

Second Interim Report to JRF

**Housing and Life Experiences:  
First interviews with a qualitative  
longitudinal panel of low income  
households**

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## Executive Summary

The Housing and Life Experiences project was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of its major programme of work on housing and poverty. The intention to better understand how housing impacts on poverty over the life course, and to inform the development of housing policy that prevents, mitigates against and lifts households out of poverty. The project commenced in January 2015, and will be completed in 2017. It has two main components. The first is a qualitative longitudinal panel study (QLPS) being undertaken by the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York that seeks to understand how housing circumstances affect households' experiences of poverty at different stages of the life course. The second component is a policy development process to be taken forward in 2017 informed by the findings of the QLPS.

This interim report presents the emerging findings from the first wave of face to face interviews undertaken as part of the QLPS.

## About the QLPS

Over the course of the QLPS three waves of qualitative and quantitative data are being collected to capture housing and life experiences of people on low incomes now, in the past, and into the future. A purposive sample of 72 participants have been recruited from six case study areas across the four nations of the UK, in three age cohorts: younger adults (aged 18-55), mid-life adults (aged 30 to 49), and older adults (aged 50+). The sample includes those living in the private rented sector (PRS), social rented sector (SRS), and homeowners. All were living on less than the Minimum Income Standard when recruited. At interview we explored with participants: their housing histories; their current housing, income, choices, and constraints; and their housing aspirations for the future.

## Key Findings

Housing was often a struggle for people to obtain and sustain throughout the life course. Some stayed put for longer periods of time than others in the same property. However, many had moved often, back and forth between tenures, sometimes gaining small benefits, but rarely more than that. There was little evidence from the narratives of a housing ladder that people mount towards an ever better standard of living, underpinned by their housing assets that will support them through any difficult times.

The British housing system poorly supports key life transitions and life events (both expected and unexpected) for those on low incomes. The narratives demonstrate how key life events – divorce, separation, the onset of chronic health problems, accident and injury, bereavement, bankruptcy, the need to take up caring responsibilities – can disrupt people's lives very suddenly, and for the most part with long term consequences. Even positive life events such as leaving home and family formation were difficult transitions to achieve on low incomes in the current housing system.

People's housing needs often changed quickly but there was little support for any housing difficulties, and such support as there was, was usually quite slow. This slow response of the housing system meant that people's housing needs and what was available to them was often at a mismatch for some time. In contrast, across the tenures, the response to people in financial

difficulties who cannot meet their housing costs was often much quicker - and often punitive in nature.

Different tenures offered different advantages and disadvantages. There were many accounts of people moving back and forth between tenures, in response to life events and the relative (non)-availability of housing depending upon their circumstances. Transitional costs were significant in all tenures. In the social rented sector, properties were often offered in a poor state of decoration; agents' fees/ deposits were often significant in the PRS (but decoration often better than social housing); and home ownership entry required a deposit. For those on low incomes, with poor purchasing power, rarely were people able to maximise their utility in any tenure. A secure tenancy in social housing offered some people stability and security at key times of change. The path to social housing, however, was tortuous, preceded for some by long periods in temporary accommodation, or in overcrowding PRS properties, and it was inaccessible to many, notably single people.

Almost all of the participants had spent some time in the PRS. Meeting housing needs at the point where individuals were making more planned transitions in life – setting up your own home, establishing a new relationship, moving to a new job – was problematic. Here the PRS was usually more accessible in comparison to other tenures, in as much as there were no waiting lists, and frontloaded payments (deposits, agents' fees) were at least less than what is required as a deposit on purchasing a home. The PRS was however also perceived to be expensive and insecure (even by those who appear to have been settled in their PRS homes for a long period). For those who were working, and not in receipt of housing benefit, PRS rent and other housing costs, were a significant drain on their income, preventing them from saving towards the purchase of their own home (if that was an aspiration), and, unless there was the prospect of a significant increase in income, effectively locking them into “managing just” for the long term. For single people on low incomes, the PRS was often their only option. Experiences of housing standards were very mixed, some positive, and some not so.

Home ownership was possible for some families with access to reasonably stable jobs, and usually significant family support. Whilst financial sacrifices were often required for younger households, most participants felt this was a worthwhile trade-off. However, some households faced uncertainties related to interest only mortgages and/or the prospect of servicing mortgages into later life; some had faced repossession. For all participants, but particularly older participants, maintenance costs were substantial.

With a view to the future, young currently low-income households on educational and career trajectories with ambitions for homeownership contrasted with those who had spent a long time on low-incomes and feared future moves would be determined by landlords rather than themselves. Key life events heavily constrained future housing options. Ageing meant tenures or housing circumstances that once were satisfactory were often no longer meeting needs.

An intention of the study was to explore whether the variations in policy in the four nations of the UK made any difference to the housing circumstances of the participants. It is difficult to discern the impact of policy differences, as there appeared to be few differences and more common themes in the six case study areas when people reflected generally about housing. The first was a recognition that for people on low incomes accessing decent housing or effecting a change or improvement in housing circumstances were difficult to achieve. Social housing across all six areas



was perceived to be hard to access, with long waiting lists, and few opportunities to move within the SRS. The PRS was considered to be expensive generally, (but particularly in London) and properties in decent neighbourhoods beyond the means of those on low incomes or dependent on housing benefit. Neighbourhood issues related to deprivation, drug use, anti-social behaviour and crime were also raised, although these were perhaps less of a concern in North Wales. The churn in the PRS was also noted as having a detrimental impact on local communities, and generally on the maintenance and repair of properties, and general appearance of neighbourhoods.

The study, to date, has demonstrated that housing has a significant role to play in helping people to manage on low incomes, but that housing often falls short in achieving its potential in the mitigation of poverty, and in some cases, exacerbates poverty amongst low income households.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

The Housing and Life Experiences project was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) as part of its major programme of work on housing and poverty. The Housing and Life Experiences project began in 2015 and builds on earlier work, including a literature review of the links between housing and poverty (Tunstall et al, 2013). It is one of a number of JRF projects that explore different aspects of housing and poverty in the UK (see:

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/housing-and-poverty>).

The Housing and Life Experiences project has two main aims:

- To understand the processes by which the dynamics of housing circumstances affect households' experience of poverty at different stages of the life course.
- To develop housing or housing-related policy and practice that can improve individual and household outcomes, by better preventing, mitigating and reducing poverty at different stages in the life course.

The project commenced in January 2015, and will be completed in 2017. It has two main components. The first is a qualitative longitudinal panel study (QPLS) being undertaken by the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York that seeks to understand how housing circumstances affect households' experiences of poverty at different stages of the life course. The second component is a policy development process to be taken forward in 2017 informed by the findings of the QPLS that is intended to identify innovative housing policy solutions to prevent, mitigate and reduce poverty at different stages of the life course.

This interim report presents the emerging findings from the first wave of face to face interviews undertaken as part of the QPLS.

## **Capturing the housing and life experiences of people on low incomes: Recruitment of a qualitative longitudinal panel study (QPLS)**

The lived experiences of people on low incomes are at the heart of this project. Over the course of the QPLS we are collating data both qualitative and quantitative data in three waves to enable us to capture housing and life experiences of people on low incomes now, in the past, and into the future. Households will be invited to take part in: a first face-to-face interview, a second telephone interview (after 9 months-1 year) and a third face-to-face interview (after another 6-9 months). The intention is to inform the two main aims of the project (as outlined above).

