

Housing Quality Indicators

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Introduction

Provision of housing funded with public money has always been the subject of careful scrutiny. In recent years, the main measures of effective provision have been price, and the achievement of suitable standards. Statutory regulations and, in the case of housing funded through the Housing Corporation, Scheme Development Standards, have been the instruments used to measure the suitability of the housing produced.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) and the Housing Corporation wished to bring measures of quality into the assessment procedure, in order to ensure that public funding achieved the best value for money. This was in parallel with initiatives by the National Housing Federation, which were preparing guidelines on quality.

On behalf of the Department and the Corporation, DEGW undertook a feasibility study into Housing Quality Indicators (HQI) between February and July 1996. DEGW were commissioned to proceed with the next stage of the project, between October 1996 and August 1998: the development of a workable set of indicators. The HQI was to be tailored to the Housing Corporation's requirements but suitable for more widespread use in the general evaluation of housing quality. During this phase, the HQI system was piloted among a number of Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), and revised to take account of the piloting process.

The Housing Corporation has now recommended the use of the HQI by RSLs in their Scheme Development Standards. In the longer term, the aim is to develop the HQI system as a flexible measurement tool of housing quality used by consumers and developers alike for new and existing stock in both the public and private sectors. To achieve this, the Department is now working with DEGW on a series of live trials that will test the HQIs in a full range of conditions.

The Aim of the HQI System

The Housing Quality Indicator (HQI) system is a measurement and assessment tool designed to allow potential or existing housing schemes to be evaluated on the basis of quality rather than simply of cost. The quality rating derived by using the system does not provide a direct correlation with financial value, nor does it not set out minimum standards.

RSLs and other developers can use the HQI system to improve the quality of their housing schemes. One of its key applications is to allow RSLs and other funding bodies to evaluate different schemes against a fixed brief. In addition, as part of the process of completing the HQI assessment, potential developers and their architects should also be able to make design decisions that result in higher quality housing with minimal cost implications. RSLs and developers should be able to monitor their success in achieving good HQI quality scores, and learn from their successes and mistakes. The structure and application of the HQI system has been formulated with these uses in mind.

The HQI allows an assessment of quality of key features of a housing project in three main categories:

- location;
- design;
- performance.

These three categories produce the ten "Quality Indicators" that make up the Housing Quality Indicator system.

Guiding Principles

The guiding principles determined the final structure and content of the HQI system.

Application

- Indicators should be usable to assess a wide range of housing including: general purpose social housing; private housing; new build and refurbished properties.
- Indicators should be relevant at different stages in the process of developing a housing scheme, including: feasibility stage; design development stage; as part of the audit process after construction.

Ease of Use

- The HQI should not take a long time to complete in a detailed way and should be easily understood.

Structure of System and Indicators

- The system should stand alone but be consistent with existing methods of measuring quality (if appropriate). In particular, the HQI system should, wherever possible, be compatible with the National Housing Federation's Standards and quality in development: A good practice guide document.
- The system should consist of a number of Indicators - each Indicator consisting of a number of topics covering the most important aspects of quality relevant to that indicator.
- Indicators within the HQI should be weighted according to Housing Corporation priorities (as far as RSLs projects are concerned). However, the system should also allow the use of alternate sets of weightings to be input by the users.

Output Information

- The scoring should maintain the concept of a range of quality rather than a single minimum standard in each aspect of quality; "points on a quality continuum" rather than rigid minimum standards.
- The indicators should give a "score" for quality that will present the outcome as a single number. However, the emphasis should be on "quality profiles" which clearly show the strengths and weaknesses of a housing scheme.

HQI Development Process

The feasibility study for the development of the HQI is described fully in the report The development of housing quality indicators: a feasibility study published by HMSO in the UK.

The research team developed the HQI system through a large number of iterations. As the project progressed, comments were sought at each stage from the steering group, a number of RSLs, and many other housing professionals. On two separate occasions, ten RSLs piloted the draft HQI leading to subsequent revisions.

A key issue addressed during the development process was the inclusion of issues relating to site and aesthetics. There were concerns that these issues were too subjective to be readily susceptible to a quality assessment that could be comparable across schemes and different assessors. Despite this undoubted problem of subjectivity, the RSLs taking part were keen to see these aspects included.

