

Media information

INSIGHT 2: THE DECENT HOMES STANDARD – HABITATION AND DISREPAIR

Chris Tait, marketing manager (specification) at Applied Energy Products Ltd, continues his series on the instigation and aims of the government’s directive on social housing and how it will impact on local authorities.

In July 2000, following its Spending Review 2001- 2004, the government announced a significant increase in resources for social housing. A ten year target was set with the aim of bringing all social housing up to a ‘decent standard’ by 2010. Owing to the lack of clarity with regards to the Decent Homes Standard, Applied Energy Products Ltd is producing guidance for housing professionals. This publication is intended to summarise key issues from the Decent Homes Standard in an easy to read way.

In its Green Paper ‘Quality and Choice: A Decent Home for All’ (July 2000), the government set two targets:

- 1. To reduce by one third the number of social housing properties which fail the Standard by 2004*
- 2. To have all social rented homes meeting the Standard by 2010*

The 2002 Spending Review renewed the commitment above and expanded the target to cover vulnerable households in the private sector. The amended target is now:

‘by 2010 to bring all social housing into decent condition, with most of the improvement taking place in deprived areas, and increase the proportion of private housing in decent condition occupied by vulnerable groups’.

According to the government, ‘a decent home is one which is wind and weather tight, warm and has modern facilities’. The government made it a priority to reverse the decades of neglect and this standard was to be the cornerstone for improving people’s quality of life in the home.

To set a national target, a common definition of decent is needed so all social landlords can work towards the same goal. A 'decent home' therefore comprises of four key components:

- It meets the current statutory minimum standard for housing
- It is in a reasonable state of repair
- It has reasonably modern facilities and services
- It provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort

In order to develop a greater understanding, this briefing guide will specifically address the first of the two components: minimum standard for housing and reasonable state of Repair.

1) Minimum Standard For Housing

The underlying tenet of the Decent Homes Standard is to ensure that social housing tenants have a property that is conducive to a better quality of life. The starting point for assessment is therefore focused on analysing the fitness of the property in relation to the minimum requirement. It should be noted that the Decent Homes Standard encourages social landlords to exceed the minimum standards where possible. Originally dwellings that fall below this standard were those seen as unfit under Section 604 of the *Housing Act 1995* (as amended by the *1989 Local Government Housing Act*). This stipulates that a dwelling should be:

- Free from serious disrepair
- Structurally stable
- Free from dampness prejudicial to health of occupants
- Adequate provision for lighting, heating and ventilation
- Adequate piped supply of whole-house water
- Effective system for drainage of foul, waste and surface water
- Suitably located WC for exclusive use of occupants
- Bath or shower and wash hand basin, with hot and cold water
- Satisfactory facilities for the preparation and cooking of food including sink with hot and cold water

However, in 1998, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) commissioned the development of a new Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) to replace the current Housing Fitness Standard (123: Housing Health and Safety Rating System: Quick Guide). This will come into force in 2005 and is seen as a more robust approach for setting and achieving minimum requirements for housing.

Housing Health and Safety Rating System

The principle behind the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) is that a dwelling should provide a safe and healthy living environment for both the occupants and any visitors. The new framework involves an evidence-based risk assessment process which will form the basis of enforcement decisions made by local authorities. The survey procedure is intended to be logical, straightforward and practical.

To uphold the health and safety of tenants, the HHSRS insists that:

- a dwelling should be free from unnecessary and avoidable hazards
- where hazards are necessary or unavoidable, they should be made as safe as reasonably possible

Hazards identified in the standard are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Potential hazards in dwellings

