



INSTITUTE *of*
HEALTH EQUITY

SELECTIVE LICENSING IN LEEDS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
THE LINK BETWEEN HOUSING AND HEALTH INEQUALITIES	4
THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR: AFFORDABILITY AND STANDARDS	5
Tackling housing and health inequalities in Leeds	5
The private rented sector in Leeds	5
WHAT IS SELECTIVE LICENSING	6
Benefits of Selective Licensing	7
SELECTIVE LICENSING IN LEEDS	8
Impact of Selective Licensing in Leeds	8
A. Improving housing conditions	9
B. Supporting tenants and Strengthening Communities	9
C. Collaborating with partners to Improve Neighbourhoods and a sense of safety and security	10
LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES	13
CONCLUSION	14
BIBLIOGRAPHY	15

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Report writing: Sarah Erskine, Mark Ireland and Tammy Boyce

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Suggested citation: Sarah Erskine, Mark Ireland, Tammy Boyce (2025) Selective Licensing Leeds. London: Institute of Health Equity.

Many thanks to UCL Educational Media for their technical support and advice

INTRODUCTION

In 2023, Leeds City Council partnered with the Institute of Health Equity to accelerate efforts to address health inequalities across the city. The Fairer, Healthier Leeds report, published at the end of the first year of work, highlights the stark inequalities in health outcomes within the city and proposes actions to address them. (1) One of the key initiatives featured in the report is the Selective Licensing scheme which aims to improve housing conditions in the private rented sector. In doing so, these improvements will reduce health inequalities linked to poor-quality housing.

Established under the Housing Act 2004, Selective Licensing is designed to ensure that: private rented sector homes meet minimum standards; are well-managed and provide safe living environments for tenants. Local councils enforce these schemes by charging licensing fees, setting conditions for landlords and issuing fines up to £30,000 for each non-compliance. However, despite these measures, many tenants still live in homes that are unsafe, damp, cold or poorly maintained. By improving housing quality and tenant protections, Selective Licensing plays a crucial role in tackling housing-related health inequalities and creating a fairer and healthier Leeds.



THE LINK BETWEEN HOUSING AND HEALTH INEQUALITIES

Housing is a key social determinant of health. Poor-quality, overcrowded or unaffordable housing contributes to significant health inequalities, negatively impacting both physical and mental well-being. (2)

HOUSING CONDITIONS IN ENGLAND: PROGRESS AND ONGOING CHALLENGES

In England, housing conditions have improved in some areas. For example, the proportion of the least energy efficient homes has fallen from 26% to 9%. However, serious housing related health risks persist despite these gains. (3) Damp and mould, which exacerbate respiratory conditions and other health problems, are becoming more prevalent. In England in 2023 damp was reported in:

- **9%** of private rented sector homes
- **7%** of social rented sector homes
- **4%** of owner-occupied homes. (3)

These figures highlight the disproportionate burden of poor housing conditions on private renters, many of whom face the worst living conditions.

FUEL POVERTY AND RISING ENERGY COSTS

Energy costs remain a major driver of health inequalities. In 2022, half of households earning under £20,000 a year did not turn on their heating due to unaffordable energy bills. (4) In 2023, an estimated **972,000 households** stated they did not turn the heating on during the winter. (5) Financial hardship remains widespread:

- **45%** of low-income households struggled to pay for energy in the past year.
- **Over one-third** of prepayment meter users had to go without power or heating when needed. (6)

With energy bills rising by an average of £149 per year from October 2023, an estimated **7.7 million households** in England, including families with children, are at risk of “fuel stress,” meaning they must spend more than 10% of their income on heating. Single-parent households are particularly vulnerable, with **77% expected to experience fuel stress this winter**. (7)

HEALTH IMPACTS OF POOR HOUSING

Substandard housing contributes to a wide range of health problems including:

- **Respiratory illnesses** (asthma, allergies) caused by damp, mould, and cold homes.
- **Winter deaths and worsening chronic conditions** due to inadequate heating.
- **Accidents and injuries**, such as falls, fires, and childhood injuries.
- **Mental health issues**, including higher levels of stress and loneliness and worse sleep quality.
- **Loss of independence** for elderly or disabled individuals due to unsuitable housing that limits mobility and daily activities. (8)

THE NEED FOR SECURE, AFFORDABLE, AND HEALTHY HOUSING

Access to a warm, safe, and stable home is essential for good health. Addressing housing-related health inequalities—by improving affordability, reducing hazards, and ensuring better housing conditions—can significantly improve overall well-being and reduce health inequalities across communities.

THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR: AFFORDABILITY AND STANDARDS

The private rented sector has grown significantly in England. In 2023-24 the private rented sector accounted for 4.7 million households in England, rising from 3.1 million in 2008-09. 19% of all households in 2023-24 lived in the private rented sector in England. (9) The private rental sector has some of the poorest housing conditions, disproportionately contributing to preventable health inequalities. (10)

Despite its growing role, the private rented sector continues to have a higher prevalence of damp, mould, and Category 1 hazards compared to other housing sectors. (11) While some hazardous conditions have declined, many private renters still live in substandard homes, highlighting the urgent need for stronger protections and enforcement.

AFFORDABILITY AND FINANCIAL STRAIN

The private rented sector not only has the lowest housing standards but is also among the most expensive. Rent consumes a significant portion of household income, particularly for low-to-middle-income families, who spend nearly **19%** of their income on rent. (11) This financial strain directly impacts living standards, increases stress and limits financial resilience.

Housing affordability in the private rented sector has worsened significantly:

- In early 2024, around a third of adults in Great Britain reported struggling to afford rent or mortgage payments. (12)
- In the year ending March 2023, private renters on a median household income in England spent an estimated 34% of their earnings on a median-priced rental home. (13)
- Since 2020, the cost of privately rented homes has increased since 2020 in the UK with rent prices rising 6.1% in England in both 2022 and 2023. (14)
- In Leeds, average rents rose by 9.3% in 2023 alone. (15)

These rising costs disproportionately impact lower-income renters, deepening housing-related health inequalities and increasing the risk of financial hardship and housing insecurity.

Tackling housing and health inequalities in Leeds

Addressing the link between housing and health has been a key priority for Leeds City Council. In 2023, Better Homes for Health and Wellbeing was designated one of the council's Breakthrough Priorities, reinforcing the commitment to tackling housing-related health inequalities. Leeds City Council has been working with key partners and stakeholders to improve housing quality, reduce inequalities, and implement the Leeds Marmot City recommendations across the local housing system. (16)

The private rented sector in Leeds

The private rented sector plays an essential role in housing provision across Leeds, accommodating a growing number of families and individuals. However, poor housing conditions remain a significant issue. The most recent statistics from 2021 find:

- **21%** of all homes in Leeds are classified as **non-decent. 15% in England.** This figure rises to 38% in the private rented sector. (17)

Given the strong link between poor housing and health inequalities, improving conditions in the private rented sector is crucial to ensuring better health outcomes for residents in Leeds.

WHAT IS SELECTIVE LICENSING

Selective Licensing aims to improve the management and quality of properties in the private rented sector; ensuring tenants live in safe, well-maintained homes.

Under Selective Licensing, all private landlords must obtain a licence for each rental property in designated areas, agreeing to comply with conditions of the scheme for up to five years. Landlords must also demonstrate they are “fit and proper persons” to hold a licence.

Selective Licensing is a **regulatory tool** that allows local authorities in England **to improve housing quality and address wider social issues** such as crime, antisocial behaviour, and social support. In December 2024 the Secretary of State changed the rules, allowing local authorities to self-designate all Selective Licensing schemes, regardless of their size. (18)

In a Selective Licensing area, landlords must meet **specific conditions** to ensure compliance with the local licensing requirements. Failure to meet these conditions or renting without a licence constitutes an offense, with penalties of up to £30,000 or prosecution, which could lead to unlimited fines. Continued non-compliance may result in a banning order placed against the landlord.

Selective Licensing schemes **target areas with poor housing conditions, high tenant turnover, deprivation, and crime**. Before implementing a Selective Licensing scheme, local authorities must conduct consultations and ensure landlords comply with housing standards through property inspections. Letting agents must also verify that properties in their portfolios are properly licensed.

The initiative has gained traction, with **over 50 councils in England implementing SL schemes**, and many more exploring similar interventions. (19) Fees vary by local authority, but funds generated through licensing are ring-fenced for administering the scheme.

