

NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM AGENDA



Wednesday 28 March 2012

at 4.30 pm

in Committee Room B

MEMBERS: NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM:

Councillors: Cook, Fenwick, Gibbon, Ingham, A Lilley, Loynes, Robinson, Tempest and Thomas

Resident Representatives:

John Cambridge, Iris Ryder and 1 vacancy

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2. TO RECEIVE ANY DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST BY MEMBERS

3. MINUTES

3.1 Minutes of the meeting held on 29 February 2012.

4. RESPONSES FROM THE COUNCIL, THE EXECUTIVE OR COMMITTEES OF THE COUNCIL TO FINAL REPORTS OF THIS FORUM

No items

5. CONSIDERATION OF REQUEST FOR SCRUTINY REVIEWS REFERRED VIA SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE

No items

6. CONSIDERATION OF PROGRESS REPORTS/BUDGET AND POLICY FRAMEWORK DOCUMENTS

No items

7. ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

- 7.1 Scrutiny Investigation into 'Private Sector Housing Schemes' -
Consideration of Draft Final Report - *Chair of the Neighbourhood
Services Scrutiny Forum*

8. ISSUES IDENTIFIED FROM FORWARD PLAN

9. ANY OTHER ITEMS WHICH THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS ARE URGENT

ITEMS FOR INFORMATION

Date of Next Meeting – To be confirmed

NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM

MINUTES

29 February 2012

The meeting commenced at 4.30 pm in the Civic Centre, Hartlepool

Present:

Councillor: Stephen Thomas (In the Chair)

Councillors: Rob Cook, Mick Fenwick, Steve Gibbon and Brenda Loynes

Resident Representatives: John Cambridge and Iris Ryder

Also Present: Gordon and Stella Johnson

Officers: Dave Stubbs, Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods
Damien Wilson, Assistant Director, Regeneration and Planning
Elaine Hind, Scrutiny Support Officer
Denise Wimpenny, Democratic Services Team

84. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors A Lilley, Robinson and Tempest.

85. Declarations of interest by Members

None.

86. Minutes of the meetings held on 18 January and 30 January 2012

Confirmed with the inclusion of the attendance of Stella and Gordon Johnson.

87. Matters arising from the minutes of 30 January 2012

The Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods provided an update in response to the issues raised at the last meeting and highlighted that a detailed written response would be provided following the meeting under separate cover:-

Minute 80 – paragraph (v) heating temperatures

Members were advised of the Invest to Save Campaign as well as the reasons for the extreme variation of heating temperatures in Council buildings.

Minute 80 – paragraph (vii) National Indicator 184

The outturn for 2010/11 showed that 91.82% of food establishments were broadly compliant. Final outturn figures for the current year would not be available until April whereupon the targets would be set for the following year.

Minute 80 – paragraph (viii) National Indicators

The Forum's comments in relation to the provision of additional information and Members input into identifying future indicators was noted and would be taken on board in future Departmental Plan proposals.

Minute 80 – paragraph (ix) – Take up of School Meals

Outturn figures, the importance of encouraging take-up of school meals including the financial impact on the Council as a result was outlined.

Minute 80 – paragraph (xii) Street Cleansing

With regard to the request for localised data in terms of wards and areas, Members were advised that it was not possible to produce a meaningful comparison percentage at ward level to compare it against the town as a whole. Current performance covering the first six months of the year was 14.9% which was below the current threshold.

Minute 80 – paragraph (xii) Maintenance of Roads

A number of factors outside the control of the Council such as severe winters had a detrimental effect on road conditions. Road conditions continued to be monitored to ensure repairs were targeted appropriately and additional funding sources were pursued where possible.

Minute 80 (xiii) – reduction in CO2 emissions/percentage CO2 reduction from local authority operations

Clarification was provided of current and past performance figures in relation to the percentage of CO2 reduction from local authority operations. In relation to percentage per capita reduction in CO2 emissions in the local authority area, it was reported that whilst this target was largely out of the Council's control it was continually monitored and could influence a carbon reduction across the town through various activities including road-shows, environment roundabout and energy saving measures in Council buildings.

Minute 80 paragraph (xv) – Household Waste/Recycling

A breakdown of recycling figures was provided. It was noted that current performance exceeded the current government requirements and was 1.6% above 2015 expectations.

Minute 82 – Former Leather Chemical Site

The Director advised that a decision was still awaited from the Environment Agency in relation to the classification of the site. In terms of the suitability of

companies who may be employed to clean up the site, assurances were provided that a rigorous testing process would be undertaken to ensure the relevant expertise was available to undertake this role. Update reports would be presented to Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee in this regard.

Minute 82 – Seaton Carew Development Site

The Forum was advised of the background to the development and indicated that following the recent appointment of a developer, the Council would shortly be in a position to publicise and consult on the proposals.

Minute 82 – Review of Concessionary Fares Payment to Bus Operators for 2012/13

In response to a Member request, the Director provided an update in relation to the contents of a report that would be presented to Cabinet in March 2012 in relation to concessionary fares payment to bus operators.

The Chair expressed thanks on behalf of the Forum to the Assistant Director, Resources for his attendance at the last meeting at short notice on behalf of the Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhood and responding to Members' queries.

88. Responses from the Council, the Executive or Committees of the Council to Final Reports of this Forum

None.

89. Consideration of request for scrutiny reviews referred via Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee

None.

90. Consideration of progress reports/budget and policy framework documents

None.

91. Localism Act Update – Covering Report/Presentation
(Scrutiny Support Officer/Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods)

The Scrutiny Support Officer advised that following the Forum's request for an update on the Localism Act, the Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods had been invited to the meeting to provide members with a presentation in this regard.

The Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods, who was in attendance at the meeting, provided a detailed and comprehensive presentation which

outlined the potential effect of the act on the delivery of services within the remit of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum. The presentation included details in relation to the following key issues:-

- Freedoms and Flexibility for Local Government
 - Local Authority Powers Pre and Post Localism Act
 - Abolition of Standards Board
 - Predetermination
 - Directly Elected Mayors
 - Empowering cities and other local areas
- New Rights and Powers for Communities
 - Community right to challenge
 - Community right to bid (assets of community value)
 - Right to approve or veto excessive Council Tax rises
 - Transparency over Senior Council Officer's Pay
 - Removal of fines and charge for rubbish collection
- Reforms of Planning System
 - Abolition of Regional Strategies
 - Duty to Co-operate
 - Neighbourhood Planning
 - Community Right to Build
 - Consult Communities on Certain Planning Applications
 - Strengthening Enforcement Rules
 - Reforming the Community Infrastructure Levy
 - Reform the way Local Plans are made
 - Nationally significant infrastructure projects
- Reforms to ensure that decisions regarding housing are taken locally
 - Social Housing Allocations Reform
 - Social Housing Tenure Reform
 - Reform of Homelessness Legislation
 - Reform of Council Housing Finance
 - National Home Swap Scheme
 - Reform of Social Housing Regulation
 - Abolition of Home Information Packs

Following the conclusion of the presentation, discussion ensued which included the following issues:-

- (i) With regard to the proposal to empower cities and other local areas, concerns were expressed regarding the potential difficulties of smaller areas like Tees Valley competing with cities like Newcastle as a Regional Centre for Growth.

- (ii) The Forum debated at length the impact of the Act. Concerns were expressed that the Act was vague, unclear and had not been adequately considered by Central Government and would result in significant legal fees in terms of advice and interpretation of the Act. The financial implications of the proposals were further debated including the future financial challenges facing the Council as a result of the recent decision not to increase Council Tax in 2012/13.
- (iii) The Director and Assistant Director responded to queries raised by the Forum in relation to planning system reforms, implications of abolition of regional strategies and neighbourhood planning arrangements.
- (iv) The Chair requested that the relevant contents of the presentation be shared with the Regeneration and Planning Services Scrutiny Forum.

The Chair thanked the Director for an informative presentation and requested that further update reports be provided as necessary.

Recommended

- (i) That the contents of the presentation and views/comments of the Forum be noted.
- (ii) That the relevant contents of the presentation be shared with the Regeneration and Planning Services Scrutiny Forum.
- (iii) Further update reports be awaited.

92. Private Sector Housing Schemes Investigation – Evidence from Hartlepool Borough Council Housing Services Team – Covering Report *(Scrutiny Support Officer)*

As part of the Forum's investigation into Private Sector Housing Schemes, the Assistant Director, Regeneration and Planning had been invited to the meeting to provide an update in relation to the following:-

- Enforcement action taken to date
- Baden Street, Carr/Hopps Street and Perth Street
- Empty Homes Initiative

The Assistant Director, Regeneration and Planning gave a detailed and comprehensive summary on enforcement activity from April 2011, details of which were tabled at the meeting in relation to the following:-

Empty Homes

- Empty Homes Officer appointed in April 2011 working with owners to bring empty homes back into use through an incentive and enforcement approach.

- Use of informal approach to return properties to occupation.
- Partnership working with Housing Hartlepool (Vela Group) utilising funding through Homes and Communities Agency currently working to bring properties back into use – 26 currently being considered as part of a lease and repair scheme. Improvement works were due to commence in March.
- Baden Street improvement scheme had been implemented including work to return empties to occupation. 16 out of 19 empty property owners were now actively engaged in the scheme.
- To date 2 empty properties on Baden Street had been re-let and improvement works were due to commence in March 2012. Owners who failed to engage in the scheme would be referred for enforcement action.
- 'Top 20' list of empty properties that had been empty the longest targeted.
- All owners had been contacted and had either brought their property back into use, had firm plans to do so or enforcement action had been identified.
- 66 empty properties had been returned into use by the end of December against the annual target of 57. This figure recorded any intervention by the Council which had resulted in a property being brought back into use. This could range from informal discussions with owners through to enforcement action.

Housing Market Renewal

- The Council took ownership of all properties on the Perth/Hurworth Street area through the CPO process. All residents were relocated prior to this and the properties had been made safe and secured prior to demolition.
- Funding had been identified through the HMR transition fund for the delivery of Carr/Hopps and approval would shortly be sought for the match funding requirement.

Housing Standards/Nuisance

- With regard to the work of Housing Standards Officers, almost 90% of the requests for service made related to disrepair, empty properties and nuisances.
- Proactive work had also been undertaken including-
 - area based walkabouts, including the Housing Market Transition site (Carr/Hopps) and closer liaison with neighbourhood managers to identify problematic empties and nuisance properties;
 - a major inspection programme of privately rented properties in the selective licensing areas;
 - work in the Perth/Hurworth Street CPO area to deal with disrepair issues; and
 - preparation work for using section 215, Town and Country

Planning Act 1990 powers to deal with properties adversely affecting the amenity of a neighbourhood.

- The number of reports of disrepair had remained steady over the course of the year, with an average of 60 per quarter; the majority had been resolved without the need to take formal enforcement action.
- In terms of enforcement action taken, four Housing Act 2004 improvement notices had been served and three notices were served under the provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 as the premises were considered to be prejudicial to health.
- In one case Emergency Remedial Action was taken under the Housing Act 2004 to deal with a situation that involved an imminent risk to health. Despite being available for a number of years, this was the first time such a course of action has been taken in Hartlepool.
- Complaints regarding empty properties peaked in the second quarter of the year and it was considered that this had been a result of having an increased presence in problematic areas and attendance by the Empty Homes Officer at residents meetings.
- 27 notices were served to require the securing of empty dwellings and 16 notices were served requiring the abatement of nuisance associated with empty properties e.g. to remove rubbish from within the property boundaries.
- There had been a dramatic decline in the number of complaints received about nuisance properties from 99 in the first quarter to 48 in the last. The reason for this was not clear but may be accounted in some part by the increase in proactive work carried out.
- 61 notices were served with regard to nuisance arising from occupied properties.

