



HOLDING ON TO HOME

Tenancy sustainment in social housing: tenant survey findings

As part of the ‘*Holding on to home: tenancy sustainment in social housing*’ study, between April and June last year, more than 1,200 social housing tenants of three case study landlords - East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Southern Housing, and Stockport Homes – were surveyed across England. This document presents the key messages of the survey findings report.

The survey findings provide valuable learning about the financial difficulties and labour market precarity facing many social housing tenants, and the consequences of these in the form of rent arrears, other debts, going without essentials, and using food banks. Financial precarity is found to be further compounded by the rising cost-of-living, changes to the benefit system, and automatic deductions from their income, with implications for tenancy sustainment. Those currently in rent arrears are, therefore, the tip of an iceberg wherein many more tenants are struggling to pay their rent as well as meet their other basic needs. These findings therefore have implications for national policy (in relation, for example, to the operation of the benefit system, labour market and tenure security, and equality), can help inform social landlords’ support and engagement activities, and will be of interest to local and national charities working with low income households, or campaigning to address poverty and inequality.



Before highlighting the key survey results, it is important to note that the survey was not designed to be representative of the social rented tenant populations of England or the case study landlords included in the survey. This is because of the purposive selection of the neighbourhoods where interviewing took place (areas with higher arrears rates, larger Universal Credit (UC)/ Housing Benefit (HB) populations, and in one case study, larger ethnic minority populations, were targeted). However, there were many similarities between the characteristics of tenants in our survey and tenants nationally, although there were also differences. The key messages to emerge from the survey are:

- The financial circumstances of the social housing tenants surveyed appeared to be very precarious, with many struggling to ‘get-by’.** The survey findings indicate low income levels, a relatively high proportion in receipt of benefits, with lower than average employment rates (36 per cent were in paid employment) compared with the national population. Many employed tenants were on casual, insecure or seasonal contracts (31 per cent of employed tenants were in precarious work) and/ or worked part time (42 per cent of employed tenants), and had little or no savings (66 per cent of all respondents had no savings at all). For many, (43 per cent) their household income did not last until their next salary/ benefit payment, one quarter were behind with at least one bill, and use of food banks in the past year was very common (21 per cent).



- **The cost-of-living crisis has compounded social housing tenants' financial precarity, with implications for tenancy sustainment.** The majority of tenants reported at the time they were surveyed that they were struggling to 'get-by' because of the cost-of-living crisis (86 per cent) but the standout result from the survey was the clear correlation between those most affected by the cost-of-living crisis, and those struggling to pay their rent (i.e. those in rent arrears, or stating that they struggled to afford their rent, or who were employing strategies such as cutting back on food and selling personal items in order to pay their rent). For a group already experiencing financial stress, any increase in costs or reduction in income potentially impacts on their ability to sustain rent payment.



- Some of those struggling to 'get-by', including those using food banks, were in paid employment (19 per cent of part time and seven per cent of full time workers had used a foodbank in the past year) suggesting that for households whose employment is insecure or low paid, **paid work does not necessarily protect** people against experiencing the deepest forms of poverty.

- **There may be a significant cohort of social housing tenants who are 'at risk' of rent arrears but are not known to be at risk by the landlord.** A small, albeit significant minority of tenants (9 per cent) were in rent arrears, but 70 per cent of all respondents (and 73 per cent of those responsible for paying all or part of their rent) reported difficulties paying their rent across a number of measures. Many (69%) were employing unsustainable strategies such as cutting back on food, incurring other debt, and selling personal items in order to pay their rent. In total, 61% had cut back on essentials such as food and heating, and one in ten had sold personal

possessions in order to pay their rent. These are tenants who may be in need of advice or support to help them sustain their tenancy but may not be known to their landlord as tenants experiencing difficulties.



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1 in 10

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- A clear implication of the point directly above is that **'rent arrears' alone is a poor measure of whether tenants are managing their rent payments**, so it is important that landlords have preventative measures in place to identify tenants who are struggling, and so need support, but who are not yet behind with their rent. There is, therefore, a **need to rethink how we understand and measure tenancy sustainment**. In its simplest form, tenancy sustainment is concerned with supporting a tenancy so that it does not come to a premature end. However, if tenants are only managing to sustain their tenancies by employing coping strategies, such as selling possessions, incurring debt or not eating in order to pay their rent, and are living in cold homes because they cannot afford the heating, can we really say that these are 'sustained tenancies'? A broader understanding of tenant sustainment is needed which encompasses a range of measures relating to the *health and quality* of a tenancy.

