

# District councils and the Private Rented Sector

WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH AND  
WELLBEING OF TENANTS AND THE LOCAL ECONOMY



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## FOREWORD

Covid-19 has had a wide-reaching impact on housing and the welfare of citizens around the UK. Districts have been on the front-line, providing housing support, getting rough sleepers off the streets, working with community members and volunteers to deliver food to the shielded and as well as much more.

This report outlines how the housing sector does not just provide accommodation but also determines the health and welfare of people because if Covid-19 has proven anything, it's that housing and health are intrinsically linked. Additionally, we have consulted our 187 members to generate best practice for dealing with issues that arise within in the private rented sector.

The case studies selected cover a wide range of topics from HMO household challenges, landlord and tenant engagement, property inspections and housing standards – but we know it is not exhaustive, and so much else is happening to improve the private rented sector, please to tell us about it.

As the lead member for the DCN's 'Better Lives' workstream, I am pleased to launch this study, and would like to thank those councils who have provided such invaluable insights into the challenges they have been dealing with, and the way that they are overcoming them. I very much hope this will be a useful source of inspiration and innovative practice to aid other councils grappling with these same issues.

Housing is central to recovery and an important part of that is offering housing that meets the needs of residents and does not contribute to health concerns. Improving PRS is one of the key ways of addressing the housing standards in the UK and in turn, protecting the health and wellbeing of residents across England.

**CLlr Giles Archibald, DCN Lead Member, Better Lives Portfolio**





## INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has often been referred to as an 'equaliser' because anyone can become infected and it can spread anywhere. However, evidence increasingly proves this is far from true, in fact Head of Health Analysis at the Office for National Statistics states "people living in more deprived areas have experienced COVID-19 mortality rates more than double those living in less deprived areas".

There are 4.6 million households living in the private rented sector (PRS).<sup>ii</sup> This represents just under 20% of households in the UK. It is a large and diverse sector; there is no one PRS. Altogether 84% of people within PRS are satisfied with their accommodation and most private landlords ensure standards are met.

However, there are challenges facing many people within the private rented sector, including overcrowding, quality of housing and mould, which can not only add stress to residents but exacerbate existing health conditions. Whilst there are certainly issues with standards in the other sectors, the private sector has the highest number of houses with Category 1 hazards, including the highest percentage of mould/damp issues. The private rented sector has the largest proportion of homes that are considered 'non-decent' for failing to meet basic requirements set out by the Decent Homes Standard. These conditions exacerbate the spread of Covid-19.

However, the sector has grown considerably over the past decade, and looks extremely different around the country, as demonstrated by this project summarising local housing market challenges. With this growth of different kinds of private rented housing has come a great many challenges regarding housing and safety standards in the hands of private landlords.

Whilst there has been a decrease in social housing due to several factors, including Right to Buy, the lack of investment in social housing and a rising population, the private rented sector has increasingly provided for lower income households. The current legislative framework does not sufficiently support vulnerable tenants in the private housing sector from poor standards and so district councils, in their regulatory role, have taken local action to deal with some of the rising concerns.

Affordability remains a critical concern as according to the Ministry for Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG)'s most recent 2018-19 English Housing Survey, the private rented sector is on average £98 per week more expensive than the social rented sector<sup>iii</sup>.

The PRS is increasingly becoming home to people from a vast range of socioeconomic backgrounds and now represents the second largest sector after homeownership. However, the PRS has proven to be a harder sector to regulate and issues arising in the sector cause issues for both tenants and district councils.

Covid-19 has raised considerable concerns around housing quality, calling for a systematic adjustment to housing supply, quality and accountability. Within this publication is a collection of eight case studies gathered from our member councils to

demonstrate how districts are taking creative steps to tackling some of the biggest challenges within the private rented sector, at a local level.

The studies cover a wide range of challenges, from health standards on the one hand, to unique issues that arise from student populated areas on the other, and as well as districts taking regulation into their own hands.

The material in this short report demonstrates the critical role of councils in driving up standards across the private rented sector, which will become ever more important in the months and years ahead as our country adapts to impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on our residents' health and economic wellbeing.

## IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PRS

As a result of Covid-19 and the impact on people's ability to work and pay rent, the Government implemented a three-month ban on evictions<sup>iv</sup> which has subsequently been extended twice to September 20th 2020, and new 6-month notice periods to be in place until at least 31 March 2021<sup>v</sup>. Whilst districts have welcomed the Government's steps, there are growing concerns over long-term implications of the lock down on many tenants in the private rented sector.

### Benefits

DCN research shows that there are 500,000 households<sup>vi</sup> paying over half of their income on private rented housing and with the rise of unemployment, cut salaries and the no-evictions ban ending, districts anticipate a rise in evictions. Within this large half a million group, districts are especially concerned for the 108,000 lone parents with children, representing 20 percent of all lone parents renting in the private sector and 100,000 16-24-year olds<sup>vii</sup>.

According to Citizens' Advice, there is "an estimated 6 million people have fallen behind on a household bill due to Covid-19, and the policy response to limit its impact. Concerningly, 4 million have fallen behind on rent, council tax or a telecoms bill where they have little protection from aggressive debt collection when temporary protections on enforcement come to an end"<sup>viii</sup>

Resolution Foundation found that despite earnings being hit across tenure groups, renters "are one-and-a-half to two times more likely to have fallen behind with their housing payments compared to mortgaged homeowners"<sup>ix</sup>. Although the increase in housing benefit to 30 per cent of market rent has been welcomed across the sector, for ongoing support to vulnerable tenants, lifting the benefit cap would have a greater long-term impact.

In addition to the threat of eviction, "many sectors - including private renting - don't have formal mechanisms to help consumers of essential services repay missed payments sustainably"<sup>x</sup>.

Councils are finding it harder to find private landlords as a number of insurance companies are not willing to provide

rent cover during the lockdown. Additionally, landlords are concerned that tenants will not pay any rent either as many are not working.

Districts indicate an increase in landlords preferring a property empty rather than let the property for fear tenants will not be able to pay. Additionally, there is concern that insurance companies are not willing to provide rent guarantee products during lockdown.

Affordability remains the key barrier within districts to accessing the PRS. Additionally, districts suggested that economic downturn in relation to real wages will inevitably hit those in PRS accommodation hardest. The more severe the economic slowdown could lead to a rise in mortgage repossessions, although at this stage there is limited data for this.

Furthermore, we have concerns where local estate agents are not letting, so they have not been able to discharge their homeless duty to many people. Some landlords who are willing to let properties are struggling to get contractors in to carry out void works.

Where lettings are continuing, there are limited viewings for some properties as landlords are self-isolating. Some landlords are doing virtual viewings, which is a bit of a barrier for some customers who don't have access to the technology.

On the other side of the matter, landlords fear the freeze on evictions will remain for months and they will have no means to take action with tenants that have not paid anything for that time. In many instances, both landlords and tenants will need support.

There has been a rise in numbers of people seeking assistance with Universal Credit (UC), Housing Benefit as well as needing support from advice organisations and food banks. Councils have indicated that their clients are finding it difficult accessing the UC website to make a claim.

Councils have seen a rise in demand for housing support in the PRS as lots of tenants are claiming UC for the first time, and historically placed tenants are with scheme landlords who they need to protect their relationships with, so it initially spiked the workload to provide that support.

In some cases, landlords reporting arrears with placed tenants as they are submitting new UC claims and having the 5-week wait which will have no tie in to the rent due date. This has caused renewed frustrations around UC.

However, as stated in the LGA's most recent private rented sector research, councils are monitoring Covid-19 developments by liaising with landlord and tenant organisations as well as third sector agencies that provide advice and support. They are also putting in place measures for the private rented sector in the event of local lockdowns<sup>xi</sup>.

## Health

In addition to the financial concerns, since the development of Covid-19, there is a clear correlation to the spread of the virus and living conditions. Mould, damp and overcrowding are just some of the living conditions that are found within the PRS that pose a threat to the health of the tenants. Overcrowding in the PRS has increased by 95% over the last decade<sup>xii</sup>, which has subsequently become a main focus for understanding the spread of Covid-19.

In an independent study published in the Journal of Public Health, it indicated a 'greater household overcrowding (household size, generations in household) were associated with increased odds of COVID-19 positive test'<sup>xiii</sup>. The need to improve housing conditions and implement effective regulations to support councils to help residents, is more pressing now than ever. The case studies below outline numerous innovative interventions councils have taken into their own hands to address the challenges faced in the PRS, before Covid-19.

