

# At home in Tewkesbury Borough

## A housing strategy for our borough 2017-2021

### Appendix 1d: Our Local Evidence – Improving the Health and Well-Being of Local People



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# 1 Introduction

This document outlines the evidence gathered by Tewkesbury Borough Council showing the housing and homelessness context in which the council is working.

We have used this evidence to identify 4 priorities for housing and homelessness along with key objectives for the next 5 years.

The strategy will link with the priorities outlined in the Council Plan 2016-2020, set out the council's priorities and objectives for housing, and appropriate activities that will help us to meet our statutory housing duty under the Housing Act 1996.

Housing is a priority in the Tewkesbury Borough Council Corporate Plan because:

*“We recognise how important it is for residents to be able to access good quality housing and housing related services that make a real difference to their lives.*

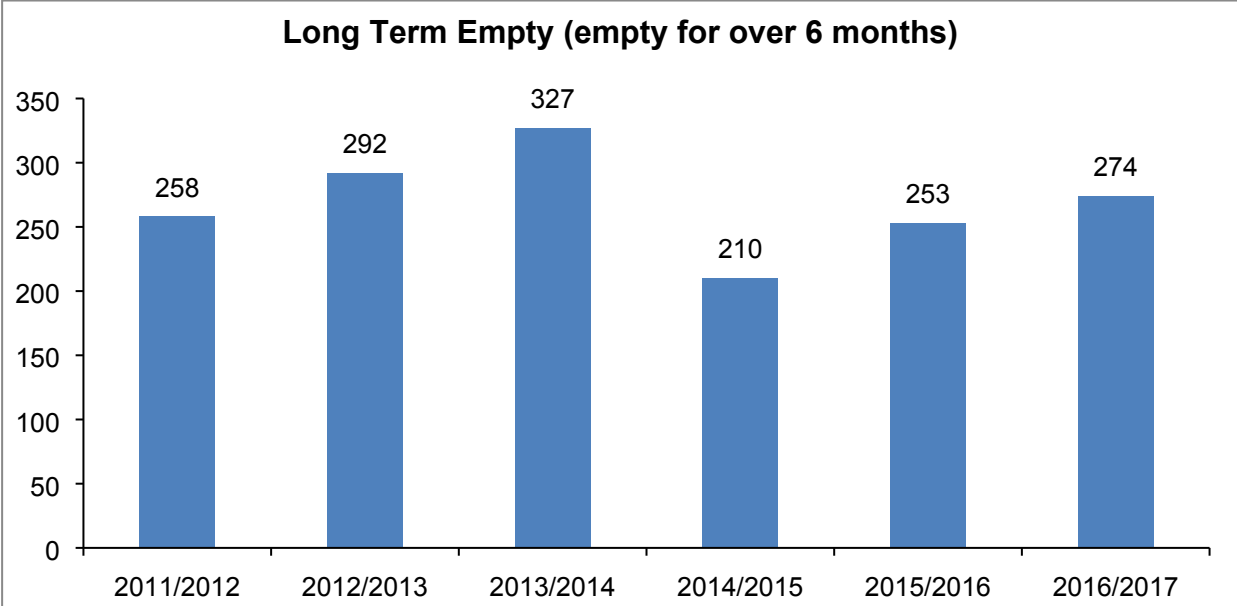
*“Not only is housing important for the health and well-being of residents it is also an important part of building and maintaining strong communities and supporting the economic prosperity of the borough.”*

Tewkesbury Borough Council recognises that access to quality affordable housing underpins the success of our area and all of the overarching corporate priorities.

## 2 Long term empty homes

The Environmental Health team works closely with partners on initiatives handling operational (enforcement) actions to bring empty homes back into use. Most empty homes brought back into use will become private sector homes. Chart 1 shows the number of long term empty properties since 2011/12.

