

Commission on Creating Healthy Cities
Call for Evidence – Northern Housing Consortium Submission
August 2021

About

The Northern Housing Consortium (NHC) is a membership organisation based in the North of England. We are the ‘Voice of Housing in the North’ working with local authorities, housing associations and ALMOs. Our members own or manage 9 out of 10 socially rented homes in the North. The NHC’s vision is to use our collective voice to have unrivalled influence in achieving housing policy that works for the North and provide outstanding services that support our members to create great places to live. The NHC brings its members together to share ideas, and to represent their interests to ensure they are heard at a regional and national government level.

The NHC welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Commission on Creating Healthy Cities as we know that good quality, affordable, safe housing is central to healthy communities.

Our evidence therefore focuses on the call for evidence’s questions within Strand 2: *The built environment, design and placemaking (housing, planning, and urban design and regeneration)* with a firm focus on the relationship between health and the quality of existing homes.

Question 2.A - Is there evidence that changes to urban design and housing quality – including energy efficiency, security, affordability – for both new development and neighbourhood regeneration, will lead to healthier cities?

Housing is a key determinant of our health and wellbeing. The World Health Organisation’s checklist for a healthy city begins with “a clean, safe physical environment of high quality (including housing quality)”¹. Good quality housing is fundamental to good physical and mental health and the upgrading of existing homes is vital to achieve healthier cities.

Going into the Covid pandemic, one in three households (32% or 7.6 million) in England had at least one major housing problem relating to overcrowding, affordability or poor-quality housing². In the North of England, there is a higher proportion of older, colder homes with around 1.3 million homes failing to meet the

¹ World Health Organisation (2021), Healthy City Checklist. Available at: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health/urban-health/who-european-healthy-cities-network/what-is-a-healthy-city/healthy-city-checklist>

² Health Foundation (2020), Better housing is crucial for our health and the COVID-19 recovery. Available at: <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/better-housing-is-crucial-for-our-health-and-the-covid-19-recovery>

Decent Homes Standard³. Government policy has focused on delivering new supply but to create healthier cities and towns, we must urgently address poor housing quality in existing homes in urban areas.

A fundamental way to do this is through upgrading the energy efficiency of homes. Improving the energy performance of homes across the North would have a significant impact on general health outcomes by making homes warmer, safer and more comfortable to live in. The Government has a target to bring as many homes as possible up to EPC band C by 2035⁴, with a target of 2030 for households experiencing fuel poverty⁵. Two thirds of the North’s homes are currently below EPC band C. In order to meet the Government’s target, around 270,000 homes in the North will need to be retrofitted every year until 2035⁶. This is equivalent to 700 homes every day and one home every 2 minutes.

Installing energy efficiency measures on a neighbourhood-basis could form part of a crucial process of neighbourhood regeneration across tenures to improve local areas. Social housing has the highest proportion of homes in bands A-C at 53%, compared to 29% of owner-occupied homes and 33% of privately rented homes⁷. These figures show a significant challenge across England, but there is a huge opportunity to use the Government’s EPC C target to initiate housing renewal plans across local areas.

The table below shows that the challenge to meet the Government’s own EPC target is faced by every core city region in England with at least 60% of homes in every region failing to meet EPC C:

City Region	Percentage of Properties with EPC Certificate Rated D-G ⁸
Newcastle	60.6
Leeds	67.3
Manchester	61.2
Liverpool	63.8
Sheffield	64.1
Birmingham	68.3
Nottingham	64.5
Bristol	61.0

³ NHC (2020) Net Zero and New Homes. Available at: <https://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Net-Zero-and-New-Homes.pdf>

⁴ BEIS (2017) Clean Growth Strategy. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/clean-growth-strategy>

⁵ BEIS (2021) Sustainable Warmth. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainable-warmth-protecting-vulnerable-households-in-england>

⁶ NHC (2021), Northern Housing Monitor. Available at: <http://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/northern-housing-monitor/>

⁷ English Housing Survey (2020). Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/energy-inefficient-dwellings>

⁸ ONS (2019), Energy Efficiency of Homes. Available at: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1GyqS_hCOvVCyz4nlq9Z3CpRZkHCnhL8t492Uj2_vcuE/edit#gid=1585762712

Cities and towns will play an integral role in meeting local and national net zero targets and a large-scale housing retrofit programme would contribute significantly to their plans to reduce emissions. More than a quarter of all emissions in the North come from existing homes⁹ and reducing this proportion would deliver on the wider climate change and health agendas in the region.