We have recruited a purposive sample of 72 participants (see Table 1.1), in three age cohorts – younger adults (aged 18-29), mid-life adults (aged 30 to 49), and older adults (aged 50 and above). All respondents were living on less than the Minimum Income Standard (i.e. what members of the public think people need to have an acceptable standard of living for their type of household -see Davis, Hirsh, and Padley, 2014). We used a professional recruitment company, QA Research, to recruit the sample.

The sample includes: homeowners – both those with mortgages and those who own outright (22 respondents); people living in the private rented sector (PRS) (21 respondents); people living in the

social rented sector (SRS) (25 respondents); and “other” – for example, in temporary accommodation, or with family (4 respondents).

We sought to interview an equal number of men and women, although it proved easier to recruit women than men, with 44 interviews achieved with women and 28 with men.

We also sought to include people with chronic health problems and disabilities; whilst our target was seven respondents, we unexpectedly spoke to 27 people with some form of health problem. We also sought to recruit, and recruited, 14 people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

Participants were recruited from six case study areas across the four nations of the UK: Fife (Scotland), North Wales (Wales), Belfast (Northern Ireland), Hull, London, and Oxford (England). These areas were selected to cover various policy areas, different ‘travel to work’ areas, a range of housing costs and levels of deprivation.

**Table 1.1: QLPS: Profile of sample**

										Chronic health problem/disability					
Area	N		Sex			Age		BME respondents				Tenure			
Hull	Exp.	Act.		Exp.	Act.		Exp.	Act.	Exp.	Act.	Exp.	Act.		Exp.	Act.
			Male	6	6	16-29	4	6					Owner	5	6
			Female	6	8	30-49	4	6					Social rent	3	2
						50+	4	2					Private rent	3	5
Belfast	12	10							0	0	1	5			
			Male	6	3	16-29	4	3					Other	1	1
			Female	6	7	30-49	4	3					Owner	5	4
						50+	4	4					Social rent	3	4
Fife	12	11							0	2	2	2			
			Male	6	6	16-29	4	2					Private rent	3	3
			Female	6	5	30-49	4	4					Other	1	0
						50+	4	5					Owner	5	5
London	12	16							7	7	1	8			
			Male	6	3	16-29	4	4					Social rent	3	8
			Female	6	13	30-49	4	7					Private rent	3	4
						50+	4	5					Other	1	2
Oxford	12	10							7	4	1	5			
			Male	6	4	16-29	4	1					Owner	5	2
			Female	6	6	30-49	4	5					Social rent	3	6
						50+	4	4					Private rent	3	2
North Wales	12	11							0	0	1	6			
			Male	6	6	16-29	4	4					Other	1	0
			Female	6	5	30-49	4	3					Owner	5	3
						50+	4	4					Social rent	3	2
													Other	1	1
Total	72	72	72	72		72	72	14	14	7	27		72	72	

Note: 'Other' tenure included living in the parental home, living with relatives or in temporary accommodation.

In this report, we present the analysis of the first wave of face-to-face qualitative interviews. At interview we explored with participants: their housing histories; their current housing, income, choices, and constraints; and their housing aspirations for the future. Subsequent interviews will explore how their circumstances change - for better or for worse – over the course of time.

To protect the anonymity of the participants we have given each a “new” name, which we will use in reporting the project’s findings over time.

## Structure of interim report

In the second chapter of this report, we focus on the “housing past” narratives. The interviews provided rich, varied, often complex, accounts of people’s lives and their housing histories. Here we use key life transitions as the framework for analysis as explained further in the chapter. In the third chapter, we consider “housing now”, with a focus on housing costs, how people “manage just” to maintain a home on a low income, and the associated strategies and stressors. A fourth chapter reports on “housing futures”, and where in future the participants thought they would be, and their attitudes to different types of tenure. Finally, in Chapter Five, reflecting on the aims of this study, we offer some broad conclusions. These conclusions will inform future policy development.

## **Chapter 2: The Role of Housing in Managing Life Transitions and Poverty over Time**

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines participants' housing histories. We draw on the experiences of the participants to explore how housing supports (or not) individuals and families at key life transition points, as well as external events, that can impact on household income and potentially disrupt people's lives. We begin by outlining the rationale for this approach, before presenting the key findings.

### **Analytical approach**

In the interviews, we asked our participants to take us through their housing history, from their childhood, to independent living and over the life course, and the key factors that led them to move from one home to another. We also asked whether these housing moves impacted on their income, and vice versa. Participants provided us with rich narratives and stories about their housing and life experiences.

We analysed the material by a number of key variables: life-course stage (early (up to 29), mid (30 to 49), older adults (aged 50 or over); life-course transition or key life event; gender; place; and structural change (economic/social policies). Our analysis revealed that, whilst all these factors played a part at times, housing histories were fundamentally shaped by key life transitions or events (for example, leaving the parental home, relationship formation or breakdown, the birth of children, the onset of ill health or disability), and sometimes by unexpected or unpredictable "external" events (for example, neighbourhood violence or damage to a property caused by flooding). These life transitions or events often had an impact on a household's income, and both life transitions and external events influenced housing options and choices.

It was clear that many of the individual life transitions that mediated housing histories did not follow a standard pattern related to age. We know that age itself is a poor proxy for life course position (Clark, 2013). In line with observations of demographic shifts, not just the "ageing" of the population, but also of decline in marriage, a rise in the average age of first parenthood, smaller families, re-partnering, complex families, non-resident parents, and increasing numbers of single person households (see for example, Graham and Sabater, 2015), the histories of the participants demonstrate the deinstitutionalisation of the life course.

Many participants' accounts included a number of transitions over time. This reflected both the age of some – older people are more likely to have more "events" - and also the 'accelerated' lives that some of the younger participants have led. While we analysed the impacts of individual transitions, these transitions were rarely isolated. Multiple transitions, close to each other, could have a devastating effect on people both in terms of financial impacts and well-being issues. In some circumstances a transition may also become a trigger to other events which have an influence on, or are influenced by, housing.

Our analysis highlighted a number of key life transitions or events which influenced the housing histories of households on low incomes:

- Leaving the parental home
- Relationship/family formation
- Relationship/family breakdown
- Income and work transitions
- Ill health and disability/caring responsibilities
- Bereavement
- Other later life transitions
- Migration to the UK
- External life events.

## Leaving the parental home

Leaving (the parental) home is a key life course transition that has seen considerable recent change. In 2015, half of those aged 20-24, a fifth of 25-29 year olds, and one in ten aged 30-34, were still living with their parents, higher percentages than at any other point in last 20 years.<sup>1</sup> Younger adults are also much more likely to rent than buy their own property than earlier generations – only 30 per cent of 25-29 year olds are buying now, compared to 55 per cent in 1996. Young households in poverty have always been more likely to rent than own, but now they also face more competition from other young households in the rental market.