Throughout the development process, the choice of Indicators and issues to be included with the HQI system was the subject of much discussion. The final choice of Indicators reflects a compromise between the importance of the issue to quality, practicality of use and the information available. The number of Indicators is also a reflection of this compromise.

How the System Works

The HQI system consists of two parts: the HQI form and a scoring spreadsheet. Initially at least it is envisioned that the RSL or developer should complete the HQI assessment. In the longer term assessments may be completed by registered assessors who have completed training courses on the use of the HQI system.

To use the HQI system information is required on the location, site and the individual units that make up the scheme.

HQI Form

The HQI form is a paper booklet containing information on the project and the ten indicators. The first page of the HQI form contains the project description. This records descriptive and locational information about the scheme being assessed.

The main body of the HQI form contains information on the ten indicators that measure quality. Each indicator contains a series of questions that are completed by the developer or client. The ten indicators are:

1. Location
2. Site - visual impact, layout and landscaping
3. Site - openspace
4. Site - routes and movement
5. Unit - size
6. Unit - layout
7. Unit - noise, light and services
8. Unit - accessibility
9. Unit - energy, green and sustainability issues
10. Performance in use

Scoring Spreadsheet

The second part of the HQI system is a scoring spreadsheet. The information from the HQI form is transferred to this spreadsheet. The spreadsheet, with its computer-based score calculation, turns the answers to the HQI form into a standardised score. This score is expressed as a series of scores showing how well the scheme performed on each indicator as well as an aggregated score.

The most current version of the scoring spreadsheet is available on the DETR website (www.detr.gov.uk). For those without access to the Internet, a diskette with the spreadsheet is available from the DETR. The spreadsheet runs on a PC or Macintosh computer in Microsoft Excel version 5 or higher.

Each indicator receives one tenth of the total possible score, as they can all be viewed as equally, though differently, important in creating quality. Failure to meet suitable levels of, say, security or noise control may render a house so uninhabitable that other factors cannot compensate. However, this does not imply that these indicators should be more heavily weighted than other factors, merely that failure to meet a certain level is unacceptable for these indicators.

HQI users have the option to change the weightings applied to each indicator. This can take account of any special priorities determined by the RSL or developer. These alternative scores are generated separately from, and in addition to, the standard weightings.

Identical overall ratings may be achieved by projects with very different characters and qualities. The difference will be apparent as the scores are represented numerically and graphically, illustrating the strengths and weaknesses of a project, and how the overall score is made up.

Application of the HQI Method

New Building Bids

At the early stages of a project, detailed information about the design of new houses or flats and their setting are generally not known. For a developer, use of the HQI at feasibility stage will imply a commitment that the detailed design will provide a particular quality score when it is fully developed.

Refurbishment Schemes

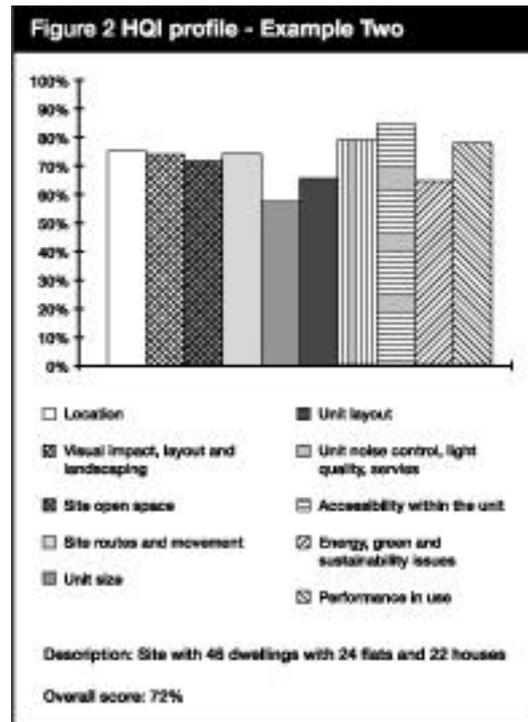
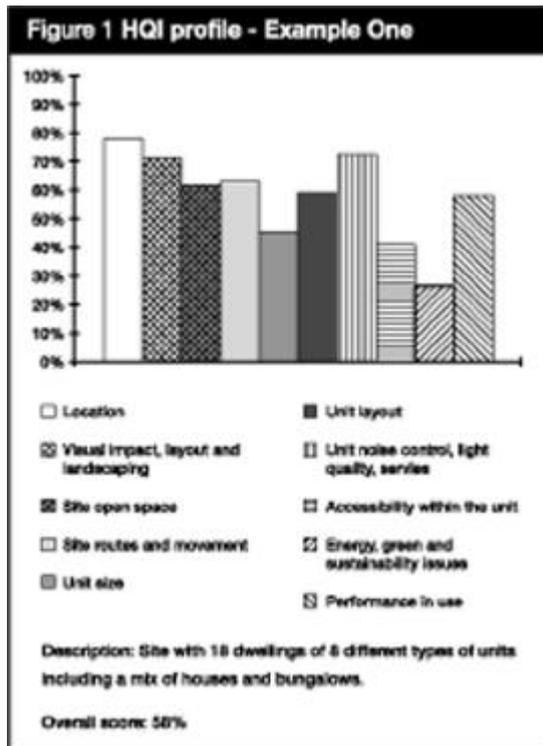
In principle, the qualities that are considered to be "good" will be the same in refurbished and new housing. However, as the former were built under different regulations and guidance they may be unable to meet all the higher levels of quality on certain indicators. This does not imply that a different set of indicators are needed for refurbished housing, but merely that typical quality scores may be lower than new housing.

