

**COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY
18 APRIL 2024**

PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide Members with an update on Private Sector Housing Strategy and service area update.

Summary

2. The Private Sector Housing Strategy was published in 2022. This strategy included a vision statement:

“We aim to increase healthy home environments that maximises well-being and life opportunities for all residents and future residents in Darlington.”

3. The strategy sets out three core aims:-
 - (a) Aim 1 Decent quality homes in the private rented sector
 - (b) Aim 2 Enable growth in the private rented sector
 - (c) Aim 3 Working with and supporting all residents in Darlington
4. Updates for each of these aims is provided in the main report.
5. The report also provides an update on the service area and projects being delivered.

Recommendation

6. It is recommended that Scrutiny Members note the contents of this report.

**Dave Winstanley
Group Director of Services**

Background Papers

There are no background papers to this report.

Christine Booth

S17 Crime and Disorder	The private sector housing team undertake a range of services that impact on preventing crime and disorder in the Borough.
Health and Wellbeing	The private sector housing team undertake a range of activity aimed at improving the health and well being of people living in the private rented sector.
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	The private sector housing team both promote investment and lead on the delivery of projects that improve energy efficiency of properties.
Diversity	The strategy was developed with regard for the Council equality duties.
Wards Affected	All Wards
Groups Affected	All Groups
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not impact on the Councils Budget and Policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision.
Council Plan	This report outlines how the private sector housing service and Private Sector Housing Strategy contribute to the current Council Plan
Efficiency	This report has no impact on the Council's Efficiency Programme. However, some of the projects and advice given will impact on the energy efficiency in the private rented sector.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers. Looked after Childrens or care leavers can access the service if required.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

7. Around 80% of Darlington's 51,885 homes are in the private sector. The Private Rented Sector more than doubled size in the 15 years to 2021, this has now stabilised, and it is currently estimated to be 20% of the housing market, approximately 8,875 properties.

Progress with the Private Sector Housing Strategy 2022-2027

8. The strategy sets out three core aims:-
 - (a) Aim 1 Decent quality homes in the private rented sector.
 - (b) Aim 2 Enable growth in the private rented sector.
 - (c) Aim 3 Working with and supporting all residents in Darlington.
9. The three core aims within the Strategy each have associated objectives. These are outlined below.

10. Aim 1 Decent quality homes in the private rented sector

- (a) **Reactive Housing Standards: the Private Sector Housing team work to ensure standards are maintained and take action where these standards are not met by providing a reactive response to complaints about poor property conditions. By dealing with these issues we reduce accidents and illness in the home and help to reduce health inequalities and improve life chances across Darlington.**
- (i) The Private Sector Housing team have continued to provide a reactive response to service requests. The team receive on average 600 requests for service per year.
 - (ii) The number of cases relating to damp and mould growth has increased by 30% in the last year from the previous four-year average.
 - (iii) A Civil Penalties protocol was adopted in June 2023 to assist with consistent and proportional legal action.
- (b) **Area based action: to tackle health inequalities in communities where housing conditions are worst.**
- (i) This action has been concentrated on the Northgate ward as part of the Northgate initiative, typically this ward contributes to 40% of the number of service requests received.
 - (ii) Darlington Borough Council was recently chosen to be part of a Healthy Homes Pilot Project to help to tackle Damp and Mould in residential properties. Darlington was chosen based on:-
 - a) Proportion of non-decent housing in the PRS;
 - b) Average deprivation score across the LA;
 - c) Proportion of LSOAs falling in the worst 10% most deprived in England;
 - d) Premature respiratory mortality rate;
 - e) Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) mortality; and,
 - f) Emergency Admissions for COPD.
- Depending on which funding stream Darlington is chosen for as part of the property, funding will either be provided to support treatment in the area or to improve statistics for damp and mould growth as a control group.
- (c) **Inspecting Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs): administering the scheme for Mandatory Licensing of relevant HMOs. Safeguarding residents living in multiply occupied properties through successful licensing and proactive property inspection.**
- (i) The number of HMO licence applications received since the publication of the strategy has increased by 45%. There are currently 51 mandatory licensed properties, with a further 11 HMO properties that are currently being investigated.

- (ii) The majority of HMOs are located in the Northgate ward however recent developments have been concentrated in Park East, particularly on Clifton Road.

11. Aim 2 Enable growth in the private rented sector

(a) **Management of private rented properties: the private-rented sector makes an important contribution to the borough's housing, provided it is well managed.**

- (i) Around 200 property inspections are carried out each year, as part of these inspections all documentation is checked to ensure landlords are managing their properties adequately.
- (ii) Property checks also includes ensuring that electrical safety checks have been carried out following the introduction of legislation in 2021, requiring all tenancies to have a valid Electrical Installation Condition Report (EICR).
- (iii) A civil policy protocol in was adopted in 2023 to issue civil penalties where landlords had not produced a valid EICR.
- (iv) The team have been involved in regional housing events to promote changes in legislation to private landlords and continue to support both regional and local landlord groups.

