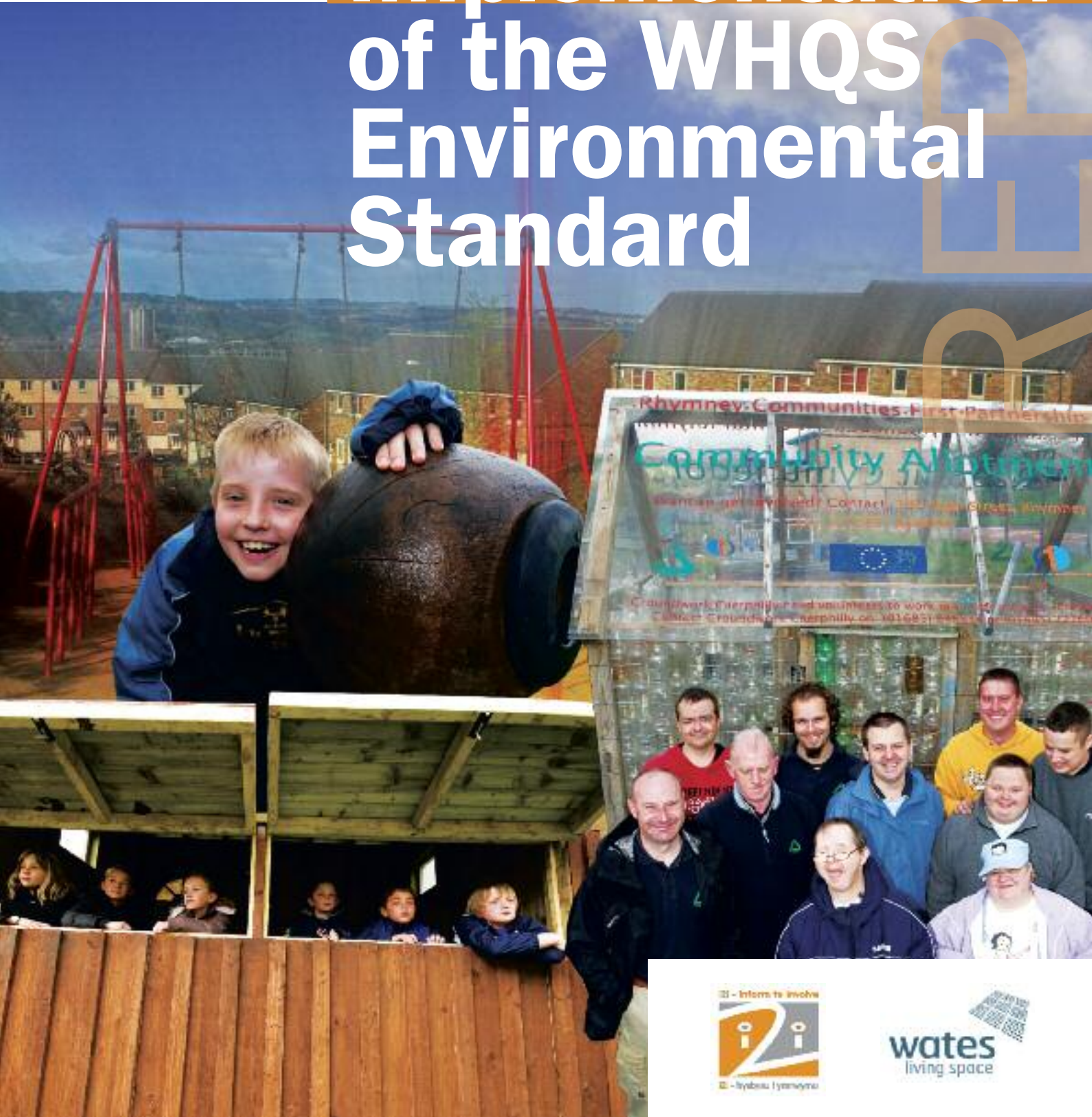




Report on the

Scope and Implementation of the WHQS Environmental Standard



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- In 2007 we became the first construction company to develop and implement our own Resident Liaison training course; this course is accredited by the CIH.
- Wates Living Space is currently undergoing the assessment process for the TPAS Pinpoint Quality for Contractors Accreditation Scheme in both England and Wales
- The Wates Building Futures programme furthers our commitment to creating sustainable communities by employing local people to carry out the WHQS works. The two week training programme aims to get the long term unemployed back to work through the construction industry. In November 2007 the first Building Futures Programme in Wales was held in Merthyr Tydfil in conjunction with the Neighbourhood Learning Centre.
- Wates initiated a research project with Business in the Community to produce the "Toolkit for Business- Building Opportunities for Businesses and Social Landlords to work together". The report examines best practice in how RSLs and Local Authorities can work with businesses to benefit the local community.
- Environmental objectives such as zero landfill waste, sustainable timber sourcing and energy efficiency help us to reduce our impact on the environment.

i2i

i2i is an Assembly Government project providing support to local authorities, tenants staff and councillors in the process of achieving the Welsh

Housing Quality Standard (WHQS).
i2i's key areas of activity are:

- WHQS support – helping tenants, staff and councillors to access clear and accurate information and take up opportunities to become more involved.
- Wider Housing issues – working with local authorities to support local and regional housing strategies including the provision of affordable housing, tackling homelessness, providing housing with support and addressing the needs of BME individuals and communities.
- WHQS Plus – maximising the opportunities for local investment, community benefit, training, jobs and small business development.

Although working primarily in the Heads of the Valleys, i2i is committed to sharing its work with local authorities and tenants throughout Wales.

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Appendices available on request or as download from TPAS Cymru or Groundwork Wales web sites:

Appendix 1: Questions for Local Authority interviews

**Appendix 2: Abstract from the Literature Review
- Guidance on Environmental Improvements**

About the Environmental Standard Report and Guidance

The project to provide interpretation and guidance about the environmental standard of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard was carried out by Groundwork Wales and TPAS Cymru.

The project was funded by the New Ideas Fund of the Welsh Assembly Government.

The following documents form a complementary suite of advice about achieving the environmental standard:

- Report on the Scope and Implementation of the WHQS Environmental Standard
- Guidance for interpretation and implementation of the environmental standard.
- Case studies of a sample of Local Authorities' approaches to the environmental standard, and of a successful environmental improvement project.
- Abstract from the literature review for the project on good practice in environmental projects.

