

Housing association builds on recycling success

For a housing association that already recycles almost all of its waste, there is little room for improvement, so Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association turned its attentions to encouraging tenants to re-use and recycle.

Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association (MTHA) already recycles almost 100 per cent of its waste but wanted help to encourage tenants to actively recycle. WRAP undertook a Resource Optimisation Review which identified a range of actions to improve the environmental impact of residents and also highlighted the potential benefits of furniture leasing.

The association, based in the Valleys, south Wales, is a housing provider which owns 1,200 properties and builds around 10 houses each year. The next development of homes will be built to Code Four in terms of the Code for Sustainable Homes.

Policy, Performance and Communications Officer Suzanne Jones said the driver for taking up the WRAP support was largely to look for fresh ideas and inspiration on how to increase tenant recycling. She said: "We were looking at refreshing the Green Dragon Award Environmental Standard so thought it would be useful to have some advice and steer on how to improve our carbon footprint and what we could do to reduce, re-use and recycle.

"It wasn't principally about cost saving, and we were fairly sure that we were going in the right direction in terms of recycling and using energy in the office, but we wanted to see if we could make any improvements in our Yew Street stores, and how we could encourage tenants to get more involved."

The association operates in an area of high social deprivation and has seen a greater

turnaround of tenants in properties than usual since the introduction of changes to housing benefit support in the rented sector. Commonly referred to as the 'Bedroom Tax', the changes cut the amount of housing benefit available to tenants if they are considered to have a spare bedroom.

Between the head office site and Yew Street stores, where waste from site maintenance including mowing and gardening and office furniture due for repair are stored, the review quickly discovered that the company generates very little waste. Almost 100 per cent is recycled and energy use was also very low. The priority then was to focus on changing tenant behaviour.

Tenant recycling

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council offers alternate weekly recycling, with weekly collections of food waste and dry recycling, and fortnightly collection of residual waste.



MTHA's site is relatively small, which means focusing on tenant behaviour gives greater opportunity for improvement



All office waste is sorted for recycling

At 42 per cent, the borough's recycling rate is the second lowest in Wales and it was felt that housing association residents were notionally achieving a maximum of just 30 per cent.

Jones said that changing behaviour to encourage better performance was desirable for a number of reasons.

"Obviously we have targets that the local authority has to meet in terms of recycling, but I think the environmental impact and the impact on generations to come is something that we really feel we should be promoting."

Suzanne Jones,
Policy, Performance and Communications,
Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association

According to the review, shifting performance from 30 to 50 per cent would be easily achievable through a joint housing association and local authority campaign focusing on garden waste, paper, kitchen waste, glass, plastics and metals. Over the entire MTHA estate, a 20 per cent uplift would equate to 366 tonnes of waste recycled, and 261 tonnes of CO₂e saved each year.

The housing association has already started to raise awareness through its tenant newsletter. Jones said: "We have a dedicated green page every quarter in the tenant newsletter. There is usually something about recycling, supporting the local authority and encouraging people to use the bins correctly." To take things a step further, the report suggested developing an education programme in partnership with the local authority, possibly supported by WRAP Cymru.

Leasing of household items

In addition to improved recycling, one of the key ways for tenant behaviour to impact on the environment is through energy use. With this in mind, the review explored the potential for a leasing model for furniture and white goods.

Currently, the houses are let unfurnished and uncarpeted. The housing association does, however, provide kitchen units, which are expected to last 15 years before being replaced.

In environmental terms, leasing offers a range of benefits over outright purchase. In general, leased furniture and white goods may last considerably longer, since the goods provided will be of better quality. Similarly, since the cost is spread over a longer period, tenants will be able to own a better quality product at a lower price. Generally, the more expensive machine is also likely to have lower running costs in terms of energy and water requirements.

The result is that environmental impact will be reduced in two ways. First, since better quality products tend to last longer, the embodied environmental impact per unit of use is reduced. Second, they have lower in-use impacts, which means that the cost of ownership will subsequently be less. The differential in water use between a £200 and £440 machine can be as great as 10 litres per cycle which, over time, represents a significant water and cost saving.

Using carbon data produced by the Furniture Re-use Network, WRAP has produced guidance on the relative benefits and suitability of individual household items for leasing. A washing machine, for example, could be leased three times, with a CO₂e saving of 160.33kg per lease. A mattress, however, would only be suitable for leasing once. Items such as cabinets, mirrors, cupboards and bedroom chairs have a very low carbon impact but could be re-used up to four times by new tenants. With a leasing model in place, 2,996 tonnes of CO₂e could be avoided per household.

Jones said that while budget restraints and staff availability currently meant the option of leasing was unviable, Merthyr Tydfil did its best to signpost reduced cost and recycled furniture to tenants. She added: "We are

also working with Save the Children, which provides grants for white goods for families who have children under three. So they can get a grant to purchase low energy white goods such as A* washing machine or tumble drier that they wouldn't have been able to afford before; we have helped around 70 families to do that.

"In the long term, that would hopefully have a knock on effect on the energy they use at home. And in terms of the housing association, it can lead to tenants taking better care of their properties if they have better furniture and white goods and we have helped them to access those."

On resource efficiency at a wider level, Jones concluded: "We feel we're contributing to the wider aims of the local authorities on the waste hierarchy, and it's important to be part of that. The cost for us is a consideration, but it is not the be all and end all, whereas perhaps for our tenants, cost is the major one."

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