Hazards	Vulnerable Group	Ideal
Excessive Cold Temperature	Elderly (65 plus)	SAP Rating of 80-85 Min temp 16¼C
Excessive High Temperatures	Elderly (65 plus)	SAP Rating of 80-85 Max temp 25¼C
Falls on Stairs etc	Children and the Elderly (65 plus)	Building Regs App Doc K (1998), & N1 & 2 (for Safety Glass) BS 4125, 5395, 6180 & 5588
Falls on the Level	Elderly (65 plus)	Building Regs App Doc A BS 5385 BS 6431
Falls between Levels	Under 5 years	Windows Building Regs App Doc B, K, L and N1 and 2 BS 8213 Balconies & Landings Building Regs App Doc K
<u>Falls related to Baths etc</u>	Elderly (65 plus)	Stable and securely fitted. Presence of slip resistance, and safety features such as handles/grip rails.
Fire	Elderly (65 plus)	Building Regs App Doc B BS 5839
Hot Surfaces and Materials	Children (0-10 years)	BS 4086 Building Regs App Doc J
<u>Damp and Mould Growth</u>	Children 5 - 14 years	Relative humidity between 45% and 60%. No mould growth or dampness.
<u>Carbon Monoxide etc</u>	Children 0 - 14 years	Building Regs App Doc F, Installation to satisfy CORGI requirements Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regs. Gas Appliances (Safety) Regs.
Radiation	All ages	Max 100 Bq/m3
Electrical Hazards	Children under 5 years	Compliance with 16th ed of IEE Regs.
Noise	All ages	Less than 75dB Leq

Lead	Children under 5 years	10ug/l in drinking water. No lead paint present.
Asbestos etc	Children 0 - 14 years	No asbestos present.
Entry by Intruders	All ages	Fully secured doors and windows. Secured by Design features.
Crowding and Space	All ages	Sufficient space for separation of different activities and provide privacy.
Explosions	All ages	Installation to satisfy CORGI requirements Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regs. Gas Appliances (Safety) Regs
Difficulties in Maintaining Domestic Hygiene	Children 0 - 5 years	No access by pests. Internal surfaces free of harbourages for pests.
Inadequate Provision for Food Safety	All ages	Adequate and suitable food storage facilities, preparation areas and cooking facilities.
Inadequate Personal Hygiene Facilities	Children 0 - 14 years	Minimum 1 bath/shower per household or 1 bath/shower per 8 persons. One wash hand basin per WC.
Inadequate Sanitation	Children 0 - 14 years	Building Regs App Doc G. Typically, one WC on entrance floor, and one for each floor containing bedrooms. All sinks, wash hand basins, WC etc adequately drained.
Contaminated Water	All ages	Water Supply (Water Quality) Regs.
Structural Failure	All ages	Building Regs App Doc A
Inadequate Lighting	All ages	Sufficient natural light to enable domestic tasks to be carried out without eyestrain during daylight hours. CIBSE Guide Vol. A
Uncombusted Fuel Gas	Children 0 - 14 years	Installation to satisfy CORGI requirements Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regs Gas Appliances (Safety) Regs
Entrapment or Collision	Children 0 - 14 years	Recommendations of Child Accident Prevention Trust
Poor Ergonomics	Children and those spending large amount of time carrying out domestic activities	All facilities at appropriate height and position for convenient use.

Faults that Lead to Hazards

The key driver of the HHSRS is the identification and rating of hazards that arise from faults. For the purposes of the HHSRS, a fault is a “failure of an element to meet the ‘ideal’ (see Table 1), whether that failure is inherent, such as a result of the original construction or manufacture, or a result of deterioration or a want of repair or maintenance” (123: Housing Health and Safety Rating System: Quick Guide). The ideal is the “currently perceived model for an element (i.e. component or constituent part, facility or amenity of a dwelling, such as a wall, a window, a staircase, a bath, means of lighting, and means of space heating) which defines the functions and safest performance criteria that can be expected of that element” (123: Housing Health and Safety Rating System: Quick Guide).

In essence, the HHSRS is fully committed to safe guarding tenants against likely harm and risk. Faults are translated into hazards (see Table 1) and the extent of the potential harm is weighted to

provide a hazard score. The greater the hazard score, the more immediate and severe the action required by the local authority. The Ideal is a benchmark for the good practice that should ensure the tenants enjoy a comfortable living environment.