Groundwork Wales' vision is of a society made up of sustainable communities which are vibrant, healthy and safe, which respect the local and global environment and where individuals and enterprises prosper.

Our purpose is to build sustainable communities in areas of need through joint environmental action.

Our values are

- Equality and Diversity
- Partnership
- Sustainability
- Innovation and Learning
- Integrity and Professionalism
- Subsidiarity

Our vision, purpose and values are underpinned by the principles of sustainable development.

There are five Trusts, four are rooted locally in over 60 per cent of the most deprived communities (Bridgend, Neath and Port Talbot, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Wrexham and Flintshire). Groundwork Wales' business is inextricably intertwined with that of the four local Trusts with a remit to support network development, provide advocacy on a national basis and deliver national programmes through Welsh Assembly

TPAS Cymru is the leading tenant participation organisation in Wales, with over 400 tenant and landlord members. TPAS Cymru exists to make effective participation a reality throughout Wales.

TPAS Cymru provides a range of services to Tenants and Landlords:-

- Training, Seminars and Conferences accessible to all
- Impartial Advice to Tenants & Landlords
- Research, Surveys and Policy Development
- Project work to improve participation practice and housing services
- Support to independent Tenant and Resident groups and their Landlords

For further information contact your nearest TPAS Cymru Office:-

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Report on the

Scope and Implementation of the WHQS Environmental Standard

Executive Summary

The environmental standard within the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) is not defined in detail but only stated in general outline. This presents problems of interpretation for social landlords in business planning and implementation of the standard. A wide range of differing approaches in scope, resources and implementation can be found as a result.

This report examines:

- the range of approaches and practices for the environmental standard by a sample of Local Authorities which are retaining stock or in process of stock transfer ;
- good practice in a range of environmental improvement projects;
- and a literature review of good practice advice for environmental improvement projects and community engagement.

The report finds that most business plans and budgets for achieving WHQS pay insufficient attention to the environmental standard, take a limited and technocratic approach, and do not engage the community effectively. The major problems identified by the research are that:

- Many landlords have taken a too narrow, technical interpretation of the environmental standard which will not address adequately the wider concerns of communities and will make it difficult to engage communities.
- Often, environmental improvement needs and priorities have not been systematically identified and prioritised by residents and communities, neither has this systematic approach formed the basis for business plan costs and action plan which makes the plan and budget inadequate.

- The process of environmental improvements has not been harnessed effectively toward objectives of social inclusion, community pride and community regeneration.

The report recommends a range of changes to practice so that the environmental standard encompasses a wider range of considerations beyond property curtilage and narrow safety/security issues, and bases business plans and budgets systematically on the aspirations and priorities of residents and communities. Changes are recommended to briefs for Housing Condition Surveys, Independent Tenant Advisors and Welsh Assembly Government advice to incorporate more effective consideration and support for the environmental standard.

Residents have to be involved in defining areas and aspirations, as well as in planning, specifications and review. Possibilities should be fostered for community enterprises, and community associations and volunteers, to be contracted to carry out aspects of environmental works, with consideration for skills development and apprenticeships. The wide range of community environmental concerns will require landlords to take the lead in partnership working with statutory and other bodies so that inputs are well co-ordinated and funding mobilised.

The report's conclusions and recommendations inform the associated Guidance on Interpretation of the Environmental Standard which forms the other major element of the suite of documents from the project. Case studies of practice by Local Authorities, and the literature review section of good practice for environmental projects are the other elements of the suite.



Report on the

Scope and Implementation of the WHQS Environmental Standard

1. Introduction

Achieving the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) is a major plank of the Welsh Assembly Government's policy for housing set out in 'Better Homes for People in Wales' (2001). The central aim of the vision is to raise the physical standard and condition of housing. However, the WHQS is not just concerned with bricks and mortar; it also includes a standard for the environment around homes and a strong commitment to increasing social inclusion and community cohesion, as well as the aim of community regeneration, through implementation of WHQS.

The environmental standard of WHQS is expressed in very general terms leaving uncertainty for social landlords about what the standard requires and how to include works and costs into the 30 year Business Plan to achieve WHQS.

This research project examined the approach of primarily Local Authority Landlords to planning and budgeting for the environmental standard of WHQS, and good practice in environmental improvement projects.

This report provides information and good practice about how social landlords are tackling the environmental standard, along with good practice and learning from a range of environmental improvement initiatives covering both environmental practice and how to involve residents in the processes and decision making.

A separate Guidance document is provided for social landlords in interpretation of the environmental standard, drawn from the conclusions of the report



2. Aim & Objectives

The overall aim of the study is to develop the understanding and application of the general environmental standard as stated in the Welsh Quality Housing Standard to enable social landlords to develop local environmental standards, and to increase focus on sustainability and inclusion issues in WHQS business plans.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To increase awareness of sustainability and environmental good practice for tenants and social landlords in achieving the WHQS;
- To enhance advice about development of a local environmental standard to supplement the weaker element of existing guidance on the environmental standard;
- To improve planning and budgeting in business plans to deliver a satisfactory environmental standard;
- To increase the profile and importance of general environmental improvements for achieving wider public sector aims to improve social inclusion, health and community cohesion.

It is recognised that a detailed, prescriptive national environmental standard would be inappropriate in the varied conditions and circumstances of social housing areas in Wales. The guidance aims to provide a range of priority environmental issues for consideration, good practice in environmental improvements and in involving residents, and practical examples of how social landlords are tackling the WHQS environmental standard. This will enable landlords to benefit from experience elsewhere while tailoring to their local needs.



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3. Methodology

The study consisted of 2 components: a desk top literature review, and interviews with selected social landlords and with environmental improvement projects. The examples reviewed aimed to encompass rural and urban areas, different areas of Wales; local authorities and some housing association practice.

3.1 The Literature Review

examined 3 areas of documentation looking at:

1. Existing guidance and good practice about environmental improvements and resident involvement;

Publications available on a range of web sites were reviewed including:
Welsh Assembly Government; Home Office; Dept. for Communities and Local Government; International Union of Tenants; TPAS England; TPAS Scotland; Communities Scotland; Housing Corporation; Chartered Institute of Housing; Joseph Rowntree Foundation; New Economics Foundation; Peabody Trust.

