords for their participation. As one of the incentives to membership (see Chapter 9) is to secure recognition as a competent landlord, such events are of considerable importance in keeping existing members on board and recruiting new members.

Reading: rewarding membership

Reading Borough Council runs an accreditation scheme in partnership with the local University and landlords who achieve accreditation are presented with a certificate by the University at a special ceremony held at regular intervals. This rewards, not only landlords who have submitted their properties for accreditation, but also secures publicity for the scheme, attracts new members, and shows that the University and the local authority are actively seeking to improve housing for students.

Building confidence with landlords and tenants

Building confidence between the parties involved in the accreditation scheme will take time, especially if past relationships have not always been good. Some early evidence that things are really changing in the relationship between the authority and local landlords is worth its weight in gold.

Regular contact, frankness in reviewing difficulties and their causes, and efforts to deliver outcomes that matter to the other stakeholders will all contribute. The best results have been achieved where local authority officers have worked hard to find information, provided access to the right source of advice, or taken personal responsibility for sorting out a problem that was important to landlords.

Creating a steering group

In most cases local authorities provide leadership and resources for accreditation because they have the resources. A Steering Group with representation from the local authority, landlords, tenants and other interested parties should be set up to monitor progress, identify concerns at an early stage, and discuss proposals for change or improvement. The group involved in setting up a scheme may simply continue on to form the scheme steering group, after implementation. Efforts should be made to avoid meetings where local authority officials are in a majority. It is important that all stakeholders feel an equal sense of ownership of the scheme, and believe that they are able to influence its direction.

Some steering groups have a constitution to ensure that they are representative, and that there is the capacity for those who wish to step down, to do so and be replaced by others. Constitutions cover arrangements for membership, frequency and conduct of meetings, and the circumstances under which changes to the scheme can be made.

West Dorset: an Accreditation Scheme Managing Committee

West Dorset accreditation scheme is managed by a Committee and consists of 11 members:

- nominated by West Dorset Council
- nominated by Accredited Landlords
- nominated by Accredited Letting Agents
- nominated by West Dorset Council but representing tenants
- nominated by Registered Social Landlords which are Associates of the scheme

CHAPTER 6

Monitoring and review

Voluntary accreditation of private landlords is a new approach in most authorities, and it is important to evaluate a scheme against its objectives, to secure continuing support from stakeholders and funding. Claims of success must be supported by good quality information. Reports on progress should be provided to stakeholders, and publicised more widely, to maintain awareness of the scheme. Chapter 10 looks in more detail at ways of obtaining publicity.

Measuring success

Success in the development and management of a scheme can be measured in a number of ways. The table below shows some potential indicators. The measurement of success must be linked to the objectives set for the scheme at the outset. General objectives should be translated into specific and measurable targets. Simple output measurements of numbers of landlords and properties included in a scheme are one measure of success. Changes over time show progress. Details of landlords dropping out of a scheme and their reasons for doing so provide valuable feedback. The proportion of the target ‘market’ that accredited properties represent gives a better indication of the *impact* of the scheme than absolute numbers.

Performance indicators for accreditation schemes

No.	Indicator
1	Number of accredited properties/bedspaces
2	Number of accredited landlords
3	Annual increase/decrease in accredited properties and landlords
4	Drop outs from scheme (properties and landlords) by year of drop out and reasons
5	Penetration of target market (% of target properties accredited)
6	Changes in condition of accredited properties
7	Investment by landlords in accredited properties arising from accreditation requirements
8	Types of work done by landlords of accredited properties
9	Complaints relating to accredited properties over time, covering periods before and a after accreditation
10	Officer time spent in dealing with complaints
11	Views of landlords about accreditation
12	Views of tenants about accredited properties and landlords
13	Views of other stakeholders – universities, voluntary sector organisations concerned with housing people in the private rented sector

■ OUTCOMES

Scheme outcomes are often more difficult to measure. They generally require comparisons with baseline data from before the scheme came into operation, so steps must be taken to ensure that this is collected. Improvements in the overall standard of privately rented property measured by fitness or disrepair require frequent inspections and this may be difficult or expensive to collect. A proxy for improvements in condition may be landlord expenditure to reach accreditation standards, or analysis of the types of work carried out.

Improvements in management practices can be measured by reductions in the level of complaints received when compared to the baseline, but where landlords are ensuring that their tenants are well informed about the standards they should expect, the number of complaints may rise rather than fall at first. Experience has shown that analysis of the types of complaint, or of the amount of officer time spent in dealing with complaints about accredited properties, reveals a change in the type of complaint, towards less serious problems.

Other stakeholders may want to see different indicators and these need to be identified in advance to enable data to be collected. Landlords will want to see evidence of quicker and more equitable treatment by local authority departments, or of help in dealing with unreasonable tenants. Tenants may see the level of complaints in relation to properties within the scheme, as the most important indicator. The best way to ensure that different stakeholder perspectives are taken into account is to seek their views on progress at regular intervals, either informally, through a scheme steering group, or more formally through regular open forums of landlords or tenants, or through questionnaires or focus groups.

The right targets or benchmarks for a scheme will depend upon local circumstances. A satisfactory level of recruitment, in an area of very high demand for rented property, may be much lower, than one where demand is lower.

Blyth Valley Approved Landlords Scheme Evaluation and monitoring

During the development of the scheme, the Steering Group considered the question 'what will success look like?' The key criteria for success were judged to be:

- An increasing number of accredited landlords
- A reduction in the number of homeless applications from the private rented sector as a result of tenancy breakdown or harassment
- A reduction in the number of reported complaints about disrepair in the sector
- Significant access opportunities for low income households through nominations and referrals to accredited properties

Conducting a review

Accreditation schemes are often established with an initial fixed term of funding, commonly around three years, and subject to review at that point. Even where the service is being supported on an ongoing basis from a general departmental budget, it will need to be reviewed regularly to assess its performance.

