

Decent Homes Standards and accessibility

The Decent Homes Standard sets government targets for social housing in England on a range of issues but does not specifically include any requirements about the accessibility of properties. This study considered the approach of six English housing associations with large refurbishment programmes following the transfer of previously council-owned stock. It looked at whether there had been a missed opportunity in terms of improving accessibility and whether there was any evidence that accessibility had actually been made worse by the works that had been carried out. The study found that:

- The housing associations contacted had been very willing to encompass access improvements for individual disabled tenants caught up in their refurbishment programmes. However, their approach had been concerned with meeting these ‘special needs’ rather than improving the accessibility of their stock overall.
- Where access-related improvements were suggested whilst other works were being carried out, the premise that “disruption would be too much for tenants” prevailed as the default position.
- There were examples of external access improvements being made to common areas serving a number of tenants. However, external areas leading to individual homes did not receive such levels of attention. Cost was the most commonly cited reason for this.
- Within properties, refurbishment did not routinely encompass some accessibility features that could have been provided at little or no additional cost (for example, additional stair-rails, relocating sockets/switches during rewiring).
- There were no examples of access being worsened. Lower threshold strips on entrance doors were being fitted as a matter of course. However, the decision not to remove steps meant that this had limited value in improving access in many properties.
- In some cases, tenants’ choice of colours and fittings may have had an adverse effect on accessibility in the longer term.
- There was little evidence of a strategic approach to accessibility issues. The researchers conclude that social landlords should put in place a coherent access strategy that would encompass properties being improved.



Background

As part of an attempt to link increased spending to better outcomes, the Government wants to bring all social housing within England into a 'decent' condition by 2010, using four main criteria. Social housing must:

- meet current statutory minimum standards;
- be in a reasonable standard of repair;
- have reasonably modern facilities and services; and
- provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort.

There has been some concern that there is no specific requirement that a home should be accessible to meet the standard (though guidance and advice do infer that accessibility should be considered). This has led some organisations to question whether an opportunity to improve accessibility is being lost. Some have even suggested that access standards may become worse as a result of refurbishment programmes. Evidence (including results from the English House Condition Survey) suggests that only a very small proportion of existing housing stock is currently accessible.

This study sought to investigate how social landlords with major refurbishment plans were addressing accessibility questions. It focused on housing associations to which previously council-owned stock had been transferred, and which had in place large-scale improvement programmes.

Case studies

The researchers identified thirteen indicators of the level of accessibility that might be achieved through refurbishment works. Six English housing associations were contacted to assess their approach to these factors:

1. *Where there was the opportunity to improve the external approach:*

- a) *were steps replaced with a shallow ramp (1:20)?*
- b) *was the entrance path made wide enough for a parked car and a pram, buggy or wheelchair user to pass?*
- c) *were doors and/or gates made distinguishable (for example, through colour or textures, and lighting)?*

All six associations improved the external approach where there was a specific requirement for the current resident. Those housing associations that had flats with communal entrances also improved the general approach. However, this would not be done as a matter of course for individual homes, cost being cited as the main reason for not doing this work.

2. *Where entrance doors were being installed, were level thresholds incorporated of no more than 15mm?*

All of the housing associations met this requirement in that none introduced a new threshold of over 15mm high at the front door. However, it was usual to leave steps in place and add a new threshold of 15mm onto the step. This meant that the value of the lower threshold was limited, since there was not enough level area for someone to rest whilst opening the door or stepping in.

3. *Where there was opportunity to provide a storage area for a bike, pram or wheelchair inside the entrance, was this being done?*

New storage areas were not usually created, lack of space often (though not always) prohibiting this. Some properties had existing storage, often old coal stores, which might take a pram or small wheelchair; most, however, would not accommodate large wheelchairs or power scooters.

4. *Where new doors were installed, were they at least 750mm wide?*

New doorways were not generally being created. All six housing associations stated they would provide wider doors whenever possible where an individual tenant had a specific requirement.

5. *Where electricity supply was renewed:*

- a) *were all switches, sockets and control panels placed at an accessible level (i.e. between 450-1200mm from the floor)?*
- b) *where a new fuse panel was being installed, did this include at least one spare spur or circuit? (This might be for any purpose, but could be required for equipment or a recharging station.)*

All six housing associations installed new sockets in kitchen refurbishments and these would comply with Building Regulations. Few moved existing sockets in the rest of the property, so these remained at about 350mm from floor level in most cases. Only one of the housing associations planned to move light switches and sockets as standard.

None of the housing associations specified spare spurs on new fuse panels, but it seemed that in some cases new fuse panels did have this facility.

