

Think Global, Act Local

Healthy Homes: Barnet FoE briefing



In Barnet, Housing is the source of 50% of current carbon emissions and so is an important area to focus on if Barnet is to get to Net Zero.

Most of us are lucky enough to have somewhere we call home that provides us with shelter and sanctuary. But, are our homes all they could be? It seems not as the 2019 Committee for Climate Change report, "[UK housing: Fit for the future?](#)", makes clear:

"UK homes are not fit for the future. Greenhouse gas emission reductions from UK housing have stalled, and efforts to adapt the housing stock for higher temperatures, flooding and water scarcity are falling far behind the increase in risk from the changing climate. The quality, design and use of homes across the UK must be improved now to address the challenges of climate change. Doing so will also improve health, wellbeing and comfort, including for vulnerable groups such as the elderly and those living with chronic illnesses".

And it is not just about being future fit, as highlighted by a 2018 [white paper by the All Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) for healthy homes and buildings](#) which says "Houses and buildings that cause or exacerbate health conditions cost the economy and our society each and every year: in healthy life years, reliance and use of healthcare services, educational attendance and attainment and work productivity and absenteeism".

Housing overview

UK Homes

There are around 30 million homes in the UK, most of which will still be around in 2050, and so we will benefit from any improvements to them for many years to come.

Most households live in houses and one in five households live in flats (most commonly in blocks of three storeys or less). Around 90% of owner occupiers live in a house compared with 63% of private renters and 55% of social renters ([English Housing Survey 2017-18](#)).

Barnet (the largest London borough by population) has around 400 thousand residents living in 150 thousand households, most of which (60%) are owned outright or with a mortgage. Private rentals make up 28% and social rentals the remaining 12% (social rentals are owned or maintained by a local council, housing association (private registered provider), charitable trust or local housing company and are occupied by a tenant or group of tenants).



Energy Efficiency

Use of gas for warming homes and providing hot water contributes significantly to household emissions.

Shifting housing to 100% renewable energy for heat and power will be achieved through a mix of central and local solutions. In Barnet, there is currently around 4 gigawatt hours (GWh) of locally produced renewable energy available in the area. This compares to the official target of 68 GWh and the FoE target of 132 GWh.

While moving away from gas is not a short term solution for the majority of home-owners and renters, and doing it will require support and advice from central and local government, more immediate results can be achieved by making our houses more energy efficient so that we use less gas and emit fewer emissions.

Energy efficiency data is only easily available for homes that have an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) and so there is a lack of quality data about all housing stock and actual energy usage. Homes are only required to have an EPC when built, sold or rented, which means the many privately owned homes that have not recently been sold are unlikely to have a certificate and owners will not have information about the efficiency of their home.

Based on the available data, according to the [Office for National Statistics](#), fewer than half of assessed homes in both England (42%) and Wales (37%) have an EPC rating of C or higher (the higher the rating the more efficient the house is and the lower the bills should be on a rating from A to G). [Flats and maisonettes](#) are on average more energy efficient than terraced, semi-detached and detached houses. Social rented dwellings are more energy efficient for all property types (compared to private rented and owner-occupied).

A 2019 article on [energy efficiency in the private rented](#) sector says that “the private rented sector has the largest proportion of the most energy inefficient homes (6.3% are F and G rated properties, compared to around 0.7% of social housing). Nearly half (45.7%) of households living in such properties are in fuel poverty. Improving the energy efficiency of private rented homes will not only improve comfort and reduce energy bills but will reduce ill health”.

[Government guidance](#) says that landlords of domestic private rented properties have to comply with the 2018 ‘Minimum Level of Energy Efficiency’ standard (EPC band E). However, this a potential gap between the minimum level of band E and the need to be C or higher.

A household is said to be in fuel poverty when its members cannot afford to keep adequately warm at a reasonable cost, given their income.