The accounts of the younger cohort revealed that leaving home was often not a linear process, rather involving to and fro from the parental home to independent living. There were a number of examples where young people struggled in their early, usually private rented, tenancies, with a return to parents helping to reduce or mitigate poverty related to housing costs. Here, the parental home acted as a 'safety net'. Although participants returned to parents usually of necessity, and this could lead to overcrowding, some also stressed the positives of everyone living together as an extended family. The difficulties of accessing social housing further constrained the younger cohort's housing options:

*"... we just couldn't afford anywhere when we were at her mum's. That's why we'd save up. It's all the fees and deposits and everything else you've got to put down on houses. It's these private landlords. I'd love to move into a council house but the list system is ridiculous at the moment ... When we were at her mum's we bid every week for, I think it was a year and we got nowhere."*

John, younger cohort, single parent, PRS, Hull

Accounts of leaving the parental home from the mid-life and older participants suggested that the initial transition to independent living in the past appeared smoother. Their narratives about leaving the parental home were less dominated by affordability issues than housing standards, with people often moving into poor quality, damp, private (rented and bought) property, sometimes setting up home in a part of a shared property, rather than in a self-contained dwelling. The relatively good housing standards of early council housing were sometimes remarked upon in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/mortgageshome/article-3458315/Number-young-adults-living-parents-hits-20-year-high-says-ONS.html>.

accounts. Often marriage had precipitated the move, although for some of our participants, the move away from family was due to economic necessity, or a preference to seek work and new horizons elsewhere.

Not everyone in our sample had parents that they could fall back on. Some were “pushed” out by poor family relationships at a very early age, and this was true of participants in all age cohorts, often as a result of re-partnering by a parent and poor relationships with the new partner leading to leaving the family home early. Others lived in the parental home for some considerable time but changes in their circumstances meant that this was no-longer tenable. For example, Claudia presented as homeless and moved to social housing in her 30s after having lived with her parents with her young daughter. Jackie, now in her early 40s, was “*thrown out*” by her parents in her late 20s as her mental health problems emerged, and she moved into social housing following a stay in hospital. Melanie, now in her 50s, had moved out to live with a partner but when this relationship broke down, couldn’t go back to her parental home and ended up sofa surfing. Eventually she found accommodation in the SRS.

Most participants had moved from the parental home into the PRS or SRS. Notably, very few young people, throughout the cohorts, mentioned sharing accommodation with friends, only partners or other family members. Just a few participants had accessed rooms in shared houses, or student accommodation, on leaving home. Rarely had individuals moved directly to home ownership, affordability being a key constraint. An exception to this was Michelle who lived at home until her early 30s, choosing this above private renting. Low housing costs and a steady income put her in a good financial position to enter owner occupation at this later stage, with the parental home acting as a ‘springboard’ into homeownership:

*“The longer you stay at home and things, it does put you on your feet rather than renting whereby, I don’t know, I think it’s a longer ladder to climb when you rent.”*

Michelle, older cohort, couple with children, home owner, North Wales

There were a couple of examples of participants staying in their parental (or other relative’s) home as a long term, “staying put” housing pathway. Two young households, both in Belfast, had remained in their childhood home into adulthood. In one case, the young man had been brought up by his grandparents in the social rented sector and had inherited their tenancy on their death. He now hoped to purchase this house via the Home Sales Scheme in Northern Ireland. In another case, a young woman’s parents had downsized out of the family home, with the young woman now the lead tenant on a shared tenancy with her brother and sister (who had a child). Both of these arrangements appeared to suit the participants well, with choices possibly influenced by the relative residential stability of communities in Northern Ireland.

## **Relationship/family formation**

Relationship formation was a key push factor to find new accommodation, however as outlined above, there were sometimes delays to housing moves due to resource constraints, with younger couples living with one of their parents for some time. Across age groups, including where people were forming a new household with a new partner later in life, being a couple was not always enough – many couples still struggled to access and maintain affordable housing, especially when one or both had a health problem and/or where the couple had children and childcare needs constrained working opportunities, and/or where one party had financial debt.

There were quite a few examples of couples living apart together (LAT). In some cases the decision to live apart was influenced by past events, such as previous abusive relationships, or because a relationship was troubled. For example, Marina, one of the younger cohort lived with her partner in a council flat, in order to care for him as he had mental health issues, but she also sometimes returned to her mum's house, living between two places. Sometimes LAT was the best way to maximise limited resources, for example Colin, a young man, was staying with his parents whilst his girlfriend (and young baby) had just moved into social housing. His parents only charged him a small amount of board so he was able to offer some modest support his partner, whereas if they lived together they would have been financially worse off:

*R: If me and [partner] lived together and, we'd have to make a joint claim and we'd only get about two thirds of what we'd get claiming separately...*

***I: If the benefits were different, would you prefer to do that or are you happy with the present arrangements?***

*R: If they were different, I'd prefer to do it ... If we were to do it all by the books ... I don't think we'd be able to afford to live there.*

Colin, younger cohort, couple with child, living in parental home, Hull

The arrival of children (or increasing family size) often led to housing moves. There were many historical examples of families entering and progressing within social housing on becoming a family/and often moving to bigger properties on the birth of subsequent children. Many accounts involved people moving from a 2 bed to 3 bed property, however there was often a time lag between moves, with overcrowding in the interim. There were one or two examples of younger people accessing social housing more recently where their eligibility was high, for example, Alicia in Hull had secured a two bed council tenancy just before the birth of her child, as she was homeless. However, there were many examples of other households struggling to access appropriate social housing, or move within social housing, despite living in overcrowded or unsuitable properties.

A number of single parents and young couples with children had moved quite extensively within the PRS, finding it difficult to access both reasonable and affordable accommodation that was in a location near to family for childcare and other support. Those participants who had entered into home ownership as a young family had usually relied on significant family assistance, for example, assistance with the deposit for a property, or on some windfall payment such as an inheritance.

## **Relationship/family breakdown**

Relationship breakdown, by its nature, usually impacts on people's housing. One party has to move, or flee, from a property, often with significant financial impacts on one or both parties (see Stock et al, 2014; Wallace et al, 2017 forthcoming). As noted above, in our households, family assistance was often key in terms of helping sustain tenancies or acting as a safety net allowing a return to the parental home.

A number of our participants had found themselves in significant financial problems following relationship breakdown. For Annette, the breakdown of her relationship had led to her getting "stuck" in her social rented flat in Oxford. She was unable to move while her former partner's name was on the tenancy and she had debts and rent arrears, some of which were inherited from



her former partner. While her housing situation was stable, this was not a desirable state for her as she would have liked to move out of an area that she felt would be a dangerous place for her son to grow up.

Low income home owners could also run into difficulties, and sometimes the circumstances under which the house was bought, for example with a 100 per cent mortgage, or when two partners were working, had an impact much later on. For example, when Marcia's relationship broke down in her 40s after her children had left home, she discovered that her former husband had taken out additional mortgages against the property in Hull. While she has been able to stay in the property, she had struggled financially as the house was originally bought with a 100 per cent mortgage and she had to contend with this together with other debts. Another home owner, Joanne, had recently separated from her husband and was waiting for the divorce settlement to be finalised. She remained in the family home in London with her son, but on a much reduced income. Her housing helped mitigate this situation as she was able to rent out a room in her house to generate extra income, alongside juggling with credit cards and putting up with living in a cold house. She reflected that this was possible because her mortgage payments were manageable - she had bought her current house when properties were less expensive, and she had also been able to use equity from the sale of her previous home which she had been able to buy when she had inherited some money. The importance of economic cycles, and family help - alongside extra space in the house - was evident here in maintaining housing through a period of reduced income.