## CASE STUDIES

These case studies highlight some innovative and proactive measures councils have taken to locally address challenges within the private rented sector, collected before the pandemic. Please get in touch if you want to know more about any of the case studies outlined.

# 1 BENEFITS OF CONDUCTING PERIODIC INSPECTIONS OF LICENSED PROPERTIES – HINCKLEY AND BOSWORTH BOROUGH COUNCIL

The Council wanted to ensure that properties it licenses are as safe as the licence they display would have you believe. Statute requires residential rental properties licensed with authorities to be inspected a minimum of once during the term of their licence (typically 5 years). These premises, including Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) or properties in areas of low demand, are often occupied by those most vulnerable in our society. Councils frequently have hundreds if not thousands of licensed premises in their areas and are often simply unable to meet their legal duties to inspect these premises during their licence period, let alone conduct periodic inspections.

The Council has a small number of licensed properties and a small team of dedicated, well-trained and competent Officers. With the resources available, the council has taken the decision that as far as it is able, it will conduct periodic inspections of each licensed premises in the area.

This has proved potentially lifesaving. For example, in one large HMO where an inspection was recently conducted it became evident upon testing the fire alarm system that it was not working even though the fire panel was displaying that it was working perfectly without fault.

Upon further investigation the certification issued for the testing of the fire alarm and emergency lighting systems was found to have been issued by the license-holders' own employee who was found to be unqualified, ill-informed and incompetent to be involved in such work. The licence holder was prosecuted for these offences, receiving modest fines close to £5,000. The licence for the premises has subsequently been revoked and the licence holder placed on the Rogue Landlord's Database. The property has also now been put up for sale by the owner as a going concern.

Had the Council not carried out periodic inspections, significant safety matters such as these may simply not have been picked up on. The moral of this being, adequate resources to carry out essential work such as this is imperative if the Council is to not only fulfill its basic legal duties but work to protect the lives of those most vulnerable in society.

It is important to invest staffing into this essential area of work. The Government has certainly given councils the powers that they need, it just has not given councils the resources to make effective use of those powers.

Cllr Stuart Bray, Leader of Hinckley and Bosworth Council: Being in the very centre of the country with fantastic transport links in every direction, private investment in our area continues to drive up demand for private rented accommodation. Like so many other parts of the country, the private rented sector in the borough of Hinckley and Bosworth now far exceeds the number of social housing properties.

Though the housing stock here is largely good, some unscrupulous landlords and agents are still all too willing to offer unsafe, substandard and grotty accommodation or fail to provide their tenants with the basic rights that the law affords them to quiet and peaceful enjoyment of their homes.

*That is why we have sought to resource our Private Sector Housing team with well-trained and highly skilled staff, and the equipment and budget necessary to allow them to inspect every private rented property that is in a state of disrepair and each licensable house in multiple occupation at regular intervals. All of this is part of our commitment to the people of the borough that have elected us to look after and act decently towards them, tackling injustices and helping them to enjoy the places where they live, work and relax.*

*The task facing us will always be a challenge. A growing private rented sector needs to be matched with the resources necessary to keep it in check. The government keep giving us the powers to ensure the sector is safe – at the local level, we are the ones who have to allow these powers to be effectively made use of.*

## 2 IMPROVING CONDITIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SETTLED RESIDENTS AND STUDENT RENTERS – WARWICK DISTRICT COUNCIL

Leamington Spa is a University town for one of the most prestigious institutions in the UK, every year student numbers are growing and there is sometimes a culture clash between settled residents and first-time tenants. A residents' group requested additional support from the Local Authority and University to tackle issues arising from Student HMO's. Warwick District Council, Warwick University and local residents came together to create a new role – Student Housing Enforcement Officer.

Warwick District Council and Warwick University were receiving increasing number of complaints from neighbours living next to student HMO's. The Council was aware of key times of year where certain issues regularly arose. In particular the start and end of the academic year for refuse. Halloween /Bonfire Night, New Year when the students return and the end of the academic year for large house parties. Various team resources and the extension of HMO licensing meant that the time and opportunity for proactive work in the community was limited. This gave rise to the impression that the Council was not taking enough action. Whilst work in the various teams had been taking place, it was recognised that the Council needed to work in a more open way and in partnership with stakeholders at Warwick University and our local residents.