Selective Licensing

- 43 licences had been issued in the selective licensing areas in 2011/12, taking the total licensed to 569
- 203 inspections had been carried out on licensed properties with 120 schedule of works sent with recommendations for action.
- In terms of the selective licensing inspections carried out, follow up inspections were being undertaken and referred for enforcement action where necessary.
- 134 notices had been served for non-supply of gas or electrical certificates.
- 68 court applications for breach of licence condition were being prepared.

In the discussion that followed a number of issues were raised which included the following:-

The Chair welcomed the progress made to date in relation to private sector housing operations, the actions taken as a result of proposed strategies and was particularly pleased to note the positive outcomes and performance statistics, as detailed above. Thanks were expressed to all staff involved for

their hard work and efforts in achieving such positive results acknowledging the benefits to private sector housing tenants as a result. The Chair indicated that this was an excellent example of the positive outcomes that could be achieved when scrutiny worked well.

In response to a request for an update in relation to the links between housing and health following the recent attendance of the Assistant Director of Health Improvement, the Assistant Director referred to the benefits of a pilot scheme arrangement to identify through the NHS those most vulnerable in terms of health as well as the long term financial savings to the health service in tackling prevention issues of this type as discussed at a recent meeting of the Forum. The Assistant Director indicated that arrangements were in place to explore funding opportunities with the NHS to promote this initiative.

The Scrutiny Support Officer reminded Members of an informal meeting scheduled for Monday 12 March to discuss the final report.

Recommended

That the information given be noted and the comments of the Forum and evidence provided be used to assist the Forum in completing the scrutiny investigation.

93. Six Month Monitoring of Agreed Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum's Recommendations *(Scrutiny Support Officer)*

The Scrutiny Support Officer provided details of progress made on the delivery of the agreed scrutiny recommendations against investigations undertaken by the Forum since the 2005/06 municipal year. The report included a chart which provided the overall progress made by all scrutiny forums since 2005 and Appendix A provided a detailed explanation of progress made against each recommendation agreed by this Forum since the last six monthly monitoring report was presented in September 2011. Members were referred to an amended appendix, a copy of which was tabled at the meeting, which provided an updated explanation of progress made against each recommendation.

It was noted that since the 2005/06 municipal year, 91% of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum's recommendations had been completed with 2% in progress, 2% overdue and 5% cancelled.

In response to a query from a member of the public, the Chair stated that the 20s plenty initiative would not be rolled out town wide following the decision taken by Cabinet in relation to the final report and any queries regarding this issue should be taken up with the relevant ward Councillor. The Director added that a report would be considered by the appropriate Portfolio Holder in March.

The Chair asked that officers be reminded of the importance of ensuring that information to feed into the monitoring report be provided within the required

timescales as delays had been experienced in receipt of the information.

Recommended

- i) That progress against the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum agreed recommendations since the 2005/06 municipal year, be noted.
- ii) Members were requested to retain Appendix A for future reference.

94. Issues Identified from Forward Plan

No items.

95. Date of Next Meeting

It was reported that the next meeting would be held on Wednesday 28 March 2012 at 4.30 pm.

The meeting concluded at 6.35 pm.

CHAIR



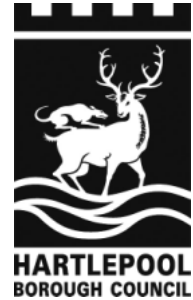
NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM

FINAL REPORT PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING SCHEMES

MARCH 2012

NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM

28 March 2012



Report of: Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum

**Subject: DRAFT FINAL REPORT – PRIVATE SECTOR
HOUSING SCHEMES**

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To present the findings of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum following its investigation into Private Sector Housing Schemes.

2. SETTING THE SCENE

- 2.1 At the meeting of Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee on 24 June 2011 Members determined their work programme for the 2011/12 Municipal Year. The topic of Private Sector Housing Schemes was selected by the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum as its topic of investigation to run from July 2011 until February 2012.
- 2.2 A number of private sector housing schemes are currently operated by Hartlepool Borough Council, these include the Selective Licensing, Landlord Accreditation, Good Tenant and Empty Homes schemes. The schemes aim to improve the areas in which they operate in a number of ways, including improving the condition and management of properties in the private rented sector, reducing anti social behaviour and developing stronger more sustainable communities where landlords, tenants and community members enjoy the benefit of good dwelling conditions, competent management and considerate neighbourly behaviour.

3. OVERALL AIM OF THE SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION

- 3.1 The overall aim of the Scrutiny investigation was to explore and evaluate private sector housing schemes in place in Hartlepool, specifically Selective Licensing, Landlord Accreditation, Empty Homes and the Good Tenant Schemes.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION

4.1 The Terms of Reference for the Scrutiny investigation were as outlined below:-

(a) To gain an understanding of private sector housing schemes in operation in Hartlepool to include:-

- Selective Licensing;
- Landlord Accreditation;
- Empty Homes Scheme;
- Good Tenant Scheme.

(b) To explore/evaluate the following:-

- (i) the effectiveness of current private sector housing schemes operating in Hartlepool in achieving desired outcomes;
- (ii) schemes which have proven successful in other areas (giving due consideration to demographics, housing types and nature of the housing problems in Hartlepool when considering the transferability of such schemes).

(c) To gain an understanding of the impact of current and future budget pressures on the way in which private sector housing schemes are provided in Hartlepool;

(d) To explore and consider the following (giving due regard to *term of reference (c)*):-

- (i) how private sector housing schemes/ services may be provided in the future;
- (ii) if there are alternative ways to achieve the desired outcomes of low levels of anti-social behaviour and active thriving communities.

5. MEMBERSHIP OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM

5.1 The membership of the Scrutiny Forum was as detailed below:-

Councillors Cook, Fenwick, Gibbon, Ingham, A Lilley, Loynes, Robinson, Tempest and Thomas

Resident Representatives: John Cambridge and Iris Ryder

6.1 Members of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum met formally from 27 July 2011 to 29 February 2012 to discuss and receive evidence relating to their investigation in to 'Private Sector Housing Schemes'. A detailed record of the issues raised during these meetings is available from the Council's Democratic Services.

- (a) Detailed Officer presentations and reports supplemented by verbal evidence;
- (b) Presentations and verbal evidence from the Authority's Elected Mayor and the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Transition;
- (c) Presentations and verbal evidence from Middlesbrough and Durham Councils;
- (d) Written evidence from Stockton Council;
- (e) Verbal evidence from Housing Hartlepool and Durham Tees Valley Probation Service;
- (f) Verbal evidence from representatives of the Landlord Steering Group and independent private sector landlords;
- (g) Evidence received from two focus groups held for private sector housing tenants; and
- (h) The views of local residents, tenants and landlords.

7 PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING SCHEMES OPERATING IN HARTLEPOOL

- Selective Licensing;
- Landlord Accreditation;
- Empty Homes; and
- Good Tenant Scheme.

Selective Licensing

- 7.2 Members were advised by the Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) that the Housing Act 2004 introduced a discretionary power for Local Authorities to designate areas for selective licensing of private sector housing. This was to be in specific target areas suffering from, or likely to suffer from low demand and / or significant and persistent anti-social behaviour. The purpose of the licenses was to improve housing management standards and reduce anti-social behaviour whilst increasing occupancy of housing stock.
- 7.3 Members noted that in January 2009, the Council obtained approval from the Department for Communities and Local Government to introduce a scheme to licence landlords and their properties in six specific areas of the town for focussed and intensive area-based activity. From 1 May the same year, private sector Landlords who owned a property or any individual that controlled or managed a property in the designated areas were required to apply for a licence.
- 7.4 The designated areas in Hartlepool are:
- Hurworth Street;
 - Furness, Cameron and Belk Streets;
 - Rodney Street;
 - Dent and Derwent Street;
 - Cornwall Street; and
 - Borrowdale and Patterdale Street.
- 7.5 Each individual privately rented dwelling is licensable, with a fee of £600 per property, potentially reducing to £300 per property if the landlord is accredited through the Landlord Accreditation Scheme, has more than one property and if they apply for a licence within a specified time.
- 7.6 In order to obtain a license, landlords need to comply with the conditions of the scheme and must:
- Be 'fit and proper' persons or employ agents who are deemed 'fit and proper' persons;
 - Manage their tenancies effectively;
 - Take up references for prospective tenants (preferably using the Good Tenant Scheme to determine suitability);
 - Take reasonable steps to deal with complaints of anti-social behaviour by their tenants; and
 - Ensure that vital safety checks are carried out in relation to category one hazards.
- 7.7 Landlords who have been granted a licence need to ensure the conditions are met and upheld. Failure to comply with such conditions can result in sanctions being imposed, as detailed overleaf:-

- A fine up to £20,000 for failure to apply for a licence in a designated area; and
- A penalty of up to £5,000 for a breach of licence conditions.

7.8 Members were informed of the following key facts in relation to the selective licensing scheme (as at 14 September 2011):-

- Applications Issued: 815
- Licences Issued: 568
- Number of Licensable Properties: 869 (*estimate*)
- Total Number of Households: 1775

7.9 The Assistant Director highlighted that Cabinet had agreed to extend the Selective Licensing scheme but this was on hold pending an assessment of the impact of the existing scheme, if the impact could be demonstrated to have addressed the key issues identified as part of original application, then the extension of the scheme would be subject to full consultation. Members felt that there were fundamental flaws in the current scheme and that it should not be rolled out further before the full outcomes were known. The Assistant Director agreed that the success of the scheme needed to be proven prior to any further roll out.

Landlord Accreditation

7.10 Members were advised by the Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) that Landlord Accreditation is a town-wide voluntary scheme launched in 2002 and aims to encourage, acknowledge and actively promote good standards of accommodation and management in privately rented housing. Landlord Accreditation is not a statutory responsibility of the Council.

7.11 Acquiring accredited status is dependent on an acceptable standard of property condition, basic amenities and management practices. Landlords must comply with a Code of Conduct and meet certain terms and conditions relating to standards and practice, which are requirements of the scheme and meet their legal obligations and responsibilities. The Code sets out a basic standard for the condition of the property and includes a number of recommendations over and above the current minimum statutory requirement. The Code also covers a wide range of tenancy matters such as tenancy agreements and inventories.

7.12 The scheme requires an element of self-regulation and therefore relies on a degree of goodwill on the parts of landlords, agents and tenants. Failure to comply with the Code of Conduct will result in the landlords membership to the scheme being withdrawn.

7.13 Although the scheme provides no income stream, it is considered to be good practice to run accreditation schemes alongside selective licensing as a means to address standards in the private rented sector.

- 7.14 Members were informed that there were 1528 accredited properties in Hartlepool and 562 property inspections had been undertaken.

Empty Homes

- 7.15 The Forum learned that the Empty Homes Strategy 2010-2015 was developed to address the excessive number of long term (empty for over six months) private sector empty homes in the Borough. It demonstrates the commitment of the Council and partners through the adoption of measures to bring privately owned empty homes back into use. The strategy is overseen by the Empty Homes Strategy Steering Group, which meet on a monthly basis to monitor progress on the delivery of the strategy.
- 7.16 Members heard that an Empty Homes Officer was appointed in April 2011 and has since begun the implementation of the Empty Homes Strategy Action Plan aimed at developing the empty homes service, developing enforcement procedures and actively working with owners to inform them of all of the options available to them to bring empty homes back into use. The Council have a number of flexible tools and incentives along with an enforcement approach to assist this work. Identifying the ownership of empty homes has been a priority. All empty properties, which are known to have been empty for longer than 2 years, have now been assessed on a case by case basis using the Empty Property Assessment Form.
- 7.17 The Forum noted that a series of positive action letters had been developed which are used to establish the owner's intentions for the property and to encourage that owner to bring the property back into use. If positive action letters are unsuccessful and the informal approach does not result in a property being brought back into use, the most suitable option for enforcement will be identified. These positive action letters also provide evidence to demonstrate enforcement action is required if a landlord does not engage. There are a number of enforcement tools identified in the Empty Homes Strategy, which are a part of an overall enforcement policy in place for private sector housing.
- 7.18 Members noted that a number of schemes were being worked on linked to bringing empty homes back into use such as the Baden Street improvement scheme.

