

## Media information

### INSIGHT 3: THE DECENT HOMES STANDARD – MODERNITY AND THERMAL COMFORT

**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. Similarly, the 2004 Spending Review introduced ‘families with children’ in recognition of the government’s commitment to tackling child poverty. 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 for vulnerable households in the private sector, including families with children, increase the proportion of private housing in decent condition’.*

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 last of the two components: reasonably modern facilities and services and a reasonable degree of thermal comfort.

### **1) Reasonably Modern Facilities and Services**

Although the Decent Homes Standard undertakes to ensure a minimum standard of housing, it also attempts to further improve the living conditions for tenants by promoting the installation of modern facilities and services. This is an attempt to add value and enhance the quality of life for social housing tenants. A dwelling will fail this criterion if it lacks three or more of the following facilities:

- a kitchen which is 20 years old or less
- a kitchen with adequate space and layout
- a bathroom which is 30 years old or less
- an appropriately located bathroom and WC
- adequate noise insulation
- adequate size and layout of common entrance areas for blocks of flats

The ages used to define the 'modern' kitchen and bathroom are less than those for the disrepair criterion (see Insight 2) and this reflects the modernity of kitchens and bathrooms, as well as their functionality and condition. This principle was agreed with local authority representatives during the consultation on the formulation of the Major Repair Allowance allocations. Again, this enables dwellings to be improved beyond the standard required in the disrepair criterion.

The national standard measured in the English House Condition Survey would fail a property on the following basis (see table 1):

**Table 1: Failing on Modern Facilities and Services**

<b>FAILING THE CRITERION</b>	<b>EXAMPLE</b>
a kitchen with inadequate space and layout	too small to contain all the required items (sink, cupboards cooker space, worktops etc) appropriate to the size of the dwelling
an inappropriately located bathroom and WC	main bathroom or WC located in a bedroom or accessed through a bedroom (unless the bedroom is not used or the dwelling is for a single person). Also fails if the main WC is external or located on a different floor to the nearest wash hand basin, or if a WC without a wash hand basin opens on to a kitchen in an inappropriate area (i.e. next to the food preparation area)
inadequate insulation from external airborne noise	where there are problems with, for example, traffic (rail, road and aeroplanes) or factory noise, landlords should ensure reasonable insulation from these problems through installation of appropriate acoustic glazing in line with the current Building Regulations
inadequate size and layout of common entrance areas for blocks of flats	insufficient room to manoeuvre easily. Includes where there are narrow access ways with awkward corners and turnings, steep staircases, inadequate landings, absence of handrails, low headroom etc

If tenants are happy with their facilities, the published guidance is clear that “landlords are not expected to make a home decent against a tenant’s wishes” (A Decent Home - The definition and guidance for implementation, ODPM, Feb 2004). Where a tenant refuses to grant permission for work to be carried out on their home, the work may be postponed until they have vacated the property. The only exception to this is where the structural integrity of the property needs to be maintained, or where there is a need to prevent other components in the dwelling from deteriorating (Government Response to the ODPM: Housing , Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee’s Report on Decent Homes, July 2004).

In some instances there may be mitigating factors which may inhibit or render the improvements required to meet the Decent Homes Standard difficult (i.e. physical or planning restrictions). Where this is the case, the property should be assessed, in consultation with the relevant body or agency, to determine the most satisfactory course of action. The outcome may determine that some improvements may be possible even if all are not. It should be noted that a dwelling would not fail this criterion, where it is impossible to make the required improvements to components for planning reasons.

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 0.7 million to 0.5 million between 1996 and 2001. In the context of all non-decent homes, this equates to 3.6% (1996) and 2.4% (2001).

The modernisation criterion has been criticised with the ODPM calling for “a greater degree of flexibility and tenant choice in determining which facilities should be replaced” (ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee Decent Homes Report, May 2004). This inflexibility has led to confusion over whether old facilities in good working order and likewise poor facilities, which fall below the old age threshold, should be replaced. However, the government contests that in order to implement the Standard on a national basis it must have clear criteria and boundaries. This ensures that those living below the Standard get improved homes and allows for effective monitoring to measure progress and assess whether a target has been achieved (Government Response to the ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee’s Report on Decent Homes, July 2004).

