

ENERGY ACTION SCOTLAND

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Energy Action Scotland Response to the first report of the Housing Improvement Task Force

“Issues in Improving Quality in Private Housing”

Introduction

Energy Action Scotland (EAS) is the charity whose mission statement is to end fuel poverty in Scotland. EAS has campaigned on the issue of fuel poverty and has delivered many practical and research projects to tackle the problems of cold, damp and expensive to heat homes. EAS has worked with both national and devolved administrations on energy efficiency programme design and implementation. It is currently a member of the Scottish Executive’s Fuel Poverty Advisory Group and sat on the Scottish Executive’s Central Heating Programme Advisory Group. EAS welcomes this report from the Housing Improvement Task Force and would wish to make the following comments.

1. As the report indicates, the whole subject of quality in private housing is extremely complex and the solutions required to produce significant improvements are no less so. EAS would not claim to have expert knowledge in all the areas covered by the report, but does draw on its extensive experience of developing energy efficient solutions to fuel poverty and of working with its large membership of housing providers, housing professionals and insulation companies to offer some proposals.

2. Over the past three years, Scottish Executive grant programmes on energy efficiency have been targeted mostly at the private sector. These programmes have offered insulation packages as a means of promoting energy efficiency to the sector. In the majority of cases, the energy efficiency works have increased the thermal efficiency of the dwelling. However, in a significant minority, the improvements have been limited by the construction type or position of the building. E.g. a solid wall property cannot benefit from the cavity wall insulation generally available from the grant schemes. Another example is a right to buy property in a flatted dwelling, where either the other Registered Social Landlord (RSL) tenants are not eligible for grants or they have not applied at the same time. In this case, the works cannot be carried out because the nature of the property’s construction requires all the flats to have the works, such as cavity wall fill, carried out at the one time. Similarly, the

current Warm Deal grant does not offer a Buildings in Multiple Occupation grant, which was available in the previous Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES). As a result, there has been a reduction in the number of private and RSL homes able to access energy efficiency grants for major energy improvements, such as cavity wall insulation or loft insulation.

3. The current problems found in the private rented sector are well described throughout the report and are of particular concern. EAS would suggest that there are a number of smaller private sector landlords who refuse permission for works to tenants who would otherwise qualify for grant assistance. As grants require the landlord's permission, the applications then fail and the tenants do not benefit.

3.1 This suggests that the sector requires even greater legislation than is currently in place. EAS is therefore recommending that all private sector landlords be licensed. As part of that licence, there should be a requirement to provide properties which are 'tenantable and habitable' as well as wind and watertight. The definition of these terms should include a minimal energy rating, set at that of the current national average, as reported in the most recent Scottish House Condition Survey (currently 1996, with the next due in **2003**).

3.2 The licence fee collected by the local authority could also help to finance grants for repairs and energy efficiency works. Landlords must be encouraged to apply for any grants available. A large number of smaller landlords let properties to tenants claiming housing benefit. This provides a means for the local authority to ensure compliance by the landlord prior to any payment of housing benefit. While this might be complicated to administer, the benefits would outweigh the complications, in EAS's view.

3.3 EAS also suggests an amendment to the current Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) licence arrangements so that they too would include compliance with a minimal energy rating.

4 In the owner occupier sector, the challenge is no less complex. The proposed solution of including a statutory energy rating in property valuation surveys would mean a further complicated change to the legal framework. However, EAS recommends that all surveys gather minimal information to allow the production of a Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) Rating. The more detailed homebuyer's survey should include a National Home Energy Rating (NHER) survey, which would give indicative running costs for the home.

4.1 An alternative would be for the seller to have a full energy survey done and to make this available to all prospective buyers. This could be incorporated into the estate agent's role in order to ensure that a survey is undertaken and attached to the schedule before a property is placed on the market.

4.2 EAS believes that an energy survey would be relatively low cost at whatever its point of introduction and, as all new homes built are required to have a SAP assessment, this would act to bring older homes into line with new homes. The issue

of tenants only staying in a property for a relatively short time should not detract from the need to have a survey.

4.3 There is a much wider energy education role required so that the public could understand the implication or meaning of an energy survey. This could be undertaken by a number of the current initiatives in place across Scotland.

For example, the Scottish Executive's "Do a Little Change A Lot" campaign could produce a range of educational adverts and publications to back up the introduction of such legislation.

4.4 While home buyers will still be concerned with the other elements of house purchase such as location, proximity to schools and shops, transport links and other amenities, the value of properties should have regard to overall condition and running costs. Two similar houses within close proximity of each other should be able to be valued differently by surveyors and purchasers based on all factors.

5. A review of the Below Tolerable Standard (BTS) was conducted in 1998. The process has still to come to fruition. EAS would welcome the completion of this process, and would like to see provision made for "dampness deleterious to an occupant's health", and a better minimum standard for what can be considered as heating in a dwelling.

6. English local authorities are being encouraged to adopt the Housing, Health and Safety Rating System in lieu of the Housing Fitness Standard. This system is similar in nature to that proposed by the Scottish Executive under the Index of Housing Quality. EAS would encourage the development and adoption of a similar housing quality index in Scotland.

7. EAS does not claim that these solutions could be easily enforced, but greater legislation is required if the quality of the housing stock in the private sector is to improve.

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