Good Tenant Scheme

- 7.19 The Forum heard that the Hartlepool Good Tenant Scheme was launched on 1st May 2008 and is a free to use tenant referencing service managed by Hartlepool Anti-Social Behaviour Unit, and delivered by the Housing Advice Team, from the Housing Options Centre in Park Road, Hartlepool. A multi-agency Steering Group oversees the operation and development of the scheme.
- 7.20 The aim of the scheme is to reduce anti-social behaviour in the private rented sector, by providing a risk management tool to landlords, and linking

vulnerable tenants to support to enable them to maintain their tenancies. Landlords subject to Selective Licensing are strongly recommended to use the Good Tenant Scheme for their tenant references.

- 7.21 Landlords are often reluctant to let their properties to people who they know little about. They fear their property could be damaged, used for illegal or immoral purposes or that the rent may not be paid. This can make finding a good property difficult and time consuming. Membership of the scheme allows someone to show that they are a good tenant quickly and easily.
- 7.22 The Forum noted that the scheme allows private sector landlords to obtain reliable, accurate and comprehensive information regarding the tenancy history of someone who has approached them for housing. This information is provided with the written consent of the prospective tenant.
- 7.23 Landlords are able to use the information provided by the scheme to make a risk assessment of whether it would be appropriate for them to take someone as their tenant. Landlords are able to confirm whether someone is a good tenant and to offer them a property. As a voluntary scheme, the final decision as to whether to take someone as a tenant remains with the landlord.
- 7.24 Applicants to the scheme are assessed on information provided by the Council and other agencies such as the Police and former landlords (where possible). An individuals' history for the past two years checked. The following checks are carried out:-
- Housing history check;
 - Anti social behaviour history check;
 - Landlord check;
 - Local knowledge check; and
 - Police knowledge check.

Membership Types

- 7.25 Members learned that the scheme operates a traffic light system of membership as follows:-
- Full Membership (Green) – Membership granted for 6 months. Applicants must have held a previous tenancy within the last two years. Applicants with no history of rent arrears, anti-social or criminal behaviour related to the tenancy or tenancy management concerns,
 - Provisional Membership (Yellow) – Membership granted for 6 months. Applicants with minor rent arrears, anti-social or criminal behaviour related to the tenancy, tenancy management concerns, or who have not previously held a tenancy,
 - Rejected Membership (Red) – Membership rejected for 12 months. Applicants whose behaviour would have entitled a landlord to seek

immediate possession of the property at court. i.e. significant rent arrears, serious anti-social / criminal behaviour, major problems involving tenancy management.

- 7.26 Where applicants are rejected they have the right to re-apply to join the scheme provided they can show an improvement in their behaviour over a consistent period of at least 6 months.
- 7.27 Originally tenants were issued with photo ID cards to prove to prospective landlords that they were part of the good tenant scheme; these cards were valid for six months. Now a letter is issued indicating the type of membership and the reason for the decision, this can be shown to landlords to save them having to confirm this information separately.
- 7.28 The Forum noted that applications for the scheme were up 43% from quarter 1 2010 to quarter 1 2011. The breakdown of the applications was as follows:-

Table 1: Breakdown of Good Tenant Scheme applications for Q1 2011 - Q1 2010

Type	Q1 2011	Q1 2010	Difference
Applicant (applications being processed at the time of the report)	23	17	6
Full Membership	75	26	49
Prov. Member - 1st Tenancy	68	69	-1
Prov. Member - ASB / Criminal Issues	11	9	2
Prov. Member - Rent Arrears	26	30	-4
Prov. Member - Support Dependant	5	2	3
Prov. Member - Tenancy Management Issues	16	4	12
Rejected Applicant	29	9	20
Tenancy Complaint	3	4	-1
Passported Membership (use limited to where references cannot be obtained or where exceptional circumstances apply)	0	9	-9
Total Applicants	256	179	77 (43% increase)

- 7.29 Members were in support of any suggestions that could improve the current situation for those renting from private landlords. They felt that schemes such as Landlord Accreditation should be mandatory, and that as long as such schemes were voluntary very little progress would be made. The Assistant Director acknowledged that the legal aspects needed to be focused upon. The Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods believed that a co-ordinated approach would be the key to success.

8 THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING SCHEMES IN ACHIEVING DESIRED OUTCOMES

- 8.1 The Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum gathered evidence from a number of sources in relation to the effectiveness of current private sector housing schemes. Information considered by Members is as follows:-

Evidence from Hartlepool Borough Council Private Sector Housing Team

- 8.2 At the meeting of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 14 September 2011, Members heard evidence from the Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning). The Forum was advised of the former and current management arrangements and that a trial restructure had been introduced in May 2011, which had seen all housing functions brought together under one manager in the Housing Services section of the Regeneration and Planning Division. The exception to this being the Good Tenant Scheme, which is managed by the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit in Neighbourhood Services, but operated from the Housing Options Centre in Park Towers. The intention of the restructure was to create a co-ordinated approach to the Council's Housing Services, which had been recognised as a limitation in previous service delivery and had resulted in a number of inefficiencies.
- 8.3 The implementation of the new management structure was being trialled for 6 months. The Forum heard that it was due to be reviewed in October / November 2011, following workshops with members of staff and line managers. If considered successful the restructure could see a major transformation in service delivery in the long term, through increased skills and capacity across the section, and greater clarity on roles and responsibilities; ensuring a more effective and efficient service together with improvements in the Council's enabling role.

Selective Licensing

- 8.4 Members heard that the implementation of the Selective Licensing Scheme in Hartlepool had been inconsistent since its inception and that there had been some significant problems in the delivery of the service, though it was noted that many issues had already being addressed.
- 8.5 The Forum was advised that other problems in relation to Selective Licensing were being worked through with new strategies, action plans and protocols being put into place to ensure the delivery of a robust scheme in future. Members also noted that at the time of the meeting the scheme was in its infancy, only being introduced in Hartlepool in early 2009 and was therefore just 20 months into its 5 year life span.
- 8.6 Members were informed of the issues identified following an audit of the scheme, these include:-

- Existing systems needing to be developed to ensure database records hold accurate, complete and up to date information;
 - Partnership arrangements needing to be strengthened to assist in a fit and proper assessment to be undertaken; and
 - Whilst recovery action had been taken to obtain documentation such as gas safety certificates, enforcement tools had not been actively used on landlords who had not cooperated in the scheme or complied with the conditions of the scheme. The Local Authority had avoided the use of such powers resulting in no landlord being subject to full enforcement.
- 8.7 The Forum was pleased to note that actions to address these and other issues identified was well under way. Members agreed that the department had shown commitment to tackling these issues.
- 8.8 The Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) advised Members that the extension to the Selective Licensing Scheme into an additional nine areas of the Borough had not yet been progressed pending an evaluation of the existing scheme, to consider its effectiveness in achieving strategic aims, determine the financial implications of administering the scheme and whether lessons can be learnt for the future.
- 8.9 Members were informed by the Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) that going forward the Council was working towards ensuring effective arrangements were in place for the Selective Licensing Scheme. Members noted that the department aimed to ensure that the scheme was consistent with the overall housing strategy and other relevant initiatives, including homelessness and anti-social behaviour initiatives and that the scheme would achieve strategic aims and objectives.
- 8.10 The Forum heard that applications would be completed for all privately rented properties in the designation area, with appropriate checks in place to ensure the applicants meet the 'fit and proper' assessment criteria. Mandatory conditions of the licence will also be clearly communicated to landlords and these will be enforced more rigorously.
- 8.11 The planning for phase two of the Selective Licensing scheme would be revisited to ensure that there was sufficient evidence to justify the adoption of the extension, and that social and economic conditions would be improved and / or anti-social behaviour reduced as a result. Detailed work would also be required to ascertain whether an extension into an additional nine areas would be manageable and it would be necessary to re-consult to ensure all landlords are included. The impact on any areas that were not taken forward would also have to be carefully managed, as aspirations had been raised in the local community through the public consultation. In the interim, whilst on hold, it would be necessary to communicate some key messages to those who had been involved in the initial consultation process to inform them of the current position.

Landlord Accreditation

- 8.12 The Forum was informed by the Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) of the issue raised in relation to Landlord Accreditation in a recent audit of the scheme. Members heard that there were issues with the way records were held and that some data had not been populated onto the system due to a reduction in admin support; standardisation of records was also required.
- 8.13 Members noted that due to a lack of resources not all properties had been inspected, which meant assurances that landlords meet the criteria for Landlord Accreditation might not necessarily be in place. The Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) advised the Forum that these inspections would now be carried out as joint inspections with those for Selective Licensing, and going forward the Council would ensure the scheme promotes good standards of accommodation in private rented housing, increases the availability housing and develops effective relationships with landlords.

Good Tenant Scheme

- 8.14 Members were informed by the Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) that observations raised following an evaluation of the Good Tenant Scheme included the need to develop simple clear procedures and standardised documents for staff; to ensure the quality of the application process and that outcomes are consistent and also to ensure the quality of the information received from the Police is improved.
- 8.15 Members were again pleased to note that action was already underway to address the observations raised.

Empty Homes

- 8.16 The Forum was advised by the Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) that areas requiring improvement in relation to empty homes had been identified during an audit of the process. The Forum noted that action had been or was being taken to address the observations:-

Table 2: Observations and Actions in relation to Empty Homes

Observation	Action
1. In the past there has been no dedicated resource to focus on bringing empty properties back into use resulting in an uncoordinated approach to tackling the problem. Tackling the issue of empty homes was being delivered by different sections within the Council, which wasn't joined up.	An Empty Homes Officer was appointed in April 2011. This appointment was delayed due to the freeze on recruitment once the Business Transformation process was underway.
	The Housing Services Team now employ a joined up team approach to the issue of empty properties.

2. Need to pro-actively work to bring long term empty homes back into use using flexible solutions / appropriate enforcement action to improve neighbourhoods and the environment.	Develop an Empty Homes Toolkit.
	Use enforcement proactively to tackle long term empty properties in areas of housing need.
	Explore opportunities for financial assistance to private owners.
3. Prevent homes from becoming long-term empty to minimise the number of properties becoming empty for longer than 6 months.	Develop a marketing and publicity approach to promote the Empty Homes Strategy.
	Provide a contact point within the Council for empty homes work.
	Enhance liaison with private landlords.
	Enhance partnership working across services.
	Establish procedures for working with mortgage companies with clients at threat of repossession.
4. Increase decent and affordable rented housing for those in housing need / maximise housing options in the town to improve access to decent and affordable housing for people in housing need.	Investigate and develop a range of re-use options for owners.
	Increase the use of affordable empty homes in meeting housing need.
	Work with registered providers to maximise housing options in the town.
5. Continue to identify the reasons for the distribution and ownership of empty homes and establish trends and reasons, and have accurate information and trends mapped in order to effectively progress strategy development and enable informed decision making.	Enhance partnership working across services.
	Develop an Empty Homes Database.
	Establish an accurate baseline of empty homes information.
	Map areas of housing need.
6. Support investment in Housing Market Renewal and its surrounding areas through the reduction of long-term empty homes to achieve long-term sustainability of these areas.	Review and monitor empty homes performance.
	Ensure empty homes work complements the regeneration activity for the town.

