

Consultation response

# Consultation on the future shape of the English Housing Survey

February 2015

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# Shelter

Shelter helps millions of people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness. We provide specialist advice and support on the phone, face to face and online, and our legal teams can attend court to defend people at risk of losing their home.

However at Shelter we understand that helping people with their immediate problems is not a long-term solution to the housing crisis. That's why we campaign to tackle the root causes, so that one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

## Introduction

Shelter welcomes the opportunity to respond to DCLG's consultation on the future shape of the English Housing Survey.

We responded to the Department's consultation on the cost effectiveness of the survey in 2010,<sup>1</sup> and we appreciate the need to review the survey regularly in response to changes in available public finances and developments in the research field. However, we are concerned that the current proposals, following on from cuts already made in 2010, will amount to a significant loss of knowledge about the housing crisis. With the need to build more homes and improve conditions in the private rented sector increasingly receiving cross-party support, it seems particularly short-sighted to consider further reductions to the foundation of our evidence base on the state of housing in England.

Shelter's view is that the English Housing Survey provides a unique dataset that must be protected. We concur with the points made on this matter by the National Statistician, John Pullinger:

*"The Survey links information collected from households with information on the fabric and condition of their home, which no other survey does. It is the only data source where residents' characteristics can be brought together with data such as housing tenure, a household's housing aspirations, and the condition of the housing stock."*<sup>2</sup>

Our response below outlines the tremendous value of the survey to Shelter's work, and the impact that the proposed changes would have on our ability to help people struggling with bad housing.

## Consultation questions

### 1. What cost-effective solutions are there to redesign the survey?

While we agree that £4 million is a lot of money, we do not agree that this cost is "excessive" in relation to the survey's public value. The survey is a key component of the evidence base for housing policy-making in England, and cost-cutting options should only be considered where the integrity of the data can be maintained.

In the context of vastly improved digital access and capability in the UK over the past few years, and clear plans to further improve this further between now and 2020,<sup>3</sup> we think it is reasonable to begin exploring online data collection methods for the English Housing Survey. However, any move towards online methods should be rigorously tested and address the limitations of online methods identified to date (for example, an increase in missing data in *Understanding Society*<sup>4</sup>). We would not expect online methods to fully replace face-to-face interviews, and of-course, would expect the physical inspection sub-sample to be retained.

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<sup>1</sup> Shelter (2010). *Response: Proposals arising from a cost review of the English Housing Survey*. Available: [www.shelter.org.uk/policylibrary](http://www.shelter.org.uk/policylibrary)

<sup>2</sup> Available: <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/correspondence/letter-from-sir-andrew-dilnot-to-rt--hon-john-healey-mp-30012015.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Government Digital Inclusion Strategy, available: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy/government-digital-inclusion-strategy](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy/government-digital-inclusion-strategy)

<sup>4</sup> Jäckle, A., Lynn, P. & Burton, J. (2013) "Going Online with a Face-to-Face Household Panel: Initial Results from an Experiment on the Understanding Society Innovation Panel", *Understanding Society Working Paper Series No. 2013-03*. Available: [www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications/working-paper/understanding-society/2013-03.pdf](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications/working-paper/understanding-society/2013-03.pdf)

**2. Pausing the English Housing Survey for one year in 2015-16 and/or running the survey on a biennial basis are possible approaches to deliver cost savings. Would you be affected if the department were to adopt either or both of those approaches?**

Pausing the survey or moving to a biennial basis would impact directly on Shelter's work. In our work, we rely directly on the annual data from the EHS to understand a range of issues in the housing sector, for example, trends in tenure and conditions. We also rely on a range of indices that draw on the EHS' annual data, such as the Index of Private Housing Rental Prices.

We are concerned by the National Statistician's assessment of the impact a biennial survey would have on time series for "the profile of housing stock, up-to-date estimates of the extent of over-crowding and under-occupation, conformity with dwelling safety standards, the extent of fuel poverty, and energy efficiency standards." Last year, we answered over 128,000 telephone calls and provided face-to-face support to over 65,000 people, not to mention over four million visits to our online advice pages. Many of the people we help face exactly these challenges. The EHS time series provide crucial evidence that enables us to understand trends and target our advice and support effectively. Even now, by the time data from the EHS is analysed and published it is already out of date. Moving to a biennial survey would mean an even greater time lag between data collection and published results, and having a subsequent impact on our ability to make educated decisions about service delivery.