Chart 1: Number of long term empty properties: Tewkesbury Borough 2011/12



Source: Tewkesbury Borough Council dataset

The Council’s Environmental Health team aims to ensure that each property achieves the highest standard. Enforcement options will include the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) under the Housing Act 2004, Empty Dwelling Management Orders, enforced sale and compulsory purchase orders.

The Council recognises that the private rented sector is growing and will need to continue to do so to help meet housing needs in the district. The Council takes its statutory enforcement role seriously and where landlords are not meeting the standards required will deliver a robust service. This is particular important that the Council can now discharge its homelessness duty into the private rented sector. Ensuring such homes are available and appropriate and that the tenancy can be sustained is, therefore, increasingly important.

However, whilst a large proportion of the Environmental Health team's time is spent on enforcement this is only to deal with a small proportion of the worst private rented housing. Enforcement should only need to be a last resort. We wish to place a larger emphasis on the proactive role the Council will play in helping landlords in the early stages. This is in particular for owners where being a landlord is not their core business, or reluctant landlords such as those who inherit a property but do not wish to sell it. The Council will promote sources of advice that are available to landlords, existing private tenants and residents considering private renting.

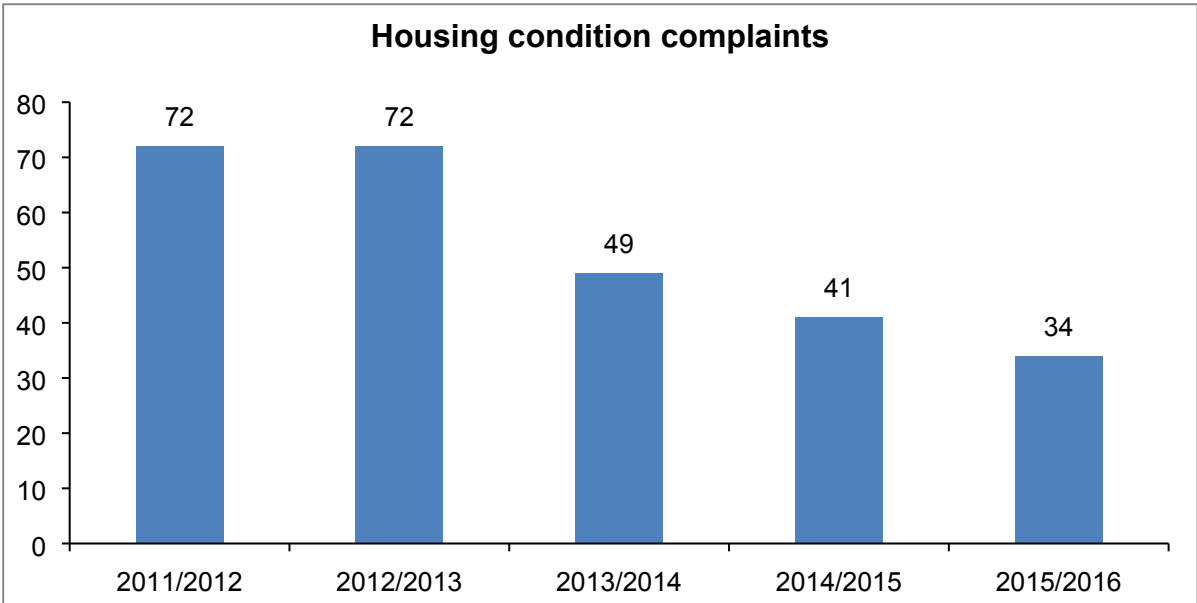
### 3 Housing Standards

Tewkesbury Borough Council has duties under the Housing Act 2004 to keep standards in homes under review and to take action on poor housing conditions.

The condition of the existing housing stock is important to ensure that residents are living in decent, safe accommodation which is suited to their needs. The condition of the housing stock is important to ensure that the increase in net housing stock through growth is not offset by a reduction in the number of existing homes which are habitable. Equally it is necessary to mitigate against the potential unintended consequence of growth that poor quality private sector housing leads to migration from existing communities into more attractive new housing developments leading to low demand neighbourhoods.

