

UNDERSTANDING DEMOGRAPHIC, SPATIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS ON FUTURE AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEMAND

Paper Two – Living in Affordable Housing

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This is the second of a suite of eight papers drawing on research carried out into demographic, spatial and economic impacts on future affordable housing demand. For full details on the methods and findings of the research see the accompanying source document.

This paper examines what the residents of affordable housing think of their housing. It initially sets out what is known about design preferences overall before exploring what affordable housing residents particularly like and dislike about their homes and considers what could be done to improve the lives of those within these tenures. The paper examines the demographic, spatial and economic impacts driving tenant satisfaction and preferences.

This paper is based on research featuring predominantly social renting tenants, but also includes some shared owners. The paper does not cover tenure aspirations as these are to be dealt with in paper 6 of this series.

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Key Findings

- *Families in social housing are often overcrowded, and even when not often want larger homes.*
- *Houses are more popular than flats, though in London more tenants are willing to accept living in flats.*
- *Private gardens and increased storage are sought after by all kinds of households, but especially by families.*
- *Lack of sound insulation is an issue for all ages of tenants and in all property types but especially in flats.*
- *Living in a nice quiet area is a key priority for most social tenants. Transport and shopping facilities are also important, as are schools for those with children.*
- *Older tenants are generally most happy with their accommodation. Downsizing and moves into sheltered housing are most often associated with widowhood and can be a very positive move for some tenants.*

1. Introduction

This paper examines what kind of affordable housing people want, which aspects of their homes they like and don't like and what could be done to improve housing to better meet the needs of the tenants (and shared owners) of today and tomorrow. It does this first by looking at what research into the private sector has found, and then by exploring a range of data sources including primary research undertaken for this project in order to understand the main priorities of social tenants.¹

As an integral part of their business planning, the private sector, including developers, has historically carried out research into what homebuyers want from housing. This can include fine detail of demand and is evidenced in what purchasers are ultimately willing to pay. This paper examines what such research can tell us about the demands of modern households before proceeding to draw on original research undertaken for this project to ascertain if the residents of affordable housing have the same priorities as private buyers, and if not, how they might differ.

Existing literature and telephone interviews with developers found the following factors to be important to today's households:

- *Dwelling types.* These are strongly influenced by family circumstance and life stage. Most people prefer detached dwellings, but middle income households preferred new developments within older terraced style housing and 49% of first time buyers are prepared to live in terraces, and 30% flats (Nathaniel Lichfield 2005).
- *Property size.* Research has found small flats to be unpopular because they have too little space, and they are seen as likely to border on areas of crime (CABE 2005). However, affordability constraints have produced a new demand for very small flats. Older people can be attracted to single-floor living in a flat, provided that lifts are included; they also

¹ The research included a survey of existing tenants and shared owners, focus groups and interviews. For full details, see the source document.

prefer blocks specially designed for them, with good security measures and effective management. (CABE, 2005).

- *Internal space.* Larger rooms, often in preference to a larger number of smaller rooms, though also specialised small rooms for computers or utilities. Families want more separation between adult and child areas; others are more amenable to open-plan living. Roof spaces with usable lofts and basements are sought after (CABE, 2005).
- *Outdoor space.* Garden size is important for all life-stage groups and dwelling types, but especially for families. 75% of those surveyed preferred private over shared or communal space. Communal spaces are preferred where they are shared only with other similar households (e.g. older people). They are often criticised by residents for poor design and being merely decorative (CABE, 2005).
- *Kitchens and bathrooms.* It is becoming almost standard practice for developers to offer not only a fully-fitted kitchen, but also a hob, cooker and all white goods. In contrast with the social housing sector, the provision of an ensuite bathroom in two bedroom private dwellings is becoming widespread, with the provision of two ensuite bathrooms in properties over 1,000-1,200 square feet. Many ensuite bathrooms in practice contain a shower rather than a bath, for space and increasingly for environmental and lifestyle reasons.
- *Energy Efficiency.* There is a growing interest in Eco-homes. Recent research by CABE, WWF and HBOS revealed that 87% of buyers want to know if their homes are environmentally friendly, with 84% willing to pay 2% extra on the purchase price for an Eco-home (Sustainable Development Commission 2005).
- *Telecommunication.* This is one area where developers appeared to be unaware of specification issues becoming familiar to social housing landlords. The switchover from analogue to digital television signals will require not only new aerials/receivers on apartment blocks, but also new wiring to individual apartments. Social housing landlords are currently debating the appropriate technology, and service charge implications, of this change, but developers (who seldom retain the ongoing maintenance responsibility) appear unaware of this impending problem.
- *Neighbourhood.* The presence of local shops is highly valued. Being able to walk around the neighbourhood was cited as a benefit especially when it was perceived as engendering a sense of community (CABE, 2005). Problems with a neighbourhood can outweigh all other factors in choosing a home (Cole and Robinson 2003).
- *Parking.* Lack of car-parking in developments based on PPG3 principles were the most frustrating aspect for many residents- 45% complained about it spontaneously (CABE 2005). Oddly, consumer surveys rank parking as a very low priority in selecting a dwelling.
- *External appearance.* People do not want to live in 'featureless boxes'. Landscaping improves the perception of the house and the neighbourhood (CABE, 2005).