- 8.17 Members learned that an incentive approach had been development in the form of the Empty Property Pilot Scheme, approved by Cabinet in August 2011. The Council was to work in partnership with Housing Hartlepool to bring empty homes back into use through a grant / loan package for landlords. There was also a pilot project to bring empty properties back into use in Baden Street. This was being introduced to address the concentrated problems and in the long term ensure the sustainability of the street. Both of

these schemes were being piloted and could be rolled out to other areas in the town in the future, if successful.

- 8.18 The work that has been undertaken in relation to bringing empty homes back into use has been an overall success with 56 empty properties brought back into use out of a target of 63 in 2010/11. Much of the work has been underpinned by the Empty Homes Strategy 2010-2015 and the preparation of a short term action plans to support the delivery of the Strategy.
- 8.19 The Forum questioned if the Baden Street scheme was still going ahead. The Assistant Director commented that one of the main problems that landlords had raised was the lack of security, often any improvements they installed in a property were stolen or vandalised that day after, and that this was one of the issues being tackled through the project.
- 8.20 Following Members queries regarding the cost of the scheme the Forum learned that the money allocated wasn't wholly grant money as it had initially been portrayed. The scheme was based on repayable loans and grants. Should a property be brought back into use with assistance under the scheme, the agreement would be that the property would remain in use for at least five years before the money could be considered to be a grant. Should that not be the case, the money would be repaid. Following discussions with the landlords it had been agreed that they would be willing to invest if the authority could guarantee the security of the properties. Many of the properties were not in as poor a condition as originally thought, so it was likely the costs would be much lower than originally anticipated.
- 8.21 There were still some reservations among Members in relation to providing private landlords with funds to improve their properties. The Mayor, who was present at the meeting, commented that the true picture of the Baden Street scheme had not been represented in the press and that £35,000 of the funding would not be recoverable, as that had been used to enhance security, which was an understandable issue for landlords. The money going into properties would be recoverable through loans.
- 8.22 Members broadly supported the proposals but did feel that communication with the public was key and needed to be improved to explain why the support for private landlords was necessary, the actual associated costs and details of the results. There was concern amongst Members that many members of the public saw the schemes as money simply being given to private sector landlords, which had now been explained was not the case.
- 8.23 The Assistant Director highlighted that there was a council tax benefit of bring the properties back into use. There was also the potential of the Council being involved in tendering quotes for the works, which would essentially recycle the money back through the Council.
- 8.24 The Mayor commented that dealing with bad landlords and empty properties was one of the big issues for Hartlepool. The Government were not funding any more housing renewal projects in the future so that funding avenue had

been removed. Hartlepool needed around 200 new homes each year to meet demand. There were 1000 empty properties in the town and if these could be brought back into use then that had to be seen as a good thing for the town and its residents. The Mayor commented that the points Members had made regarding communication were valid and would be taken on board.

Challenges

- 8.25 In addition to the challenges faced in relation to selective licensing Members noted that all the schemes were facing staff shortages and limited resources. The lengthy timescales involved in enforcement action were also a challenge that needed to be managed effectively.
- 8.26 Members raised the changes to legislation regarding housing benefits as a concern, particularly the introduction of a single room rate for the under 35's and the impact that this might have on houses of multiple occupation. The Housing Services Manager indicated that the council had a discretionary housing payment fund where small tops ups to rent could be paid; but that budget was already under severe stress. A member of the Landlords Association highlighted that this change to legislation affected mainly singles males aged 25-35 and was likely to start to cause problems in early 2012, more were likely to have to share properties which could ultimately lead to more empty properties. It was estimated that this could potentially affect up to 330 people in the town, the majority of which would be private sector renters.
- 8.27 The Forum also felt that the increase in metal thefts was a major problem for landlords renovating properties. Members felt that the powers to prosecute in this area needed to be strengthened as the current legislation dated back to 1964 and the maximum fine was currently £1000. Members asked that representations be made to the Hartlepool MP (Iain Wright) to pressure for legislation to be strengthened.

Evidence from the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Housing

- 8.28 At the meeting of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 14 September 2011 Members were delighted to received evidence from the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Housing, The Mayor.
- 8.29 The Mayor commented that it had been some time since the Cabinet had considered the Selective Licensing scheme and he was aware it hadn't gone as well as everyone had hoped with mixed reviews from the public and landlords. The scheme was inter-dependent on all sides becoming involved to make it work.

- 8.30 The Mayor considered enforcement to be a key issue and work was underway to review the way Section 215 notices¹ were issued to help in the process of bringing empty properties back into use. It had to be stressed that properties in the town were generally in good condition; it tended not to be the properties that brought an area down but the people in them. Baden Street was a good example of this where a little assistance to landlords could make a significant difference and those that did not wish to engage with the Council would be rigorously pursued. The Mayor felt that tackling licensing had taken longer than he would have liked but the issues were being dealt with and it was still very high on his agenda.
- 8.31 Members questioned why the authority simply couldn't retain properties that it had to go into and improve. The Mayor indicated that legally the properties belonged to the owner/landlord, the authority did want to work with landlords; enforcement only worked to a certain point.
- 8.32 The Forum considered that while the physical conditions of many of the properties was not too bad, there still needed to be discussions on some basic standards. The Assistant Director commented that helping people set up homes was also an issue; Cabinet would be considering a report on a scheme to give tenants access to decent affordable furniture, particularly young people setting up their first home. The scheme would provide furniture through a loan payback system. Evidence showed that similar schemes elsewhere secured longer tenancies.
- 8.33 The Mayor also identified that there was an opportunity for groups to train vulnerable people to gain experience in the building trade by giving them the opportunity to work on schemes to bring properties back in to use.

Evidence from Hartlepool Landlords

- 8.34 The Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum considered evidence from representatives from the Landlord Steering Group and independent landlords at the meeting of the Forum on 14 September 2011.
- 8.35 The representative of the Landlord Steering Group felt that the Landlord Accreditation Scheme had taken a back seat to licensing over the past few years and many landlords did look for proper accreditation. It was unfortunate that the scheme could not be extended town-wide and had to be targeted as this would be a way of ending the dispersal of bad tenants to blight other areas. Selective licensing seemed to be more about getting numbers involved than actually tackling bad tenants and landlords.
- 8.36 The members of the Landlord Steering Group had been keen to join the process as they hoped it would be good for business as well as reducing social problems, landlords had to be seen as part of the solution. In some areas if landlords did not come in and buy properties, the problems could be

¹ Section 215 notices require the owners of land and buildings to take action to clean up those which are adversely affecting the amenity of an area.

greater. Landlords in general invested an average of £15,000 into properties to bring them up to standard. It was not in their interests to leave them empty, that meant no income and a greater chance of damage and theft.

- 8.37 The landlords have wanted a reliable tenant referencing scheme for years but some won't use the current system as they felt it was too slow, landlords also felt there was no need to issue 'cards' to people as there was no guarantee that anyone on the scheme would be good tenants all the way through a twelve month let. The system would be better if it included past references, was speeded up and applied to the whole of the town.
- 8.38 An independent landlord indicated that landlords did not have too many problems with the current licensing zones but they would if the zones were extended. There were mixed experiences with the referencing scheme and even so called 'good' tenants had left huge problems after a let. One improvement that the scheme could make was to move online and allow landlords to update a record of their experiences following a tenancy.
- 8.39 The Assistant Director informed the Forum that frequently not enough feedback on tenants was coming through from landlords. More landlord information was required to build up a better database. Members were supportive of the exploration of additional ways to enable landlords to leave feedback following tenancies, including online methods.
- 8.40 A representative of the Hartlepool Landlords Steering Group referred to advice he had recently given to a landlord against improving a property because of the problems in an area through thefts of copper piping, wiring and other fittings. The lack of general security also made it difficult to get insurance for some properties. Even if improved, the chance of getting a good tenant because of the area was also unlikely. This caused Members concern. The landlord also indicated that because of the current market selling the property wouldn't be advisable. Members were concerned that the Council moving in and taking on such properties could leave the authority in exactly the same position as the landlord.
- 8.41 The Assistant Director indicated that some security problems could be quickly addressed in some streets. In some it was as simple as street lights being repaired and a general clean up to give a visible uplift. It may be the case that the authority did need to work closer with the landlords to see what sort of dual investment could be made to make areas more attractive to tenants.
- 8.42 A representative from Belk, Cameron and Fumess Streets Residents Association, commented that residents were having problems with vandalism and sinking house values if they were next door to an empty property. Empty homes weren't productive for anyone; the landlord not getting any rent and the Council was not receiving council tax. Residents did not want yet another bad tenant on their doorstep, they wanted to work with landlords to improve the community of the streets which was in everyone's best interests.

Evidence from Housing Hartlepool

- 8.43 At the meeting of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum on 14 September 2011. Members took evidence from representatives from Housing Hartlepool. The Forum heard that Housing Hartlepool were working with the Council to bring empty properties back into use. A scheme had been developed with the National Housing Council to look at this issue. Properties could be empty for a number of reasons, from the landlord having difficulties, problems in finding tenants in certain areas, to some homes being inherited by families with no decision being taken on what to do with it.
- 8.44 The representatives from Housing Hartlepool advised Members that some issues were relatively easy to deal with, some weren't. There were twenty properties that had been empty for over five years in the town, all for different reasons. Finance should be available through the scheme to bring around 25 homes back into use. The improvements would be repaid through loans over three to ten years and the property would be managed by Housing Hartlepool while the loan was being repaid. The Forum noted that Housing Hartlepool would need to assess carefully the properties brought into the scheme as the investment would need to be protected. Homes would need to be of a good standard, affordable and let-able. The improvement work would be geared to providing local employment and training and while this was only a small number of properties, the money could be recycled into new properties as the loans were repaid. The Forum welcomed the scheme reported by Housing Hartlepool as a positive step.
- 8.45 There was still a general concern within the Forum as to where bad tenants would be housed, as it was noted that bad tenants tended to gravitate to certain areas, increasing the level of blight on the other residents. The Assistant Director indicated that there would always be bad tenants, though some did turn themselves around and all the effort had to be directed towards that change.

Evidence from Middlesbrough Borough Council

- 8.46 The Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum was pleased to welcome the Strategic Housing Manager and the Principal Environmental Health Officer from Middlesbrough Council to provide evidence in relation the private sector housing services they provide.
- 8.47 Members learned that wards in the older housing areas of Middlesbrough had up to 28% privately rented housing, with over 10,000 properties wrapped around the town centre dating back to pre 1919. The Stock Condition Survey found that 38% of private rented properties did not meet Decent Homes Standards, with the highest rate of category one hazards than any other tenure (category 1 hazards are those that are deemed to damage health, either through potential for accidents or causing illness or medical conditions).

- 8.48 All four of Middlesbrough's older housing area wards rank in the lowest ten in Tees Valley's Community Vitality Index for 2010/11. Middlesbrough Council's aim was therefore to transform failing housing areas in older housing regions through a variety of improvements. The Forum heard that improvements already carried out include:-

- Facelifts undertaken - 1,170
- Match loan incentive scheme - 114
- Home improvement loans and grants - 500
- Minor repairs – 816 (since 2007)
- Various improvement grants – 217

- 8.49 Members heard that the aims of the private rented sector services were to improve management standards, tackle anti-social behaviour and enable access and consultation. Officers were also working on a number of future initiatives including a private rented housing strategy and healthy homes scheme aimed at reducing health inequalities caused by poor quality housing conditions. This would be done through door-to-door outreach work and by establishment of a Healthy Homes Forum Partnership.