Living in poor condition, cold, damp homes that are not suitable for a household's needs have a detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of the occupiers. When accidents and illness occur because homes are not fit, it has an impact on a person's ability to participate in work, education, social and other activities and consequently impacts on social care services and the NHS. Chart 2 shows the number of housing condition complaints to Tewkesbury Borough Council since 2011/12.

*Chart 2: Number of housing condition complaints made to Tewkesbury Borough Council 2011/12 - 2015/16*



Source: Tewkesbury Borough Council dataset

The majority of home owners will, therefore, be offered no more than self-help to secure home improvements. Nevertheless, the Council recognises that there will be situations where support is necessary and appropriate for vulnerable home owners.

The Environmental Health Team offers advice that aims to demonstrating to a private landlord the works that are needed to avoid enforcement action being taken against them, for landlord accreditation and or for the property to be accepted onto a Local Letting Agency; they also provide an owner of an empty home with details of the works necessary to put the property in a state suitable for letting or that are likely to affect the sale price of the property.

The Council will take appropriate action against landlords and home owners as appropriate in accordance with the Council's Enforcement Concordat, Enforcement Policy and Scheme of Officer Delegation. This includes a period of informal action to encourage a landlord to take action voluntarily.

There are thought to be exceptionally few Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) requiring mandatory licensing in Tewkesbury Borough. Progressing licenses has, therefore, not been a priority to date. Nevertheless, the Council now recognises it should pursue owners operating a licensable HMO illegally. Where a HMO requiring a license comes to the attention of the Council, the Environmental Health team shall send a standard application pack to the owner.

Discussions with our local Registered Providers have indicated that following the 1% rent reduction and assessments of their financial position, they are seeking alternatives to their current ways of working. This is particularly important when the council has become increasingly more reliant on them to provide Affordable Housing. Some are looking to reduce non-essential elements of the business such as community work, levying service charges to counteract the impact of these reductions and also bringing in stricter affordability levels to house only those tenants with good payment histories to guarantee rent is paid.

### **3.1 Improving Housing Conditions in the Private Rented Sector**

Tewkesbury Borough Council along with the other district councils in Gloucestershire run and encourage landlords to join the "Fit to Rent" property accreditation scheme to inspect and approve houses let out to tenants. It is a voluntary and free service for landlords in the county which recognises good quality, well managed private lettings. The scheme aims to encourage good practice in the private rented market by giving approval to landlords and lettings that meet property standards and a management code of practice.

Certain minimum standards are required before a Fit to Rent certificate is issued to a landlord. The inspection is by the Environmental Health Department and covers such issues as fire safety, kitchen and bathroom facilities and room sizes. Annually, a landlord event is hosted by the six local authorities in Gloucestershire. This, together with an annual newsletter, helps to disseminate information from central government on legislative requirements and changes that will affect landlords.

Currently, there is a countywide website hosted by Cotswold District Council<sup>1</sup> We have also produced a landlord handbook which is free to all Fit to Rent landlords. Over 180 properties have already been accredited in Gloucestershire. At Tewkesbury Borough Council there are 6 landlords with 9 properties awarded 'Fit to Rent' status.

### **3.2 Houses in Multiple Occupation**

In addition to the Fit to rent Scheme some properties are required to pass more stringent legal requirements for a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) licence.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.cotswold.gov.uk/go/landlord](http://www.cotswold.gov.uk/go/landlord)

There are only 6 houses in multiple occupation licensed in the borough. Nevertheless we will continue to regulate these and other houses in multiple occupation and work to identify others who may need a licence.