On housing affordability, we know affordability issues impact on the mental health of people as they are forced to make difficult financial decisions when housing costs are high, leading to stress and anxiety. A study supported by the NHC found that this has been particularly acute during the Covid-19 pandemic, with respondents to the research noting they were facing new forms of precariousness relating to household income and outgoings due to job loss or increased utility bills from spending more time at home, leading to negative impacts on respondents' mental health¹⁰. There are also indirect impacts such as having less disposable income to spend on things that promote good health such as healthy food and exercise¹¹. Through a neighbourhood approach to housing retrofit and neighbourhood regeneration, low-income households experiencing fuel poverty could see their bills reduced if energy efficiency measures were improved and their home was transitioned to a low-carbon heat source. The direct financial impact on tenants/residents would only be possible if there were opportunities for low-income households to access grant funding to improve homes (either directly for owner-occupiers or through schemes targeted at landlords).

Question 2.C - What evidence is available to support the case for changes to local and national policies for housing and the built environment in the light of the Covid experience?

The social, environmental and economic effects of poor housing quality in the North of England were already significant but the Covid pandemic has exacerbated these existing problems. The Covid-19 Marmot Review found that the pandemic has increased regional health inequalities and therefore recommended that central to the Government's strategy to 'levelling-up' should be a commitment to reduce social and economic inequalities across the regions¹². The Review made clear the links between poor housing, ill health and deprivation.

⁹ BEIS (2019) UK local authority carbon dioxide emissions estimates 2017. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-local-authority-and-regional-carbon-dioxide-emissions-national-statistics-2005-to-2018>

¹⁰ NHC (2020), Lockdown. Rundown. Breakdown. Available at: <https://www.flipsnack.com/NorthernHousingConsortium/lockdown-rundown-breakdown-1hpf1x7e47/full-view.html>

¹¹ Health Foundation (2020), Better housing is crucial for our health and the COVID-19 recovery. Available at: <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/better-housing-is-crucial-for-our-health-and-the-covid-19-recovery>

¹² Institute of Health Equity (2020), Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review. Available at: <https://www.instituteoftheequity.org/resources-reports/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review>

Overcrowded housing in particular was identified as a high-risk factor for Covid-19 infection and mortality in the Marmot Review due to cramped, and possibly unsafe, conditions worsening side effects and making self-isolation and social distancing much more difficult. The report made clear that this has disproportionately impacted British people who self-identify as Black, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian who are more likely to live in overcrowded housing. The report urged for targeted action in urban areas where there is a higher level of overcrowded and multiple-occupation housing.

The Marmot Review also found that while all types of households have experienced a decline in wellbeing during the lockdown periods, private renters have experienced the largest decline. The private rented sector is home to 1 in 5 people in the North and 27% of these homes fail to meet the Decent Homes Standard¹³. As we have outlined, poor quality housing affects the mental and physical wellbeing of people and this sector represents a particular challenge. A report published last year by the APPG for Housing in the North, of which the NHC acts as Secretariat, detailed recommendations to address inadequate housing quality in the private rented sector. On energy efficiency, the report recommended a new regulatory framework to enforce minimum standards in the private rented sector. This would involve a system of landlord registration alongside licensing; better use of data to identify energy inefficient homes without an EPC certificate; and increased capacity in local authorities to be able to enforce standards. This will be even more important if BEIS strengthens EPC targets within the private rented sector to EPC C as a minimum for new tenancies from April 2025, and for all privately rented homes to reach EPC C from April 2028¹⁴, as they have consulted on. We are awaiting Government's response to this consultation.

