Housing Conditions and Equality

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Introduction

This briefing considers ways housing providers can manage their stock to meet the needs of diverse tenants.

Equitable asset management

In recent years, housing conditions, service failure, damp and mould have increasingly been under the media spotlight. Good asset management is not only about ensuring homes are affordable and attractive to tenants while being financially viable, but it also requires understanding of the **needs and aspirations of tenants.**

Tenants in social housing

Understanding diversity is key to ensuring a well-maintained home. We know certain groups are over-represented in social housing. Some 34% of social tenants are disabled compared to 21% of the general population for example, while ethnic minorities make up around 8% of social tenants compared to 6.3% of the general population.

Ethnic minority groups are much more likely to experience overcrowding: 3.8% of White British people in Wales experience overcrowding compared to 24.6% of Gypsy or Irish Travellers, 25.5% of Bangladeshi people, 24.5 % of Black African people, 21.2% of Pakistani people and 19.9% of Arab people (Census 2021). Additionally, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Black African, Black Other and Mixed White/Black ethnic groups are considerably more likely to have damp as an issue in their homes.

Further, in Wales we have what the Equality and Human Rights Commission have labelled a 'hidden housing crisis' – there not being enough accessible homes. The number of older people with physical impairments is estimated to rise by 50% between 2015 and 2035 alongside a growing older population.

Organisational culture and asset management

An organisation's culture can influence how it approaches the maintenance, repairs and general up-keep of homes in tandem with the tenant.

Awaab Ishak

Awaab Ishak, aged two, died after being exposed to mould at his Rochdale home in December 2020. Awaab's father, Faisal Abdullah, repeatedly raised the issue with Rochdale Boroughwide Housing (RBH) but no action was taken. The family was blamed for damp and mould due to assumed 'ritual washing' in the bathroom (even though this wasn't the case).

Awaab's father said: "The way I felt RBH conveyed the message to me is that, I come from Sudan so I should be grateful to be housed and that's it, get on with it,"

An Ombudsman investigation confirmed a culture within the organisation that saw Black tenants as less deserving of a good home, e.g. due to refugee status.

The Housing Ombudsman in England told the Coroner's Court that the law needed to be re-enforced in this area as some social landlords have an "outdated, ineffective, sometimes dismissive" approach, with an overemphasis on blaming the tenant's lifestyle.

Awaab's family experiences and the tragic outcome, are an example of what happens when racism is institutional or systemic. Recognising equality, diversity, and inclusion is integral to how assets are managed and how people are treated. Simple steps can be effective, including being proactive and questioning behaviours, assumptions, and any unconscious bias at all levels of an organisation. Meanwhile, gathering EDI data against repairs, maintenance, satisfaction rates and under-reporting can give an insight into any changes required.

Understanding culture in maintaining homes

Aelwyd is a housing association supporting older people across south Wales which has a "what matters" conversation, where they visit every tenant once a year. These discussions identify any needs a tenant may have, but also the condition of the home – for instance, have repairs been undertaken adequately? Aelwyd has found, sometimes, that older people are reluctant to report issues in their home and so this visit often identifies problems like damp or mould. Moreover, it builds rapport between the organisation and the tenant.

Diversity and how tenants use their homes

Understanding how your tenants are diverse gives an appreciation of how they may wish to live in their homes or the challenges they face. Below, we explore two differences based on heating and cooking:

Heating homes – some disabled and/or older people need to maintain the temperature of their home at a higher rate than an average person to stay **warm and healthy.** This could discourage opening windows, affecting issues like mould and damp. When retrofitting, targeting homes by tenants' needs could improve their quality of life but also help proactively better maintain the asset.

Cultural behaviour and cooking – Research by Dr Satish BK of Cardiff University looked at kitchens and differences between white British and Asian British households. The research found Asian British households opened their windows with much less frequency than average. While a majority of Asian British households on average cooked for over 2 hours a day compared to white British majority of less than half an hour. As a result, the Asian British households studied had higher condensation levels, higher average temperatures and higher Co2 emissions.

