



Luton Private Sector Renewal Strategy 2010-2013

Improving and moving forward



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Introduction

Luton's Sustainable Communities Strategy 2008 and Local Housing Strategy (refreshed March 2010) both mention '*tackling poor conditions within the private sector housing stock*' as a key priority.

This Private Sector Renewal Strategy (PSRS) draws together information from 15 years of housing condition surveys and the current legislative framework set against the corporate objectives, to identify a series of priorities that will assist in making a difference to the condition of housing within Luton and the quality of life of local people.

To assess the condition of the housing in Luton, the Council commissioned borough wide housing condition surveys in 1990, 1995, 2000/1, and 2006. In preparing for the 2006 survey, the Council also commissioned the Building Research Establishment – Stock Progression Programme. (BRE-SPP) to help formulate the sampling process for subsequent individual property surveys.

Recognising the size of the challenge, the overarching aim of the PSRS is to contribute to the 'housing' outcomes within Luton's:

- refreshed 2010 Housing Strategy Action Plan
- Corporate Plan
- Community Plan
- Sustainable Communities Strategy
- Local Area Agreement
- Public Service Agreement Targets
- National Indicators.

To achieve this we will:

- work closely with our many partners within and outside the Council to achieve a privately owned housing sector which is accessible, of high structural quality, equipped with modern amenities, energy efficient, effectively managed and sufficiently diverse to meet a wide range of housing needs and preferences
- strive to ensure delivery of decent homes across all tenures.

Our focus and approach will be to:

- inform, educate and regulate the sector, deploying enforcement powers when appropriate;
- promote the menu of *Housing Options* available to homeowners, private sector landlords and tenants to support them to improve and maintain their homes; and
- provide a customer focused quality service.

Context

National Priorities

The key driver of national housing policy is a commitment to improving housing quality across all tenures including the owner-occupied sector, but accepts that some homeowners, particularly the elderly and most vulnerable, do not have the necessary resources to keep their homes to a good standard.

Specifically in terms of the private sector there is recognition that poor quality housing:

- is proven to have a negative impact on the health of the occupants
- contributes to social exclusion
- can lead to poor educational attainment
- has a negative impact on people's well being

There is a strong need to improve the standards in the private rented sector.

The Rugg Review

The previous Government commissioned a review of the Private Rented Sector in 2008 and the resulting Rugg Review made a series of recommendations on policy 'directions of travel' that seek to maximise the full potential of the Private Rented Sector

The Housing Minister for the new coalition Government has stated that there are no plans for new regulations covering the private rented sector and will not be taking forward proposals in the earlier Rugg Review.

Instead, the Minister calls on councils to use all existing powers at their disposal to tackle rogue landlords who fail to provide good quality accommodation and blight local neighbourhoods.

However, the Council will continue to support the following elements of the Rugg Review on the basis of best practice:

- **Developing a sound evidence base** by commissioning regular house condition surveys
- **Promoting housing management** through a local landlord accreditation scheme
- **Equalising the rental choices** by promoting the private rented sector as a real housing solution for many households

Regional and Sub-regional Priorities

The Draft East of England Regional Housing Strategy 2010 -2014 states that:

‘...Existing housing in the East of England will provide the majority of homes for many decades. Improving its quality and sustainability is therefore a key priority for achieving the vision as well as specific needs for regeneration and in delivering reductions in carbon emissions...’

And identifies the following priorities:

- Improving conditions in privately rented and owner-occupied homes
- Retrofit the existing stock to improve thermal comfort
- Develop a better understanding of and address the housing issues in areas in need of regeneration
- Making best use is made of the existing stock,

The Bedfordshire sub-regional Housing Strategy is currently under review, and will be superseded by a Partnership Business Plan which will feature issues around private sector renewal.

The Local Position - Luton

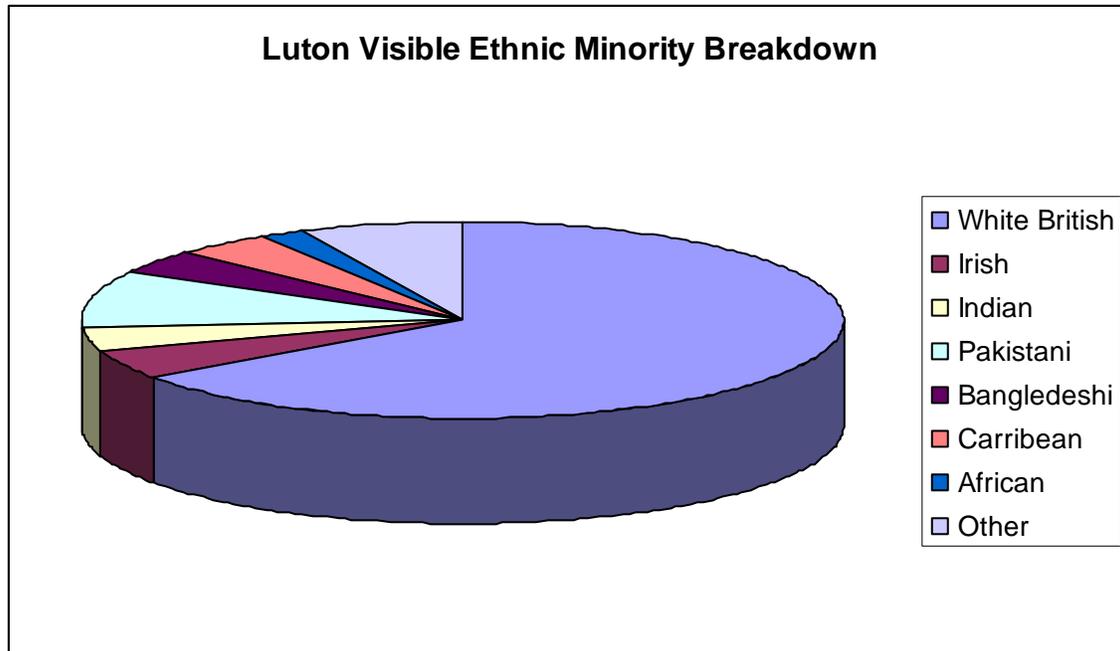
Background to Luton

The Borough of Luton is a geographically small urban unitary authority. The population at the last census was 187,000 although local estimates suggest this may have risen as high as 202,500.