Another of the report's recommendations was to establish a Housing Quality Investment Fund as part of a long-term commitment to neighbourhood regeneration to boost investment for cross-tenure housing improvements and tackle concentrations of poor-quality housing. This would help to 'level-up' the regions and reduce regional inequalities by reducing the level of poor-quality housing in the North and in turn reducing the impact of poor housing on the physical and mental health of communities. We are expecting a white paper on proposals to make the rental market fairer and more effective, including an end to 'no fault' evictions under Section 21 of the Housing Act 1988, to explore the merits of a landlord register, and introduce a suite of other reforms. This presents an opportunity to take forward the recommendations from the APPG for Housing in the North.

The pandemic has spotlighted the inadequate quality of many of our homes in the North and exposed people to their housing problems even more so; this was

¹³ APPG Housing in the North (2020), No Home Left Behind. Available at: <https://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/No-Home-Left-Behind-APPG-Housing-in-the-North-1.pdf>

¹⁴ BEIS (2021), Improving the Energy Performance of Privately Rented Homes in England and Wales. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/946175/prs-consultation-2020.pdf

captured by one private renter interviewed as part of the lockdown research supported by the NHC:

“I’d say probably lockdown has heightened the stress that I feel from this because all it is, I see it every day, every minute of every day, so it’s probably heightened my stress for sure, and probably made me feel a lot worse than I would normally.”

Central to a green recovery should be an intensive programme of housing renewal with a fabric-first approach to upgrade the region’s poor-quality housing and make it more energy efficient, ready for low carbon heat technologies. This will also contribute to the region’s readiness for possible future pandemics and increasing the resilience of buildings in the face of climate change.

Question 2.2 - What is the evidence that poor quality housing leads to physical and mental ill health, excess (winter) deaths, accidents in the home, increased hospital admissions and readmissions, premature moves into residential care and fuel poverty?

It is well-evidenced that poor-quality housing creates, or worsens, health conditions which reduces quality of life and can even lead to premature death: housing that is expensive or difficult to heat contributes to poor respiratory and cardiovascular outcomes; high indoor temperatures can cause heat related illnesses and increase cardiovascular mortality; indoor air pollution harms respiratory and cardiovascular health; crowded housing increases the risk of exposure to infectious diseases; and insecure housing due to affordability or weak security of tenure causes stress¹⁵.

With 80% of the homes people will be living in by 2050 already built¹⁶, improving existing homes should be a priority to eliminate the health risks outlined. The Future Homes Standard will require new homes to be zero-carbon ready from 2025¹⁷ so there needs to be a focus on lifting the standards to create healthier existing homes. A warm, dry, safe and comfortable home leads to better health outcomes, but good-quality housing is also more likely to lead to better indirect results including improved outcomes in the early years, better employment prospects and strong community resilience and wellbeing, which are all associated with good health¹⁸.

Around 30% of households in the North have at least one member who has a long-term illness or disability and lives in non-decent housing. The largest share by tenure of those with a long-term illness or disability living in non-decent homes is among owner occupiers (61%), with a lower proportion in the private rented sector (23%)

¹⁵ Centre for Ageing Better (2020), Home and Dry. Available at: <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Home-and-dry-report.pdf>

¹⁶ Boardman, Brenda (2007), Home Truths. Available at: <https://www.eci.ox.ac.uk/research/energy/downloads/boardman07-hometruths.pdf>

¹⁷ Future Homes Standard 2025 (2019). Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/the-future-homes-standard-changes-to-part-l-and-part-f-of-the-building-regulations-for-new-dwellings>

¹⁸ King’s Fund (2018), Housing and Health. Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/topics/housing?f%5B0%5D=type%3A5842>

and lower again in the social housing sector (16%)¹⁹. This highlights the cross-tenure approach needed to improve housing quality in the region for those most at risk and prevent poor-quality housing worsening existing health conditions. Grant funding must be available to low-income households in the owner-occupied sector to improve the energy performance of their home and funding/incentive schemes in place to support the social sector and private landlords to make the improvements necessary to reduce the negative impact of homes on health.