*"Yes, had to [get in a lodger], otherwise I wouldn't be able to still be here actually because that money makes a big difference, so, yes, he's been here for just over a year now but I didn't really feel that I had that much of a decision because I needed to get some more income quickly, so that seemed the easiest way!"*

Joanne, older cohort, single parent, home owner, London

Men also faced difficult housing and financial transitions following relationship breakdown. For example, Robert, an older man in Oxford had been married three times, each time buying a house, but now lives in social rented housing as his former wife and children continued living in the family home. Another older man in Oxford, Ryan, following the breakdown of his relationship, also left everything for his ex-wife. He became seriously ill with heart disease shortly after this and had to give up work. He had been able to access social housing but it was in poor condition (damp and expensive to heat), and isolated in a village. He was struggling financially. Whilst social housing had some limitations, this was better than the experiences of some of the younger men in the study who had no eligibility for social housing. One young man in Hull was renting two rooms for himself and his visiting children in a shared house and had to pay the total price for these two rooms even though his children only visited for half the week.

### **Domestic violence**

Some female participants had fled from domestic violence. Timely access to housing could really support, or exacerbate, this situation. Stays in temporary accommodation or hostels were often reported to be traumatic and sometimes prolonged experiences which had negative impacts on family health, on women's capacity to continue working or studying, and often took them away from crucial family support networks. Where appropriate alternative accommodation was easily accessible, a difficult transition had been more manageable. For example, Edna, one of the older cohort in North Wales, had left a violent partner some 20 years before, but was able to live in a friend's house until she could get a financial settlement via the courts (and could purchase her

own flat). Anwen, another participant in Wales with three children had been rehoused very quickly via the homelessness system into another social rented tenancy, while her husband remained in the former family home. She reflected on how grateful she was for the support that she had received from the Domestic Violence team and wished she had made this move sooner. Fear of becoming homeless or in living in temporary accommodation had made her reluctant to leave her husband.

## Income and work transitions

At the point of recruitment into the study all participants were living on less than the Minimum Income Standard for their household size. Some of the younger participants were hopeful of increasing their income over time, particularly those in education or training, and others in the midlife groups were confident of remaining in work. Some of the midlife and older participants had in the past been much more comfortably off. This group included: those who had worked and were now retired; or currently not able to work due to ill health or disability, or caring responsibilities; and some who had experienced relationship breakdown, and were now living on a reduced income. Some had in the past received unexpected financial boosts such as an inheritance. There were also those who had been worse off financially in the past, and while still on a low income, were marginally better off than they had been in the past. Examples here included those that had been able to resolve debt problems, (usually through Debt Recovery Orders) or had received additional benefit payments (usually relating to disability).

Bankruptcy was a key life event that could lead to considerable housing instability with a long lasting legacy. One older participant, Nick, had led a boom and bust life, buying his first house at the age of 19. Following the 2008 global financial crisis, his business went bankrupt and (now suffering from debilitating illness) he was forced to move back to his parents' home and then into the PRS in London. He feels strongly that if he had not sold the flat where he had lived on his own, he would be in a far better situation:

*"I had a stake in what was going on in that I owned something so it allowed me to feel part of stuff. I'm not sure that I would've enjoyed it that much if I'd been living in a situation I'm living in now as a tenant, with no security and whatever [...] It's all I'd aspire to have is a council kind of place now ... I'd cry for it. I'd literally give my right arm now, I'm telling you, to have that kind of security."*

Nick, older cohort, single man, PRS, London

Edna, an older participant in North Wales, had enjoyed an eventful life, owning three different properties at different times. However, in retirement she went bankrupt, and had to sell her home. She then moved to a house owned by her daughter.

Owning a house had provided one participant in Fife, Jack, with a way out of financial problems on two occasions in his life: first when he built up personal debt, and second following a failed business venture. He was able to buy the house he currently lives in following a legacy given to his wife. Being able to sell a house and move on having paid off debts (on both occasions living with family members for a while) has however, had consequences and his wife suffers from depression as a result of the stress, and consequently she was unable to work for several years.

## Ill health and disability

The on-set (and continuation) of illness or disability was a major life event faced by many people in our sample. When coping with ill health and disability additional help is often needed from family, friends and external agencies. Long-term disability increases the risk of living in poverty and often leads to a change in people's working arrangements and income levels (most usually a reduction). Where housing costs are high, reductions in income as a consequence of ill health or the onset of disability can mean people have to move. For example, Robin was living in the private rented sector in North Wales but the onset of his wife's disability at the same time as her maternity pay ran out, meant that she was unable to return to work. Initially they had to leave the PRS and move back to family, but since have returned to the PRS but are struggling to find a property that meets their needs. Jackie had long standing mental health problems. Having bought her SRS flat under the Right to Buy in London, she got into arrears with her mortgage when she became ill and could not work. She had to sell her flat, and move into the PRS. In another case, external financial advice from CAB had helped Anwen, in her 50's, stay in her PRS home in North Wales. She had a long term physical health problem, and needed to reduce her working hours but was worrying about covering her rent. The Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) helped her to consider her options and calculated that she would receive help with her rent if she worked part-time. The CAB was also helping her to apply for a Personal Independence Payment. It also helped that her landlord was a family friend and she felt he was charging a fair rent.

For some of the participants, housing provided stability at a time when ill health had precipitated other events which had a negative effect on their financial stability and well-being. For Richard in Fife, ill-health forced him to give up work, which led to mental ill-health and the breakdown of his relationship. Over a continued difficult period of about 20 years, he felt able to talk to his social landlord and was able to negotiate at times when he was not able to pay his rent. In another example, Kevin in Fife had long term severe mental health issues that have prevented him from working for many years. His parents regularly gave him money to tide him over, but another significant factor was his relationship with his PRS landlady, who maintained a low rent on the property and has been generally supportive (for instance maintaining his tenancy during a time when he was not able to live independently). This contrasted strongly with the experience of Chris in Hull, who had been asked by his landlord (as he wished to sell the property) to leave the family home at a time when he was receiving treatment for cancer.

Where housing was more affordable and/or participants had other safety nets, they were in a much better position to remain in their housing and cope financially. Living mortgage free, where combined with other resources (for example, savings, sickness benefit, redundancy payments), could make a huge difference. Michelle, in her 50s, had to give up work suddenly due to ill health. At the same time her husband was made redundant. They had already been able to pay off their mortgage on their North Wales home and her husband had received a redundancy payment, which along with other savings meant at least in the shorter term they had few financial worries, and indeed as her husband was at home he was able to support her through her various treatments, and take care of their two young children.