2. Perspectives, interpretation and practice to date by Local authorities and stock transfer landlords for the WHQS environmental standard;

- Offer documents of stock transfer landlords and Business Plans for WHQS were examined but little documentation is available and the consideration within documents about environmental improvements is slight. Most information at this stage was gathered from informal interviews.
- A range of local authorities were reviewed across Wales including those retaining their stock and others in process of transferring to a new RSL landlord:
Caerphilly, Carmarthenshire, Denbighshire, Neath Port Talbot, Rhondda Cynon Taf,

Swansea, Torfaen.

- Although the Decent Homes standard in England does not include an environmental standard a range of English local authorities and transfer landlords with significant environmental improvement initiatives were reviewed:
Derby, Enfield, Hackney, Oxford, S. Lakeland, Vale Services, Watford.

3. Examples of environmental improvement projects to identify good practice and assess impacts, and to provide case studies in resident involvement and environmental improvement.

- Environmental improvement project reports were reviewed for all Groundwork projects in Wales and some in England in: Bury, Medway/Swale, St. Helens, Thurnscoe.
- Examples of good practice in environmental projects was sought from TPAS Cymru members, and projects by Cymdeithas Tai Eryri and Cymdeithas Tai Clwyd were reviewed.
- A range of small scale improvement projects in England were reviewed through reports available from TPAS England.

3.2 Research interviews were undertaken with

- A sample of local authority retention and transfer landlords in Wales: Carmarthenshire, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Denbighshire, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Valleys to Coast; and also Derby in England.
- Groundwork project at Aberavon in Neath Port Talbot.

A set of standard questions was developed for interviews with Local Authority Landlords and the same questions used as appropriate for interviews about the environmental improvement projects. The standard questions are provided as Appendix 1 which is available from TPAS Cymru or Groundwork Wales web sites.

The broad themes of the questions were:

1. Vision
How does the landlord interpret the environmental element of the WHQS?
2. Involving tenants
How does the landlord involve tenants in the process?
3. Budgeting
How was the budget for environmental standard work set in the WHQS business plan?
4. Methodology
What are the planning processes adopted by the landlord?
5. Delivery structures
What are the delivery structures for achieving and maintaining the WHQS environmental standard?

3.3 Interpretation of the Standard

The WHQS environmental standard states: 'Homes should be located in attractive, safe environments that tenants can relate to and where they can feel proud to live.'

The analysis of findings from the research has focused on four key words or phrases which are undefined in the statement of the environmental standard above:

- attractive
- safe
- can relate to
- can feel proud.

All four key elements are very subjective and must be based on the views and priorities of residents rather than being technically specified and professionally implemented. Some of the factors involved in residents' views would include:

- Identity of the area;
- Individualisation of own property;
- Controllable or defensible space;
- Meeting needs for security and leisure;
- Relationships with other residents;
- Aesthetics.

3.4 Study Outputs

The output of the research project is presented as:

- A Report which: compares the approach and practice in relation to the environmental standard of WHQS by different social landlords in Wales; reviews recommended good practice in environmental improvement schemes; and explores the experience of a number of environmental improvement initiatives in Wales.
- Guidance in interpretation of the environmental standard of WHQS and in resourcing and implementing the standard.
- A collection of case studies.
- Abstract from the literature review of good practice for environmental projects.

4. Findings

The environmental standard of WHQS was seen as vague and therefore more difficult to plan for than other, more specific elements of WHQS. However, this was appreciated as being ‘non-prescriptive’ and allowing flexibility for the varied range of circumstances around Wales and between estates in the same area.

The drawback is that there is a wide variation in approach and practice by different landlords to environmental improvements for WHQS, and further that these variations are not linked in many cases to any systematic consideration of local circumstances and needs. The basis of business planning for the environmental standard has been sketchy in many cases and not founded on tenants views which would be a central expectation from the wording of the standard.

4.1 WHQS Environmental Standard Practice by Local Authorities

There was a very stark spectrum in perspectives and subsequent approaches within the Local Authorities interviewed.

At one end of the spectrum was a limited, more technocratic approach characterised by:

- approving of the secondary priority of the environmental standard within WHQS;
- interpreting ‘environment’ as the curtilage only plus safety by design issues;
- involving tenants through existing structures only;
- budgets set at historic levels;
- seeing no possibility of devolving budgets for environmental work to tenants;
- seeing sustainability as a matter of design (as required by tenants), choice of materials and routine maintenance.

While at the other end of the spectrum the characteristics were:

- priority of the environmental standard in WHQS guidance seen as inadequate and an ‘after thought’;
- interpreting ‘environment’ as a wide scope of social, economic and environmental issues;
- wider efforts made to obtain tenants’ views on environmental priorities;
- seeing the environmental standard as a development process and a ‘fantastic opportunity to develop tenant participation and encourage more tenants and new Tenant & Resident Associations (TRAs)’;
- setting a budget well above historical levels,
- developing a devolved role for tenants in setting budget priorities – ‘can’t see how it would work any other way’;
- developing an asset management strategy which enables areas to be identified for priority levels of spend on environmental improvements;
- fostering volunteer involvement within each community in delivery of environmental works;
- seeing local community ownership as the key to maintenance and sustainability.

4.1.1 The Vision

Some of the landlords reviewed or interviewed in Wales have given relatively minor consideration to the environmental standard of the WHQS. The emphasis has been strongly on the bricks and mortar aspects of home improvements and technical standards and specifications, alongside basic aspects such as paths, fences/walls, street lighting, parking. Most landlords felt that this level of priority was appropriate given that the environmental standard is given secondary priority in WAG guidance. A few landlords felt that environmental improvements should be given higher status.

Two landlords of those interviewed stood out as taking a more holistic approach to achieving the broader aims of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard through a broader based asset management approach with partnership working to deliver greater impacts and outcomes.

Carmarthenshire

Carmarthenshire County Council is retaining its housing stock but has developed its own enhanced WHQS standard. The Carmarthenshire Homes Standard sets a clear target of increasing tenant satisfaction with their estates by 2% per year with a starting baseline from 2007. The environmental standard is seen as crucial to achieving this target because it has a great impact on how tenants view the area in which they live.

