

## Section 3: Action on Bury's existing homes

Most of the homes Bury residents will be living in, in 2030, already exist. Many people are living in a decent home that suits their needs but too many are living in poor quality homes and circumstances.

A 2018 report by the Smith Institute for the Northern Housing Consortium called *The Hidden Cost of Poor Quality Housing in the North*<sup>7</sup> showed Bury to be around the average for northern boroughs on a range of criteria relating to housing stock condition. Despite being slightly above average for fuel poverty, this still means that around 5,000 Bury households were found to be living in fuel poverty. It cites Office of National Statistics figures that show Bury has a significantly higher percentage of Excess Winter Mortality (EWM) than both the regional and national average.

This section explains how we will work with landlords and tenants as well as homeowners to take action on Bury's existing housing. The theme is continued in Section 4 which focuses on providing better access to a suitable permanent home and in Section 6 that considers how to address unhealthy homes as part of a broader focus on health and wellbeing.

### 3.1 Improving condition of Council homes

In 2018, Six Town Housing undertook a stock condition survey of Council homes and developed an Asset Management Strategy for investment in our homes over the three years to 2021 within a 30-year investment plan as part of our overall HRA business plan.

The Council has since declared a Climate Change Emergency and set a target to achieve carbon neutral homes by 2038. In the light of this, and of the need for ongoing investment in our homes to maintain the asset and provide decent homes for tenants, we will undertake a further 'Stock Condition and Eco-analysis' to ascertain both the condition of our stock and the 'carbon status' of homes. We will use this to generate a plan of action for achieving a new 'Bury Eco-Standard' that will replace the current Bury Standard. We are currently proposing three strands to this action plan, as set out in Section 7 of this strategy.

### 3.2 Action on leasehold properties on Council-owned estates

There are around 4,000 privately owned, former Right to Buy properties mixed with properties managed by Six Town Housing.

There may be opportunities for joint investment, for example, for installing zero carbon measures such as solar PV, energy advice, ECO-grants. There might also be opportunities for

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<sup>7</sup> Northern Housing Consortium constituency profile for Bury: <https://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/constituency-profiles/2018/north-west/2/bury-south.pdf>

general works to the public realm that would help sustain the wider community and neighbourhood, making it a better place to live more general improvements

### **3.3 Health and safety and improved powers of redress**

Six Town Housing has a Fire Safety Policy and Management Plan which is regularly reviewed and monitored by Board. We will continue to review this and to install relevant fire safety and other measures in response to recommendations from the Grenfell Inquiry. Six Town will also set out further measures to provide greater redress, better regulation and improve the quality of social housing, including a review of its tenant scrutiny arrangements in line with the proposed Social Housing White Paper

### **3.4 Improving and expanding the role of the private rented sector**

Almost 15% of Bury's residents live in private rented accommodation, ranging from less than 10% of Tottington's residents to almost 18% of Prestwich's residents. Private tenants include 'active choice' renters and 'frustrated would-be' homeowners and the sector also meets some of the long-term affordable housing need of the borough. Bury's relatively high private rents – which have increased by over 20% over the last ten years – mean that even lower quartile properties (the 25% of cheapest properties) are often not affordable to some households.

Bury Council's overall approach is to improve private renting experience for all tenants and landlords and increase move-on accommodation for homeless people. Making a positive difference to the lives of private tenants is also a priority across Greater Manchester (Strategic Priority A2 in the GM Housing Strategy).

We will work proactively with landlords to drive positive relationships and high property and management standards including through the GMCA Good Landlords Scheme. We will coordinate this with our 'ethical lettings' scheme providing financial and legal reassurances regarding letting to benefit claimants and a vehicle for meeting high standards through a leasing option. We will combine these positive approaches with proactive enforcement to address sub-standard practices and properties where necessary.

It is important that we provide appropriate 'tenancy sustainment' support for private tenants; this is addressed in Section 5 of this strategy.

#### **3.4.1 Encouraging high standards: accreditation through the GM Good Landlord Scheme**

To encourage good management in the sector we will engage with the Greater Manchester Good Landlord Model being developed, working with Bury's landlords and tenants to make it work well locally. Landlords who maintain their properties to a decent, safe standard and treat residents fairly when it comes to rents, deposits, length of tenancies and eviction will be able to become accredited. This will help prospective tenants to know which are the good condition and well managed properties and should help to drive up standards.

We will look for ways of encouraging our landlords to be a part of national information networks, such as the National Residential Landlords Association that has the latest up to date legal information and guidance landlords require to have the necessary knowledge to manage their properties effectively.