Though poor housing negatively impacts all age groups, the impact of non-decent housing is most harshly felt by the older population, with an astonishing 30,000 more deaths each winter due to inadequate heating in homes²⁰. In the North, a third of all non-decent homes house someone aged 60 or over, nearly 60% of these are in the North West, which has the highest levels of older people in non-decent housing in England²¹. Again, the largest proportion of these homes are in the owner-occupied sector with relatively low levels in the private rented sector and social housing sector.

Children are also disproportionately affected by poor-quality housing, with *Shelter* finding poor quality housing leads to a 25% higher risk of severe ill-health and disability during childhood and early adulthood, increased likelihood of children suffering mental health problems, and a reduced chance of attaining well at school²².

Housing decarbonisation provides a real opportunity to improve housing across Northern cities and towns, in line with the Government's targets to get as many homes to EPC C by 2035. Improving the energy performance of homes will lead to fewer households experiencing fuel poverty by reducing bills, reducing the impact of poor housing conditions on those with pre-existing health conditions by making homes more efficient to heat, and ending the development of preventable illnesses caused by poor-quality housing.

Question 2.3 - Can the gains from improved housing be quantified financially?

The economic gains from a large-scale retrofit programme in the North are significant. Following the above section, it is estimated that the cost of poor housing to the NHS is £1.4 billion per year and estimates have shown that reducing excess cold in homes would save the NHS £848 million per year²³. Investing in housing

¹⁹ NHC (2018), The hidden costs of poor quality housing in the North. Available at: <https://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/The-Hidden-Costs-of-Poor-Quality-Housing-in-the-North.pdf>

²⁰ ONS (2018) Excess winter mortality. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/excesswintermortalityinenglandandwales/2017to2018provisionaland2016to2017final>

²¹ NHC (2018), The hidden costs of poor quality housing in the North. Available at: <https://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/The-Hidden-Costs-of-Poor-Quality-Housing-in-the-North.pdf>

²² Shelter (2006), Chance of a lifetime - the impact of bad housing on children's lives. Available at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/chance_of_a_lifetime_-_the_impact_of_bad_housing_on_childrens_lives

²³ BRE (2015), The Cost of Poor Housing to the NHS. Available at: <https://www.bre.co.uk/filelibrary/pdf/87741-Cost-of-Poor-Housing-Briefing-Paper-v3.pdf>

retrofit would be an investment in the North's health, with retrofit schemes elsewhere in the UK having shown to save the NHS 42p for every £1 invested²⁴. Improving housing conditions would reduce pressure on the NHS and deliver savings.

The returns to GDP from a programme of housing retrofit are estimated at £3.20 per £1 invested by Government and the Cost Benefit Ratio (Value for Money) indicator for a programme of housing retrofit is estimated at 2.27:1 which classifies the programme as "high" Value for Money²⁵.

Housing retrofit also offers the North huge job-creating potential. A recent report by IPPR North, supported by the NHC, found that 77,000 direct jobs in the North and 111,000 indirect jobs across the UK could be created by 2035 if retrofit were to be invested in over a 10-year period²⁶. The report outlined these jobs could generate £3.85 billion GVA direct in the North and an additional £5.61 million indirect GVA in supply chains around the country.

Analysis in the *Northern Powerhomes* report shows 5 million homes in the North need to be retrofitted, and more recent figures show that this would be equivalent to retrofiting 270,000 homes per year until 2035²⁷. The new, green jobs this would bring to the region would require a stronger and more responsive skills system so that people in the region can access the training and re-training needed to fill these roles. There are huge opportunities here to stimulate the economy by creating jobs and building up supply chains in the North whilst creating healthier homes and neighbourhoods.