Assessment

The hazard assessment is based upon a person / group deemed to be most vulnerable and not the current occupiers. The implication of this is that while a property may appear safe for a healthy 30 year old, it may not be considered so for a young child or elderly resident.

Faults are judged by a surveyor to see if they give rise to any of the 24 hazards (see Table 1)

Each hazard is scored on

- probability of hazard occurring within a 12 month period (ratio 1 in 10)
- the likely outcome in terms of harm if it did occur (Class I – IV with I most severe)
- spread of outcomes (% weighting of all harms occurring)
- 10 bands of hazard scores ranging from A = 5000+ to J = 9 or less

(see Table 2)

A hazard with a score of greater than 1000 (Band C), requires immediate intervention.

Table 2: Formula for calculating a hazard score

Class of Harm Weighting			Likelihood 1 in	Spread of Harm (%)		
I	10,000	÷	100	X	0	= 0
II	1,000	÷	100	X	10	= 100
III	300	÷	100	X	30	= 90
IV	10	÷	100	X	60	= 6
				Hazard Score	=	196

The Enforcement Framework

The local authority has a duty or power to act if a hazard above or below a threshold score to be prescribed by Regulations (Category I and Category II hazards) exists. Where they intend to act, authorities can use their own judgement as to the most appropriate means of dealing with the hazard.

The options include:

- improvement notices requiring owners to carry out remedial action
- prohibition orders to close all or part of a building
- demolition
- clearance

- immediate remedial action by local authority
- immediate prohibition of occupation.

Based upon the figures from the English stock condition surveys, the number of homes failing the Decent Homes Standard on this criterion has been reduced from 1.4 million to 850,000 between 1996 and 2001. In the context of all non-decent homes, this equates to 7.2% (1996) and 4.2% (2001).

The Government has committed £4-5m to meet the HHSRS start-up costs of local authorities, including training. The introduction of the HHSRS will see non-decent homes increase by 450,000. 100,000 of these will be targeted for support through Decent Homes funding (40,000 social housing and 60,000 vulnerable private households). The government does not consider that the change from the fitness to freedom from serious hazards as the first of the Decent Homes criterion will have a material effect upon the delivery of the programme (Government Response to the ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee's Report on Decent Homes, July 2004).

2) Reasonable State of Repair

The second section of the Decent Homes Standard considers disrepair and requires that properties be in a reasonable state of repair. This is not mutually exclusive from the fitness for habitation guidelines as described above and looks specifically at the age and condition of the key building components. These components are critical to a property's ability to be wind, weather tight and warm.

Age

The component lifetimes used to assess whether the building components are 'old' are shown in Table 3. The lifetime of a component is used as a determinant in assessing whether a building is in disrepair. This is very subjective as some components may exceed their prescribed lifetime and still be in working order. A property will be deemed in a state of disrepair if:

- one or more KEY building components (marked * in Table 3) are old and, because of their condition, need replacing or major repair

or

- two or more other building components are old and because of their condition, need replacing or major repair

Table 3 outlines the expected lifetime for the building components and breaks it down by dwelling type. Building components are the structural parts of a dwelling (e.g. wall structure, roof structure), other external elements (e.g. roof covering, chimneys) and internal services and amenities (e.g. kitchens, heating systems). Key building components are those which, if in poor condition, could have an immediate impact on the integrity of the building and cause further deterioration in other components.

Table 3: Component lifetimes used in the disrepair criterion in years

Building components (key components marked*)	Houses and bungalows	All flats in blocks of below 6 storeys	All flats in blocks of 6 or more storeys
Wall structure*	80	80	80
Lintels*	60	60	60
Brickwork (spalling)*	30	30	30
Wall finish*	60	60	30
Roof structure*	50	30	30
Roof finish*	50	30	30
Chimney*	50	50	N/A
Windows*	40	30	30
External doors*	40	30	30
Kitchen	30	30	30
Bathrooms	40	40	40
Heating central heating gas boiler*	15	15	15
Heating central heating dist. system	40	40	40
Heating other*	30	30	30
Electrical systems*	30	30	30

A building component which requires replacing before it reaches its expected lifetime has failed early. Under the terms of the definition, this early failure does not render the dwelling non-decent but should be dealt with by the landlord, typically on a responsive basis.

