

---

# Sustain: A Longitudinal Study of Housing Wellbeing in the Private Rented Sector

---

Mary Smith, Francesca Albanese and Jenna Truder

A partnership project between Shelter and Crisis funded by the Big Lottery Fund  
Sustain@shelter.org.uk

## Background

---

There are currently 3.6 million households living in the private rented sector (PRS) in England and the sector has grown by more than 1.5 million households since 2001<sup>1</sup>. It is increasingly being used to accommodate people when they become homeless and this growth will continue with the implementation of the Localism Act<sup>2</sup>, as local authorities gain new powers to discharge their homelessness duty<sup>3</sup> into the PRS. Statistics also show that in the last year, on average, 18 per cent of all accepted homelessness claims were due to the end of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy<sup>4</sup> in the PRS.<sup>5</sup> More broadly there are also considerable problems in the PRS regarding housing conditions, as well as problems with the landlord/tenant relationship in the sector, which are well documented. These factors raise questions about the suitability of the PRS to accommodate the needs of these households and the long-term stability it offers as a housing option in England.

This three-year study is designed to fill an important evidence gap on the PRS by exploring the long-term experiences, individual outcomes and wellbeing of homeless people who are helped to move into the sector by a range of support agencies. The research will support future policy and service development in the sector.

---

<sup>1</sup> *English Housing Survey: Headline Report 2010–11.*

<sup>2</sup> An assured shorthold tenancy is a type of assured tenancy which offers the landlord a guaranteed right to repossess his property at the end of the term.

<sup>3</sup> In England, local authorities have a duty to find suitable housing for certain categories of homeless households, including households with children and 'vulnerable' households and others 'in priority need'.

<sup>4</sup> The Localism Act contains a number of proposals to give local authorities new freedoms and flexibility.

<sup>5</sup> DCLG P1E statistics (January 2011–December 2011).

## Objectives

---

The research has four key objectives to bridge the evidence gap that exists in identifying and understanding longer-term outcomes of homeless people who enter the PRS as a result of being resettled after being homeless or in housing need. These are:

- To identify the personal and social factors that affect formerly homeless people's experiences and wellbeing in the PRS.
- To understand long term well-being and housing outcomes for vulnerable households in respect to sustainability of tenants.
- To produce a series of recommendations for service providers to enable them to support sustainability and wellbeing amongst vulnerable groups being housed in the PRS.
- To make suggestions for future policy improvements to renting that will improve tenant outcomes and sustainability in wellbeing and housing.

## Methods

---

The research is longitudinal in design with qualitative interviews being conducted three times over a two-year period with people in their homes. The research aims to capture the experiences of people once in their tenancies, what might influence tenancy sustainability, and general feelings of satisfaction and wellbeing over a long-term period.

Interviews are conducted in participant's homes at 0 to 2 months, at 6 to 10 months and at 16 to 21 months, encouraging participants to situate their experience within the property and wider locality. The research is focusing on three English regions to ensure a range of place-specific experiences and practices are captured, and were selected based on PRS density and number of PRS tenancies, ratio of social tenancies, and other factors inherent in assessing homeless and general support needs.

The eligibility criteria for the study included people who were previously homeless or in housing need, and recently resettled into the PRS. At the time of the first interview, participants had been in their tenancy for no longer than two months. Participants were recruited through a range of statutory and voluntary organisations, allowing a greater understanding of available support in each area.

The study's sample is also split between households with (dependent) children and households without dependent children (single households). This was to ensure that research would capture any potential differences in the experiences of these two groups in relation to support services. The researchers interviewed one person in each household due to the fact that household composition can change over time. Where there were two adults in a household, the researchers generally interviewed the person referred to them as reporting a housing need.

### **Progress to date**

---

In the first round of interviews (Wave 1) 171 eligible participants in the three geographical areas were interviewed, with the sample split equally between each area. All participants received Local Housing Allowance, a type of housing benefit for people living in the PRS. Wave 2 fieldwork took place between January and May 2012 when a total of 150 follow-up interviews (an 88 per cent retention of the participants interviewed in Wave 1) were completed with participants in their homes. A third and final wave of interviews will take place at 16-21 months between November 2012 and March 2013.

### **Emerging findings**

---

In the first round of interviews four key areas formed part of people's experiences:

- Finding help when they approached an agency as homeless or in housing need.
- Decision making about moving into the PRS and finding a tenancy.
- Life in the early stages of the tenancy.
- The sustainability of accommodation and hopes for the future.

Initial findings show that people have limited knowledge about sources of help for those in housing need and generally find it hard to find support. The type of support varied considerably, by region, organisation and by individual, regardless of need. Across all three regions we found that when people were given specific support to move into the PRS, they were more likely to feel positive when that support was perceived as being of a higher level – for example, given practical help to find a PRS tenancy rather than simply being given a list of landlords.

Most people had moved into the PRS because they felt they had no other choice, due to being told they would be unlikely to access social tenancies, or being refused help by the local authority. There were also a number of barriers which meant it was hard for people to access tenancies without some level of assistance. These

included: not having a rent deposit, landlords not accepting housing benefit claimants, and/or not accepting rent deposit or bond schemes, not having a guarantor and property scarcity.

In the early stages of the tenancy (up to 2 months) people reported having difficult choices to make about how to manage their finances, including going without heating, electricity or food in order to prioritise costs for their children. People experienced a number of practical barriers and constraints to living in their property, some people did not have, or could not rent somewhere with basic white goods, such as fridges and freezers and the means of heating food. For others, having to take any or the first available tenancy had wider negative impacts on their lives, for some this meant moving areas and isolation from informal support networks. For families, it often meant disruption for children's schooling.

People did feel that their new housing was a 'stepping stone' to improving their lives and wellbeing. After a period of disruption people wanted to achieve housing stability, and felt that this would enable them to achieve stability in their lives more broadly. Although people wanted to stay in their tenancies, they often expressed concerns about being able to do so. For example, some worried that their landlords would raise rents or evict them. This was a barrier to considering their tenancies as 'home'.

A final report with full analysis across three waves of interviews will be available in Autumn 2013.

**Full findings of wave 1 interviews can be found in our Interim Report.**