

Parliamentary briefing from Mind

Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation)

January 2018



About Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We provide advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. We campaign to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding.

Mind is a member of the Mental Health Alliance. The Alliance is a coalition of more than 75 organisations from across the mental health spectrum and beyond that work together to advocate for fair implementation of the Mental Health Act in England and Wales.

Summary

Housing is a key issue affecting people with mental health problems: people with a mental health condition are four times more likely to report that poor housing has made their health worse.¹ Where you live can have a huge impact on your mental health – everyone needs safe, stable and suitable housing to stay well.

One in three people in the UK live in poor quality housing, and people with mental health problems are even more likely to live in a low quality home.² Living somewhere that's cold, damp and mouldy in particular can damage a person's mental health, and worsen conditions for those already living with mental health problems.³ In fact, research has shown that the physical condition of your home is strongly predictive of your mental health.⁴ Shelter's research with GPs found that they spontaneously identify housing problems as a factor in their patients' mental health problems, both as a contributing factor

¹ Social Exclusion Unit (2004, Office of Deputy PM) cited in Centre for Mental Health report (June 2016)

² Barnes, M., Caullinane, C., Scott, S. & Silvester, H. (2013) *People Living in Bad Housing: Numbers and Health Impacts*. London: National Centre for Social Research; Kyle, T. & Dunn, J.R. (2008) Effects of Housing Circumstances on Health, Quality of Life and Healthcare Use for People with Severe Mental Illness: A review. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 16(1), pp.1–15.

³ Damp (Krieger, J. & Higgins, D.L. (2002) Housing and Health: Time again for public health action. *American Journal of Public Health*, 92(5), pp.758–768); mould (What Works Wellbeing (2017) *Housing and Wellbeing: Policy Briefing*. London: What Works Wellbeing); and cold (Gibson, M., Petticrew, M., Bambra, C., Sowden, A.J., Wright, K.E. & Whitehead, M. (2011) Housing and Health Inequalities: A synthesis of systematic reviews of interventions aimed at different pathways linking housing and health. *Health & Place*, 17(1), pp.175–184; Harris, J., Hall, J., Meltzer, H., Jenkins, R., Oreszcyn, T. & McManus, S. (2010) *Health, Mental Health and Housing Conditions in England*. London: National Centre for Social Research.)

⁴ Smith, M., Albanese, F. & Truder, J. (2014) *A Roof Over My Head: the final report of the Sustain project, a longitudinal study of housing outcomes and wellbeing in private rented accommodation*. London: Shelter and Crisis; Evans, G.W., Wells, N.M., Chan, H-Y.E. & Saltzman, H. (2000) Housing Quality and Mental Health. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 68(3), pp.526–530.

and sometimes a sole cause. Condition of property was one of the main issues GPs saw as causing mental health problems in adults and children.⁵

Disproportionate impact of poor quality housing on people with mental health problems

We are concerned that people with mental health problems are disproportionately affected by poor housing conditions. This is for two reasons: firstly the private rented sector, in which people with mental health problems are overrepresented, has the highest concentration of poor quality accommodation.⁶ Secondly, there is evidence that those with serious mental health conditions are disproportionately allocated to the least desirable homes in the least desirable areas.⁷

Research has shown that the poorest quality rented accommodation is already targeted at the most vulnerable, including those with mental health problems and multiple complex needs, and especially those who have been evicted or had previous rent arrears.⁸ These individuals, considered undesirable tenants by much of the social and private rented sector, are left powerless and with little option but to accept these 'slum' rentals. Individuals living with mental health problems are more likely to have experienced eviction and are four times more likely to have fallen into rent arrears, making them doubly vulnerable to being forced to live in the worst homes on the market.

I live in a bedsit with rotten windows, crawling with ants, the pub is open all hours, it's on a busy road – but they knew I was desperate and I would take it.

'Sarah'

Moreover, people with mental health problems face stigmatising and outdated attitudes from private landlords who refuse to rent to them, and social housing staff who inadequately prioritise them in allocation processes, further reducing the amount of decent quality accommodation that is available to them.⁹ Stigma and lack of understanding about the relationship between housing and mental health amongst social housing providers has led to a situation whereby people with mental health problems are being allocated the homes in the worst condition. The reality is that people with mental health problems are facing discrimination on several fronts, and are disproportionately vulnerable to the kind of issue this bill seeks to address. We're delighted that this bill has been brought before the House of Commons again and are thankful to Karen Buck MP for championing this important cause.

I did all the decoration myself. It [the flat] was truly grimy when I moved in. I actually had to pay for all the materials from my graduate loan... I'd been given

⁵ Shelter (2017) *The Impact of Housing Problems on Mental Health*. London: Shelter.

