

The Need for Neighbourhood Renewal

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Nearly half a million council dwellings are classed as in 'poor condition' by the English Housing Condition Survey (EHCS). The EHCS defines poor condition as being unfit, lacking in basic amenities or in disrepair, that is a need for urgent repairs to the external fabric of the property estimated to cost in excess of £1,000.

Perhaps less visible than problem council estates are the 2.4 million private sector dwellings defined by the Survey as in poor condition. Nearly a million of these are 'unsuitable for human habitation' within the meaning of section 604 of the Housing Act 1985, but three-quarters *are* lived in. The majority of these houses were built before 1919 in the inner neighbourhoods of Britain's once great industrial cities, and they are part of the more than six million pre-1919 houses in Britain, comprising over 30 per cent of the total stock.

The EHCS estimates that, in England as a whole, 909,000 dwellings are unfit (4.8 per cent of the total stock) 463,000 lack one or more of the basic amenities (2.5 per cent) and 2.4 million are in poor repair (12.9 per cent). Just over 200,000 (1.1 per cent) failed on all three criteria and 730,000 (3.9 per cent) failed on two or more. In total nearly 2.9 million dwellings (15 per cent of the stock) are in poor condition in England. To this can be added about one quarter of a million dwellings in Wales (Welsh Office, 1988) and probably a similar number in Scotland, although there is no survey there.

The EHCS and other sources help us understand the scale of the bricks and mortar problem. The relationship between condition and tenure is described by the EHCS in terms of proportions of dwellings unfit, lacking in basic amenities or in serious disrepair. On this basis 42 per cent of dwellings in the private rented sector, 13 per cent of owner-occupied dwellings, 11 per cent of local authority dwellings and 7 per cent of housing association dwellings are in poor condition. For all tenures a strong relationship between dwelling age and poor condition is apparent, but regardless of age, dwellings in the private

rented sector are proportionately in poorest condition compared with other tenures. Similarly 90 per cent of vacant dwellings in poor condition are also in private ownership. However over one-half of the post-1919 dwellings in poor condition are in the local authority sector. Figure 2.1 summarises the condition of houses in England.

Figure 2.1 Dwellings in poor condition by tenure and age

	Owner occupied	Private rented	Local authority	Housing association	Vacant	All dwellings
Pre 1919	1010	427	48	17	243	1745
1919-1944	344	60	169	8	45	626
Post-1944	162	36	258	6	35	497
All dwellings	1516	523	475	31	323	2868

thousands

Note: local authority includes new town.

Source: *English House Condition Survey, 1986* (pub.1988).

From the EHCS data some simple conclusions can be drawn which put the housing condition problem into perspective:

- 15 per cent of all dwellings in England are in poor condition;
- 61 per cent of all dwellings in poor condition were built before 1919, 22 per cent are of inter-war construction, and 17 per cent are post-war;
- of all dwellings in poor condition, 53 per cent are in owner-occupation, 18 per cent are privately rented, 17 per cent are local authority dwellings, 1 per cent are housing association dwellings, and 11 per cent are vacant;
- 35 per cent of pre-1919 dwellings are in poor condition;
- the number of pre-1919 dwellings in poor condition (1.7 million) is beginning to be approached by the number of inter-war and post-war dwellings in poor condition (1.1 million). Of these newer dwellings, 45 per cent are in owner occupation and 38 per cent are local authority stock.

These government figures demonstrate a very substantial housing problem, and a comparison of the 1981 and 1986 English House Condition Surveys shows little overall change in numbers of dwellings in poor condition, despite some programmes of improvement works in the public and private sectors. However, since 1981, less than one-third of houses then identified as suitable for improvement in area action programmes (ie in Housing Action Areas or General Improvement Areas) had received any attention by 1986. This total

backlog of disrepair was calculated in 1981 as £35 million, and is now calculated as about £50 million at 1989 prices (Perry, 1989).

The neighbourhood environment

The House Condition Survey also provides evidence of two other dimensions relevant to neighbourhood renewal – people and the environment.

