

Cambridge Centre
for Housing &
Planning Research

Housing issues facing non-resident fathers: recommendations for policy and practice

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December 2018



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1. Overview

The Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR) is a research centre within the University of Cambridge, with over 25 years' experience of research in policy evaluation and analysis, and expertise in housing, poverty and welfare reforms.

In 2017, Anna Clarke and Kathryn Muir from CCHPR completed research into the issue of non-resident parents living in shared housing. Non-resident parents are parents who live separately from their children, following separation from their other parent, but still play some part in their children's care. The parents with whom the children spend the majority of their time are referred to as resident parents¹. The findings of this research are outlined below and the full report is available on the CCHPR website.

It was clear from this research that housing for non-resident parents is a complex area, influenced by interlinking issues of family law, housing policy and benefit calculation. CCHPR wanted to continue conversations on this topic, and organised a roundtable at the University of Cambridge on 20 November 2018. The team received funding for this event from the Economic and Social Research Council through the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account.

The theme of the roundtable event was 'housing issues facing non-resident fathers'. The focus was on non-resident fathers rather than all non-resident parents because the vast majority of non-resident parents are men. Mothers in this situation are likely to face different issues, and it was decided to focus solely on the experiences of fathers.

The roundtable was an interdisciplinary event which provided an opportunity for practitioners, researchers and policy-makers to discuss the many issues fathers face after separation, and talk about how these might be addressed. Twenty people attended the round table from the following organisations:

- Anglia Ruskin University
- Commonweal Housing
- Crisis
- Dads House
- Department for Work and Pensions
- Fathers4Justice

¹ When calculating Child Maintenance payments, non-resident parents are known as 'paying parents', and resident parents are known as 'receiving parents'.

- Khazanah Research Institute
- Romsey Mill
- The Kurt and Magda Stern Foundation
- UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE)
- University of Bristol
- University of Cambridge
- University of Kent
- University of York
- Worcester Citizens Advice Bureau & Worcester Housing and Benefits Advice Centre

2. Issues identified in previous CCHPR research

The event began with a presentation of the findings of the research carried out by Anna Clarke and Kathryn Muir in 2017 on non-resident parents and shared housing. The full report is available on the [CCHPR website](#). The main points are summarised below:

In most cases, ongoing contact with both parents is beneficial for children. This is partly supported by UK policy, because it is stated in the Children and Families Act 2014 that: *“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”*. However, this wording falls short of recommending any specific amount of contact with each parent, and critics say there is still a presumption of a ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ parent following divorce.

Benefit rules further enforce the idea of a primary and secondary parent, with only the ‘resident parent’ (usually the mother) able to claim benefits for their children.

Many non-resident fathers struggle financially, with high outgoings including child maintenance payments, court costs and high accommodation costs. High housing costs restrict some non-resident parents to shared housing. Non-resident fathers living in shared housing are less likely to have overnight contact with their children.

The research conducted interviews with 13 non-resident fathers, asking them about their experience of having contact with their children in shared houses. Fathers highlighted the following barriers to contact in shared houses:

- **Housemate issues:** safety concerns, children disturbing housemates, lifestyle clashes (noise, mess, drinking, smoking).
- **Space issues:** lack of space in bedrooms, children not feeling 'at home' as they could not store belongings. The extent to which lack of space was a barrier was affected by the number, age and gender of the children, and the parents' views on acceptable sleeping arrangements.
- **Property issues:** substandard properties (particularly in the private rented sector), landlord restrictions on children's visits.
- **Views of other (resident) parent**
- **Feelings of shame**

These barriers affected non-resident parents in different ways, resulting in a range of experiences of contact, from positive overnight contact to no contact in the property at all. The level of contact was partly determined by fathers' parenting values i.e. what they thought was acceptable.

It was clear that the barriers were having deep emotional and psychological impacts on fathers and children. In a shared house, fathers are unable to fulfil fathering identity roles (adapted from Olmstead, 2009²) of 'caretaker', 'protector' and 'provider'.

A quarter of separated fathers are no longer in contact with their children two years after separation (Haux, McKay and Cain, 2017³). This is often presented as a personal choice or individual failing on the part of non-resident parents, ignoring the structural factors that may be responsible for loss of contact (including housing).

² Olmstead, S.B., Futris T.G., Pasley, K. (2009) An Exploration of Married and Divorced, Nonresident Men's Perceptions and Organization of Their Father Role Identity. *Fathering*. 2009(7), pp.249–268.

³ Haux, T., McKay, S. and Cain, R. (2017) 'Shared care after separation in the United Kingdom: limited data, limited practice?' in *Family Court Review* (55,4) pp. 572–585.

This research found that fathers desperately want to parent their children and are battling to secure suitable accommodation, but are restricted by the physical conditions, and also their own parenting values as they want the best for their children. It also found that many non-resident parents made significant personal sacrifices in order to maintain contact with their children.

