Town and Country Planning Association
Working to secure homes, places and communities
where everyone can thrive

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Healthy Homes Principles – what's the evidence?

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Decent homes are vital to give people a good foundation to thrive in their daily lives. Yet, one in ten people in the UK (over 6 million people) are living in poor quality housing. In addition, 3.7 million homes (15%) in England failed to meet the decent homes standard in 2022[1], and 2.6 million homes (11%) were found to be poor quality and 'hazardous' to occupants in 2021, according to the Building Research Establishment (BRE)[2].

People living in poor quality homes are twice as likely to have poor general health than people who do not (11% of people compared to 22%). Those from more disadvantaged groups are more likely to be living in poor quality housing – 22% of people in the lowest quintile income group live in poor quality homes, compared to 4% in the top quintile income group[3].

There is a wealth of evidence which shows how the quality of our homes and neighbourhoods directly and indirectly impact both our mental and physical health. Poor quality homes increase the likelihood of respiratory, cardiovascular, and communicable diseases, along with a higher risk of mortality[4]. The BRE estimates that treating sickness associated with poor quality homes costs the NHS at least £2 billion every year, and carries wider costs to society of over £18 billion, such as through reduced capacity to work[2]. Additionally, they increase the risk of severe ill health and disability during childhood[5] and the proportion of children citing housing concerns as an obstacle to school attendance jumped from 11% in 2022 to 19% in 2023, an increase of 73%[6].

To ensure better and more inclusive health outcomes, the TCPA has identified 12 Healthy Homes principles that all new housing developments must provide, as outlined below.

[1] Chapter 4: Dwelling condition - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[2] BRE report finds poor housing is costing NHS £1.4bn a year | BRE Group
[3] Trying times • Resolution Foundation 2023
[4] Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On - The Health Foundation
[5] Chance of a lifetime - the impact of bad housing on children's lives - Shelter England
[6] Poor housing a growing barrier to school attendance in England, charity reveals | Schools | The Guardian

Principle 1. Fire safety

In England, there were 275 fire-related fatalities in the year ending June 2022 compared with 251 in the previous year. Over 40,000 fire incidents were linked to dwellings and other buildings in that period.

With statistics like these it is imperative that our homes are built to be fire safe, meeting and exceeding Building Safety Regulations to avoid tragedies like the Grenfell Tower fire.

Principle 2. Liveable space

More than two million children in England live in overcrowded accommodation with little or no personal space, and over 300,000 share beds with family members[7].

Nearly a third of adults in Britain (15.9 million people) have experienced mental of physical health problems due to the condition or lack of space in their home during the Covid-19 lockdown; 52% of those who said their homes weren't big enough suffered from health problems according to a YouGov survey.[8]

Principle 3. Inclusive, accessible and adaptable

Building accessible homes is a vital part of ensuring that the nation's housing stock is sustainable and meets the needs of its residents. The Equality and Human Rights Commission lists mobility problems, indignity, poorer mental health, feelings of social isolation and anxiety all as impacts of non-accessible homes and reports that those without accessible homes are four times less likely to be in work.[9]

In 2018, data from the English Housing Survey showed that 91% of homes didn't provide the four main features to be considered even 'visitable'[10]. According to Habinteg, 70% of new homes built between 2020-2030 won't be required to meet any of the optional access standards necessary to improve accessibility and adaptability for older and disabled people.[11] 104,000 people are on waiting lists for accessible and adaptable homes.[12]

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[7] National Housing Federation - Overcrowding in England (2023)

[8] National Housing Federation. 2020

[9] Housing and disabled people: Britain's Hidden Crisis. Equality and Human Rights Commission

[10] English Housing Survey 2018: accessibility of English homes - fact sheet - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

[11] Habinteg Housing Association Annual Report and Financial Statements 2020.

[12] 'Disabled people want their homes 'not to hurt them' - The Big Issue, May 2023

Principle 4. Access to natural light

There is strong evidence that indoor access to natural light has a positive impact on mental health and circadian sleep cycles. Yet there is no mandatory requirement to ensure provision of windows in new homes.