The population of the town is also culturally diverse with 35% of local residents being non-white. The largest ethnic minorities being White Irish and Pakistani accounting for nearly a third of the total BME population. The remainder reflects the considerable ethnic diversity within the town.

There has also been significant levels on international in-migration from EU A8 countries (such as Poland) and from Africa.

Emerging evidence suggests that this is a sustained in-migration – in that the migrants are establishing family units in Luton. Research has been commissioned to provide detailed information on the composition of the town in 2010.



Source: 2001 Census Figures (note that this excludes recent in-migration)

Housing in Luton

Although Luton is 30 miles north of London, it faces many housing problems similar to those experienced by some London Boroughs.

Luton is densely populated, with a diverse local community, facing high demand for housing, particularly affordable housing. Many local people can no longer afford to buy their own home.

There is effectively no more land left for development in Luton and all new housing development has to take place on land previously built on. There is a shortage of Brownfield sites.

Luton also experiences high levels of homelessness, poor housing in the private sector and high levels of deprivation.

Recent housing needs data shows a continuing imbalance between supply and demand, with demand significantly outstripping supply. The most recent housing needs study concluded a shortfall of 934 units per year, with nearly 50% of this shortfall being affordable housing.

The Bedfordshire Strategy Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) 2010 also highlights a need for continued investment to deliver decent homes and improve thermal comfort in the private sector, focussing particularly on the needs of vulnerable occupiers. **The SHMA also recognised a steady increase since 1999 in the buy-to-let market across the country**

How does Luton compare with other authorities?

The evidence from the latest Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) published in 2007 by the CLG indicated that six of Luton's 121 super output areas¹ (SOAs) feature in the top 10% of the most deprived SOAs in England. Such areas are more likely than average to contain non-decent housing and much more likely to suffer from a poor quality environment.

Overall, in the rank of average scores, Luton now ranks at 87th place out of the 354 local authorities in England. In 2004, Luton ranked at 101st place. Therefore, relative to the rest of England, Luton is more deprived now than it was in 2004. Within the East of England, Luton's rank is the third highest (previously Luton had been in 5th place).

The regional picture indicates that relative to the rest of the East of England parts of Luton are considerably more deprived. 39 SOAs in Luton appear in the top 10% within the East of England.

Here is a quick snapshot of Luton's housing stock, with some comparisons to national averages:

- Luton is made up of 17% private rented accommodation (compared to 12.6% across all of England)
- Luton has a higher proportion of semi-detached houses than the national average
- Luton has a lower proportion of detached houses and bungalows than the national average
- Only 12% of dwellings in Luton were built prior to 1919 (compared to 24.4% nationally)
- 22.4% of Luton's private sector stock is non decent (this is compared to 34% across all of England according to the English House Condition Survey Headline Report 2008-09)
- 29% of vulnerable people in Luton live in non decent homes

[Source - Private Sector Stock Condition Survey 2006 Fordham Research]

¹ Super Output Areas are a number of Out Areas with common characteristics produce by the Office for National Statistics

Linking to other Strategies

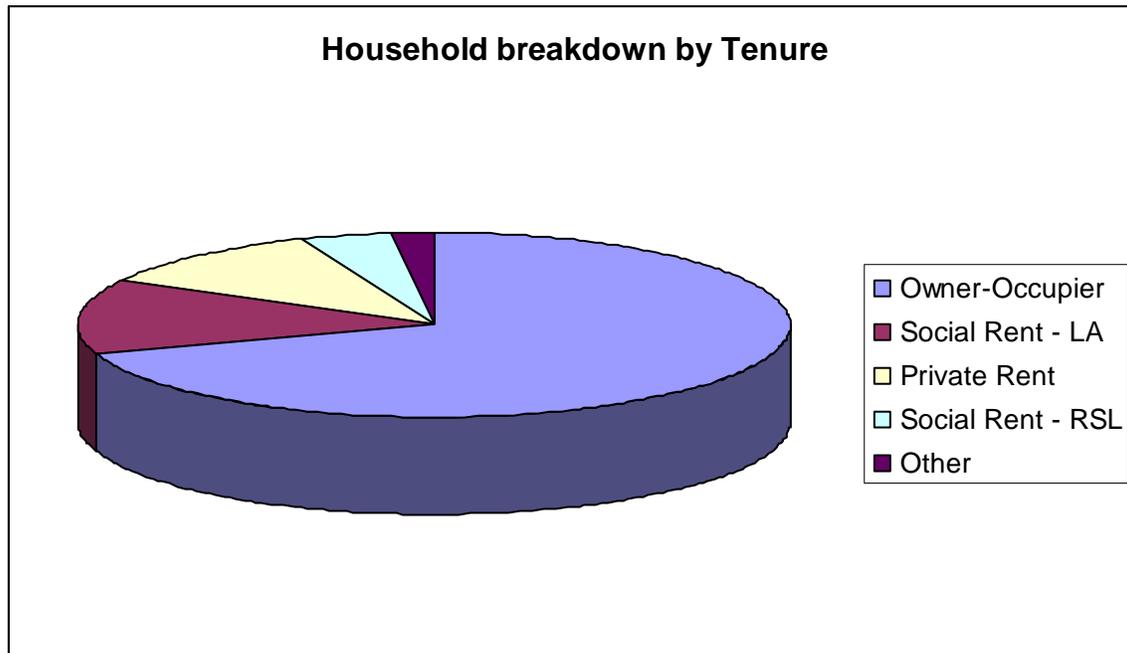
The work of the Private Sector Housing Team impacts on and contributes to a number of other Strategies and work areas across the Council. These include:

Strategy	Connection
<p>Supporting People Commissioning plan –</p> <p>Out priorities and strategy for commissioning housing related support over the next 3 years</p>	<p>The Supporting People commissioning priorities needs to have regard to the housing related support needs across all tenures.</p> <p>The Home Improvement Agency (HIA) will have a positive impact on vulnerable groups living in the private sector, but there are other groups that would also benefit from housing related support. There are serious tenancy sustainment issues in the private sector, which is the main cause of homelessness – but currently there are no housing related support contracts for tenants in the sector.</p>
<p>Luton Partnership Strategy to reduce health Inequalities 2010- 2026,</p> <p>A Joint PCT/LBC plan to reduce health inequalities in the areas with the worst health outcomes</p>	<p>Makes the connection between poor health and poor housing. Particular focus on the MSOA.</p>
<p>Anti Poverty Strategy</p>	<p>The impact of the introduction of the local housing allowance has the potential to have a negative impact on the private rented sector, generating more pressure on homelessness numbers. Close attention will be given to the impact of these changes.</p>
<p>Adult Social Care Commissioning Strategies</p>	<p>The need for suitable accommodation will feature within these strategies, and not all the accommodation will be provided from the public sector. Any accommodation from the private sector must be safe, secure and suitable.</p>
<p>Growth Area - Core Strategy Options</p>	<p>Although the development of the new</p>

Strategy	Connection
Core strategy is currently out for public examination, can link the shape your future website?	housing within Luton's growth area will not be coming in significant numbers by 2011, there will be a fundamental need to evaluate the impact the urban extensions into the growth areas outside the Borough will have on the existing housing.
Homelessness Strategy – Our plan for dealing with Luton's homeless families through prevention, mediation and assistance	The Homelessness Strategy uses the private sector to provide temporary accommodation for clients and Private Sector Housing Officers liaise closely with Temporary Accommodation Officers to ensure standards are maintained. Any Landlords/Agents used by the Temporary Accommodation Team will be Accredited Landlords.
Sustainable Community Strategy BMcG	The work of the Private Sector Housing Team links strongly to three of the Sustainable Community Strategy Objectives. These include Stronger & Safer Communities; Environment & Economic Development and Health & Well Being.
Empty Homes Strategy – Our plan to bring empty homes back into use, recognising they are a blight on local communities and a wasted resource	There are strong links with the Empty Homes Strategy. Private Sector Housing officers have powers to secure vacant premises against unauthorised access and, through the Empty Homes Officer, offer the Empty Homes Grant to encourage re-occupation.
LBC Environmental Strategy Framework	Environmental Strategy Framework gathers all local actions and concerns regarding the environment. Private Sector Housing work on housing stock improvements and in particular energy efficiency and affordable warmth feeds into this.

Private Sector Housing in Luton – summary and progress

Private sector dwellings are a very valuable and important housing resource in which over 80% the residents of Luton live. Within the sector, owner occupation is the largest tenure, but the borough also has a higher than average homes in the private rented sector.



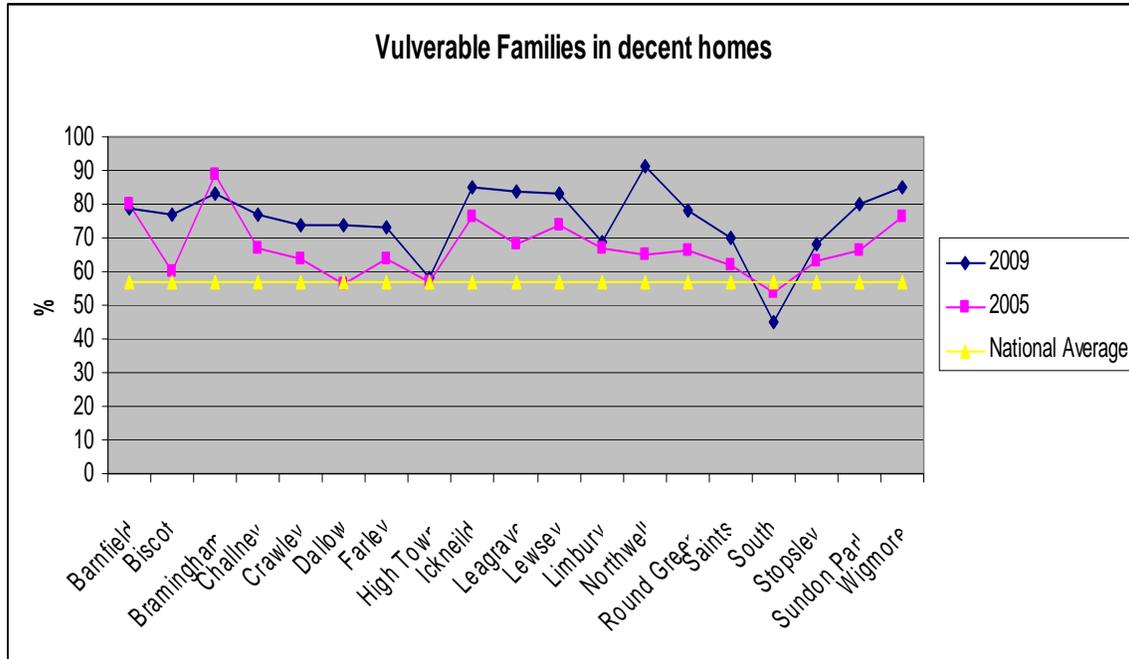
Source: ONS projections 2004

Progress in Luton’s Private Sector Housing 2005-2009

The condition of private sector stock in Luton is consistently above the national average:

Problem	Luton 2005	Luton 2009	National
Non Decent Stock	32%	32%	36%
HHSRS Cat 1	N/A	18%	24%
Vulnerable in Decent Home	65%	75%	57%
Fuel Poverty	7%	6%	12%
Disrepair	9%	6%	8%

Source: Housing Stock Modelling: Luton, BRE 2009



Source: Housing Stock Modelling: Luton, BRE 2009

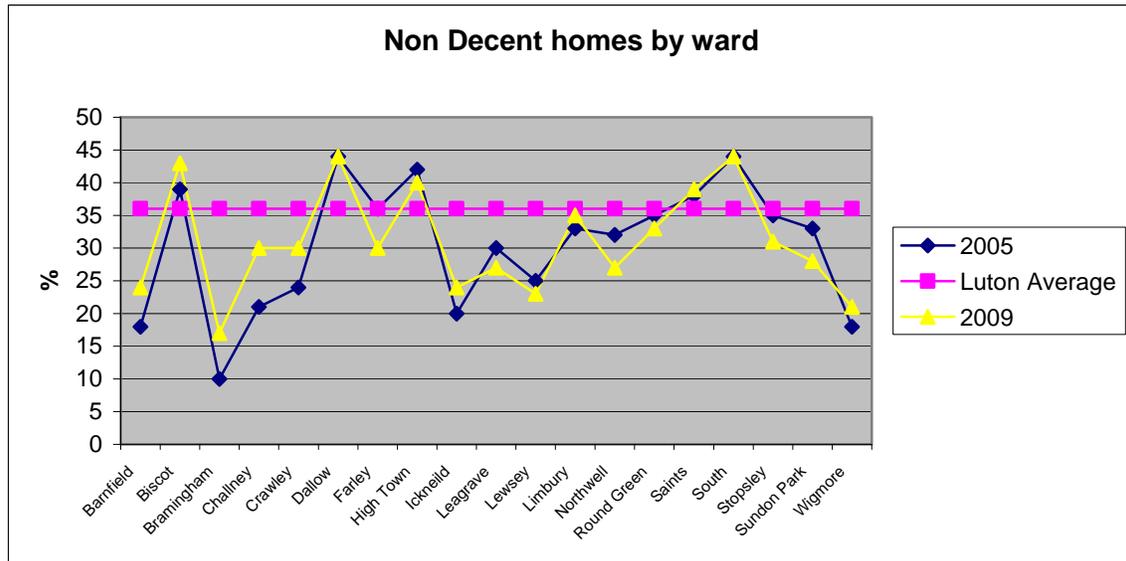
Furthermore the chart above shows a consistent increase in standards over the last four years, with the number of vulnerable families in decent homes rising drastically, with only one ward falling under the national average.

Whilst non-decency across Luton is below the national average there are wards which display high levels of non decency in their private sector stock. Notably South and Biscot wards where non decency amongst private sector stock is relatively high and continuing to increase.

Ward	Non Decent Private Stock 2005	Non Decent Private Stock 2009	Change 2005-2009
Barnfield	18%	24%	+6
Biscot	39%	43%	+4
Bramingham	10%	17%	+7
Challney	32%	30%	-2
Crawley	35%	30%	-5
Dallow	44%	44%	0
Farley	36%	30%	-6
High town	42%	40%	-2
Ickneild	20%	24%	+4

Leagrave	30%	27%	-3
Lewsey	25%	23%	-2
Limbury	33%	35%	+2
Northwell	32%	27%	-5
Round Green	35%	33%	-2
Saints	38%	39%	+1
South	44%	44%	0
Stopsley	35%	31%	-4
Sundon Park	33%	28%	-5
Wigmore	18%	21%	+3

Source: Housing Stock Modelling: Luton, BRE 2009



Source: Housing Stock Modelling: Luton, BRE 2009

It is clear that over the last four years:

- Private sector accommodation across the Borough has generally improved
- The number of vulnerable people occupying non decent homes has fallen dramatically and is well below the national average
- Fuel poverty in Luton has fallen
- Disrepair in Luton has fallen
- Thermal comfort standards have risen

However:

- Some wards still have high numbers of non decent homes, the single most common hazard being Excess cold
- Standards are falling in several wards including Biscot which already had a high number of non decent dwellings
- South ward is well above the national average for vulnerable households occupying non decent accommodation.

Overcrowding

Levels of overcrowding are measured using the “bedroom standard” - essentially this is the difference between the number of bedrooms needed to avoid undesirable sharing (given the number and ages of household members and their relationships to each other) and the number of bedrooms actually available to the household.

The Private Sector Housing Stock Condition Survey (2006) suggested that around 7.6% of private sector households in Luton are overcrowded, with around 1.4% of households being seriously overcrowded. These figures are consistent with the results of the 2001 Stock Condition Survey which suggested that around 8% of households were overcrowded (including RSL dwellings).

Nationally, the CLG English Housing Survey Headline Report 2008-09 reports that overcrowding was highest in the rented sectors, 6.7% of social rented households and 5.4% of private rented households were overcrowded as measured by the bedroom standard. In contrast, only 1.6% of owner occupiers were overcrowded.

Homelessness

With the increases in homelessness in Luton and the numbers of social housing units remaining constant, the private rented sector has become increasingly the tenure which fills the gap for the Council in attempting to meet the imbalance between supply and demand of affordable housing. The private rented sector is also a significant contributor to the homeless pressures in that evictions from the private rented sector are amongst the most significant causes of homelessness in Luton.

The Council's Homelessness Strategy is contained within a separate document.