- 8.50 The Forum was informed that Middlesbrough provides the following range of services and statutory duties:-

Landlord and tenant Support

- Empty houses, eyesore premises and land 55 premises improved 2010/11;

Housing Standards and Enforcement (HHSRS)

- 758 premises inspected 2010/11
- 80 Legal Notices served
- 4 prosecutions

Licensing of Houses of Multiple Occupation

- 120 licensable HMO's

Investigation of illegal eviction and harassment

- 30 investigations

Immigration inspections

- 50 inspections

Homeless Provision

- Inspection of B&B premises

Accreditation of bed and breakfast accommodation

- 4 B&B providers signed up to an SLA on required standards

- 8.51 The Forum noted that following any complaint an inspection would be undertaken by the Environmental Health Team. This visit would include a review of how any potential hazards in the property may affect the person living there, for example those over 65 are likely to be more vulnerable to trips and falls.

- 8.52 At the date of the Forum, meeting 80 legal notices had been issued to landlords in relation to Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS)

issues for 2011 and 4 prosecutions had taken place where these had failed to be addressed. In 2007 12 notices were issued, which had increased to 144 in 2010. The Principal Environmental Health Officer advised the Forum that every selective licensed property is visited by a member of the team and that ideally these types of visit should be carried out once a year, but unfortunately this was not possible due to the current financial situation the Council found itself in. The Principal Environmental Health Officer also advised Members that Middlesbrough were very rigorous in taking enforcement action to tackle problems in the private rented sector.

- 8.53 The Council was undertaking a number of other measures to improve management standards, tackle anti-social behaviour and enable access and consultation in the private rented sector. Initiatives include the setting up of the 'Shield Project' a free tenant referencing service for landlords. In 2010/11 602 landlords joined the scheme and 490 applicants had been referenced.
- 8.54 To tackle the issue of anti social behaviour the Neighbourhood Safety Team works with other agencies such as CCTV, street wardens, neighbourhood police and problem solving groups. The officers also have a range of measures such as warning letters, fixed penalty notices, parenting orders, individual support orders and anti social behaviour orders (ASBOs) to tackle those who do not want to engage.
- 8.55 There are a number of projects in place to enable greater access to housing and prevent homelessness. The 'rent bond scheme' provides a bond for homeless client groups, so that rather than having to go into bed & breakfast accommodation they are able to access the private rented sector. The DISC Key Project provides access to the private rented sector for socially excluded adults through support packages and a bond scheme.
- 8.56 Middlesbrough Council have tried to develop productive relationships with landlords as ultimately it is in everyone's interest to ensure areas and properties are of a standard that people want to live in. The Council currently work with the National Landlords Association and Teesside Landlords Association.
- 8.57 The Forum noted that as income received from Selective Licensing Schemes had not been ring-fenced, Middlesbrough Council was ceasing Selective Licensing at the end of November 2011 and was working towards an exit strategy for this. The Forum supported the continued ring-fencing of Selective Licensing income in Hartlepool to secure the future provision of the scheme.
- 8.58 A landlord representative questioned what additional powers had been achieved through the introduction of Selective Licensing. The Principal Environmental Health Officer reported that the introduction of Selective Licensing had allowed financial and officer resources to be target in that area, the primary achievement of the introduction had been a reduction in anti-social behaviour. It was questioned whether Selective Licensing itself had led to this reduction or whether it had been co-incidental. The Principal

Environmental Health Officer felt that the concerted effort involved in Selective Licensing had made a difference in a number of factors, including anti-social behaviour.

Healthy Homes Scheme

- 8.59 The Forum learned that Middlesbrough Council had introduced a pilot scheme to reduce health inequalities caused by poor quality housing conditions. This was an innovative scheme which aimed to engage with some of the most vulnerable private sector tenants in the Gresham ward (an older housing area). The scheme involved proactive door-to-door outreach work to identify where assistance was needed at an earlier stage (similar to the fire services outreach model).
- 8.60 The aims of the scheme was to:
- make homes healthier and safer to prevent avoidable deaths and hospitalisations; and
 - ensure households receive a single assessment of their general health and well being and are actively encouraged to access appropriate services.
- 8.61 Members heard that a face to face pilot study had been carried out in August 2011 over 1 week in Gresham. Seventeen households had been targeted and issues arose such as:
- a third of households reported that they perceived their health is affected by living in their current property;
 - almost half of households are not registered with a dentist;
 - over half of the households reported a problem of dampness within the property; and
 - due to the demography of the area, it would suggest that these findings are unlikely to be unique.
- 8.62 The next stage was to establish a Healthy Homes Forum Partnership to follow the pilot cases through, this would include colleagues from welfare, benefits and energy efficiency (amongst others).
- 8.63 The Strategic Housing Service Manager advised the Forum that publicity would be carried out before the launch of a full scheme in an attempt to engage people who don't normally engage with services. Members noted that in the future there was a real need to focus on tackling escalating public service costs with a real focus on prevention. The scheme would need to be carried out in conjunction with the local Primary Care Trust (PCT), as early intervention prevented people ending up in hospital and was beneficial for the Council, PCT and the tenants themselves.
- 8.64 Officers would be able to carry out an assessment of properties and had the powers to ensure that health hazards were removed from homes. The Healthy Homes model had been utilised successfully in Liverpool for some

time, where the model was funded by the PCT. The Forum heard that the following had been achieved by the Liverpool scheme:-

Liverpool's Scheme April 09 to May 10

- Achievements
 - 7,274 properties visited
 - 5,373 surveys completed
 - 8,479 referrals to partners
 - 1,313 HHSRS inspections carried out
 - £1.5m private sector leverage
 - 32 health promotion events
- Referrals to partners (8,479)
 - 1,345 Environmental Health
 - 1,268 Dentist
 - 969 Food and Nutrition
 - 901 Fire Service
 - 675 Energy efficiency
 - 591 Mental well-being
 - 543 Lifestyle advisor
 - 502 Education/employment/ training
 - 474 Fuel poverty
 - 339 Smoking
 - 248 benefit maximisation
 - 221 Age concern
 - 181 Doctor
 - 164 Sure Start
 - 58 Alcohol and drugs

- 8.65 Members were very keen to explore the introduction of a healthy homes scheme within Hartlepool and questioned who carried out the door-to-door outreach part of the programme. The Strategic Housing Services Manager advised the Forum that the pilot was carried out by staff from the Housing Regeneration Department. If the decision was made to continue the scheme full-time special advocates would be trained. Officers were hoping to acquire health funding to train current staff at risk of redundancy.

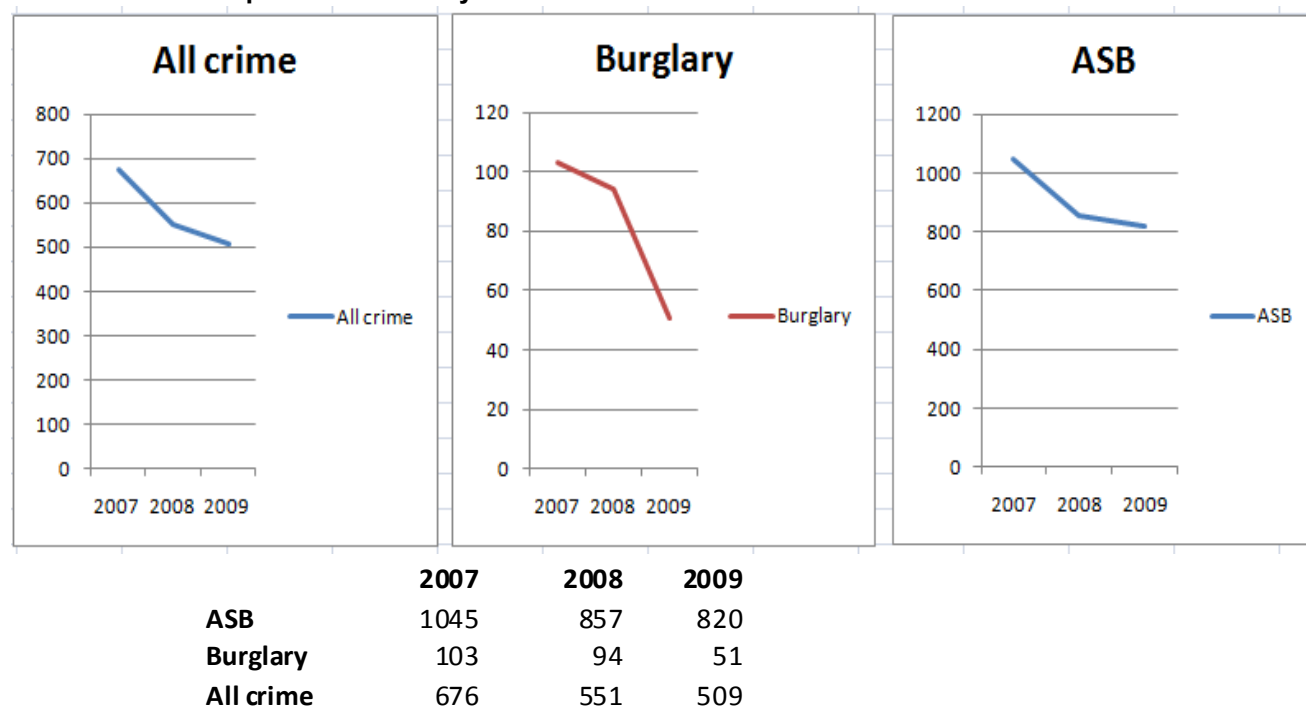
Evidence from Durham County Council

- 8.66 At the meeting of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum on 26 October 2011 Members received evidence from representatives of Durham County Council Housing Team.
- 8.67 The Forum learned there had been a major local government review in Durham with county and district councils amalgamated, this had resulted in many differing work practices in relation to housing services needing to be integrated.

- 8.68 There are about 232,000 homes in County Durham, 80% or 185,000 of which are private sector housing, owned by an owner-occupier, private landlord or private companies. The best estimate is that approximately 16% of private sector housing is owned by private landlords.
- 8.69 Members heard that Durham was taking a two pronged approach to housing renewal and improvement. There were eight regeneration areas within Durham, these tended to have the most issues and required the most capital funding and resources. The other element was to act as a safety net where there were problem landlords and vulnerable tenants with all interventions taking place contributing to improving property conditions or management standards.
- 8.70 The Forum noted that Durham provides the following services for landlords and tenants:-
- Lobbying Central Government
 - Website
 - Landlord Training / Briefing Sessions
 - Advice Line
 - Referencing
 - Enhanced services to tenants
 - Choice Based Lettings
- 8.71 Durham Council does not operate a Landlord Accreditation Scheme as, due to the amalgamation of several borough councils (each with differing working practices, strategies and fees) it was felt that a choice based letting scheme would be more appropriate as a way of improving management standards and services.
- 8.72 Members were informed by the representative from Durham County Council that Durham currently has a number of selective licensing areas with low demand for housing and high levels of anti social behaviour. There had been huge expectations for selective licensing but it was stressed that this was only meant to be one tool to combat the problems these areas face and was meant to be used in conjunction with other interventions. Selective Licence designations take many months to implement and do not deal with property condition or environmental issues.
- 8.73 The Forum noted that at the time of the meeting the figures for licensing in the designations of Dean Bank, Ferryhill, Chilton West, Wembley and Easington were as follows:-
- Dean Bank – 328 Licensable; 259 Licensed; Pending 16; 53 Empty /Exempt; 3 prosecutions pending for breach
 - Chilton – 160 Licensable; 107Licensed; Pending 14; 38 Empty / Exempt, 1 prosecution pending
 - Wembley – 121Licensable; 68 Licensed: 1 Revoked: 21 Empty/ Exempt: Pending 31

8.74 The representatives from Durham Council informed the Forum of the following success in relation to the work undertaken in Ferryhill:-

Table 3 Partnership Success – Ferryhill



8.75 The Forum heard that this success was attributable to the work of the anti social behaviour, environmental protection and alcohol abuse teams, plus the Police and Streetscene and that selective licensing had also played a role in the success.

