

Housing & Health

reducing health inequalities

The health of people in Britain today is probably better than ever before. However, an overall picture of wealth has masked marked inequalities between different groups of people and between different parts of the country.

Until recently the focus of health policy was on the individual and on the treatment of their symptoms by increasingly sophisticated medical solutions. Of late there has been an increasing recognition that the health of both individuals and communities is affected by a wide range of social, economic and environmental factors.

INITIATIVES UNDERTAKEN INCLUDE

Brokering the involvement of tenants and residents in health promotion and planning so that Health Improvement Programmes better reflect the needs of the local community

Undertaking health impact assessments to demonstrate the health gain of changes in the living environment

Participating in the creation of Healthy Living Networks and Healthy Living Centres

Improving the heating, insulation and air quality in homes to reduce the incidence of respiratory diseases (e.g. asthma) and hence reduce days lost from school and work and drugs budgets

Providing advice and improving access for homeless people to health, care and other support services

Providing expertise to Primary Care Groups in the development of primary care centres and other community health and fitness facilities

Promoting independence for people with a range of mobility problems and reducing accidents in the home by making improvements in design and internal layout

The Government itself accepts that housing has a key role to play in preventing poor health and in helping people whose health is compromised to maintain a decent quality of life. Tessa Jowell MP, the Minister for Public Health, has said “for this government, the health of the individual cannot be separated from the surrounding environment.” The government has also committed itself to placing a new emphasis on reducing inequalities in health and to create a more cohesive society by encouraging the partnerships required to address them.

This implies a shift towards more preventative measures that seek to tackle the root causes of health inequality. The report of the Independent Inquiry into Health Inequalities, commissioned by the government in 1997 from Sir Donald Acheson, traces the roots of ill health to social and environmental factors. Central to these are the living standards of poor households, an area where the report argues that further steps should be taken to secure improvements.

Independent social landlords are well placed to assist in a more preventative approach to health. Through their experience of development, of providing well designed housing, of providing community support services and of forming partnerships they are integral not just to the improvement of health services but the public's health overall.

This factsheet looks at the issues and demonstrates ways that independent social landlords are currently working to improve the health of the communities in which they work. Turn to the back page for more ideas on what can be done.



National
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Reducing Health Inequalities

The Government is committed to improving the health of the worst off in society. Housing associations (or independent social landlords) house many of these people and are key players in any strategy to reduce health inequalities.

In 1997 the Government commissioned Sir Donald Acheson, formerly Chief Medical Officer at the Department of Health, to undertake an inquiry into the issue and his committee's report was published in November 1998.

The Inquiry identified three key areas which offer opportunities, over time, to improve the health of the less well off. These are:

- **all policies likely to have an effect on health should be evaluated in terms of their impact on health inequalities, and should favour those who are less well-off;**
- **a high priority should be given to the health of families with children;**
- **further steps should be taken to reduce income inequalities and improve the living standards of poor households.**

The report recommends the development of:

- **policies which improve the availability of social housing for the less well off, within a framework of environmental improvement, planning and design, which takes into account social networks, and access to goods and services;**
- **policies which improve housing provision and access to health care, for both officially and unofficially homeless people;**
- **policies which aim to improve the quality of housing, specifically:**
 - improving insulation and heating systems in new and existing buildings, in order to further reduce fuel poverty;
 - amending housing and licensing conditions, and housing regulations on space and amenity, to reduce accidents in the home.
- **policies which reduce the fear of crime and violence, and create a safe environment for people to live in;**

- **policies, which will further reduce income inequalities, and improve the living standards of households in receipt of social security benefits.**

HEALTH IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMMES

Health Improvement Programmes are joint local strategies for improving the health and health care of local communities. HImPs are intended to be the key planning documents for improving community health. The Health authority has a duty to work in partnership with other agencies and to involve the local community.

Independent Social Landlords have expertise in partnership working. They can also play a key role in helping to put together and manage multi-agency responses to public health issues.

HEALTH ACTION ZONES

Health Action Zones have been established to develop partnerships that will harness the energy of local communities to reduce health inequalities. Each Zone will span a period of five to ten years in order to encourage a more long term approach to planning.

Independent Social Landlords have expertise in involving local communities in decision making and can encourage proper consideration of wider social and environmental factors.

HEALTHY LIVING CENTRES

Healthy Living Centres are designed to help people of all ages to maximise their health and well-being. Their focus will be on health as a positive attribute that helps people get the most out of life, embracing both physical, mental and spiritual well-being.

SOURCES

Towards a Strategy for Health and Housing, Health & Housing, 1998; Meeting Part M and Designing Lifetime Homes, JRF, 1999; An Independent Inquiry into Health Inequalities, HMSO, 1998; The Real Cost of Poor Housing, RICS, 1997.

IMPROVING EXISTING PROPERTIES

Fighting asthma with insulation and warmth

BACKGROUND

In 1994 Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority transferred £50,000 to each of the six housing authorities in Cornwall to improve the heating and insulation of 114 council houses where tenants had children with moderate to severe asthma.

PROJECT

In most cases an open fire heated a single room and there were signs of damp and mould growth in many unheated bedrooms where children slept. Housing officers calculated an energy rating for the house and identified what needed to be done to provide a warm dry home.

Housing officers interviewed the families in each of the houses before the work was undertaken. They noted the children's symptoms of asthma, days lost from school and visits to the general practitioner and hospital.

RESULTS

After the work had been carried out:

- the energy ratings for each home had increased;
- there was a significant improvement in the respiratory symptoms of the children;
- there was a significant decrease in the number of school days lost.

INCREASING INDEPENDENCE

Lifetime Homes Standards

BACKGROUND

The need for accessible housing is increasing. Roughly one in four households include someone with a disability. The proportion of elderly people in the population is rising.

Lifetime Homes is an idea developed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in conjunction with housing providers. They incorporate 16 design features such as level thresholds, wider doorways, a downstairs toilet, and some strengthening of walls for the later addition of equipment. If all new housing and housing renovation was carried out to Lifetime Homes standards there would be an increase in independence for people with a range of disabilities and savings on major adaptations.

PROJECT

Habinteg Housing Association has developed a scheme in Colindale, north London, of 30 homes of which 23 are designed to Lifetime Homes standards. The remaining seven are built to wheelchair design standards.

RESULTS

Tenants have reported improvements in their quality of life and greater ease in carrying out everyday tasks. There is an improvement in quality of life for people with young children and a reduction in accidents. Such adaptations as become necessary – as a result of frailty, accident or disability – are easily installed and it is easier for disabled people to visit their friends. There is evidence that there is not only a reduced cost in terms of installation but also a reduced need for care and support.



PROMOTING HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES

Providing advice and support

BACKGROUND

There is an increasing recognition of the difficulties faced by people trying to bring up children in temporary or insecure accommodation. Simple tasks such as bathing and cooking are made much more difficult. There are considerable stresses and strains caused by the lack of space. This is doubly so for those who have poor physical and mental health or who have learning difficulties.

PROJECT

PHA Group have worked in partnership with a range of other agencies, in Portsmouth, to set up the EC Roberts Centre. The Centre helps people who are being re-housed in order to reduce the risk of future homelessness or family breakdown. The centre provides a mixture of practical and emotional advice and support such as money advice and parenting skills.

RESULT

The people who use the centre, many of whom live in bed and breakfast and other forms of temporary accommodation, talk of feeling less isolated and anxious with an enhanced ability to cope. Early diagnosis of problems and sign-posting to appropriate services has led to a reduction in stress related illnesses.

COMMUNITY LIVING

Opening doors to the Community

BACKGROUND

After as much as 35 years in an institution, a closure of a psychiatric hospital posed a number of issues to patients and local services alike. The prospects of doors being opened which were thought to be closed had to be handled sensitively. Stonham Housing Association's Durham Mental Health Services took up the challenge and a number of schemes have been developed that enable clients to achieve the highest levels of independence.

PROJECT

A range of services and accommodation is provided with differing levels of support. Clients can move through the accommodation as their needs change. A day-time scheme that operates from different local villages daily, gives users who live in their own homes the vital help and friendship to help them stay there.

In everything, the people who use Stonham's services have a say and are consulted on changes. They are encouraged to use local community services and local people are involved in supporting the scheme.

RESULT

The scheme has helped break down traditional stereotypes of mental illness and helped the clients to make links with the local area and integrate into the community.

study
case
studies

In March 1998, the Government announced its intention to complement its wider public health strategies by establishing a number of Healthy Living Centres in various parts of the country using £300 million from the New Opportunities Fund.

Independent Social Landlords can contribute to a better physical environment and can also deliver appropriate support services which will result in improved health and lower take-up of other services.

PRIMARY CARE GROUPS

Primary Care Groups have been formed to bring together members of the primary care team (such as GP's and nurses) to take an active role in commissioning and look at how primary care can be improved locally. PCGs are defined according to geographical boundaries and cover populations between 50,000 and 200,000 people.

Independent Social Landlords have experience of being partners in the development of primary care centres and have an important contribution to make in achieving more seamless front-line services.



The Next Step

Independent social landlords are natural partners in programmes and initiatives to improve the health of local people and the health services they receive. Investment in housing is an investment in health. In addition to the work already undertaken, more can be done.

- **enhancing the role of housing**

Whether by making community care work, or by improving the physical environment, housing plays a vital role in ensuring healthy communities. Housing providers need to play their full part alongside health providers in ensuring that the role of housing is understood and maximised.

- **seizing new opportunities**

Many independent social landlords are engaged in local regeneration or offer community development services. It is important that in such initiatives, links are made to health issues.

- **building healthy communities**

The homes that independent social landlords build are of high quality. Closer liaison with health providers can result in benefits for all. Advice can be offered to health providers as to the best way to invest in the living environment to improve health and target resources to areas of greatest health inequality.

- **improving the health of communities**

Independent social landlords can help to identify the health needs of their tenants and of the communities in which they work. Their commitment to tenant participation means that they can help health authorities involve residents.

- **working together**

Independent social landlords can help to create partnerships with health organisations and others to ensure that the needs of those who are in poor housing, or who are homeless, are met and that health improvements are delivered.

Health & Housing is a charity that promotes the link between good health and good housing. H&H is currently working with a group of independent landlords to investigate ways in which they improve the health of the communities in which they work.

Independent social landlords are non-profit making bodies who house more than a million people in England. The Federation represents them and is a voice for decent housing for all.



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