A team, representing the major stakeholders within the local authority, landlords, tenants and partner organisations such as university accommodation services should conduct reviews.

As well as referring to scheme objectives, reviews should include best value criteria as other benchmarks for assessing success and directing the future of the scheme. The concerns of other stakeholders should have equal weight to those of the local authority.

■ IDENTIFYING CHANGES

Changes suggested by reviews should be realistic in terms of available funding, staff resources and time-scales. Potential changes need to be agreed by all stakeholders, especially landlord representatives. It is important to identify in advance, changes likely to lead to opposition from landlords, and to consult widely on them. While landlords will accept changes required by legislative or other statutory requirements, they are more reluctant to take on board other changes, such as, additions to standards, especially at short notice.

■ ON-GOING FUNDING

Some accreditation schemes are supported by funding from a specific initiative (such as an SRB project) or by a one-off grant. Those responsible for operating and supporting the scheme should consider from an early stage how the scheme is to be carried forward when the initial funding ceases.

A continuation strategy must be developed well before initial funding is due to come to an end.

PART 2

Key Features



CHAPTER 7

Getting the right staff

The importance of staffing

Having the right staff in post is essential to the success of an accreditation scheme. Too many existing schemes, in staffing terms, operate on a shoestring. Developing a new scheme takes time and energy and cannot readily be fitted into the gaps between other duties. If it is, the scheme will be in danger of losing momentum when other higher priority tasks get in the way. External partners will take away the message that the local authority is not sufficiently committed to the scheme.

The skills required to work together with landlords to develop and run a voluntary scheme, are very different from those required in a statutory scheme or in enforcement action. Existing accreditation schemes often rely too heavily on staff used to dealing with landlords through the use of statutory powers, without providing them with training to cope with a voluntary relationship. Developing an accreditation scheme requires the ability to work in collaboration with landlords and to generate enthusiasm amongst them and others. Staff will also require the capacity to mobilise the resources that will be needed from many sources within their authority, and outside, to make a scheme work successfully. They will need to be able to deal confidently with senior officers from a range of local authority departments, and from partner organisations, and to have the judgement to know when they need support from their own managers.

■ STAFF RESOURCES

Most accreditation schemes rely on a few staff only, with many being run by a single officer who also has other duties. It is often difficult to secure resources for accreditation as it is not a statutory function, but, if a scheme goes ahead, it is vital that sufficient staff resources are provided to ensure that it can be run effectively. It is a waste of resources to under-staff a scheme. More resources will be required in the development, launch and early recruitment stages of a scheme to develop materials and procedures and to give it a good start. As things become more routine, fewer resources may be required. But if a scheme expands successfully, staffing levels must be reviewed to ensure that they are adequate.

■ JOB DESCRIPTION

A specimen job description and person specification for the lead officer are shown below. It is widely recognised that initiatives of this kind rely heavily on the particular skill and personal characteristics of the person leading them. Strong motivation, good communication skills and the ability to work within a multi-disciplinary network will be more important than any particular professional background.

Job description and person specification for lead officer

Job description

To establish, and maintain, good working relationships, with landlords, tenants and other stakeholders and to be responsible for the operation of the accreditation scheme.

To administer the scheme and maintain channels of communication with all interested parties.

In particular to:

1. Identify and record contact details for all landlords managing property within the area covered by the scheme
2. Establish regular opportunities for contact with landlords
3. Establish and keep under regular review the standards to be operated within the scheme
4. Maintain a register of accredited landlords
5. Deal with applications for admission to membership and renewal of membership of the scheme.
6. Ensure that the accredited properties continue to meet the standards required by the scheme
7. To promote the scheme will all interested parties and the general public
8. Maintain regular contact with all interested parties including other local authority departments, partner organisations and voluntary agencies.

Person specification

Essential

- Good communication and inter-personal skills
- Impartiality
- Entrepreneurial temperament, self-starter

Desireable

- Knowledge of legislation and practice related to private rented housing
- Experience of work relating to the private rented sector

■ TRAINING

The training needs of the post-holder will depend upon their previous experience and qualifications. They should have a good working knowledge of landlord and tenant law, a knowledge of the workings of the other departments of the authority with which they will have to deal, and some practical knowledge in relation to housing management and housing fitness. In some authorities, training has included the first stages of training for housing benefit officers, in order to be able to respond to the more straightforward landlord enquiries.

Leeds: training other staff involved in accreditation

In Leeds, a large number of front-line staff visiting properties in relation to complaints, grant enquiries or for other purposes were expected to play a role in accreditation through checking standards, and more positively, by drawing the attention of landlords to the scheme. Training to re-orientate these staff to the need to sell the accreditation scheme to landlords and to rely on persuasion rather than powers to require compliance with legislation, was recognised as a priority in the authority.

Place in the structure

An accreditation scheme touches on the responsibilities of several departments of a local authority, so there are several potential locations for the administration of a scheme. In most authorities the initiative has developed within the environmental health housing function, close to those responsible for private sector housing conditions, grant provision and enforcement. In a few cases, responsibility is located within a housing department and is associated with housing advice, tenant liaison and related functions. The choice depends on the structure of each local authority, where the enthusiasm to develop a scheme is coming from, and other factors such as the calibre of the staff involved and their management and support arrangements. Where a scheme is located within a section dealing with housing conditions, it is important to ensure that management issues are not neglected, and likewise, that a scheme run by housing advice does not downplay physical condition issues.