An analysis of 6,017 residents across eight European cities found that those with self-reported low levels of natural light where 1.4 times as likely to report depression and 1.5 times as likely to report a fall when compared to those satisfied with their home's light levels.[13]
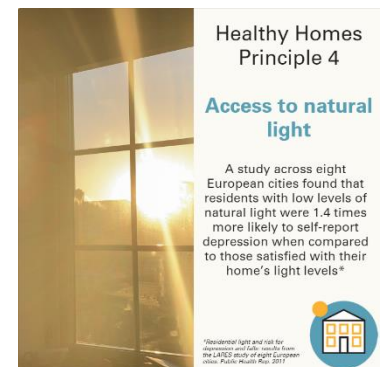
Principle 5. Cut carbon emissions

Energy use in homes accounts for 20% of total UK carbon emissions[14]. Homes with poor energy efficiency and insulation contribute to energy insecurity and even fuel poverty. Up to 22.3 million homes do not have the adequate level of insultation to ensure energy efficiency[15]. According to the ONS, over half of adults were worried about heating their homes this last winter[16].

Whilst poorly insulated, cold and damp homes increase respiratory diseases and energy insecurity affects people's sleeping and levels of anxiety.
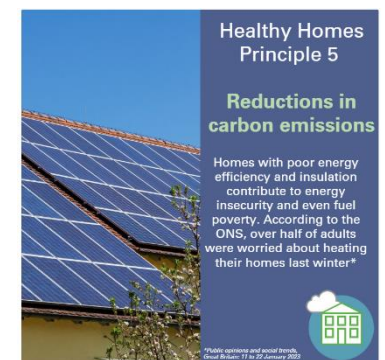
Principle 6. Access to amenities and transport

All homes should be designed with good access to public transport, the GP, schools, local shops and parks to support our health and wellbeing[17]. Public Health England found that neighbourhoods without active travel options (buses, trains, walking and cycling routes) negatively impact mental wellbeing and increase the risk of Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal diseases[18].

Access to green and blue (water-based) infrastructure has also been shown to mitigate stress and promote healthy lifestyles. A survey of 406 adults in Scotland found that the amount of green space in a neighbourhood was a significant predictor of stress levels.[19]
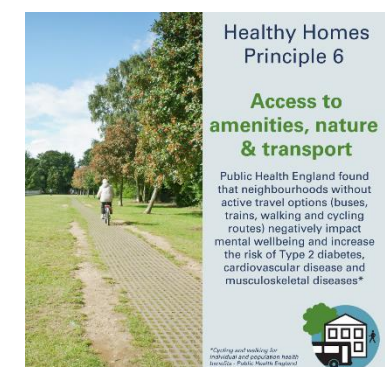
[13] Residential light and risk for depression and falls: results from the LARES study of eight European cities. Public Health Rep. 2011
[14] Environmental standards for new housing, Research briefing – House of Commons Library 2024
[15] Energy efficiency of UK homes - House of Commons Library (parliament.uk)
[16] Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: 11 to 22 January 2023
[17] The 20-minute neighbourhood (tcpa.org.uk)
[18] Cycling and walking for individual - Public Health England
[19] Mitigating Stress and Supporting Health in Deprived Urban Communities…Environment. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2016

Principle 7. Safe from crime

The Government's Safer Places guide states that most crime reduction through the planning system is delivered through crime prevention.[20]

When homes are purposely designed to build out crime, not only are communities safer, but our health and wellbeing benefits too. Studies confirm this, as neighbourhood crime can be a contextual predictor of mental health.[21]

Principle 8. Climate resilient

Since 2016, 570,000 new homes have been built that are not resilient to short term high temperatures[22]. Heatwaves cause higher rates of mortality, and those most likely to suffer are the very young, the elderly and people with conditions like asthma[23].

Homes also need to be resilient to increased risk from flooding and storms which have a significant financial cost as well as negative impact on the mental health of people whose homes are affected[24]. The Environment Agency estimates that 5.7 million properties in England are at risk of flooding [25]. Only 200,000 of them will benefit from flood defences according to the reviewed 2021-2027 capital programme[26].

Principle 9. Prevent air pollution

Ambient and indoor air pollution in the UK is associated with approximately 28,000 to 36,000 deaths and costs the NHS £43 million each year[27]. Between 2017 and 2025, the total estimated NHS and social care cost from treating sickness linked to outdoor air pollution will be at least £1.6 billion in England[28].

Poor indoor air quality has been linked to lung diseases and increased risk of heart disease and stroke[29]. Provisions must be made to ensure new homes minimise air pollution, ensure good ventilation and do not contribute to unsafe levels.