Mixed Unit Schemes, Standard House Types, Single Unit and Small Schemes

The HQI can be applied to schemes containing a mixture of different units. It can also be applied to standard house types, single unit schemes and small schemes. Special instructions for the scoring of the indicators for such circumstances are included in the HQI document.

A Worked Example: Interpreting the Results

The two examples shown below clearly illustrate the importance of working with the HQI profile rather than the single overall HQI score. Both examples differ in their composition and in the resultant HQI scores. The profiles (bar-charts) also indicate very clearly the aspects of a scheme that need to be brought to a higher standard and those that reach minimum or higher standards.



Analysis of HQI quality profiles

	Example one	Example two
Location	Many good features, some poor	Many good features, none poor
Site - layout and landscaping	A few missing qualities in all areas	A few missing qualities in all areas
Site - open space	Some opportunities missed	Flats without private open space
Site - routes and movement	Some opportunities missed	Some opportunities missed
Unit - size	Basic size only	A little above basic size
Unit - layout	A few "plus" features for most units	Includes most "plus" features for most units
Unit - noise, light and services	A few missed opportunities	Many good features
Unit - accessibility	Not particularly good	Most units very good
Unit - energy and sustainability	SAP rating OK, BREEAM omitted	SAP rating OK, basic BREEAM is OK.
Performance in use	Adaptability not very good	Houses more adaptable than flats
Overall HQI score	58%	72%

The tabular analysis above shows the reasons for the outcomes in each indicator. The differences that emerge are in some cases easy to rectify, such as enabling the flats to be more adaptable in Example Two. It is likely that for new build schemes a score of well over 50% will be achievable with little difficulty but RSLs will be in a position to choose which aspects they enhance to do so.

Next Steps

Although initially developed for use by RSLs, those involved with this work recognised that it had wider potential, and the DETR intends to continue testing and developing the system. During the next six months carry out live trials of the HQI system will be carried out involving new and existing stock in both the public and private sectors. There will be a particular emphasis on correlating the HQI scoring system with actual consumer experience of housing quality in a range of traditional and innovative development schemes. The opportunities for developing other versions of the HQI system for use in other countries or regions, based on the UK methodology, will also be explored.

References

National Housing Federation (1998) Standards and quality in development: A good practice guide, National Housing Federation, London, ISBN 086297 354 6

DETR (1997), Housing Quality Indicators: A feasibility study, DETR, London, ISBN 1 85112 028 9

The HQI document can be obtained from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Publications Sales Centre. Unit 21, Goldthorpe Industrial Estate, Goldthorpe, Rotherham S63 9BL
Tel: 01709 891318 Fax: 01709 881673
ISBN 1 851121 54 4, price £18.00

Copies of the HQI scoring diskette can be obtained from the DETR Housing Support Unit 21A4 Eland House Bressenden Place London SW1E 5DU. Fax: 0171 890 3529 e-mail: rae.detr@gtnet.gov.uk. Please mark enquiry HSU/HQI Diskette.

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