Management and support arrangements

In most local authorities the person operating the scheme on a day-to-day basis will be a middle-ranking or more junior member of staff. The work of operating an accreditation scheme can be stressful and post-holders may find themselves exposed to conflicting expectations, even within their own local authority. They will sometimes need strong and consistent support from senior management, to ensure that they can deliver scheme objectives. It is vital that the operation of the scheme is well linked into the structures of the host department and that consistent support is provided.

■ ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

As well as the time of a responsible officer or team to run the scheme, administrative backup will be required, both prior to launch to assist with publicity and recruitment, and on a continuing basis to keep the scheme going and to keep records up to date. As funding for accreditation is difficult to come by, there is a temptation to save money by reducing the amount of administrative support provided. This is false economy as it absorbs time, more fruitfully used in operating and promoting the scheme.

To maintain records of accredited properties and landlords, to facilitate routine re-accreditation or updating of certificates, as well as other regular contact with landlords, and to enable publicity and information mailshots to be carried out efficiently, the scheme will need a computerised database.. Experience with existing schemes has shown a tendency to underestimate administrative requirements both in terms of staff and facilities.

Lancaster: the advantage of good administrative back up

The benefits of good administrative systems and adequate staffing to operate them are demonstrated in Lancaster. Here a bespoke database (based on one of the most commonly available database programmes) has been developed. This enables an administrator to deal with all aspects of the scheme except inspections. The database tracks the progress of cases, automatically generates standard letters and reminders (for example, relating to the annual submission of gas safety certificates), prints certificates and other material, and produces regular progress and management reports. This not only minimises running costs but also ensures that landlords see that the scheme is operated efficiently and effectively.

CHAPTER 8

Setting standards and ensuring they are met

Standards of accreditation

The standards adopted for landlords and properties to be included within the accreditation scheme are crucial to its success. It is essential to discuss standards in detail with landlords to ensure that they are acceptable, or to explore and resolve disagreements.

Standards set too high, act as a disincentive to landlords, and schemes struggle to attract the critical mass needed to flourish and achieve credibility among landlords and tenants. Standards set too low, offer little protection to tenants and are not attractive to landlords who seek to distinguish themselves by good performance.

■ CHANGING STANDARDS OR GRADED STANDARDS

Nobody would expect standards to be set in stone. There is always scope for learning from experience, responding to legislation, or following the demands of the market. Sometimes, local authorities, in order to recruit as many landlords as possible, have set standards at the outset of a scheme, which are lower than they ideally want. They have then tried to raise standards over time towards their preferred level. But difficulties can arise in pushing up standards, if landlords feel that they have been misled or that they are being forced to improve standards against their will.

A better approach is the introduction of a system of graded accreditation, distinguishing between a minimum or basic standard and higher levels of provision, for example through a 'star' rating system. This enables those landlords who do not wish to (or who cannot) achieve, more than the basic standard, to remain as members on the terms to which they first agreed. But it also gives recognition to those seeking to provide better standards and enables potential tenants to make better judgements.

■ SCOPE OF STANDARDS

Each accreditation scheme has its own set of standards, agreed between the various stakeholders involved. Standards must cover both tenancy management and property condition. Local authority staff from an environmental health background often place more emphasis on physical standards, but tenants regard the conduct of their tenancy and relations with the landlord as of greater importance. Compliance with physical standards is easier to monitor than compliance with management standards, but it is important to ensure that the balance is right if tenants' needs are to be met.

In most schemes, safety issues – fire and arrangements for means of escape, gas appliances and carbon monoxide poisoning, and gross disrepair creating hazards such as unsafe floors or stairways – are the foundation of standards. More advanced standards cover disrepair injurious to health, comfort, or to the fabric of the building, tenancy conditions, and the management service provided by the landlord. The box below shows the content of a typical set of basic standards with an optional higher tier of accreditation.

Reading: Accreditation scheme standards	
Grade 2 (the basic standard)	
Furniture	To comply with current Furniture and Furnishings (Fire Safety) Regulations
Repair	Property to be kept in a good state of repair
Gas Safety	Appliance inspected in accordance with current Gas Safety Regulations
Electrical Safety	Installation to be adequate, safe and in good working order Fire Protection In shared and single occupancy houses, at least one smoke detector on each floor. In other property, dependent on size and layout a protected escape route to the front door with fire doors to this route, a fire detection system, emergency lighting, and fire-fighting equipment may be required
Management	Fair treatment of tenants, provision of essential information including procedure for reporting defects
Deposits	To be returned promptly at the end of a tenancy with reasons provided in writing if money is withheld
Contracts	All tenancies should have a written contract stating the rent level and provisions for review
Landlord	No cases of harassment, illegal eviction, non-compliance with notices, outstanding debts to council, and problems with benefit fraud or recovery
Grade 1 (the higher standard)	
All the above, plus:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accurate inventory • Planned cyclical maintenance system • Property to be safe and secure against unauthorised access • Adequate insurance cover 	

Standards should be set out in detail in the documentation supplied to applicants, but in clear language that landlords and tenants can understand. Different standards may be needed for different types of property, distinguishing between, single household accommodation, shared housing occupied by a group of people, and larger dwellings which have been converted for multiple occupation.

■ BENCHMARKS

Some benchmarks will be set by legislation or by other bodies that have statutory responsibilities, such as the fire service. But often the local authority will need, in consultation with other stakeholders, to establish what is a reasonable level to expect. Comparison with the standards set by neighbouring authorities could help in providing benchmarks. Landlords who also manage property in areas covered by neighbouring accreditation schemes will find parity between standards to be helpful.