[20] Safer Places: The Planning System and Crime Prevention
[21] The impact of neighbourhood crime on mental health: A systematic review and meta-analysis, Social Science & Medicine, 2021
[22] Climate change - UKGBC - UK Green Building Council
[23] Heatwave deaths set to soar as UK summers become hotter | Climate crisis | The Guardian
[24] Flooding and health: national study - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[25] Managing flood risk - Public Accounts Committee - House of Commons (parliament.uk)
[26] Flood resilience eroded by poorly maintained defences with Government in the dark on progress - Committees - UK Parliament
[27] NICE impact respiratory conditions, 2020.
[28] Urban outdoor air quality - POST (parliament.uk) Parliament briefing January 2023
[29] Asthma and Lung UK. What is indoor air pollution?

Principle 10. Limit light and noise pollution

Findings by the World Health Organisation (WHO) state that noise is the second largest environmental cause of health problems, just after air pollution, and it can result in increased risk for cardiovascular disease, sleep disturbance, cognitive impairment, and permanent hearing impairment.[30] In 2018, 100,000 years of good health were lost in England due to road traffic noise. Most of these losses were due to chronic annoyance and sleep disturbance, followed by stroke, ischemic heart disease and diabetes.[31]

Light pollution is also damaging to human health as it impacts our circadian cycle. CPRE reports that prolonged exposure to light pollution can lead to depression, sleeplessness and heart and blood problems.[32]

Principle 11. Ensure thermal comfort

With the changing climate and increased occurrence of extreme weather events, it is imperative that our new homes provide year-round thermal comfort for residents. Poor thermal comfort undermines sleep quality and exacerbates cardiac, pulmonary and respiratory conditions[33]. Over 700,000 homes in England were found to be 'excessively cold' in the winter[34], with the NHS spending over £540m a year treating people affected by the worst properties. Following the decision to slash subsidies for loft and wall insulation, more than 70,000 excess winter deaths were caused by living in consequently cold, damp housing conditions over the last ten years[35].

Poor insulation and limited ventilation also means that many homes are overheating in the summer. Over half of the UK housing stock (55% or 15.7 million homes) currently fails the bedroom overheating criterion[36], and an estimated 791 excess deaths are associated with overheating every year in England and Wales [37].

[30] WHO: Environmental Noise Guidelines for the European Region
[31] Noise pollution: mapping the health impacts of transportation noise in England - UK Health Security Agency (blog.gov.uk)
[32] CPRE: How light pollution affects our health
[33] Jessel et al, (2019); Wang et al, (2022)
[34] BRE cost of poor housing tenure analysis 2023.pdf (bregroup.com)
[35] Activists build cemetery from insulation boards outside Parliament warning "cold homes cost lives" | Greenpeace
[36] Addressing overheating risk in existing UK homes - Arup 2022
[37] Small-area assessment of temperature-related mortality risks in England and Wales: a case time series analysis, 2022.

Principle 12. Genuinely affordable and secure homes*

The **Healthy Homes Bill** calls for local authorities to plan for affordable housing needs to secure the long-term health, safety and wellbeing of residents. In particular, to assess affordability based on average and below-average household income levels, rather than tied to market rates. Genuinely affordable homes support many social objectives that help people to thrive, including reducing health inequalities. Affordable housing can contribute to improved reported health and life satisfaction, crime reduction, better labour market, and improved educational outcomes[38].

This also applies to ensuring security of housing tenure. This refers to the need for legal protections for residents against harassment, forced 'no-fault' evictions, excessive tenancy fees, uncertain duration of tenancies and other threats. One review found that greater tenure security can 'boost economic mobility, improve housing and environmental conditions, including reduced exposure to pollution, create safer and better resourced communities, and improve physical and mental health'[39].

*Supplementary principle linked to the Healthy Homes Bill / amendment

Healthy Homes Act Campaign

Campaign sponsor

Nationwide Foundation

Further links

Campaign for Healthy Homes: tcpa.org.uk/collection/campaign-for-healthy-homes/

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38 Great Places. Assessing the social and economic impact of affordable housing investment. [cited 2023 Nov 13].
39 Baumgartner J, Rodriguez J, Berkhout F, et al. Synthesizing the links between secure housing tenure and health for more equitable cities. Wellcome Open Res. 2022;7(18).