Planned housing moves to meet longer term health needs could work well. For example, moving to a ground floor flat which was in good condition, affordable (including cheap to heat) provided security and mitigated other aspects of being on a low income for Irene, in her 80s and had bought her flat in Oxford outright using the proceeds of a previous house sale and help from family: *'It's*

*all so convenient, I've never lived in such luxury before, there are sockets everywhere, light switches everywhere'. However, Irene did feel relatively isolated in her community.*

### **Caring responsibilities**

In our sample, there were a number of families who had long-term caring responsibilities for other family members, including both children with physical and/or emotional disabilities or older people. This often necessitated limiting working hours and/or a reliance on (top-up) benefits, meaning that families were living in long-term poverty. For example, in London, Maurice, in his 30s, had unexpectedly become the primary carer for his teenage disabled child. Here, access to social housing had proved paramount to support this arrangement – although the process to obtain social housing had caused significant difficulties as he was living for a long period (six months) in temporary accommodation where he had to share a room with his daughter. This situation was only resolved following the intervention of his MP. During this transition, financial problems developed, in part due to mix-ups with benefits and in part due to the cost of making his new social housing habitable.

Social housing also proved important for Benjamin who is in his 50s, in Wales, who had secured a tenancy for his family which was suitable for his adult son with cerebral palsy. Recent welfare changes had been a threat to Richard who was living alone in a two bedroom social rented property. He had become liable for the spare room subsidy and was in financial difficulty as a result. At the same time, his father died, leaving his disabled mother in need of a carer. His mother moved in with him, and this solved both problems. Richard commented:

*"I'm adequately housed, but they were saying why should a single person have a two-bedroomed house? What if I took ill, what if I hadn't been here and Mum had ... she would have had to go into a home."*

Richard, older cohort, single person living with dependant parent, SRS, Fife

One participant had become the guardian of her three nephews and niece following the death of her sister, giving up her sheltered accommodation to live with her sister's young family in their SRS flat in London. Another participant in North Wales had become the guardian for three very young grandchildren who had moved into the two bedroom SRS house where she had brought up her own family. In both these cases, social housing provided at least some level of security in very difficult circumstances when unexpected events had brought new responsibilities.

### **Bereavement**

Bereavement is a traumatic life event that can impact on housing needs. In our sample, at least four families had experienced the loss of a child with devastating consequences. In two cases, poor quality housing in the lower end of the PRS appeared to exacerbate these problems. In Hull, a young couple who had lost a young child had temporarily gone back to live with family members but then moved back into poor quality housing, in poor neighbourhoods. Poor housing and neighbourhood conditions had exacerbated the mother's depression. A kind landlord had given them a deposit to move on when he had to sell his property, and their new small house was felt to be better than previous flats, but they could only afford this with family topping up the rent.

In contrast, a good home could help, or at least not hinder, people's experiences. Following the death of her young child 20 years ago, one of our older participants in Belfast had received

help from medical professionals to move to a new social housing tenancy with more natural light. Whilst the move didn't help with the initial grief, she felt that the new house had a positive impact on her well-being over time and, although she still suffered from depression, the house helped her to cope with life:

*"... a lot brighter and open ... that one was closed in ... It was a darker house, smaller. This is more open and airy. I think that does help with your mental wellbeing. Personally I think it helps you mentally. There are lot of windows and a lot of rooms. You know, there's more sunlight getting in. When you're depressed you're anxious and uptight, and everything is closed in. It makes you feel darker inside. Which a lot of people wouldn't understand."*

Louisa, older cohort, single parent, home owner, Belfast

Good quality housing had also assisted a mid-life participant, Zoe, with coping following the sudden death of her husband – she got comfort from staying in the house in the social rented sector in Belfast. She lived close to friends and family, and had space for relatives to move in with her, and for her children to support her emotionally and practically immediately following her husband's death. Financially, it had been easier to manage on a lower social rent, with no worries about responsibility for repairs.

## Other later life transitions

The extent of freedom that older participants had to be able to adjust to changing circumstances, both as children left the family home and as their own needs changed with old age, was often dependent on the resources that they had built up earlier in life, and the availability of suitable housing for them to move to if appropriate, while taking into account other factors such as being close to family.

Some housing situations better served people's changing circumstances. For example, Julia had lived in the house that she and her husband had owned outright for 47 years in Fife. The house had adapted well to their changing needs, from having a young family, to now accommodating her husband's lower levels of mobility. Whilst upkeep on this house was affordable, and not having had housing costs for almost half a century they had been able to build up savings. In contrast Gerrard owned a large home where his family had had lived for 46 years in Belfast. Maintenance costs were now emerging as a burden. They wanted to stay put in the house to maintain their links with family and the local community but this was increasingly difficult on a small pension:

*"At the moment you live with it until something falls off. Especially at the minute where - it would be different now if you had people here bringing in an income."*

Gerrard, older cohort, couple, home owner, Belfast

For others, having bought property with an interest only mortgage was a problem with a growing urgency as they grew older and may not continue working. Louisa had an interest only mortgage with five years to go and no equity in the property. She regretted her decision to buy:

*"My brothers and sisters all owned theirs and they sort of forced me into it [...] Yes, my brother actually gave me £500... I'm sorry I bought it like... Because of the repairs and if you need anything done you have to do it yourself, you'll not.....I would give anything to be able to rent."*

Louisa, older cohort, single parent, home owner, Belfast



Not all the older and mid-life participants were in secure housing. Both Anwen and Nick, in their fifties, and both with health problems, lived in the private rented sector and would have preferred to have homes in the SRS, in part because of the greater security it offered, more affordable rent, and the likelihood that the properties would be in better condition.

Family support continued to be important into mid and later life. Irene, in Oxford, used the equity from the sale of her home, topped up with a loan from her son-in-law to buy outright, *'the best house I've ever lived in'*, in a private sheltered housing scheme, and to have housing that was appropriate to her needs for the first time. Edna, in her 70s, had experienced financial difficulties post retirement, and had moved into a property in North Wales that her daughter owned, receiving housing benefit to cover the rent.

There were fewer examples of people downsizing in social housing. Albert's partner had made an altruistic choice to downsize from her 4 bedroom social housing when her older children left home, even though her previous 4 bedroom property was more convenient for her disabled daughter as it was all on one floor.

*"It took me nine years to get a four bedroom property when I had 5 children, so when I didn't have so many children at home anymore I figured it was time to downsize into a smaller property, so we downsized to a three bedroom and then again when we were moving closer to your [husband's] parents and we only had this one [disabled daughter] still in the house."*

Albert's partner, older cohort, couple with dependant adult, SRS, Fife

A number of social tenants' poverty had worsened when their children turned 18, when their benefits were reduced, and there was an assumption that adult children would contribute to the rent. One participant really feared what would happen when her son turned 18, and she would need to pay bedroom tax or charge her son rent.

## Migration to the UK

It is notable that several of the older participants had spent periods living and working abroad and had used the proceeds of this to contribute to the purchase of houses at a relatively young age, contributing in two cases to later housing stability. Those participants who were migrants to the UK came from several different backgrounds and had differing reasons for moving to the UK, from pursuing studies to seeking work. Here, early housing histories often involved multiple stays in Houses in Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) in the private rented sector, with low paid work as the main income source, and a lack of family support available. For example, Beatrice had moved from Europe to find work in London, lived in HMOs, as lodger, and then in the PRS with a partner with no extended family support. These participants had a common aspiration to own property, and some had achieved this, living in privately rented properties until they had saved for a deposit and had stable employment. Several participants mentioned that before they had gained permanent residency rights, they were unwilling to do anything that might potentially jeopardise their future immigration status such as applying for benefits or for social housing. In some cases, housing decisions were made with a view to being able to afford to send money home, either to support family or as "back up" where an eventual move might be needed or desired at a later stage. Naomi had bought a house in Fife with an interest only mortgage, and as interest rates were currently low, this had allowed her partner to begin a new business venture in their country of origin. Two of the migrant participants in Oxfordshire had suffered from ill health and found themselves

unable to work. These participants had both previously lived in privately rented housing in poor conditions and were able to secure social housing when they became homeless.

