

# Parenting in a house-share: non-resident parents' experiences of living in shared housing

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# Overview of presentation

- **About the research project**
- **Background and policy context**
- **Quantitative data on non-resident parents**
- **Qualitative data from interviews**
- **Conclusions**



# Research study

On behalf of Commonweal Housing

## **Aim:**

Understand the experiences of non-resident parents living in shared housing

## **Methods:**

- Explored existing datasets to establish what is known about non-resident parents
- Telephone interviews with:
  - 15 non-resident parents
  - 4 organisations
  - 11 housing providers

# Background

- Rise in separated parents - single parent households have tripled in last 30 years
- Increase in non-resident parents (who live apart from their children but still provide some of their care)
- Vast majority are men
- Estimated 5 percent of UK men aged 16-64 are a father to non-resident children – **just under 1 million men**  
(*Poole et. al., 2013*)

# Importance of contact

- Increasing recognition of value of maintaining relationships with both parents after split
- Section 11 of Children and Families Act 2014: unless there is evidence to suggest otherwise **the courts are to assume that the involvement of both parents after separation is in the child's best interests**
- Regular overnight stays linked to greater closeness and better quality relationship with non-resident parent (*Cashmore et al. 2009*)
- “Brief dinners and occasional weekend visits do not provide a broad enough or extensive enough basis for such relationships to be fostered... weekday and weekend daytime and night-time activities are important” (*Lamb, 2016*)

# Policy context

But despite the importance of regular contact with both parents, **benefit rules** only recognise a child's housing needs at one address:



## **'Resident parent'** **(usually mother)**

Can claim Child Benefit (gateway benefit for Housing Benefit and Tax Credits)

## **'Non-resident parent'** **(usually father)**

Not eligible for any child-related benefits.  
Treated the same as a single person

Renting in the private sector  
If aged under 35:  
only eligible for Housing Benefit to rent a room in a shared house.

# Data on non-resident parents

- Many non-resident parents struggle financially.
- Around **70% of non-resident fathers are living in poverty** (*Dermott and Pantazis 2014*)
- Housing is likely to be an issue for many
- There is no good data source on how many non-resident parents live in shared housing. DWP (2011) estimate that **18% of 25-34 year old single Housing Benefit claimants without dependent children are non-resident parents**. They would only be entitled to the shared room rate
- High housing costs in many areas of the UK may restrict many other non-resident parents (of all ages) to shared housing

# Data on non-resident parents

- Non-resident parents in shared housing are less likely to have their children stay overnight

## Frequency of overnight contact

	Not in shared housing	Shared housing
<b>Regular basis</b>	55%	35%
<b>Irregular basis</b>	18%	4%
<b>Not at all</b>	28%	61%

*(Clarke and Muir, 2017 drawing on 'Understanding Society' data)*



# Findings from interviews

1. **Diversity of experiences: housing strategies and level of contact**
2. **Issues experienced in shared housing:**
  - a. **Housemate issues**
  - b. **Space issues**
  - c. **Property issues**
  - d. **Other issues**
3. **Emotional and psychological effects**



# Diversity of experiences

## **Housing strategies taken**

- Accessed shared housing - through private rental sector, housing association/charity or specialist scheme for non-resident parents
- Took on a lodger in their own house
- Moved in with friends or family

## **Of the 15 interviewees, 13 have lived in a shared house**

- 8 had overnight contact
- 3 had daytime contact only
- 2 had no contact in house

**All described issues that made contact difficult in a shared home**

# Issues with contact in shared housing

## 1. Housemate issues



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## a. Lifestyle clashes – lack of control over environment

e.g. noise, lack of cleanliness, drinking, smoking, drug-taking

“I was often cleaning up beer bottles and all that kind of stuff first thing in the morning, just so I could use the communal space.”

“Sometimes they’re smoking a cigarette he [son] is like ‘Oh, why are they doing that?’. I open the window and tell him ‘It’s not our place. There’s not much I can do about it’.”