With regard to the environment, EHCS surveyors were asked to assess whether action was needed: to repair roads or pavements; to repair fences, gardens and common areas around dwellings; to improve lighting, tree planting or landscaping; to clear or improve vacant or derelict sites; to provide public green space; to provide private gardens; or to tackle intrusive industry or traffic. A dwelling was considered to be located in a poor environment if action was required on four or more of these items.

Some two million English dwellings (10.6 per cent of the total) were considered to be located in ‘poor environments’. They were not evenly distributed throughout the country. Inner London contained the highest proportion of dwellings in poor environments, with a quarter of its dwellings located in such areas. The North West, Outer London and Yorkshire and Humberside had higher than average proportions of their dwellings in poor environments (respectively 15 per cent, 13 per cent and 13 per cent) .

In terms of proximity of dwellings in poor condition, almost 60 per cent of the dwellings in poor condition (excluding detached houses) had immediate neighbours in similar or worse condition. This grouping together of dwellings in poor condition was more prevalent in local authority housing than in other tenures. Almost three-quarters of the poor condition, local authority stock was in blocks of flats in similar condition.

As well as conventional measures of condition, the incidence of vandalism, graffiti and the dumping of rubbish in the common areas of blocks of flats was recorded. Some 6 per cent of flats generally were affected, but half of all local authority flats were affected and in 10 per cent of the latter vandalism, graffiti, litter and dumped rubbish is judged to be extensive.

The majority of dwellings in poor condition were in neighbourhoods where the rest of the housing was in generally good condition, but about 11 per cent of the stock in poor condition was in areas where the majority of the housing was run down. An area of run down housing is defined as one which required comprehensive repair/improvement or clearance, or selective repair/improvements and clearance. Poor condition dwellings were more likely to be in association with other dwellings in poor condition in areas of older property, in areas of flats rather than houses and in areas where the

majority of the property was owned by the local authority. The implications are that two and a half million dwellings in poor condition are in neighbourhoods of mixed condition housing. Around one-half of a million dwellings in poor condition in England are in seriously run-down neighbourhoods.

Social conditions

The EHCS household interview survey shows that elderly people, ethnic minority households, single people, single parents, those on low incomes and tenants of private landlords are worst housed.

Households headed by someone aged 75 and over suffered worst conditions in terms of housing unfitness and lack of basic amenities. Although they made up only 10 per cent of households, nationally they were three times more likely than other households to live in dwellings lacking basic amenities and one and a half times more likely to live in unfit dwellings. Elderly persons living alone were more likely to occupy housing in poor condition than elderly couples or similarly aged people in larger households. Nineteen per cent of single pensioners had houses which were in poor condition compared with 14 per cent of pensioner households of more than one person. At the regional level higher proportions of households aged 75 and over lived in poor condition dwellings in the north and rest of England compared with the South East. This is explained by the South East having lower proportions of this group of households and dwellings in poor condition than the other two regions.

Poor housing and unemployment are related. More than one-fifth of the unemployed lived in housing in poor condition and they were 50 per cent more likely to live in such housing compared with all households at the national level. But this picture showed great variation at the regional level. Over a quarter of the unemployed in the north lived in poor condition housing

Figure 2.2 Regional differences in groups of households living in poor condition housing

% households in poor condition

	North	Rest of England	South East	All regions
Aged 75 and over	21.9	20.2	16.7	19.5
Unemployed	27.4	23.6	12.2	21.7
Income less than £3,000	22.0	20.0	13.6	18.3

Source: *English House Condition Survey, 1986* (pub. 1988).

compared with only 12 per cent of the unemployed in the South East (Figure 2.2). This difference is not only attributable to the higher proportion of unemployed in the north. In this region they were 60 per cent more likely than all households to live in housing in poor condition whereas in the South East they were as likely as other households to do so. In part this is explained by the majority of the unemployed in the South East being council tenants in housing which was, on average, in better condition than in the private sector.

The worst housed were single people below retirement age, 23 per cent of whom lived in dwellings which are in poor condition. The EHCS showed that a high proportion of this group was living in private rented accommodation.

