

ARCH and NFA submission to Decent Homes Review: Criterion (c) Modern facilities & services

Introduction

The National Federation of ALMOs (NFA) and the Association of Retained Council Housing (ARCH) are core participants of the Decent Homes Review Sounding Board. This joint submission supplements our comments at the Sounding Board meeting on 24 June 2021, drawing on a meeting of representatives from our member organisations held on 1 July 2021.

Our comments focus on the 6 key questions posed in the paper circulated at the Sounding Board meeting on 24 June 2021.

Q1: Modern facilities

Q1a: How useful is it that the Standard sets out component lifetimes in respect of kitchens and bathrooms?

Q1b: How useful is it that the Standard references “size” and “layout” that might be nearly impossible to remedy?

Q1c: Does clustering of three or more issues rendering a home non-decent remain a useful and valid approach?

The setting out of component lifetimes for kitchens (20 years) and bathrooms (30 years) in the current Decent Homes Standard provides a useful guide for tenants as to when a kitchen or bathroom might be expected to be replaced but makes no reference to the condition of the kitchen or bathroom which could lead to unnecessary expectations and pressures from tenants and increased expenditure in replacing kitchens and bathrooms exceeding the component lifetimes but otherwise in excellent condition.

The current clustering together with the other 4 elements of the current criterion (c) [Kitchen with adequate space & layout, an appropriately located bathroom and WC, adequate external noise insulation and adequate size and layout of common entrance areas for blocks of flats] makes it difficult for tenants themselves to determine if their home fails this particular criterion of the Decent Homes Standard. Tenants may be surprised to find out that on a strict interpretation of the guidance even though their kitchen and/or bathroom is more than 20/30 years old because they have the other elements their home is considered decent. and There is therefore an argument for separating out

Association of Retained Council Housing
4 Riley Court, Millburn Hill Road
University of Warwick Science Park, CV4 7HP
Tel: 024 7647 2711

info@arch-housing.org.uk
www.arch-housing.org.uk
@ARCH_housing
Company Reg.No: 07970258

National Federation of ALMOs
4 Riley Court, Millburn Hill Road
University of Warwick Science Park, CV4 7HP
Tel: 024 7647 2729

info@almos.org.uk
www.almos.org.uk
@NFA_ALMOs
Company Reg. No: 6781539

the components or grouping them in a different way but that is likely to lead to a significant increase in dwellings failing the Standard and significant increased costs of remediation/compliance with each and every one of the 6 current elements as defined.

Much of the local authority housing stock was built in the interwar and immediate post WW2 years when lifestyles and tenant expectations were different. Past modernisation schemes, many pre-Decent Homes, have addressed the criteria of an appropriately located bathroom and WC. However, if the components of the current criteria were to be separated out, further guidance in determining whether a kitchen has adequate space and layout and whether common entrance areas for blocks of flats are of adequate size and layout would be needed having regard to the feasibility and reasonable cost of making alterations to the size and layout of kitchens and common entrance areas that, assessed independently rather than as part of the “clustered” components, would fail the Standard. For example: a kitchen may be determined to fail the criteria in terms of inadequate space if it is too small to contain all the required items appropriate to the size of the dwelling but there is a growing expectation amongst residents that kitchens should be able to accommodate an increasing range of modern day domestic appliances such as dishwashers, American style fridge freezers etc alongside the traditional cooker and refrigerator etc, as well as a range of worktop appliances such as microwaves and food processors etc. but even if it failed on that individual criteria providing the home did not lack 2 or more of the other 6 facilities it would still currently meet the Decent Homes Standard.

There could therefore be major cost implications in “de-clustering” the six elements. There is also a limit to the usefulness of the references to size and layouts of kitchens as any updating of this part of the standard should not require any major re-modelling of existing flats as this would be prohibitively expensive, on the other hand it can prompt landlords to consider making better use of the space if and when a refit is planned.

Q2: Is it feasible for the Decent Homes Standard to require minimum expectations on communal areas and facilities outside the dwelling? If so, what facilities & services should be in scope?

We appreciate that tenants and residents have an expectation that the estate on which their home is located should be well maintained and where the responsibility falls to the landlord (and in the case of local authority landlords, is expenditure that can be legally charged to the Housing Revenue Account) this is a reasonable expectation and there is a case for a revised Decent Homes Standard to set out clear standards for communal areas associated with the letting of the dwelling and the landlord’s repairing obligations.