Ensuring that standards are met

There are a number ways of ensuring that accreditation standards are met. There are two stages: initial accreditation – when a landlord or property joins a scheme; and re-accreditation – renewal of initial accreditation after an interval has elapsed.

■ INITIAL ACCREDITATION

The most common approaches used in different schemes are:

- Full initial inspection of all properties and checking of landlord management record and practices by an independent organisation (usually the local authority, but in some schemes for students, a member of university or college staff). This is by far the most common approach.
- Self-certification by landlords against accreditation standards.
- Initial inspection and checking of a sample of properties by an independent organisation.

There is no consensus on which of these approaches is right. Schemes using full inspection argue that this is the only way to ensure that standards are met. Some landlords support full inspection because they feel it protects the reputation of the scheme and rewards those who have invested in attaining the standards.

The case for self-certification is partly pragmatic – in schemes covering large numbers of lettings, the resources required for inspection are too great. Provided that there are sanctions for non-compliance when this is uncovered (for example through complaints), landlords should be trusted to accredit their own properties.

A compromise between these positions is the inspection of a random sample of properties. This enables the inclusion of a larger number of properties within a scheme, whilst ensuring that those abusing the system are likely to be caught out.

This guidance has stressed that the involvement of a significant proportion of local landlords and properties is essential to the success of a scheme. Unless the authority is able to commit a large number of staff to carry out initial inspections, the best way of securing this will be through self-inspection, using an agreed schedule, backed by appropriate documentation, such as gas safety certificates, and monitored by inspection of a sample of accredited properties.

■ PROVISIONAL ACCREDITATION

It is useful to have a mechanism that allows landlords whose properties do not fulfil all the requirements of accreditation to be accepted into a scheme on a provisional basis. This ensures that contact is maintained with landlords who are willing to comply with standards, but only need time or advice to do so. They can register their properties, and receive assistance with necessary work or changes to management practices, as soon as they can.

Provisional accreditation can be given where relatively minor improvements are necessary and where the landlord agrees to undertake them within a fixed period. Some schemes have a separate application form for landlords who are aware that they cannot immediately meet the required standards. Others simply advise landlords applying as part of the normal accreditation procedure, that they are only entitled to provisional accreditation.

Provisional accreditation is especially useful in areas where there are landlords with large portfolios who are required by scheme rules to include all their properties.

Reading: provisional accreditation

In Reading, several landlords with large portfolios had been discouraged from joining the accreditation scheme because a minority of their properties had failed to meet the basic requirements. The authority decided to provisionally accredit all of the properties of any landlord where at least three-quarters of the portfolio met the standards and a rolling programme of work was agreed for the remainder. By implementing such a system the authority acknowledged that bringing a property fully up recommended standards was expensive and time consuming. This approach allowed landlords to make a commitment to achieving the full standards, as time and finance permitted. The advantage to the local authority was that dialogue and ongoing contact was established with landlords, which increased the likelihood that properties would eventually be accredited.

■ RE-ACCREDITATION

For re-accreditation, the options and arguments are similar. Where properties are fully re-inspected, a decision is also needed on the frequency of re-inspection. Practice varies from one year to as much as five years, although most schemes require periodic evidence of renewal of safety certificates. A few schemes allow full self- certification for re-accreditation. Again, a compromise here is to allow self- certification, but, to inspect a sample of lettings and check a sample of landlords for management record. There is more reliance on self-certification at the re-accreditation stage than for initial accreditation, especially where a landlord has provided up-to-date safety certificates and where there have been no complaints or disputes. This rightly reflects the development of trust between local authority and landlord.

■ CONSULTING TENANTS

There is a strong case for consulting tenants, both about whether their landlord is suitable to be admitted to the scheme, and in the case of schemes with self- accreditation, as a second check on compliance.

Unipol, Leeds: student accreditation scheme

Unipol, which administers the student accommodation accreditation scheme in Leeds, undertakes an annual postal survey of the tenants at each registered property. The format of the survey is kept very simple, to maximise the response. It asks tenants to tick boxes, to indicate whether or not a property has particular features, or whether the landlord provides certain services.

■ DISPUTE RESOLUTION

Disputes sometimes arise but accreditation schemes can minimise these by making the required standards explicit to both landlords and tenants. Accreditation schemes should have procedures for staff to investigate complaints and resolve disputes, and a means of

appeal if either party feels aggrieved. Ideally, every attempt should be made to secure an informal resolution. Formal mechanisms for investigating complaints are rare. Most are dealt with by an informal approach to a landlord and remedial action where necessary. Existing schemes reported very low levels of complaints.

REMOVING ACCREDITATION

In most schemes accreditation can be rescinded if a landlord is found to be in serious breach of the required standards of condition or management. There are very few cases where accreditation is withdrawn through non-compliance.

But it is important to have formal procedures in place to deal with complaints in cases that cannot be amicably resolved.

Leeds City Council/Unipol: dealing with complaints

Leeds City Council and Unipol make a Complaint Form available to tenants, through Citizens Advice Bureau or the Council offices. This allows tenants to lodge a formal complaint.

Tenants receive written acknowledgement of their complaint within 14 days and a reassurance that the complaint is being investigated. They are subsequently informed of the outcome and of any action to be taken to remedy the situation.