### **3.3 Private sector leasing scheme**

The Gloucestershire Private Sector Leasing Scheme is a project to lease properties from private landlords to provide housing for local people from all sectors of the community. Private sector landlords who want to rent their property out, but do not wish to manage it, can lease the property to a partner housing association for up to five years. The housing association will manage the property on behalf of the landlord, housing tenants from the council's waiting list. When the lease period comes to an end the housing association guarantees to return the property to the landlord in the same condition as at the start of lease. Throughout the lease period the landlord receives a guaranteed monthly rent, even during void periods.

Mears Plexus who operate the scheme is dedicated to managing residential property in partnership with landlords, investors and local authorities. At the time of publication, 9 properties are managed by the service in Tewkesbury Borough.



## 4 Housing Conditions

Tewkesbury Borough Council gives advice on, and can take enforcement action to deal with problems arising in rented properties. Examples include housing conditions, drainage, nuisance, vermin and accumulations.

The housing health and safety rating system (HHSRS) is the means by which a home is judged for suitability to be lived in. It applies to all homes be they owner-occupied or tenanted. Tewkesbury Borough Council officers are trained to use the HHSRS. Enforcement action to remedy any hazards found in a property can be in many forms. It can range from a legal notice to make sure the owner is aware of a problem or hazard, right through to immediate closure of a property considered to be too dangerous to live in.

Between 1st April 2015 and 31st March 2016 Tewkesbury Borough Council dealt with 36 complaints regarding property conditions and served one housing conditions improvement notice.

Tewkesbury Borough Council has built relationships and contacts with organisations such as the National Landlords Association and Gloucestershire Landlords Association. This has helped to spread the message of encouraging landlords to make their properties available. For example, officers meet regularly with both organisations and share information.

### 4.1 Disabled Facilities Grants

Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) were introduced by the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act (HGCRA) 1996. There are also annual regulations called the Housing Renewal Grants Regulations which govern how Local Authorities administer Disabled Facilities Grants and there is a good practice guidance which Local Authorities are encouraged to follow when administering DFG's<sup>2</sup>.

DFG's provide households with any number of aids and adaptations to ensure their home is suitable to live in. From 2010/11 to 2015/16, 674 households have benefited from a DFG in Tewkesbury Borough as shown in Table 1. Households come from all tenures and the number of application vary year on year. The table also shows the total spend per year.

*Table 1: Number of completed DFGs and the total spend per year by Tewkesbury Borough Council 2011/12-2015/16*

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Number of DFG's	111	109	108	118	129	99
Total Spend	£621,627	£689,192	£618,521	£676,577	£772,409	£543,351

