

Implementing Decent Homes Standards

How housing associations are addressing accessibility issues

Marcus Ormerod and Pam Thomas

This report investigates how social landlords with major refurbishment programmes to bring homes up to Decent Homes Standards were addressing accessibility issues.

The study reviewed the approach of six housing associations undertaking improvements to homes following the transfer of previously council-owned stock. The Decent Homes Standards set government targets to be achieved by 2010 for social housing on a range of issues, but the standards do not specifically include any requirements about the accessibility of properties. Whilst the government is half-way through its programme there remains £21 billion of work yet to be carried out.

The research looks at whether there has 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. A set of 13 access issues were used within case studies to assess the extent to which accessibility was being achieved.



**JOSEPH ROWNTREE
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Summary

This study assesses the approach to accessibility of stock transfer properties, which were undergoing improvements to bring them in line with Decent Homes Standards, within six Housing Associations in England. The research was not designed to be representative of all Housing Associations, but to provide a quick snapshot of the current situation. The Decent Homes Standards set government targets for Registered Social Landlords on a wide range of issues but do not specifically include access as an issue. This is an area of concern since this is a missed opportunity for increasing accessibility of properties, and critically has the potential that accessibility may inadvertently become worse. The key findings from the study, by Dr Pam Thomas and Marcus Ormerod, are as follows.

- There is a ‘special needs’ mindset on items that would improve access and this leads to a special adaptations rather than to a mainstream view of accessibility within the six Housing Associations.
- External access improvements are often made to common areas that serve large numbers of tenants, whereas external areas leading to individual units do not receive such levels of attention.
- The premise of ‘disruption would be too much for tenants’ prevails as the default position on suggesting access-related improvements while other works are being carried out. If a tenant specifically requests access-related work then the six Housing Associations do provide this but it is then seen as a ‘special need’.
- Tenant choice of colours and fittings may have adverse effect on accessibility. When choosing items, such as tonal contrast and kitchen design, tenants are not informed if that choice reduces access.
- Lower threshold strips on entrance doors are being fitted, but this is due to ecological reasons in choosing timber doors, rather than fitting UPVC doors with high thresholds.
- Steps are not being removed on individual units, unless requested by tenants. Lower thresholds are fitted to these steps but there is not enough level area for someone to rest while opening the door or stepping in.
- While the six Housing Associations do have an overt policy on refusing to remove ground-floor toilets, they do not insist on replacing a ground-floor toilet if the tenant has previously removed it.

- Second handrails are not being fitted to staircases even where there is room to do so.
- Some access-related issues, such as selecting matt wall tiles over high gloss, which would reduce glare, are not being considered by the six Housing Associations.
- Going through the process of the interview for the study made the six Housing Associations more aware of access issues.

1 Decent Homes Standard and accessibility

As part of the Government's attempt to link increased spending to better outcomes, the Government established that:

... 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.
(ODPM, 2004)

The definition that the Government uses for a decent home is 'one which is wind and weather tight, warm and has modern facilities' (ODPM, 2004). Four main criteria are used to determine if a home meets this definition.

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

Notably, there is no specific mention within the definition, or its criteria, that a home should be accessible both for occupiers and their visitors. This issue was taken up by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Habinteg Housing Association and the Disability Rights Commission in a joint submission to the ODPM Committee: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions.

There are, however, certain requirements and advice within Decent Home Standards that relate to accessibility by implication. Although access is not specifically mentioned as a main criterion, since accessibility and inclusive design is part of the revised Building Regulations (Part M in England and Wales) and its Approved Document (AD M), there is an inferred requirement in achieving a Decent Homes Standard.

