



all party parliamentary group  
for healthy homes and buildings

## The importance of healthy homes and buildings to mental health and wellbeing

*Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> April 3.00-4.30pm, Committee Room 5, House of Commons*

### NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

**Welcome and introductions from Jim Shannon MP, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Healthy Homes and Buildings.**

**The digital presentations from the speakers can be viewed at <http://devoconnect.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Combined-slides.pdf>.**

**Elena Marco**, Head of the Department of Architecture and Built Environment, Centre for Sustainable Planning and Environments, UWE

- Important to educate the next generation of builders.
- 1/6 in England have common mental illnesses.
- Important to build 'Pathways of Influence' to alleviate particular health problems e.g. encouraging physical activity, allow for more social engagement/privacy, autonomy.
- Discussions should not be confined to the house – structure of community is as important as the building itself. Social / cultural / environmental factors aggravate housing problems.
- 1/3 of housing in substantial disrepair
- Problem is particularly acute for elderly – 80 year olds spend 80% of time at home. A problem that will only become more acute with the UK's ageing population.
- BRE – Unhealthy homes cost NHS £600m a year.
- Talking of quality and comfort vs space is a false dichotomy – 'better' space does not necessarily mean more of it. EXAMPLE: In Spain, properties are the same size as in UK, but legal obligation to provide ancillary storage space. Allows for residents to better organise their space, opportunity to alleviate mental health issues such as anxiety.
- Important to approach housing design in a holistic sense, thinking in greater detail about the use and function of rooms. Need to move away from defining quality and

value of housing on number of rooms and towards judging what is done in these rooms and the benefit that its design, rather than just its size, can have on residents.

- Future-proofing against climate change needs to include retro-fitting ones already in existence.
- There were four concluding statements:
  - Housings impact on mental health cannot be viewed in isolation but must be seen as part of a broader social network.
  - Adaptability and flexibility in building design are critical to accommodate tenants throughout their entire lives
  - Development of retrofit / energy agenda
  - Consider future space needs of buildings when designing

**Sara MacLennan**, Head of Evidence and Analysis, What Works Centre for Wellbeing

- What Works Centre for Wellbeing works with twelve consortium universities and other stakeholders to systematically pull together the research and literature on subjects related to wellbeing and to share information on what has shown evidence of working and the cost-effectiveness of initiatives.
- Wellbeing can be measured using objective measures or as a subjective assessment of a person's life. Subjective measures mean asking people how satisfied / happy they are with their lives.
- Unexpected noise can have a considerable impact on wellbeing as well as mental health – humans can adapt to other changes in environments but not to this.
- The key messages from the presentation included:
  - There is some initial evidence of the links between housing and wellbeing.
  - Aspects which are important for wellbeing go beyond the physical design of the house themselves, such as the community, social relations, wider environment, even commute.
  - Detail from DCLG analysis of the [English Housing Survey](#): Debt in relation to housing was the factor found to have the highest impact on wellbeing with the potential for it to reduce wellbeing by 0.6 points (on 1-10 scale). The cost of repairs to buildings has been shown to decrease wellbeing by 0.03 points.
- The What Works Centre is at the early stages of gathering evidence around 'What Works' - including cost effectiveness. What Works Centre for Wellbeing have recently completed a [scoping review](#) (which can be read at <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/2017/01/04/housing-and-wellbeing-special-focus/>) identifying where the gaps in research related to wellbeing and housing. A systematic review of housing interventions for vulnerable groups will be produced later this year. This piece of work will include analysis of the cost-effectiveness of these different interventions.

**Richard Mazuch**, Senior Director of Design and Innovation, IBI Group

- Consideration of the health impact of buildings in construction and retro-fitting is more important than ever before.
- Purpose of IBI Group's Design and Innovation department is to review research and occasionally fund it with the aim of identifying the most effective.
- Sonic environment, temperature and light effect all of us as well as our infrastructure – sleep deprivation costs the UK economy £40m per annum.
- NHS and social care in crisis – smarter building design will reduce hospital bed-blocking and independence in elderly. Houses need to be designed or retrofitted with assistive technology to reflect the illnesses of those that are living in them e.g. the home of someone who is bipolar will look very different to someone suffering from dementia.
- Essential to recognise that buildings need to be designed to reflect those that live in them. Judging senses and the diagnostics should govern how we build homes [see link to presentation above].
- 'Salutogenic House of Tomorrow' project incorporates these new assistive technologies and gives an insight into what the future of healthy housing could look like [see link to presentation above].

**Philippa Gill**, Partner, Verdextra

- Humans are ultimately mammals – our optimum habitat is not urban. Despite this, 70% will live in cities soon. Essential to 'start with the animal' and work to ensure that homes and buildings provide for key factors that influence life expectancy and wellbeing – sleep, exercise, diet, social interaction.
- City dwellers have 40% higher risk of depression, over 20% more anxiety, and double the risk of schizophrenia. Mental illness is now the leading cause of long-term disability worldwide.
- The separation between the physical and mental is false – they both stem from the same root causes. For example, the University of Edinburgh has found that an increase in access to green spaces can reduce the costs associated with the treatment of mental health as well as addressing the causes of physical ailments.
- Need for common-sense construction – need for someone in every construction team / project whose role is to ensure that health considerations are not forgotten when constructing new buildings.

**Jim Shannon MP, Chair of the APPG, thanked the speakers and opened the debate to questions and comments, which included the following:**

- The danger is that the unravelling of regulation, through the Greater Repeal Act, will

lead to a fall in building standard; even now, as an architect, the regulatory framework that a project is built around needs to be contained in the brief otherwise there is a danger it will not be realised.

- There are plans to incorporate the findings of 10 Healthy Towns into the national policy framework. Public Health England would like to see the 10 Healthy Towns initiative influence housing regulatory framework. However, there is a need to produce evidence first to demonstrate the initiatives' effectiveness. There are expected over the next few years; the project is funded until 2029.
- The government has made efforts to demonstrate that it is concerned about issues pertaining to healthy buildings including indoor air quality. However, this is undermined by their push to sell public land; unclear if are in fact 'thought leaders' in this agenda. Other institutions also have a role in this process – NHS need to revise use of ancillary land to benefit people / patients; lack of awareness in local government regarding construction of healthy homes.
- Important not to simply blame house-builders for the problem. There is a need to work collaboratively across the housing on these issues. Furthermore, difficulty of relying on retro-fitting is that the housing stock is so large and typologies so varied that the task is very difficult. Need to find ways to address the scale of this problem and find investment solutions are reflective of this variety.
- While addressing the problem of retro-fitting on a national scale is its main stumbling, it is an issue that must be addressed. Over the coming decades, the overwhelming majority of people will live in houses that are already built today and new builds in the past have only ever added at most 1% to the housing stock – retro-fitting is key in some form to addressing healthy homes and buildings.
- There is a need to develop a means of assessing the 'value' of a property beyond its market price but reflecting indoor air quality, fuel efficiency etc. Need for this to be in the public domain.

**The meeting closed with thanks to all speakers and to DevoConnect for arranging the meeting.**