Whether these priorities are shared by residents of affordable housing however remains largely untested and unresearched. Those purchasing newly-built market housing tend to be financially better-off. Affordable housing residents may be less prepared to pay extra in their rent or service charges for certain fittings. There are differences in the types of households likely to be occupying the properties: For instance, most new two bedroom open market properties may be bought by young working singles and couples who might prefer showers to baths and have no

interest in a garden, whereas two bedroom social housing properties are likely to be rented to families with one or two children who may therefore have quite different priorities.

In terms of overall satisfaction, the Survey of English Housing suggests that social tenants are broadly satisfied with their neighbourhood (80% were satisfied or very satisfied, compared with 84% of private tenants and 89% of owner-occupiers) and similarly with their home (79% compared with 81% of private tenants and 95% of owner-occupiers). Similarly, the Housing Corporation's Existing Tenants Survey found that four fifths of respondents were satisfied with their current home and just 5% dissatisfied, with the highest levels of satisfaction found in Yorkshire and the Humber (94%) and the lowest in London (72%).

The rest of this paper aims to draw on the new research carried out for this project to explore the priorities, needs and preferences of those living in affordable housing, and how priorities differ with demographic, spatial and economic factors. It therefore examines in greater depth what drives satisfaction, and what residents of affordable housing want from their homes.

2. Larger homes

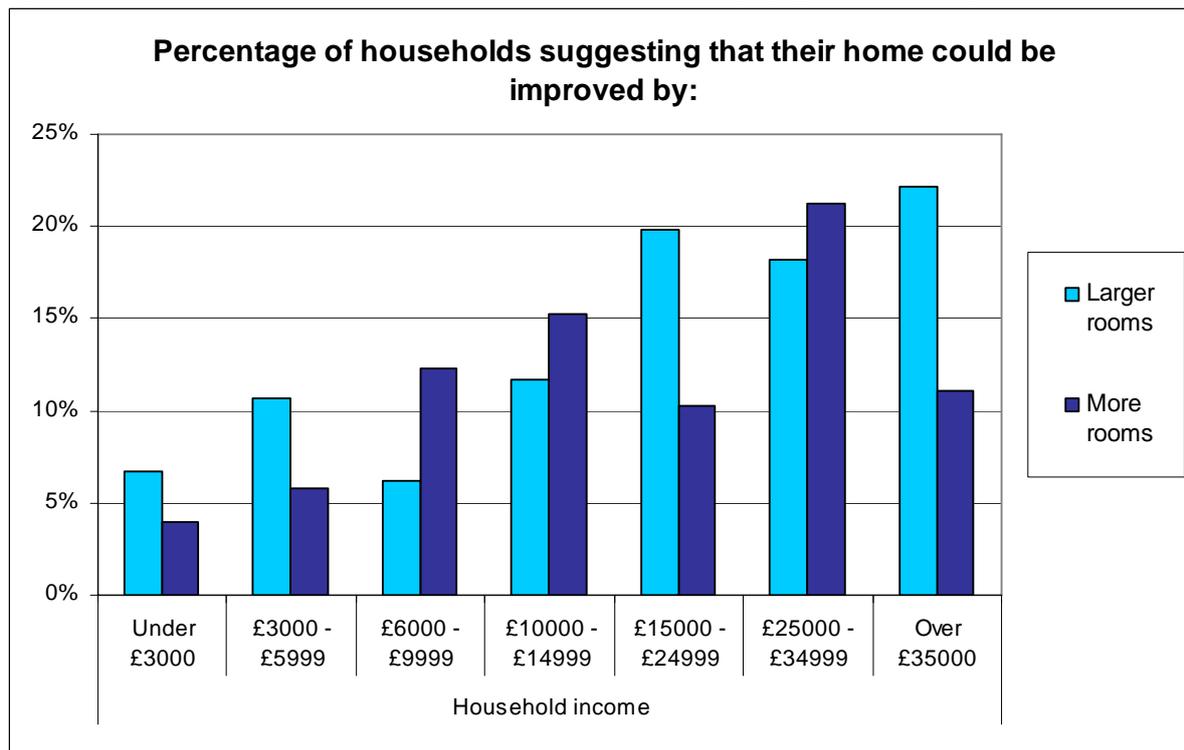
Perhaps unsurprisingly, complaints that their home was too small vastly outnumbered those from people perceiving their home to be too large. Overcrowding was, in most cases, the result of having had more children since taking on the tenancy, but being unable to move because they did not have high enough priority for a transfer.