Ethnic minorities, particularly from the New Commonwealth and Pakistan, lived in housing in poor condition compared with other households. The proportion of ethnic minority households living in unfit housing was two and a half times higher than other households (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3 Ethnic origin of head of households living in dwellings in poor condition

% households in dwellings in poor condition

	Lacking basic amenities	Unfit	In poor repair	All households
Birthplace of household head				
United Kingdom	2.0	3.8	12.5	91.3
Other Europe	1.2	2.6	11.3	2.7
New Commonwealth and Pakistan	2.5	9.3	21.9	4.9
Other	0.9	2.3	13.3	1.1
All households	2.0	4.0	13.1	100

Source: *English House Condition Survey, 1986* (pub. 1988).

The EHCS (p.44) notes that ‘poor housing was related *above all* to income’, (my emphasis) where household income is taken as net annual income of household head and partner. Half of all households lacking amenities, one-third of those in unfit housing and 27 per cent of those whose homes were in poor repair had net incomes of less than £3,000. The majority of these households lived in rented accommodation (Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4 Income of households occupying dwellings in poor condition by tenure

thousands

£	Owner occupiers	Local private renting	Housing authority tenants	Association tenants	All households in poor condition housing
0-2999	335	267	201	12	815
3000-5999	366	174	175	20	735
6000-8999	342	99	74	--	515
9000-11,999	252	70	36	1	359
12000-14999	171	18	3	--	192
15000 and over	95	13	--	--	108
All	1561	641	489	33	2724

Note: Local authority includes new town.

Source: *English House Condition Survey, 1986* (pub. 1988).

In summary, the following points can be made:

- in absolute terms, over three quarters of a million households occupied housing in poor condition and had an income of less than £3,000 per annum.
- one and a half million households occupied housing in poor condition and had an income of less than £6,000 per annum.
- over one and a half million owner-occupiers lived in housing in poor condition; a further half a million private renters lived in housing in poor condition; a total of 2.2 million households lived in privately-owned housing in poor condition.
- three quarters of a million owner-occupier households, living in housing in poor condition, have incomes of less than £6,000 p.a; nearly half a million private renting households were in a similar situation.

These figures are for England alone, and do not include Scotland or Wales. However a similar magnitude of problem is likely.

Mortgage arrears and rent arrears

Renewal schemes are invariably in neighbourhoods with low levels of economic activity and with substantial poverty, and therefore involve an important element of subsidy to allow rents to be 'affordable', mortgages to be paid in low-cost ownership schemes, and repairs to be undertaken in

owner-occupied property. Although such affordability is a key issue facing the social housing sector today, there is little consensus over its appropriate definition in terms of the proportion of income which can reasonably be expected to be spent on housing. Without entering this debate two statistical items demonstrates problems of affordability: rises in rent arrears over the past four years (Figure 2.5), and building society mortgage arrears (Figure 2.6)

Rent arrears is the main debt problem in Britain – one million households, five per cent of all households, have rent debt. Sixteen per cent of tenants have problems with rent arrears (Berthoud and Kempson, 1990). The problem is mainly one for council tenants, more than 9 out of 10 rent arrears are to local authorities.

Mortgage arrears have also grown dramatically (Figure 2.6). Both kinds of arrears are known to rise as unemployment rates rise, and mortgage arrears are also vulnerable to interest rate rises.

Figure 2.5 Trends in rent arrears since 1984 (by type of authority)

Figure 2.6 Building Society mortgage arrears

	<i>United Kingdom 1980-1987</i>							
	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987
Number of loans outstanding (millions)	5.4	5.5	5.7	5.9	6.4	6.6	7.0	7.1
Number of loans in arrears by:								
6-12 months	13,490	18,720	23,790	25,580	41,940	48,790	45,250	47,710
more than 12 months	na	na	4,810	6,540	8,260	11,210	11,310	12,630
Number of possessions(a)	3,020	4,240	5,950	7,320	10,930	16,490	20,930	22,630

(a) Including properties voluntarily surrendered.

Source: *BSA Bulletin No.54*, April 1988.

Conclusion

This short analysis of statistics, mainly from the English House Condition Survey, confirms that there is a serious national housing problem in Britain, and that to understand the problem one needs also to consider both the socio-economic situation of the residents, and the environment outside the dwellings – that is, the neighbourhood.