In Section 4 of the ODPM publication on implementing the Decent Home Standard, in relation to 'Standard of work to be carried out', paragraph 4.4. advises:

When considering refurbishment packages, landlords should consult with current Building Regulations and other relevant technical publications. (ODPM, 2004)

Part M of the Building Regulations (England and Wales) covers the area of access to and use of buildings, and deals with accessibility and inclusive design. There is an Approved Document (AD M) that suggests ways of achieving Part M and provides design details. Part M and AD M were substantially revised in May 2004, although the section on housing remains unaltered from the previous two versions. In terms of housing the AD M uses the Lifetime Homes criteria as the main basis for its suggestions. However, within Part M, there have been significant changes in how and where it should be applied. Under regulation 4(2) of Part M there is a requirement that, where dwellings are altered, they should not be made less compliant with Part M than they were before the work began. This is regardless of whether the building was previously subject to the regulations or not.

The elements of accessibility required by AD M of the Building Regulations Part M (England and Wales) in respect of housing can be summarised as follows.

- The approach to the house should be wide enough for wheelchair users, even when there is a parked car.
- The approach should not be too steep; ideally it should be level.
- An accessible threshold at entrance level should be provided.
- Doorways and corridors should be wide enough to allow wheelchair users to manoeuvre into and out of rooms.
- Communal stairs in blocks of flats should provide ease of access to ambulant disabled people.
- A stepped change of level within an entrance storey should allow ease of access to ambulant disabled people.
- Wheelchair users should be able to use any lift provided in a block of flats.
- Switches and sockets should be at a convenient height for all.
- All homes should have an entrance-level toilet that is usable by a wheelchair user.

The Part M requirement is a minimum standard and the Decent Homes General Principles of Application does give further advice on the issue of accessibility:

2.3 landlords may also wish to consider which relevant Lifetime Home Standards are appropriate when carrying out work to properties and whether the work to be undertaken can be modified to help meet the needs of people with disabilities.
(ODPM, 2004)

The Lifetime Home Standards are the result of research by Habinteg Housing Association and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. They form a set of 16 design features that apply to both the interior and exterior of the home. They set good-practice standards for designing homes that are both accessible and adaptable to the changing needs of people at all stages in their life. The 16 design features are as follows.

- 1 Where there is car parking adjacent to the home, it should be capable of enlargement to attain 3,300mm width.
- 2 The distance from the car parking space to the home should be kept to a minimum and should be level or gently sloping.
- 3 The approach to all entrances should be level or gently sloping.
- 4 All entrances should be illuminated, have level access over the threshold and have a covered main entrance.
- 5 Communal stairs should provide easy access and, where homes are reached by a lift, it should be wheelchair accessible.
- 6 The width of internal doorways and hallways should conform to Part M, except that, when the approach is not head on and the corridor width is 900mm, the clear opening width should be 900mm rather than 800mm. There should be 300mm to the side of the leading edge of the doors on the entrance level.
- 7 There should be space for turning a wheelchair in dining areas and living rooms, and adequate circulation space for wheelchair users elsewhere.
- 8 The living room or living/bedroom should be at entrance level.
- 9 In homes of two or more storeys, there should be space on the ground floor that could be used as a convenient bedspace.

- 10 There should be a wheelchair-accessible entrance-level WC with drainage provision enabling a shower to be fitted in the future.
- 11 Walls in bathrooms and toilets should be capable of taking adaptations such as handrails.
- 12 The design should incorporate provision for a future stairlift and a suitably identified space for potential installation of a through-the-floor lift from the ground to the first floor, for example to a bedroom next to a bathroom.
- 13 The design should provide for a reasonable route for a potential hoist from a main bedroom to the bathroom.
- 14 The bathroom should be designed to incorporate ease of access, to the bath and WC and wash basin.
- 15 Living-room window glazing should begin at 800mm or lower, and windows should be easy to open/operate.
- 16 Switches, sockets, ventilation and service controls should be at a height usable by all (i.e. between 450mm and 1,200mm from the floor).

These design features should be included in all new homes and, where practicable, be incorporated into refurbishment programmes.

The number of properties that are fit or unfit at a national level is measured through the English House Condition Survey. The determination of whether a property is fit or unfit usually relates to the state of repair and, in the case of kitchen and bathroom, that they should be of an adequate size and have fittings that are less than 30 years old. This information is related to the Decent Homes Standards.