The Standard is not designed to be a utopian vision that covers everything a tenant wants. However, landlords should use their own judgement and consider tenant priorities when implementing the standard.

## **2) A Reasonable Degree of Thermal Comfort**

Arguably the most important part of the Decent Homes Standard is concerned with ensuring dwellings provide a minimum level of warmth. By creating an environment of thermal comfort, tenants are more likely to enjoy a better quality of life. On top of generating heat, this criterion considers the issues of energy efficiency in order to maximise energy usage and minimise running costs. As such, the criterion requires a dwelling to have both:

- efficient heating
- and
- effective insulation

To achieve a reasonable degree of thermal comfort, it has been identified that heating, insulation and ventilation are not mutually exclusive.

Efficient heating is defined as “any gas or oil programmable central heating or electric storage heaters or programmable LPG/solid fuel central heating or similarly efficient heating systems which are

developed in the future” (A Decent Home - The definition and guidance for implementation, ODPM, Feb 2004). Heating sources which provide less energy efficient options will fail the Decent Homes Standard. Programmable heating refers to systems where the timing and temperature of the heating can be controlled by the tenants.

The level of efficiency varies depending on the type of heating system installed and as a result, guidelines have been issued to ensure that an appropriate level of insulation is provided in each property. This can be summarised as follows:

- For dwellings with gas/oil programmable heating, cavity wall insulation or at least 50mm loft insulation is an effective package of insulation
- For dwellings heated by electric storage heaters/LPG/programmable solid fuel central heating a higher specification of insulation is required: at least 200mm of loft insulation and cavity wall insulation

(A Decent Home - The definition and guidance for implementation, ODPM, Feb 2004).

Where new heating systems are being installed or an existing system replaced, landlords should take the opportunity, where possible, to increase the energy efficiency of the dwelling. This would be achieved through the installation of energy efficient intelligent electric heating systems and an appropriate level of insulation. If new heating or insulation is installed, it is important that steps are taken to ensure the dwelling is adequately ventilated (A Decent Home - The definition and guidance for implementation, ODPM, Feb 2004).

Three energy efficiency programmes have been initiated to provide additional resources to carry out the aforementioned improvements. The programmes are:

- **The Energy Efficiency Commitment (EEC)**

This requires electricity and gas suppliers to meet targets for the promotion of improvements in domestic energy efficiency. They do this by encouraging and assisting domestic consumers (in both private and public sectors) to take up energy efficiency measures.

- **Warm Front**

This scheme tackles fuel poverty among vulnerable households in the private rented and owner occupied sectors. The scheme provides grants for packages of insulation and heating improvements, including central heating systems, for eligible households.

- **Transco's Affordable Warmth Programme**

This programme has introduced Affordable Warmth leases targeted at registered social landlords and local authorities. These leases make the installation of energy efficiency measures more financially attractive for both landlords and tenants.

Although the thermal comfort criterion has been criticised for promoting a standard that is too low (ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee Decent Homes Report, May 2004), it is not the intention of the government to change the goalposts at this stage (Government Response to the ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee's Report on Decent Homes, July 2004). The published guidance states that the level of work carried out to those homes below standard will "vary in line with the policies of social landlords". It also states that when tackling homes that fail through less than 50mm loft insulation "a greater depth should be installed", and when considering refurbishment work landlords "should consult current Building Regulations and other relevant technical publications" (A Decent Home - The definition and guidance for implementation, ODPM, Feb 2004).

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 7.8 million to 5.5 million between 1996 and 2001. In the context of all non-decent homes, this equates to 38.5% (1996) and 26.3% (2001).

