

ROCHFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL CPA SELF – ASSESSMENT FOR MEETING THE DECENT HOMES STANDARD

1. What is the Council trying to achieve in relation to the Standard. Does the Council know the condition of their housing stock and their compliance with the Decent Homes Standard.

The Council owns and manages a small housing stock comprising 1778 dwellings. The housing stock consists of flats houses and bungalows all of traditional construction and is in generally good condition. 977 of the properties are houses and bungalows with 801 flats, of these 118 flats are between three and five storeys high. 665 units of the stock is designated for pensioner accommodation.

The Council has produced a strategy for 'Delivery of Decent Homes by 2010' which includes a detailed Action Plan. The Delivery Strategy forms part of the HRA Business Plan which identifies levels of funding in line with projected works.

The Council's Business Plan has close links within its Housing Strategy and the Capital Programme. Both the Housing Strategy and Business Plan are presently in draft form and were submitted to the Government Office East (GO-East) for fit for purpose assessment in August 2003. Initial response to the submission is currently being evaluated and will be discussed with Go-East in January 2004, with a view to achieving fitness for purpose by mid 2004.

The Council aims to ensure that it maintains its homes effectively and efficiently to provide decent homes for all of its tenants. Currently 82% of the stock meets the Decent Homes Standard (DHS), the other 18% failing on thermal comfort due to the SAP rating of the overall stock. The Decent Homes delivery strategy is to ensure that all properties remain decent and resources will be targeted to update those properties identified to become potentially non decent within the stipulated timescale.

The Council has invested significant expenditure on the maintenance and improvement of its housing stock over the years to provide double glazing, central heating, cavity wall insulation and some loft insulation. Many properties built in the 1960's and 1970's have now reached the point when they require further expenditure to meet the DHS age criteria. This has been identified as dovetailing into Decent Homes Initiative which focuses on bringing build elements up to decency standards. £6.2 million has been identified in the Business Plan and Housing Capital Programme as required to achieve and maintain all properties at decency standards.

The Council is confident that the base information it holds on all its properties is sufficient to provide an understanding of what needs to be done to meet the DHS. A full stock condition survey of the Council's housing stock has not been undertaken since 1991, however knowledge of current stock condition is available through a number of information routes which are regularly updated. This includes the cyclic maintenance programme which provides for all properties to be fully inspected externally on a five-year cycle, and all identified repairs incorporated into the annual cyclic maintenance programme.

Staff involved in maintenance are long-serving and because of the low stock level have very detailed knowledge of all premises. Stock information is therefore considered to be good, but in putting together the Decent Homes database it is planned that this will be confirmed further through detailed surveys of all properties on a rolling programme annually commencing in January 2004, and externally verified through an independent survey. The Council holds full maintenance records of all its properties for a period in excess of 13 years.

Information established as described in the Housing Business Plan has now been validated by an external company of Chartered Surveyors using 'beacon properties' across the District. The survey was completed and reported in July 2003. These properties represent the type, style and age of all the Council's general needs stock. These "beacon properties" were initially chosen by an external consultant in carrying out a stock valuation exercise in 2000

The validation report concluded:-

"Our Summary shows that none of the properties inspected failed the Decent Homes tests on grounds of lack of modern facilities or state of repair. This agrees with the data provided by the Council.

Our inspection does show that 2 properties fail on fitness standard, although this could be simply remedied, and that 11 properties fail the thermal comfort test. This is well below the national average for social housing: the Government's estimate, based on the 2001 English House Condition Survey, was that 40–50% of social housing was non-decent.

We have also predicted ahead to 2010 using our data and adding the time differential to the age of the component. This analysis shows that 56 dwellings may fail the State of Repair test by 2010, although 9 of these have already failed the Thermal Comfort test"

The Council has been investing in its stock and to date the following elements have been replaced or updated:

- Central Heating systems and Insulation to all properties
- Double Glazing to all properties
- All Cavity walls have been insulated
- Older roofs have been replaced
- Some kitchens and bathrooms have been replaced
- Front and back door replacement commenced in 2002

This last item was a tenant request identified through a consultation exercise, following the installation of double glazing to the properties.

The Council is currently undertaking a full consultation with tenants of the general stock on all issues related to decent homes. This is due for return by the end of December 2003. This questionnaire will provide further information on the stock and identify tenant aspirations for their homes. It includes identification of cases where tenants may have carried out improvements themselves.

This survey is also seeking improved tenant involvement in choice of materials, preferred options and methods of delivery, by seeking to set up a tenant panel. Tenant participation has been identified as a weakness and the appointment of a Tenant Liaison Officer has greatly improved communication with tenants.

The Council must manage the prioritisation of maintenance and renewal within the housing stock and Decent Homes is seen as one of the main drivers for change. The Housing Best Value Inspectors identified that more planned programmes of work are required if the Council is to manage the reduction in responsive maintenance to give an appropriate balance between responsive and planned maintenance. budgets and programmes for 2004/05 have been reconfigured to ensure that this balance is achieved.