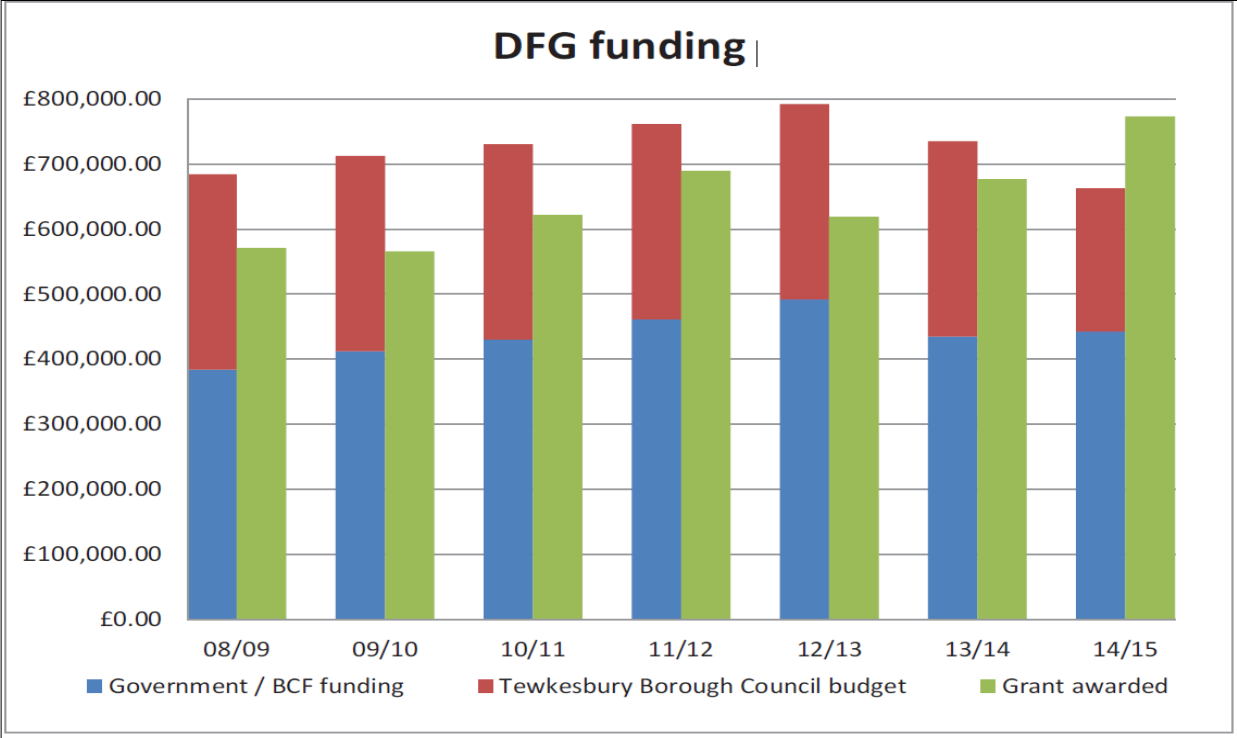
Source: Tewkesbury Borough Council dataset

Although central government funding has gradually risen over the past 15 years it has only kept pace with inflation. Consequently the central government subsidy only accounts for a proportion of the resources local authorities put into DFG's. Tewkesbury Borough Council's

<sup>2</sup> Home adaptations for disabled people: a detailed guide to related legislation, guidance and good practice <http://careandrepair-england.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/DFG-Good-Practice-Guide-30th-Sept-13.pdf>

medium term financial plan offers £220,000 of capital funding over the next five years to meet the local demand. Chart 3 shows the funding for DFGs.

**Chart 3: DFG funding: Tewkesbury Borough Council 2008-2015**



	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Government/BCF	£384,000	£412,000	£430,000	£460,923	£491,847	£434,717	£442,446
Tewkesbury Borough Council	£300,000	£300,000	£300,000	£300,000	£300,000	£300,000	£220,000
Grant awarded	£570,984	£565,192	£624,627	£636,404	£674,509	£676,577	£772,409

Source: Tewkesbury Borough Council dataset

As part of the June 2013 Spending Review the government announced the creation of a pooled fund to enable the NHS and local authorities to jointly commission health and social care services. The 2015-16 allocations to the Better Care Fund (BCF) for Gloucestershire have been confirmed by the Gloucestershire Health and Wellbeing Board. This year the funding allocation to all districts for DFGs has been ring-fenced at the capital levels from 2014/15, however, this ring-fence ceases next financial year, i.e. the administrators of the fund are not obliged to specifically provide funding for DFG's.