As has been mentioned, upgrading the energy performance of homes reduces bills for the household with ongoing energy bill savings for residents estimated at £1.79 billion per year across the North if all homes were brought up to EPC C²⁸. This is particularly important when considering other housing factors that contribute to ill health such as those experiencing fuel poverty and experiencing other affordability issues.

²⁴ C. Liddell (2008) Estimating the Impacts of Northern Ireland's Warm Homes Scheme 2000–2008. University of Ulster and Marmot Review Team

²⁵ Washan, P et al (2014) Building the future: economic and fiscal impacts of making homes energy efficient. Verco/Cambridge Econometrics. Available at: <https://www.sustainableenergyassociation.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Building-the-Future-TheEconomic-and-Fiscal-impacts-of-making-homes-energy-efficient.pdf>

²⁶ IPPR North (2020) Northern Powerhomes. Available at: <https://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Northern-Powerhomes-A-green-recovery-plan-to-decarbonise-homes-in-the-North1.pdf>

²⁷ NHC (2021), Northern Housing Monitor. Available at: <http://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/northern-housing-monitor/>

²⁸ Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group (2020). Available at: https://www.theeig.co.uk/media/1096/eeig_report_rebuilding_for_resilience_pages_01.pdf

Question 2.5 - Does the evidence from the pandemic show links between susceptibility to the Covid virus and health inequalities such as: overcrowding; multigenerational households; cold and damp conditions; lack of space to work or study at home; lack of garden/balcony/green space?

Housing quality issues did not begin with the Covid pandemic, but they have been magnified by it showing further why there needs to be a national priority given to increasing the quality of existing homes, in addition to the commitment to increase new housing supply. Consequences of poor housing conditions such as increased risk of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases can all lead to worse outcomes if an individual becomes infected with Covid.

A report published last year by the University of Huddersfield, supported by the NHC and Nationwide Foundation, documented the lived experience of those living in poor quality housing through the first period of lockdown. Thermal comfort was a major theme within the report and a recurring topic during interviews with low-income households about their lockdown experience. The struggle to keep homes as warm as possible due to deficient elements in the fabric of properties, such as a lack of insulation or presence of draughts, led to some people no longer opening their windows which further lowered internal air quality and exacerbated existing respiratory conditions²⁹. This is even more significant now due to ventilation within homes being central to Public Health England's guidance about preventing the spread of Covid. The development of coughs from spending more time in damp and mouldy conditions also took on a new dimension with the risk of becoming infected with Covid.

The report concluded that "rundown homes are resulting in rundown people" with a strong relationship between mental health and poor housing during the pandemic identified. During interviews, people spoke about the grinding effect that living in cold, damp homes that were often in disrepair had on them, with many reporting an onset or resurgence of mental ill health such as depression and anxiety. Confinement to poor-quality housing during periods of lockdown was a major factor in reports of poor mental health, as were concerns about the precarity of tenure, the frailty of homes and uncertainty about financial wellbeing.

Overcrowding and a lack of outdoor space was also found to be contributing to poor physical and mental health, with young people in particular having lower satisfaction levels with housing due to disproportionately living in denser and lower-quality private rented homes³⁰. These factors also led to a higher risk of Covid transmission as people locked down and self-isolated together in limited space. Overcrowding is currently at the highest rate in both the social rented and private rented sectors since

²⁹ NHC (2020), Lockdown. Rundown. Breakdown. Available at: <https://www.flipsnack.com/NorthernHousingConsortium/lockdown-rundown-breakdown-1hpf1x7e47/full-view.html>

³⁰ Resolution Foundation (2020), Lockdown Living. Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/07/Lockdown-living.pdf>

1995-96 when data collection began and is more common in ethnic minority households³¹.

On the struggle for thermal comfort, the *Lockdown. Rundown. Breakdown.* report recommended thoroughly insulating poor-quality homes and replacing heating systems to tackle cold homes and reduce carbon emissions. This action could be maximised if policy makers envisioned housing retrofit as a wider opportunity to undertake a holistic approach to improving the fabric of homes and the ways in which they are heated.