The Housing Act 2004 introduced three types of licensing falls into three categories:

- **Mandatory Licensing:** Required for large Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) (five or more tenants from at least two households sharing facilities). These properties must meet minimum space and amenity standards.
- **Additional Licensing:** Applied to smaller HMOs when councils identify significant management concerns beyond those covered by mandatory licensing.
- **Selective Licensing:** Applied to specific areas where private rental housing fails to meet minimum standards or contributes to issues such as crime, antisocial behaviour or deprivation.

Both Additional and Selective Licensing are discretionary powers available to local authorities, allowing them to introduce these schemes provided they have a valid business case and have conducted consultation on the proposal.

BENEFITS OF SELECTIVE LICENSING

Selective Licensing plays a **crucial role in improving housing quality and reducing health inequalities**. It is most effective when combined with other measures, such as **landlord engagement, strong enforcement, and tenant support services**. (20)

Selective Licensing schemes enable local authorities to tackle substandard rental housing while addressing wider social challenges. Initially introduced to **combat antisocial behaviour in low-demand housing areas**, Selective Licensing has evolved to focus on improving **tenant well-being, reducing homelessness, and ensuring minimum housing standards**.

Research in **Greater London** has demonstrated the positive impact of SL on public health and community outcomes. Areas with Selective Licensing schemes have seen:

- **Improved mental health indicators**
- **Reduced antidepressant use**

- Lower reliance on mental health benefits
- Decreased antisocial behaviour
- Fewer recorded cases of depression (21)

However, **high population turnover** in these neighbourhoods suggest some methodological issues. As such, these researchers concluded a comprehensive national evaluation is needed to fully understand the impact of Selective Licensing on housing conditions and tenant health and well-being. (22)



SELECTIVE LICENSING IN LEEDS

Leeds is among the 20% of English councils that have implemented a Selective Licensing scheme to improve rental housing conditions.

WHY SELECTIVE LICENSING?

As part of its strategy to address poor housing standards in the city, the Council responded to complaints from tenants, encouraged landlords to self-regulate by joining the Leeds Rental Standard, and targeted small geographical areas through proactive home visits. However, none of these approaches was sufficient to tackle the scale of issues in the private rented sector or to enable wider access to homes.

To have a greater impact, Leeds City Council introduced Selective Licensing in two high-density urban areas, **Beeston and Harehills**, where more than **6,200 properties** have been subject to licensing.

LICENSING REQUIREMENTS IN LEEDS

All rental properties in Selective Licensing areas were licensed at a cost of £825 per property. Leeds City Council staff conducted property inspections to ensure compliance with key conditions, including:

- **Maintaining gas and electrical safety standards.**
- **Addressing waste management.**
- **Proactively inspecting properties** to ensure they are safe, warm, and secure.
- **Tenant health discussions** to assess housing-related health needs.
- **Collaboration on antisocial behaviour**, involving landlords and local agencies.

IMPACT OF SELECTIVE LICENSING IN LEEDS

The five-year period of these two schemes concluded on 5 January 2025. In this period they have driven significant housing and neighbourhood improvements and supported action on the wider determinants of health.

Although the initial Selective Licensing scheme did not include an evaluation component, **in 2024, Leeds Public Health partnered with** Leeds City Council's **Housing Team** to assess its impact on **housing quality and health inequalities**. Early findings align with research from Greater London, showing improvements in **mental well-being and reductions in antisocial behaviour**. (22)

Although not part of the initial evaluation of the scheme in the two areas, the review commissioned by the Public Health team clearly highlighted the impact of poor housing in the private rented sector is a significant health issue. The lessons learned from this evaluation, alongside the need to focus on the quality of homes, has provided valuable insights. These lessons will be integrated into the day-to-day operations of the private rented sector team and will be incorporated in any future Selective Licensing schemes the Council may choose to implement moving forward.

The Selective Licensing scheme has delivered tangible benefits for tenants and communities including:

- a) Improving housing conditions
- b) Supporting tenants and strengthening communities
- c) Collaborating with partners to tackle wider issues

A. Improving housing conditions

Selective Licensing has enabled Leeds City Council to **gain a realistic understanding** of **private rented sector housing quality**. During the initial consultations for the schemes, landlords stated that the majority of properties were fully compliant, with 75% meeting the necessary standards. However, over the 5 years of the scheme, inspections found that **75% of properties in Beeston** and **89% in Harehills** were not compliant with their licence conditions. The **main licence breaches** were related to poor property management, electrical issues, the absence of working smoke alarms, lack of appropriate certification and missing gas safety certificates.