Feelings that their home was too small were not restricted to those technically overcrowded. Other focus group participants commented that they really needed more space in order to accommodate non-resident children coming to visit, for other visitors, or in order to work from home. Looking to the future all these uses of space are likely to increase as greater numbers of children spend time between two homes and working from home becomes more common.

The survey found the commonest improvements desired to be larger rooms, and additional habitable rooms. Looking at responses in relation to income indicates that the employed and better-off households are the most likely to feel squeezed for space and storage at present (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1

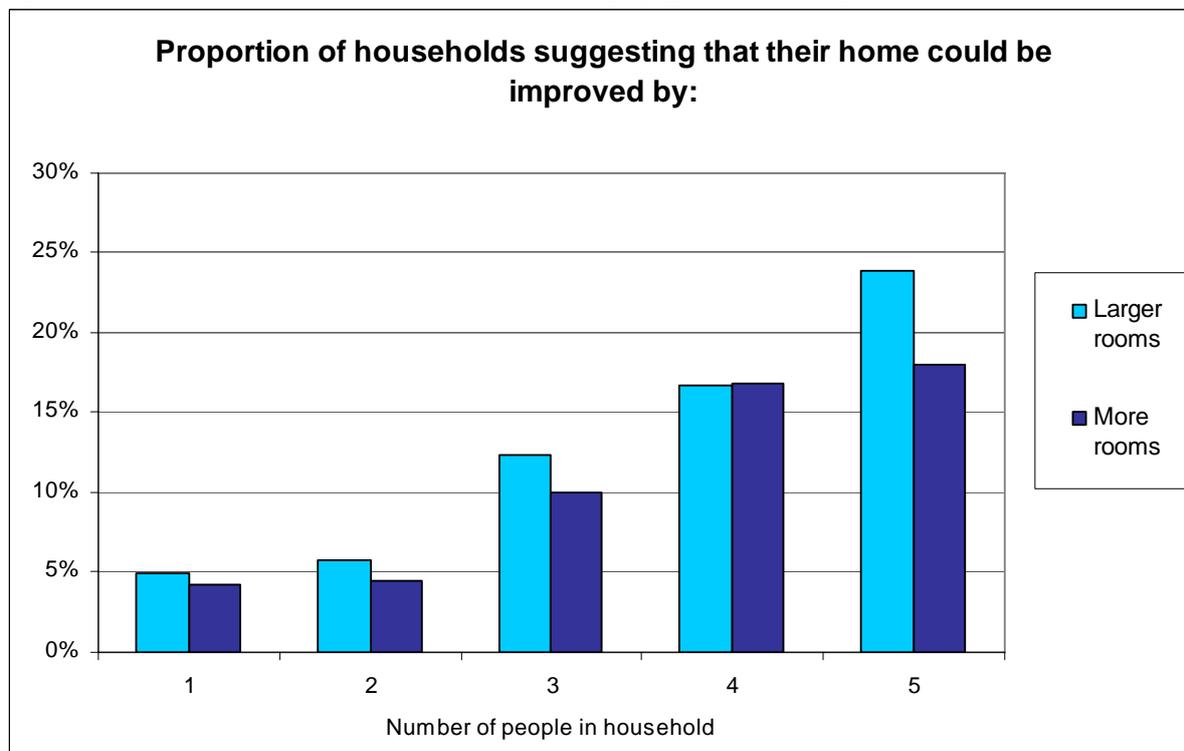
Source: BMRB survey of affordable housing residents, 2007