8.76 Members questioned whether this success had merely displaced problems to other areas, but were advised that care was taken when re-housing potential problem tenants to ensure they did not end up in areas with high anti social behaviour, which tended to curb their own behaviour and almost became self regulating. There was also a lot of work undertaken with landlords and support packages were put in place to help tenants.

8.77 The Forum heard that selective licensing enforcement was limited to breaches of Part 3 of Housing Act 2004 – Management of Property, non – compliance with the requirement to obtain a licence (criminal offence - maximum fine £20,000) and breach of Licence condition (maximum fine £5,000 per breach).

8.78 To date six landlords of eleven properties had been successfully prosecuted, six in Dean Bank and five in Chilton West. Seven formal warning letters had been issued in respect of breach of licence conditions. In total fines ranging from £750 - £17,210 have been imposed totalling £26,510.

Evidence from Stockton Borough Council

8.79 At the meeting of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum on 26 October 2011 Members considered written evidence from Stockton Borough Council Private Sector Housing Division.

8.80 Members noted that Stockton Borough Council's Private Sector Housing Division provides a number of services. These include improving poor housing conditions, mandatory licensing of houses in multiple occupation, landlord accreditation, the provision of financial assistance to improve the condition of the private sector stock or to provide adaptations for people with special physical needs and the bringing back into use long term empty properties. The Council does not operate a selective licensing scheme.

Stockton's private sector housing stock condition survey

8.81 In November 2009, the Private Sector Housing Division completed its statutory, borough wide private sector housing stock condition survey. This was procured jointly with Hartlepool and Darlington Councils. The headline information revealed:

- There were 67,150 private sector homes in the borough of which 58,120 (86.5%) are owner occupied and 9,030 (13.5%) are private rented;
- There are 10,700 homes in the borough that do not meet the Decent Homes Standard of which 4,500 are non decent because they contain a category 1 hazard;
- The total cost to remedy category 1 hazards is £16 million;
- The total cost to remedy non-decent homes is £42 million;
- 33,237 (51%) of households in the borough live on an income of less than £15,000 per year, which raises significant affordability issues;
- 9,500 dwellings (14.7%) have at least one resident with a long-term illness or disability, of these, 4180 (44%) are unsteady on their feet;
- Since 2003 the number of empty dwellings has increased by 27% from 1,600 to 2,420; and
- 99% of households in fuel poverty have an income less than £15,000 per year and 31% of private rented tenants are classed as fuel poor.

Improving poor housing conditions in the private sector

8.82 Members noted that the Private Sector Housing Division has a number of 'tools' it utilises to remedy sub standard housing conditions. Stockton's approach to dealing with unsatisfactory conditions and poor landlord practices is both proactive and reactive.

8.83 Stockton Borough Council utilises a 'private rented toolkit' comprising of:

- Informal actions – to support and encourage landlords to improve their property and management practices.

- Formal actions – Stockton have introduced a mandatory House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing Scheme and were the first authority in the Tees Valley to apply for an Interim Empty Dwelling Management Order to take control of a long term empty property.

Services provided to improve homes in the private sector (rented or owner occupied)

8.84 The Forum noted that Stockton Borough Council provides the following services to all private sector housing residents:-

- Advice and information relating to the rights and responsibilities of home owners, landlords and tenants;
- Disabled adaptations;
- Facelift Projects;
- Landlord Forum events and newsletters;
- Landlord Accreditation Scheme;
- A Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing scheme;
- Advice and financial assistance for homeowners to improve the condition of their home;
- Advice and signposting to financial assistance for homeowners, landlords and tenants who wish to improve the energy efficiency of the homes they own or rent;
- A free tenant referencing service to landlords;
- A rent deposit/bond scheme for tenants who wish to move into a property owned by a member of the Council's Landlord Accreditation Scheme;
- Joint working with Cleveland Fire Brigade through its Winter Warmth campaign;
- Joint working with Cleveland Fire Brigade to develop common standards for means of escape and other fire safety measures in Houses in Multiple Occupation; and
- A proactive approach to dealing with the issues caused by empty homes.

Evidence from the Neighbourhood Services Team

8.85 At the meeting of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum on 26 October 2011 Members received evidence from the Assistant Director (Neighbourhood Services) regarding the role of the Neighbourhood Management and Anti Social Behaviour Teams in relation to private sector housing schemes.

8.86 Members learned that there was good working links and communication between the Neighbourhood and Private Sector Housing Teams and teams working in the community would refer sub-standard housing issues to the Private Sector Housing Team. Community Development Officers work with residents associations to identify issues, which are then fed to the Police to enable resources to be targeted effectively.

- 8.87 Members learned that the Neighbourhood Teams undertook activities such as boarding up empty properties, house clearances, dealing with anti-social behaviour, property standards and the Good Tenant Scheme. Members were interested to learn that the department are part of the 'Team around the Household' that supports families with multiple problems and identifies interventions that work, whilst aligning services to achieve the common objectives and formulating an action plan which individuals and families would sign up to.
- 8.88 Members raised concerns regarding who would pay for the household clearances and disposal of waste when landlords could not be located and were advised that the Council would cover the cost as they had a social responsibility to dispose of waste where it might pose a health risk. Landlords were chased for payment but this process could take time and it was thought preferable to remove the rubbish and send an invoice after the event.
- 8.89 The Forum had previously learned that the Neighbourhood Services Department were responsible for the Good Tenant Scheme and questioned whether details of the scheme could be included on the application form for housing benefit to encourage tenants to sign up and use the scheme. The Assistant Director felt that this was an area that could be explored.

Evidence from the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Transition

- 8.90 When the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum met on 9 November 2011, following a Cabinet re-shuffle, Members welcomed the new Portfolio Holder for Housing and Transition to provide evidence in relation to private sector housing schemes.
- 8.91 The Portfolio Holder commented that delays to the extension of selective licensing areas were unfortunate but the reasons for the delay was well reported and in his opinion justified and when licensing was implemented properly it did have a positive effect for local residents. Landlord Accreditation had however only been good at regulating the good landlords; it did nothing to correct the bad landlords. The Council was being proactive in wishing to work with landlords to improve housing streets and neighbourhoods with the pilot scheme in Baden Street being a good example of what could be done when all parties work together.
- 8.92 The Portfolio Holder had recently received a report outlining the wide range of actions that are available to the local authority to tackle problem properties, landlords and tenants. The Portfolio Holder felt that Council had not been using the full range of enforcement open to it and highlighted the use of Section 215 enforcement notices to tidy and repair properties, as a particular example.
- 8.93 The Portfolio Holder made a plea to elected members to report problem empty properties within their wards, as officers needed as much information as possible. The Portfolio Holder felt that the Forum was in a position,

though the investigation, to lobby the town's MP to make it easier for the authority to take quick action to alleviate problems with properties before they became issues that started to 'drag down' whole streets and neighbourhoods. Many of the powers available now were too slow and too cumbersome and frequently the law seemed to be on the side of the owner rather than those suffering the consequences. The Minister for Local Government and the Communities had also proposed changes to the law so properties have now to stand empty for two years rather than 6 months, before action could be taken.

- 8.94 The Portfolio Holder considered that changes in benefits – not just housing benefit but the localisation of management, would have a big effect on housing in the future. The Portfolio Holder explained that the government was allocating funding direct to local authorities but not before top slicing 10% and determining that benefits to pensioners must be protected. As the local authority would have to manage these benefits, the Portfolio Holder could envisage the benefits being paid out being reduced by up to 20% for other recipients. He felt that many individuals and families could be priced out of private rented sector and landlords would need to be realistic on rent levels in the future.
- 8.95 In relation to the quality of housing on offer in the private sector, the Portfolio Holder advised Members that there were powers for the authority to tackle issues such as no heating, damp etc. The Portfolio Holder had asked officers to implement a more robust communication process with private tenants, who were often unaware of their rights, he felt that housing at the lower end of the market was damaging people's health and some investment now would save money later.
- 8.96 The Portfolio Holder believed that private sector tenants were unaware of their rights when it came to the quality of their property and, even if they were aware, they were intimidated by the thought of asking for improvements. Many tenants were also unaware that issues could be dealt with in such a way that the landlord would not know it was the tenant who had reported the issue.
- 8.97 Members commented that there were many tenants that were concerned that complaining about their housing conditions could lead to repercussions with their landlord. It was indicated by the Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) that the council could issue orders for problems to be put right and would support tenants coming forward, landlord necessarily need to know that it was the tenant who had raised the concerns. The main problem appeared to be that the majority of tenants were unaware of their rights.
- 8.98 Members considered that it was important to ensure that tenants were made aware of their rights and the powers the authority had to put them right and the Forum would be supportive of measures to publicise this.
- 8.99 The Portfolio Holder considered that while the authority 'needed to show its teeth' through enforcement, much more could be achieved through working

with landlords to ensure good tenants were placed in good quality housing. Enforcement should be targeted at those who did not wish to work with the authority.

- 8.100 The Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) commented that there was a need to build upon the landlord / tenant relationship. Enforcement was a tool that could be utilised and one landlord in court could act as an encouragement for others to improve their properties, but bringing landlords 'on side' through their own volition would be much more productive.
- 8.101 With regard to the link between housing and health the Portfolio Holder stressed that he believed that the link was extremely important. There was clear evidence to show that poor housing affected health.

Evidence from Hartlepool Borough Council Health Improvement Team

- 8.102 At the meeting of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum on 9 November 2011, Members welcomed evidence from the Assistant Director, Health Improvement from Hartlepool Borough Council.
- 8.103 The Assistant Director advised the Forum that link between poor housing and health was complex and difficult to assess but research did suggest that poor housing was associated with increased risk of cardiovascular diseases, respiratory diseases and depression and anxiety. There was also hazards in poor housing that could contribute to the risks of accidents. The Assistant Director went on to outline the issues associated with cold houses, the impact of poor housing on children and young people, the level of the problems created by poor housing on health and the campaigns and initiatives to tackle them.
- 8.104 The Assistant Director advised the Forum that nationally there were between 25,000 and 30,000 excess winter deaths, with the North East share of this total being approximately 1700. Low income and poor housing exacerbate health problems making fuel poverty one of the most serious causes of health inequalities. It was estimated that there are approximately 297,000 fuel poor households in the North East.
- 8.105 The Assistant Director provided details of the joint work already being undertaken in this area, including the Winter Warmth Campaign by Cleveland Fire Brigade, the Hotspots Campaign, promotion of the flu vaccine and national initiatives.
- 8.106 The Forum heard that there was a need to secure recurring resources to tackle the health and housing agenda and due to the changes that were underway in public health there was a greater opportunity to concentrate on contributing factors such as this. There was also the potential to integrate this work into that of the shadow Health and Wellbeing Board. There were also opportunities to raise the profile of issues such as the link between health and housing through staff training and in community settings.

- 8.107 The Assistant Director highlighted the work being undertaken by Middlesbrough Council based on the Liverpool Healthy Homes Programme. The Housing and Transition Portfolio Holder, who was also present at the meeting, commented that he wished to tap into some of the health money that was available to deal with one off spending to support schemes to tackle small scale but important works such as insulating homes.
- 8.108 The Forum supported such an approach and questioned if the various health providers could do more to help in this work, even through bringing pressure on the government to tackle the issues of poor housing and its affect on poor health and the inflated costs of energy for those on low incomes. The Chair commented that initiatives such as that in Baden Street could be linked into wider initiatives to highlight the influence of improved housing on health.
- 8.109 The Forum supported that idea of joint working between the NHS and the Council and felt that the feasibility of bringing a scheme such as that operated in Liverpool to Hartlepool should be explored further.