In addition to the residents' complaints, the Council's contact with student tenants highlighted that poor housing conditions were commonly accepted to be part of the student experience. Conversations the Council has had with student tenants also identified that they are not confident in how to select a good property or how to approach their landlord when issues arise.

Proactive inspections of the street scene have picked up and addressed issues with properties where the Council would have expected to receive complaints. These have either been addressed directly through the work of the Student Housing Enforcement Officer or by referrals to other departments within the Council. Residents can see the officer visiting shared properties in their area and this helps establish the visible proactive point of contact for the community that the Council wants to achieve.

Priority streets were identified for doorstep visits in the run up to Halloween and Bonfire Night, this was followed up with a letter to HMO landlords and a leaflet to residents. Advice was given on the doorstep to the students about noise nuisance, any refuse issues present and the support that the Private Sector Housing Team can offer. It resulted in a quiet Halloween and bonfire night where year on year the Council has previously had complaints of large chaotic house parties.

Proactive inspections of non-licensable HMO properties are about to begin. The aim of these is to pick up and deal with any disrepair and safety issues before complaints are received

and make landlords aware that the Council has a greater capacity for oversight of private rented accommodation. It also helps to educate landlords about the housing standards the Council expects and improve student perception of their accommodation. Moving from re-active to proactive should save time spent dealing with acute disrepair cases and free up the Council's Environmental Health Officers to deal with other areas of work. It is expected that the role may generate income through the serving on Civil Penalty Notices for housing offences where appropriate. There is also the potential to identify new HMO properties which may need licensing.

Warwick District Council would suggest making it mandatory for landlords of all HMO's to register their properties with local housing authorities, not just the licensable HMO's. There is a lot of work involved in trying to identify and locate unlicensed HMO's and this takes resources away from proactive community-based work that the new Student Housing Officer role is delivering.

In addition, council tax or business rates should be levied on HMOs as these are commercial operations and consume council resources particularly in respect of waste collection.

Jan Matecki, Housing Portfolio Holder: *'Warwick District Council are very happy to be working in partnership with the University of Warwick and the local community on this project. To ensure all our residents live in safe and secure homes and to improve relations between the settled residents and students renting accommodation, often for the first time.'*



# 3 IMPROVING ENERGY PERFORMANCE IN THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR – CHERWELL DISTRICT COUNCIL/ OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Improving energy efficiency is recognized by the Oxfordshire councils as a core part of initiatives to raise housing standards. Improving a home's energy efficiency helps the occupants keep warm, reduces their energy bills and provides better protection for their health and wellbeing. The Oxfordshire Health Improvement Board is seeking to encourage greater collaboration and joint working between organisations tackling fuel poverty.

Against this background Oxfordshire County Council, Oxford City Council and Cherwell District Council have simplified the way in which poor energy efficiency in rented properties can be tackled. The county council has delegated enforcement powers to the district councils to enable district councils to enforce the legal requirements for properties to have an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC). This enables the district councils to effectively enforce the minimum energy efficiency standards as part of normal programmes concerning housing standards. It demonstrates a new way of working between councils in a two-tier local authority area.

It would be beneficial to simplify the responsibilities of councils in relation to the different legislation which applies to the private rented sector, letting agents and landlords. Currently the legal framework is fragmented, with different tiers of council responsible for different aspects of regulations applying to the same businesses and properties.

Cllr John Donaldson, Cherwell District Council's lead member for housing, said: *"Here in north Oxfordshire, private rented accommodation is a really important part of the local housing mix, so we are committed to ensuring high standards. The introduction of Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards will make an important contribution to improving the least energy-efficient homes. Our Housing Standards team is already using its enforcement powers to identify properties that may be in breach of the energy-efficiency rules but regulatory framework applying to landlords and letting agents is particularly complex in two-tier council areas as a result of the split of enforcement responsibilities."*

*"By working closely with Oxfordshire County Council and changing the way in which the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards and Energy Performance Certificate regulations are enforced, we can simplify the requirements for all concerned and ensure we are making most effective use of these regulations which will, in turn, help improve housing standards in the district. Ensuring homes are easier to heat and keep warm will help tenants to live safe and healthy lives and also help reduce carbon emissions, so there is a positive benefit for the local environment as well."*







## 4 LANDLORD ACCREDITATION SCHEME – CHICHESTER AND ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

Previous stock condition surveys highlighted that the Council had a higher than average private rented sector and this sector has a greater proportion of housing health and safety hazards than other sectors. The Council's Private Sector Renewal Strategy identified improving standards within the private sector as a main priority.