Whilst this could reflect the greater expectations of better-off households, it may also be attributed to the fact that, typically, these households are also the largest. Larger households tend to want more space (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2

Source: BMRB survey of affordable housing residents, 2007



As well as size and number of bedrooms, tenants also commented on more specific aspects of the size of their homes. Kitchens in particular were often seen as too small.

Lack of storage space was also a problem mentioned frequently, especially in flats. Again the survey found it to be families who were much more likely to mention this as an improvement they would like to see in their current home. All but one of the households in the survey identifying this need had children.

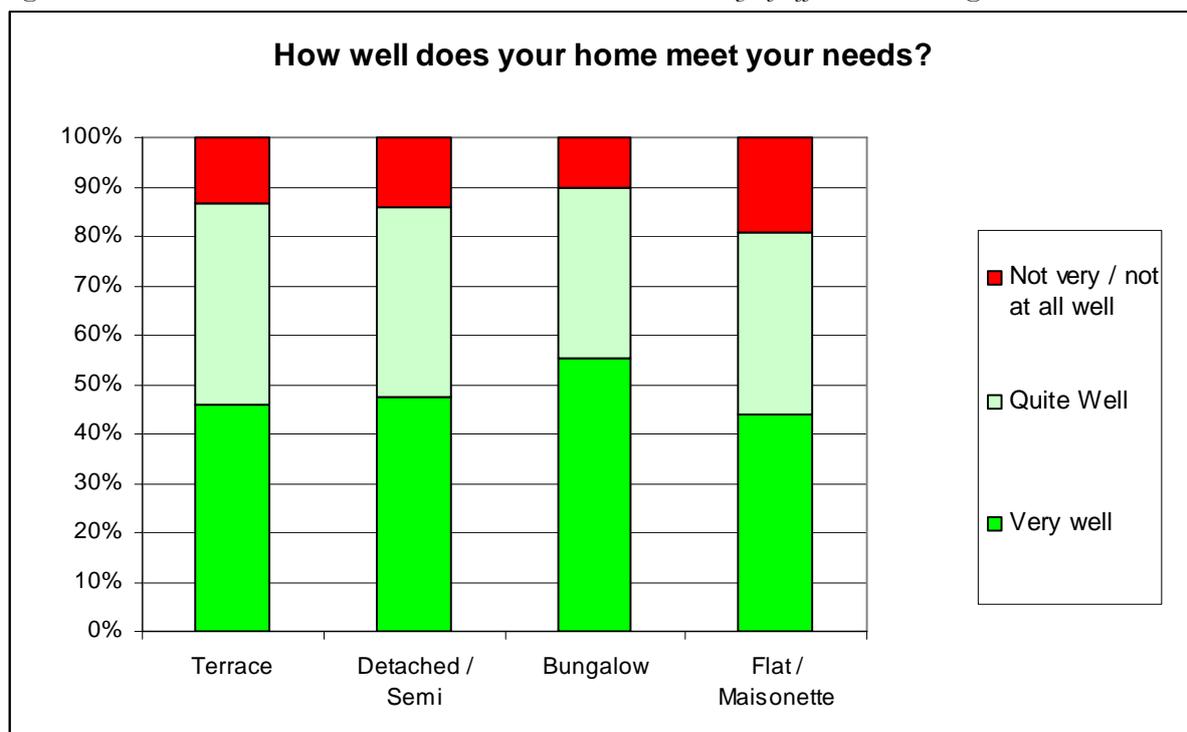
Several focus groups discussed the possibility that the lack of space would be felt more acutely in the future as people increased the amount of material possessions, such as computers, that they wanted to fit into their homes.