The Landlord recognises that this cannot be achieved by the Housing department alone and requires a high degree of corporate commitment. The Housing service is actively seeking partnership with partners such as Police, Regeneration, Social Services and residents. A budget for environmental improvements has been set at levels that are very high compared to historic levels. Carmarthen hopes to attract residents into the process because there are less financial barriers to achieving residents' wishes and meeting their priorities. Consideration is being given to devolving a greater share of the decision making process to tenants with potential barriers such as training and capacity building being identified.

Carmarthenshire hopes to encourage more Tenant & Resident groups to be formed as a result of the greater range of involvement options afforded by increased improvement activity. Housing officers and are seen as the facilitators of the process working in partnership with tenants and residents in order to define priorities and possibly manage the process.

Newport

During the stock transfer consultation process tenants were asked to list areas for improvement; this has given Newport a priority list of tenants' aspirations. The information from the tenant survey has informed a wide ranging asset improvement plan. The Offer Document includes a strong commitment to improving the environment.

The Landlord is keen to involve the wider community in identifying priorities – particularly in areas where there are low or dispersed levels of social housing. Initial priorities identified include security, defensible space and improving communal areas within estates.

Delivery of the environmental standard is viewed as an opportunity to increase local employment opportunities – particularly for communities with high levels of social deprivation. Environmental works could provide a means of bringing people into employment and the community benefiting directly from the capital expenditure on the WHQS environmental standard.

A MORI poll in 2001 ('Decent Homes, Decent Spaces' – Neighbourhoods Green, 2004) found that the top four 'liveability issues' to improve quality of life were:

- cleaner streets
- community safety
- improved parks
- reduced vandalism.

The inclusion of cleaner streets and improved parks in the top four indicates the wider issues of green space and aesthetics which tenants and residents relate to and take pride in, besides the basics of safety and security.

The same publication highlighted the choices of social emphasis which need to be made in planning environmental improvements, for example choosing between CCTV cameras or employing park keepers. This aspect of the vision for environmental improvements may well involve different social emphasis between professionals and residents.

The scope of environmental improvements merges seamlessly with wider objectives for social and economic regeneration of areas, and needs to be linked with wider regeneration. Important lessons about scope and vision of regeneration are drawn in 'Tenant Involvement in Estate Regeneration' – Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1994:

- A rounded view is necessary of the need for and types of improvements including for example community arts.
- Sustainability of improvements is linked to effective social and economic change.
- It is a barrier to effectiveness of regeneration if improvements are limited to what the landlord owns.

The implication of a wider view including land not owned by the landlord is the necessity for wider partnerships with a range of relevant partners, and mobilising a range of funding sources.

4.1.2 Involving Tenants

In stock transfer situations tenants have been widely consulted but less widely involved in planning and decisions about options and business planning. However, the processes have concentrated on whether to transfer or not, and on the form of the stock transfer landlord; there has been little consultation by most Local Authorities with tenants about environmental aspects of WHQS as a basis for setting an environmental improvement budget for the business plan.

It is probably unrealistic to expect this to happen given the scale of the issues and the relatively short time scales involved in stock options and transfer processes, but post-transfer this shortfall has to be made up if we are not to create decent homes in possibly unacceptable environments. Several local authorities mentioned the need for more consultation work with tenants to identify environmental considerations. However, this poses the question of how those considerations can be accommodated in a business plan already submitted perhaps without all the considerations that further consultation would identify.

In Local Authorities retaining their stock, and in Housing Associations, the approach to WHQS has been very much business as usual, with a few exceptions. The emphasis has been on achieving internal improvements to homes and the basic aspects, but there has been significantly less consultation or involvement of tenants in the issues and the planning than in stock transfer situations. There has been little activity about the environmental standard of WHQS or involvement of tenants and residents in that, outside existing initiatives for community or environmental development. A number of Housing Associations have already well established area based initiatives which involve tenants and residents in the wider community and environmental development of their areas, and other Housing Associations are developing this approach.

Denbighshire

Tenants have been well involved in the development of environmental improvements for WHQS in Denbighshire. Denbighshire recognises that the environmental elements of the WHQS are very much based on the aspirations of all stakeholders particularly the local communities of tenants and residents.

The system for identifying, approving and prioritising environmental improvements has tenants in a central role:

- Environmental schemes are suggested by the wider body of stakeholders (from groups or individuals – there is nothing preventing ideas coming forward on an ad-hoc basis).
- The scheme is interpreted by officers to produce a summary description to facilitate wider involvement.
- The Tenants Federation decides whether each scheme is to be added to the environmental improvements list.
- The scheme is then sent out for detailed design and consultation by a dedicated surveyor before being resubmitted to the Tenants Federation to set its priority in the list.
- The list of works is viewed as an active document which can be continually updated to reflect the priorities of the communities involved.

All the landlords interviewed accepted that environmental improvements and the standard represented a chance to 'engender pride' in a community, and recognised that long term sustainable improvements depended on a sense of ownership by the community. However significant reservations were expressed by some landlords about prospects for successful community engagement with environmental improvements because of:

- Previous experience of tenants/residents failing to commit to environmental improvement schemes.
- Dependence for success on involvement of a range of other statutory and voluntary bodies – unless tenants and residents see commitment from all related bodies it is difficult to create enthusiasm.

Given successful experience identified in the literature review in Wales and around the UK, (see references and case studies in Useful Resources section), the reservations probably need to be turned into aims and acted on:

- to involve tenants and residents fully in processes so they can see the influence they are having and so generate commitment;
- and to build the effective collaboration between relevant bodies which demonstrates their commitment and shows concrete benefits to communities.

Only few landlords expressed a positive view about involving tenants in the environmental standard as a process which should aim at developing and enhancing tenants' capabilities and confidence, rather than just being a mechanism to help implement the environmental standard.

Poor methods of participation may be at the root of unsuccessful experiences of community engagement with environmental improvements. The Welsh Assembly Government publication 'Customer Service and Public Engagement' is concerned with broad public services but there are points of good practice applicable to involvement of tenants in WHQS:

- People are more interested in issues close to their home – local area involvement is likely to be more effective.
- People are interested in decision making and monitoring performance rather than ongoing delivery; and when issues are 'live' and they can influence outcomes.
- A wide range of different methods is needed to involve different people and groups – at appropriate times.
- Disabled people need to be involved in design for their access and safety perspectives.
- Professionals need to be good communicators with appropriate, jargon free language; open and not defensive; respond to issues across department or agency boundaries; and take responsibility to bridge to the lay person rather than leaving tenants to connect with the professional level.
- Stable, long term contact with staff, who should reflect the ethnic profile of the area, makes for effective connection.