## **Other external life events**

### ***Poor neighbourhoods/neighbourhood violence/harassment***

There were many examples of poor neighbourhoods making people's overall living situation worse:

*"It was a cheap house, it was all we could afford... It was a nice house; it was just a horrible area... There was a charity shop right behind my house that was getting broken into daily. It was there, there was this little alley that anyone could get into and then my back garden. Everywhere was getting broken into and there was always arguing and fights. I hated it. Plus, I didn't know anybody round there as well..."*

Sandra, young cohort, single parent, PRS, Hull

Some people had been personally subject to neighbourhood violence or burglary, leading to people either moving or feeling insecure in their properties. As a young single mother, Anwen's home had been broken into during the night while she was asleep, and she consequently moved as she did not feel safe.

In addition, there were two examples of racist/discrimination. In both cases the participants had become homeless when suffering from ill health and had been offered social housing in areas that they were not familiar with. In one case, the participant was eventually offered a house in another area after the intervention of his MP, and in the other case the participant is still living in this area, but has felt forced to move her children to a school in another village. Taking her children to this school by an irregular rural bus service and with a long walk makes it next to impossible for her to work, particularly given the lack of opportunity in her local area.

### ***Structural problems and damage***

Almost all of the participants had lived in properties at some point which had been in a poor state of repair. A number of our older participants could remember living in PRS properties when they were children, or as young adults, which had been condemned and they were consequently rehoused, usually in the SRS. A small number of other participants had in the more recent past been forced to leave their homes due to unforeseen events such as flooding, or the emergence of unexpected structural problems. For Tony, a single parent with a teenage daughter, the flooding of his home had meant a stay in temporary accommodation until he was able to access a suitable property in the SRS. Peter had moved in with his sister and when his flat was flooded (and consequently demolished), and still remained there six years later. When there were major problems with the drains and foundations to her home Daphne and her family had to move out while the problems were resolved. Fortunately the costs had been covered by insurance however it had been a stressful and difficult time.

## Conclusion

Our analysis highlighted how housing changes and moves were often made in response to life events or transitions. There was considerable diversity of experience. While some of the participants had experienced housing stability, remaining in the same home for prolonged periods, others had moved frequently between properties and tenures as their situations changed. Relationship breakdown, poor health and disability were often the drivers of change. Other factors such as place, or structural factors, sometimes operated as mediating factors as to how well or not people were able to manage these transitions. Historically, housing systems have been geared towards stability and a simple life course. In this context, a complexity of life events and transitions, coupled with long-term or intermittent poverty, can be a major disadvantage.

The first interviews with the QLPS participants provided little evidence for a housing ladder for those on lower incomes. Rather, housing was often a struggle for some people to obtain and sustain throughout the life course. Moves sometimes offered small benefits, but rarely anything more than that, with the closest analogy being a housing merry-go-round rather than a ladder.



## Chapter 3: Housing Now

### Introduction

In this chapter we focus on participants' current living situation. In the interviews we asked participants about how they managed their housing related costs, including rent or mortgage payments, and other related costs associated with making a home, heating, maintenance and repair. We also asked how they managed financially more generally and about housing and other strategies that helped them cope on a limited income. This chapter also explores the impact of housing on people's health and well-being.

### Housing costs

#### *Paying the mortgage or rent*

Across the sample of participants housing costs varied considerably, influenced predominately by tenure, as well as area and length of residency (mainly for owners).

Some older homeowners owned their properties outright, thus their "housing" costs were much reduced (although not always affordable for some). Those of our participants who were paying a mortgage had usually bought their property at a period where their incomes were higher and/or house prices much lower or had received some type of "windfall" (usually an inheritance), or perhaps bought under the Right to Buy, that had reduced the amount they had to borrow. Some had interest only mortgages which meant their mortgage payments were relatively low, but they faced considerable uncertainty in the longer term.

Many felt that rents were "too high" generally, but particularly in the PRS, and certainly when compared to rent charged on similar properties in the SRS.

*"I feel sorry for anyone that's in private because I think that you're being ripped off with the rent, I really do. Why is it that you can pay £118 or whatever it is on this house [Housing Association property], you wouldn't even get a room for that on the private sector. You're not telling – I know they've got to make a bit of money out of it, but I've got some friends that live in private ... her rent is £1,600 a month, for a three bedroom. That was the cheapest she could find.*

Melanie, mid cohort, single parent, SRS, London

Some who were working and renting in the PRS or SRS paid the full cost of their rent. Others paid something towards their rent and received some housing benefit, and others received housing benefit that covered the full cost of their rent. Some lived in "imploded" households (see below) and covered the costs of their rent with various contributions from different members of the household.

For those who were working and living in the SRS their rent still consumed a considerable portion of their household income. For example, Ben, in North Wales, who had been forced to retire early due to ill health, received no housing benefit as his wife was still working; paying the rent was a struggle on a single low income. Similarly Connor, in Belfast, working full time, and separated from his partner but with a young daughter, struggled to meet his SRS rent and other housing

costs. Zara, a single mum with three children living in London had been made redundant, and had since started working part time. She reflected that it was much easier to pay her rent now she received housing benefit than it had been when she worked full time.

Private sector renters who were not receiving housing benefit and usually spending a good proportion of their income on rent reflected how they were unlikely ever to be in the position to save anything for their own futures unless their incomes increased very substantially. David, a young man living with his partner in North Wales – both were working - explains:

*"Yes, I think it's [house] fine but I think I'm paying for them to live a better life, as in - because this is their second home, I'm paying for their mortgage on this house, which - if I'm paying that, I'm not really saving myself any money for the future because my money's just going on the bills to keep going each month to stay here."*

David, young cohort, couple, PRS, North Wales

This was echoed by Anwen – living in the PRS in North Wales – and at the time of interview still working full time for a charity where she earned £13,000 per year. She felt secure in her tenancy as her landlord was a family friend and she had lived in the house for 14 years. She had previously lived in the SRS, and compared what she had paid for a decent family house then to the rent she paid for a smaller older property with fewer amenities, and calculated how much over the years she had spent in rent.

*"Yes, that's my only qualm, is that I've had to pay out my wages, I worked it out for the time I've been here I've paid £40,000 to my landlord. Yes? That's a lot of money, and I've worked bloody hard for that money. ... Why isn't there more help to have got a mortgage? That £40,000 could have been coming back to my family and me couldn't it? If I was able to get on the ladder in the first place, but I wasn't."*

Anwen, older cohort, single person, PRS, North Wales

Jackie reflected a similar view. She had bought her flat in London under the Right to Buy, but when illness prevented her from working, she got into arrears with her mortgage. She had to sell her flat and moved to the PRS. Her rent was covered mostly by housing benefit but it was at least three times as much as her mortgage re-payments had been.

