

Health and Housing

What is the relationship between health and housing?

There is a relationship between people's health and the condition and quality of the accommodation they live in. Intervening in housing can provide real health benefits.

Why is this important?

The government says that:

"Poor condition housing can impact on the health of its occupants and concentrations of such housing can undermine the sustainability of the communities in which they are located. The Government believes that everyone should have the opportunity of a decent home".¹

In 2006, the government introduced a tool for assessing the severity of hazards and risks to health (the Housing Health and Safety Rating System or HHSRS), which contributes to the Decent Homes Standard. This identifies 29 hazards or threats to health that can exist in housing, including: excessively cold temperatures, damp and mould growth, falls in and around the home, fire and electrical hazards. Of these, the most common are damp and mould, cold, overcrowding, fear of crime, physical and mental harm resulting from a domestic break-in, falls on floors, paths, door thresholds and stairs, and fire.²

Cold homes are responsible for approximately 25,000 deaths in the UK each year. Excess winter deaths are significantly worse in the UK than in, say, Scandinavia and Russia. For older people, cold in winter is associated with an increase in respiratory symptoms and arthritic problems.

Overall, it has been estimated that poor housing in England is costing the National Health Service in excess of £600 million a year.³



What is the picture in Bristol?

The map on the next page shows where the major hazards and risks to health as a result of housing conditions are found in Bristol (based on the HHSRS described above). These are strongly linked to deprivation. It has been estimated that savings to the health service would outweigh the cost of improving housing to address hazards, in terms of saved medical diagnosis, treatment and care.

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What are we doing about it?

Bristol's draft Housing Strategy has as one of its priorities: "Healthy Home, Healthy You." This looks at improving health through quality housing and providing good quality homes with high-energy efficiency, safety minimum standards and effective management upkeep.

One example of how this is being delivered is a rolling programme of Home Action Zones (HAZ), which target some of the most deprived parts of the city. The HAZ focus on areas where housing could be contributing to putting the occupiers' health at risk. Homeowners are offered assistance with improvements such as central heating, insulation and removing serious risks of trips and falls.

This includes financial assistance such as low cost loans and **grants**. Where the service is able, it signposts people to other services. So far, in excess of 300 households have benefited from a range of services. An example of the work HAZ carries out is below.

Survey results from residents in Windmill Hill show that:

- 36% of respondents who received a low interest loan or grant to make their home decent felt warmer in their home and more comfortable. 50% felt that the health of the household had improved.
- Of those households receiving free home security work, 58% feared property crime and burglary less. 6% said their health had improved.
- 17% of households who just had small-scale "handyperson" work carried out felt less at risk of a fall in or around their home.

In 2005/06 there were 183 excess winter deaths in Bristol (93% being over the age of 65). Whilst this has now reduced to around 165, improving the insulation and heating in homes could avoid further deaths. Action includes:



- Bristol City Council uses its regulatory powers under the Housing Act 2004 to tackle the issue through taking action against the owners of privately rented homes where there is an unacceptably high risk of the Excess Cold hazard.⁴
- An extensive package of grant and loan assistance based upon the Decent Home Standard generally, energy efficiency particularly, and targeted area action in areas with high levels of non-decent homes and deprivation.⁵
- Private sector landlords wanting accreditation of their properties will receive free loft insulation, draught-proofing etc as part of joining the scheme.
- An Affordable Warmth Strategy and action plan has been prepared.
- As a housing provider, Bristol has a Decent Home Standard plan and development plans for pre-reinforced concrete homes and pre-fabs which are particularly hard to heat.⁶



What is our current performance in this area?

- As of April 2009, 93% of the Council's owned housing stock met the Decent Home Standard against the government target of 100% by 2010.
- A house condition survey of the private housing stock carried out in 2007/08 identified that 77% of vulnerable households were living in decent homes (against a government target, now dropped, of 70% by 2010).
- Energy efficiency has steadily increased in both the Council's own stock and in the private housing stock, thus improving living conditions and reducing the threat to health through cold.
- The government has set a target in relation to tackling fuel poverty (households who have to spend more than 10% of their income on fuel). A recent local survey (February 2009) found that 8.3% of households on means-tested benefits live in homes in particular danger of fuel poverty. A further 39.3% of households live in homes where more could be done. These findings have formed the basis of targets for the next 4 years within the Council's Affordable Warmth Strategy and Action Plan.

References

¹ Extract from Communities and Local Government website, available at:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing/rentingandletting/privatesectorrenewal/>

² CIEH (2008) Good Housing Leads To Good Health: A toolkit for environmental health practitioners, Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, London, available at:

http://www.cieh.org/policy/Good_Housing_Leads_to_Good_Health.html

³ Davidson M, Roys M, Nicol S, Ormandy D, and Ambrose P (2009) The Real Cost of Poor Housing. IHS BRE Press, Bracknell

⁴ Please see Private Housing Enforcement Policy, available at:

<http://www.bristol.gov.uk/ccm/content/Housing/Private-Housing/enforcement-policy.en>

⁵ For further information, please go to:

<http://www.bristol.gov.uk/ccm/content/Housing/Private-Housing/grants-and-loans-for-private-housing.en>

⁶ For further information, please go to:

<http://www.bristol.gov.uk/ccm/navigation/housing/council-housing/council-housing---decent-homes>

To contact Bristol City Council Private Housing, email: private.housing@bristol.gov.uk.



This fact sheet was produced by Bristol Public Health in cooperation with:



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