A tribunal/review panel has been developed to investigate complaints which cannot be resolved informally and amicably. It is made up of a representative group of nine stakeholders:

- 3 representatives of the council
- 1 representative of UNIPOL (the organisation which runs the local student accommodation accreditation scheme)
- 1 representative of the Citizens Advice Bureau
- 1 representative of the Leeds Property Association (landlords association)
- 1 representative of a Managing Agents Association
- 1 representative of the small landlords sector
- 1 private sector tenant

It is the duty of the panel to consider disciplinary action, as appropriate, in respect of persistent, and/or serious breaches of the Code.

The Panel hearings are conducted in formal quasi-judicial fashion, with landlords and tenants (who can be represented by CAB) invited to attend the panel to put their case forward. All parties concerned have the opportunity to ask questions of those appearing. However, legal representation at the hearing is not allowed. The Panel has the power to rescind membership of the accreditation scheme. A landlord may appeal against its decision to the Director of Housing.

CHAPTER 9

Incentives to landlords

Why should a landlord join an accreditation scheme?

Landlords join accreditation schemes for a variety of reasons.

■ STATUS

One attraction is the status associated with being publicly identified as a good landlord whose accommodation meets an official standard. Many landlords value this for its own sake and as a way of distinguishing themselves from the less well-intentioned or competent landlords who often attract media attention. Recognising this, most accreditation schemes have ways of marking accreditation status, including the preparation and issue of a list of landlords or properties meeting the standard, the issue of membership documentation such as cards or certificates, and the organisation of public recognition events as referred to in Chapter 5.

■ MARKETING ADVANTAGE

Accreditation can achieve a marketing advantage, if tenants, or potential tenants, are made aware of the benefits of renting an accredited property. Referral agencies may give accredited lettings preference in advertising, or refuse to advertise non-accredited lettings. In some student schemes, the high penetration of accreditation into the market and promotion by university accommodation staff, has made it almost essential for landlords to join.

Lancaster: a weekly list of available accommodation

In Lancaster, accredited landlords are able to contact the local authority accreditation team when accommodation becomes vacant and request inclusion of property details in a weekly bulletin. The bulletin is updated on a weekly basis and faxed to around 40 local advice agencies or projects working with young people. Some use this directly to refer potential tenants to landlords, whilst others keep the information in their office to be consulted by callers. Although there are some problems – for example when a landlord fails to notify the authority that property has been let – the scheme is valued both by landlords and tenants.

Leeds: accreditation of student accommodation

In Leeds, approximately 75% of student accommodation, falls within, the Unipol accreditation scheme. The Universities strongly encourage students to seek out accredited properties, and access to information on these properties is readily available. As a result, there is a strong incentive for new and existing landlords to join the scheme and to remain in it. This has enabled Unipol to exert pressure on landlords to increase their standards in a number of key areas.

Incentives

In some areas, especially those with high demand for private rented accommodation, these factors are not enough to persuade landlords to join in significant numbers and other incentives are needed.

■ A LIAISON OFFICER

Many landlords find the structure of local authorities confusing and experience problems in securing access to the individuals and services they require. Some landlords feel that they face negative attitudes within local authorities when seeking information or advice on property condition or tenancy issues. Often, to combat this, accreditation scheme staff act as an initial contact point for landlords in relation to any matter that requires contact with the local authority. They can often resolve the matter by an internal phone call, or at least introduce the landlord to the right person elsewhere in the authority. An accredited landlord usually receives quicker or more helpful treatment than one who is not accredited. Landlords value this incentive highly.

Offering this benefit to accredited landlords requires accreditation staff to build a network of contacts within the local authority, so that they know who the appropriate person will be, and can make the necessary connections. This needs to be negotiated with senior staff in other departments at an early stage in the development of a scheme if it is to be offered.

■ AN IMPROVED RELATIONSHIP WITH HOUSING BENEFIT

Many landlords, rightly or wrongly, feel highly dissatisfied with the administration of housing benefit. Landlords frequently suggest that a major incentive to join an accreditation scheme would be expedited procedures for the payment of housing benefit. Unfortunately the prevailing view amongst those administering housing benefit is that it is unlawful for them to give a better service to some tenants than to others on the basis that their landlord is a member of an accreditation scheme.

Despite this, there are some things that can be done to help accredited landlords with housing benefit. It is relatively easy for housing benefit staff to make special presentations to meetings of accredited landlords on benefits generally or on specific issues such as advance warning of changes to the system. Landlords can be provided with information and assistance that will allow them to support tenants in making accurate and timely applications. In some schemes, the housing benefit department has produced a manual of guidance on benefit, which is made available to accredited landlords and has designated a nominated officer to deal with their enquiries. More generally, as a better relationship is built up over time between housing benefit officers and accredited landlords, a variety of problems (for example in relation to repayment of benefit) can be more easily managed.

Lancaster Accreditation Scheme: Promoting understanding of Housing Benefit

Lancaster City Council's Revenue Services and Private Housing Services have produced a comprehensive manual on housing benefit that is available to accredited landlords. Its intention is to increase knowledge and understanding of the housing and council tax benefit schemes and to assist landlords when dealing with any tenant who makes a claim. The manual is produced in a format allowing material to be updated easily.

Leeds City Council: Access to Housing Benefit Department

Leeds City Council provides accredited landlords with a direct telephone 'hotline' to the housing benefit department for use when advice is needed or in the case of specific queries. This enables accredited landlords to avoid any delays in using the busy general lines.

■ DEALING WITH ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Some schemes offer help to landlords in avoiding, or dealing with anti-social behaviour by tenants or other management problems. Where accredited landlords receive nominations, some local authorities filter out tenants with a history of behavioural or other tenancy problems. In one area, there are plans to 'accredit' tenants on the basis of their tenancy record in the same way as landlords are vetted. Another scheme has regular meetings between accredited landlords, the local authority, and local police to discuss problems and advise landlords.