Most of these points of good practice are also contained in the National Tenant Participation Strategy (NTPS) published by WAG in April 2007. Two Local Authorities drew the link between environmental standard improvement works and the NTPS, seeing local area based environmental improvements as a major arena of activity for development of Local Tenant Participation Strategy activities.

Other issues were raised about tenant involvement in priority setting or budget allocation which are important for ensuring fair and effective allocation of environmental funding:

- Ensuring that existing tenant structures are genuinely representative of communities' preferences – this requirement applies equally to any different methods of gathering tenants' views, or to officer led or officer partnership allocation mechanisms.
- Guarding against some areas being disadvantaged because they have no group, or less able members, to represent their needs and views compared to other areas.

4.1.3 Budgeting

Budgets for environmental works receive a lower priority than the budgets required for physical/structural improvements to housing stock. Whether a budget allows significant environmental improvement depends upon the initial vision the landlord has. A narrowly defined budget (set against historic levels) tends to derive from basic considerations such as health and safety with a focus on the immediate property boundaries. Higher levels of budget tend to come from landlords with a wider vision of the possible community and regeneration benefits.

Carmarthenshire specifically recognised the connection between success in environmental improvement and success in basic WHQS improvement:

“The environmental work still has to be completed to a decent level otherwise the overall gains from WHQS will not have as great an impact on the communities in Carmarthenshire.”

Most business plans for stock transfer or retention have included only notional estimates of the costs of achieving the environmental standard. It was explicit in some cases, but usually apparent, that the pressure of keeping business plan and budget viable for retention, or just as low as possible, was the greater determinant of the budget for environmental improvements. Usually costings are not systematically based by defining the environmental improvements needed and then budgeting accordingly, and are often based on a percentage proportion of the main budget.

A factor in creating this outlook is WAG's own WHQS Definition Tool which is a spreadsheet to assist Local Authorities in budgeting for the programme of works. It contains only items for internal and curtilage works which contributes to a narrow vision of environmental improvements and limited, inadequate budgets.

However:

- Newport carried out consultation during the stock options/transfer process specifically to identify environmental needs and priorities but the business plan budget was still based on a (generous) notional sum per property.
- Denbighshire included environmental works in the brief of the consultant carrying out their stock condition survey so that environmental costs were considered from the start. Planning and delivery of environmental improvements has benefited from a partnership approach to WHQS across other Council Departments.
- Valleys to Coast initiated a holistic approach to estate improvement on 4 estates in 2005, the Estate Improvement Programme. The programme aimed to identify and address key improvement issues on each estate taking into account the different sets of physical challenges as well as a complex array of social issues. Budgeting was based systematically on the wide range of issues raised by residents.

There is wide variation in the budgets for environmental improvements with the range of funds not necessarily reflecting population or needs of areas:

Landlord Environmental Budget (stock size)	Environmental Budget
Carmarthenshire (10000)	£48m over 7 years – whole Local Authority spend not just Housing Dept.
Denbighshire (3500)	£1.75m over 10 years – only Housing Revenue Account spend
Newport (9600)	£9.2m over 10 years; Plus small works environmental fund of £50,000 pa.
RCT Homes (10265)	£7m over 30 years Plus Tenants environmental improvement fund of £50,000 pa
Swansea (14500)	£14m over 30 years
Valleys to Coast (6000+)	£5m approx in first 5 years plus £600k maintenance annually (initial transfer business plan)

For comparison Derby Homes in England has a 5 year 'Estates Pride' fund of £15 million with decisions made by a City wide partnership body following extensive consultation.

Valleys to Coast

Owing to the timing of the original transfer the initial business plan provided limited resources (£5m capital plus approximately £600K per annum for maintenance) for the environmental elements of WHQS. Since transfer V2C has looked at innovative ways to deliver the environmental standard and address the wider aspirations of tenants and residents.

To better establish the likely costs and scope of improvements, V2C developed an Estate Improvement Programme (EIP) that would explore options and opportunities for environmental improvements on four large V2C estates. Each estate presented a different set of environmental challenges as well as a complex array of social and economic issues. V2C adopted a methodology that was based on engagement and involvement of local residents.

During the course of 2006, a masterplan for each estate was prepared which established a coherent context and foundation for holistic improvement. The pilot programme was fully costed allowing further refinements to the business planning process. In order to bring investment into local neighbourhoods, V2C is exploring opportunities to develop and support social enterprises which will deliver environmental improvement pilots, provide ongoing maintenance services and facilitate training and skills development for local people.

To ensure other smaller neighbourhoods were able to carry out environmental improvements, V2C established a Neighbourhoods Improvement Fund (NIF) which enables local housing officers and residents to bid for funding and other resources. V2C has also established a small grants scheme – the Community Support Fund – to complement broader investment. The fund

invests in community initiative and supports local activities and projects. V2C commits £40,000 per annum to the fund; in addition the fund receives the proceeds from the disposal of small assets such as ‘garden’ land. This ensures that the value of local assets is retained for the benefit of tenants and the wider community.

It is significant that both Local Authorities retaining their stock, Carmarthenshire and Denbighshire, emphasized the importance and value of their partnership working with other Departments of the Local Authority. For stock transfer landlords and existing RSLs these same partnerships need to be built across organisations to mobilise resources as well as co-operation, and because the wider scope of environmental improvements goes beyond their land ownership and responsibilities.



Small Devolved Budgets

Several Local Authorities already have, or have set up, smaller budgets for environmental improvements which are administered and allocated by tenants, or by tenants in partnership with Officers:

Caerphilly:

Environmental Strategies for each Area & Neighbourhood Housing Office are devised annually. Each office has its own devolved budget, which enables spend on environmental works to be targeted in line with the priorities for the area/estate.

Denbighshire:

In addition to the process of listing and prioritising environmental schemes, each area has an allocation of funding annually and tenants and officers jointly determine how this funding will be used on the schemes proposed.

Neath Port Talbot:

NPT has in place already a tenant led approach to small scale environmental improvements not linked to WHQS. The small scale environmental improvement budget is £50,000 annually of which one quarter (£12,500) is made available to the Borough-wide Tenants Forum. The Forum defines criteria and awards funding for small scale projects that meet the criteria. The forum is keen to continue and expand the scheme at an increased resource level if WHQS funding allows.