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.

3. Summary of discussion

This section is a summary of the points raised by individuals during the small-group and whole-group discussions.

3.1. What other issues do non-resident fathers face?

In addition to the issues highlighted in the original research, it was suggested that non-resident fathers face the following additional issues:

- To a certain extent, wider U.K society still views caring for children as the role of the mother. Ideas about gender roles may make the granting of sole custody more likely than an expectation of equally shared parenting. Other European countries have much higher levels of shared parenting, this is partly related to wider societal attitudes about gender roles.
- It is very costly and time-consuming for parents to apply to court, a situation that discussants suggested has worsened in recent years.
- Non-resident fathers can experience a vicious cycle, where being unable to have contact with their children has a negative impact on their mental health, or causes them to engage in behaviours such as drinking or drug-taking, but these issues then further limit their ability to have contact with their children.

Unable to see children



Issues with mental health, addiction etc.

- Non-resident fathers are often reluctant to admit they are struggling with issues such as mental health and addiction, perhaps because of general stigma, a reluctance to ask for help, or because of fear that such issues may be used as a reason to prevent contact.
- There is no single point for advice for separated fathers (there are a wide range of existing organisations).

3.2. What policy changes could help?

Suggested policy changes centred around improving fathers' financial situation and removing barriers to existing accommodation options:

- Non-resident fathers could be exempted from the Shared Accommodation Rate of Local Housing Allowance, allowing them to receive housing benefit to cover a one-bedroom flat, rather than being restricted to a room in a shared house.
- The current freeze on Local Housing Allowance rates could be lifted, to stop there being such dramatic shortfall between the benefits non-resident fathers can receive and the actual rents in a given area.
- Non-resident fathers could be 'passported' through the system to secure appropriate accommodation, for example non-resident parents could be prioritised for social housing if they have caring responsibilities.
- When calculating benefit entitlements, the Department for Work and Pensions could recognise shared caring duties and respond flexibly.
- The 'removal of the spare room subsidy' commonly known as the 'bedroom tax' could be abolished, as it was perceived by discussants to be damaging.

3.3. What housing solutions could help?

Suggestions were made about the creation of appropriate shared housing for non-resident fathers and their visiting children, for example properties with limits on noise, curfews, spare bedrooms, child-friendly housemates and longer tenancies to provide more stability. Possible housing models, funding sources and providers were suggested:

Suggested providers of shared housing

- Social landlords could be incentivised to provide shared accommodation suitable for different groups, including non-resident fathers. Central government and local authorities could incentivise this.
- Housing Associations could challenge their asset management strategy - large houses with 4-5 bedrooms are being disposed of because they are no longer used for traditional families, but these could be ideal for shared housing.

- Another option would be to encourage private landlords to adapt properties for sharing for particular groups with particular needs, including non-resident fathers. However, some suggested that private landlords tend to be wary of the risk of needing to evict tenants due to non-payment of rent, so social landlords may be better suited to this project.
- Even if housing providers do provide shared accommodation, they may still need to be encouraged to prioritise separated fathers.

Schemes that could provide a model for other projects

- **Hope into Action:** Houses purchased by individuals and rented to homeless people in need. Partners with local churches for mentoring and support of residents.
- **Crisis Help to Rent projects:** support innovative housing solutions for homeless people to access sustainable accommodation.
- **CABWHABAC** ran a shared house for non-resident parents⁴ where there was a spare room for their children to stay when they visited. Residents had enhanced DBS checks, and ex-partners could inspect the property. Most of the fathers who accessed this accommodation were in their thirties. This model was supported by Crisis but was unable to be financially sustainable after this funding finished. This kind of accommodation needs to be self-funding.
- There is off-base accommodation for service personnel at RAF Lossiemouth that can be booked by non-resident fathers to have contact with their children. This is run by the Armed Forces charity, SSAFA.
- Innovation in the private sector could be replicated in accommodation for non-resident fathers (for example properties could include very small sleeping spaces for visiting children, such as those found in 'capsule hotels' in [Japan](#)).
- Other ideas include using digital technology to link fathers looking for accommodation, or using modern methods of construction such as modular houses constructed off-site to build affordable accommodation.

⁴ More details about this scheme are given in Clarke, A and Muir, K (2017) *Non-resident parents and shared housing*. Cambridge: CCHPR.

Sources of funding for shared housing schemes

- [Commonweal Housing](#) support small pilot projects, enabling a period of testing for new ideas. Partners are discouraged from taking government funding at this early stage because this comes with too many outcome expectations.
- Social investment funds are another potential source of funding for new models.
- Some young fathers live in hostels, the cost of which is high. The money used for this could be channelled into other housing projects which are more appropriate for non-resident fathers.
- The money paid to house individuals and families in temporary housing could be directed to shared accommodation schemes.

