



# Worcester City

## Private Sector Housing Strategy Action Plan

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### Extension

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March 2021



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# 1.0 Introduction

The Private Sector Housing Strategy (known forwards as the strategy) covered the time period from 2015 to 2020. It was planned that a new stock condition survey would be undertaken in 2019/2020 which would assist in informing a new five year strategy. However, some of the data which was included into the 2015 Private Sector Housing Stock Condition Survey is now out of date and for example, the 2021 census which provides important population data to inform the strategy, isn't as yet available.

Due to these issues and that Covid-19 will affect any practical surveying of properties in the City, the Council has agreed to undertake a desk-based stock condition review using the existing data which the Council has, or is able to obtain, and to procure a full stock condition survey to be undertaken in 2022. The information from the full survey will then be available to inform a new strategy.

In the meantime, the 2015-2020 strategy will be extended to include an update and an extended action plan. The findings from the desk-based stock condition review, an update from any new legislation will result in new actions being created for 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. These new actions can be found at the end of this document.

## 1.1 Background to the Strategy

In 2015 the Private Sector Housing Stock Condition Survey advised that 84% of the housing stock in Worcester is privately owned (owner occupiers and shared ownership) and 19% privately rented. Due to the presence of the University of Worcester there is a higher proportion of Houses in Multiple Occupation in Worcester at 5% compared to 1.9% National Average. Therefore, it is essential that the private sector housing stock in Worcester is encouraged to be at a high standard for safety, energy efficiency and well managed by professional landlords.

The strategy identified that by investing in homes and to ensure standards are maintained and improved the positive outcome for people living in the City and the City as a whole are:

- ◆ Fewer homes that pose a risk to health and wellbeing
- ◆ Improved outcomes for families, the elderly and young people
- ◆ More independence for older vulnerable household
- ◆ Lower carbon admissions, improved energy efficiency and reduced fuel poverty
- ◆ Communities that are attractive and economically viable.

The strategy identified five themes:

**1. Encourage and enable owner occupiers to repair and maintain their homes to a good standard.** This theme's focus was on improving the proportion of owner occupied properties which have not been maintained or kept at a good condition standard. It was to increase awareness of services available to support owners to maintain and improve their homes, such as equity release schemes and home repair loans.

**2. Encourage and enable private sector landlords and agents to provide good quality, well managed properties in a professional way.** This theme's focus was on improve property standards in rented accommodation by implementing Additional Licensing in 2015, raising awareness of landlord and tenants rights and responsibilities; as well as addressing rogue landlords.

**3. Enable people whose independence may be at risk to safely remain in or return to their home.** This theme's focus was to increase property standards in vulnerable people homes to ensure those needing adaptations and services to remain in, or return to their homes, receive the right information and support and to monitor the Home Improve Agency delivery of this service.

**4. Maximise the use of the existing private sector housing stock.** The theme's focus was to reduce the proportion of people under occupying private homes. As well as continuing to expand the City Life Letting Agency, reduce the number of long term empty properties and identify any housing inequalities identified in BME groups.

**5. Enable more energy efficient and sustainable homes and reduce fuel poverty.** The theme's focus was on improving energy efficiency of homes in Worcester by attracting funding and reducing fuel poverty through targeted work.

# 2.0 Changes to the Private Sector in the last five years

It is worth noting that since the strategy was in place that there has been several legislative changes which effects the sector. These have been summarised in this section.

## 2.1 Legislative Changes

During the last five years there have been several legislative changes focusing on improving property standards which are detailed below:

**2.1.1 Redress Schemes for Letting Agency Work and Property Management Work (Requirement to belong to a Scheme etc) (England) Order 2014.** This legislation requires letting agents and managers to be a member of two Government approved redress schemes. There is a financial penalty for not being a member.

**2.1.2 The Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarm (England) Regulations 2015.** Since 1 October 2015 landlords have been required to have at least one smoke alarm installed on every storey of their rental property and a carbon monoxide alarm in every room which has a solid fuel burning appliance. The landlord is to make sure that the alarms are in working order at the start of each tenancy. There is a financial penalty for non-compliance.