Some of those receiving housing benefit did not receive the full cost of their rent, and were making up the short fall from other benefits (for example, Disability Living Allowance,) or with some financial support from their family. Whilst this could be a struggle they were prepared to pay the extra (while they could) if they liked the property or the area, or if they felt the rent they paid was reasonable or cheaper in comparison with rents for similar properties. Often cheaper alternatives were difficult to find without moving to a different area or a less suitable property.

In the PRS there were costs loaded at the point of starting a tenancy - finding a deposit, paying agents' fees, and losing deposits or fees. These "up-front" costs contributed to the anxieties about insecurity expressed by some in the PRS. Apart from the upheaval of moving, it was also very costly. The most extreme example is that of Jackie who reported she had paid between £6,000 and £7,000 (which included six months' rent in advance) when she first moved into her studio flat. She believed the high deposit requested by the landlord was intended to discourage people on low incomes or benefits. She used the small amount of equity she had left from the sale of her flat once her mortgage arrears had been paid. In some instances, individuals had been able to move in to a

property without a deposit or fees, usually because the landlord was known to them, and this often had influenced their decision to move to a particular place.

Whether renting or buying, working or receiving benefits, the rent or mortgage payments were the priority for most.

*"I do struggle. Once I've paid my rent I've hardly got anything left, but I manage. I have to manage [laughing]. As my mum says, as long as your rent's paid."*

Claudia, mid cohort, single parent, SRS, London

*"I am managing but if I fell ill I would be in trouble – I can't afford to fall ill. If somebody gets in my taxi that's got a cold, I say "Get out!" I can't afford to be off for two weeks."*

Jack, older cohort, couple, home owner, Fife

### ***Making a home***

Beyond the regular payments of the rent or mortgage, our participants spoke about other costs associated with their housing, including regular bills for fuel, council tax, and water rates, maintenance and repair, as well as the challenges of making a "home", or "keeping a place nice" or "comfortable" on a low income.

Unsurprisingly energy costs were a primary concern across all ages and tenures. The size, condition of the property, type of heating system, and payment method obviously influenced how much people paid. Some participants said their homes were relatively cheap to keep warm because they were in good condition, or quite small, or the heating system was efficient. However, for others the poor condition of their properties increased their fuel bills. Some participants were on high cost tariffs particularly those using pre-pay cards, although for some using pre-paid cards was their preference as they were able to contain their spending on fuel and prevent arrears being built up. Others had shopped around for cheaper deals or tariffs. Many reported that they had at best to "be careful", for example by only heating one room, and at worst were cold during the winter months. However being cold was preferable to running up a large fuel bill.

*"It's the heating, it's the gas because we were left with other people's gas bill. Every time we put money in, it takes it, you get one bath between the lot of us and it goes out. It's hard to keep the house warm."*

Angela, older cohort, single parent, SRS, London

*"When we've got the grandkids coming we put the heating on".*

Benjamin, older cohort, couple with dependent child, SRS, North Wales

Many of our participants spoke about the importance, but expense, of making a "home". In the social rented sector, a good number of participants spoke about the costs of decorating and cleaning their properties when they first moved in because the properties were often let in an extremely poor condition. Claudia felt she had no choice but to take the property she was offered:

*I was in a hostel with my daughter, and this was the property they offered me. I did refuse it because of the work, it was really, really bad. Yes, it was really, really bad, but my housing officer said if I didn't take it I would be in the hostel for another 12 to 18 months, so that's why I took it".*

Claudia, mid cohort, single parent, SRS, London

Melanie had got into considerable debt as a consequence of moving (from a one bed room flat) to a two bed room property and of cleaning, decorating, and furnishing her new home. She was, however, determined to make a decent home for her and her son although she struggled to keep up with the debt repayments.

*"I had to use the credit card, I had to buy my boy a bed, bedding, carpet, blinds I had to buy, curtains, it's things that we had to have. Are you with me? I had to buy flooring, and then you have to pay someone to come in and do the flooring. So then I had to take out loans. It just never seemed that we were clear or anything. I'd say about another year, year and a half before I even see a light at the end of the tunnel to start putting any more things down in here. I'm in debt about £2,500 which is quite a lot. I've never been in that much debt. But, what was I supposed to do? I can't tell my boy he can't have carpet down on his floor, and you can't have a bed to sleep in yet because you've got to wait. You know? It's things we needed, like you need, you have to have curtains."*

Melanie, mid cohort, single parent, SRS, London

Others in the SRS rented sector and those who owned their properties also talked about decorating and keeping their homes "nice" over time, and how difficult this was on a low income. Many others remarked that it was simply beyond their means to keep their homes as they would like them, and this was a source of considerable distress for some.

### ***Maintenance and repair***

For those who owned their own properties maintenance and repair costs could be burdensome. Some had borrowed money to pay for essential repairs. Daphne, a single parent, with a long term chronic health condition, had bought her house under the Right to Buy, and then was faced with significant costs where there was a major problem with the drains under the property. The family had to move out for a time while repairs were made. The work was unsatisfactory, and she had to take legal action against the contractor. The whole process was stressful and costly.

*"At the moment I can think of none [advantages] with owning because it's just money, money, money and insurances and house insurance, life insurance. It's just money, money, money. Whereas I'm older now, and I realise that now. The kids will probably all move away anyway and do their own thing. If something goes wrong, I have to pay for it whereas if it's rented off the Housing Executive, it's done, fixed within a couple of hours."*

Daphne, mid cohort, single parent, home owner, Belfast

Similarly, Gerrard, a retired participant had given up trying to keep on top of the maintenance and repair of the family home.

*"We don't spend anything on it now for the simple fact of the age of these houses, you could if you were to do everything, you'd need to be working to keep the house."*

Gerrard, older cohort, couple, home owner, Belfast

Joanne, who had recently separated from her husband, noted that the house was shabby, and often cold as the heating system was broken, but said it was "liveable".

*"I'd like to do some work on the house. I need for example, to put a new hearth in there, I need to get the fire sorted out and it does need decorating just about everywhere. And the kitchen's not properly finished yet. There are things to do but it's liveable, I mean, it's not ... I know we've got better conditions than a lot of people."*

Joanne, older cohort, single parent, home owner, London

While tenants are not responsible for maintenance and repair, the condition of a property does have implications for their housing costs. For example, efficient heating systems or a well maintained and insulated property help to reduce heating bills. Damp had in some cases caused damage to people's clothing and furniture – bedding and beds had to be replaced. For those in the SRS there were mixed reports about how well landlords responded to requests for repairs and refurbishment, although for the most part there was usually a reasonable response. Similarly in the PRS, some landlords were reported to be very good at responding to requests for repairs. However some said they were often reluctant to push the landlord for small repairs or maintenance, as they did not want to be seen as troublesome tenants, or give cause for a rent increase:

*I: "I hate the letting agent."*

**R: Okay, why is that?**

*I: "For jobs and things, I like to keep things nice and that and it bothers me if there's something not working or whatever and I've phoned up so many times that I had to stop because it was really upsetting me, because they wouldn't do it and he'll make it sound like he's going to do something and then he just doesn't do it. That's the letting agent, I suppose if it was my own place I would get these things fixed, but if the landlord doesn't want to do it and he's not putting the rent up, you don't want to rock the boat too much."*

Jackie, mid cohort, single person, PRS, London

None of the participants in SRS expressed any concerns about complaining to their landlord, or requesting maintenance and repairs, or their security of tenure, beyond the obvious observation that they had to pay their rent (which could be a struggle) and meet the conditions of their tenancy agreement.