Newport:

An environmental fund of £50,000 pa is available for bids from tenant organisations. Training and support is envisaged to ensure that tenant organisations have the capacity to formulate and delivery such projects.

Rhondda Cynon Taf:

An annual budget of £50,000 will be allocated to a 'Tenants environmental improvement fund'. This fund is to be locally defined and administered by the existing tenants federation

within RCT; a relatively narrow remit has been attached (tidiness, security, play areas and lighting to pathways and estates).

4.1.4 Methodology

Few Local Authorities have applied the environmental standard of the WHQS to their local circumstances in order to define a 'local environmental standard'. Most Local Authorities have fallen back on a conventional approach usually with narrowly defined scope focused on the curtilage of the properties and/or safe by design considerations. In most cases this has been a professional, technical process to decide the scope of environmental improvements to be included and the priorities, without tenants' involvement. It must be recognised that in some cases, eg Caerphilly, large scale estate regeneration schemes have been completed over the past 5 years and the approach to WHQS environmental improvements is a continuation of these initiatives.

Three Local Authorities have taken a different approach specifically within the framework and principles of WHQS:

- Carmarthenshire set a high level of budget for environmental improvement work and are consulting tenants and residents to identify local priorities. Their asset management strategy identifies areas with the greatest need for investment. The impact of improvement work will be measured in terms of social, economic and health impacts.
- Denbighshire has a system to involve tenants and residents in developing environmental improvements and in allocating funding for them.
- Newport consulted about environmental improvements within their stock options consultations to provide estate-by-estate priority lists. Investment plans are in preparation and tenants will be consulted on these before implementation.

In Newport the priority issues identified by tenants included security, defensible space and communal areas but other priorities were identified varying by estate. The issues of safety and security are clearly high priorities but are not the only priorities for tenants. A narrow approach to environmental standard of WHQS precludes flexibility toward tenants' wider priorities and reduces scope for improving tenant and community participation.

4.1.5 Delivery

All Local Authorities plan to use contractors and/or Direct Labour Organisations to deliver schemes but there are big differences in attitude toward use of volunteers. One Authority will use few volunteers because we have a 'claims orientated' society while another will use volunteers from the community as much as is possible. Only one Authority in interview outlined the potential for using environmental improvement work as part of training, apprenticeship and local job generation.

A similar split in approach is seen about the role of tenants in monitoring and managing environmental works in the future. Approaches ranged from a reliance on professional design, delivery and management through to tenants being involved at Board level and at local level through TRAs in priorities and design, monitoring and long term planning – with a recognition of the need for and opportunity for capacity building and training to make this a reality.

This division in approach was not one between Local Authorities which retained stock and new, transfer Social Registered Landlords but cut across the categories.

Vale Homes in England is adopting an Environmental Management System based on 2 internationally recognised standards. Although not restricted to environmental improvements the systems provide a holistic basis for the organisation's operation internally and externally to improve the environment generally.

4.2 Environmental Improvement Practice

The environmental improvement projects were examined for good practice and learning points under the headings of:

- Issues of environmental concern to residents;
- Components of environmental improvement;
- Processes to involve residents.

4.2.1 Issues of environmental concern to residents;

Staff involved in projects listed a wider range of concerns for residents than safety and security issues, though these were firmly among the priorities. The concerns are very much seen and expressed from the perspectives of residents who want:

1. Nice surroundings, street trees, pleasant to live, parks
2. Social interaction, meeting neighbours, places to meet.
3. Views and vistas from housing, screening bad views, highlighting good views. The ability to see beyond the curtilage of your residence is important in order to feel that you belong to the wider environment, to feel connected.
4. Attractive gateways to areas because first impressions count. Perception is nine tenths of reality and fear of crime is often greater than actual risks of crime. If major gateways,

- nodes and entrances of an area look nice, clean and not vandalised, people feel safer.
5. Permeability, get away from cul-de-sacs, the ability to walk to facilities is more social.
 6. Streets not dominated by the car – design this out. Parking should be away from main entrances of residential accommodation, car parks should be around the sides and/or backs. Large expanses of concrete should be broken up, defining walkways through car parks
 7. Green routes for access and enjoyment. If they are overlooked and well lit, people feel comfortable using them – this is passive surveillance.
 8. Clearly defined defensible space, fenced off small green spaces and verandas.
 9. Secure communal areas; all should have physical and/or visual access and be overlooked.
 10. Communal space should have flexible use.

This wider range of issues will inevitably arise whenever residents and communities are consulted about their concerns and priorities. Communities will not restrict their concerns to their garden fencing, paths and lighting – and neither will environmental improvements restricted to these issues generate the pride and commitment for which the environmental standard aims.

4.2.2 Components of environmental improvement;

Corresponding to this wider vision and range of concerns there was a wide range of projects within all the improvement schemes examined.

- **Homezones**
These are a design solution where pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles share the space on equal terms, therefore reducing the

negative impact of the car and to create a more attractive and social street scene.

- **Street trees**
Trees can be used to visually enhance the street scene and to screen poor views. They aid air quality by absorbing polluting gases; they can be used to buffer noise and to reduce the affect of urban heat.
- **Alley-Gating**
Closing off back lanes with gates to encourage the enhancement of under utilised and abused space, give residents and children a secure area for play and socialising.
- **Enhancements to open spaces**
A strategic approach to open space with the development of a hierarchy of parks: central parks for use by people from a wide area and development of smaller pocket parks designed specifically to meet the needs of local residents, using court yards and large open grass verges currently not in use. Central parks include high quality play areas for older children, with pocket parks including play facilities for toddlers.
- **Play provision, 'Teen Zones' and Multi-use Games Areas**
There are good examples of installed equipment and associated green space for supervised provision for play and activity for young and older children. Again, involvement of the client group and the wider members of the host community is essential and can add a positive dimension to the amenity value and safety of the locality.
- **Green routes; Loops, links and corridors**
Green routes are pedestrian/cycle routes through the area to increase access and encourage people to cycle and walk more, creating welcoming and safe walkways connecting key facilities to residential areas. Loops and Links connect communities and facilities to public transport systems and main or arterial cycleway networks.

