

The cost of unhealthy housing to the NHS

House of Commons debate

26 February 2019



Key messages

- Poor quality housing can have a detrimental impact on both physical and mental health and wellbeing. It can be the cause of many preventable diseases and injuries, including serious respiratory diseases such as asthma and bronchitis.
- Councils understand how the quality of housing affects the health and wellbeing of their residents. The NHS spends at least £2.5 billion a year treating people with illnesses directly linked to living in cold, damp and dangerous conditions.ⁱ
- Our ageing population means that older people make up a growing part of our housing market. But there is a chronic under-supply of desirable, affordable “age-friendly” homes. These are homes with sufficient space, and the ability for life-changing adaptations to be made.
- Many households either do not want to own their home, or cannot afford to. However, there is a shortage of good quality, affordable rented accommodation. This often forces people to live in ill-suited houses in the private rented sector.
- Councils have a key role to play in building good quality social homes, and in enforcing strong standards. In addition, local authorities must be empowered to provide access to the right infrastructure, through the planning system, to allow people to live healthy lives.
- We welcome recent measures to improve housing standards, including through legislation and enhanced fines for bad landlords. It is also vital that councils are given the financial powers to provide much-needed social housing, including the ability to replace all homes sold under Right to Buy.
- Councils are providing temporary housing for over 82,000 homeless households, including over 123,000 children.ⁱⁱ The cost of homelessness experienced by single people to the NHS and social care is high, and a range of indicators demonstrate that homeless people suffer worse health than others.
- Local services face an overall funding gap of £3.1 billion in 2019/20, which we estimate will rise to £8 billion by 2024/25. It is vital that the Government uses the 2019 Spending Review to deliver truly sustainable funding for local government.ⁱⁱⁱ

Briefing

For more information, please contact:
Thomas Leighton, Public Affairs and Campaigns Adviser
Thomas.Leighton@local.gov.uk / 0207 664 3094

Further information

The health and care costs of poor housing

The personal, economic and social costs to inadequate housing are substantial. This is why councils, and our partners in the health and care sector know how vital it is to improve unsafe existing homes, and to build good, safe and appropriate new homes to meet residents' needs. The high cost of poor housing is demonstrated by the following:

- The NHS spends at least £2.5 billion a year treating people with illnesses directly linked to living in cold, damp and dangerous homes.
- Treating children and young people injured by accidents in the home costs A&E departments across the United Kingdom around £146 million a year.
- Among the over 65s, falls and fractures account for 4 million hospital bed days each year in England, costing £2 billion.
- Over 25,000 people die each year in the UK as a result of living in cold temperatures much of this is due to living in poorly heated homes.^{iv}

Councils understand how the quality of housing affects the health and wellbeing of their residents. Since public health made the formal transfer to local government in April 2013, great strides have been made to tackle the wider social and economic determinants of poor health.

Housing and older people

The number of people aged over 65 is forecast to rise over the next decade, from the current 11.7 million people, to 14.3 million by 2025, a 22 per cent rise. This means that one in five of the total population will be over 65 in 10 years' time, which will become one in four by 2050.

Between 2008 and 2039, 74 per cent of projected household growth will be made up of households with someone aged 65 or older. In the UK, the vast majority of over 65s currently live in the mainstream housing market. Only 0.6 per cent of over 65s live in housing with care, which is 10 times less than in more mature retirement housing markets such as the USA and Australia.

Housing is a key component of health and care, and is the foundation upon which people can achieve a positive quality of life. The impact of poor housing on health is similar to that of smoking or alcohol and costs the NHS at least £1.4 billion a year, as well as creating housing worries that ends in homelessness for too many families. We are calling for a renewed national and local effort to build more homes for older people that is:

- intelligence led, including working with older people to understand demand
- enabled by a local planning framework, set within clear national policy
- collectively led by local housing and health partners
- integrating housing with health and care strategies and services
- successfully adapting existing housing and providing older people that want to 'rightsize' the means to do so

Councils want to see a desperately-needed residential revolution in older people's housing. The Government published its social housing green paper in August 2018, setting out its proposals to reform the relationship between tenants and

landlords. We welcome the green paper, and the positive intent it signals towards delivering more affordable housing, which would benefit older people in the social housing sector.

As part of the green paper, the Government announced a review of the Decent Homes Standard. Significant progress has been made in bringing council owned housing up to the Decent Homes standard, and the Government can help support further improvement by providing the freedoms and flexibilities that will allow councils to invest in their housing stock over the longer term.

Housing standards

The private rented sector has more than doubled in size since 2002, with more young people, families and lone parent families renting privately than before. In 2016/2017, there were 4.7 million households in the private rented sector, accounting for 20 per cent of households in England. By comparison, the social rented sector accounted for 3.9 million, or 17 per cent of households.^v

Local authority environmental health departments are responsible for enforcing against bad landlords and poor housing. The funding which councils receive for housing standards enforcement is currently inadequate. The rapid growth in the private rented sector has not been matched by resources for environmental health and trading standards teams.

It is vital that the Government provides additional funding for environmental health services. The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) has warned that the variation in housing enforcement across councils can be attributed partly to the 'squeeze' on overall budgets and resources for local government.^{vi} In a 2015 survey carried out by CIEH, almost half of the respondents said resources for environmental health teams were just about adequate to provide a basic statutory service. Reductions to environmental health budgets were estimated at roughly 30 per cent, between 2013/14 and 2015/16.^{vii}

Local housing and regulatory services have been under severe pressure for some time. While measures such as the introduction of civil penalties are welcome, this still leaves councils to meet the upfront cost of proactive work. Informal action can resolve an issue quickly but this will not result in a penalty, and is therefore very costly for councils.

Providing a stable financial platform for social housing will support councils to make long term-investment into improving housing standards.

Social housing supply

According to Government statistics, new housing completions in 2017/18 reached 163,250 - a 16 per cent increase from the previous year.^{viii} This is positive news. However, councils are responsible for a small proportion of the total completed. The figures show that whilst private developers built 134,110 and housing associations 27,410 only 1,730 houses were completed by local authorities.

The lifting of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) borrowing cap was a welcome and necessary step, which councils and the LGA had long called for. The Government has estimated this will lead up to 9,000 new homes a year. This is a significant contribution to the estimated 100,000 social homes a year needed. Councils will need to build the capacity in their housing teams, and we will be working to ensure the sector is well equipped to build houses at scale.

Councils want to encourage home ownership, without a corresponding decline in

the number of social rented homes. It is therefore essential that the Government enables councils to keep 100 per cent of receipts from RtB sales to invest in new housing. Currently councils are only able to retain a third of receipts from the sale of homes, meaning only a small number can be replaced. Right to Buy sales have quadrupled in the last five years, during which time local authorities have lost enough homes to house the population of Oxford.^{ix} This loss of social rented housing risks pushing more families into the private rented sector, driving up housing benefit spending, and exacerbating our homelessness crisis.^x

Homelessness

It is a tragedy when a household becomes homeless. Homelessness often results from a combination of events such as relationship breakdown, debt, adverse experiences in childhood and through ill health. Homelessness and ill health are intrinsically linked and professionals in both sectors have a role to play in tackling the issues together. The health of people experiencing homelessness is significantly worse than that of the general population, and the cost of homelessness experienced by single people to the NHS and social care is considerable.^{xi}

A recent audit found that 41 per cent of homeless people reported a long term physical health problem and 45 per cent had a diagnosed mental health problem, compared with 28 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively, in the general population. The last conservative estimate (2010) of the healthcare cost associated with this population was £86 million per year.^{xii}

Homelessness is complex and often reflects other vulnerabilities or circumstances related to health, justice or social services. Successful homelessness strategies require all public services to contribute in a way that recognises the personal needs, strengths and assets of every household. Councils are doing everything they can to prevent and solve homelessness, working closely with partners to place people into secure, appropriate accommodation.

The rising number of people across the country needing support to prevent or resolve homelessness is putting a severe strain on council homelessness budgets. Our latest analysis demonstrates that homelessness support (including temporary accommodation) faces a funding gap of £110 million in 2019/20, and £421 million in 2024/25. There are officially 82,310 homeless households, in need of temporary accommodation and other forms of support from local authorities. This number includes over 123,000 children, which represents the highest number of children without a permanent home since 2007.^{xiii}

Further resources

Since the transfer of public health to local government in 2013, councils have made good progress in implementing approaches to housing and planning which chime with public health outcomes. Our [Healthy Homes, Healthy Lives](#) report contains numerous case studies of this successful work in local areas.

For a detailed look at how housing affects health and wellbeing in England, read our latest [research report](#), which is published on our LG Inform service. LG Inform allows you to access, compare and analyse data across a range of council service areas.

Visit [LG Inform Plus](#) for an in-depth view of housing, health and wellbeing at ward level.

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- ii https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/764357/TA_Tables.xlsx
- iii <https://www.local.gov.uk/spending-review-2019>
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- v MHCLG, English Housing Survey, 2016/17 (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/675942/2016-17_EHS_Headline_Report.pdf)
- vi Chartered Institute of Environmental Health Parliamentary Briefing, Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill, December 2017 (<https://www.cieh.org/media/1167/homes-bill-fitness-for-human-habitation-and-liability-for-housing-standards.pdf>)
- vii Chartered institute of Environmental Health, environmental health workforce survey 2014/15, July 2015 (https://www.cieh.org/media/1262/environmental-health-workforce-survey-2014_15.pdf)
- viii MHCLG, House building; new build dwellings, England: December Quarter 2017
- ix <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-responds-latest-government-right-buy-sales-stats>
- x LGA media release, March 2018 (<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-responds-new-planning-laws-councils>)
- x LGA media release, March 2018 (<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/barn-conversion-developments-heap-more-pressure-rural-schools-roads-and-affordability>)
- xi https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/22.7%20HEALTH%20AND%20HOMELESSNESS_v08_WEB_0.PDF
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