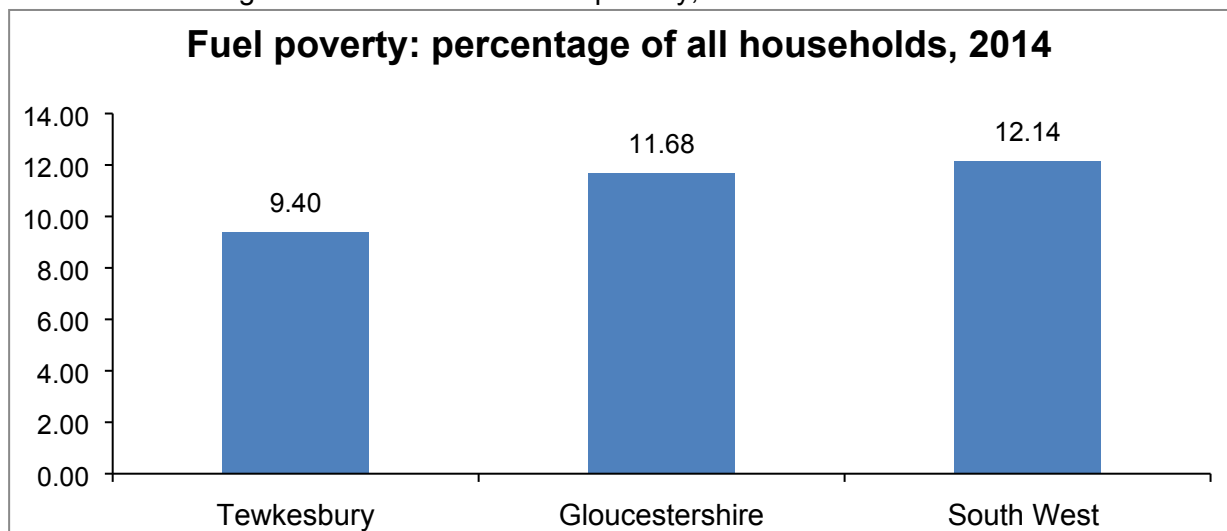
Nevertheless the direction of travel is a move to more planned care and to avoid unplanned admissions to hospitals and care homes where care can be provided more effectively in people's homes or the community.

It is ultimately the health service rather than local authorities that benefit financially from the preventative measures of DFGs and funding mechanisms need to reflect this reality. A number of studies have recognised that there is a financial benefit to the government as a whole in providing DFGs that enable applicants to remain in their own homes. When weighed up against the cost of a place in a residential home, the cost of a DFG which allows an applicant to remain in their own home makes financial sense.

## 5 Fuel Poverty

Fuel poverty is defined as where a household spends more than 10% of its income on providing adequate heating 9.4% of households are living in fuel poverty in the borough; this is lower than the figure for Gloucestershire at 11.7% and 12.1% for the South West (2014), see Chart 4.

Chart 4: Percentage of all households in fuel poverty, 2014



The energy efficiency of a property is a contributing factor to excess cold and damp and mould hazards and therefore to cold related illness. Excess cold can be caused by poor housing conditions or simply because an occupier cannot afford to adequately heat their home (fuel poverty). The indoor temperature of a home can affect an occupant's physical, mental and social health and wellbeing. The Environmental Health team have powers to tackle such issues, especially when the property is tenanted. The Borough Council expects all providers with stock in its area, to respond to the needs of those in fuel poverty, either by way of property improvements or through the involvement of external advice agencies.

Free advice on energy efficiency promotion and fuel poverty is available from the Warm and Well Advice Line.