3. Houses rather than flats

The survey found that the proportion of households saying that their home did not meet their needs was higher for those in flats than for other types of accommodation though the difference is not stark (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1

Source: BMRB survey of affordable housing residents, 2007



The focus groups discussed various problems associated with flats. These were largely to do with noise from other tenants; upkeep of, and disputes over, communal areas; broken lifts; and a lack of private garden space. The design of flats sometimes meant that some rooms were without a window or adequate ventilation. There were also several discussions of problems with items falling from upper flats onto staircases, gardens or people down below.

Noise was a major issue brought up repeatedly. Many tenants had seen improved external insulation and double glazing installed in their home as part of the decent homes work being carried out. In many cases they appreciated this not so much for the thermal insulation

properties, but for the noise reduction provided. In flats, however, noise travels through internal walls which were often reported to be very thin and lacking sound insulation.

These problems are present to some extent in all high density accommodation. However the problems are likely to be heightened in mono-tenure social housing estates due to the high density of occupation, and the fact that a high proportion of the people are at home in the day and therefore using the space more intensely.²

It is also apparent that many tenants seeking to swap homes by means of a mutual exchange will only consider houses rather than flats. This leaves those in flats less able to move by this means, especially if they want to move to a house.³

4. Private gardens

In discussions about what tenants liked about their home, gardens were the subject brought up most often, and were very much appreciated by many that had them.

I like the front and the back gardens though. I can plant some vegetables there. Flowers as well.

(Birmingham focus group)

I have a nice ground-floor flat and a lovely garden, I am quite happy there, I have very good neighbours and they help me out, and I like to work in my garden so I am quite happy there.

(London focus group)

Unfortunately for some tenants, recurrent problems with communal gardens such as dog fouling, inadequate grass-cutting and anti-social behaviour made them difficult to use:

I don't use the gardens. I've known other people to, but they've nearly had things fall on their heads like cigarette ends coming out the windows, or CDs.

(Birmingham focus group)

The survey suggested that it is mainly families who have a strong desire for good gardens; four times as many households with children mentioned gardens when asked what would improve their home, as households without children.

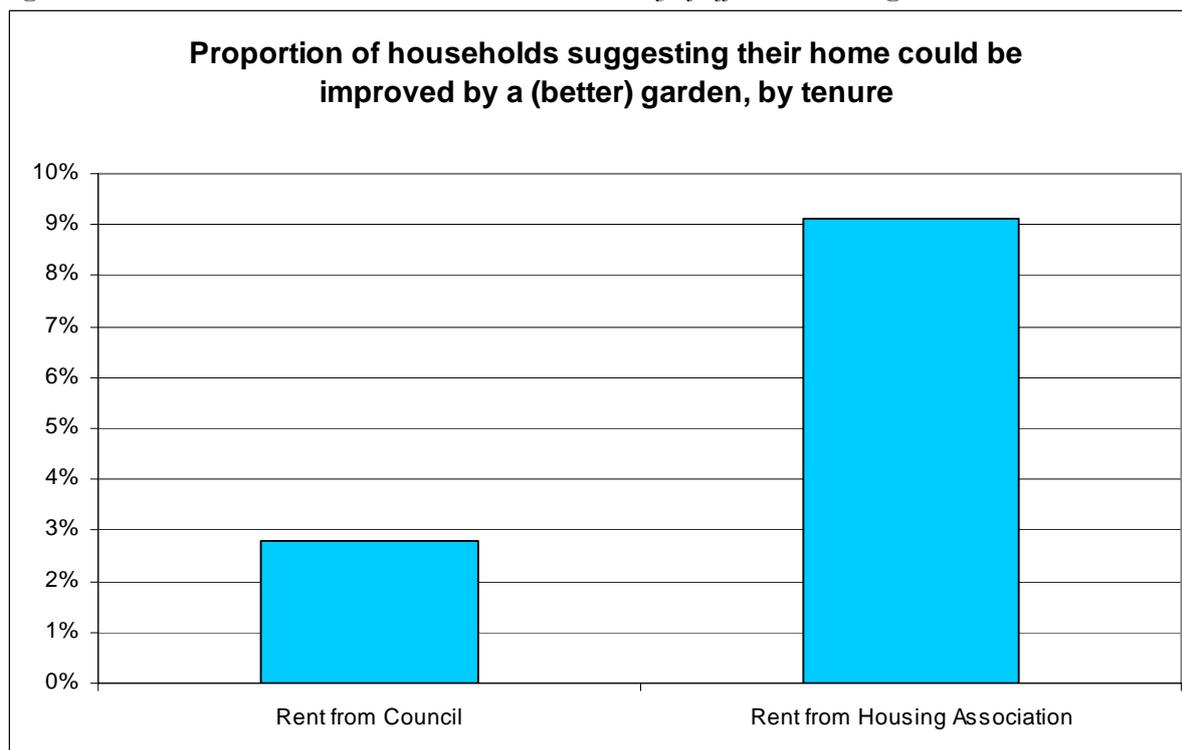
The value of gardens to families with children is well attested to in the research literature. Even so, recently-built affordable housing has done little to meet this need. Housing Association tenants (whose properties are, on the whole, newer than those of council tenants) were significantly more likely to say they wanted improvements to the garden, than council tenants. (Figure 4.1)