Within the English House Condition Survey there is an assumption of 'able-bodiedness', because, if a wheelchair user or other disabled person could use these facilities, the dwelling itself would still be deemed to be 'fit' if it met the set criteria. However, the report of the 2001 English House Condition Survey (ODPM, 2003) did for the first time ask about certain access features in people's homes. These access features were four very basic features, which were drawn from the key points of Part M of the building regulations:

- 750mm clear width door openings
- flush thresholds
- bathroom/WC at entrance level
- level access to dwelling.

The ODPM (2003) report English House Condition Survey publishes the results of research into whether homes may be considered decent or not. The introduction of minimum standards of Part M of the building regulations has meant that, for the first time, there is information to show:

Level access to the dwelling is less common in pre-1919 dwellings (60%) and even rarer in converted flats (39%). While 40% of all dwellings have a bath/WC at entrance level, this falls to 20% among small terraced houses. The incidence of flush thresholds varies widely by dwelling type from 64% in high rise flats to just 13% in semi-detached houses. The wider 750mm door openings are particularly uncommon in small terraced houses and pre-1919 dwellings.

Altogether, 700,000 dwellings have all four of these access features. Just over half of these dwellings are in the social rented sector. Only 40% of dwellings with these features are owner occupied.
(ODPM, 2003)

This information, while minimal, is useful to show the extent of inaccessibility. Of the 20.5 million households in England, only 0.7 per cent have all four of the access features and half of these are in the social sector.

Since the English House Condition Survey measures only four aspects of accessibility a more detailed set of criteria was developed for the research. In this study the requirements of Part M and AD M of the Building Regulations in England and Wales, plus the Lifetime Homes Standards, were used to develop a set of accessibility criteria for housing undergoing improvement works. The experience and knowledge of the researchers in the field of inclusive design identified further access issues not covered by AD M, or Lifetime Homes, and these were added to them to establish a total of 13 distinct areas for investigation with six Housing Associations.

2 About the project

The researchers were Dr Pam Thomas and Marcus Ormerod of the SURFACE Inclusive Design Research Centre at the University of Salford. Six differing Housing Associations that were involved in England in stock transfers of properties, which were currently undertaking refurbishment programmes, were chosen and key staff interviewed. A selection of homes from these six Housing Association portfolios were visited and data on access issues collected.

In discussions with the six Housing Associations it is apparent that attaining Decent Home Standards was not necessarily the driver for these Housing Associations, but the Standards were incorporated into the general programme of refurbishment.

While the area of interest for this research was with general needs housing, all six Housing Associations were keen to demonstrate how they ensured that disabled tenants had their specific requirements met in their own homes. All six Housing Associations worked closely with occupational therapists where present tenants had access requirements that were not met by mainstream design and planned standard refurbishments.

Interview questions were developed using various accessibility criteria applicable to dwellings and this identified 13 distinct areas where access issues in refurbishment of homes could be investigated (see the Appendix). Discussion with key staff from the six Housing Associations covered these 13 areas and asked if it was difficult to attain the access features mentioned and whether work is currently carried out as a general improvement. All six Housing Associations were interviewed only about stock transfer properties. Properties were visited in order to see the outcome of work carried out and to consider whether it had achieved the accessibility criteria.

Housing Associations that took part in the study

Six Housing Associations kindly agreed to participate in the research involving interviews and site visits. Two of the six Housing Associations were set up independently to manage the stock transfer properties, two were set up as new Housing Associations within existing Housing Groups, and two were established Housing Associations taking on new stock transfers.

Table 1 The participating Housing Associations

Housing Association	Number of homes transferred in the stock transfer
1	12,500
2	7,500
3	2,400
4	1,157
5	25,000
6	4,000

Joint choice

All six Housing Associations consulted with tenants to ascertain their wishes. Accessibility was raised, not as a communal issue by tenants, but on an individual basis. The only exception to this was where older tenants required a facility for parking scooters on the ground level of a high-rise block. One Housing Association reported that a group of tenants in a low-rise block wanted the lift removed because the maintenance charge increased their rent. The Housing Association as a consequence removed the lift.