The cyclic maintenance programme has been reviewed and will remain at it's current 5 year cycle but is due to be reviewed again in 2004/05 to check that it is operating in line with Decent Homes requirements. An analysis will be made to assess whether the cycle is still appropriate in maintaining the existing external condition of the stock. It is anticipated that increasing the maintenance cycle will allow resources to be redirected to provide additional support to Decent Homes programmes.

Given the need to maximise the opportunity that arises from the increased planned programmes of work between now and 2010 then the possibility of new methods of procurement arises. The Council is investigating the opportunity of either partnering with a sizeable contractor to deliver long-term programmes or a rolling programme of biannual tenders to keep the work with smaller more local contractors. Council policy is to use small local contractors to support the local/rural economy. This work will be completed by April 2004, monitored through a service action plan.

The Council has an existing Procurement Strategy published in 2001 which is inclusive of the opportunities of partnering in the broadest sense which will support the opportunity this programme identifies. The Council's current procurement strategy will be updated by July 2004 and research is currently being carried out to meet this objective in response to the recently published national procurement strategy issued by the ODPM. If the partnering route is chosen, then it needs to consider joint programmes with other social housing providers and partnership with contractors and suppliers.

Thermal insulation has been identified as one of the key issues to ensure that the Council's stock meets the Decent Homes Standard. Loft Insulation of properties is a key element in the upgrading of SAP values. The Council will be working with tenants to further improve thermal comfort in their homes.

The Council assesses annually the repairs and maintenance needs in order to prepare the annual estimates as part of the Council budget process. This also forms part of the HRA Business Plan. This sets out the detailed aims, issues, objectives, targets and performance in respect of maintenance of the Council's housing stock in the light of the current years experience. This plan is subject to yearly reviews to ensure that the Council addresses the right priorities in the light of stock condition data, tenant consultation and that Council's policies and priorities meets Audit Commission guidelines.

2. Is the Council delivering its plans to meet the Decent Homes Standard?

The Council has now restructured its Housing Capital Programme which is supported by the Major Repairs Allowance, and is wholly directed to achieving the Decent Homes Standard.

The Council is reviewing its IT systems to ensure they are able to deliver the information requirements to ensure the delivery of the Decent Homes Standard. The current maintenance records on SAFFRON will be moved to a new version in 2004 which will provide better recording of Decent Homes criteria and provide the basis for monitoring of progress. The move to a five year budget strategy will enable modern methods of procurement to be employed to meet the Decent Homes Standard.

The draft Council Housing Capital Programme has been agreed by Council and will be discussed with tenant representatives in early 2004. This will directly focus on the delivery of the Decent Homes Standard up to 2010. The Consultation exercise will identify tenant aspirations.

The Council ensures under its void policy that when a property is re-let that everything is checked, certified and meets what the Council considers to be a good state of repair. The opportunity is taken to replace kitchens and bathrooms to minimise disruption to tenants and for properties where central heating had been refused by a previous tenant, this is then installed. Over the last ten years many homes have been upgraded in this way.

3. How well does the Council monitor its progress and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plan.

Progress towards the Decent Homes Standard through the Decent Homes delivery action plan is reported through the Financial Programmes Group which reports twice yearly to Members.

The Council has a system of quarterly management reports which are used to monitor progress and performance and which are reported to Members. These include performance indicator information. Further development of useful local performance indicators is in progress.

The Decent Homes Standard also forms part of the Service Action Plan in Contracted Services to monitor the delivery programme. This is reported twice yearly to Members.

The management of the Capital Programme is reported to Members on a twice-yearly basis to assess whether the programme is still on target to deliver DHS and to re-direct resources where slippage occurs.

There are regular six weekly client/contractor meetings between the Head of Revenue and Housing Management and the Property Maintenance and Highways Manager to monitor all housing programmes. These are minuted and used to prepare Housing monitoring reports. These meetings provide regular feed back on all housing maintenance issues.

All Heads of Service with responsibility for the delivery of the Decent Homes Standard are members of Operational Management Team. This group meet on a fortnightly basis to help manage the Councils Operational activities and share common issues. They are all also members of the Finance and External Services (F&ES) management team under the Corporate Director (Finance and External Services), which also meets monthly.

The Council is an active member of the Housing Quality Network, the Essex Housing Officers Group, the Chartered Institute of Housing, and the East Anglian Association of Building Maintenance Officers. From these sources it gathers information and shares experience as well as from Beacon Councils and Best Practice Authorities.

At a local level it works closely with three partner Housing Associations, and can capture experience and initiatives from the best of the private sector.

In 2003, as part of the Housing Best Value Review, detailed discussions were opened with J.S.S. Pinnacle, a private housing management services company, and Springboard Housing Association to see whether gains could be achieved by using common contractors, systems and staff. The results of that exercise did not provide firm evidence of any significant gains at that time. Although this initiative was not progressed any further at that stage the Council identified that current maintenance procedures in the Council were in line with the private sector methodology. Further internal reviews of procedures have produced some streamlining of procedures and training of administration staff is now constantly reviewed to ensure that all procedures are adhered to and experience used to improve systems.