As a result:

- Over **6,721 property visits** were conducted across **2,979 different homes**.
- More than **1,598 homes in Beeston and Harehills** were significantly improved.
- **5,294 hazards** were identified, including in both **Category 1 and Category 2** hazards.
- Over **6,000 people** are now living in **better-quality homes** as a result of Selective Licensing.
- More than **2,900 legal notices** were issued to landlords for failing to meet conditions and maintain acceptable standards.
- **Enforcement actions** led to **680 landlord investigations** and **404 civil penalties**, totalling £2.4 million in fines related to offences under Selective Licensing, including operating without a licence or breaching conditions.

The Selective Licensing scheme has also supported landlords in understanding their responsibilities and improving property management practices. One landlord praised Leeds City Council for professional and fair inspections, which motivated them to upgrade multiple properties:

“Thanks for...the way you conducted the re-inspection. It was fair and professional and encourages an effective working relationship between landlords and Leeds City Council ... Following your previous visit in October, I have been making steps towards improvements across another property and I think I can have my other property available for inspection soon.”

A managing agent noted that Selective Licensing forced reluctant landlords to improve properties and remove criminal elements from rental portfolios. They credited the scheme with compelling reluctant landlords to carry out necessary works.

Despite these achievements, poor-quality housing remains an issue, emphasising the need for continued intervention and enforcement.

B. Supporting tenants and strengthening communities

Selective Licensing has provided **direct support** to tenants beyond housing improvements, support that tackles the social determinants of health. During property visits, Leeds City Council facilitated over **1,900 referrals** (806 in Beeston and 1130 in Harehills) to partner organisations for issues such as:

- **Employment support**
- **English language courses**
- **Financial and debt advice**
- **Health services**

CASE STUDIES

- An elderly man living in extreme disrepair, without heating, food or money, was supported by Leeds City Council through collaboration with Leeds Anti-Social Behaviour Team and Leeds social work team. He was rehoused while his home was renovated.
- A family with no furniture received beds, furniture and essential household items through Third Sector Partners - Leeds and Moortown Furniture Store and Zarach. Previously, they all shared a single mattress.

- A tenant suffering from severe disrepair for three years reported improvements after Leeds City Council compelled the landlord to install fire doors, stair handrails and smoke alarms.

“Since the council have been involved, through Selective Licensing, they have made the landlord put all these things right and I am really happy with the result. I now love living in this house.”

- A mother and child who relocated from South England due to personal issues faced ongoing neglect from their landlord. After Leeds City Council intervened, their landlord fixed hazardous water leaks and improved other property issues.

“My daughter had slipped down the stairs once due to water coming through the roof when it had rained. We had told the landlords, but they decided not to do anything about it. My landlords were absolutely awful to me. When you and your team told me you could help me, it meant so much I was so happy! You did so much for me and I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve have done for me.”

C. Collaborating with partners to improve neighbourhoods and develop a sense of safety and security

Selective Licensing in Leeds adopts a multi-agency collaborative approach involving: Leeds City Council; West Yorkshire Police; Cleaner Neighbourhood Teams; Locality Teams; Gypsy Roma Traveller Team, and Leeds Antisocial Behaviour Team.

These agencies **coordinate efforts** to improve housing conditions, reduce crime, and support vulnerable tenants. **Joint inspections** have also helped address issues such as **cannabis cultivation, illegal subletting, and unmanaged properties**.

To support the areas, and in addition to addressing housing conditions, **officers** in the service also collaborated **with partners** to tackle poor environmental conditions within the boundaries of properties. This included **working alongside Anti-Social Behaviour colleagues** to address issues affecting homes and wider criminality in the sector.

As part of the licence conditions, landlords were required to support environmental issues by **ensuring tenants were informed about waste collection services** and maintained their homes in a reasonable condition. While Selective Licensing does not have powers to address wider environmental issues across the areas, such as fly-tipping, which fall outside the curtilage of the properties, **officers** whilst out in the areas **worked with colleagues in the Cleaner Neighbourhoods Team** to report broader environmental concerns they could address.