The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) 2008 identified that:

- The proportion of 0-19 year olds in Luton is 28%, but thje figure is higher than this in the Biscot, Dallow, Farley, Legrave, Lewsey, Northwell, Saints and Wigmore wards.

- Income deprivation affecting children was high in Northwell, Biscot, Dallow, Lewsey, High Town, Round Green, South wards.
- six areas – two each in Biscot and Dallow and one each in High Town and Northwell wards – feature in the top 10% most deprived areas in England and Wales on the overall Index of Multiple Deprivation.
- Housing is a particular issue for older people as many older people live in the worst housing conditions or lack suitable accommodation. National statistics suggest a third of older people live in non-decent homes. This when over 65s spend 80% of their time in their homes (which rises to 90% in the over 85s). There are specific housing issues such as that older people are twice as likely to be unable to afford fuel in winter and thermally inefficient housing has been linked to increase in deaths in the colder months. They are also at the highest risk of dying in a dwelling fire.
- ONS experimental data suggest that 50-64 year olds are concentrated in Lewsey, Challney, Leagrave and Round Green wards; 65-74 year olds are concentrated in Lewsey and Challney wards; 75-84 year olds are concentrated in Lewsey, Challney, Icknield and Farley wards; and 85 year olds are concentrated in Challney, Biscot and Farley wards.
- Additionally ONS experimental data suggests that Biscot, Challney, Dallow, Farley, High Town, Icknield, Leagrave, Lewsey, Northwell, Round Green, Saints and South wards all exceed the All-Luton score (15.3%) for both “the percentage of people with a long-term illness” and “the percentage of people whose health was not good” with the top 3 wards in both cases being Farley, Lewsey and South wards.

Ward	% with limiting long term illness	Percentage of people whose health was Not good
Barnfield	11.2%	5.1%
Biscot	15.7%	9.0%
Bramingham	10.7%	4.6%
Challney	16.7%	8.25
Crawley	14.0%	7.1%
Dallow	15.6%	8.9%
Farley	18.1%	9.6%
High town	17.0%	8.6%
Icknield	16.3%	8.3%
Leagrave	16.3%	8.6%
Lewsey	17.2%	9.6%
Limbury	15.0%	7.4%

Northwell	16.2%	9.3%
Round Green	15.9%	8.2%
Saints	15.3%	8.4%
South	18.0%	10.1%
Stopsley	14.6%	7.0%
Sundon Park	13.9%	7.0%
Wigmore	10.0%	5.0%
All Luton	15.3%	8.1%

Source: ONS Experimental data

Poor Housing / Poor Health

The House Condition Survey identified four wards (Biscot, Dallow, High Town & South) with the highest levels of non-decency. These wards formed the original parts of the Town and contain the oldest housing.

Biscot & Dallow contain high levels of both 0-19 year olds and income deprivation affecting children.

Biscot, Dallow, High Town and South wards have high levels of people with a long term illness and people whose health was not good.

During the consultation with stakeholders on developing the local housing strategy, a key priority was to make the connection between good housing and good health. Within the work programme is an evaluation of targeting decent homes resources to those areas of the town with the poorest housing and the largest health inequalities.

Enforcement Action

The Enforcement Concordat

The Enforcement Concordat encourages Local Authorities to try and resolve matters informally although accepts that there will be instances where the Council will have to resort to formal action.

The Council has adopted the central and local government Concordat on Good Enforcement Practice which has the following guiding principles:

- **Openness:** to ensure that information and advice is provided in plain and simple language.

- **Helpfulness:** to ensure a courteous and efficient service is provided and that advice and assistance with compliance is provided.
- **Complaints about service:** to ensure the provision of well publicised, effective, timely and easily accessible complaints procedures to business, the public, employees and consumer groups.
- **Proportionality:** to ensure that action taken relates directly to the actual or potential risk to health, safety or the environment.
- **Consistency:** to ensure that duties are carried out in a fair, equitable and consistent manner.

The Housing Act 2004

The principal legislation used by the Council in enforcing standards in the private sector is the Housing Act 2004 which introduced the Housing Health and Safety Rating System replacing the previous housing unfitness criteria - in use for many years and which focused on remedial attention on the defects and deficiencies of the fabric of the dwelling. Details of the various categories of hazard in the Housing Health and Safety Rating System are included at Appendix B.

Emphasis is now on ensuring the health and welfare of the occupiers by tackling hazards, which may adversely impact on their health, safety and wellbeing.

The enforcement staff within the Private Sector Housing Team have been accredited to undertake assessments under the HHSRS, and enforcement action is regularly pursued to secure remedies.

Other Legislation

The Council has a wealth of other legislation at its disposal to raise standards in the Private Sector – key legislation includes:

- Public Health Act 1936 - to repair defective drainage; to deal with filthy & verminous premises
- Public Health Act 1961 - to repair defective drainage
- Environmental Protection Act 1990 - to deal with Nuisance arising from domestic premises
- Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 – to deal with accumulations of refuse leading to rodent infestation
- Building Act 1984 - to repair defective drainage
- Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions Act) 1982 – to secure empty premises

Prosecution/Works in Default

Where the Council is unable to resolve matters informally, formal Notice will be served requiring the rectification of defects within a specified time period. Where the defects remain, the Council will use its powers to prosecute offenders and/or carry out the Works in Default.

Empty Homes

Empty Properties cause a great deal of problems for neighbouring residents often being sites where refuse accumulates through fly-tipping and attracting rodent activity; and attracting squatters.

In addition to the Nuisance factor – Empty Properties represent potentially unutilised units of accommodation and the Council is keen to maximise the living accommodation within the Town, and will use the various legislation at its disposal to encourage their return to the useful housing stock.

There are approximately 722 Homes in Luton that have been empty for more than six months and consequently are classed as ‘Long-term Empty Homes’ The Council target an element of the grants programme to bring long term empty homes back into use.