The Government proposes to close this gap by setting new targets to ensure all new lets have an EPC rating of at least C by 2025, and by 2028 for existing lets. This already seems to be encouraging some [landlords to buy higher efficient properties](#), and with a growing number of banks and building societies offering lower mortgage rates to landlords buying more energy efficient properties there may be further growth in purchases of newer, more energy efficient properties.



Looking at Barnet EPC data, existing houses have a median energy efficiency score of around 55/100 (band D) compared to new homes which are above 80 (band B) (you can check the scores for your part of Barnet [here](#) (see figure 7)).

In Barnet, only [42% of homes](#) are designated as well insulated – less than the best performing similar London Borough with 50% and significantly below the official target of 89% and the FoE target of 100%. Poor insulation means we waste money and produce more emissions.

The age of a dwelling has the biggest impact on its energy efficiency, with newer homes much more likely than older homes to have an EPC rating of C or above. According to Barnet Council, over two thirds of Barnet's housing stock was built before 1944 and the carbon emissions associated with the heating of Barnet's older housing stock creates a higher than average contribution to the borough's overall carbon emissions compared to the rest of London.

As around 88% of homes are privately owned (including the 28% which are private rentals), making all of Barnet's homes more healthy will need owners to act. However, an ONS survey found less than a fifth of people in Great Britain (19%) were considering improving their home's energy efficiency. Of those who were not considering any improvements, the most common reason for this was believing their home was already efficient enough (35%), followed by not owning their own home (29%) and changes costing too much money (28%).

However, according to a February 2022 [news report](#), high energy prices might be persuading more people to consider green home improvements, although knowing where to begin is an issue for many.

So clearly there needs to be more effort made to help owners understand the actual efficiency of their property and what needs to be done, including what can be done at low cost for immediate impact.

Healthy Homes - More than Energy Efficiency

Ill-health from cold or damp homes

According to the [energy saving trust](#) "National Energy Action estimates that 10,000 deaths each year are attributable to living in a cold home, similar to the number of people who die from breast or prostate cancer each year. Moreover, work undertaken by the Building Research Establishment (BRE) highlights that cold-related illnesses from privately rented F and G rated properties costs the NHS £35 million per year".

As well as cold homes causing ill-health, damp homes are also a problem. Barnet Council provides [advice about condensation](#) and its link to health. "Condensation can be an indication that something has gone wrong with the property, or the way in which tenants are living is causing too much moisture vapour and not airing the property enough. If left, condensation can turn into damp and mould which is not good



for health...damp can be caused due to a fault in a property e.g. leaky roof, burst pipe or faulty damp proof coursing can cause rising damp and penetrative damp”.

It is not just faulty homes that cause damp, our actions can also contribute: “Behaviours such as drying clothes indoors, cooking without lids on pots and pans, not heating the house adequately and bathing/showering with all the windows shut creates water vapour in the air inside the property, and if is not aerated and adequately heated, this could then turn to damp”.

And the solution doesn't seem to be difficult and doesn't cost much: “This type of condensation damp and mould caused by behaviours can often be fixed by:

- cleaning the affected areas before making simple behavioural changes
- put lids on pans when boiling foods
- opening windows after having a shower to aerate the room
- close doors to the rest of the house if possible when cooking
- if you have furniture very close to a cold wall, water vapour can become trapped and condense behind these, creating damp and mould. If you notice that this has happened, clean the condensation/damp and move the furniture forward by roughly 3-4 inches.”

Water

Barnet lies within an area that is suffering from serious water stress, where current or future demand for household water is, or is likely to take, a high proportion of the effective rainfall which contributes to supply. Protecting and enhancing our streams and reducing water demand (through increased water efficiency and behaviour change) are pressing issues. However, the focus of Government and Local Authorities seems to be mainly on energy efficiency of homes rather than energy and water efficiency.

A significant amount of water is wasted in homes from dripping taps, leaky loos and a range of behaviours. Water companies have targets to significantly reduce the water consumption in homes as well as reducing leaks in the streets. [Affinity Water](#) provides advice, free water saving devices and water efficiency checks. Reducing the amount of heated water (e.g. by taking a slightly shorter shower) helps reduce gas consumption, emissions and bills.