Points to consider when designing shared housing for non-resident fathers

- It is important that children have a space to call their own when they visit both parents. This will promote feelings of belonging and certainty, and a positive relationship with both parents.
- There is likely to be an element of conflict and challenge in shared housing, even if this is specifically shared housing for non-resident fathers. It is important to minimise this challenge by getting to know people before placing them in the accommodation, and by having a transition phase.
- Another point to consider is follow-on accommodation. Not all fathers would need to be in social housing long-term, so a process of moving people on in a supported way would need to be developed.

3.4. What other actions could help?

Other suggested actions centred on how perceptions could be changed to recognise the positive impact separated fathers have on their children's lives, and how more support could be given to fathers at the point of separation:

- The UK government could take a more joined-up approach to families, and be more supportive of parenting overall.
- The wider impact of non-resident fathers and their value to society could be championed, as they have a positive impact on society as a whole.

- Non-resident fathers can, in some cases, be vulnerable because of their financial situation, housing situation and/or emotional state following separation. This needs to be recognised in public narratives and policy discourses. Policy change is needed to change the narrative.
- There could be a champion of men's issues at a local authority level, so that fathers' voices are heard.
- Parents should be further encouraged to make non-legal arrangements for looking after their children after separation.
- Individual families should consider different housing options that could work for them. For example, 'bird nesting' is a model of shared parenting where children stay in the family home and parents alternate staying with them. No single solution will meet all needs. A range of solutions and options needs to be available.
- There needs to be a clear source of information and advice for fathers at the point of separation from their partner. There could be a clear contact organisation in each city for fathers who have recently separated ([Dads House](#) in London is an example of this).

3.5. What further research is needed?

The following areas of future research were identified:

- The impact on individuals and society of children not having contact with their non-resident father: lack of contact is likely to have negative impacts on the welfare and mental health of both fathers and children, with far-reaching, wider societal impacts. Research could measure these.
- Conversely, collaborative parenting and non-resident fathers having a safe space where they can spend quality time with their children are likely to have a positive impact on child welfare outcomes. Research could measure these.
- Research with children into how they have been able to maintain a relationship with their non-resident father, and the impact of this on children's outcomes.
- Longitudinal studies into the relationship between non-resident fathers and their children would be valuable.

- International examples could be studied, but researchers should bear in mind the different socio-political contexts in different countries.
- There is a gap between statute and reality – research could be carried out to identify the pinch points.
- Research could be carried out into the benefits system – for example, to study the cost of splitting benefits between both separated parents in different ways.
- Research with non-resident fathers could ask them what they want from their housing, as some may have a preference for sharing, if the environment is suitable.
- There could be an evaluation of the reform of child maintenance, and research into what facilitates collaboration between parents.

4. Conclusions

Research has shown the importance of children having regular daytime and overnight contact with both parents following separation⁵. However, this is not possible if non-resident fathers are unable to secure suitable accommodation where they can have their children to visit.

Some of the factors that make finding suitable accommodation difficult for non-resident fathers relate to wider problems with the housing market:

- The shortage of affordable housing to buy or rent.
- The freezing of Local Housing Allowance rates, so that those on low incomes do not receive sufficient benefit to cover actual rents in any given area.
- The shortage of social housing, meaning only those in 'priority need' are likely to secure this form of accommodation.

Other difficulties relate more specifically to how non-resident parents are assessed and treated by the housing and benefits systems:

- Non-resident parents are assessed as single people, meaning they are given no allowance for the accommodation requirements of visiting children.

The roundtable generated several ideas for changes that could address the issues faced by non-resident fathers. These centred around:

- **Policy changes:** improving fathers' financial situations and removing barriers to existing accommodation options appropriate for visiting children.
- **Housing solutions:** encouraging housing providers to run appropriate shared housing for non-resident fathers and their visiting children (suggestions for different housing models, funding sources and providers).

⁵ This research is detailed in Clarke and Muir (2017)

- **Other actions:** Promoting a wider understanding from government and wider society about the positive role that non-resident parents can play in their children's lives, and the benefits of this for society as a whole; improving the emotional support and guidance available to fathers at the point of separation.

The roundtable also generated suggestions for future areas of research which would strengthen the literature on the advantages for children of ongoing contact with their non-resident father, and also on the disadvantages of this contact being prevented.

It is unacceptable that relationships between fathers and their children should be being damaged due to a lack of appropriate accommodation. It is hoped that the roundtable and this report will encourage ongoing discussion about the issues faced by non-resident parents, and also commitment to take action to alleviate these issues.

Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research are interested in carrying out further research in this area. If you would be interested in collaborating on this, or if you have any questions, please contact Kathryn Muir on kam85@cam.ac.uk or through our website, www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk.