

Housing conditions

The housing stock of the District is generally in good condition. This is partly because it is relatively new, with an above average proportion of private stock having been built between 1945 and 1980 and much of the social housing in the district being post-1964.

Across all stock, whether owned or rented:

- The 2011 census found that 2.1% of households lacked central heating, and 3% of households were overcrowded;
- Council Tax records showed that there were 1,364 empty homes in the district as at October 2015, approximately 2.2% of the stock of which 497 (fewer than 1%) had been empty for more than six months;
- In 2012 an assessment of the scale of fuel poverty (people unable to heat their homes sufficiently to keep warm) suggested that around 6,700 households (11.6%) were at risk of fuel poverty.

It makes sense to consider housing conditions by tenure because our powers and duties as a council differ according to tenure and because most of the data that we have is also tenure specific.

Council homes

Full details on the condition of the Council's housing stock and investment priorities are contained in the Council's Housing Revenue Account Business Plan which was produced in 2012 when we became responsible for the full financing of the plan following the government's ending of the subsidy system.

We own around 5,500 rented homes and they are in reasonably good condition. All of these homes meet the government's Decent Homes Standard. This states that housing should be: fit to live in; in a reasonable state of repair; have reasonably modern facilities and services; and provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort. We also own the freehold of over 500 homes sold on long leases, for which we retain some residual responsibility should major works be required.

Our current data on stock condition is drawn from a 2010 sample stock-condition survey which was validated and updated in October 2011. This estimated that we will need to spend £661 million on our housing stock over the following 50 years. It found that there was not a significant backlog of responsive repairs and as a consequence our revenue budget for cyclical, responsive and void repairs has been profiled at around £4.3 million per year. Less than 1% of the stock is empty at any one time, representing the normal flow of vacancies and there are few if any difficult to let or low demand properties. However there is an ongoing need to continue to repair, maintain and improve the stock and enhance the living environment to meet tenants' requirements.

Housing association homes

There are now over 2,700 housing association rented homes in the District and a further 450 homes in shared ownership. The vast majority of these are relatively new, having been built over the last 20 to 30 years to modern standards of design, facilities and energy efficiency. The condition of these properties is therefore believed to be good. Furthermore housing associations have for many years been required to put money aside for future repairs and improvements. They should therefore be able to finance such works as are necessary from their own resources.

The small proportion of housing association properties that are older are mainly second hand properties bought by associations for subsequent letting as rented housing. However even in these circumstances if the property is not in a satisfactory condition at the time of purchase the association is required by its regulator, the Homes and Communities Agency, to carry out repairs to bring it up to standard before letting it. These properties may have more significant future investment needs and housing associations do consider selling such properties when they become vacant to divest themselves of the financial liability and to generate money to invest into building new homes.

Under the Housing and Planning Act 2016 housing associations have been given greater discretion to make such sales without the need for permission so this may become an increasing part of their strategies in years to come. The Warwick district will be a particularly attractive area to consider for a disposals strategy because of the strong housing market and the high values that can be realised from sales.

As at 1st April 2015 only 4 units of housing association stock failed the Decent Homes Standard and there were just 9 housing association general needs homes vacant at that time, of which two were not available for letting.

Private sector homes

In 2011 a private sector housing stock condition survey was undertaken to provide us with a detailed understanding of the condition of housing in the owner-occupied and private-rented sector.

Key information on the private sector is as follows.

Private housing stock condition

- There are fewer old dwellings than the national average but more converted flats, semi-detached houses and houses in multiple occupation
- 19% of the private sector stock as a whole, and 34% of the private-rented stock, was built prior to 1919 and is likely to have higher ongoing maintenance costs
- 24% of the stock, and 32% of the private rented stock, does not meet the Decent Homes Standard. In terms of failure reasons 15% contain a category one hazard, 10% have a poor degree of thermal comfort, 3% are in need of repair and 0.4% lack modern facilities*
- Generally the older properties have the higher rates of failure but there is one exception to this: properties built between 1965 and 1980 have significantly higher failure rates than would be expected. This is due to a large number of purpose-built flats and other dwellings in this age band with thermal comfort and excess cold issues.
- Energy efficiency in the private stock is around the national average of 52 on the government's Standard Assessment Procedure rating where 1 is poor and 100 is excellent.
- There are no areas of abandoned or derelict housing in the District.
- As at 5 October 2015 there were 1,315 empty private properties (2.5%) of which 495 had been empty for more than 6 months.
- There are 330 licensed houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) in the District and an estimated 1,100 non-licensed HMOs.