² 41% of social rented housing is flatted, around 70% of households contain no full-time worker and over a third contain children. All these figures are much higher than for private sector housing. In total, 25% of all children in social housing live in flats, as compared with only 5% in private housing (SEH 2005/6).

³ For further discussion on mutual exchanges, see paper 3 of this series.

Figure 4.1

Source: BMRB survey of affordable housing residents, 2007



5. Design and maintenance

Good design can make a huge impact on residents' quality of life, and subsequent maintenance issues that arise.

The main design issue that arose was lack of sound insulation. This was especially a problem in flats (see above) though also in some houses too, with many tenants reporting problems with noise carrying both between storeys and between walls.

Lack of adequate ventilation came up in several discussions. To compensate for inadequate ventilation, tenants often opened windows and doors onto stairwells, allowing noise and cooking smells to enter neighbouring properties and sparking disputes between neighbours.

Lack of parking was also a key issue for tenants in many urban areas, and rubbish collection in nearly all areas. Disposal of rubbish was sometimes not well-planned for, and was also an issue that frequently sparked conflict between neighbours. Residents sometimes felt that the local authority had failed to understand the specific needs of their estate, though there were some positive examples given of when tenants had got involved in working with the Housing Association and Local Authority to solve the problems.

Other issues of concern were heating systems and draught proofing, although opinions on the fuel type were split, with some tenants nostalgic about older types of heating and regretting the lack of choice in social housing. Energy efficiency was brought up on several occasions and there was some enthusiasm for micro-generation from solar power and other eco-friendly initiatives.

Tenants were divided over the level of service they wanted their landlord to provide. On the one hand, some appreciated the level of service provided and emphasised the advantage of social

renting in terms of the security this provides. Other tenants were keen to make their own improvements to their home, and sometimes came into conflict with their landlord when they wanted to take on responsibility themselves for dealing with contractors and overseeing improvements:

A lot of tenants like me, have done their own decoration for instance. Put down their own flooring.....And now these people [contractors] have come in and ruined it and all your decoration that you've done. I've got my own paint, because I've recently been decorating. Well, I don't think they're very happy about using my paint, but I bought my paint; see what I'm saying?

(London tenant)

Some confusion arose regarding which bodies were responsible for management of communal areas, some managed by the Housing Association, others by the local council. Tenants were sometimes confused as to who should be putting up street names, replacing broken lighting or dealing with problem neighbours.

6. A good neighbourhood

Location was, unsurprisingly, a major issue in terms of what people valued about their homes. Transport links and shopping facilities were the most valued features overall. However, what came up even more frequently in the cities (London and Birmingham) was the desire to live in a nice quiet area.