6. *Where a ground-floor toilet was present:*

- a) was the toilet kept at entrance level (rather than relocated upstairs), and was a hand basin installed?*
- b) did new taps have lever or cross-head tops and were they consistent, with 'hot' on the left and 'cold' on the right?*
- c) were replacement installations provided with large flush handles?*
- d) was the toilet room made large enough for a wheelchair user where this was possible?*

None of the housing associations removed downstairs toilets. However, they did not reinstate them when they had been removed by previous tenants. All six offered a choice of taps. Cross-head taps were always an option and most tenants chose these, with few choosing lever taps. None of the housing associations offered large-handled flush toilets as a standard option. Enlarging the toilet room was not feasible in most cases due to the original layout.

7. *Where new windows were being installed, were they easy to open and operate, with low handles (and, where possible, did living-room window glazing begin at 800mm or lower)?*

All of the six housing associations had installed new windows. In some instances tenants had been given a limited choice of the style of window to be installed. Most windows were side opening, with easy-to-grip handles installed at mid-height. There was often an additional top window which opened at high level, although one of the housing associations did include bottom-opening windows within the mainstream range.

8. *Where new kitchen spaces were being designed, was enough space allowed for a wheelchair user to enter and circulate?*

The overall size of the kitchen was not altered in most refurbishments. However, removing built-in ladders had enlarged some kitchen spaces. All tenants had some choice in the design of their new kitchens.

9. *Where new fixtures and fittings were being installed in any room, were these tonal-/colour-contrasted to assist people with low vision?*

In the refurbishment programmes, this primarily applied to kitchens and bathrooms. In all cases, tenants were given a choice of the colour and style of kitchen units and worktops. Tenants were not made aware of the impact of tonal/colour choice in terms of accessibility.

10. *Where new wall tiles were being installed, were these matt rather than gloss (to prevent glare) and did they contrast with fixtures or fittings?*

Few of the housing associations had matt wall tiles as a choice at the time of the research, but they now intend to offer this option.

11. *Where stairs were wide enough, were two handrails installed (in either individual homes or communal areas)?*

None of the six housing associations did this as standard in individual homes.

12. *In accommodation with communal areas, if work was to be done to improve lifts, did this include improving accessibility for people with physical or sensory impairments?*

Not all of the housing associations had properties with lifts but where they were present and had been refurbished or replaced, all control panels had been lowered and their lighting improved.

13. *Was there an access statement, related to an access strategy, which:*

- a) was used in the decent home refurbishment scheme?*
- b) was incorporated into tender documents, specifications and bills of quantities used in engaging the contractor?*

Two of the six housing associations had an access statement in place that was incorporated into tender documents. Some of those whose access strategies were being developed had been focusing attention on employment issues and the running of the organisation, rather than on issues relating to the accessibility of stock.

Conclusions

At the outset of the research there was concern that not only might refurbishment schemes not address access improvements, but also that some issues could be made worse. There were no examples of this in the results from this particular study, but there was evidence of a particular – and relatively narrow – standpoint on access improvements. This does suggest that an opportunity to improve the accessibility of existing stock is being missed.

The findings suggest that social housing providers may see access improvements as the province of those they regard to have ‘special needs’ rather than viewing improved accessibility across their stock-holding as an important mainstream issue. Whilst impressive efforts were made to assist individual tenants, there was little evidence of engagement with general accessibility or universal design concerns beyond works to communal areas.

Some access improvements were viewed as prohibitively costly. Others, with no or minimal resource implications, were also not generally undertaken, and some may have been adversely affected by aspects of tenants’ choice. For example, second handrails were not being fitted to staircases, even where there was room to do so, and other simple access-related issues were not being considered, such as selecting matt wall tiles over high gloss to reduce glare.

The housing associations involved in the research were, however, willing to consider for the future a number of the issues that had been raised in the course of the study. This suggests that it is partly a lack of awareness that is impeding possible progress on mainstream access improvements.

The researchers conclude that social housing providers should develop a comprehensive access strategy, taking on board the issues that relate to the physical housing stock that they own and manage. This would provide a framework through which to detail the accessibility issues that could be addressed in refurbishment programmes, identifying current barriers and how they could be removed. Although the research looked specifically at the English situation, there are also broader lessons for the UK as a whole.

About the project

The researchers were Pam Thomas and Marcus Ormerod of the SURFACE Inclusive Design Research Centre, University of Salford. A desktop study was undertaken to establish the potential impact of Decent Homes Standards on accessibility issues. From this a set of thirteen distinct areas were identified: these formed the basis for investigation in the case studies.

The case studies involved six housing associations in England which had been involved in stock transfer and which were undertaking refurbishment programmes. Key staff were interviewed, a selection of homes were visited and data on access issues collected.

For more information

The full report, **Implementing Decent Homes Standards: How housing associations are addressing accessibility issues** by Marcus Ormerod and Pam Thomas, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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