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### **1913 Wakefield Corporation embarks on the provision of council houses**

It has been said that Wakefield Council ‘set about the task’ of building council houses only in 1918. (‘Portobello: Wakefield’s First Major Council Housing Estate’, *Aspects of Wakefield 2*, 1999, p67). But that is not the case. Wakefield actually embarked on its first schemes to provide housing for the working classes in 1913. The confusion may arise because the Council’s Housing and Town Planning Committee was not set up until December 1918 (it first met on 24 January 1919) and no houses were actually built before then, but plans to build council houses were formulated before that by the Sanitary Committee.

It had long been recognised that the ill health and early death-rate of poorer people could be attributed at least in part to the squalid conditions of their homes. The 1890 Housing Act addressed this by giving local authorities the power to demolish slums and rehouse their inhabitants. Whilst fully aware of the problems in Wakefield, the Council did little beyond from time to time declaring dwellings unfit for human habitation and requiring their landlords to improve them.

In his report for 1903, however, Wakefield’s Medical Officer of Health, Dr Thomas Gibson, urged that ‘there is only one solution to the problem – the provision of cheap habitable homes by the Municipality and the gradual demolition of slum property’. He returned to the theme many times.

At last in January 1913 the Sanitary Committee asked a small group of its members to consult with the Medical Officer and report back as to what additional accommodation was required for the housing of the working classes. It focused on the Westgate area where some of the worst slums, with serious overcrowding, were to be found in the yards running off the main street. The ‘Westgate sub-committee’ found that there was a need for more housing and recommended that the Council take action under Part III of the 1890 Act. The City Surveyor was asked to prepare plans for 30 dwellings which could be let at 3s.6d a week.

The next step was to find a site. There was nowhere available off Westgate itself. In April 1913 a plot on New Brunswick Street, off Thornes Lane, was identified. This proved to be unavailable and the Sanitary Committee turned instead to the Alverthorpe area. The Council acquired a site in Rufford Street

with the intention of building its 30 houses there. Early in 1914 it also determined to buy land at Elm Tree Street, Belle Vue with, again, thirty houses in mind. W.H.Ogden was appointed as both quantity surveyor and architect for the two schemes.

But the war forestalled the developments.

The Sanitary Committee returned to the matter in 1918 when the Government was emphasising the necessity for new homes for the working classes. Plans were revised for housing in Elm Tree Street under the advice of the architect for the Local Government Board. Early in 1919 the Council received confirmation that the scheme would qualify for Government subsidy under the Housing and Town Planning Act of that year. There were to be 64 houses, built in small blocks. The majority were to have three bedrooms but a sixth of them would have only two bedrooms. They would be lit by electricity. Harold Dalton, of the Council's Town Planning staff, was appointed as the architect and clerk of works.

The one vexed question was that of the weekly rent. Recommendations were tossed to and fro between the Housing and Town Planning Committee, the Council in full meeting, and the Government's Housing Commissioner. Finally, and only in February 1920, a rent of eight shillings a week for the smaller houses and 10 shillings a week for the larger ones was determined. The Corporation's first house tenants moved in later in the same year. At the same time the Rufford Street scheme was under way.

The sources for the above are the annual reports of Wakefield's Medical Officer of Health and Wakefield Corporation Minutes.

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