The Social Housing White Paper published last year announced a review of the Decent Homes Standard with a proposal to "better support the decarbonisation and energy efficiency of social homes"³². This review is a significant post-Covid opportunity to update the Standard in line with the Government's ambitions on net zero. We think this is an opportunity to transform the existing requirements around homes achieving 'a reasonable degree of thermal comfort' to include a requirement for high levels of energy efficiency, as well as making reference to the low carbon heating solutions that will become standard in all homes in the future. The NHC is a core participant in the sounding board for this review, which is being led by MHCLG.

Future housing policy and regulation should reflect key lessons learnt from the Covid lockdown experience of many people and adapt planning and building to accommodate a wider range of circumstances than before, such as requiring internal space for working from home and access to outdoor space for fresh air. For wider areas, cities and towns now need to be planned, built and managed in ways that are conducive to new ways of living and with a focus on sustainable practices and achieving net zero targets³³.

Question 2.6 - How best can Local Planning Authorities play a positive, proactive role in creating the healthy city?

Local authorities will play a vital role in retrofitting existing homes to contribute to healthier communities in the North. Wherever possible, a neighbourhood approach to deliver fabric-first home retrofits in line with the principle of 'worst first' should be taken led by local authorities and other partners. Local authorities are ambitious to reach net zero targets and are ambitious in their plans to increase the energy efficiency of homes, but they require consistent and long-term funding and direction from Government to be able to deliver fully on their ambitions.

The role of local authorities will cut across tenures to reach the Government's target for as many homes as possible to reach EPC C by 2035. Government has consulted on even more ambitious proposals for the private rented sector, with Minimum

³¹ House of Commons Library (2021), Household overcrowding and the covid-19 outbreak. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2021-0023/>

³² Social Housing White Paper (2020). Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-charter-for-social-housing-residents-social-housing-white-paper>

³³ Centre for Cities (2021), Net Zero: Decarbonising the City. Available at: <https://www.centreforcities.org/reader/net-zero-decarbonising-the-city/>

Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) of EPC C by 2025 for new lettings, and 2028 for all privately rented homes. This could pose an additional challenge around enforcing these standards. For local authorities to step into this potentially transformative role, they need the capital investment, officer capacity and revenue funding to support them.

Research by the NHC and CaCHE has shown that the North has experienced larger comparative reductions in housing and planning capacity since 2010, with 80% of local authority capacity in the North now concentrated in statutory services. The change in average net spend per local authority in the North between 2010/11 and 2018/19 stood at -54% for housing services and -65% for planning and development services. Across the rest of England, this difference stood at -34% for housing services and -50% for planning and development services³⁴. Updated analysis to cover the full ten-year period from 2010/11 shows the total planning and development spending has fallen in local authorities in the North in absolute terms by 73%³⁵. The figure for total housing services spend in the North is -58%. The decline in local authority capacity must be addressed if local authorities are to play their vital role in the housing decarbonisation agenda.

The relatively successful Local Authority Delivery element of the Green Homes Grant scheme proves that local authorities are able to act quickly using local knowledge and expertise to work with partners to bring together existing supply chains and deliver energy efficiency improvements in their area. On funding from central government, the NHC are calling for the Autumn Spending Review to bring forward and frontload the £3.8bn Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund that was promised in the Conservative Party manifesto and confirm the £2.5bn of Home Upgrade Grants for low-income private renters and owner-occupiers.

Local authorities can play the key role of bringing together stakeholders across local government, housing associations, further education, the skills sector, manufacturers, and installers to roll out home retrofit schemes and decarbonise domestic heat. The challenge to increase the quality of existing homes across the region is huge but the opportunities from doing so would bring better health, social, environmental, and economic outcomes.

³⁴ NHC (2020), Time to Level-Up: Local Authority Housing and Planning Capacity in the North of England. Available at: <https://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/influencing/ournorth/local-authority-capacity/>

³⁵ NHC (2021), Northern Housing Monitor. Available at: <http://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/northern-housing-monitor/>