3 Findings

The six Housing Associations were interviewed on a range of 13 accessibility issues that might be considered during refurbishment projects on social housing being brought up to the Decent Homes Standard. The accessibility issues and the responses of the six Housing Associations to them are now covered.

1 **Where there is the opportunity to improve the external approach:**

a steps are replaced with a shallow ramp (1 in 20 gradient).

A level, or gently sloping, external approach will provide the least barrier for people to gain entry to the dwelling. Removal of steps will allow wheelchair users, powered scooter users, and parents with prams and buggies access to the property.

All six Housing Associations do this where there is a specific requirement for the current resident. Those of the six Housing Associations that had flats with communal entrances also improved the approach. However, for individual approaches, this would not be done as a matter of course, cost being cited as the main reason for not doing this work.

b with an entrance path wide enough for a parked car and a pram, buggy or wheelchair user to pass this is done.

While a property will usually have a firm surface leading to the entrance it is often insufficient in width to accommodate a parked vehicle with enough room for a person to manoeuvre around it to the front door. Providing either separate parking and path, or one wide paved surface for both, is good practice.

Those of the six Housing Associations that had flats with communal entrances improved the approach providing level access, and for individual units where there is a specific requirement for the current resident. However, for individual approaches, this would not routinely be done. Some tenants specifically request a wider paving of the front garden; however, this may be for low maintenance rather than access concerns. Cost is again a main inhibiting factor in widening individual entrance paths on all properties.

Image 1 A typical paved pathway leading to a stepped front-entrance door



c Doors and or gates are made distinguishable, for example through colour or textures, and lighting.

Locating doors and gates for a person with a visual impairment will be easier if they are made to contrast through tonal/colour variation and tactile/texture from their surroundings.

All six Housing Associations offer a choice of style and colour of individual entrance doors. However, none had a choice of colour for gates, nor any tactile indication of gates (unless specifically required for a particular tenant).

New communal doors are of a contrasting tone/colour to the surrounding walls and frames. They have glass viewing panels in the doors to allow people to see if there is someone on the other side of the door and therefore prevent collision. The communal doors provided closed automatically for safety, but this also meant they could be quite difficult to push open.

Image 2 A wide paved area with designated parking in a communal housing scheme



Image 3 Choice of approach to the entrance of ramp and steps, but the blue door is far clearer than the timber main entrance



2 Where entrance doors are being installed, level thresholds are incorporated, especially UPVC door frames, or with a threshold of no more than 15mm.

Any threshold on a door can become a barrier for a wheelchair user. A level threshold is the best option wherever possible, but, if a threshold has to be introduced, then a chamfered strip no higher than 15mm will allow access.

None of the six Housing Associations introduce a new threshold of over 15mm high at the front door. Two Housing Associations had removed thresholds and replaced them with ones that were 15mm high. One Housing Association had kept the existing concrete 50mm threshold, not adding or taking away from it, the cost of removing it being given as the reason for not removing it. It seems usual to leave steps in place and add a new threshold of 15mm onto the step.

Other issues on entrance doors are being addressed by the six Housing Associations. Door furniture, such as handles, are improved during refurbishment, although in some cases the handles are positioned quite high up on the door. Stand-off viewers have been installed by some Housing Associations. If the current tenant requires the viewer to be placed in a lower position this is done.

Image 4 An entrance door with two steps up



3 Where there is opportunity to provide, inside the entrance, storage for a bike, pram or wheelchair, this is done.

Once inside the home there needs to be some place to store items that are used for outside activities. This may be a bike and pram, or wheelchair and power scooter. A person with a mobility impairment may use a wheelchair to travel distances outside, but prefer not to use it within the house. Safe storage of these valuable items is important.

It does not seem usual for new storage areas to be created; lack of space often prohibits this, although that is not always an issue. Some properties have existing storage areas, often old coal-storage sheds, which may take a pram/buggy, bike or small wheelchair. Most would not take a power scooter. However, one property visited did have an existing outhouse that had been refurbished to store a power scooter of the present tenant. This involved improved security and installing an electricity supply. A bicycle store was provided through the conversion of an ex-laundry room for a multi-storey block by one Housing Association. Another Housing Association is considering changing the use of a games room to provide storage space for power scooters at the ground-floor level of a high-rise block, as many of the tenants are now older people who use power scooters.