- **Gateways and entrances to the area**
An important initial visual consideration to any housing and public space development. Good use of materials or locally distinctive characteristics provide a good first impression of the area; encourage potential investment and help residents develop a stronger sense of place, pride and wellbeing in the area.
- **Enhancements to key features**
Using a key feature such as a river or a boggy area to highlight local character, improve access and bring about opportunities for local interpretation to the location.
- **Wildlife and habitats**
Utilising and protecting any areas of particular interest highlights their value to the community where it may not be readily evident. Linking with local biodiversity action plans and events will increase learning and pride in the natural assets of the area
- **Community facilities**
Community infrastructure and facilities can provide shared public space and opportunities for community engagement and commitment. An outdoor element to the facilities can add to the physical and visual impression of the area. These need consideration as part of the business planning for the environmental element of WHQS.
- **Community art**
Can add to the identity of an area. Can be community produced or professional but must be agreed, supported and designed with involvement of the community
- **Street furniture and signage**
Benches, planting and other features can provide a connecting theme in the area and increase identity, as well as offering opportunities for social contact. They can also add to safety and overview of areas
- **Litter picks**
Incorporating litter picks and clean-ups into management regimes or community action improves the feel and amenity value of the area as well as improving safety.

Parc y Gors, at Trem yr Wyddfa, Gwynedd

This project was primarily about providing outdoor recreation space for young people, in particular in relation to an area of boggy ground skirted by recent road schemes. Concerns widened out to a range of other, connected community issues and eventually the feasibility plan also encompassed:

- Poor drainage to gardens
- Parking and home zones
- Play places and Teen Zone
- Boundary walls
- Open areas
- Pathways and access

4.2.3 Processes to involve residents.

A range of good practice points for the process and methods of involving residents in environmental projects come out of the case studies undertaken:

- Start with the residents concerns and ideas, work through the residents and involve the residents in evaluation and the next cycle of planning.
- Be strategic – keep an overview to identify the interconnection of different strands of an issue, while retaining a local viewpoint. Having a strategic view and rationale is essential to be able to apply for sources of external funding which will want to see clear connection of need to proposed projects and to intended outcomes.
- Work with established community organisations and/or foster setting up of appropriate community organisations and provide training and support. This is a point strongly made from a number of community development projects supported by Joseph Rowntree Foundation – ‘Changing Neighbourhoods: The impact of light touch support’.

- Establish structures for residents to be able to influence the project, but beware of overloading active residents with too many committees.

One area which did not emerge strongly from the case studies and interviews is that of involving harder to engage groups of residents including minority ethnic communities. A good practice point from ‘What works in Community Involvement in Area Based Initiatives?’ – Home Office, is that engaging these groups requires both mainstream effort to contact and include all groups of residents, and targeted initiatives aimed specifically at the needs, perspectives or association points of those groups.

These are all points which echo lessons identified in a number of the sources of advice and good practice which were reviewed in the literature review. A particularly concise blueprint for the process of involving residents is provided in ‘Decent Homes; Decent Spaces’ from a project of the Notting Hill Housing Group:

Notting Hill Housing Group

The process we adopted came down to the following:

- Gather base-line evidence and agree a vision for the future with residents
- Enlist support / interest of all key stakeholders
- Produce a feasibility study /masterplan
- Consult with the community /form a Friends Group
- Keep the profile of the project high
- Develop a costed maintenance plan at the design stage
- Manoeuvre to attract a cocktail of capital and revenue funding
- Project manage the works
- Handover to the local authority / Friends Group

What is lacking in most of the approaches to the environmental standard of WHQS and environmental improvement works and budgeting is this systematic and resident focused method. In particular starting with gathering evidence and agreeing a vision for the local environment. Another missing aspect is treating the whole process as part of the wider agenda and objectives for empowering communities, valuing and building expertise of residents, and working toward community regeneration. (See Participation in anti-poverty and regeneration work and research: Overcoming barriers and creating opportunities – Joseph Rowntree Foundation, for a strong exposition of this basis.)

Briton Ferry West Landscape Strategy

Development of the strategy in Briton Ferry demonstrated a wide range of methods to engage residents including a range of different groups, and to develop partnerships:

- Themed sub-committees of residents, statutory and voluntary bodies to work on different areas of development
- First step was to establish a residents group
- Residents were involved in planning and design for home zones and alley gating
- Developed 'street champions' to inform and persuade neighbours
- Provided a small community project budget to stimulate local interest
- Linked to other environmental organisations eg. Keep Wales Tidy to harness their expertise and resources
- Involved schools with pupils taking part in projects and on the Project Partner meetings
- Developed wider partnerships with other bodies – this is a requirement for access to many funding sources
- Consulted young people directly on play provision
- Linked into wider community regeneration plans via Communities First



5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The links between environmental and community issues and purely housing management services issues are clear. If social housing tenants and other residents don't like the area they live in then there will be housing management problems around hard to let properties, high transfer requests, voids and damage to empty properties. There are likely also to be issues of poor safety and security and anti social behaviour, with associated housing management costs. (Decent Homes, Decent Spaces – Neighbourhoods Green)

The primary priority of WHQS to improve conditions in the home is likely to fail in the long term unless the wider environmental and social inclusion aims of the WHQS are also achieved. The implementation of the environmental standard needs to put at centre stage the interpretation of tenants' relationship to and pride in their area.

Most landlords are giving insufficient emphasis or planning to the environmental standard of WHQS, even given its secondary priority as a standard in WAG Guidance.

Recommendation:

1. Higher priority should be given to preparation of the Business Plan element for environmental improvements, with recognition of its long term importance for sustainability in the whole quality of an area for both the general environment and the properties.

Business planning and resources for the environmental standard have not been based on survey evidence or specific planning with residents, except in Newport and Denbighshire, but have been notional. In most cases the funding in the Business Plan has been inadequately low.

Recommendations:

2. Business planning and costing for environmental improvements should be based as far as possible on an assessment of actual environmental needs and priorities in each area. Stock condition surveys should have a wider remit to consider environmental needs, perhaps through a sampling arrangement.
3. If this is not feasible in the time scales of stock option appraisal then the basis of funding for environmental improvements should be clear and transparent in the Business Plan, with a commitment to carry out surveys and consultations after stock transfer to determine an evidence base for environmental improvements planning and costs.
4. Funding in the Business Plan for environmental improvements should not be unrealistically low; it could take account of the higher levels set by some Local Authorities.