(b) **Empty Properties: making best use of all our homes. We cannot allow homes to stay empty while housing is in short supply. Increasing activity to bring long term empty homes back into use.**

- (i) In October 2023, there were 1765 empty residential properties, with 677 being reported as being long term empty properties (over 6 months). Although the number of long-term empty properties has reduced slightly since the baseline number in 2020, the number has remained broadly consistent for the last 10 years.
- (ii) The number of service requests received for empty properties have also remained consistent over the past five years, with the team receiving 37 requests per year.
- (iii) The team have been involved in providing both reactive advice and assistance to both owners of empty properties and affected neighbouring properties, but also proactive assistance to organisations wanting to acquire properties to house vulnerable residents.

(c) **New homes: with a growing population and changing lifestyles we need to provide additional homes that are affordable for our residents, in the right place, and of the right quality to meet future demand.**

- (i) The Private Sector Housing Team have provided planning consultation advice to housing developers in order to ensure that resulting properties meet a decent housing standard in term of space and amenity.

- (ii) On average the team respond to 12 requests per year for consultations. As the number of larger Houses in Multiple increase however this number is also increasing with the team responding to 20 requests in 2023.

12. **Aim 3 Working with and supporting all residents in Darlington**

(a) **Green Homes: exploring and developing energy efficiency. Energy-efficiency is good for the borough and can save households money and make people healthier. Delivering warm home solutions to alleviate fuel poverty.**

- (i) Over the past 12 months this has been a rapidly developing area the team have been involved in, with the number of service requests for energy efficiency advice increased by 70% in 2023 from the previous four yearly average.
- (ii) There has also been a significant increase in requests for declarations in relation to the Energy Company Obligation scheme. ECO4 Flex is a household referral mechanism within the wider ECO4 scheme which enables Local Authorities to widen the eligibility criteria for ECO. Under ECO4 Flex, a participating Local Authority can refer private tenure households that it considers to be living in fuel poverty or on a low income and vulnerable to the effects of living in a cold home. While ECO4 Flex is optional, suppliers can deliver up to 50% of their ECO obligation under this mechanism. In 2023, the team responded to 20 requests. In the first quarter of 2024, this demand has increased with 36 requests having been processed to date.
- (iii) The Team have also been involved in the Home Upgrade Grant phase 2, by managing the project on behalf of the other Tees Valley authorities involved in the scheme. Delivery for the scheme is expected to commence in April 2024.

(b) **Encourage and support owner occupiers to maintain safe homes: by advising of financial assistance that is available to homeowners.**

- (i) Although there is limited financial assistance available the team have provided signposting to organisations who are able to provide assistance.

(c) **Meeting the needs of residents living in Park Home Sites and Residential Caravan sites, the including the travelling community: by proactively improving the licensing conditions of existing licensed sites.**

- (i) Over the past 12 months the caravan site licensing conditions for new sites have been amended.

Service Area Update

13. The legal and regulatory framework within which the Private Rented Sector operates is fragmented and complex. There are also national legislative changes to the management of the Private rented sector.

- (a) Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023

- (b) The Renters Reform Bill is expected to be passed in the current parliamentary session although the full reforms proposed may take a number of years to be implemented.

14. These are increasing demand and duties on the service area. An overview of some of the existing and future challenges are outlined below:

- (a) Generally the number of service requests is increasing.
- (b) We have experienced an increase the number of service requests relating to tenancy advice both from landlords and tenants, due to rent increases, the service of eviction notices.
- (c) Empty properties are expected to rise in the short term as private landlords are evaluating their market position.
- (d) There has been an increase in energy efficiency advice requests both from owner occupiers and private tenants.
- (e) Asylum and Refugee schemes such as the Homes for Ukraine Scheme is currently adding a pressure on the service to provide an inspection service for prospective properties.

15. The team are delivering a number of projects that contribute towards the aims in the strategy. An overview of some of the projects is below:-

- (a) **Home Upgrade Grant Phase 2** – This project is being led by Darlington and is expected to run until March 2025. Delivery is expected to commence in April 2024.
- (b) **ECO4 - ECOflex declarations – as 12(a)(ii)** as above this project will continue until March 2025.
- (c) **Healthy Homes Pilot Project to help to tackle Damp and Mould – as 10(b)(ii)** above should funding be approved a project will commence in April 24 for 12 months.
- (d) **Stock Condition Survey** – Funding has been received to carry out a Private Sector Housing Stock condition survey.

16. The team will continue to explore feasibility of initiatives and the use of discretionary powers to deliver the outcomes of the strategy.