

# Government side-steps decarbonisation in their Decent Homes Standard review

*Part 2 of the government's review of the Decent Homes Standard refuses to incorporate the urgent task of decarbonisation and retro-fitting Britain's social housing stock.*

In its 2020 Social Housing White Paper, published in November 2020, the government committed to “Review the [Decent Homes Standard](#)<sup>1</sup> to consider if it should be updated, including how it can better support decarbonisation and energy efficiency of social homes...” In its Charter for social housing tenants the government said

“We are committed to decarbonising our homes. Climate change is a critical global issue, and homes [contribute 14% of all UK greenhouse emissions](#). Working to address the impact of social homes will contribute to the United Kingdom’s commitment to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 and help to reduce residents’ energy bills.”

One of the four criteria for determining whether a home is considered “decent” under the DHS is the requirement to provide “a reasonable degree of thermal comfort”. Clearly this definition is completely inadequate because decarbonisation isn't mentioned. It's not a question of comfort but of health. The review paper on 'thermal comfort' recognised that “Fuel poverty has been linked to excess winter deaths, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and poor mental health.” Inadequate heating and insulation are usually the causes.

Decarbonisation of homes is necessary to cut greenhouse emissions. But it's no use just putting in a heat pump if all the heat is leaking out. That drives up the cost to the tenant instead of cutting it. Properly executed retro-fitting will cut heating costs significantly and potentially resolve the problem of damp and mould.

This issue was raised by participants in the Sounding Board set up for Part 1 of the review. However, it was stated early in the review that it would “need to be mindful of costs and that additional expectations on DHS *may not be followed by funding* and sector may need to fund”. In fact participants suggested that it would be necessary to reopen the 2012 'debt settlement' (when the new finance system, 'self-financing' was introduced) because the amount of debt councils were given was in part based on an estimate of the cost of maintaining the DHS. How can councils implement an improved DHS, never mind retro-fitting, without extra funding?

Having ostensibly committed to decarbonisation the government is now rowing back. Part 2 of the DHS review will consult on

- Ventilation (“particularly in the context of damp and mould”)
- Home security (robust doors and windows)
- Thermostatic mixer valves
- Window restrictors
- Electrical safety
- Refuse management
- Water security.

They propose to discuss ventilation separately from decarbonisation which makes no sense. We are told that “whilst taking on board the feedback from Part 1 on 'thermal comfort', we will not be discussing this element during Part 2.” Why not? They admit that “this is a crucial element of the standard” but they are still considering “how this interacts with broader work on de-carbonisation and energy efficiency.”

A clue to their sidestepping this issue can be found in the just published [British energy security](#)

<sup>1</sup> See our Briefing on the Decent Homes Standard and discussion of the review.  
<https://thelabourcampaignforcouncilhousing.files.wordpress.com/2021/05/dhs-standard-briefing-2.pdf>

[strategy](#). The government is shying away from its commitment to decarbonise homes, partly because of the cost, but also because they envisage a “gradual transition”. In the face of what is an existential climate crisis the government says

“...this is not being imposed on people and is a gradual transition following the grain of behaviour. The British people are no-nonsense pragmatists who can make decisions based on the information.”

Hence they are not proposing to phase out the sale and replacement of new gas boilers until 2035.

Where does this leave social housing? The document refers to the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, but this wasn't universal funding. Councils had to bid for it in 'wave' 1. There were only 69 projects granted a share of £179 million. The next 'wave' is supposed to provide £800 million over three years. Yet when you compare this to the task of retro-fitting nearly 4 million council and housing association homes you can see how grossly inadequate the programme is.

So far as council housing is concerned there is no way that councils can decarbonise their homes and retro-fit them without government funding. Council housing is burdened by nearly £26 billion debt, which costs around £1.4 billion a year to service. If we assume a cost of £30,000 to install a heat pump and adequately retro-fit a home, then the cost for 1.5 million council homes alone would be £45 billion. [This can't be done by borrowing](#). Since housing revenue accounts' only income is tenants rent and service charges there is no way they can afford to service more borrowing on top of existing debt.

The problem of damp and mould which has been graphically exposed by the ITV investigation into housing association and council homes is the result of neglect by landlords but also of poverty. The “cost of living crisis”, in particular the huge increase in the cost of heating, is only going to make matters worse. More and more tenants will be unable to afford to put their heating on.

To imagine that decarbonisation and retro-fitting is a task which can be dealt with by “gradual transition” is absurd. In order to address the problem of the climate emergency and unhealthy living conditions they need to be viewed as urgent and necessary tasks. The government cannot be allowed to sidestep this issue.

The updated DHS needs to include decarbonisation and retro-fitting as a key component of a 'decent' home. Whilst the transformation of existing social housing cannot be achieved overnight it needs to be done rapidly, as does the country's housing stock generally. We need to hold in mind two images. The first is of the Arctic and Antarctic with temperatures 30 and 40 degrees above normal. The second is of tenants being allowed to live in conditions unfit for human habitation as shown on ITV. An improved DHS (not to mention an energy strategy) which does not include the aim of decarbonisation and retro-fitting is just tinkering. In the consultation in the summer the government has to be told this in no uncertain terms.

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