An example of the joint working involved an individual who was responsible for significant flytipping in one of the Selective Licensing areas. **A member of the public made a complaint** to the Council’s Cleaner Neighbourhoods Team regarding multiple **incidents of fly-tipping** from a residential property in Harehills. People, including children, living at the property were seen dumping unwanted household items onto the pavement. During their investigation, the Cleaner Neighbourhoods Team contacted the Selective Licensing team to request an inspection of the property. After the inspection, **the Selective Licensing team reached out to the licence holder and property manager** to request copies of any references they had obtained for the tenant. The requirement to seek tenant references is a condition of the Selective Licensing conditions. The references provided, which included photographic images of the tenant, were later passed to the Police, who used them to **identify and arrest the tenant**, who was subsequently charged with 40 fly-tipping offences.

Through collaboration with landlords, officers were able to **improve** the appearance of **homes and their curtilage** on a property-by-property basis. The before and after pictures illustrate the significant improvements achieved in several cases.

PHOTOGRAPHS BEFORE AND AFTER IMPROVEMENTS MADE TO EXTERNAL CONDITIONS.

BEFORE



AFTER



BEFORE



AFTER



In terms of wider partnership working to address Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) and housing conditions, collaboration with **the Trap House Group with the Leeds ASB Team** and Police colleagues in South Leeds has resulted in **targeted action against properties involved in cuckooing, brothels, drug dealing and cannabis growing**. Selective Licensing allows the disruption of such activities through enforcement for failure to have a licence or breaches of licence conditions. This approach enables the partnership to consider the issue and implement the best solution, whether that be through housing enforcement or a closure order via the Leeds ASB Team. It also **ensures vulnerable tenants** receive support from agencies as part of the enforcement actions against landlords.

The service has also worked closely with partners such as the **Police, Immigration, Environmental Crime Team** as well as the Leeds ASB Team to **tackle serious criminal activity** in the area.

Selective Licensing provides the Council and partners with **insights into broader issues**, enabling the identification of individuals who use the private rented sector as part of their business models for criminal activity. Since the introduction of Selective Licensing and partnership working, **553 cannabis grows** have been found in the private rented sector across the areas, 291 in East Leeds and 262 in South Leeds, averaging two a week over the five years of the scheme.

By changing the way partners work together, better outcomes have been achieved and neighbourhoods have improved. Several operations have been directly initiated as a result of Selective Licensing and the information and intelligence gathered through this partnership. This collaborative approach has allowed for the disruption of criminality not just in the areas but across Leeds. Officers from the team now accompany the Police on warrants, supporting disruption tactics, following up with landlords, improving intelligence sharing and disrupting criminal activity and improving the sense of safety and security in these neighbourhoods.

Examples of collaborative actions taken include:

Operation Braylock has transformed how the Leeds Selective Licensing team collaborate with partners such as the Police. Based on initial intelligence regarding crime in the private rented sector, it became clear that both areas had significant issues with cannabis grows. As a result, the Police created a dedicated team, working with with the Selective Licensing team and Immigration, to target and disrupt criminal activity across the city. In the 18 months leading up to June 2024, 103 cannabis farms were raided, 135 arrests were made and 33,000+ cannabis plants were seized, with a street value of £35 million. 95 arrests led to 170 years of prison sentences, and 13 individuals were immediately deported. The operation has dismantled a nationwide network and disrupted international organised crime gangs. This operation is ongoing and continues to disrupt the drug supply in the city and reduce criminality.

Operation Barrowberry - Clear Hold Build - was implemented in Harehills. Selective Licensing supported this process by collaborating closely with the Neighbourhood Police Team. The Clear phase involved agreed operational processes targeting those causing issues for the area, including managing agents and landlords, as well as action days with partners targeting both commercial and residential properties, executing warrants against cannabis grows, and sharing intelligence to help partners achieve a reduction in criminality. Outcomes from the initial phase of Clear Hold Build saw a **40% reduction in criminal activity**, resulting in Harehills dropping from the highest-ranked area for criminality in Leeds to the third highest.

Reducing criminal activity is crucial in improving the sense of safety within neighbourhoods, which in turn have a significant role in tackling health inequalities. High levels of crime contribute to increased stress, anxiety, and a general decline in mental health for residents (23), particularly in areas of high deprivation, similar to the areas where the Leeds Selective Licensing scheme has occurred. When criminal activity is reduced, residents feel safer in their homes and communities, leading to improved mental well-being, greater social cohesion, and increased engagement in positive activities (23).