■ INFORMATION AND CONSULTATION

Many accreditation schemes offer accredited landlords written or verbal information on matters such as the regulations covering their activities, and forthcoming changes in legislation or regulations. Examples of this material are discussed in Chapter 10. It is also common to offer a one-to-one advice service. Schemes also consult with accredited landlords, for example over the local housing strategy, or about broader proposals (such as the proposal for licensing of HMOs). The benefits go both ways, for as relationships with the local authority develop, accredited landlords provide a convenient sounding board for the local authority and a source of valuable informal comment on policies and proposals.

■ GRANT AID

Local authorities have powers to give grants to private landlords for repairs, improvements and adaptation to properties. In some accreditation schemes, grants are used as an explicit incentive to landlords to join. Authorities use a variety of approaches. They must of course be sure that any policy does not fetter their discretion to give grants to landlords more generally.

In some cases, a specific discretionary 'accreditation grant' is made available to landlords for work to meet accreditation standards provided that this is eligible under the normal grant regulations. Some schemes set a relatively low limit on this grant. In other cases, accredited landlords, or more commonly those seeking accreditation, receive priority for grant aid, or access to a larger grant. The exact nature of any grant incentive is a matter for individual local authorities, and will be strongly influenced by the level of resources available. The views of local landlords should however be taken into account. There is also a strong case for a grant incentive that can be sustained over a period of years to avoid differences in the way landlords are treated over time.

■ DISCOUNTS AND GROUP PURCHASE ON GOODS AND SERVICES

Some schemes have arranged for accredited landlords to receive discounts or to benefit from group purchase schemes to cover building materials, or services. The most common incentive offered to landlords is access to preferential rates of property insurance.

Reading Borough Council: group discount scheme

Reading Borough council has arranged for accredited landlords to receive a significant discount (on production of an accreditation identity card) from a range of local businesses, such as builders, bed suppliers and hardware shops. Goods or services on which discount is available include ironmongery, plumbing, heating and electrical materials, fire extinguishers, electrical services, gas inspection fees, and insurance.

■ RENT DEPOSIT SCHEMES

In some authorities tenants of accredited landlords have access to a rent deposit scheme under which the authority pays or guarantees a deposit to the landlord on the tenant's behalf against non-payment of rent or damage. In addition to offering access to accommodation to those who would otherwise be excluded through their inability to raise a deposit, the scheme can also provide a benefit to landlords in enabling them to accept tenants who they might otherwise have to exclude.

A national Tenancy Deposit Scheme (TDS) is being piloted in Brent, Camden, Birmingham, Brighton and Hove, Merseyside, West Lancashire, Norwich and Norfolk and a decision will be taken in 2002 on whether to roll the scheme out nationally. Under this scheme deposits paid by tenants to landlords are either insured against non-return, or held by an independent financial institution until the end of the tenancy. Deposits returned by agreement, incur no further action, but the Independent Housing Ombudsman resolves disputes. Authorities in the pilot areas could promote the scheme as a further incentive to accreditation and assist landlords in joining. Further information on the TDS is available from, the Independent Housing Ombudsman service, who manage the scheme (<http://www.ihos.org.uk/tds>).

Publicising the incentives

In marketing incentives to landlords it is important to make them fully aware of the benefits of membership, rather than expecting them to work this out for themselves. Here are two examples citing the benefits of particular schemes.

Leeds City Council: benefits of accreditation

- A market advantage when letting property
- Personalised Code membership certificate and credit sized membership card
- Automatic authority given to use the Council's Code of Standards logo
- Peel off Code logo stickers, for use on personal stationary, rent agreements etc.
- Display posters advertising the Code
- Promotion of code properties by the Council including on the internet
- Free advertising of members' properties to let and specialist professional advice from Housing Advice Centre on landlord/tenant law and contractual matters
- A Code members newsletter is issued periodically
- Periodic training sessions and open forums are held on current topical matters
- Access to a Housing Benefits Service telephone 'hotline' for Code members
- The provision of an exclusive landlord's guide to legal standards and responsibilities associated with letting
- Specialist advice on housing standards from Environmental Health Officers
- The opportunity to influence the Council's Private Rented Sector policies
- Provision of Code of Standards 'Guide to Tenancies for Private Landlords'
- Provision of the tenant's handbook 'Living In Your Home'
- Preferential rate of house renovation grants for Code landlords
- Amnesty on tenant generated waste disposal charges at Civic Amenity sites

Lancaster Accreditation Scheme: Incentives to landlords

- An edge over other providers in attracting new tenants
- An enhanced image with potential lenders
- A lower turnover of tenants with savings on management costs
- A decrease in abuse of the property
- Positive publicity
- Entry onto scheme database
- A referrals service on notification of vacancies
- Access to discounts on various building-related goods and services
- Access to preferential arrangements for property insurance
- Access to advice on tenancy matters, model tenancy agreements, etc
- A Deposit Guarantee Scheme for eligible tenants
- Financial assistance for certain works to multiply occupied properties in the Morecambe SRB area
- Access to the expertise of housing professionals
- The option to request a maintenance schedule for the property (to help avoid heavy or unexpected capital outlay)
- The option to use the scheme's tenancy mediation service
- Provision of housing benefit information booklet Provision of a housing advice pack for landlords

CHAPTER 10

Providing information and publicity materials

The importance of good publicity and clear information on accreditation has been stressed at a number of points in this guidance. This chapter looks at the provision of information and publicity in more detail.

Getting accredited

■ INTRODUCTORY BOOKLETS

All accreditation schemes need a leaflet or brief booklet explaining the objectives of the scheme, the standards required for accreditation, and the process of application. This should be mailed out to landlords but should also be distributed more widely so that tenants, potential tenants and the public at large are aware of the scheme. Some landlords first hear about accreditation from their tenants.

Partner organisations, such as university accommodation services, Citizens' Advice Bureaux and Housing Advice offices should be provided with supplies of the leaflet or may wish to incorporate the material into leaflets of their own. Part of the process of developing a scheme will be to make contact with these organisations and spend some time explaining the scheme to them and securing their active support.

West Dorset Accreditation scheme: Promotional Leaflet

West Dorset DC produce a promotional leaflet, which:

- Has an attractive glossy appearance with illustrations
- Displays the name and logo of the scheme
- Uses a concise, bullet point format
- States the aims of the scheme
- States that it is VOLUNTARY and FREE
- Lists benefits to landlords
- Provides the name and telephone number of the accreditation officer

■ ACCREDITATION PACKS

For landlords who reach the point of making an enquiry, it is important to provide clear but more detailed information about the scheme. Where an enquiry is made in writing, it is useful to have an accreditation pack to send out to prospective scheme members. Normally, this will contain:

- an overview of the scheme and its operation – how and why it was developed;
- a summary of scheme standards together with fuller details;
- a description of incentives to become accredited;
- an overview of the application process explaining what will happen and the steps a landlord should take to apply;
- an application form;
- additional guidance, such as a list of frequently asked questions;
- other information produced by the local authority or by others which may be useful to landlords.

It is important to follow this up, wherever possible, by telephone contact and an offer of help in dealing with the application process. In one successful scheme, the application pack is rarely sent out cold to landlords – instead the authority tries to make telephone contact and to arrange to meet the landlord at one of the properties to be accredited, in order to work through the process face to face.

■ APPLICATION FORMS

Careful thought should be given to the information needed from applicants. Data Protection legislation specifies that information, especially of a personal or sensitive nature, should not be collected or held unless there is good reason. If too much information is requested from landlords, this may deter them from applying. This is an area where consultation with landlords is essential.

As some schemes look to accredit landlords and others to accredit properties, the level of information required will vary. Schemes relying on self-certification clearly need to collect more information than those where the next step is a face to face meeting with the landlord and a visit to all properties which are being submitted for accreditation.

For self-certification schemes, or those where only a sample of properties are inspected, the application form needs full details of the landlord and the properties to be accredited. Some schemes only require a general declaration from the landlord of compliance with scheme standards, but others provide a checklist requiring the landlord to certify compliance on selected issues, such as:

- electrical safety requirements;
- gas safety requirements;
- cleaning arrangements for common parts;
- availability of amenities for exclusive use;
- presence of a range of fire precaution measures;
- existence of a planned maintenance programme;

- emergency repair procedures;
- complaints procedures;
- compliance with a range of management requirements.

For schemes involving full inspection, all that may be needed at the outset are contact details for the landlord and the addresses and basic details of properties being put forward for accreditation. Some schemes require details of the whole of a landlord's portfolio in the area covered by the scheme.

■ CERTIFICATE OF ACCREDITATION

A certificate should be provided as proof of accreditation status for each property awarded accreditation, or for each landlord if that is the basis for accreditation. As many landlords regard enhanced status as an incentive to join an accreditation scheme (see Chapter 9) it is important to ensure that an appropriate certificate is provided. It should incorporate the scheme logo, the address of the property, the name of the landlord, date awarded and date of expiry, and should be signed by a person of status such as the Director of Housing. When displayed within the property this can promote the scheme to tenants or prospective tenants.

■ NAME AND LOGO

An accreditation scheme needs an interesting name and a memorable logo that allows it to be readily recognisable by landlords and tenants. It is important to ensure that the logo can only be used by agents or landlords and in relation to properties accredited under the scheme. Two examples of scheme logos are shown below.



After accreditation

■ GOOD LANDLORD GUIDE

The provision of accurate information and professional advice to landlords by council officers is an important incentive to membership of an accreditation scheme. A good landlord guide, for distribution to accredited landlords, is one way of ensuring that all relevant information and general advice is brought together. A guide in loose-leaf format allows updates to be issued and revised editions to be prepared easily. The box below shows the topics covered in a typical guide produced by Kensington and Chelsea.

Kensington and Chelsea 'Let's rent' scheme landlord guide

- 1 Introduction
- 2 A-Z of Advice, Information and Services
- 3 Empty Homes
- 4 Basic Information for New or Potential Landlords
- 5 Finding Tenants
- 6 Deposits
- 7 Housing Benefit – Information for Landlords
- 8 New Tenancies
- 9 Existing Tenancies
- 10 Good Management
- 11 Advice for Landlords of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)
- 12 Grants
- 13 Advice for Landlords on Housing Fitness
- 14 Enforcement Notices
- 15 Management Regulations for Housing in Multiple Occupation
- 16 Furniture and Fire Safety
- 17 Gas Safety
- 18 Energy Efficiency
- 19 Noise Problems
- 20 Planning
- 21 Building Regulations
- 22 Information Leaflets

■ NEWSLETTERS

Regular communication with landlords is essential to maintain enthusiasm and commitment to the scheme. A regular newsletter is one option. Contributions should be included from all organisations and individuals with a stake in the scheme. The newsletter should not just be a mouthpiece for the organisation managing the scheme, nor simply a 'good news' sheet, but an opportunity to air differences of view or discuss cases where difficulties have arisen.

Leeds City Council: 'The Network' Newsletter

A quarterly, four page, newsletter, is produced by the accreditation team and is distributed to all code of standard members. It:

- Updates landlords about the scheme, e.g. numbers joined, achievements or new features of the scheme,
- Provides information about local authority proposals related to the private rented sector and an avenue to comment,
- Includes information on forum meetings and the opportunity to suggest topics to be covered,
- Provides information on the Leeds housing market
- Thanks landlords for their co-operation and support for the scheme

■ PROPERTY LOG BOOK

Another option is, a log-book for landlords, in which the details of fire, gas and electrical safety may be recorded. This should be kept in the property to which it relates. In addition to advice on relevant regulations, it could provide space for details of equipment, dates of inspection, and other information to be recorded and updated.

■ MEETINGS AND BRIEFINGS

Regular meetings for landlords with accredited properties, usually on a quarterly basis, give an opportunity to review the operation of the scheme and to provide information or training, or to consult with landlords over a range of issues. Sometimes scheme meetings are linked with a broader landlord forum, but separate meetings are a way of strengthening the incentives to landlords to join.

Experience shows that attendance at meetings may wane. After the initial round of topics imagination is needed to devise a programme that will attract a significant proportion of members. Ironically the success of an accreditation scheme in addressing the difficulties in relationships between the various parties may lead to a fall in attendance at meetings. Consultation with landlords suggest that gradually reducing the frequency of meetings is sensible. It is still possible to organise ad hoc special events when circumstances require.

Publicising the scheme

■ WEBSITE

Advertising the scheme through a website will enable information to reach more people, for example landlords living outside the local area. There is evidence that groups such as students who are more likely to access a website find this a particularly valuable way of obtaining information.

Leeds: using the web

In Leeds, Unipol, the independent organisation running the student accommodation accreditation scheme, maintains a computerised database with details of accredited properties available to students either through access to its web site or by visiting the office and checking availability on line by using one of a number of computer terminals. It has plans to make its web site available via other gateways and to provide access via mobile phones. It has just begun to implement a star rating system to differentiate properties within the accredited list as an incentive to landlords to improve standards further.

■ POSTERS, BADGES AND BEER MATS

Some schemes produce other materials to advertise the scheme, to identify members or to encourage potential tenants to seek an accredited landlord. Examples include:

- a badge displayed in the property showing that it, or the landlord, is a member of the accreditation scheme;
- a poster, displayed in the property, that sets out the principal standards required for membership of the scheme and contact details for further enquiries or to register complaints;

- schemes catering for students have used the most imaginative approaches – eg beer mats advertising accreditation distributed in the Students' Union bar.

■ PROMOTING STANDARDS TO TENANTS

As discussed in Chapter 5, existing and prospective tenants need to know of the existence of an accreditation scheme and to have some understanding of the standards that they can expect. This enables tenants to ask the right questions before accepting a tenancy, to approach their landlord when repairs or other changes are needed, and to help the local authority to ensure compliance.

Derby City Council and Derby University: informing prospective tenants about the scheme

To promote their accreditation scheme to prospective student tenants, Derby University Residential Services mails an information pack to all 2,600 students, currently accommodated in the University halls of residence in their first year of studies, most of whom will move out into privately rented accommodation in their second year. This package contains an introductory letter to the Residential Service, information on the registration scheme, a general advice booklet for the private rented sector, and DETR pamphlets regarding fire and carbon monoxide safety.

Walsall and Wolverhampton councils: informing tenants about standards

Walsall and Wolverhampton MBC both operate an accreditation scheme. Jointly they have produced a booklet 'The free essential guide to privately renting'. It is aimed at prospective private rented tenants. It contains:

- A check list to use when viewing a property to indicate if it is in good repair
- A list of questions to ask landlord/lady/agent
- Information on the fitness standard
- Responsibilities of the landlord and tenant
- Information on housing benefit (for landlord and tenant)
- Information on the Walsall and Wolverhampton Accreditation Schemes
- A fire safety check list from the West Midlands Fire Service
- Advertisements – to defray the costs of production

This is currently being reviewed, and it is proposed that the neighbouring metropolitan borough councils will endorse the new booklet. Not all of these councils currently have a scheme in operation, but they are keen to distribute the document within their area as an information source to prospective tenants.

CHAPTER 11

What to do next?

Next steps

After looking through this guidance, the next steps in developing an accreditation scheme are:

- 1 Decide whether to go ahead.
- 2 Look at the flow chart describing the process of scheme development (see **Chapter 1**), the main decisions which need to be taken (**Chapter 1**), and the timetable (**Chapter 2**) and produce an *action plan*.
- 3 Contact other local authorities nearby or with a similar private rented sector, discuss their experience, and visit them to see what they are doing on the ground – see **Who to contact** below. Government offices may be able to advise on who to talk to.
- 4 Contact the researchers for further information on any of the material in this guide – see **Who to contact**.
- 5 Contact local landlords' groups, via the national landlord representative bodies if necessary – see **Who to contact**.
- 6 Compile a list of other potential partners, and contact them.
- 7 Set up a Working Group to take things forward.

Who to contact

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DETR

The first point of contact for Local authorities is their Government Regional Office.

Queries relating to private rented sector policy can be directed to the Private Rented Sector Division at
Private_rented@detr.gsi.gov.uk

Voluntary accreditation is a key policy measure to help well-intentioned landlords to improve standards in the private rented sector. This good practice guidance is aimed at local authorities and other organisations wanting to develop an accreditation scheme. It provides key good practice points and examples, and sets out the process of developing and running a scheme, and the key factors for success.

£15

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