

Large
Agents
Representation
Group

c/o JMW Solicitors LLP
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2nd February 2023

Clive Betts MP
Chair
Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Clive,

Ensuring the Property Portal Works for the Private Rented Sector

Thank you for meeting with us recently. During the course of the meeting you asked for further information on LARG's concerns regarding and proposals for the planned Property Portal for the private rented sector.

As an organisation, LARG supports the development of the Portal. The information held on it needs to be easily accessible and understood by tenants to give them peace of mind that rental properties are safe and secure.

LARG members have been working with officials on the development of the Portal, and are concerned that, at present, it risks becoming toothless.

Currently, all that is proposed is that existing Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs) Electrical Inspection Condition Reports and Gas Safety Certificates for each property will be uploaded by landlords. There will be no tool to validate the accuracy of those documents, check that the scanned documents are legible, or even to validate that the uploaded documents are the certificates they claim to be.

We are concerned that, given the complexity and technical nature of such certificates, simply uploading them will not meet the test of providing clarity to tenants about whether a property is safe or not. Tenants are unlikely to have the knowledge and understanding to know what they mean or whether they are valid. LARG members invest in substantial training for their staff to give them the skills necessary to understand these documents, tenants have no similar resource.

Given this, for the Portal to work gas and electrical safety certificates need to be fully digitised, as is the case for EPCs. Such digitisation should include a coding system so that the Portal can itself verify that the documents are in date and identify no hazards requiring addressing. Ideally, this should lead to a "traffic light" style system so that valid certificates were given a "green light" such that tenants have an unequivocal visual indication of property safety. At the very least the Portal should include clear information for tenants to enable them to understand how best to 'read' such certificates and understand what they mean. There is little point putting information on the Portal if tenants cannot immediately establish if a property is safe or not.

We understand the portal is being built around Unique Property Reference Numbers (UPRN's). Given this, all properties should be searchable on the Portal using the UPRN.

We further consider that properties should be independently inspected every five years to confirm that they do not have any major hazards in them. We do not consider that this requires fully qualified Environmental Health Officers. We envisage a lower-level qualification, much like an EPC assessor holds, which would allow an assessor to identify serious and obvious hazards such as damp and mould and obvious safety hazards. This could be financed by a modest fee charged to landlords and could be conducted by accredited private sector inspectors. We would envisage these inspectors being dual-qualified as EPC assessors and carrying out both reports at the same time. Reports from such inspections could be fully digitised and included on the Portal. On a practical level it would also allow an assessor to confirm the validity of the electrical and gas safety certificates as it may take time to put in place a fully digital system for these.

I trust that this is helpful and would be happy to discuss further any other points related to the Portal.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Smith', with a stylized, cursive script.

David Smith
Policy Consultant to LARG