



Lockdown.

Rundown.

Breakdown.

**The COVID-19 lockdown and the
impact of poor-quality housing on
occupants in the North of
England**

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The report

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Policy Briefing

October 2020

Overview

This report looks at the impact living in poor-quality accommodation had on Northern households during the pandemic. Amongst many findings we highlight following five main impacts:

1. Existing poor conditions are worsening, leading to longer-periods living in non-decent accommodation.
2. Renters are under-reporting repair issues and concerns out of fear of eviction and rent increases.
3. There is likely to be a backlog of major repairs to deal with over the coming months.
4. There is an increase in energy use, due to more people spending more time at home. These costs are causing increased anxiety to a wider range of households.
5. Households feel financially insecure and renters feel insecure in their tenancies.

The report calls for urgent action this winter and longer-term policy responses to ensure that the condition of and access to existing homes is treated as a priority equal to the importance of the supply of new homes.

Accessible on the Northern Housing Consortium website
<https://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/influencing/lockdown/>



Philip Brown, Dillon Newton, Rachel Armitage and Leanne Monchuk. October 2020.

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Why housing quality matters

- Housing has been **hugely** important during the pandemic
- Those most at risk of experiencing the worst impacts of the pandemic tend to **already have some pre-existing vulnerability**, inequality or precarity
- Poor quality housing has demonstrable **impacts on people's health and wellbeing**



The study



- Document and understand the experience of households living in poor-quality, 'non-decent', accommodation in the North of England
- Primary research undertaken between May-July 2020
- 50 interviews with households and eight with professionals



Worsening of poor-quality housing

- Poor-quality housing getting worse
- Essential repair work postponed
- Overuse of facilities and inclement weather



I've got really bad damp in my house. I've had it since I moved into the property 18 months ago. I've had various attempts at repairs – bodge jobs, basically – by the landlord and his contractors, and I was just getting somewhere with environmental health; when lockdown came in everything was suspended... There's a horrible smell of damp like when you've not dried your shoes out properly and they stink. My house kind of smells like that when I haven't got windows and doors open. It's never – I say it's never bothered me – it's always bothered me, but it's bothered me more and more and more because I work from home, and I'm working in the kitchen, and I'm looking at it every day directly and seeing it there. It's just getting worse. The landlord keeps saying, 'There's nothing I can do. There's nothing I can do.' (PRSBOLT1, female, 36, single)





- Little repair work
- Landlord inaction?
- Social distancing playing a role
- Likelihood of a backlog of repairs

The number of complaints from people coming to us has been significantly down. It does go down in summer months anyway, but this started back in April, and I would say it has been running [below] what it would normally be, so that seems to suggest to me that there is a hidden problem there. Well, people quite naturally are scared of COVID-19, and people are doing their best to try and stop spreading it. I think it is fear on the behalf of tenants that if we go in we might spread it or they might spread it to us, so I do think there is that fear, so there will definitely be hidden problems. (PROFKIRK1, local authority)



Tenant-landlord relations

- Some landlords had been proactive
- Some were unsympathetic most apathetic
- Little engagement – fear of rent reprisals
- Prioritising payment of rent above other costs such as food. People cutting down on meals – rent, heat, eat in that order

...even though it's damp, I have got somewhere, and I think, it's just, I don't know, I just, I'd be scared if I had to find somewhere else because I wouldn't want to have to pay any more. I think £600 is top lot really, even though there's problems, and I'm scared of complaining to her. (PRSMANC5, male, 62, couple)

I think the major thing also that has changed, we decided that we're going to be having only two meals a day, so we have breakfast and dinner, no lunch. (PRSMANC3, female, 33, family)



Coping strategies

- Practical
- Spatial
- Psychological
- Ownership



- Some evidence of overheating
- Mostly, people were just cold
- Watching energy bills increase
- Intensification as we progress towards winter and restrictions tighten once again

I worry about managing this home, but mainly because of costs, the cost of heating it, because of the repairs and everything else that is actually needed in the home... On the hottest day of the year I need to wear a cardigan inside my home because my home gets that cold, you literally come inside from outside on the hottest day of the year and you feel like you're walking into a fridge. So on the coldest day of the year, me and my daughter will literally snuggle under blankets in the middle of the bed. It's the insulation, it's the heating system, because of the floor he... Supposedly, I've got loft insulation, but again, the loft insulation is over 30 years old, so it needs redone again, but the landlord won't go to that expense because he's done it once. The radiators in the rooms, they are – I've been told by a friend who is a heating engineer, I've been told the radiators in the room are not of adequate size to heat the rooms that there are, but even if they were the floorboards literally suck the heat out from underneath the house because there's damp all underneath it. We're really worried about this winter coming because they've fixed the problem in the back room and re-put in five airbricks going along the side of my house. So it's hard to explain, but because I live next door to a seven-storey mill the road – I live on an end terrace, and the road at the side of my house acts like a wind tunnel. So again, if you have a slight breeze somewhere else and it's really windy at the end of my house, and on that same wall now I now have full airbricks going into my home. (PRSMANC14, female, 44, lone parent)



A 1°C temperature decrease during winter months is associated with a:



5% ↑ in respiratory illness, including influenza

3% ↑ in death from respiratory disease



2% ↑ in death from cardiovascular disease in the over 65s

Prolonged³ cold weather can **x2** the risk of death from cardiovascular disease

Azam S, Jones T, Wood S, Bebbington E, Woodfine L and Bellis MA (2019). Improving winter health and well-being and reducing winter pressures. A preventative approach. Public Health Wales, Cardiff.

- Emotionally grinding
- Coughs and illness attributed to damp conditions
- Onset or resurgence of mental ill-health



“Well, it's an added stress that you don't need. Being at home more, I'm conscious that I'm spending money that I don't have. Again, it's that I'll go and check how much I've got in the meter, right it's £9, okay that's £9 of electric, and I've got the kids on Thursday or Friday, so I'll try and push and push and push and push each last minute on those machines until I have a payday, and then I'll top up £30 on both. Then I try and stretch it out further and further and further, whereas before it was stretched, but I knew that I could go to work, use my laptop and charge my phone, or the laptop to use at home. I wasn't using the TV throughout the day. I wasn't using the heating to do clothing as much, or cook as much at home. The kids aren't on the TV or the Xbox when she's round here” (PRSLDS3).



- Poor quality housing was already having an impact on people – this has been exacerbated
- People are more energy vulnerable
- Income insecurity – with increasing costs
- Huge levels of anxiety
- Vulnerable to ill health and homelessness
- Tangible physical improvements and regulation could mitigate much of the risk

