

# THE REAL COST OF POOR HOUSING

Mike Roys, Maggie Davidson and Simon Nicol, BRE

David Ormandy, University of Warwick, and Peter Ambrose, University of Brighton



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# ACRONYMS

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CIEH	Chartered Institute of Environmental Health
CLG	Department for Communities and Local Government
DWP	Department of Works and Pensions
DALY	disability adjusted life years
EBD	environmental burden of disease
HASS	Home Accident Surveillance System
HHSRS	Housing Health and Safety Rating System
ICD	International Classification of Diseases (WHO)
LARES	Large Analysis and Review of European housing and health Status
NPV	net present value
ONS	Office of National Statistics
RIA	Regulatory Impact Assessment
SAP	standard assessment procedure
SRB	Single Regeneration Budget
WHO	World Health Organization

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## FOREWORD

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As President of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, I am delighted to have been asked to write the Foreword to this significant research report, which provides timely evidence that can be used to persuade policy-makers to better direct activity and investment in housing. Despite the recognition that even in the 21st century housing is a key determinant of health, too often it has proved difficult to make the public health case for more concerted action on housing conditions – hence the development of the CIEH HHSRS Costs Calculator.

As the WHO LARES Project has also shown: the home environment; the dwelling itself; the community; and the neighbourhood have significant roles in the housing and health nexus. The Housing Health and Safety Rating System has been developed as a methodology to better assess the risks to health and safety from deficiencies in dwellings and allows interventions to be better focussed. Additionally, it should lead to more coherent strategies to deal with housing conditions, but it also has wider applications in the development of policy, as this research report demonstrates. We often hear calls for a more joined-up approach to policy development – this report underpins why in the arena of housing and public health this is so important. It clearly demonstrates that money invested in improving poor housing could have a significant impact in improving health and reducing the financial burden on the NHS (the most immediate and obvious costs to society of unhealthy housing).

This is an important publication that should not only be used by local housing authorities in developing



strategies with Primary Care Trusts so as to better direct scarce resources, but should be essential reading for those at the Government level not just in the Departments of Health, and Communities and Local Government, but particularly those within HM Treasury.

**Dr Stephen Battersby**  
President, CIEH





# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 BACKGROUND

There is a long established, recognised relationship between poor housing and poor health. In Victorian times diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera and typhus were known to be associated with insanitary, cold, damp and overcrowded housing conditions. This led to various public health acts and eventually to the Housing of the Working Class Act, 1890 which was the first attempt to consolidate the law relating to housing. The first national definition of homes that were 'unfit for human habitation' appeared in the Housing Act of 1954 and this remained (with various changes) as the minimum standard of housing in England and Wales until 2006 (the last version, following the 1989 Housing Act, is still applied in Northern Ireland). The problems of disease associated with 'slum' living have largely been eradicated, but there remains a significant number of health and safety hazards in the home, compounded by the fact that the UK has one of the oldest stocks of housing in the developed world, and one of the lowest rates of housing replacement.

Many studies have investigated the relationship between housing and health but, because of the number of intervening variables, it is difficult to demonstrate clear and measurable cause/effect relationships. Nevertheless there is a large and growing body of evidence linking systematically adverse health effects with poor housing conditions. These conditions include dampness, the effects of living in a cold home, household accidents, noise, insecurity, overcrowding and fire safety. Unaffordable housing can also be poor housing and there is compelling evidence linking unaffordable housing to poor health (Zaccheus 2000 Trust, 2005). It must be acknowledged that a number of poor housing conditions (eg overcrowding, inability to heat the home to a reasonable temperature or keep up with the costs of necessary maintenance) often arise as a direct result of high rents, mortgage payments, utility bills etc.

BRE and Warwick University have been involved in the development of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) which was included in the 2004 Housing





## THE REAL COST OF POOR HOUSING

The relationship between poor housing and poor health has been recognised for a long time, but until recently it has not been possible to estimate the cost to society of poor housing. Although the problems of disease associated with slum living have largely been eradicated in England, a significant number of health and safety hazards in the home remain.

This report highlights weaknesses in existing models of the housing stock and proposes a new model which overcomes them. The model uses data obtained from the English House Condition Survey to illustrate the effects of various scenarios and repair options. It clearly demonstrates that money invested in improving poor housing could have a significant impact on improving health and reducing the financial burden on the NHS.



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