The Council's strategy to bring about improvement concentrated on promoting and expanding our Landlord Accreditation Scheme, including offering local landlords match-funded financial assistance to support them to improve their properties. The principal benefits of the scheme included forming sustainable relationships with local landlords, and ensuring the Council had an accurate database of privately rented properties that would be routinely inspected.

The Chichester and Arun Landlord Accreditation Scheme was introduced in 2006. The scheme extends to all private sector landlords, and the Council is proud to say that there are now over 420 accredited properties in this district with numbers continuing to grow. The scheme was conceived following a House Condition survey showing that Chichester had a higher than average private rented sector with a high rate of housing health and safety hazards.

Accreditation is not only the recognition that a landlord has voluntarily complied with standards which exceed the minimum legal requirements for let property, but also that they agree to abide by the scheme Code of Good Management. Tenants choosing to rent an accredited property will also have the peace of mind that comes with living in a well-managed, rental property of a high standard.

As a result, the relationships that have been built with local landlords have been invaluable and there are so many examples to demonstrate where these relationships have saved the Council time and money.

It would be important to introduce compulsory electrical installation 5-year checks as well as have a mandatory registration scheme for privately rented properties. Additionally, it would be helpful to extend mandatory HMO licensing to all HMOs and make CO detectors compulsory for gas appliances.

Councillor Norma Graves, Cabinet Member for Housing Services, Communications, Licensing and Events at Chichester District Council, said: "Providing access to suitable housing is one of Chichester District Council's key priorities. Since the council started the scheme in 2006, our district-wide Landlord Accreditation Scheme has been helping landlords reduce hazards and improve the condition of the properties they rent out.

*This has been incredibly successful in raising the standard of privately rented accommodation in the district. The scheme is free of charge and landlords who join can enjoy benefits which include, financial assistance towards the cost of bringing their properties up to the scheme standard. We have built very good relationships with landlords and I am very pleased that the scheme continues to grow, with more properties coming on board each year."*

# 5 LANDLORD AND TENANT ENGAGEMENT – RYEDALE BOROUGH COUNCIL

The Council recognised the importance of ensuring that tenants and landlords have the skills and knowledge to successfully manage and sustain a tenancy.

Currently this is provided within the Council's supported accommodation schemes through a resettlement package. This educates the tenants in independent and practical living skills, highlights what is expected of them to sustain a tenancy and outlines a landlord's responsibilities.

Engagement with landlords is through an annual landlord's forum, external training and our website, to ensure landlords are advised of the changes in legislation in respect of the private sector. This ensures they manage their properties effectively and safely.

29 residents moved into the council supported accommodation in 2018/19, who had access to the resettlement package. It is also being rolled out in part with individuals in the community, through the Council's Supported Lettings Officer who identifies areas where tenants would benefit from further education and support.

Both the landlord forum and training has attracted landlords and letting agents and provided positive feedback and has improved knowledge.

A suggestion would be to provide longer term funding streams to allow schemes to be created and sustained. Ensure sufficient financial resources for councils to deliver the new legislation relating to the PRS and guidance to both councils and landlords in respect of the new legislation.







## 6 PROTECTING GUARDIANS UNDER HMO MANAGEMENT REGULATIONS – COLCHESTER BOROUGH COUNCIL

This case has clarified that properties occupied by guardians can fall within the definition of an HMO, the requirement to be licensed and to comply with HMO Management Regulations.

There appears to have been a perceived lack of legal clarity amongst councils around whether properties occupied by guardians fall within the definition of a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) within the Housing Act 2004. This has resulted in an apparent reluctance to take enforcement action where property guardian companies have breached legal requirements.

However, in 2017, the industry issued its own white paper to clarify the application of housing law and to set expectations. In January 2018, Colchester BC was alerted to problems at a former residential care home, including poor living conditions and a lack of adequate facilities for the number of occupiers. The property was occupied by 30 guardians.