Security in and around social housing is a crucial issue to some groups of tenants, but went completely unmentioned with other groups. Inner-city locations clearly had a great deal more need for policing and security than more rural or suburban areas.

The survey found that respondents from households with children were significantly more likely to identify problems with the area as something they wanted to see improved. In some cases these issues overshadowed any more minor problems they had with the house:

The area is full of drug dealers. Make the area more safe; don't worry about the house.

(Survey response)

Parents attending the focus group discussions often expressed concerns about their children playing outside and getting caught up in trouble. In some cases they kept their children indoors, sometimes in overcrowded flats, rather than let them play out.

In some cases tenants had made no efforts to even report the problems they were experiencing, or had failed to see their complaints resolved. Many tenants appeared unclear as to who was responsible for security or for dealing with crime or anti-social behaviour on their estate, sometimes wanting their Housing Association to deal with problems but being told instead to contact the police.

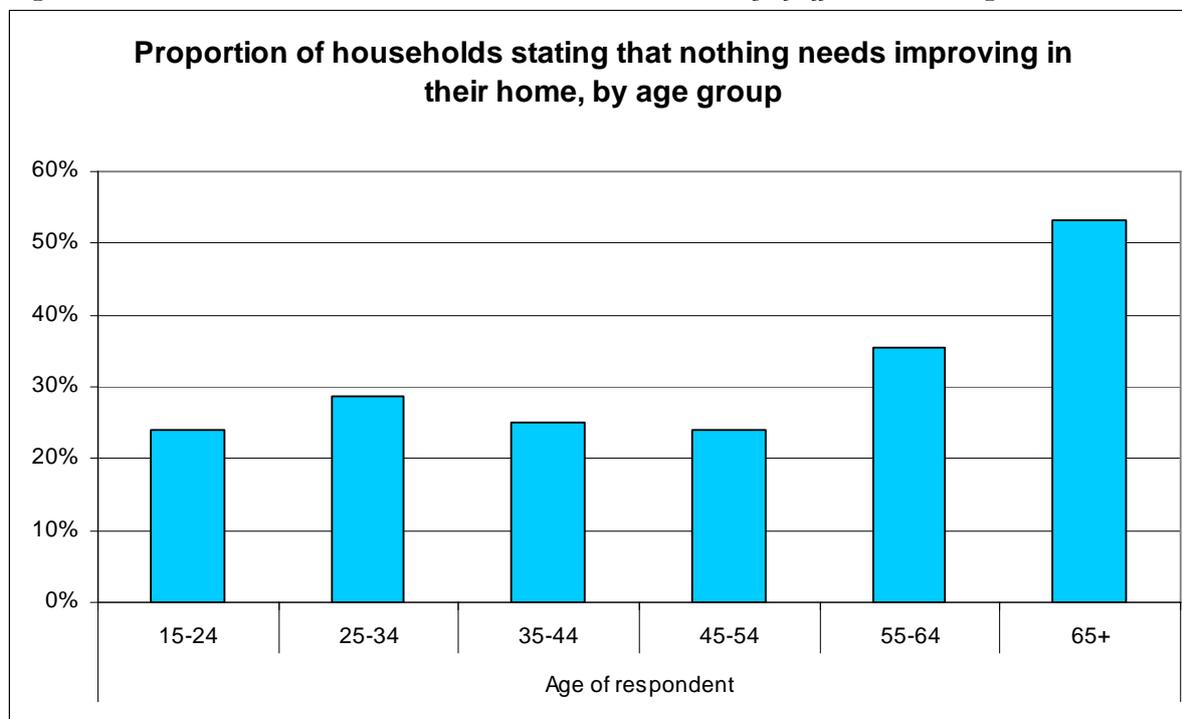
Experiencing problems with crime on an estate can, however, bring people together to address it. There were examples where residents' groups had formed and worked with their landlord or the police to help address problems. Letters sent to parents, evictions and concierges had brought great improvements to some areas.

7. Facilities and support in old age

Overall, older people are happier with their housing than younger people. Households in the oldest age group (65+) were more than twice as likely to spontaneously say nothing needed to be improved in their current house than those aged under 55 (Figure 7.1).