**3. If the department were to run the survey on a biennial basis, what would be the best approach to carry out a robust and cost effective survey?**

Biennial survey feasibility

In 2010, we were willing to consider the possibility of a biennial survey, as a compromise to the sample size at that time being maintained. However, we do not believe it is feasible to move to a biennial survey without again increasing the sample size to at least that in 2010. If the Department were to choose between a biennial survey with an increased sample size, and an annual survey with the smaller sample size, our preference now is to retain the annual survey for the reasons set out in our answer to Q2.

Sample size

In 2010, we argued strongly that the existing sample size should be retained. Due to "considerable concern" expressed across the 100 consultation respondents about the cut to sample size at that time, DCLG decided to implement the smaller of the sample size cuts proposed. In fact, the sample size has already been reduced to such an extent that Shelter, rather than DCLG, now runs the largest survey of private tenants.<sup>5</sup> In our previous response, we noted the impact the smaller sample size would have on our ability to do the analysis we required.

*"A large part of the analysis that we undertake requires cohort level analysis... A reduction in the sample size would seriously limit [this]... A reduction of 25% to the sample size would mean that the numbers of assured shorthold tenants covered by the survey would fall from around 1100 to just over 800. A reduction of closer to 40% would significantly limit the opportunity for even the broadest segmentation of private renting households."<sup>6</sup>*

Our concerns about sample size have in fact been borne out, and in part, have led to us commissioning our own (online) survey. While we are proud of our contribution to the evidence base through this survey, online surveys commissioned by charities or private companies are no replacement for the EHS.

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<sup>5</sup> Shelter's online survey of 4,500 private tenants, administered by YouGov in December 2012 and December 2013. Findings available: [http://england.shelter.org.uk/professional\\_resources/policy\\_and\\_research/policy\\_library/policy\\_library\\_folder/report\\_safe\\_and\\_decent\\_homes](http://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/policy_library_folder/report_safe_and_decent_homes)

<sup>6</sup> Shelter (2010) *Response: Proposals arising from a cost review of the English Housing Survey*. Available: [www.shelter.org.uk/policylibrary](http://www.shelter.org.uk/policylibrary)

## Follow-up respondents from previous surveys

We would welcome further exploration of follow-up with a sample of existing respondents, either to add a longitudinal element into the survey, or for a qualitative follow-up study to add depth to the findings and understand how people's housing experiences change over time. Follow-up provides a real opportunity to better understand the survey findings, particularly in the context of substantial policy changes since 2008.

However, we would not support follow-up with this sub-sample as a substitute for running the annual survey in its current form. Rather, the annual survey with a longitudinal sub-sample, or the annual survey with qualitative follow-up, should be viewed as an opportunity to add value to the existing survey for limited additional cost.

#### **4. Which topics in the survey are of most and least value to you?**

Shelter regularly draws on topics from across the survey to inform our work, reflecting both the broad scope of our work and the inter-connectedness of the housing issues covered by the survey. Those that we use regularly in our research and service development include:

- Accommodation, tenure, ownership type, mortgages, renting, social renting, rooms in accommodation, type of dwelling and household
- Satisfaction with accommodation, satisfaction with repairs and maintenance
- Council tax and utilities, energy efficiency, condensation and damp
- Rent and housing benefit, previous tenancy and deposit and current deposit
- Buying aspirations
- Whether working, earnings, other outgoings for household, benefits, income support and mortgage interest, savings and investments.

Just in the past four months, we have used the EHS in four research reports and briefings (all available in our online Policy Library<sup>7</sup>):

- *What happens when there aren't enough homes?* (February 2015)
- *Understanding landlord business models* (December 2014)
- *Safe and Decent Homes* (December 2014)
- *In the mix: the need for a diverse supply of new homes* (November 2014)

Even where we are not using variables on a regular basis right now, these should not be interpreted as being of "least value." While we may not be currently focused on a particular issue covered by the survey, if the survey picked up a change that suggested the issue was becoming more prominent, we might use that evidence to decide to shift the focus of our work. If variables are simply removed from the survey, we would be less equipped to adapt our work in this way.

#### **5. Are there any questions that you would consider removing?**

As noted in the consultation document, in 2010 the length of the questionnaire was already dramatically reduced from 50 to 30 minutes and the physical survey was cut by three pages. We believe that any further reduction in the length of the survey would compromise the value of the data, and that if cost savings are necessary, they should be made through other means.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.shelter.org.uk/policylibrary](http://www.shelter.org.uk/policylibrary)