

## **COVID-19 and Housing – How can we build back better?**

Jackie Erdman is NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's Head of Equality and Human Rights and Chair of the Healthy Homes Working Group (HHWG). Here Jackie introduces the HHWG and the group's plans for healthy housing in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 has shone a light on the significant role housing plays in tackling the fundamental causes of health inequalities. Housing conditions substantially contributed to the unequal impact of the pandemic across society because housing is fundamental to protecting and promoting our physical and mental health. Housing that is affordable, accessible, that is well designed and energy efficient and gives people access to green space is crucial to 'building back better' as we recover from the pandemic.

The Healthy Homes Working Group is a group of public health practitioners working on behalf of the Scottish Health Promotion Managers. The group represents urban and rural Scotland, with the aim of providing leadership for colleagues working across public health to build partnerships with housing professionals. The group seeks to influence local and national housing policy and strategy by calling for a 'health in all policies approach', or in other words housing policy that promotes good health and reduces health inequalities. It is supported by Public Health Scotland who have built up considerable expertise on housing policy and partnership working in relation to public health. A significant report published in 2017 called Foundations for Wellbeing: reconnecting public health and housing underpins the aspiration to re-establish the link between public health and housing.

Scotland has some forward looking policy approaches to improving Scotland's housing conditions such as the affordable homes programme and the Housing to 2040 route map and vision which is currently being written. In this context the Healthy Homes Working Group held an event promoted as 'Healthy Homes in Scotland' in November 2019 with representatives from over 80 organisations. This event explored how we could work together towards delivering accessible, affordable, high quality, sustainable and secure homes for everyone to support people's health and to tackle health inequalities. It offered everyone an opportunity to share partner's priorities which included our changing demographics, tackling homelessness, responding to the climate emergency, addressing child poverty, and more.

The impact of COVID-19 is being felt now and will be for many years to come, and with that in mind, the Healthy Homes Working Group have developed an action plan to reflect the group's early thinking on a public health and housing response to the crisis. One of our first actions will be to hold seminars on mental health and poverty associated with housing. Lockdown has made people feel isolated and this has had an impact on mental health. The increased risk of experiencing gender based violence, unemployment, poverty and eviction will impact on people financially but also risks a significant increase in mental health issues. We know that some groups are particularly affected by poor housing conditions, a fact painfully highlighted by the pandemic, for example refugees and asylum seekers, people living in areas of deprivation, single parents and some Black and Minority Ethnic communities.

The important dialogue we started at the Healthy Homes in Scotland event must now involve people who are experiencing or who have experienced poor housing across all sectors, including the private sector. We have some exciting ideas and collaboration planned for the next two years and we look forward to continuing this engagement with our partners and communities.

Sadly I am stepping down as Chair in September 2020 as I will be retiring from the NHS. However I fully intend to be involved in housing in some other capacity in the next few years and I will be interested to see how the work of the groups develops. It has been a privilege to work with such a committed group of practitioners who are taking forward housing as a public health issue in their local areas across Scotland.

If you would like to know more about the group you can contact Katrina Reid, Health Improvement Manager at Public Health Scotland on [Katrina.reid1@nhs.net](mailto:Katrina.reid1@nhs.net) or on 07901103682.

Jackie Erdman  
Healthy Homes Working Group Chair  
August 2020