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Guidance on
Interpretation of the WHQS Environmental Standard

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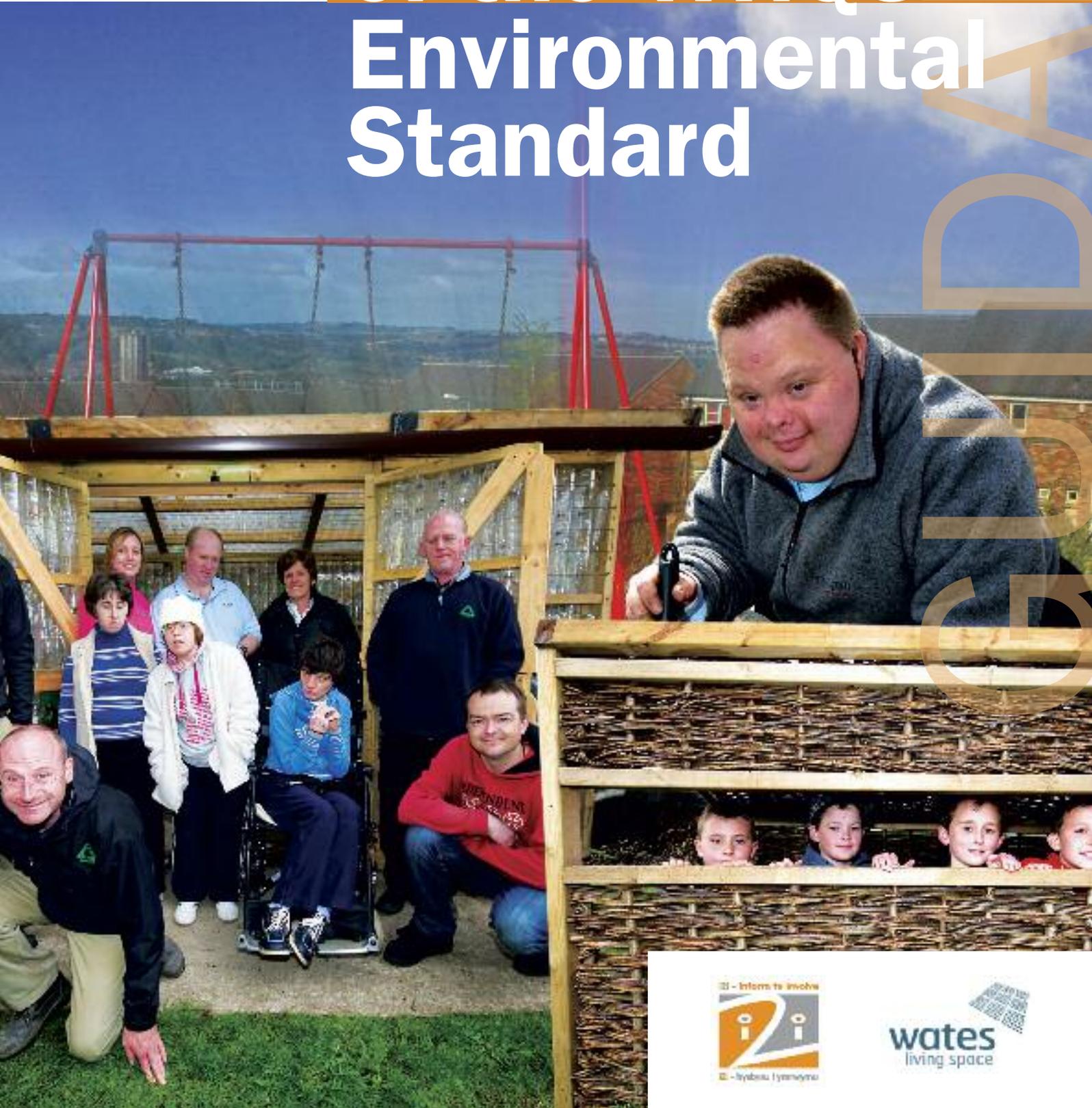
This Guidance has been produced by TPAS Cymru and Groundwork Wales and is part of a suite of documents including:
• Report on the Scope and Implementation of the Environmental Standard of WHQS;
• Case Studies of approaches to business planning and implementation of the environmental standard;
• Abstract from the Literature Review - Guidance on Environmental Improvements.

These documents are available from:
www.tpascymru.org.uk or
www.groundworkwales.org.uk

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CONTENTS

Interpretation of the WHQS Environmental Standard New Ideas Fund

GUIDANCE

1. The WHQS Requirement

The environmental standard for the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) states:
Located in Attractive and Safe Environments

"All homes should be located in an environment to which residents can relate and in which they can be proud to live."

WAG good practice advice issued with the WHQS 1 is divided under 2 headings:

- Local Environment – concerned with defensible space, boundaries and fencing.

- General Environment – which includes a list of characteristics and examples which would or could be included in a good environment.