* The figures do not add up to 24% as some properties fail on multiple grounds.

Overall the private sector stock of 51,700 homes at that time was found to be in better condition than the national average on all indicators.

Current initiatives on housing conditions

Private sector

Our overall approach is to provide advice and guidance for owners, landlords and tenants to encourage a positive, well-managed and thriving sector that meets the needs of all parties. However where necessary we also use our powers to take enforcement action against bad housing conditions or poor management standards where we become aware of them.

Our website is the primary source of information about the principal rights and obligations of private landlords and tenants and this is kept up to date as new legislation and regulations are produced.

We have set up the Warwick District Landlords' Blog and produce a newsletter for private landlords as additional resources for landlords through which training events, new government consultations and regulations are publicised. We also have a long-standing Landlord Steering Group which operates across the Warwick and Stratford districts and seeks to establish effective working relationships between private landlords, agents and stakeholders and the two district councils.

Within the Private Sector Housing Team we employ Housing Standards Officers to take action on poor housing conditions. In September 2014 we agreed a new corporate enforcement policy to ensure that we deal with all types of enforcement, including standards in housing, in a consistent manner. We follow any legal requirements but we try to work with and negotiate with all relevant parties to resolve the issue without the need for formal legal action which we regard as the last resort. Nevertheless where it is not possible to reach agreement with the person responsible we will use whatever statutory powers we have and will deal firmly with those that deliberately or persistently fail to comply with the normal rules and standards.

In limited circumstances we may be able to provide grant or loan funding towards the costs of works to bring homes up to reasonable standards. Most grants are means-tested and subject to certain eligibility rules and repayment conditions. Spending on these grants and loans over the last three years is shown in table 11.

Grant or loan type	Yearly expenditure (£)		
	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Renovation grants	19,964	0	0
Renovation loans	7,035	2,956	0
Disabled facilities loans	0	0	0
Home repair assistance	7,630	4,539	42
Decent homes grant	8,340	26,235	23,949
Discretionary disabled facility grants	36,705	24,594	34,018
TOTAL	79,674	58,324	58,009

Houses in multiple occupation

There has been an increase in the number of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) in Royal Leamington Spa in recent years, driven in the main by the increasing number of students living in the area and particularly in the central and southern parts of the town. It is estimated that over 80% of HMOs in the district are student accommodation.

While bringing positive benefits to the local economy, this also unfortunately brings problems for the settled community with increased complaints of noise in the early hours, poor property conditions and litter and household refuse in the streets.

In April 2012 the Council agreed an "Article 4 direction" for Royal Leamington Spa, which is a mechanism to require that planning permission is needed to change a single dwelling into a small HMO. This enables us to control the location of new HMOs and so limit their concentration in particular parts of the town.

Despite this complaints have continued to increase and recently the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee has set up a Task and Finish Group to investigate all of the issues around HMOs in the district. This is expected to report its findings and recommendations later this year.

Student housing

We also do work more generally on student housing. Our Landlord Liaison Officer (LLO) attended the Student Housing Day at the University in autumn 2015 and will be attending again in 2016. Over 1000 first year students attended for advice on renting private property in their second year. We used this as an opportunity to promote an app developed by Homestamp (of which we are a member) which covers everything students need to look at when viewing properties, particularly safety and legislative issues.

The LLO spent an afternoon with a Student Advisor at the Students' Union to see how we could work together to support students and encourage referrals to us for serious disrepair and have since worked with them on a couple of individual cases. Our waste contractor Suez and the Students' Union are trying to arrange a student initiative (litter picking) in Royal Leamington Spa during the next academic year.

Warwick Accommodation, which is the Warwick University lettings company, has two members on the Landlord Steering Group. We have had several meetings since November with Community Protection, Neighbourhood Services and Warwick Accommodation regarding student refuse and HMO issues.

Strategically we support the provision of student accommodation on the campus of the University of Warwick, which falls within our district, and the draft Local Plan allows for further expansion.

Local authority – major repairs and improvements

We have continued to carry out planned maintenance and improvements to our own housing stock based on the data that we have. In the last three financial years (2013/14 to 2015/16) we spent £7.2 million on cyclical and major works to the housing stock and £13.8 million on capital improvement and renewals.

A new full stock condition survey was commissioned in April 2016 and the results will be used to review the Business Plan and to produce a new Asset Management and Investment Strategy. The full range of actions to be taken on maintaining and improving our stock will be set out in that document rather than here.