Diversity-driven design and adaptations

Understanding the diversity of tenants and the communities you work in can help plan and design more appropriate homes. For instance, the research above could suggest that in communities with a higher number of Asian British households, consideration be given to a higher level of ventilation in kitchens. Other kitchen considerations could include size and number of sinks, grease traps, the placement of a washing machine, storage for large pots and bigger sacks of food provisions. Not only could this help with damp, mould, and condensation, but also protect units not designed for bigger storage as well as avoiding hazards.

Some households will have very different needs in terms of washing, for example – the bathroom design stage could consider a wet room-type environment with water resistant flooring and tiling, increased ventilation, and windows which open and encourage circulation. The orientation of toilets, distance between basin and toilet (or provision of hose) may be important for some tenants. Providing shower facilities as running water is a preference in some cultures and may also be helpful. You can find more about culturally inclusive design here.

Some cultures prefer intergenerational living. Without an appropriate supply of the right homes, this may lead to overcrowding. Designing a greater number of larger homes could prevent this. While this may be needed in some areas more than others, research has shown this is becoming more common across the board as grown-up children either return or remain in the family home longer, partly driven by the housing crisis.

Taff Housing – Data driven approach to tackling overcrowding

Taff Housing works across an ethnically diverse area of Cardiff. Knowing there was a risk of overcrowding, Taff cross-referenced its own data with information supplied to Cardiff City Council's waiting lists and identified its most overcrowded homes.

Building new homes in Cardiff can be expensive, so using funding supplied by the Welsh Government for larger social homes, 10 properties were given loft conversions to increase the number of bedrooms in their home. To boost the supply of family homes, Taff has also started to convert previously adapted flats in traditional houses back into homes. While this reduces the number of units available, it can boost the total number of people who can be housed.

Understanding diversity in maintenance

Maintenance policies and the way teams respond to the needs of tenants can affect tenant satisfaction, but also the condition of the home. Good, two-way communication can encourage tenants to report issues, while poor services or lack of response could deter them in the future. Supplying relevant equality data to contractors/operatives can also be helpful. For instance, a deaf tenant may take longer to answer the door. Having contractors aware of diverse needs could also help them identify if there are any adaptations or unmet accessibility needs which need to be addressed – which could affect the condition of the home. It may also affect how they work; for example, noisy repairs or maintenance for someone who is neurodivergent could be distressing and without an understanding approach, it may prevent a tenant reporting an issue.

Taff has developed a damp and mould policy which uses a dashboard approach whereby problems are assessed by severity and any vulnerability in the households (i.e. chronic health conditions, age, and disability). Based on the rating of both factors, a timeline is established for when repairs must be completed.

Cultural competency and bespoke solutions

Ensuring contractors and maintenance teams have codes of conduct and a requirement for cultural competency or disability-related training can mean they have a better understanding of issues tenants may face – and provide appropriate solutions.

Training on things like safeguarding could help them pick up any potential issues around domestic violence or hate crime which are leading to more repairs (damages to front door or windows) and issues better understood and managed. Empowering repairs and maintenance teams to provide solutions based on this understanding can identify solutions other than 'standard'; e.g. if you identify that there is repeat damage due to storing bulk food items (and storage not being appropriate for this) and protect against further damage.

Decarbonisation

Conversations with social housing landlords on decarbonisation plans identified that some organisations are basing their frameworks' priorities primarily on housing condition. Others are using additional data to prioritise certain homes based on tenants' vulnerability, e.g. financial situation of the household; disability; risk of fuel poverty. Having and using this data can not only help vulnerable tenants but also better protect the asset.

Communicating with tenants

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Equality Impact Assessments

EIAs are tools for an organisation to look at its impact on diverse groups; to question how diverse people are experiencing services and whether the outcomes are equitable. Specifically, they could support the development of damp and mould policies, decarbonisation plans or WHQS2023 compliance.

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