The Council's Empty Homes Strategy is detailed in a separate document.

Houses In Multiple Occupation

A House In Multiple Occupation is defined as:

A house, with more than two separate households in residence, occupied as individual rooms, bed sits and flatlets with some sharing of amenities such as bathrooms, WCs and Kitchens.

The Private Sector Housing Stock Condition Survey (2006) estimated that there were 2,496 HMO dwellings at the time of the survey. Our own historical data puts the figure at 1650 and the actual figure is likely to be somewhere between the two. The following are some of the main characteristics of HMOs:

- HMOs are dominated by the private rented sector. It is estimated that over a quarter of private rented dwellings are also HMOs
- HMOs are typically older dwellings – just under half of HMOs are pre-1919 dwellings (45.8%) compared with only 12% of the overall private sector stock

Whilst all HMO buildings have the use of all basic amenities a number share facilities up to and worse than a ratio of 1:5, and over 10% were categorised as inadequately or poorly managed. There are significant improvements which can be made to fire detection systems with a quarter of HMOs having no fire detection system and half only having battery smoke detectors.

In terms of the HHSRS, it is estimated that 12.4% of HMOs have at least one Category 1 hazards and that 30.4% fail the decent homes standard. Both of these figures are significantly above the averages for the borough as a whole.

It is estimated that across Luton there are just under 200 HMO buildings which are likely to fall under the definition of a licensable HMO. At the present time a total of 40 HMOs have already been licensed and the Council is continuing its programme of encouraging landlords to bring their properties up to a standard where they can be licensed. Luton has also successfully prosecuted a local Landlord for failure to license resulting in a fine of £5,000 and then a subsequent payment of £1200 to one of the tenants under a Rent Repayment order.

The Council's approach to improving the conditions in HMOs is currently targeting those HMOs which require licensing – these HMOs tend to be larger dwellings and have a higher fire risk, whilst taking a reactive, risk based response to service requests using a series of key risk indicators to prioritise work.

Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation - HMO

The Licensing of Housing in Multiple Occupation requires that a building of three or more storeys (currently excluding self contained flats) which is occupied by five or more persons living as 2 or more households – must be licensed.

Additional licensing

Local Authorities have discretionary power which they may wish to apply to a particular designated area and particular category of HMO. This primarily targets HMOs which are considered to be managed ineffectively. The power for a LHA to designate areas is contained in section 56 of the Act. No such designated areas have yet been identified in Luton, requiring this action.

Landlord Accreditation

The Council is currently developing a Luton Landlord Accreditation Scheme where the Council recognises those properties in the private rented sector, which are well maintained and well managed. Accredited landlords would be required to comply with a range of standards covering areas including gas and electrical safety, general maintenance, fire precautions and management of properties.

The scheme would be voluntary and it would be up to individual landlords to decide if they wish to apply to join. It is expected that most landlords who maintain their properties in good condition will want to have that formally acknowledged and the list of Accredited Landlords would be available to potential tenants.

The Local Housing Assistance Policy

The Legislative Framework

In 2002, the Regulatory Reform Order (RRO) effectively, repealed much of the existing prescriptive legislation governing the provision of renewal grants to homeowners and replaced it with a new wide-ranging power to provide assistance for housing renewal with a range of options that include grants or combination of grants and loans. The RRO did not replace the existing system with a new one but effectively gave Local Authorities a blank page on which to set out their own Housing Renewal Policy to reflect the needs of their area and communities, which is detailed below:

Luton Housing Assistance policy

The Council has established the local policy for helping vulnerable owner-occupiers to maintain their homes. A number of discretionary forms of assistance have been developed and these are targeted at clients in receipt of income-related benefits. In every case where the applicant is a private tenant the works for which assistance is given will exclude any for which the Council is empowered by statute to require a landlord to carry out.

Referrals are also made to the Government Warm Front Scheme where clients require loft and/or cavity wall insulation.

- Decent Homes Assistance is available to allow applicants to repair their properties and is conditional upon achieving the Decent Homes Standard. The Council will award a maximum grant of £20,000 which will be subject to an interest-free charge on the property.
- Home Security Grants are available to allow applicants to install basic security measures such as window and door locks to their properties. These grants are limited to a maximum of £5,000.
- Healthy Heating Grants are available to applicants for the Government Warm Front Scheme, where the cost of the proposed works exceeds the maximum Warm Front Grant available. Healthy Heating Grants are also available for urgent repairs/replacement where the client is vulnerable and there is likely to be an unacceptable delay in the delivery of a Warm Front Grant.

In relation to people with disabilities the policy provides for the following interventions:

- Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants are available up to the mandatory limit (currently £30,000). The Council will offer additional monies where the cost of the works exceeds the mandatory limit, which will be subject to an interest-free charge on the property.
- Relocation Assistance is available to assist applicants for Disabled Facilities Grants with the cost of moving to a more readily adaptable home - the assistance is limited to a maximum of £10,000 and subject to an interest-free charge on the property.

The Council encourages private owners to bring vacant properties back into use by offering Empty Homes Grants

- Empty Homes Grants are available to owners of properties which have been vacant for a period of not less than two years. Assistance is given at a rate of 50% of the eligible expense and is limited to a maximum of £30,000 per application. In return for the Empty Homes Grant, Landlords must allow the Council nomination rights for a five year period.

The Housing Assistance Policy is covered in more detail in a separate document.

Other Housing Options

In addition to the Housing Assistance Policy the Council has developed the following *Housing Options*, which aims to address practical issues around condition of housing in the private sector.

Houseproud Scheme

The Council has entered into a partnership with the Home Improvement Trust (HIT), which is a “not-for-profit” organisation that aims to help homeowners aged 60 and over or households with a disabled person of any age, to further assist people to repair, improve or adapt their homes so they can continue living there safely and independently.