⁶ Smith, et al. (2014) *A Roof Over My Head*; Barnes, et al. (2013) *People Living in Bad Housing*; May, J. (2000) Housing Histories and Homeless Careers: A biographical approach. *Housing Studies*, 15(4), pp.613–638; Ellaway, A. & Macintyre, S. (1998) Does Housing Tenure Predict Health in the UK Because It Exposes People to Different Levels of Housing Related Hazards in the Home or Its Surroundings? *Health & Place*, 4(2), pp.141–150

⁷ Johnson R., Griffiths C. and Nottingham T., At home? Mental health issues arising in social housing. National Institute for Mental Health in England. Cited in Centre for Mental Health report (June 2016)

⁸ Rugg, J. & Rhodes, D. (2008) *The private rented sector: Its contribution and potential*. York: Centre for Housing Policy, University of York.

⁹ Corrigan, P.W. (1998) The Impact of Stigma on Severe Mental Illness. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 5(2), pp.201–222; Page, S. (1996) Effects of the Mental Illness Label in 1993. *Journal of Health & Social Policy*, 7(2), pp.61–68

this council accommodation and I didn't want to complain. To be honest, I didn't feel worthy of it. None of my friends had flats... Also, mental health problems make it harder to complain – you have other things to think about.
 'Sophie'

At the moment, poor quality housing is a lose-lose for people with mental health problems. They're more likely to live in this kind of home, and this kind of home is likely to worsen their mental health too. It's a travesty that some of the most vulnerable people in society are being forced to live in homes that aren't fit for human habitation because of an outdated piece of legislation.

How will this Bill help people living with mental health problems?

This Bill seeks to bring legislation around housing quality into the twenty-first century, giving tenants greater protections, and greater power to force landlords to keep their homes in a fit state. People with mental health problems are more likely to be in this situation, which means this bill will disproportionately benefit them – giving them a clearer route to legal recourse, a greater sense of autonomy, and hopefully overhauling a system which leaves people with the greatest problems at the bottom of the pile.

If passed, it will help people with mental health problems living in poor quality homes that are making them more unwell, to get their landlords to take action. It will encourage landlords to undertake home improvements in order to fulfil their duty – research has shown that home improvements, for instance, warmth and energy efficiency interventions can have a positive effect on mental health – particularly for vulnerable individuals.¹⁰ Reducing cold has been shown to be one of the cheapest and most reliable housing improvements for increasing someone's wellbeing.¹¹ In this way, the bill also has the potential to directly improve vulnerable people's wellbeing, reducing their need to use mental health services, and thereby lessening the financial impact on the NHS by an amount proven to outweigh the cost of home improvements.¹² This Bill will hopefully increase the average quality of homes on the market, reducing future cases of housing-related mental ill-health: people living in newer and better-maintained buildings tend to have better mental health and to use fewer health services.¹³

Giving people with mental health problems a clear legal route by which to encourage or force their landlords to keep their home in a fit state, will bring an end to a confusing system, only navigable by legal professionals. It will put some of the power back into the hands of the tenants. This Bill makes both moral and financial sense for people living with mental health problems, as well as simple common sense: people living in the twenty first century shouldn't be held hostage to rent caps set in the nineteenth.

¹⁰ Barnes et al. (2013) *People Living in Bad Housing*; Gibson et al. (2011) *Housing and Health Inequalities*

¹¹ Thomson, H., Thomas, S., Sellstrom, E. & Petticrew, M. (2009) The Health Impacts of Housing Improvement: A systematic review of intervention studies from 1887 to 2007. *American Journal of Public Health*, 99(S3), pp.681–692.

¹² Harkness, J., Newman, S.J. & Salkever, D. (2004) The Cost-Effectiveness of Independent Housing for the Chronically Mentally Ill: Do housing and neighborhood features matter? *Health Services Research*, 39(5), pp. 1341–1360.

¹³ Harkness et al. (2004) The Cost-Effectiveness of Independent Housing

Case study

'Crystal' was allocated a social housing property because she was considered vulnerable due to her on-going mental health problems. She was reassured that the home would meet the government's 'Decent Homes' standard – with a new kitchen, bathroom, and freshly painted walls. However, when she moved in much of the work had not been completed. When she complained to her local authority, she was provided with B&Q vouchers and told to "fix it yourself".

"There should be [housing quality] standards that are adhered to. Some problems have more impact than others. One year on in a flat where the decorating wasn't finished, that makes you feel a bit crap – it brings your mood down. You compare yourself to other people. It makes you feel worse if your flat is in a worse position than neighbours."

'Crystal'

For more information on this briefing, to organise a meeting with Mind and to visit your local Mind please contact:

Ellie White

Senior Policy and Campaigns Officer

t: 020 8215 244

e: e.white@mind.org.uk