The conditions that would prevent contact being possible in a property varied from parent to parent, and seemed to be based on their **personal parenting values**, which determined **what they were prepared to accept**

## **b. Safety concerns**

“It’s that thing about not knowing the past of the individuals concerned. You don’t know if they’ve got a criminal record for child abuse. You just don’t know.”

## **c. Children disturbing housemates**

“If something’s missing, it’s ‘Oh, have your kids had that?’. If something’s been moved, the first point of call would be my kids, which did cause an argument.”

## **d. Parent can’t relax with child in house**

“You have to be a bit more aware of other people. You don’t want to take over the whole house.”

# Issues with contact in shared housing

## 2. Space issues



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## a. Lack of space – rooms designed for one

“The room I had was really tiny to be fair. I got a double bed in there at one point but then that took up literally all the room, there was nowhere to walk.”

## b. Sharing a bedroom/bed

The extent to which lack of space was a barrier to contact was affected by the **number, age and genders of the children**, as well as the **parent’s own views** on what was an acceptable sleeping arrangement.

“My room is a broom cupboard, there’s a space for one bed, a wardrobe, and that’s about it... There’s no space to get an extra mattress on the floor. She’s four years old, I can’t really have her in my bed.”

## c. Children not feeling at home

“When my son comes to me he has to bring his own clothes, when he leaves he has to take them with him. There’s nowhere to put them...so he doesn’t feel that he’s at home, he feels like he’s just coming to stay for one or two days.”

One father shared a bedroom with his visiting son (10) and daughter (12). He was trying to access another room for his daughter:

“I’m aware that she maybe feels uncomfortable showing her new friends she shares this space [bedroom] with her dad and brother. Or maybe she just wants more privacy”



# Issues with contact in shared housing

## 3. Property issues



## a. Substandard properties

Interviewees renting in the private rented sector described low quality, unsafe properties unsuitable for visiting children. They spoke about their lack of control over their situation: their financial position limited the properties they could access

“The ceiling is leaking because of the bathroom. It’s just been a botch job and every now and then there’s water leaking over.”

“it was a house full of people and there were rats in the kitchen... but at the time I just had to grin and bear it because that’s all I could get my hands on”.

## **b. Landlord restrictions**

Several of the interviewees had encountered landlord rules that prevented them from having their children to visit:

“To get told: ‘Oh there’s a place for you, but... your kids can’t come there’, it’s a bit of a kick in the teeth sort of thing”

Some interviewees abided by rules barring children from visiting the property, others broke them. E.g. one non-resident father in supported accommodation:

“Obviously I have to move slyly... When [housing case-worker] calls me, and tells me that he’s coming to do a session with me, I have to make sure my kids ain’t there. That’s the way I have to live at the moment.”

# Issues with contact in shared housing

## 4. Other issues

a. Views of other  
(resident) parent

b. Shame



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## **a. Views of other (resident) parent**

Some ex-partners had preventing contact with their children because the non-resident parent was in shared accommodation:

“Everything becomes weaponised.”

“A lot of the fathers are helpless, once they haven’t really got homes their hands are tied behind their back, because they know that their ex-partner will hold that against them, that they haven’t got a safe place to take their kids.”

Lack of understanding of housing challenges:

“My ex-partner was living in the same house for 5 years and she didn’t realise the market really changed... Even flat shares are ridiculously expensive...She thought I was just being lazy to not get a house”.

## b. Shame

Worried about views of ex-partner: e.g. father who does not bring children into property:

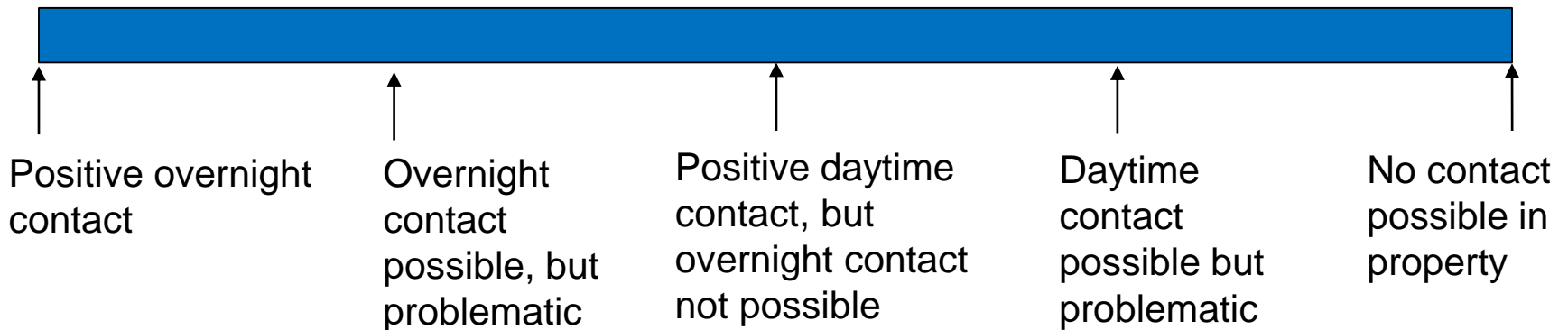
“I would feel I am letting them down. I would feel embarrassed to let them in. Because they will just say to mother how I live, and knowing her she will be using that against me again. She will say they are not proper conditions for children to live in.”

Worried about views of children:

“It’s quite degrading as well. You’re bringing your kids into a room... children don’t understand the concept of boundaries and land... It’s ‘Why don’t you own this house, Dad?’.”

# Range of experiences

The issues affected non resident parents in different ways, resulting in a range of experiences of contact



**Level of contact partly determined by personal views about what is acceptable, e.g. sharing a room or bed with a visiting child.**

Sometimes conflict in views between the non-resident parent, resident parent, housemates, landlord and/or children.

# Emotional and psychological impacts

## Non-resident parents and children

“[I want to] cuddle them, read them a story, bath time, things like that. That’s the things that’s hard.”

“All I want is a place I can call home, with a little space for her with her toys, a clean bathroom where I can give her a bath.”

“I have this feeling of shame, I don’t talk about this too much, because you don’t feel like you provide for your family.”

“The housing situation has given [ex-partner] power and she’s used that to alienate my entire side of the family. My kids don’t know one half of the family any more. It got so confusing and difficult for my daughter to cope with. She can’t cope with the situation”



**Example:** One non resident parent had rented an Airbnb for one night where he stayed with his daughter:

“We have this wonderful memory of this time we spent together... we were both so happy.”

His daughter now keeps asking to stay with him again, but his ideas of **appropriate parenting** will not allow him to take her to multiple Airbnbs:

“I don’t think it’s something healthy for a child to have a parent who is always in a different place... it doesn’t show any kind of stability from my part for my child.”

His values will also not allow him to take her to his shared house because it is messy, noisy, there is not enough space and his housemates smoke in the house: “**which is something terrible to do around a child**”

# Stress and sacrifice

Many non-resident parents made **significant personal sacrifices** in order to maintain contact with their children:

- Relocating to another part of the country
- Moving in with family members
- Taking on lodgers
- Changing job (so their working hours or location would fit with contact with their children)

Non-resident parents described **stress** they had experienced in:

- Challenging resident parents in court over contact
- Moving accommodation multiple times to find child-friendly accommodation on limited resources

# Deadbeat dads?

- A quarter of separated fathers are no longer in contact with their child(ren) two years after separation (*Haux, McKay and Cain, 2017*)
- This is often presented as a personal choice or individual failing on the part of non-resident parents
- Discourse around 'dead-beat dads' ignores the structural factors that may be responsible for loss of contact (including housing)
- Our research found that fathers desperately want to parent their children and are battling to secure suitable accommodation
- They are restricted by the physical conditions, and also their own **parenting values** as they want the best for their children

# Conclusion

- In most cases ongoing contact is beneficial for children
- Many dedicated parents are essentially prevented from having contact in their home by financial and political barriers
- This area is very under-researched
- For the emotional and psychological well-being of non-resident parents and their children, it is vital that these issues begin to be exposed and addressed



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