HIT provides access to loans that are both affordable and risk-free which are specially designed to meet the needs of older people and disabled people. The Houseproud Scheme complements the Council’s own Decent Homes Assistance scheme by being available to the client group detailed above regardless of benefit entitlement.

Luton’s Housing Assistance Agency Service

The Council operates an in-house Agency to assist the over-60s and disabled people through the Housing Assistance process.

The Agency will assist as follows:

1. the completion of the application form and the submission of any relevant information required for the Test of Resources.
2. the preparation of any necessary plans and their submission to the Council’s Building Control Section and Planning Department.
3. the selection of a reputable builder through a closed competitive tendering process.
4. the preparation of a written contract (with a retention sum of 5% for a six months defects liability period) between the applicant and the builder
5. the supervision of all works through to completion
6. a retention inspection after six months prior to the release of the builder’s money

In addition, all larger works carried out through the Agency are the subject of Luton Borough Council Warranty Scheme.

Regeneration initiatives

The Council has a very successful track record of attracting funding for regeneration initiatives working in partnership with RSLs, residential developers, landowners, and the former Housing Corporation and the Single Regeneration Budget delivering good quality affordable housing in areas of the town that have high levels of need and levels of multiple deprivation.

The challenge for the Council in the very severe pressure on the public finances will be to secure adequate funding for future projects.

A key task for the future is for the council with partner agencies and other funders to seek out and secure funding to deliver new regeneration programmes.

Standards

Service Standards

The private sector housing renewal is delivered by the Private Sector Housing Teams within the Housing and Community Living Department. The framework for service delivery is set out in the published *Service Standards*, which covers the timeliness and quality of the services provided.

These service standards are included at Appendix C (Housing Assistance) and Appendix D (Enforcement).

Customer care

The PSRS is delivered by the Private Sector Housing Team, and aims to provide an easily accessible customer focused service. The front of house service is provided through the corporate customer contact centre.

Customer satisfaction questionnaire are provided for all service requests but the response level is less than 10%, although the satisfaction rate of respondents is very positive. The format of the questionnaire is being reviewed currently to increase the response rate.

Mindful of the diverse local community, all documents are made available on request in the various languages spoken by the local community. The take up of grants and the enforcement action taken is monitored against ethnic minorities to ensure the equity of the service.

Equality Impact Assessment

The PSRS and the Grants Policy have both been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment – the outcomes of which have been featured in the Equality Action and Improvement Plan.

Budget and resources

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Housing General Fund					
Private Sector Repair/Improvement [capital programme]	1,202,000	3,475,000	2,300,000	2,300,000	2,300,000
Private Sector Housing [Revenue Costs]			1,829		
Central Government Contribution					
DFGS	586,000	487,000	510,000	492,000	492,000
Decent Homes	340,000	440,000	440,000	251,672	173,000

Within the medium term financial plan, additional capital resources have been allocated from 2008/9 onwards to increase the programme.

Priorities for Action

This section of the strategy outlines the options and priorities that, following widespread consultation, the Council has decided will be progressed during the next three years.

Decent Homes Assistance

The system of providing owner occupiers with interest free loans to bring homes up to the decent homes standard has been in place for two years. Take up has been slow and the scheme is under review. A key aspect of that review will be the options around targeting the programme to the areas of the Borough with the poorest housing and the biggest health inequalities.

Energy Efficiency

The hazard of excess cold has been identified across the country as the single most common failure of the HHSRS standard. Inefficiency in heating appliances can lead to increased CO₂ emissions and, nationally a third of CO₂ emissions are attributed to households, especially to space and water heating.

We have previously achieved beacon status for our affordable warmth programme and the Council has seen its investment in the Housing Assistance program rise in relation to those forms of Assistance targeting Energy Efficiency – Cosy Homes Grants and Healthy Heating Assistance, and it is expected that this area will continue to grow as prices in fuel increase. Luton was part of the Eon project of improving 100 homes in a 100 days – which will provide invaluable research into the impact of improved thermal comfort.

In the rented sector the Council will continue to tackle properties exhibiting excess cold using its Statutory Powers.

A programme of energy awareness sessions for residents is being developed in cooperation with Adult Community Learning, Community Development and the Council's Climate Change Team.

Houseproud Scheme

Similar to the Decent Homes Assistance, the partnership with Home Improvement Trust (HIT) has had very limited take up, although there has been increased activity in recent months, and as yet has secured only a very limited additional investment in the private sector. The aim is to re-launch the initiative with applicants on the Grants Waiting List.

Empty Homes Initiatives

There are in the region of 200-300 hard core long term empty homes in Luton, and the current approach of persuasion is having limited effect. A review of the current range of empty homes initiatives and enforcement action will be undertaken with a view to improve performance.

The Empty Homes Strategy is covered in more detail in a separate document.

Home Improvement Agency

The Council was awarded beacon status for its work surrounding Affordable Warmth measures which centred around the multi-agency Warmer Luton Partnership. The Partnership comprised a number of key agencies with a shared vision to improving the homes of vulnerable clients across Luton and although focussed on energy efficiency/thermal comfort measures, included access to income maximization, money advice, social care and prevention services.