This list is provided below to emphasize that the scope of environmental improvements is wider than some landlords have considered.

- Landmarks – new trees or street furniture.

- Symbolic entrance to a small group of houses.

- Variation to elevation or colour.

- Traffic calming.

- Improvements to street lighting.

- Rationalising pedestrian routes.

- Accessible roads and footpaths providing safety for residents, pedestrians and children.

- Practical, maintainable soft and hard landscaping with planting in protected locations.

- Adequate and effective street lighting.
- Adequate and safe play space for young children.

- Adequate, practical and maintainable communal areas.

- Clear dwelling identification and boundaries.

- Practically located and well identified utility services.

- Adequate car parking, practically located and clearly visible to residents.

2. Interpretation

The key elements for interpretation of the environmental standard are:

- **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.

This Guidance is based on the principle that only residents can decide what mix of environment elements works for them and makes them proud of their community. The features of the environment prioritised will be subjective and variable between communities.

Limited, technically defined environmental improvements are likely to conflict with the wider perspectives and aspirations of residents, but they also fail the wider aspirations which underpin WHQS and wider Welsh Assembly Government objectives for social inclusion and citizen engagement. The WHQS policy is explicit in seeing the expenditure and the processes of home and environmental improvement as serving the aims of building greater community engagement and social cohesion.

This is a problem for social landlords and professionals trying to achieve WHQS including the environmental standard because there will be no standard provision for environmental improvement. However, there can be standard processes undertaken with residents and communities to determine what their local environmental standard will be, and there can be

a good practice standard for those processes

The major problems identified by the research project into the environmental standard are that:

- Many landlords have taken a too narrow, technical interpretation of the environmental standard.

A limited selection of elements from the list above have been chosen and professional, technical criteria applied to produce a plan and budget which are restricted from the start and which will be a difficulty for subsequent consultation with and participation of 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.

Good quality practice in the interpretation and implementation of the environmental standard will have to overcome these barriers. To successfully achieve the environmental standard the community's planning and design time needs to be properly valued and resourced to allow community-centred involvement. This would ultimately reduce the costs of poor design and inadequate involvement and ownership of the developments.

3. The Process

Once residents are engaged with the question of improvement to their area environment, their considerations will not be limited to a restricted list of elements. A whole range of different issues and viewpoints are bound to be expressed and an essential part of the process will be to enable communities to prioritise their aspirations.

It is very likely that some of the aspirations will be beyond the remit and funding of social landlords to achieve, and wider partnerships will be necessary with wider authority and funding resources.

Communities' views must be taken on in the round - from residents' holistic perspective rather than the fragmented perspective of different organisations' responsibilities. Communities must participate strongly in the planning and decision making for improvements. Unless this is done it is likely that any environmental improvements will not be ones that the community relates to, feels proud of, and helps to maintain and sustain.

The process recommended is one which follows good practice identified in 'It's Our Space', CABE. It should aim to achieve a local environmental standard for each community based on residents' views and priorities, and through which the community is supported and resourced to become more self determining, confident and effective.

1. Identify residents' and community' aspirations and priorities for environmental improvements

- Consult residents and patch officers to agree their identification of community boundaries for a local environmental standard.

- Identify any existing area environmental surveys or plans through cross department working.

- Engage with relevant partnerships and wider planning for environmental improvement and area regeneration.

- Understand the area – increase community understanding of function and constraints of the area, work with the planning department and community together to develop a vision.

- Prepare the brief for environmental work, incorporating aspirations and goals of the area and involve the community in its design.

- Include identifying environmental standard priorities in the briefs for the Independent Tenant Advisor and for the House (& Community) Condition Survey.

- Link with existing community organisations and stakeholders to obtain their views and engage them in the process.

- Offer opportunities for representatives from different communities to visit other examples of successful environmental improvements or to have visits from residents of successful areas.

- Undertake any additional survey and consultation work needed beyond any existing environmental surveys or plans, specific to each identified community area.

- Develop a 'local environmental standard for WHQS' on an area basis reflecting the specific concerns and priorities of that community.

2. Cost the priority environmental improvements into the Business Plan for a realistic budget

- Develop sampling methods (types of problems etc) to produce indicative costings that can be used across various communities.

- Involve residents and community organisations in prioritising environmental improvements, and in reviewing costings for inclusion in the Business Plan.

- Include long term maintenance costs in the budget based on a range of delivery mechanisms from volunteers through to large scale contractors.

- Establish a small grant scheme within the business plan costs for environmental improvements with devolved responsibility to local residents' group or a joint residents/ officers group for allocation of funds.

- Identify sources of funding for lower priority schemes and/or elements that require longer term provision eg use of land disposal to fund improvements (increases flexibility in terms of budgeting and helps to clarify elements that are in initial business plan and how longer term projects can be funded).

3. Use the process of planning for the environmental standard to increase resident and community participation, and to channel advice, support and training

- Use a range of interesting methods to engage residents, and to include all sectors of residents, not just public meetings and surveys eg planning for real, study visits.