- The survey findings indicate that various **aspects of the benefit system may be undermining tenants' ability to afford their rent**. For example, **tenants on UC** were more likely than their counterparts on HB to be in rent arrears (14% compared with 9%), and to face wider financial challenges such as running out of money before

the end of the month (58% compared with 44%). This highlights the importance of providing support to UC claimants, particularly as they transition on to the benefit. The Government estimates that many claimants are better off under UC and, as a dynamic benefit with tapers in place, UC more quickly adjusts to changes in income. For many tenants responding to our survey, this does not appear to have been the case. Tenants **subject to some welfare reforms**, particularly the benefit cap but also benefit sanctions, as well as those having **automatic deductions** from their benefits, were more likely to encounter difficulties affording their rent.

- The vast majority of tenants (93%) did not find it difficult to communicate with their landlord about their rent. However, the survey results suggest that **tenants who are in greatest need of contact with their landlord, may also be those who find it most difficult to engage with them**. Tenants in rent arrears and those who report struggling to afford their rent were significantly more likely to express difficulties communicating with their landlord about their rent than those not in arrears or struggling to pay.

- **Anxiety and the stigma associated with financial problems appears to be at the heart of tenants' reluctance to contact their landlord when they fall into arrears.**

For landlords looking to engage with tenants who have fallen into arrears, these barriers to engagement may be more difficult to address than technical ones such as digital poverty. Given the importance that many landlords place on tenants engaging with them when they fall into arrears, with many committed to not evicting tenants who engage, this presents a major challenge. Increased anxiety can also impact tenants mental and physical health, potentially further exacerbating difficulties sustaining a tenancy. **Efforts are therefore required to address the stigma associated with financial difficulties in order to allay tenant anxieties, to foster productive and preventative communication that supports tenancy sustainment.**



- **The financial circumstances of some of the socio-demographic groups surveyed were particularly precarious and, not unexpectedly, it was these groups who found it most difficult to pay their rent.** Across various measures of financial insecurity – for example, running out of money often, getting behind with bills, use of food banks, having no savings – certain groups frequently emerged as being disproportionately affected. These included some minority ethnic tenants but particularly those of Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British heritage, households containing children, people with mental ill health, and those on UC. In turn, financial precarity can make tenants vulnerable to difficulties paying their rent and so to accruing rent arrears. In relation to rent payment, the following groups experienced the greatest difficulties: UC claimants; women; tenants aged 35-49; tenants who identified as Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British, those whose employment status was part-time/ self-employed/ freelance; tenants who look after the home or family; and, households with children.
- However, it is important to note that advanced statistical analysis (logistic regression) highlighted only two socio-demographic characteristics as being (statistically significant) important ‘drivers’ of rent difficulty in ‘their own right’: households with children and ‘households with other adults’, which were both identified as being statistically significant in the regression model for ‘difficulty affording rent’. And no socio-demographic characteristics were identified in the model for rent arrears. Particularly in the case of arrears, then, it is other characteristics, such as being subject to an automatic deduction, that appear to be driving rent payment difficulties. **Critically, however, these characteristics may interact with socio-demographic attributes and be inextricably linked and impossible to disentangle.**

- To help make sense of the rent payment behaviour of tenants, and the behaviour of landlords in relation to tenancy sustainment, we are employing a concept from behavioural science – ‘COM-B’ – as a loose framework for the collection and analysis of the data. At the core of the COM-B framework is a ‘behaviour system’ which presents behaviour (B) as a result of the interplay between the ‘capabilities’ (C) of subjects, the ‘opportunity’ (O) they have to enact behaviours, and their ‘motivation’ (M). The key message from applying a **COM-B** lens to the survey findings is that it **is only by improving the context within which tenants live their lives (‘opportunity’) - i.e. their financial resources - that they will find it easier to pay their rent** and be in a better position to sustain their tenancies. As such, efforts that focus solely on ‘motivation’ and ‘capability’ are unlikely to achieve significant positive outcomes in relation to rent arrears and tenancy sustainment. Advice and support in the form of income maximisation, benefit checks, debt advice, and initiatives to facilitate economic activity – support that many landlords already provide – are much more likely to be effective.

A copy of the report, ‘*Tenancy sustainment in social housing: tenant survey findings*’, by Peter Thomas, Paul Hickman and Kesia Reeve, can be downloaded, [here >](#)

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