To put Table 3 into context, it is worth considering the age profile of local authority stock as at 2000. Table 4 shows that 83% of local authority stock was built before 1974. According to the ODPM (Chart 105 Dwelling stock: by tenure, England, historical series (chart): Oct 04), local authority stock totaled around 2.8 million in 2000, therefore suggesting that around 2.3 million of their properties are aged 30 years or above. As such, it is no surprise that significant funding has been mobilized to improve kitchens, bathrooms and heating systems.

Table 4: Mix of local authority dwellings by age 2000 (%)

Year Built	Pre-1945	1945 - 1964	1965 - 1974	Post 1974
% of Dwellings	24	38	21	17

(DEFRA)

Condition

Table 5 sets out the definitions used within the disrepair criterion to identify whether building components are 'in poor condition'. Social landlords should consider appropriate minimum standards to use for their own local assessment and measurement of progress. The conditions are open to interpretation as the term 'major repair' may be construed differently by different people.

Table 5: Definition of 'poor condition' used in disrepair criterion

Definition of 'poor condition' used in English House Condition Survey	
Wall structure	Replace 10% or more or repair 30% or more
Wall finish	Replace/repoint/renew 50% or more
Chimneys	1 chimney need partial rebuilding or more
Roof structure	Replace 10% or more or strengthen 30% or more
Roof covering	Replace or isolated repairs to 50% or more
Windows	Replace at least one window or repair/replace sash or member to least two (excluding easing sashes, reglazing painting)
External doors	Replace at least one
Kitchen	Major repair or replace 3 or more items out of the 6 (cold water drinking supply, hot water, sink, cooking provision, cupboards, worktop)
Bathroom	Major repairs or replace 2 or more items (bath, wash hand basin, WC)
Electrical system	Replace or major repair to system
Central heating boiler	Replace or major repair
Central heating distribution	Replace or major repair
Storage heaters	Replace or major repair

During a stock condition survey, the surveyors should assess the extent to which individual building components require immediate work. Their judgement should be used to assess whether the components should be classified as being in poor condition at the time of inspection. In general, and

where possible, any component should be repaired as opposed to being replaced. The component should only be replaced when:

- it is sufficiently damaged that it is impossible to repair
- it is unsuitable, and would be even if repaired either because the material has deteriorated or because the component was never suitable
- even if the component (external) were repaired now, it would still need to be replaced within 5 years.

Based upon the figures from the English stock condition surveys, the number of homes failing the Decent Homes Standard on this criterion has been reduced from 2.6 million to 1.87,000 between 1996 and 2001. In the context of all non-decent homes, this equates to 11.6% (1996) and 8.8% (2001).

Summary

In summary, the Decent Homes Standard consists of four main criteria that combine to measure the standard of a property. Social landlords must understand each of the components in order to ensure that their housing stock meets a minimum requirement by 2010. This paper, in particular has focused on two of the components: minimum standard for housing and reasonable state of repair.

The minimum standard for housing has seen the Housing Act definition replaced by the Housing Health and Safety Rating System. The HHSRS is a thorough procedure that assesses a property in terms of the health and safety of the most vulnerable occupants. Faults are converted into hazards and the overall score will determine the course of action for the local authority.

The second criterion assesses the condition of the building components in terms of their need for repair. It does so by looking at the age and the condition of the stock. It is designed to help plan future investment needs. Landlords are more likely to be able to predict component failure after the component has reached a certain age than predicting early failures.


Owing to the condition of the existing stock, around 220,000 properties per annum will have to be brought up to the Decent Homes Standard from 2005-2010. Some of the key repair, maintenance and improvement works include kitchen / bathroom upgrades, and the installation of new heating systems. This represents a significant commitment and workload for housing professionals.

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