### **3.4.2 Ethical and sustainable private sector lettings**

The Council is in discussions with a GMCA initiative called GM Let Us, to provide a facility for all private landlords across Greater Manchester to access an 'ethical lettings agency'.

The purpose would be three-fold:

- to provide a high-quality lettings service for private landlords that supports both tenants and landlords well
- to provide a means of bringing private rental properties up to a decent and low carbon standard
- to increase the supply of long-term tenancies in healthy, suitable homes for people in housing need, particularly homeless people and rough sleepers

We are currently considering our options for delivering the different elements of our Ethical Lettings agency. Options currently comprise:

- Six Town Homes to take on this role for Bury landlords and private tenants
- Work with partners in the GM Let Us ELA Framework or directly with one of the partners to Let Us that has already established its ethical lettings agency
- For Bury Council to lead on some aspects, such property improvement, with Six Town or a Registered Provider providing other functions such as the ongoing management service

### **3.4.2 HMO Licensing**

The scope of mandatory licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) broadened in 2018 so many properties that didn't meet the criteria for licensing now do. Building on the improvements to standards that have been achieved through our current HMO Licensing Scheme, we will proactively seek out and enforce against landlords and agents who have not yet obtained a license. This will raise additional revenue to support our enforcement activity.

### **3.4.4 Enforcement action against poor management and property conditions**

We will continue to enforce against poor management practices and poor property conditions across the borough, where private rented homes do not meet legal standards. We will draw on a range of legal powers including those in the Housing Act 2004 and the Housing and Planning Act 2016 that provides the powers to impose a civil penalty of up to £30,000 as an alternative to prosecution for certain housing offences. We will deliver increasingly proactive enforcement approaches, driving improvement in partnership with

landlords. We may consider Selective Licensing if there are indications that a place-based approach would work better, although this is not our first option for driving improvement.

### 3.5 Bringing empty homes back into use

There are 2,770 vacant dwellings (3.3%) in Bury, which is a little above the national vacancy rate. However, around 40% have been unoccupied for at least 6 months. If a proportion of these could be brought back into use, that would help to increase the supply of homes for occupation across the borough. Long-term vacant dwellings also affect the image of an area and can lead to other problems in the neighbourhood such as crime and antisocial behaviour.

#### Action on empty properties

The Council acquired and refurbished 48 empty homes, and these are now managed and let by Six Town Housing.

While short term empty properties are unavoidable, we discourage homes being left empty for long periods. The Council charges an 'Empty Property Premium' off 200% of Council Tax on properties that have been empty and unfurnished for more than 2 years, rising to 300% on properties that have been empty for over 5 years.

We are currently reviewing our strategy for identifying and bringing long-term empty homes back into use. We intend to publish an updated Empty Homes Strategy that will detail a mix of methods including the potential to let through the Ethical Lettings Scheme. This will include consideration of:

- The use of Council Tax records to map the location of dwellings that have been empty for more than 2 years
- Inviting Bury residents to bring long-term empty homes to our attention
- The effectiveness of the current financial disincentives to keep properties empty
- What further assistance, incentives or sanctions might be offered
- Use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders and other powers in the Housing Act 2004 to intervene
- The extent to which any future Ethical Lettings Scheme might support lease or purchase and refurbishment of homes for letting
- The potential for the increase in supply to add to our affordable housing supply

We will look at best practice from other places to inform this strategy. We will also aim to use the latest low carbon technology on any refurbishments the Council undertakes.

### 3.6 Adapting homes for people to live well in the community

Over 60% of people over the age of 65 want to live in their current homes for as long as possible, with support when needed, and this rises to over 85% of people over the age of 85. This represents a growing group of people, giving that our population is ageing.

Bury's aim is for everyone to live well within their homes and communities for as long as possible and to reduce the need for the more institutional settings such as care homes and specialist housing schemes. Living in a home that is free from hazards, supports mobility and enables older people and others with disabilities to live well, is key to achieving this. We are intending to upgrade how we work to adapt homes across all sectors to make them fit for the occupants to live well and reduce hospital use.

The Council will update its Financial Assistance Policy that sets out how Disabled Facilities Grant (within the Better Care Fund) will be spent. This will improve flexibility enabling the Council to assist more residents and provide more timely solutions to enable residents to live in their homes for longer.

We will also review provision of existing adapted properties across Bury to enable better matching with occupants who need an adapted home.

Some of the RPs operating in Bury have particular specialisms, for example in paid-for handyperson services, falls prevention, facilitating hospital discharge. We will explore how we might work with them to make these more widely available to Bury residents.

### **3.7 Redeveloping our traveller site**

The Council and Six Town Housing is progressing the redevelopment of Fernhill Traveller site to meet modern standards.