### **Decent Homes Plus**

The ODPM has expressed its desire to see a more ambitious Decent Homes Standard to supersede the current 2010 standard. The committee recommends that a more 'aspirational Decent Homes Plus' target be set for a later date and the scope of which should be broader and demand a higher standard. The initial target date suggested by the ODPM is in the 2015-2020 range. The new Decent Homes Plus should be better aligned to the wishes and expectations of the occupants and should include:

*"a much more ambitious thermal comfort criterion which is in line with Building Regulations in force at the time the new Standard is set" (ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee Decent Homes Report, May 2004).*

Given the confusion and uncertainty of the 2010 Decent Homes Standard, the introduction of a new standard at this stage would further complicate matters. On top of this, it is perhaps, too early to consider targets for 2015-20. Standards and people's aspirations change over time and any target set for that period now is likely to be outdated before 2020. With this in mind, the government is focussing its attention on meeting the existing challenges as posed by the 2010 target (Government

Response to the ODPM: Housing , Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee's Report on Decent Homes, July 2004).

The ODPM has presented a number of recommendations relating to the concept of 'Decent Homes Plus'. With regards to thermal comfort, the proposal would include much more ambitious requirements and would use a widely recognised industry measure such as Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) ratings. The chosen measure would be used across all the targets and policies in the energy efficiency area (ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee Decent Homes Report, May 2004).

### **Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP)**

SAP is the government's recommended system for home energy rating and it offers a benchmark method for measuring the energy efficiency of a dwelling. It is based on a calculated energy cost for space and water heating and in 2001, the Carbon Index (CI) was introduced into SAP. The CI is based on CO<sup>2</sup> emissions associated with space and water heating. Both the SAP rating and the CI are adjusted for the floor area so that they are essentially independent of dwelling size for a given built form.

The SAP rating is expressed on a scale of 1-120 (the higher the number the lower the carbon emitted) and although all new buildings must have a SAP rating, as yet there is no minimum standard. Some housing providers specify a target SAP value as a measure of efficiency. The CI should be expressed as a value to one decimal place between 0.0 – 10.0 (the higher the number the better the performance). Both measures take into account a range of factors that contribute to energy efficiency. These are:

- thermal insulation
- efficiency and control of the heating and domestic hot water
- ventilation
- solar gain
- fuel prices

The calculations are not affected by the geographical location or factors that depend on the individual characteristics of the household. These include:

- household size and composition
- ownership and efficiency of particular domestic electrical appliances
- individual heating patterns and temperatures

## 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: reasonably modern facilities and services and a reasonable degree of thermal comfort.

The incorporation of the modern facilities criterion is an attempt to add value to the standard of living for social housing tenants. On top of achieving a minimum standard for housing, this component is aimed at reducing the polarity that epitomises the UK housing market. There has been some concern as to the inflexibility of the criterion but the government is unable to succumb to every individual tenant request. Decisions on prioritising spend and meeting tenant needs have been devolved to the social landlord level and they are then employing their own judgement to satisfy them. For the Standard to be applicable on a national basis, the scope must be clear and consistent.

The second criterion assesses the thermal comfort of the property. The majority of homes that fail the Decent Homes Standard fail on the basis of this criterion and, as such, this is a key area that must be addressed. Thermal comfort is contingent on the efficiency of the heating, insulation and ventilation systems installed in a property. These are not mutually exclusive and require minimum standards to ensure a comfortable living temperature is maintained. Where new heating systems are installed, there must be:

- an element of controllability
- a minimum level of insulation
- an adequate provision of ventilation

The ODPM has suggested that the thermal comfort criterion should play a key role in its proposed Decent Homes Plus standard that may set new, tougher standards for 2015-2020. If this happens, the early indications suggest that the SAP rating system will be used as a guiding principle for energy efficiency.


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.

## **Applied Energy Products Ltd (AEPL)**

Based in the UK, AEPL has some of the best known brands and products available for heating, ventilation and showering solutions:

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- Xpelair
- Redring

We have significant experience in Egan driven best value and partnering solutions and can offer help and advice to housing professionals looking to achieve the Decent Homes Standard. To find out how we can help, contact us on:

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