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

As with any significant initiative, it is important to continually evaluate and refine the process. The Selective Licensing scheme has provided valuable insights, and several lessons have been learned that will guide future improvements. The following key takeaways highlight areas for growth and opportunities for enhancing the impact of the scheme:

- **Strengthening Health Partnerships:** A key lesson is the importance of continuing to build partnerships. The Marmot Places approach has underscored the need for a closer relationship between housing and health sectors. Discussions are underway to explore how to work more effectively with social prescribers, allowing for a more holistic approach to service delivery. In particular, housing officers have identified and resolved significant health issues, but stronger partnerships would have allowed for more effective resource utilisation.
- **Improved Communication:** A key lesson is the need for more effective communication with local communities, including landlords, to showcase the benefits and improvements achieved by the Selective Licensing scheme. While action days, newsletters, and social media have been used, these efforts have not fully engaged stakeholders. A more strategic and comprehensive communication approach could help demonstrate the positive outcomes and garner greater support.
- **Enhancing the Online Application Process:** Another valuable lesson is the need to improve the online Licensing application process for landlords. While the system allows for applications and payments to be made, it has been identified as needing improvement to enhance user experience. A review of the application forms and processes will be necessary to make it more user-friendly, particularly if future schemes are implemented.
- **Alternative Inspection Process:** The scheme has revealed the potential value of an alternative inspection process. One possibility is simplifying the inspections to increase the number of properties inspected, while separating complex cases into a dedicated team. This shift would allow more resources to focus on broader issues in collaboration with partners. Regardless, the core aim of addressing issues related to housing conditions and supporting individuals through multi-agency collaboration will remain.
- **Promoting Engagement with the Landlord Sector:** A significant lesson learned is the need to better engage with the landlords in the private rental sector to encourage participation in supportive programs, such as the Leeds Rental Standard. Despite the benefits of training, education, and access to discounts, these offerings could be better promoted. Selective Licensing presents an opportunity to not only address housing conditions but also to engage landlords and encourage their active participation in improving their businesses.
- **Reviewing Licence Conditions:** Given the significant issues related to poor management, housing conditions, and criminal activities such as drug grows, there is a clear need to review the conditions attached to the original licences. As a result, new conditions are being consulted on for the next proposed scheme, including regular inspections to monitor best practices, document issues, and ensure actions are taken. Additionally, a new condition is being proposed to prevent properties from being used for criminal activities.

CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP

The implementation of Selective Licensing coincided with Leeds being a Marmot city, which emphasised the importance of cross-sector partnerships in addressing health inequalities. Joint training for health and housing staff has fostered informal collaboration, knowledge sharing, and mutual problem-solving. A multi-agency group has also been established to coordinate service delivery across health and housing, further strengthening the integration of services.

INTEGRATING HOUSING AND HEALTH DATA

A key lesson from the Selective Licensing scheme has been the importance of integrating housing data with health data to improve targeted interventions. The Public Health team has been instrumental in this effort, working with the Selective Licensing team to incorporate housing data from the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, which enhances the evidence base for interventions.

CONCLUSION

The Selective Licensing scheme has not only focussed on improving housing conditions but has also been pivotal in supporting residents in some of Leeds' most deprived areas, where both housing and health outcomes are often poorer. Throughout the time of the Selective Licensing scheme, many tenants have received vital support, resulting in significant improvements to their physical and mental well-being. The 1,900 referrals made through Selective Licensing to partners to partners such as employment support and financial advice underscore the strong connection between housing quality and health inequalities.

Selective Licensing in Leeds has **proven effective in addressing poor housing conditions, supporting vulnerable tenants, and tackling the social determinants of health**. By integrating Selective Licensing within a broader **health inequalities framework**, the scheme has contributed to **improved mental and physical health**, reduced **antisocial behaviour**, and fostered partnerships and **collaborative problem-solving** among local agencies. Through rigorous and consistent property inspections, targeted enforcement, and proactive engagement with landlords, the scheme has driven notable improvements in the private rented sector. Moreover, Selective Licensing has facilitated access to essential services, strengthened community partnerships, and contributed to tackling broader issues such as crime and financial insecurity.

Despite these successes, challenges remain, including the ongoing prevalence of poor housing conditions and the need for continued compliance and enforcement. Moving forward, Leeds City Council is considering expansion of Selective Licensing, enhancing evaluation efforts, and further embedding housing quality into public health strategies. By embedding housing improvements within a wider public health and inequalities framework, Selective Licensing will continue to play a critical role in creating healthier, safer, and more equitable living conditions across the city.

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