4 Where new doors are installed they will be at least 750mm wide.

Doors with less width than 750mm can create a barrier for wheelchair users. If new doors are being installed then increasing the width will be beneficial. Rehanging doors so that the door does not block the approach into a room will improve accessibility.

New doorways are not being created in the improvement works, so this has not been done in any of the general properties. All six Housing Associations stated they would provide wider doors whenever possible where an individual tenant had a specific requirement. One Housing Association rehanges doors to open against the wall in order to improve access for all. Another Housing Association noted the widening of doors as an issue they would take on board in the forthcoming refurbishment of some bungalows where all interior walls are being relocated.

5 Where electricity supply is renewed,

- a all switches, sockets and control panels are put in a place that is accessible (i.e. between 450 and 1,200mm from the floor).***

Placing switches, sockets and controls at heights that can be reached both from standing and sitting positions will allow use by most people.

All six Housing Associations install new sockets in kitchen refurbishments and these would comply with Building Regulations. Few move sockets in the rest of the property, so they remain at about 350mm from floor level in most cases. Only if there is a specific requirement of the tenant are they moved. Similarly, with light switches, they usually remain at the original height, unless specifically required by the tenant to be at an accessible height. Only one Housing Association planned to move light switches and sockets as standard, but sometimes tenants declined to have this work done, as it spoiled decoration.

- b and a new fuse panel is being installed, at least one spare spur or circuit is included (this may be for any purpose, but may be required for equipment or a recharging station).***

Spare capacity within the electric circuit system will allow for expansion of that system for future requirements, such as power for a stairlift, recharging equipment for a power scooter, etc.

None of the six Housing Associations specified this, but it seemed that, in some cases, new fuse panels had a spare spur. Most of the six Housing Associations thought this was something they could add to specifications for future work.

6 Where a ground floor toilet needs to have a wash-hand basin,

- a the toilet is kept at entrance level and a hand basin installed (rather than put toilet upstairs),***

The provision of a ground-floor toilet and wash-hand basin in a two-storey home allows someone to continue living as part of the household even if they cannot get to

the first-floor level. Also it increases the visitability of the property for those people who otherwise would be precluded basic sanitary provision when they visited their friends, family, etc.

None of the six Housing Associations removed downstairs toilets. However, some had inherited properties where the tenants had previously removed these themselves. A ground-floor toilet would not be reinstated if the tenant did not want this feature. While this may be satisfactory for the current tenant it reduces the accessibility of that property for future tenants.

b new taps have lever or cross-head tops, and are consistent with hot on the left and cold on the right.

The style of the tops of taps fluctuates with current design trends. A cross-head top style on a tap is the easiest for someone with limited dexterity to turn on and off. Having hot water on the left and cold water on the right is the usual layout in most countries and adopting this reduces the chances of people scalding themselves by operating the wrong tap by mistake. Standardisation of layout also helps blind people to use taps with confidence.

All six Housing Associations offer a choice of taps. Cross-head taps were always an option and most tenants chose these. Some Housing Associations offered lever taps, but these may not be chosen by tenants. Crystal round-top style taps are still on offer and some tenants choose these. Where there is occupational therapist involvement lever taps are always installed.

Image 5 Wash-hand basin tap with large lever handles fitted



c *Where a new toilet is to be installed it has a large flush handle,*

A person with limited dexterity can find small handles and push-button flushes on toilet cisterns difficult to operate. A large flush handle provides greater leverage and a more extensive pad area for ease of operation.

None of the six Housing Associations offers this as a standard option; this would only be available where there is occupational therapist involvement. The requirements to install low water use flush was mentioned by some of the six Housing Associations and these have a press-button flush on the top of the cistern, which may give rise to access problems, as some of these can be hard to press down below the lid level of the cistern. Some light-touch flushes are available, but they are likely to have maintenance difficulties.

d *if possible the toilet room is made large enough for a wheelchair user.*

Many toilet rooms have insufficient space to allow a wheelchair user to transfer from chair to toilet basin. This means that they have to leave the wheelchair outside, or blocking the doorway, when using the toilet. Combining the toilet and bathroom in one larger room will provide more overall space than two separate rooms.

This was not feasible in most cases because of the original layout. In one block of low-rise flats with separate toilet and bathrooms, which were adjacent, knocking these into one room would probably have been a better use of space. This was not considered to be feasible, as all tenants were living in the flats and demolition work is very disruptive. Additionally, in this example, access to the flats for all but the ground-floor properties is not wheelchair accessible. One Housing Association had removed the bath from the downstairs bathroom leaving just a toilet and wash-hand basin. The room was made smaller in order to increase the size of the kitchen.

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

Often, opening windows are placed at high level and can be difficult to operate from a sitting position. Additionally, lower-level windows in living rooms will afford a view for a seated person.

All the six Housing Associations have installed new windows. In some cases tenants have a limited choice of the style of window to be installed. In most cases the windows are side opening and the handles are fairly chunky and easy to grip, and are usually installed at mid height. There is often an additional top window, which also opens. In some cases there is only a top window opener, which is inaccessible to many people. One Housing Association did include bottom-opening windows within the mainstream range. Opening kitchen windows is often made more difficult because the sink or other unit is placed in front of the window.

Image 6 Window with lower handle opening



8 Where new kitchen spaces are being designed, enough space is allowed for a wheelchair user to enter and circulate.

Kitchen spaces should provide sufficient circulation space to allow tenants to use the facilities safely and ergonomically. A 1,500mm turning circle is required for a wheelchair user to turn through 180 degrees. While this may not be feasible in some kitchen designs the entrance and layout should allow for access and use of the kitchen by a wheelchair user.

In several cases kitchen spaces have been enlarged by the removal of built-in larders. The overall size of the kitchen is not altered in most refurbishments, an exception being where the downstairs bathroom size had been reduced to increase

the kitchen. The reduction in bathroom size to increase the kitchen area only moves the access problem from one room to another. All tenants had choice in the design of their new kitchens; usually a kitchen designer was employed to assist in the layout. Where wheelchair-accessible fixtures and fittings are currently required all six Housing Associations will provide them, usually in conjunction with the local authority Social Services Department.

Image 7 Kitchen layout allowing some circulation within a limited space



9 Where new fixtures and fittings are being installed in any room, these are tonal/colour contrasted (this assists people with low vision).

The tonal/colour contrast of switches, work surfaces, doors, walls and floors is important for someone with a visual impairment in order to distinguish the edges and junctions between them. A white switch on a white wall is hard to find and operate.

Realistically, this applies primarily in kitchen and bathrooms. In all cases tenants have a choice of the colour and style of kitchen units and worktops. Bathroom suites were white in all but one case. However, there was a choice of wall-tile colour so tonal/colour contrast could be achieved.

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

Glare is a considerable barrier for a person with a visual impairment. Their reliance on their residual vision means that glare from shiny surfaces will easily reduce the useful visual information they can perceive. Providing matt surfaces in important areas such as kitchens and bathrooms will reduce the chance of accidents.

Few of the six Housing Associations had matt wall tiles as a choice, but they now intend to offer matt as an option, with the exception of one that supplies only white gloss tiles.

11 Where stairs are wide enough two handrails are installed – either in individual units or in communal areas.

Providing handrails on both sides of a staircase will make its use far easier. A person who has a weakness on one side of their body, say through a stroke, will use one handrail when ascending and the other when descending.

None of the six Housing Associations does this as standard in individual units. Some flats already have a second handrail, but not all. Some of the six Housing Associations have said they will now consider adding this into the programme.

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

Where lifts are provided then the size of the lift car, the door and the waiting area in front of the lift should accommodate wheelchair users. Audible and tactile information, along with visual cues, help in operating it. Consideration should be given to the increasing use of scooters and power chairs. Scooters are generally longer than manual wheelchairs and have a larger turning circle. Power chairs are heavier because of the battery packs.

Image 8 Staircase with handrails on each side and a stairlift track



Not all of the six Housing Associations had properties with lifts. Where lifts have been improved all panels have been lowered and lighting improved. Only two had audio announcers. Braille on buttons was present in only some cases, but these were features that the six Housing Associations said they would include in future works.

13 There is an access statement, which is related to an access strategy, that we:

a use in the Decent Home refurbishment scheme

An access statement details how access features for that particular project are being incorporated into the refurbishment. Although Part M of the Building Regulations advises that access statements are used to justify reasons where access cannot be achieved, good practice recommends that access statements should be used to

explain all access-related items. An access statement provides an opportunity for the client, design and construction team to explain how they intend to achieve access on that project.

An access strategy is a strategic document that states the intentions of an organisation in terms of its stance on access issues. Therefore an access strategy will cover the housing offices and employment of staff along with the approach towards new developments and refurbishment projects of the housing stock. It should start with the mission statement of what the organisation aspires to achieve.

There should be a clear linkage between the strategic access strategy and the specific access statement for a particular project. While the access strategy is likely to be an aspiration the access statement will take a more pragmatic view of what is realistically achievable on site.

Few of the six Housing Associations had an access strategy in place; others are at various stages of development. Where there is an access strategy, this may be more related to Disability Discrimination Act employment issues and the running of the organisation, rather than for the Decent Home refurbishment scheme.

b incorporate into tender documents, specifications, and bills of quantities, which are used in engaging the contractor.

The decisions made and stated in the access statement need to be taken through to all the contract documentation for the project in order to ensure that the access-related items are not lost in the physical aspect of turning the plan into reality. It is important to ensure in the fine detail of the documents that accessible features have need specified. Additionally, an access feature can be rendered useless if the operative who fixes it does not understand the key access issues that make it work effectively. A toilet flush handle positioned in a corner is harder to operate than one set on the open side of a toilet cistern. A plumber will often fit the flush handle on the right-hand side, irrespective of whether this is the best position, simply because the blanking plug on the cistern is already in the left-hand position. Few of the six Housing Associations did this, but agreed that it is something they would consider doing in future.

4 Conclusions

Housing Associations are carrying out Decent Homes Standard improvement work as part of their refurbishment programmes on stock transfer properties. These programmes are not seen entirely as being driven by the Decent Homes Standard, but it does form part of the criteria for setting the standards to be achieved.

The findings of this research are based on six Housing Associations and therefore cannot be representative of all Housing Associations. However, the results demonstrate that there is often a 'special needs' mindset on items that would improve access within the six Housing Associations and this leads to a special adaptations, rather than to a mainstream, view of accessibility. The six Housing Associations are prepared to do everything they can for tenants once they have been identified as requiring 'special needs', but this is on an individual basis. During refurbishment programmes to improve entire areas, the opportunity to increase the overall accessibility of properties is not given the same level of attention, yet this would potentially help not only existing tenants but future ones as well. The lack of explicit statements on improving accessibility as part of the Decent Homes Standards means that access improvements are not being undertaken.

External access improvements are often made to common areas that serve large numbers of tenants, such as multi-storey housing. The similar external areas leading to individual houses do not receive such levels of attention, in terms of access, during refurbishment works. The use of common areas by many tenants provides an impetus to seek solutions that work for a wide range of users.

On suggesting access-related improvements while other refurbishment works are being carried out, there is a prevailing premise, which creates a default position within the six Housing Associations, of 'disruption would be too much for tenants'. If a tenant specifically requires access-related work then the six Housing Associations do provide this, but it is then seen as a 'special need'. Through this approach the opportunity to mainstream accessibility is missed.

There is a move by the six Housing Associations to give tenants increased levels of choice, wherever possible, within refurbishment works. Tenant choice of colours and fittings, however, may have adverse effect on accessibility. When choosing items tenants are not informed if that choice reduces access, such as tonal/colour contrast and kitchen layout/design. In satisfying current tenant choice the accessibility requirements of future tenants are discounted. While redecoration to change the paint colours may be relatively simple, altering the layout of the kitchen, or retiling, may be more difficult to achieve.

At the outset of the research there was concern that high thresholds were being introduced as a result of the installation of UPVC doors and frames. However, in the refurbishments visited, lower threshold strips on entrance doors are being fitted. This is due to ecological reasons in choosing timber doors that more easily allow for a lower threshold strip rather than fitting UPVC doors with high thresholds. However, steps to entrance doors are not being removed on individual units, unless requested by tenants. Lower thresholds are fitted to these steps. But there is not enough level area on the step for someone to rest while opening the door, or for those who cannot step over the threshold to rest a foot while stepping in.

While the six Housing Associations do have an overt policy on refusing to remove ground-floor toilets, they do not insist on replacing a ground-floor toilet if the tenant has previously removed it. Therefore, if there is no longer a ground-floor toilet, it is unlikely to be replaced during the refurbishment process.

Second handrails are not being fitted to staircases even where there is room to do so. A handrail on either side of the stairs is beneficial to many people who require a handrail on one side for ascending and one on the other for descending.

Some simple access-related issues are not being considered by the six Housing Associations, such as selecting matt wall tiles over high gloss, which would reduce glare.

Overall, the six Housing Associations involved in the research found that going through the process of the interview for the study made them more aware of access issues. On future refurbishment works they would take on board improving mainstream accessibility.

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Appendix: Interview questions

Where work is being carried out in order to meet the Decent Homes Standards:

- 1 Where there is the opportunity to improve the external approach:
 - a with steps with a shallow ramp (1 in 20 gradient) this is done
 - b with an entrance path wide enough for a parked car and a pram, buggy or wheelchair user to pass this is done
 - c doors and or gates are made distinguishable, for example through colour or textures, and lighting.
- 2 Where entrance doors are being installed, level thresholds are incorporated, especially UPVC door frames with threshold of no more than 15mm.
- 3 Where there is opportunity to provide, inside the entrance, storage for a bike, pram or wheelchair, this is done.
- 4 Where new doors are installed they will be at least 750mm wide.
- 5 Where electricity supply is renewed:
 - a all switches, sockets and control panels are put in a place that is accessible (i.e. between 450 and 1,200mm from the floor)
 - b and a new fuse panel is being installed, at least one spare spur or circuit is included (this may be for any purpose, but may be required for equipment or a recharging station).
- 6 Where a ground-floor toilet needs to have a wash-hand basin:
 - a the toilet is kept at entrance level and a hand basin installed (rather than put toilet upstairs)
 - b new taps have lever or cross-head handles, and are consistent in hot being on the left and cold on the right
 - c where a new toilet is to be installed it has a large-handled flush
 - d if possible the room is made large enough for a wheelchair user.
- 7 Where new windows are being installed they are easy to open, and operate, with low handles (where possible living-room window glazing begins at 800mm or lower).
- 8 Where new kitchen spaces are being designed, enough space is allowed for a wheelchair user to enter and circulate.

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- 9 Where new fixtures and fittings are being installed in any room, these are tonal/ colour contrasted (this assists people with low vision).
- 10 Where new tiles are being installed these are matt, rather than gloss (to prevent glare) and contrast with fixtures or fittings.
- 11 Where stairs are wide enough two handrails are installed – either in individual units or in communal areas.
- 12 In accommodation with communal areas:
 - a stairs and corridors provide easy access
 - b if work is to be done to improve lifts, this will include improving accessibility for people with physical or sensory impairments.
- 13 There is an access statement, which is related to an access strategy, that we:
 - a use in the Decent Home refurbishment scheme
 - b incorporate into tender documents, specifications, and bills of quantities, which are used in engaging the contractor.

For each of these areas the following questions were asked.

- How easy or difficult is this for you to do as part of bringing properties up to Decent Homes Standards?
- Are you currently doing this?
- If not could you do it?
- What would need to change before you could do this?
- Example of property visited where this was/or was not feasible.