

Decent Homes Standard for Scotland

Why do We Need a Set Standard of Decency?

People's homes and their environment are critical to the quality of their lives. For most people, they are the foundation upon which their everyday life is based. They should be somewhere where people feel safe and comfortable. This means wind and weather-tight, well insulated and energy efficient, and with good amenities in a safe and congenial neighbourhood.

As standards of living have risen, the quality of the vast majority of the nation's housing has improved. However, the quality of life of some people is hindered because they live in homes or neighbourhoods that fall below even the most basic standards. Homes in poor condition and neighbourhoods in decline, can exacerbate physical and mental health problems, and prevent children from fulfilling their true potential.

Scotland's households have the right to live in good quality homes.

England and Wales have already faced up to the challenges ahead and have both adopted a decency standard for their stock. It is time that Scotland did the same.

House Conditions

Improvements have been made to the conditions of Scotland's housing however significant problems still remain.

While only 1% of Scottish homes fail the Tolerable Standard this measurement is in urgent need of review and fails to reveal the true nature of Scotland's housing stock:

- 534, 000 dwellings suffer from either dampness or condensation affecting at least 367,000 children and 119,000 pensioners;
- 870,480 homes have at least one problem in need of urgent repair;
- 348,000 dwellings have a poor energy rating;
- 5% of households with instances of long-term illness or disability say that they require adaptations to their housing;
- Only 24,000 ambulant disabled homes are available for the 124,000 ambulant disabled households in Scotland.
- At least 137,000 dwellings have lead present in their water supply

CIH in Scotland Proposal

The figures on house conditions detailed above amply demonstrate the poor quality of a significant proportion of Scotland's stock and the urgent need for a new of method to evaluate stock condition. We propose the introduction of measurements of stock conditions.

1. Update Tolerable Standard

The Tolerable Standard has remained largely unaltered since its introduction in 1968 and CIH in Scotland believe that it is woefully out of date as a measure of the minimum standard for housing. We believe that the Tolerable Standard should be updated to include serious disrepair, rising and penetrating damp, electrical wiring and thermal efficiency.

2. Introduce Scottish Decent Homes Standard

However an updated Tolerable Standard is not enough as people deserve more than structurally adequate housing alone. CIH in Scotland therefore believe that an aspirational standard should also be introduced to include not only physical conditions but also home amenities, environmental standards and accessibility.

What Would Constitute a 'Decent' Home?

Clear goals and definitions are required to ensure the realisation of our vision of good quality housing. The definition given below draws on the Standards already in place in England and Wales.

To be defined as 'decent', a home should meet each of the following criteria:

1. Meet the updated statutory minimum for housing, currently the Tolerable Standard;

Housing would have to meet the new updated minimum tolerable standard including serious disrepair, rising and penetrating damp, electrical wiring and thermal efficiency.

2. Be safe and secure;

Dwellings should be free from safety hazards particularly in relation to stairs and landings, kitchens, fire escape, electrical installations, heating installations and applicants and security.

3. Provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort, be well insulated, be adequately heated and fuel efficient;

Homes should be able to provide comfort by heating to a reasonable level, have effective ventilation to minimise condensation and be well insulated to ensure the heating system economical to run.

4. Contain modern facilities including kitchens and bathrooms;

All dwellings should contain modern facilities in good condition; however a dwelling would not fail where it is impossible to make the required improvements for planning reasons.

5. Be well managed (for rented housing);

Housing should be efficiently managed to address both the needs of individual tenants and the community.

6. Be located in attractive and safe environments;

It is not only the interior of a dwelling which impacts on quality of life but also the neighbourhood. Consideration should be given to factors such as landscaping, drying facilities, streetlighting, car parking although a dwelling would not fail where it is impossible to make the required improvements for planning reasons.

7. As far as possible suit the specific requirements of the household;

Provide sufficient space standards where possible and include any necessary adaptations to meet the requirements of a household.

Setting a Target

The Decent Homes Standard should be applied to dwellings in both the public and private sectors and local authorities would assess the condition of all housing tenures as part of their strategic function.

Good quality social housing should be readily available for those who cannot afford to buy. The CIH in Scotland believe that a target date of 2013 should be set by which all housing in the social rented sector should meet the Decent Homes Standard. This is in line with the ten year target dates set in England and Wales for their social housing stock.

While the Scottish Executive does not have the same control over the condition of stock in the private sector as it does with the public sector, CIH in Scotland believes that a target should also be set for the eradication of poor quality private stock. Indeed as deprived neighbourhoods are increasingly of mixed tenure, and with many more home owners on low incomes, the case for developing a specific target for private sector housing grows.

The Welsh Assembly has already led the way promising to 'half the number of Welsh homes in a state of serious disrepair by 2005'¹. To replicate such a policy Scotland will require national and local strategies to encourage all owners to invest in their properties alongside sufficient resources to enable the programme to be delivered.

Measures currently being investigated by the Housing Improvement Task Force which would help meet a private sector target include:

- Improve information to house buyers including Sellers Packs with log books to record maintenance and improvements;
- Increase local authority funding for repair and improvement grants;
- Introduction of other mechanisms to allow owners to carry out work include low cost loans and equity release.

How Would the Decent Homes Standard Target for Social Housing be Delivered?

Delivery would be dependent on social landlords who would quantify the level of non-decent housing in their stock, develop an investment strategy with appropriate targets towards eliminating the problem and measure progress against these.

Local authorities and housing associations would be individually responsible for ensuring that their stock meets the Decent Homes Standard. Local authorities will be required to set out how they will deliver decent homes in a Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan. Housing Associations will be required to set out their strategy in an assessment management strategy.

Progress towards the target will be monitored nationally through the Scottish House Condition Survey while local authorities and housing associations will inform Communities Scotland of their progress.

Some local authorities and housing associations have developed their own local housing standards by which they are already measuring the quality of their stock. These local standards can be retained if they are higher than the national Standard as the latter should be seen as a minimum standard designed to trigger action in the poorest housing and not a barrier to further improvements.

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¹ Better Homes for People in Wales: A National Housing Strategy for Wales.