- Develop area based environmental standard working groups (or link to the environmental sub-group in the case of Communities First areas) to inform and to contribute to the design of environmental improvements and to act as a conduit through which communities can feed into overall plans.

- Ensure in particular that disabled people are included early in planning and in reviewing and commenting on plans to inform accessibility.

- Work with and support community organisations to play a role in design and consultation processes. There are community based toolkits available to help demystify technical jargon.

- Consider how community associations could be contracted to carry out elements of consultation work within a long-term consultation budget.

- Identify interest and opportunities for community enterprises to deliver elements of environmental improvement work or maintenance, and mobilise support and training.

- Support and involve residents to project plan the implementation stage. This is often a difficult period for community residents who become frustrated during the compliance and statutory stages of planning if they are not aware of the timescales and processes.

4. Implement with community involvement to build sustainability

- Involve residents and area environmental working groups in deciding specifications for work and appointing contractors with support from technical officers.

- Support local groups with responsibility for the small grant scheme to establish open and transparent systems to identify projects, allocate funds and monitor delivery.

- Involve schools and young people to identify elements of environmental improvements relevant to them.

- Identify projects suitable for volunteers to contribute to implementation
  – including schools, youth clubs, community associations etc.

- Consider how community associations could be contracted to carry out elements of implementation work, including through local community group clauses to commercial contracts.

- Identify partnership funding for works outside the landlord's remit in collaboration with wider Partnerships and community planning structures.

Monitor and Review

- Report back progress to residents through newsletters, community meetings etc.

- Provide mechanisms for residents and community groups to report problems or complaints and build monitoring and evaluation into the remit of area based groups.

- Report regularly to area environmental working groups on detailed progress, problems, complaints and how they have been dealt with.

- Review area environmental plans periodically, linked to wider partnership plans as appropriate.
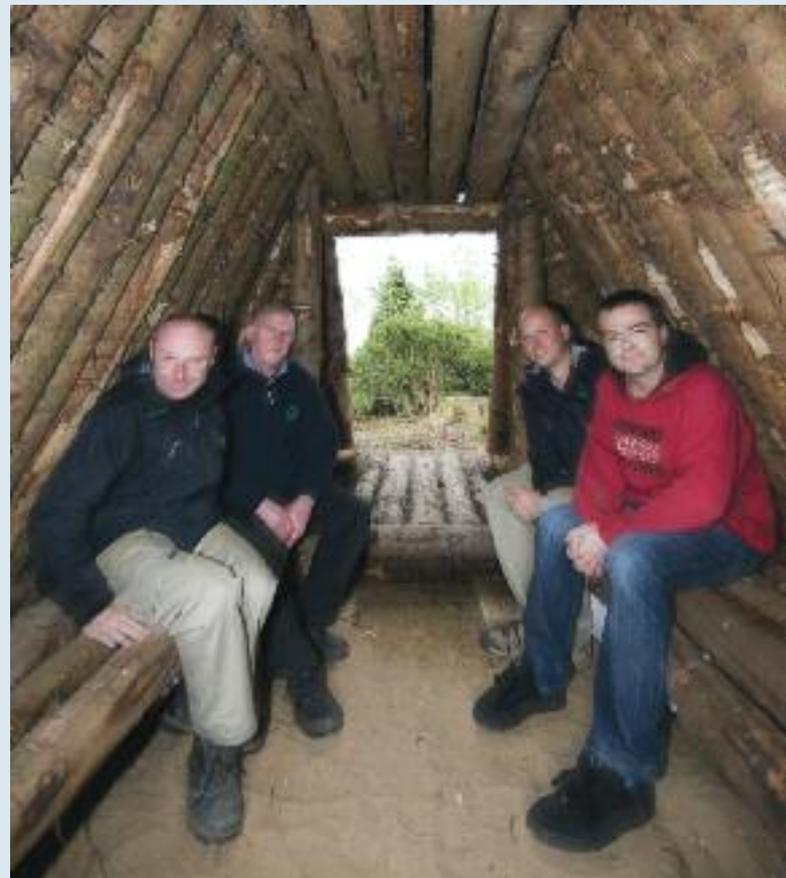
4. The Elements of Environmental Improvements

The range of considerations in possible environmental improvement is very wide and the following list illustrates the elements found in the projects reviewed by the research. The list is not comprehensive but equally not all elements are likely to be included in any one community's plan for environmental improvement. This list should be read alongside the list of 'general environment' improvements in existing WHQS guidance which includes more technical elements about lighting, utilities, parking and property boundaries.

- **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.

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Wates Group

Part of the family owned Wates Group, Wates Living Space is one of the UK's leading affordable housing construction services companies. Working with RSLs, Local Authorities and ALMOs, we build or refurbish more than 20,000 homes each year through our locally based teams.

While creating high quality homes is our core activity our work is very much community based, aimed at creating sustainable communities rather than just decent homes, and improving the supply and quality of affordable housing:

- 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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