Association of Retained Council Housing
4 Riley Court, Millburn Hill Road
University of Warwick Science Park, CV4 7HP
Tel:024 7647 2711

info@arch-housing.org.uk
www.arch-housing.org.uk
@ARCH_housing
Company Reg.No:07970258

National Federation of ALMOs
4 Riley Court, Millburn Hill Road
University of Warwick Science Park, CV4 7HP
Tel:024 7647 2729

info@almos.org.uk
www.almos.org.uk
@NFA_ALMOs
Company Reg. No:6781539

However, it must be recognised that many social housing dwellings are not located on traditional council estates, and even where they are, the responsibility for public footpaths, street lighting, roads, playgrounds, trees, grassed verges etc may lie with the responsible local authority (and in the case of district councils, not even with the same local authority that owns and manages the housing stock) to be funded through the General Fund from Council Tax etc.

We would support the Housing Ombudsman's view that a minimum standard should apply to shared areas that contribute to a resident's sense of home such as lifts, communal entrances, stairwells, balconies and external areas such as exterior security lighting to the dwelling or the communal entrance areas, bin areas, bin chutes, drying areas, outhouses & sheds, garage courts, communal laundries & showers in supported accommodation etc. providing the maintenance of such areas falls to the landlord under the tenancy agreement and the costs of maintenance can be charged to the council's Housing Revenue Account.

In determining the standard that should apply to communal areas and facilities reference needs to be made to the relevant fire safety standards to be set under the Fire Safety Act and Building Safety Bill.

Q3: What could the Decent Homes Standard say about physical security and crime prevention through environmental design?

The Standard could require as standard the fitting of security locks to doors and windows, security lighting, door entry systems to communal areas etc to a standard similar to the WIDE security combination referred to in the paper submitted to the Sounding Board.

The example given in the paper circulated at the Sounding Board of crime prevention through design in tackling a hotspot of ASB in the garden of socially rented flats in Bromley is not uncommon, however resources for such improvements are limited and competing demands need to be prioritised. We do not believe that a detailed specification or standard could or should be applied in the Decent Homes Standard for every dwelling or flat block/communal area. However, any revised Decent Homes Standard could require that where the landlord plans security improvements or modernisation of a dwelling, block of flats or an estate as a whole, such improvements should not only be subject to consultation with residents, but any improvements planned should meet "Secured by Design" standards.

Association of Retained Council Housing
4 Riley Court, Millburn Hill Road
University of Warwick Science Park, CV4 7HP
Tel: 024 7647 2711

info@arch-housing.org.uk
www.arch-housing.org.uk
@ARCH_housing
Company Reg.No: 07970258

National Federation of ALMOs
4 Riley Court, Millburn Hill Road
University of Warwick Science Park, CV4 7HP
Tel: 024 7647 2729

info@almos.org.uk
www.almos.org.uk
@NFA_ALMOs
Company Reg. No: 6781539

Q4: What could the Decent Homes Standard say about digital connectivity and social homes?

The Government has promised that every UK home and business can access fast, and reliable digital connectivity and the government is investing £5 billion to ensure that everyone will have the same access to gigabit-capable broadband.

Social housing tenants are also income taxpayers and should not be expected to have to “pay twice” through their rent to access fast and reliable digital connectivity. However, any new Decent Homes Standard could include a duty on landlords to consider the grant of appropriate wayleaves to enable access to the fast and reliable connectivity promised by the Government, but the cost should not fall as an additional burden on social housing rent payers over and above the costs to occupiers in other tenures.

Q5: What could the Decent Homes Standard say about electrical safety?

This question is being discussed and addressed in the Electrical Safety Working Group established by MHCLG and ARCH and the NFA are submitting our views into that Working Group. It may be appropriate, at some point in the future for the members of the Decent Homes Sounding Board to consider the output and recommendations from the Electrical Safety Working Group for incorporation into any final recommendations for review of the Decent Homes Standard.

Q6: What could the Decent Homes Standard say about adaptations and accessibility of existing general needs social homes?

The needs of individual tenants with disabilities differs enormously from the fitting of an individual grab rail to the building of ground floor and first floor extensions & lifts and it would be extremely difficult (and in the majority of tenancies unnecessary) to set specific generic standards for application to existing general needs social homes. It may however be appropriate to include a general commitment to consider and assess the need for adaptations on an individual case by case basis.

Association of Retained Council Housing
4 Riley Court, Millburn Hill Road
University of Warwick Science Park, CV4 7HP
Tel:024 7647 2711

info@arch-housing.org.uk
www.arch-housing.org.uk
@ARCH_housing
Company Reg.No:07970258

National Federation of ALMOs
4 Riley Court, Millburn Hill Road
University of Warwick Science Park, CV4 7HP
Tel:024 7647 2729

info@almos.org.uk
www.almos.org.uk
@NFA_ALMOs
Company Reg. No:6781539