The inspection found clear evidence of a number of offences under the Housing Act 2004, including failure to have a licence and more than 30 breaches of the HMO Management Regulations. Whilst property management company gave undertakings to address all offences, minimal action was taken, other than steps to require all residents to vacate.

As a result of the Council's intervention, the company that ran the guardian scheme was subsequently prosecuted. Whilst found guilty of all offences, they had since gone into voluntary administration, so only nominal fines were awarded. The Council understands that several former residents also pursued Rent Repayment Orders themselves, recovering around £20,000.

It is important to ensure councils are clear on their enforcement responsibilities, by endorsing the industry guidance and directing them to this. Establishing a compulsory registration/licensing scheme for all landlords, with minimum membership requirements would be helpful. Additionally, it would be beneficial to introduce management regulations relating to single family households, with set standards, similar to the HMO Management Regulations.

Cllr Adam Fox, Colchester Borough Council Portfolio Holder for Housing, said: *"Colchester Borough Council is committed to improving standards of private sector housing accommodation across the borough. When accommodation is not being responsibly managed and regulations are breached, we will work with those involved to resolve the issues – but, if this proves to be unsuccessful, we will take legal action to remedy the situation and ensure tenants can enjoy a safe and healthy home which meets regulations."*



# 7 SELECTIVE LICENSING EVALUATION AND FUTURE EXPANSION – EAST STAFFORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

The Selective Licensing Scheme Pilot was approved by Cabinet in June 2017 to improve housing conditions and management of privately rented accommodation in the eastern area of Anglesey. Following a mandatory three-month standstill period, the designation became active on 12 September 2017 and is effective until 11 September 2022.

Councils have powers to introduce selective licensing schemes which require landlords to apply for a licence if they want to rent out a property. This means the council can check whether they are a “fit or proper person” to be a landlord, as well as making other stipulations concerning management of the property and appropriate safety measures.

Selective licensing was introduced to protect the welfare of tenants, provide confidence in the rented sector, and ensure that standards are met. It is more conducive to good landlords but provides an environment that is less opportunistic and attractive for poor and criminal landlords. It also assists landlords in dealing with tenants that choose to cause anti-social behaviour.

A Selective Licensing Policy was adopted setting out how the scheme will be delivered to ensure that the Council effectively:

- Implements the selective licensing scheme, ensuring that all licensing functions are carried out in accordance with the provisions of the Housing Act;
- Monitors and enforces any licences granted during the selective licensing scheme;
- Ensures any future proposals for introducing licensing designations are given due consideration in accordance with the statutory requirements;
- Implements and delivers existing and future schemes in cohesion with other related strategies and initiatives: particularly those in place to tackle issues of empty properties, fly tipping and anti-social behaviour.

The policy set out an annual review of the operation of the selective licensing scheme along with a review of the licence fees to measure whether it is having the desired effect and achieving its aims and objectives. Should the review indicate that the designation has worked and the issues that it intended to resolve have been resolved then the local authority may consider that the designation is no longer needed and may be revised or revoked. Alternatively, if the designation is failing to tackle the issues then the designation may be revised or revoked, and alternative measures may be considered to address the issues.

The first review completed in November 2018 reported that inspections of rented accommodation had identified numerous hazards which resulted in improvements to the living conditions and the management of properties within the selective licensing area. At this time there was no identified increase in homelessness which was one of the main concerns raised by stakeholders and the average fee also remained low due to a high take-up of the discounts for early compliance with the scheme.

The first two years of the scheme have demonstrated ongoing compliance with the licensing requirements of the scheme with the majority of properties being granted a licence. However, a number of landlords continue to evade the schemes requirements for which enforcement action is being taken. Whilst the majority of properties have been licensed, the majority of inspections identified works that were required to improve the condition of the property. To assess compliance with these requirements, the forthcoming year will focus on inspection revisits to assess and summarise the overall improvements that have been made due to selective licensing.

Due to the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2018, there has been a slight decrease in the number of initial enquiries across the whole borough. The housing options team have indicated that this figure is representative of the number of enquiries within the whole borough, with no significant pressures from the selective licensing area to indicate that selective licensing has been a causal factor in homelessness applications.

