



Briefing on New ODPM Guidance: A Decent Home – the Definition and Guidance for Implementation

A new target has been set – ‘to secure, at local authority level, a year on year increase in the proportion of private sector housing in decent condition occupied by vulnerable groups and as a minimum to reach the national target figure of 70% by 2010.’

1. Background

1.1. In July 2000 the Government announced an increase in resources for housing and set a target to:

“ensure that all social housing meets set standards of decency by 2010, by reducing the number of households living in social housing that does not meet these standards by a third between 2001 and 2004, with most of the improvement taking place in the most deprived local authority areas”

1.2. The 2002 Spending Review renewed the commitment to making all social housing decent by 2010. The target was also expanded to cover vulnerable households in the private sector. The target (PSA7) is now:

“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”

1.3. This new Guidance provides greater clarity on some aspects of the decent homes definition and its implementation, links decent homes to the wider regeneration agenda, clarifies roles and responsibilities between the Housing Inspectorate, Government Offices and the Community Housing Task Force. It also includes new sections on the private sector and covers the transition to the Housing Health and Safety Rating System.

1.4. The new Guidance

- summarises the definition of a Decent Home,
- provides a detailed definition of the Decent Homes Standard.
- explains how the standard should be locally implemented
- details how to measure the baseline position and monitor progress

- examines how delivering decent homes should be a part of a wider strategy for regeneration

2. Definition of a Decent Home

2.1. There are no substantial changes to the definition of a Decent Home.

2.2. A Decent Home is defined as meeting 4 criteria:

- It meets the current statutory minimum standard for housing
- It is in a reasonable state of repair
- It has reasonably modern facilities
- It provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort

2.3. Each of these criterion is explained in detail in Section 3 (p9)

3. Local Implementation

3.1. The Guidance points out that investment in bringing stock up to Decent Homes Standard needs to be considered in terms of future demand for the stock. In areas of low demand it is suggested that clearance should be considered as a possible option.

3.2. It is noted that the Decent Home Standard is a minimum standard and that landlords may also consider a number of other factors when planning work to improve housing including *ensuring works undertaken do not make the home more difficult to use for a person with disabilities, considering lifetime homes and carrying out works in a sustainable way (4.5)*

3.3. The link between delivery of Decent Homes and health benefits/ reducing health inequalities is noted (4.10) and it is suggested that it may be appropriate to focus investment on the most deprived areas or vulnerable householders, such as prioritising heating and insulation for elderly tenants.

4. Detailed Consideration of the Application of the Decent Homes Standard to Vulnerable Households in the Private Sector

4.1. *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future* (ODPM 2003) committed an additional £30 million for at least two years (2004/05 and 2005/06) to support vulnerable households living in the private sector. As part of the bidding process for the single housing investment pot (SHIP) regional housing boards issued guidance to local authorities stating – *'authorities should consider how they can assist in increasing the proportion of private sector housing in decent condition occupied by vulnerable groups'*.

4.2. *ODPM Circular 05/2003 - Housing Renewal*, issued in June 2003, sets out how a local authority should develop a private sector renewal strategy as part of its overall housing strategy and how it should publish a policy setting out its use of powers under the *Regulatory Reform Order 2002* (RRO) to support private sector renewal. Meeting the private sector element of the decent homes target should be an important element of this process.

4.3. The Circular sets out national targets for increasing the number of vulnerable households who are owner-occupiers or tenants of private landlords living in decent housing conditions. The circular states that in 2001 only 57% of vulnerable households were in decent homes. The 43% in non-decent homes represents 1.2 million households of whom 70% are owner-occupiers and 30% private tenants. A national target has been set therefore to increase the proportion of vulnerable¹ households living in decent homes to 63% by 2005, to 70% by 2010 and to 75% by 2020.

Background data to new private sector DHS target - April 2001 (source ODPM - EHCS 2001)

- ◆ 17.2 million private homes
- ◆ 5.2 million H/H in non-decent properties including 4.2 million o/occ & 1 million tenants
- ◆ 1.2 million of the households in non-decent homes are vulnerable
- ◆ 1.2 million H/Hs represents 43% of ALL vulnerable households living in the private sector
- ◆ Of the 1.2 million, 840,000 (70%) are owner occupiers and 360,000 are private tenants.

Note: of the 7 million households living in non-decent housing in 2001, only 1.8 million were occupying social housing.

4.4. The guidance in paragraph 4.19 states – ‘*Home Improvement Agencies (HIAs) are seen by the Government as having a particularly important role to play in taking forward the decent homes agenda. HIAs provide a valuable service to help elderly, disabled and vulnerable people to remain living independently in their own home for as long as they wish. There are currently around 230 HIAs covering 285 local authority areas. They assess the clients’ needs for improvements and adaptations, arrange the best funding option and provide support during the stress and disruption that work in the home can cause. This enables the client to remain in a safe, warm and secure environment’.*

4.5. Paragraph 4.23 explains how the new flexibilities provided through the 2002 Regulatory Reform Order can be used to assist in meeting the new private sector decent homes standard. Paragraph 4.25 refers to enforcement powers and states –

‘Local authorities have statutory duties to take enforcement action to deal with unfit properties and discretionary powers to deal with those in serious disrepair. When the Housing Health and Safety Rating System comes into force they will have a duty to take enforcement action against category one hazards and discretionary powers to enforce against category two hazards. Enforcement action will therefore remain a key part of the strategy to deal with non-decent homes, particularly dealing with those in the private rented sector. In relation to a local authority policy on the use of discretionary enforcement

¹ Vulnerable households have been defined as those in receipt of at least one of the principal means tested or disability related benefits.

powers, authorities are expected to have regard to the PSA target and its focus on vulnerable households.

5. Delivering Decent Homes in the Private Sector

5.1. Local authorities will need to establish a baseline position that will include the following key information:

- The number of non-decent private sector dwellings in the owner-occupied and private rented sectors;
- The reasons for these dwellings failing the decency standard in relation to the four criteria and the approximate cost of rectifying the problem;
- The number of vulnerable households living in the private sector and the proportion of them living in non-decent homes; and
- An analysis of the local housing market with an emphasis on the present and future levels of un-mortgaged equity in the target non-decent properties occupied by vulnerable households and the socio-economic circumstances of the occupiers. This analysis will help to determine the appropriate policy response in terms of the potential for loans and equity release policies in addition to grants.

5.2. In reviewing their strategies, local authorities are expected to identify the level of non-decent homes occupied by vulnerable households in their authority and within the level of resources available to produce a robust and consistent policy response to the problem. This response needs to be sufficient to ensure that, at the national level, targets for private sector decent homes are being achieved. Consistency with the national target is difficult to define precisely in central guidance and is a matter for discussion with Government Offices in relation to policy priorities set out in the Regional Housing Strategies and the individual local authority Housing Strategies.

5.3. The policy should, however, be robust enough to secure, at local authority level, a year on year increase in the proportion of vulnerable households living in decent homes and as a minimum to reach the same target figure of 70% by 2010 as set nationally.

All Documents referred to are available on the ODPM website www.odpm.gov.uk

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