

Sustain: a longitudinal study of housing wellbeing in the private rented sector

Executive summary

This research summary presents key interim findings from the Sustain project – a longitudinal qualitative research study exploring the use of the private rented sector (PRS) to accommodate homeless people and those in housing need, as well as exploring housing wellbeing. The research is working in three different regions¹ with people who have received support to move into their tenancies from statutory, voluntary and charity agencies.

Conducted by Shelter and Crisis, and funded by the Big Lottery Fund, the three-year study is designed to fill an important evidence gap on the PRS by exploring the long-term experiences, 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.

This interim research sets out the initial experiences of 171 people, recently resettled into the PRS, who were interviewed between April and October 2011.

There are currently 3.6 million households living in the PRS in England and the sector has grown by more than 1.5 million households since 2001.² It is increasingly being used to accommodate homeless households. Forthcoming changes in legislation (Localism Act 2011) mean that from summer 2012 local authorities will be able to discharge their

homelessness duties into the PRS. At the same time during the last year, on average, 18 per cent of people accepted as homeless by local authorities gave the end of a standard PRS tenancy as a reason (increasing to 19 per cent in the last quarter).³ In this context there are questions about the sector's ability to accommodate the needs of these households and the long-term stability it offers as a housing option.

Key findings

This research reviews evidence from the first of three rounds of qualitative interviews⁴ that took place with people shortly after they had moved into their PRS tenancies. In the interviews participants spoke about support they received, their experiences and decision making about housing options, and their circumstances and challenges during the first weeks of their new tenancies.

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.

1. East and South East London boroughs, Greater Manchester and its surrounds, and the East Sussex coastal and inland region.
2. *English Housing Survey: Headline Report 2010–11*.

3. Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) P1E statistics, January 2011–December 2011.
4. Participants will be interviewed three times over a two-year period – wave 1 (April–October 2011), wave 2 (January–May 2012), and wave 3 (late 2012 to early 2013).

Finding help

- People have limited knowledge about sources of help for those in housing need and generally find it hard to find support.
- Specific barriers faced when approaching local authorities for support, especially among single households, included a lack of ID or debt accrued from previous tenancies.
- Types of support offered to people in housing need varies considerably, by region, organisation and by individual, regardless of need.
- 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.
- At the same time, some people had a limited understanding of the support they had actually received to move into the PRS and, in some cases, the implications of accepting it. This included not being aware of the legal implications of support – for example, their local authority having discharged their homelessness duty for them into the PRS.

Decision making

- Most 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.
- A number of barriers meant people found it hard to access tenancies on their own. 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.
- Supply of PRS accommodation differed by region and affected people's decision-making behaviour. For example, more choice in Greater Manchester meant that people tended to choose properties based on area. In comparison, people found it challenging to find a property in London and reported they were often forced to take the first place they could afford in order to avoid being homeless.

- Overall, people often accepted the first tenancy they could find where a landlord accepted their application. As a result, some moved into unsuitable homes or areas – for example, moving to new areas resulting in isolation from informal support networks.

Life in the tenancy now

- Availability of basic furniture had an impact on how people could live and manage budgets. Some people had very little or no furniture and reported sharing beds.
- 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. This had a negative impact on their ability to budget and plan for food.
- 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.
- Having to take any or the first available tenancy had wider negative impacts on people's lives. As mentioned, for some this meant moving areas and isolation from informal support networks. For families, it often meant disruption for children's schooling.

Sustainability of accommodation and hopes for the future

- People felt that their new housing was a 'stepping stone' to improving their lives and wellbeing.
- People were generally positive about the future and relieved they were no longer homeless. They wanted to improve the properties and make them feel like 'home'.
- People wanted to achieve housing stability, and felt that this would enable them to achieve stability in their lives more broadly. For example, some felt that having a place to stay in the long term would have a positive impact on their ability to plan for the future and find work.
- People wanted to stay in their tenancies, but 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'.

Emerging policy and practice questions

These interim findings reflect participants' self-reported experiences shortly after they had moved into their PRS tenancies. As interviews continue at waves 2 and 3, the research may find that people's circumstances change, or that concerns are resolved or exacerbated. Full practice and policy recommendations, informed by evidence gathered by the study, will be made in the final report. However, the interim findings do point to a number of emerging questions that are informing the study going forward, and which may be of interest to practitioners and policymakers:

Finding help

- **People find it hard to find support.**
Is this due to the marketing or availability of support?
- **There are practical barriers to support such as lack of ID.**
Do, or should, local authorities help fund people to get ID?
- **There are many different support practices.**
Do different support models have different outcomes?
Are they limited by design or funding?
- **People have a limited knowledge about the support they receive and, in some cases, how the PRS works.**
How could people be helped or empowered to understand more about the support they receive and their tenancies?

Decision making

- **People often had to move into the first tenancy they could find where the landlord would accept them.**
When participants are established in their tenancies, do they seek to find something better or are their choices more permanently limited?
- **Barriers meant people found it hard to access tenancies on their own. These included not having a rent deposit, landlords not accepting Housing Benefit claimants, and/or not accepting rent deposit or bond schemes, and not having a guarantor.**

What can help overcome these barriers?
How can organisations support people to access tenancies?

- **People felt that the PRS was the only realistic option they had.**
Do people decide to stay in the PRS?
If people move out of their tenancies, why and where do they move?
- **People were worried about asking their landlords about repair, just in case they were seen as a bad tenant and/or evicted.**
If repair issues emerged, did people overcome their fears about speaking to landlords?
How did the relationship with the landlord develop?

Life in the tenancy now

- **Some people didn't have white goods, which negatively impacted their ability to manage their costs.**
Did the absence of basic white goods and furnishings continue to be a problem, or were people able to acquire white goods?
Do support agencies need to focus on this issue more?
- **People were generally satisfied with the condition of their properties when they moved in.**
Have the conditions of their properties continued to be satisfactory?
- **People were concerned they might not be able to stay.**
Could people stay in their tenancies if they wanted to?
Does their accommodation feel like 'home' and why?
What has happened in people's lives since we last spoke to them?

In the next two sets of interviews the study will explore participants' wellbeing, outcomes, and the factors that feed into tenancy sustainability. Interviews will examine how people's lives might have changed since they moved into the PRS, and whether they are still in the same tenancies. The final report will be published in autumn 2013.

More information can be found in the project's full interim report. Click on these links to download:

http://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_practice/sustain

<http://www.privaterentedsector.org.uk/SUSTAIN.asp>

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