**2.1.3 The Energy Efficiency (Private Rented Property) (England and Wales) Regulations 2015** stipulates that a substandard property (a property where the energy efficiency level is below an E band) must not be let to tenants unless the property has been included on the PRS exemption register. This now applies to all existing tenancies since 1 April 2020. There is a financial penalty for not meeting this legislation.

**2.1.4 Housing and Planning Act 2016. This legislation provided new measures to tackle rogue landlords.**

This included:

- ◆ Civil Penalties as an alternative to prosecution for specified cases
- ◆ Extension to the rent repayment order to cover more offences
- ◆ Database of rogue landlords and letting agents
- ◆ Banning Order for serious and prolific offenders
- ◆ Regulations for electrical safety
- ◆ Clarification on abandonment.

**2.1.5 The Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (Mandatory Conditions of Licences)(England) Regulations 2018** has introduced a National minimum bedroom size for all new and renewed HMO licences of 6.51m<sup>2</sup> for one adult and 10.22m<sup>2</sup> for two adults.

**2.1.6 The Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (Prescribed Description)(England) Order 2018.** Removed the three or more story requirement for a HMO to be a mandatory licenced HMO. Therefore, all HMOs with five or more people now require a mandatory licence.

**2.1.7 Home (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 – Came into force on 30 March 2019.** Its aims are to ensure that rented (private and social) houses and flats are fit for human habitation, healthy, safe and free from serious harm. This Act enables tenants to take their landlords to court to enforce the landlord to carry out essential repairs and pay compensation. This legislation is not able to be enforced by the Council but is there to empower tenants to hold their landlord to account.

**2.1.8 Electrical Safety Standards in the Private Rented Sector (England) Regulations 2020.** Came into force on 1 July 2020 for all new tenancies and from 1 April 2021 for all existing tenancies. These Regulations make it mandatory for all private rented properties to ensure that every electrical installation is inspected and tested at least every five years by a qualified person. The landlord must obtain a report of the inspection and supply this to any new tenant before they occupy the property and to the Local Authority if requested. There is a financial penalty imposed for landlords who fail in their Legal Duty.

## 2.2 Policy Changes

**2.2.1 Additional Licencing.** The five year citywide Additional Licensing scheme (2015- 2020), which was implemented as part of the strategy's actions, was reviewed in its final year in 2019/2020. Following this review The Council's Communities Committee decided to declare a ward based Additional Licensing scheme from 1 September 2020. This means that Additional Licensing continues, but is confined to the wards of Arboretum, Cathedral, Bedwardine, St Clements and St Johns where all HMOs need a licence. The remaining wards in the City will only require a Mandatory Licence when a HMO has five or more occupants.

**2.2.2 Increase in Empty Property Council Tax Premiums.** In 2019 it was agreed at Council to charge a long term empty homes premium of 100% council tax for homes which had been empty for two years or more. In 2020 it has been agreed at Council to charge a premium of 200% council tax for properties which have been empty for five years or more and charge a premium of 300% council tax for properties which have been empty for 10 years or more. This is a mechanism to encourage long term empty homes owners to bring their properties back into use.

**2.2.3 Promoting Independent Living (PIL).** In April 2020 this contract was taken over by a new provider to deliver Disabled Facilities Grants and other assistance under the Better Care Fund.

**2.2.4 Changes to the Council's Social Lettings Agency.** In January 2020 City Life Lettings changed its name to Worcester City Lettings. The agency also developed its services further to let only and to offer a managed lets service for landlords. As well as developing a private sector leasing scheme for taking on new properties to provide accommodation for homeless families.



# 3.0 Desk-top Housing Stock Condition Review

## 3.1 Purpose

To assist with developing the actions for this strategy extension it was decided to use the findings of the desk-top housing stock condition review. This review compared the figures from 2015 with the most recent which Officers were able to gather. This was to see whether there had been any significant changes between these dates and therefore where to focus any particular work stream/ project.

## 3.2 Method Statement

To add context to the review information provided in this document it was, where new and updated data available, compared with the previous survey conducted in 2015.

Also, comparisons are made against the national information provided in the English Housing Survey (EHS) 2019 -2020 (2018 data) Headline Report. This is a national survey of people's housing circumstances and the condition and energy efficiency of housing in England. This report provides the findings from the 2019-2020 survey. The EHS report does not contain full information on Decent Homes Standard failures, the latest detailed information being in the EHCS 2007; and neither does it provide consolidated information on vulnerability.

Due to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions this report was not able to incorporate a house-to-house survey, the results of which could have been used to complement the data gathered.

At the time of writing, this report data from the National Census 2021 were not yet available.

The information referred to within this document was obtained from several sources using a variety of methods where possible. Worcester City Council obtained data relevant to a number of key fields within the 2015 survey, as listed above, in order to complete this desk-based review.



### 3.3 Key Findings

The key differences, when comparing this review with the previous report survey from 2015, are detailed below:

- ◆ Dwelling Stock increased by 6.4 % (2,285)
- ◆ Empty Dwellings decreased by 1% (14)
- ◆ Enrolled Students increased by 1% (84)
- ◆ Identified HMOs decreased by 38% (573)
- ◆ Overcrowding in Social Housing increased 29% (671)
- ◆ Almost 1.5 million funding awarded for Energy Efficiency Initiatives



## 4.0 Empty Homes

During the period which the strategy covers there has been a decrease in the number of empty homes from 1,180 in 2015 to 1,166 in 2019<sup>1</sup>. However the number of long term empty properties (those which are empty for more than two years) has increased from 371 in 2015 to 404 in 2019.

The National housing shortage within the UK has resulted in focus on utilising empty homes. There are several categories which empty homes fall into: those which are in a poor condition and causing community problems; those which are just empty but kept maintained; and then there are second homes. Second homes in Worcester are predominantly empty properties which are furnished and not often occupied by their owners. The changes in council tax billing has unintentionally increased the number of 'second homes' as they are reclassified from being listed as 'empty properties'.

The Private Sector Housing Team carry out an empty homes program of writing to owners of empty homes which have been empty for over two years to offer advice and assistance to bringing them back into use as well as carrying out external visits and assessments of empty homes reported by the public, councillors and for all properties which have been empty for over two years. The assessment bandings indicate that the majority of properties in Worcester are in a reasonable maintained condition. With only 12% of the properties surveyed being in the higher priority bandings (14 out of 110 properties).

Those properties which are in the higher bandings (A-C) will be discussed at the Multi-departmental Worcester City Council's Problem Property Group to determine the most appropriate course of action from the most appropriate Department. This utilises Environmental Health, Planning, Housing and Community legislation as well as using powers such as Empty Dwelling Management Orders, Enforced Sales and Compulsory Purchase Properties which can be considered for persistent high banded problematic empty properties where enforcement notices may have been served previously.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-dwelling-stock-including-vacants>

Proactive empty homes work should also be weighed up with the resource intensive visiting, monitoring and case work involved with these properties in relation to the small net gain of properties actually being brought back into use by Officer intervention rather than natural circumstances such as the completion of probate or property sale.

Empty homes are a complex and emotive area, dealing with a property as well as the owner. There are many reasons why properties remain empty and these include properties going through the sale process, probate system, refurbishments/ renovations, where the owner is in a care home or living elsewhere to provide care. As well as the more complex sentimental or emotive reasons of the owner.

There are some methods to assist in bringing back empty properties instead of enforcement, these include monetary schemes. For example, some Councils offer an Empty Homes Loan or grant scheme. Currently there are no financial assistance available from the Council. A previous scheme ended in 2013, due to lack of uptake and, in part due to conditions attached to the loan which required use of the property once works had been completed for Worcester's people in a housing need. Another monetary scheme is to increase the Council Tax empty property premium. This means that an empty property owner has to pay a higher council tax charge than an occupied property. The financial premiums may have some effect however it is too soon to determine its success yet.



# 5.0 Energy Efficiency

To assess the energy efficiency standard of a property an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) is carried out.

For the last 10 years these have been needed to sell a property as well as to legally rent one. The JSNA profile on Housing and Health (2019) shows that 70% of the properties in Worcester has an EPC band of D or above but that there is still a considerable percentage of the housing stock in the city which is below a band D. There are reasons for this as some listed buildings will not be able to improve their energy efficiency without compromising the listed part of their fabric. For example, double glazing would not be allowed and that they may not have lofts to be able to insulate due to the structure of the building.

It has been recognised that properties with low EPCs are not only more expensive to heat but can result in excess cold to the occupier. Therefore, the Government introduced additional requirements for rented properties. Since 1 April 2020 it is prohibited to rent a property out which has an EPC band of an F or G (unless they are on the property exemption register). The Private Sector Housing Team have been working with landlords to advise them of this requirement and have been in contact with landlords who are still not meeting this requirement. For those landlords who have refused to undertake works to increase the EPC band or who are not eligible to go on the property exemption register, Compliance Notices have been issued.

As well as increasing enforcement measures, the Government has had several schemes over the last few years with the aim of improving energy efficiency and reducing the carbon footprint. These schemes include the Green Deal and ECO funding. The most recent of these schemes is The Green Homes Grant which is also part of the economic recovery from Covid-19. Through the Local Authority Delivery Scheme (LADS) £500m was available for local authorities to bid for and £300m to be allocated through the regional energy hubs as well as providing funding for an energy voucher scheme.

Worcester secured £1.2m capital funding to deliver an external wall insulation scheme and to assist with Platform Housing to also deliver energy efficiency measures in their properties. In addition to this, the Midland Energy Hub also secured a further £490,000 for projects. This work is closely linked to the Environmental Sustainability Strategy which has been adopted by the Council.

# 6.0 Extended Action Plan

**Theme 1.** Encourage and enable owner occupiers to repair and maintain their homes to a good standard

Ref No.	Action	Lead Officers	Target Completion Date	Outcome	Links to other plans/ strategies	Progress
30	To continue to ensure that there is Home Repair Assistance accessible and available via Promoting Independence Living Contract	Private Sector Team Manager / Millbrook	End 2022	To increase the numbers of properties with no Category 1 or High Category 2 Hazards		
31	To continue to advise on charitable funding and handy person and befriending services.		End 2022	To increase the numbers of properties with no Category 1 or High Category 2 Hazards		



**Theme 2.** Encourage and enable private sector landlords and agents to provide good quality, well managed properties in a professional way.

Ref No.	Action	Lead Officers	Target Completion Date	Outcome	Links to other plans/ strategies	Progress
32	To implement the ward based Additional Licensing Scheme	Private Sector Team	1 September 2020 new scheme starts.	To ensure HMO accommodation is safe for occupation		
33	To complete licence and HMO property inspections following September 2020 renewal applications	Private Sector Housing Team	Dependant on Covid 19 restrictions – Summer 2021	To ensure HMO accommodation is safe for occupation	Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy	
34	To continue to hold an annual landlord Forum	Private Sector Team	Annually (Covid 19 restrictions dependant)	To achieve a professional, knowledgeable and compliant private sector market		
35	To hold a tenant information event with other partner agencies. With advice stalls for tenants to drop in for information.	Private Sector Team	End of 2022 (Covid – 19 restrictions dependant)	To inform tenants of their rights and responsibilities		



**Theme 2.** Encourage and enable private sector landlords and agents to provide good quality, well managed properties in a professional way.

Ref No.	Action	Lead Officers	Target Completion Date	Outcome	Links to other plans/ strategies	Progress
36	To continue to produce an annual landlords newsletter	Private Sector Team	Annual – Summer time	To achieve a professional, knowledgeable and compliant private sector market		
37	To produce an annual tenants' newsletter	Private Sector Team	Annual - Spring time	To achieve a professional, knowledgeable and compliant private sector market		
38	To spot check compliance of letting agents and property managers with Redress Scheme	Private Sector Team	End of 2022	To ensure Letting Agents and Property Managers are meeting their obligations		



**Theme 3.** Enable people whose independence may be at risk to safely remain in or return to their home.

Ref No.	Action	Lead Officers	Target Completion Date	Outcome	Links to other plans/ strategies	Progress
39	To continue to monitor the Promoting Independent Living Contract	Private Sector Team Manager	End of 2022	To increase independent living and reduce hospital admissions		
40	To set up and maintain a promoting Independence in Worcestershire website.  Providing general information about agency services contact details and a facility to manage on-line enquiries and customer feedback	Millbrook	End of 2021	To increase access to independent living		





**Theme 4.** Maximise the use of the existing private sector housing stock

Ref No.	Action	Lead Officers	Target Completion Date	Outcome	Links to other plans/ strategies	Progress
41	To continue to chair the Problem Property Group	Private Sector Team Manager	End of 2022	To bring long term empty homes back into use		
42	To work with Worcester City Lettings to offer a service for empty homes owners to bring properties back into use into a Managed or Leased service	Worcester City Lettings and Property Standards Officers	End of 2022	To bring long term empty homes back into use		
43	To promote to second home owners assistance to rent property with Worcester City Lettings	Worcester City Lettings	End of 2022	To increase occupation of housing stock		
44	To promote Worcester City Lettings	Worcester City Lettings	End of 2022	To provide good quality private sector accommodation to homeless families		



**Theme 4.** Maximise the use of the existing private sector housing stock

Ref No.	Action	Lead Officers	Target Completion Date	Outcome	Links to other plans/ strategies	Progress
45	To promote and continue to develop the Private Sector Leasing Scheme	Worcester City Lettings	End of 2022	To provide good quality private sector accommodation to homeless families		
46	To write to all empty homes owners with properties which have been empty for over 12 months  To offer advice and assistance on bringing their homes back into use	Private Sector Housing Team	From April 2021	To bring back empty homes		



**Theme 5.** Enable more energy efficient and sustainable homes and reduce fuel poverty

Ref No.	Action	Lead Officers	Target Completion Date	Outcome	Links to other plans/ strategies	Progress
47	To ensure that no private rented properties are occupied with an EPC of F or G unless there is an exemption register	Property Standards Officers	June 2021	To ensure private rented properties meet legal energy efficiency standards	Environmental Sustainability Strategy	
48	Completion of Phase 1A. To install external wall insulation on 20 properties for low income households	Housing Strategy Officer	30 June 2021	<p>To improve the energy efficiency of a property</p> <p>To reduce the carbon emissions in Worcester</p> <p>To reduce fuel poverty</p>	Environmental Sustainability Strategy	



**Theme 5.** Enable more energy efficient and sustainable homes and reduce fuel poverty

Ref No.	Action	Lead Officers	Target Completion Date	Outcome	Links to other plans/ strategies	Progress
49	<p>Completion of Phase 1B. To install external wall insulation in a further 40 properties for low income households</p> <p>To work with local housing provide to deliver energy efficiency improvements to 100 social rented properties in Worcester</p>	Housing Strategy Officer	30 September 2021	<p>To improve the energy efficiency of a property</p> <p>To reduce the carbon emissions in Worcester</p> <p>To reduce fuel poverty</p>	Environmental Sustainability Strategy	
50	<p>Completion of Phase 2</p> <p>To improve energy efficiency in properties below EPC band D for low income households</p>	Housing Strategy Officer	December 2021	<p>To improve the energy efficiency of a property</p> <p>To reduce the carbon emissions in Worcester</p> <p>To reduce fuel poverty</p>	Environmental Sustainability Strategy	





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March 2021