### 5.1 Affordable warmth – Warm & Well

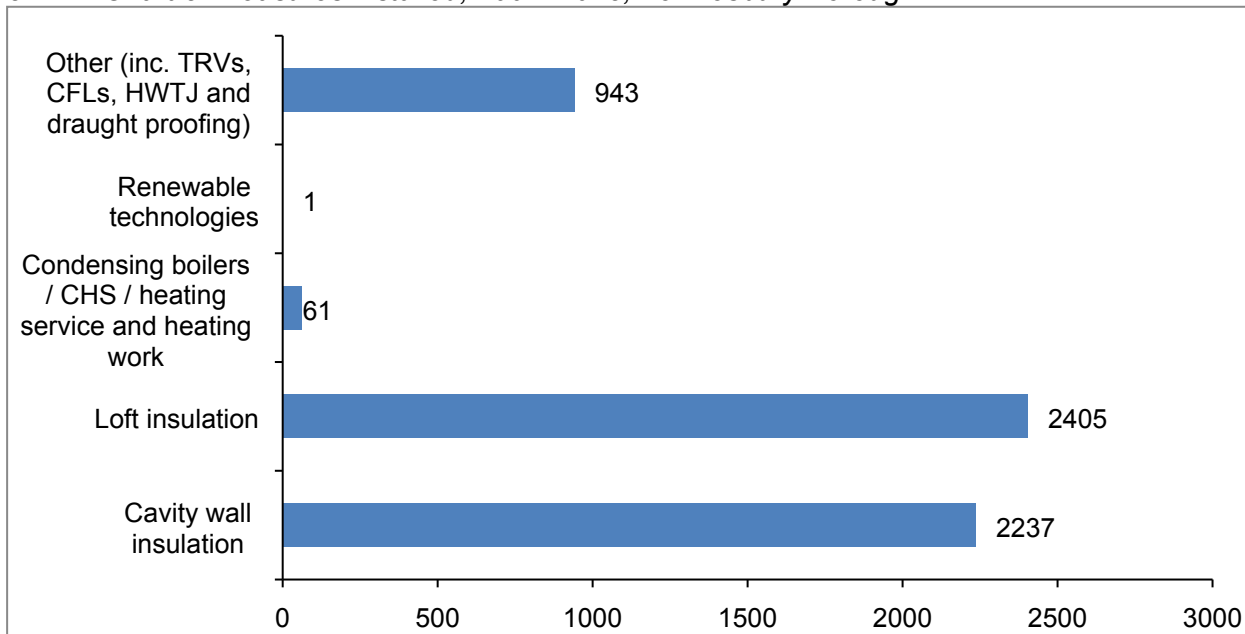
The countywide home improvement agency, Safe at Home, is funded by the six Gloucestershire district authorities, Gloucestershire County Council and the Gloucestershire NHS Trust, to assist clients with major works to their properties, focussing on providing services and assistance to elderly and vulnerable clients. Whilst this is the contracted countywide home improvement agency, Tewkesbury Borough Council provides information on other agencies and surveyors in the local area that can help.

The current contract has been extended until 2017 and at the time of writing, partners are considering priorities for future delivery. Providing adaptations is seen as particularly important given the possible health implications, care and support costs of residents not obtaining essential disabled adaptations in a timely fashion. However, it is essential that delivery of this aspect of the private sector housing service is integrated with all other aspects.

We therefore work across services to assess housing need and whether a move to more appropriate accommodation is required.

Chart 5 details the measures installed in Tewkesbury Borough via Warm & Well from 2001-2015.

5.2 Chart 5: Measures installed, 2001–2015, Tewkesbury Borough



Source: Tewkesbury Borough Council dataset

For detail about the affordable warmth strategy in Gloucestershire please see the Action for Affordable Warmth; A strategy for Gloucestershire and South Gloucestershire, 2013-2018 <sup>3</sup> and Gloucestershire Affordable Warmth Action Plan 2013-2016<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Action for Affordable Warmth; A strategy for Gloucestershire and South Gloucestershire, 2013-2018

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B4KyFQA43JaOWTFxd18zUVZWZ2M/view>

<sup>4</sup> Gloucestershire Affordable Warmth Action Plan 2013-2016

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B4KyFQA43JaOeE81YnA0UjBGSVU/view>

## 6 Vacant Properties

Tewkesbury Borough does not have a problem with vacant dwellings but nevertheless will work to bring properties back into use.

Total vacant dwellings in 2014/15 averaged:

- 1,157 for council areas in the South West
- 1,242 for councils in Gloucestershire
- 797 in Tewkesbury borough

Source: Communities and Local Government.

The properties that are of most concern are a smaller proportion of the 727 in Tewkesbury Borough, being those vacant for 6 months or more.

The environmental health team work with housing services and council tax teams to assess empty homes in Tewkesbury Borough to ensure that those that can be brought into use are encouraged.