Evidence from Durham Tees Valley Probation Service

- 8.110 At the meeting of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum on 18 January 2012 the Forum welcomed representatives from Durham Tees Valley Probation Service, to give evidence in relation to the placement of ex-offenders back into the community into private rented accommodation.
- 8.111 The Forum learned that the issue of housing was central to reducing the re-offending rate, as statistics had shown that those who were homeless, did not access housing support or were living in inappropriate accommodation, were far more likely to reoffend than those who had a decent home, as this could be the only stability they had in their lives.
- 8.112 The representatives from Durham Tees Valley Probation Services highlighted that despite the evidence that having a home when leaving prison reduces re-offending, it was often difficult to arrange suitable accommodation prior to a prisoner's release, which could result in delays of weeks or months before suitable accommodation could be found.
- 8.113 Even those who were housed on release were likely to lose accommodation if they did not receive the right support. Supported accommodation schemes are available, for example to help with alcohol issues, but there are long waiting lists and it can be very difficult to gain a place.
- 8.114 Historically the Probation Service has had to place offenders in whatever accommodation was available, but this was often sub-standard or inappropriate. The Good Tenant Scheme (GTS) has assisted the placement process as it looks at offenders individually, those on a programme may be allocated an amber (provisional) membership. However, the membership card will state the offence but not the packages in place to support the offender, meaning it does not give the landlord a full and complete picture.

- 8.115 The Probation Services were keen to develop their relationship with the Council to share information on progress the offender had made since leaving prison, the support packages available to prevent re-offending and to ensure appropriate housing placements were made. The Probation Service highlighted that they were not permitted to share details of previous convictions with landlords, however risk assessments were undertaken on the likelihood of re-offending and it would assist if these could be accepted as part of the good tenant scheme. The benefits of housing ex-offenders in their local communities to reduce the risk of re-offending were outlined.
- 8.116 Members of the Forum were supportive of the Probation Services and the Housing Services Team taking discussions regarding the Good Tenant Scheme and the use of information further.
- 8.117 Another problem highlighted by the Probation Service was the use of accommodation out of the area, due to this being the only accommodation available. Members were advised that this can hamper the progress of an offenders and relationships with key professional such as probation staff, drugs workers and treatment nurses can break down. The offenders can also return to the area of their own accord having fallen out of treatment or programmes, making the situation worse.
- 8.118 Schemes such as Community Campus were highlighted as working very well but, this is only resourced to work with a relatively small number of offenders. Members heard that there is only positive feedback for this scheme. The need for more schemes of this type was emphasised.
- 8.119 The Probation Service representatives advised the Forum of the problems offenders finding their own accommodation and landlord can cause. If the Probation Service is not made aware that the offender has found accommodation, a support package and a risk management plan will not be put in place.
- 8.120 Members questioned what they could do to assist with building the trust of communities in relation to the housing of offenders and were advised by the Probation Services representatives that a problem was often lack of information regarding the behaviour of the offender. As a member of the joint action group (JAG) which contains Police and housing amongst other services, the Probation Service can step in if they are made aware of problems, but often they are not informed. Members were advised that information sharing is key to enable the Probation Service to address offenders' behaviour.
- 8.121 The Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) advised the representatives of the Probation Service about the Landlord Steering Group and extended an invitation to attend the group and highlight some of the difficulties the Probation Service faces housing offenders. The Forum was supportive of this as a way forward.

Feedback from Tenant Focus Groups & Questionnaires

- 8.122 The Forum was very interested in the views of private sector housing tenants, landlords and local residents in areas of high private rented housing. In order to gather as much opinion as possible Members held two focus groups within local community settings and also published questionnaires for landlords and tenants, the results of which were discussed by the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum at the meeting of 26 October 2011.
- 8.123 There were mixed views from both tenants and landlords as to the success of the schemes with some landlords feeling that they were being penalised for co-operating with the schemes whilst no action had been taken against bad Landlords.
- 8.124 One landlord felt that bad landlords keep bad tenants in properties rather than dealing with problems, this in turn caused problems for good landlords and tenants, there was a concern that as areas would become full of bad landlords and tenants that they will become areas where families will not want to live causing a downward spiral.
- 8.125 The landlords identified that in order to influence decent people to move back into areas and regenerate the area there needed to be increased publicity about what is being done, and once tenants moved back in they need strong back up from the Council should things start to go wrong, as at the moment landlords tend to deal with problem neighbours themselves.
- 8.126 The majority of respondents to the tenant questionnaire did not feel that being part of the good tenant scheme had helped them to find quality accommodation and having a landlord that participated in private sector housing schemes had benefitted them as a tenant. It should be noted that there was a very low response rate to the questionnaires, which took place prior to the department actively increasing enforcement action.

9 IMPACT OF CURRENT AND FUTURE BUDGET PRESSURES AND HOW PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING SCHEMES COULD BE PROVIDED IN THE FUTURE

- 9.1 Members of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum were keen to explore the impact of current and future budget pressures and to examine how private sector housing schemes could be provided in the future. The Forum considered evidence as follows:-

Evidence from Middlesbrough Borough Council

- 9.2 At the meeting of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum on the 26 October 2011 Members considered evidence from Middlesbrough Council. The Forum learned that the Council was looking to develop a private rented housing strategy and was working with groups and carrying out consultation

to gather information regarding the private rented sector, particularly in areas that were not regeneration areas as the sector is changing dramatically.

- 9.3 The Forum also heard that Middlesbrough Council was looking to start a small scheme with private sector landlords to house homeless households, though resourcing this was a problem. The Council was also hoping to put in a bid for some funding to regenerate empty homes, and was also aware that the change to housing benefits would impact on the area.

Evidence from Durham County Council

- 9.4 At the meeting of the Forum on 26 October 2011 Members received evidence from Durham Council in relation to how they see Private Sector housing Schemes being provided in the future.

- 9.5 The representatives from Durham County Council identified that their outcomes for success in the future would be:-

- Raise awareness of services available and to engage and educate;
- Prioritise and Focus and be proactive rather than reactive;
- Information Sharing is Key – Referencing;
- Development of Joint Operational Protocols linking to ASB Escalation Policy, Environmental Protection and Housing Solutions;
- Good ICT system for accessible to network;
- Use of all available enforcement powers including Management Orders /ASB Closures; and
- Recognition at Local Multi Agency Problem Solving forums.

- 9.6 Members were keen to gain an understanding of how Durham Council planned to maintain levels of service for the private rented sector given the current economic climate. The Area Based Housing Regeneration Manager advised Members that support would be targeted around the eight regeneration areas and there would be a reorganisation of the service with empty homes and landlord services being amalgamated.

- 9.7 Members also questioned whether Durham had considered moving away from selective licensing and were advised by the Durham Council representatives that an evaluation of services was due to be carried out with in the next 12 months and no decisions would be taken until that had taken place. The main advantage of selective licensing was good engagement with landlords, which officers felt, was vitally important and fundamental to housing provision particularly given changes contained within the localism bill.

Evidence from Stockton Borough Council

- 9.8 During the meeting of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum on 26 October 2011 Members received written evidence from Stockton Council. The Forum noted that Stockton's 2009 Stock Condition Survey highlighted that £42million was required to remedy non decent homes and £16million

was required to remove category 1 hazards under the Housing Health and Safety Rating Scheme – a standard by which the condition of a property is assessed upon inspection.

- 9.9 Due to a lack of sufficient finance to deal with the extent of the problem, Stockton have developed a new strategic direction for dealing with properties in disrepair and in need of renovation. The emphasis of this is to achieve positive health outcomes through the provision of timely and effective interventions rather than simply focusing on improving poor housing conditions.
- 9.10 Key to the success of this objective is the targeting of housing conditions that have the biggest impact on the health of residents, a focus on the removal of category 1 hazards only. The Council will look to remove damp and perished wall plaster by providing a damp proof course and at the same time provide an efficient, effective heating system to remedy excess cold rather than look to carry out additional works to the whole of the house that may not necessarily have a negative impact on the occupier's health.
- 9.11 To ensure resources are effectively targeted to those most at risk and to obtain the biggest impact from limited funding Stockton Council works successfully with colleagues in Health and in Social Care. Housing Services are represented at both Partnership and Management Team levels of the Health and Well Being Partnership and at the Housing and Neighbourhood Partnership.
- 9.12 Through active membership of the Health and Well Being Partnership Stockton have successfully bid for PCT funding to provide financial assistance to remove category 1 hazards for the past two years. This funding not only eliminates the category 1 hazards it also reduces NHS expenditure on medical treatment and hospital care.
- 9.13 Stockton Council Housing Services actively contributes to the annual statutory Joint Strategic Needs Assessment between the PCT and the Council, which highlights the links between poor housing and poor health and the affects an increasing older population will have on available budgets for disabled adaptations.

Current funding position

- 9.14 The Government announced that it will no longer provide funding to Councils for private sector housing renewal and has reduced the funding for Disabled Facilities Grants. At Stockton there has been an 88% reduction in capital funding to improve housing conditions and a reduction of 34% in Disabled Facilities Grant funding.
- 9.15 The consequences of large budget reductions are very significant as over the last three years the number of requests for financial assistance has increased by 21% and the number of requests for Disabled Facilities Grants has increased by 38%. Similarly, the number of requests for service from

tenants in the private rented sector has increased by 24% over the same time period. This increase in demand for services is a direct result of the current economic climate and is set to increase due to recently announced changes to the Local Housing Allowance, homelessness duties and changes to social housing tenancies that will significantly increase demand in the private rented sector. In the past 8 months, there has been a 40% reduction in the number of officers working in the Private Sector Housing Division.

Evidence from Hartlepool Council Health Improvement Team

- 9.16 At the meeting of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 18 January 2012 the Assistant Director of Health Improvement provided Members with an update on work that had been carried out in relation to the links between poor housing standards and poor health, since her attendance at the Forum meeting on 9 November 2011.
- 9.17 The Assistant Director of Health Improvement informed the Forum that since the her attendance a the Forum meeting discussions had taken place with the Housing and Transition Portfolio Holder and the Assistant Director of Regeneration and Planning on the way forward in terms of pursuing joint working with the NHS, with a view to improving housing stock in the town and identifying those most vulnerable in terms of health via a pilot scheme.
- 9.18 Members noted that it was intended that a proposal would be developed in the coming weeks to work with the Health Service to identify a practical solution to the issues raised. It has reported that the Shadow Health and Wellbeing Board had looked at winter warmth and housing poverty indicating that housing was a key issue in the Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- 9.19 The Housing and Transition Portfolio Holder, who was also in attendance at the meeting, welcomed the proposals and emphasised the importance of joint working between the NHS and the Council to establish the links and working in partnership to address the problem areas. The need to explore issues that contributed to poor health and the benefits of creating healthy homes, as well as obtaining evidence of good practice from other local authorities was emphasised.
- 9.20 The Assistant Director of Health Improvement made reference to the benefits of a pilot scheme arrangement to identity, through the NHS, those most vulnerable in terms of health as well as the potential long term financial savings to the health service in tackling prevention issues of this type.
- 9.21 Members supported the proposals and were keen to secure health funding as suggested to promote this initiative, the Forum reiterated their suggestion that any proposals were reflected in the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.

Evidence from the Housing Services Team

- 9.22 At the meeting of the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum on 29 February 2012 Members welcomed evidence from the Assistant Director

(Regeneration and Planning) in relation to the work undertaken to date on enforcement.