The focus of most environmental works for WHQS has been within the curtilage of the property and/or on community safety issues such as lighting and pathways. Most landlords have not considered the wider needs and possibilities for environmental improvement, nor the potential to use a local environmental standard to enhance community cohesion and commitment.

Recommendations:

5. Landlords should consider a wide scope for environmental improvements and should take the vision for each area from the residents views.
6. WAG should revise the WHQS Definition Tool to include a range of environmental items for costing, or strengthen advice and guidance about the environmental standard in other ways.

Most landlords have not used the environmental standard as an opportunity to generate greater tenant and resident involvement, nor to consider the potential opportunities for community regeneration and local jobs connected to environmental improvement work. Stock transfer consultation is geared towards the ballot, the consultation is seen often as a means to an end rather than a process that can reinvigorate the organisation itself.

Recommendations:

7. Landlords should use wider methods than traditional, formal ways of consultation and develop imaginative and varied methods to involve residents widely and across different groups in the community.
8. Tenants and residents should be involved in developing a local environmental standard for WHQS which can act as a framework for development of environmental improvement plans for each area.
9. The remit for Independent Tenant Advisors should include work to help tenants identify environmental improvement priorities.
10. Small scale area environmental funds devolved to local resident decision, or joint resident/officer decision, are a valuable way to engage residents and to build skills and confidence. All landlords should consider this approach and learn from the experience of those landlords already running this type of scheme.
11. Consideration should be given to possibilities of training, apprenticeships and jobs for local people within environmental improvement work and ongoing maintenance.

The approach to environmental improvement in some landlords has been a predominantly technocratic one with professionals setting priorities and making decisions with a minimum of tenant/resident involvement. Long term sustainability has been interpreted as a matter of design and materials while ignoring the requirement of community commitment to create sustainability.

Recommendations:

12. Tenants/residents should be strongly involved in identification of environmental issues and improvements, priorities, design and monitoring of progress and quality.
13. WAG's own guidance needs to focus less on technical issues and include more on the importance of sense of place and community to create sustainability.

Residents in the environmental improvement projects examined identified a much wider range of issues than is included in most Business Plans; these are the issues which can make an area attractive as well as safe and in which residents can take pride.

Recommendation:

14. Landlords should be aware of existing experience and practice and draw on the expertise of landlords or voluntary organisations which have undertaken diverse environmental improvement projects.

The approach advocated in this report and associated Guidance is a long term development process needing to tackle a range of diverse community issues as well as physical building, landscaping and infrastructure ones. It will take time, not least to develop the community trust, commitment and involvement needed and it is likely not to be completed by 2012 – the deadline for achieving WHQS.

Recommendation:

5. Landlords and WAG should appreciate this differing situation for environmental improvements and accept significant progress against a systematically based strategy by 2012, with a viable action plan for further development and implementation of the strategy.



Social landlords do not have ownership of all land nor control of the range of functions relevant to the wider environment; landlords have limitations in funding for wider environmental vision. Effective partnerships between Local Authority departments, other statutory bodies, social landlords and tenants/residents are essential to deal with community and environmental issues from the holistic view of the residents, and not from a fragmented view of different agency responsibilities.

Recommendations:

16. Business plans and local environmental standards should be linked with existing environmental plans for areas and implemented in partnership with relevant statutory and voluntary organisations.
17. Landlords should take the lead in establishing strong partnerships, or working with existing partnerships, with other statutory and voluntary bodies relevant to area environmental improvements and community development. The partnership must develop joint commitment, share perspectives and expertise, and pool different funding sources to address the holistic demands of communities' environments.



6. Useful Resources

References:

See Appendix 2 for specific useful points from a range of these resources.

As Safe As Houses?
Crime and the Built Environment, Residential Developments
- Cardiff City Council 2006, 'Tumelty, J.

Bringing Neighbourhood Centre Stage in Wales –
Joseph Rowntree Foundation,
Witherden, M., 2006.

Changing Neighbourhoods:
The Impact of the Light Touch Support in
20 Communities – lessons from the JRF
Neighbourhood Programme,
Joseph Rowntree Foundation,
Taylor et al, 2007.

Customer Service and Public Engagement
in Making the Connections : Building Better
Customer Services -
Department of Public Services Management,
Welsh Assembly Government. 2006.

Decent Homes, Decent Spaces' –
Neighbourhoods Green:
Peabody Trust

Environmental Policy Derby Homes –
www.derbyhomes.org

Green Cities and Why We Need Them –
New Economics Foundation,
Nicholson-Lord, D., 2003

It's Our Space,
a guide for community groups working
to improve public space -
CABE, 2006.

Participation in anti-poverty and regeneration
work and research:

Overcoming barriers and creating opportunities –
Joseph Rowntree Foundation,
Peter Beresford and Martin Hoban

Tenant Involvement in Estate Regeneration,
Housing Findings Research No 132
Joseph Rowntree Foundation,
Watson, D., 1994.

The Community Development Challenge -
Department of Community and Local
Government, 2006.

What works in Community Involvement in Area
Based Initiatives?
Home Office Online Report 53/04,
Burton et al., 2004.

Related Resources:

- CABE Space (2003),
The Value of Public Space,
CABE Space
- CABE Space (2004),
Green space strategies;
a good practice guide,
CABE Space
- CABE Space (2004),
What would you do with this space?
Involving young people in the design and care
of urban spaces,
CABE Space
- Children's Play Council (2002),
More than Swings and Roundabouts;
Planning for outdoor play.
National Children's Bureau
- Community Design Gwent (Oct. 2007),
Steps to Success:
A Good Practice Guide to Community Design
- Notting Hill Housing Group and Caplin, J.
(2002), Green and (un)Pleasant;
How communities can transform public open
space, Tavistock Improvement Group and
Notting Hill Housing Group
- Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2002),
Living Places; Cleaner, Safer, Greener,
ODPM
- Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2003),
Sustainable Communities;
Building for the Future,
ODPM

Organisations

- Groundwork Wales
www.groundworkwales.org.uk
- Tenant Participation Advisory Service
(TPAS) Cymru
www.tpascymru.org.uk
- CABE Space
www.cabespace.org.uk
- Children's Play Council
www.ncb.org.uk
- Groundwork
www.groundwork.org.uk
- Housing Corporation
www.housingcorp.gov.uk



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