Recognising its success, the Council is building on existing partnerships both within and external to the Council to provide a Home Improvement Agency, comprising the following elements:

Service	Provider
Major Works Agency - Assistance with major repairs/adaptations through the Council's Housing Assistance Scheme (Disabled Facilities Grants/Decent Homes Assistance etc)	Private Sector Housing
Equity Release scheme - Loans for repairs/adaptations through the Council's Partner, Houseproud.	The Home Improvement Trust
Home Fire Safety Scheme - Free home fire safety checks plus installation of free smoke alarms and energy saving light bulbs	Bedfordshire and Luton Fire and Rescue services.
Warm Front Scheme - To help private households (owner occupier and private rented tenants) access the Government Warm Front grant	EAGA
Healthy Heating Scheme - Warm Front top-ups – to pay any excess arising above the limit of the Warm Front Grant; Emergency Heating – to install heating/repair for highly vulnerable clients (who cannot sustain a delay) who have an immediate need assessed by a health professional.	Private Sector Housing
Benefit Advice - to assist and support people to maximise their income by carrying out benefit checks and providing comprehensive support to apply for appropriate benefits including representation at appeals and tribunals where necessary.	Luton Citizen Advice Bureau
Access to Social/Community Support - Screening all referrals requiring elements of Social assistance and referring on including Social Support; Information & advice (excl benefits); Advocacy; Carers support; Handyperson scheme	LBC Adult Social Care
Minor Adaptations/DASH - Provision of minor adaptations to assist clients in and around their home such as grab rails for front door;	LBC Occupational

chair-raisers; tap-adapters; half-steps etc	Therapy
Signposting Service - Offering housing-related advocacy, advice, assisting with obtaining or accessing funds for home improvement and/or maintenance such as equity release, grants and signposting to other HIA partners and other relevant services, to CLS Quality Mark Standard. Production and distribution of public information factsheets and leaflets.	Luton Age Concern
Hospital Discharge Service - Assisting with moving beds/furniture to facilitate hospital discharge, and other minor aids and adaptations.	Luton Age Concern
Provision of Key Safes - Providing a coded-security advice enabling access by carers where a householder cannot open the door.	Luton Age Concern
Radiator Loan Scheme - Households with no access to heating provisions can be loaned two oil-filled radiators until heating issues are resolved.	Luton Age Concern
Financial Advice - Offering financial advice for example money management, budget planning.	Luton Age Concern
Home Audits - Identifying works to improve energy efficiency, Home Safety, Home Maintenance and Home Security and signposting to other services.	Eastern Training Ltd
Home Security Grant - The provision of basic measures to improve Home Security.	Eastern Training Ltd/ Beds Police Partnership
Handyperson Scheme - The provision of minor repairs and other works	Eastern Training Ltd/ Luton Age Concern

The HIA is currently in its pilot phase with a review scheduled for September 2010 and the aim to commission a long-term HIA by April 2011.

Landlords Accreditation Scheme

A Landlords Accreditation Scheme is being developed with the support of the Luton Housing Partnership and the Landlords Forum and is expected to be launched in Summer 2010.

Overcrowding

Luton has secured funding across the Council from the Migration Impacts Fund (MIF) to deliver activities in the services most affected by legal migration. These include skills, community safety, housing, public health, children and young people, and integration.

With the agreement of the Local Public Service Board, the MIF funding has been used to appoint an additional Private Sector Housing Officer with the specific aim of kick-starting an inspection programme of non-licensable HMOs using a risk based approach.

It is felt likely that the cheapest accommodation within the Town is likely to be within HMOs and these in turn are likely to prove the most attractive to the migrant population who are often undertaking low-income work, and are hence likely to exhibit higher levels of overcrowding.

Mandatory licensing

The ongoing programme of inspection of HMO's within the Borough requiring licensing will continue. This programme of inspection will include those multi occupied properties that fall outside the HMO registration to ensure that standards are maintained.

Maintaining a high level of inspection is seen as a key factor in maintaining standards in this traditionally poor end of the private sector to let market.

Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

The Council is currently reviewing its commissioning strategies for Adult Social Care and DFGs play an important part in promoting independence. The aim is to maximise the benefits of the programme, by delivering a service that is as responsive as possible to meet individuals' needs. The Government is planning changes to the DFG regime, following a national consultation exercise. The DFG policy and Adult Social Care Commissioning strategies will be reviewed to reflect the changes.

The Council's Luton Excellence team has recently focussed on the provision of Disabled Facilities Grants within the Borough and has suggested a number of improvements which are the subject of a separate action plan.

Value for money

As part of the corporate approach to Value for Money assessments, the costs of the Private Sector Housing Adaptations Service have recently been reviewed with the following results:

- Comparing the services costs over the last 3 years, the service is now providing more grants than at any point in the last three years and is doing so for only a very slight increase in cost.
- Users are receiving a lot more product for a little more resource.

In addition to this, users surveys show increasing levels of satisfaction with the service provided by the team. External benchmarking is now under way and the results will be used to compare the internal costs with like authorities.

Private Sector House Condition Survey

The 2006 survey, was refreshed in 2009 using the BRE-SPP model and will require refreshing by 2014 the aim will be to undertake on a sub-regional basis.

10. Consultation

In developing this Strategy, and / or specific elements within – the following consultees have been involved with the outcomes indicated:

Consultee	Outcome
Luton Housing Partnership	<p>Emphasised the importance of making the health housing connection</p> <p>Recognised the importance of improving the private sector – NI 187 – affordable warmth indicator to feature in the LAA local key performance indicators.</p> <p>PSA 7 to be retained as a measure of the success in reducing the numbers of vulnerable households living in non decent homes.</p>
Landlord and Letting Agent Forums	<p>Provides updates on legislation accompanied by workshops and is a discussion forum for exchange of information with a view to creating better practices and improved standards.</p> <p>Support for the promotion of a more comprehensive accreditation service.</p> <p>Recognised the role that the private rented sector will play in supporting the Council's homelessness prevention role.</p>
Bedfordshire Sub-Regional Group	<p>Continues to support the importance of private sector renewal within the sub-regional strategic objectives.</p>
Housing Assistance applicants	<p>Views on procedures and performance from satisfaction questionnaires.</p> <p>Extensive consultation on the local Housing Assistance policy.</p>
	Supported the introduction of a Landlord

Housing Conference January 2010	accreditation scheme. Supported the promotion of housing within the Local Strategic Partnership
Focus group	