- 9.23 Members learned that an overarching housing services enforcement policy was approved by the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Transition on 18 October 2011 and that this encompassed all enforcement aspects of Housing Services, rather than introducing new powers its main purpose was to consolidate existing policies.
- 9.24 The Assistant Director provided the Forum with a summary of enforcement activity from April 2011 as follows:-

Empty Homes

- Empty Homes Officer appointed in April 2011 working with owners to bring empty homes back into use through an incentive and enforcement approach.
- Use of informal approach to return properties to occupation.
- Partnership working with Housing Hartlepool (Vela Group) utilising funding through Homes and Communities Agency currently working to bring properties back into use – 26 currently being considered as part of a lease and repair scheme. Improvement works are due to commence in March.
- Baden Street improvement scheme has been implemented including work to return empties to occupation. 16 out of 19 empty property owners are now actively engaged in the scheme.
- To date 2 empty properties on Baden Street have been re-let and improvement works are due to commence in March 2012. Owners who fail to engage in the scheme will be referred for enforcement action.
- 'Top 20' list of empty properties that have been empty the longest targeted.
- All owners have been contacted and have either brought their property back into use, have firm plans to do so or enforcement action has been identified.
- 66 empty properties had been returned into use by the end of December against the annual target of 57. This figure records any intervention by the Council which has resulted in a property being brought back into use. This can range from informal discussions with owners through to enforcement action.

Housing Market Renewal (HMR)

- The Council took ownership of all properties on the Perth/Hurworth Street area through the CPO process. All residents were relocated prior to this and now the properties have been made safe and secured prior to demolition.
- Funding has been identified through the HMR transition fund for the delivery of Carr/Hopps and approval will shortly be sought for the match-funding requirement.

Housing Standards/Nuisance

- With regards to the work of the Housing Standards Officers, almost 90% of the requests for service made related to disrepair, empty properties and nuisances.
- Proactive work has also been undertaken including-
 - area based walkabouts, including the Housing Market Transition site (Carr/Hopps) and closer liaison with neighbourhood managers to identify problematic empties and nuisance properties;
 - a major inspection programme of privately rented properties in the selective licensing areas;
 - work in the Perth/Hurworth Street CPO area to deal with disrepair issues; and
 - preparation work for using section 215, Town and Country Planning Act 1990 powers to deal with properties adversely affecting the amenity of a neighbourhood.
- The number of reports of disrepair has remained steady over the course of the year, with an average of 60 per quarter; the majority have been resolved without the need to take formal enforcement action.
- In terms of enforcement action taken, four Housing Act 2004 improvement notices have been served and three notices were served under the provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 as the premises were considered to be prejudicial to health.
- In one case Emergency Remedial Action was taken under the Housing Act 2004 to deal with a situation that involved an imminent risk to health. Despite being available for a number of years, this is the first time such a course of action has been taken in Hartlepool.
- Complaints regarding empty properties peaked in the second quarter of the year and we believe that this has been a result of having an increased presence in problematic areas and attendance by the Empty Homes Officer at residents meetings.
- 27 notices were served to require the securing of empty dwellings and 16 notices were served requiring the abatement of nuisance associated with empty properties e.g. to remove rubbish from within the property boundaries.
- There has been a dramatic decline in the number of complaints received about nuisance properties from 99 in the first quarter to 48 in the last. The reason for this is not clear but may be accounted in some part by the increase in proactive work carried out.
- 61 notices were served with regards to nuisance arising from occupied properties.

Selective Licensing

- 43 licences have been issued in the selective licensing areas in 2011/12, taking the total licensed to 569
- 203 inspections have been carried out on licensed properties with 120 schedule of works sent with recommendations for action.

- In terms of the selective licensing inspections carried out, follow up inspections are being undertaken and referred for enforcement action where necessary.
- 134 notices have been served for non-supply of gas or electrical certificates.
- 68 court applications for breach of licence condition being prepared

- 9.25 The Forum learned that the top 20 properties that had been empty the longest had all now been addressed. With the exception of one property that was in dispute with Crown Estates the rest were being brought back into use by either the owner, housing Hartlepool or were going through compulsory purchase. Once a satisfactory outcome had been achieved for these houses officers would move onto the next 20 on the empty homes list.
- 9.26 Members of the Forum were very pleased with the amount of work that had been undertaken in this area since the start of the scrutiny investigation and congratulated the department on the real strides forward that had been made since the restructure of the services. The Forum noted that, as part of the work undertaken, there was now evidence to support the next phase of selective licensing, should the Council determine that this was the way forward. It could be proven that the scheme had brought areas back in to use and improved the quality of management of properties within the selective licensing areas.
- 9.27 The Assistant Director advised Members on the progress of the Healthy Homes initiative suggested as part of the scrutiny investigation. The department would like to put together a pilot scheme to identify individuals who may receive health benefits from improvements to their properties. Once these individuals had been identified the Department's vision was to carry out the required work and monitor the results over a sustained period of time through a number of measures such as the number of GP visits etc. The results could then be compared to the data from a period before the intervention took place, in an attempt to determine the health benefits derived from improvements to the property. The Assistant Director was currently discussing the funding surrounding the pilot scheme with the PCT.
- 9.28 The Forum fully endorsed and supported the development of this initiative as an early intervention method to improve the health of those in poor quality housing.

10 CONCLUSIONS

- 10.1 The Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum concluded:-

- (a) That during the course of the investigation Members were very pleased to note the significant progress that had been made in the service delivery of private sector housing schemes since the reorganisation of the housing services department;

- (b) That current legislation in relation to metal thefts was not adequate to deter would be thieves;
- (c) That the changes to housing benefit legislation were likely to impact on child and family poverty in Hartlepool;
- (d) That the reasons for providing support and grants to private sector landlords to renovate properties had not been communicated effectively to the public;
- (e) That for a number of reasons some of the landlords who participated in the investigation did not see the benefit of using the Good Tenant Scheme;
- (f) That Healthy Homes schemes are a proactive way of tackling health inequalities caused by poor quality housing and are beneficial to tenants, the Council and the NHS;
- (g) That the private sector tenants may not be aware of their rights in relation to the standard and maintenance of their property required by their landlord; and
- (h) That the provision of suitable housing was a key element to the prevention of re-offending.

11 RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 The Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum has taken evidence from a wide range of sources to assist in the formulation of a balanced range of recommendations. The Forum's key recommendations to Cabinet are as outlined below:-

- (a) That the ring-fencing of selective licensing income should continue, to secure the provision of the scheme in the future;
- (b) That representations are made to the Hartlepool MP to lobby for legislation relating to the theft of metal to be strengthened and fines increased;
- (c) That the Housing Services Team undertake awareness raising activities with Hartlepool Borough Council Staff, Elected Members and service users to ensure that the impact of changes to housing benefit legislation are communicated and factored in to advice provided to potential claimants;
- (d) That Hartlepool Borough Council explore methods to introduce and fund a Healthy Homes Scheme in conjunction with NHS Hartlepool;

- (e) That communication with the public is improved to highlight the regeneration benefits that result from the provision of loans and grants to private landlords to renovate properties in specific areas of the town;
- (f) That additional ways to enable landlords to leave feedback for the Good Tenant Scheme, including online methods be explored;
- (g) That the link between poor housing and poor health is recognised in the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment;
- (h) That the feasibility of including details of the Good Tenant Scheme within housing benefit application packs is assessed;
- (i) That publicity is undertaken to inform private rented tenants of their rights in relation to the condition of their homes and the powers the authority has to ensure landlords maintain properties to a decent standard;
- (j) That Hartlepool Borough Council works with the Probation Service to explore the use of Probation Service risk assessments and information regarding support packages in place for ex-offenders, as part of the Good Tenant Scheme assessment;
- (k) That an invitation is extended to the Probation Service to attend the Landlord Steering Group to further develop the relationship and information sharing practices between the Probation Service, landlords and the Council.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Committee is grateful to all those who have presented evidence during the course of our investigation. We would like to place on record our appreciation, in particular of the willingness and co-operation we have received from the below named:-

Hartlepool Borough Council:

The Mayor – Stuart Drummond
Councillor Jonathan Brash – Portfolio Holder for Housing and Transition
Dave Stubbs – Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods
Damien Wilson – Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning)
Denise Ogden – Assistant Director (Neighbourhood Services)
Louise Wallace – Assistant Director of Health Improvement
Nigel Johnson – Housing Services Manager

External Representatives:

Nigel Budd – Housing Hartlepool
Mark Dutton – Housing Hartlepool
Janine Turner – Middlesbrough Council
Stuart Wears – Middlesbrough Council

Angela Stephenson –Durham County Council
Diane Hedley – Durham County Council
Alan Ridden – Landlord Steering Group Representative
Sue Thompson – Landlord Steering Group Representative
Terry Campbell – Mowbray Properties
Gemma Sparrow – Durham Tees Valley Probation Service
Julie Keay – Durham Tees Valley Probation Service
Local Residents

**COUNCILLOR STEPHEN THOMAS
CHAIR OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM**

March 2012

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

The following background papers were consulted or referred to in the preparation of this report:-

- (i) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled 'Scrutiny Investigation into 'Private Sector Housing Schemes – Scoping Report', presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 27 July 2011.
- (ii) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled 'Scrutiny Investigation into Private Sector Housing Schemes – Setting the Scene Presentation – Covering Report' presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 27 July 2011.
- (iii) Presentation of the Assistant Director (Regeneration and Neighbourhoods) entitled 'NSSF Investigation: Private Sector Housing Schemes' presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 27 July 2011.
- (iv) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled 'Scrutiny Investigation into Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from Hartlepool Borough Council Housing Services Team – Covering Report' presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 14 September 2011.
- (v) Report of the Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) entitled 'Scrutiny Investigation into Private Sector Housing Schemes – Stage 2 Operation and Performance' presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 14 September 2011.
- (vi) Presentation of the Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning) entitled 'NSSF Investigation: Private Sector Housing Schemes Stage 2 – 'Operation and Performance' presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 14 September 2011.
- (vii) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled 'Scrutiny Investigation into Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from the Portfolio Holder for

- Community Safety and Housing – Covering Report’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 14 September 2011.
- (viii) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled ‘Scrutiny Investigation into Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from the Hartlepool Landlords Steering Group – Covering Report’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 14 September 2011.
 - (ix) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled ‘Scrutiny Investigation into Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from Housing Hartlepool – Covering Report’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 14 September 2011.
 - (x) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled ‘Scrutiny Investigation into Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from Middlesbrough Council – Covering Report’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 26 October 2011.
 - (xi) Presentation of the Strategic Housing Services Manager and the Principal Environmental Health Officer from Middlesbrough Council entitled ‘Private Sector Housing’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 26 October 2011.
 - (xii) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled ‘Scrutiny Investigation into Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from Durham County Council – Covering Report’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 26 October 2011.
 - (xiii) Presentation of representatives from Durham Council Housing Renewals and Improvements Services entitled ‘Private Sector Housing Initiatives’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 26 October 2011.
 - (xiv) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled ‘Scrutiny Investigation into Private Sector Housing Schemes – Written Evidence from Stockton Council’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 26 October 2011.
 - (xv) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled ‘Scrutiny Investigation into Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from the Neighbourhood Services Team – Covering Report’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 26 October 2011.
 - (xvi) Presentation of the Assistant Director of Neighbourhood Services entitled ‘Neighbourhood Services’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 26 October 2011.
 - (xvii) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled ‘Private Sector Housing Schemes – Feedback from Tenant Focus Groups and Responses to Questionnaires – Covering Report’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 26 October 2011.
 - (xviii) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled ‘Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from the Authority’s Portfolio Holder for Housing and Transition – Covering Report’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 9 November 2011.
 - (xix) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled ‘Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from the Health Improvement Team – Covering Report’ presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 9 November 2011.

- (xx) Presentation of the Assistant Director of Health Improvement entitled 'Health and Housing' presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 9 November 2011.
- (xxi) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled 'Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from Durham Tees Valley Probation Service – Covering Report' presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 18 January 2012.
- (xxii) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled 'Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from the Health Improvement Team – Covering Report' presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 18 January 2012.
- (xxiii) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled 'Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from the Housing Services Team – Covering Report' presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 18 January 2012.
- (xxiv) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer entitled 'Private Sector Housing Schemes – Evidence from the Housing Services Team – Covering Report' presented to the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Forum of 29 February 2012.