Figure 7.1

Source: BMRB survey of affordable housing residents, 2007



When comparing differences by age from a single cross-sectional survey, it is difficult to gauge whether differences between age groups are primarily accounted for by the differing situations of the generations, differences in expectations over time, or differences in perspective brought about by ageing, which are more stable over time.

Despite overall high levels of satisfaction, there were several distinct issues arising for older people in terms of their housing aspirations and preferences.

In terms of accommodation type, the older people at focus groups expressed near-unanimous enthusiasm for bungalows. Some were unable to manage stairs, and others were concerned that they may become unable to do so in the future. They shared the general dislike of flats for the reasons discussed above. Many had downsized to small bungalows, usually with just one bedroom, from larger houses where they had brought up families. This seemed to happen most often at the point when people were widowed and felt a need for a smaller, more manageable home and in some cases the support and friendship offered by sheltered or supported housing:

I loved my home. We would all like to keep in our own homes. I had ten years by myself after he died. It was very lonely - the long winter nights were the worst. I'm in sheltered now and I love it. There are people next door all the time.

The problem with your own house is you get lonely and need company. You don't want to trouble your family so you have to be on your own.

The warden, she explains your letters when you can't understand them. She will chat to you if you are unhappy, and help you with things like sorting out the electricity bills.

(Older tenants in Suffolk focus groups)

Warden services were a much-valued aspect of supported housing, more for the day-to-day contact than for real emergencies.

Older couples were more likely to want to remain in their own homes, instead seeking features such as a walk-in shower to enable them to do so. However, around 80% of households headed by someone aged over 65 are single person households, and this proportion is likely to remain steady over the coming years.⁴

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, the issues that this research has found to be key to meeting the demands of today's tenants fall into two broad categories:

- Size of home
- Use of communal spaces and facilities

Wanting a larger home was probably the factor which emerged more strongly than any other. It is much rarer to be seeking a smaller home, despite the lower running costs this might entail. Families especially are likely to say that they need more space.

Other than the issues around property size, a range of other points came out of the research, most of which have one common root – they hinge on difficulties and conflicts arising from use of communal spaces and facilities. 42% of social housing is flatted, (compared with 40% of private rented housing and only 7% of owner-occupied). Flatted housing necessitates a certain amount of shared facilities such as stairwells, lifts and gardens. In addition, social rented houses for historical reasons are often on estates with some degree of shared outdoor space.

This research found there to be some circumstances in which shared spaces can work and be highly valued by residents: older widows often found companionship in sheltered housing and greatly valued the shared space that enabled them to meet others and form a sense of community. There were also tenants from a Housing Association for single people who spoke with enthusiasm about the tenants' lounge and office space, offering them the opportunity to meet up with others. However, there were many more occasions where shared spaces were a key cause of difficulties and conflict, especially when different ages and household types are sharing. Different views surrounding where, when and how children should be playing, noise, dogs and belongings left in stairwells can all become major issues for residents.

Overall, this research has found that whilst residents of affordable housing share some of the desires and preferences of owner-occupiers, priorities are not exactly the same. The desire for more indoor and outdoor space seems to be a strong theme across all tenure groups and household types, and to be especially crucial for families. Parking is also an issue in most central urban areas, irrespective of tenure.

However, there are many more issues surrounding the usage and management of communal areas for affordable housing residents. These issues would seem to be of a greater importance to

⁴ See Annex 2 of source document for full figures.

affordable housing residents than some of the other desires owners express, such as ensuite bathrooms and separate computer rooms.

Many of the issues raised relate to the physical attributes of the stock which would be difficult to change within existing housing, but which could be addressed better in the design of new housing. Soundproofing and ventilation are key issues for tenants, not really covered within the Decent Homes Standard and hence not always key priorities for Housing Associations.

Overcrowding and lack of space is a difficult issue to tackle whilst the housing stock is under such pressure overall. However, extensions, loft conversions, garden sheds and studios would offer possibilities in some areas. More could also be done to make better use of existing stock by encouraging smaller older households to move to smaller housing, freeing up larger homes for young families. It is when children are young that families are likely to most want a garden; yet long waiting lists for transfers can mean families finally get one just as their children are entering their teens. Not many years later the children leave altogether.

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