Waste

Households are a source of other forms of waste. We throw a lot of stuff into our bins but in Barnet now [less than 30%](#) is reused, recycled or composted (compared to the best similar borough at 49%, the official target of 68% and the FoE target of 100%) and the non-recycled waste goes to landfill or incinerators costing money and increasing emissions. Much of the focus of the council is on collection of waste rather than on reducing waste or increasing composting.



Consumption

When considering the wider supply chain, household consumption accounts for more emissions and waste than considered above. Our consumption footprint is much greater than most of us are aware – when we buy a coffee from a barista do we understand how much energy and water is used in the production and transportation of coffee beans and how this compares to a cup of tea? From fast fashion to food, we buy a lot of stuff that gets thrown away.

Retrofit - Skills Gap and policy failure

[It is estimated](#) that to meet Net Zero 2050 targets the home retrofit market needs to decarbonise 8 homes a minute for the next 29 years. One barrier to this is a lack of skills, about which the Committee for Climate Change observed “The chopping and changing of UK Government policy has inhibited skills development in housing design, construction and in the installation of new measures”.

Not only has there been a lack of policy consistency [Schemes have under-delivered](#) with the Green Homes Grant scheme being described by MPs as “botched” and cuts to grants have “decimated” the industry leading to it being difficult to find an installer.

These factors are likely to contribute to slow initial progress on retrofitting and so it is important to consider what can be done now to help make our homes healthy.

Cost of Living crisis

Unhealthy homes that waste energy increase the risk of households experiencing fuel poverty. In 2018 the percentage of households across the borough of Barnet who were [experiencing fuel poverty](#) (based on the ‘Low income, high cost’ methodology) were 11.8%, compared to 11.4% across London and 10.3% across England.

With predicted increases in energy costs combined with wider inflation, the issue is wider than just fuel poverty with reports of people having to choose between [“heating and eating”](#). Waiting for the longer term benefits of retrofitting will not address the immediate challenge facing millions across the country.

Conclusions

Unhealthy homes are wasteful, cost money, increase emissions, and can make us ill. Making our homes healthy will also have wider benefits including creating green local jobs, reducing demand on the NHS, helping contribute to net zero and lowering household bills.

However, solutions often seem to look at individual aspects of homes rather than taking a joined up view. We need consistent policies based upon a real understanding of the issues supported by good data and clear, consistent advice and support for homeowners and private landlords.



The reports from the [Committee on Climate Change](#) (CCC) and the [All Party Parliamentary Group](#) (APPG) both make recommendations but it is not clear whether they are being implemented.

The Barnet Sustainability Strategy Framework seems to focus on improving the energy efficiency of council owned property to help achieve net-zero council operations by 2030. There appears to be little detail about what the council will do to ensure that privately owned homes reduce emissions beyond providing advice.

With respect to renewable energy, the framework says that the council “will work to develop a proposal to install and generate electricity from solar panels on Barnet’s buildings...explore alternative energy generation...assess the potential for the implementation of district heating”.

Development of the council sustainability strategy provides the opportunity to provide detail about how the council will help improve the health of Barnet’s homes including, for example,

- Appointing a lead officer for healthy homes
- Providing a [one stop shop for trusted advice](#), support and help to assess and improve the health of our homes
- Helping develop a local network of suppliers for healthy homes
- Helping secure grants for retrofitting private homes

While local councils can play a significant role in driving change there are many questions that need to be addressed at the national level including (but not limited to):

- What is the role of business? Will the polluter pays principle lead to gas companies being held responsible for the emissions of their customers, food manufacturers and supermarkets for food waste and packaging waste, water companies for water leaks in homes?
- How can businesses and councils collaborate to help improve the health of all homes?
- Why is the cost of gas for homes significantly cheaper than electricity? Are there structural changes to how prices are set that should be changed to support decarbonisation of homes?
- Is policy sufficient to address the issues quickly enough?
- Are the CCC and APPG recommendations being acted upon?
- How will change be funded?