Cllr Bernard Peters, Deputy Leader for Regulatory and Community Support said: *“Whilst the East Staffordshire Selective Licensing programme is still in its infancy it is clearly making a difference. Since its inception in 2017, it has supported improvement in the management and condition of private rented properties in East Staffordshire resulting in a noticeable reduction in housing complaints in the ward where it has been implemented.*

*“Because of this success we are now in the process of consulting on the expansion of the selective licensing scheme to other areas of the Borough that have a high proportion of private rented accommodation and high levels of housing complaints.*

*“East Staffordshire Borough Council has a key role to play in improving the quality and standard of private rented accommodation, targeting poor property conditions and dealing with unscrupulous landlords that do not comply with housing requirements. Selective Licensing is a key tool that proactively improves the condition and management of private rented accommodation and holds landlords to account for*

*the condition of their properties. There are still areas within the Borough that are known to have a high proportion of private rented accommodation and a high number of houses with poor conditions, we must do everything we can to make sure these numbers are reduced.*

*"The success of the programme to date is testament to the hard work of the East Staffordshire Borough Council Selective Licensing Team. It is pleasing to hear that this work has been recognised at a national level and is to be used by the District Councils' Network as part of its research".*





# 8

## STRATEGIC APPROACH TO RAISING STANDARDS IN THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR – WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL

The Council has a large private rented sector and in particular a high proportion of HMOs. (Est. 2,500).

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council saw the importance in addressing the very poor private rented sector, particularly standard of HMOs and particularly student accommodation. There have been very poor management practices and, in some cases, dangerous conditions. The Council would suggest that all HMOs are required a license, regardless of the number of occupiers.

### Data

The Council gathers data about the nature and location of private rentals and who owns/manages them, by using the Council's and partner information. The Council carries out desk top research and in geographical 'hot spots', send questionnaires direct to properties, asking occupiers to confirm the tenure. This has proven very successful, with 80% return rate. Recently they have run team 'door knocking' campaigns. Once inspected, each property is risk rated via a bespoke system which generates a suitable re-visit period, which is programmed in.

### Advice/Support

The Council provides education, training and support to landlords and renters. It does this through a joint Landlord Forum (working with the NLA); providing information and advice on our website and via leaflets and telephone advice and also through running a Landlord Accreditation Scheme [www.pal-online.org.uk](http://www.pal-online.org.uk). The Council focuses on improving the practice of Letting Agents, who can become 'partners' to the Accreditation Scheme – achieving a greater impact, maximizing limited resources. The Council now has sixteen agents on board and cover nearly 2000 properties.

### Enforcement

The Council actively enforces where there are breaches of the law or poor practices. It actively uses civil penalties, improvement notices and full prosecution. The Council has 100% success rate and has publicised widely where landlords have sanctions, as this sends a strong message.

The Council has measurable outcomes which show that the standard of HMO has improved significantly. It has 200 properties managed by 100 landlords and sixteen agents on the Council's Landlord Accreditation Scheme, which is now a source of good quality rental properties for students and other members of the community.

Additionally, the Council provides training for landlords and agents through this scheme, therefore have improved skills and knowledge in the sector.

The Council Leader, Cllr Tony Kingsbury: We want everyone to feel confident when renting a property in the borough, so we're delighted that our comprehensive approach to raising standards in the private rental sector has led to a significant improvement in the quality of accommodation available.

*Our priority has always been to maintain standards and keep people safe. By working in partnership with local landlords and tenants to provide training, information and support, we have also improved knowledge around the sector and our Landlord Accreditation Scheme is now a source for good quality properties.*





# CONCLUSION

Covid-19 has proven to be anything but a great 'equaliser' and districts offer the key services and support to mitigating its impact. Districts are in a vital position when it comes to housing and in the recovery. With the right resources and funding, they can ensure housing is not only decent but supplied to all those who need it.

In the last ten years, districts have seen a significant cut to resources and funding, resulting in less of an ability to address issues that arise in the PRS. Despite this, research indicates that most districts consistently do more for homelessness prevention than legally required to. In the case of PRS, this is the same, districts often take matters into their own hands to support vulnerable tenants.

This report shows just that, that councils use local knowledge and tools to generate strategies to uphold accountability and standards. As a result, the DCN is proud to share these actions in order to provide insight to other councils and offer the support that they do not necessarily get from central Government.

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