## **'Managing just'**

From the various "housing now" narratives it is clear that living on a low income could be a constant and sometimes stressful financial juggling act for some of the participants, particularly those who had been living on a low income for long periods and did not envisage their circumstances changing. The strategies people adopted to "manage just" the phrase many people used when they were asked about coping on a low income - were varied. For a good number of people across all age cohorts, support from family and friends was an essential element of getting by.

## **Budgeting and juggling**

Some explained how they were used to managing on a low income, and knew how to budget. Others simply juggled their bills – paying a little now and again – prioritising their rent or mortgage payments and then those bills or payments that would result in consequences – electricity being cut off, bailiffs being called - if left unpaid. Some drew on savings they had (although very few of our participants had savings), some borrowed money from family, particularly for larger one-off payments or costly items that needed to be replaced, or, if they had access to credit (and many did not), used their credit facilities.

*“Got to be on your toes all the time...your rent is due on the 5<sup>th</sup>, you get your housing benefit on the 10<sup>th</sup>, you’re five days late with your rent. I can’t afford to be in that situation”.*

Nick, older cohort, single, PRS, London

*“I’m very good at budgeting no matter what it is, so if I’m having a good month and I’ve paid all my bills then we get a little luxury or whatever. If it’s a bad month you just draw back a bit. I’ve been like that since I was 17 because remember I’ve been on my own since 17 and then I think I used to get £42 a week and I had to pay rent. The rent was £6 but you still had to pay gas, as everybody else, and electric, so I’m used to budgeting.”*

Zara, mid cohort, single parent, SRS, London

*“I’m always in my overdraft...Pretty much always, yes [laughs], unless I get a huge inheritance, well I wouldn’t say a huge inheritance, if I got a lump sum of money from somewhere quite unexpectedly that would be nice, but no, I’m always overdrawn, but yes, it is as it is.”*

Lily, mid cohort, single parent, home owner, North Wales

For those in receipt of housing and/or other benefits, their main concern was that their benefits were accurately calculated, and paid without interruption. Delays in assessing claims, or reductions in benefits or overpayments that had then been reclaimed or deducted from on-going payments had caused considerable hardship to a number of participants.

Few of our participants had any significant savings, or were able to save. One young couple (in the PRS) were trying to save. Both were students approaching the end of their periods of study and were aware that there was likely to be a period between finishing education and finding work when they might struggle. One had a weekend job, and the other took on casual paid work at the University to put a little aside. Another homeowner older couple had accrued savings from a redundancy payment and inheritance and this money was seeing them through a particularly difficult time when neither could work. However, Ben had used his redundancy payment to pay for re-decorating his SRS house, and bought a car to enable him to be in a better position to find new work, and to take his wife to work as she worked unsociable hours as a cleaner. Some older participants had some savings that they had put by in previous years. Generally, however, few participants had any kind of financial safety net.

Most of those we spoke to were very cautious about getting into debt, and most were not in a position to get access to credit or overdraft facilities. Some had previous experience of debt problems (including bankruptcy), and knew only too well how debts could escalate. Some had got into debt at the point of moving home (see above), or improving their homes,



or paying for a one-off sometimes unexpected expense (costly dental treatment being one example). Two participants, both waiting to finalise divorce settlements, and both working, were heavily overdrawn. Both were hopeful that in the longer term they would be able to resolve these debts by re-mortgaging their properties.

### ***Living apart together***

There were examples of “exploded” households where couples did not live together as their income would be significantly reduced (see previous chapter for further details). For example, Jackie spoke about her partner, and how he could only pay his mortgage by taking in lodgers. If she moved into his house as his partner, she would not receive housing benefit and would not be able to contribute to the mortgage. A very young couple in Hull with a child lived separately but nearby - the young man lived with his parents - as to live together on his income would not be possible.

### ***Imploded households***

There were a group of participants who shared their homes with relatives usually out of necessity. For the most part, these arrangements appeared to work well enough. For example, Richard’s elderly mother had come to live with him in his two bedroom SRS house after the Spare Room Subsidy came into operation. He could not afford the additional payment, and she was no longer able to live on her own, so this seemed to be the best solution for both of them. Ella shared a house with her brother, sister, and sister’s young baby. Between them they could afford the rent – paid with a combination of wages and benefits. They had taken over the tenancy of the house after their parents had moved out. Peter, a single man in his 40’s, lived with his sister and her family in a housing association property. He was on a waiting list for a social rented property, and had been living with his sister for six years. He spoke warmly about family life. Nevertheless his preference was at some point to have his own place as he felt his sister had done enough for him. However, some living situations were less than ideal. For example, Dorothy had become the guardian to her sister’s four children following her sister’s death. She had moved from her own flat to live with them in their three bedroom SRS property. Dorothy acknowledged this was less than ideal, she said:

*“They all sometimes get on each other’s nerves. Unless they come in here or the dining - they’ve got no space of their - the only one that’s got any space, that can go in and shut the door, get away from everybody is [niece], because she’s a girl so she’s got her own room...”*

Dorothy, older cohort, living with extended family, SRS, London

### ***Taking in lodgers***

The idea of taking in a lodger either did not appeal or was not an option for many of our participants. Usually people did not have the space to accommodate others, or for those who were renting, would not be allowed to take in a lodger under the conditions of their rental agreement. Some had experience of living in shared properties, and were unwilling to return to more communal living if it could be avoided. For participants with young children having a “stranger” in the house was not seen to be desirable at all. There were, however, some participants who did have lodgers. Mostly (but not always) these arrangements were with people already known to the

participant and were always due to necessity. The lodgers' contribution was an essential element of the household budget.

### **Ecology of support**

A common theme linking many accounts regardless of type of tenure, type of household, or age across all the six case study areas is how support from family networks, and perhaps to a lesser extent other social networks, is crucial to many people who are 'managing just'. Support from family and friends could be financial, practical and emotional, and was both received and given by the participants. Such support might include: small loans or gifts of money particularly to tide people over in difficult times or to assist with unexpected expenses; help with childcare; help with household tasks such as decorating or gardening; borrowing, lending, and sharing different items; providing lifts and so forth. In many cases family had provided accommodation both currently and in the past (see also section 2).

*"I will say my mum and dad and my brother who I care for, they're pretty good and they do help me. Yes, so they give me £20 here – my brother's really good, he gave me £50 a few weeks ago to put on my gas and electric and get a bit of shopping. Yes, my mum and dad, and my brother are really good to me."*

Claudia, mid cohort, single parent, SRS, London

For Kevin, his mental health problems made it highly problematic to share with others which he acknowledged would be cheaper than living on his own. His parents helped out with regular weekly assistance.

*"I wish my parents didn't give me that extra money, but they give it to me anyway. I've asked them not to, but they like doing it."*

Kevin, mid cohort, single person, PRS, Fife

Unsurprisingly the desire to live and continue to live near to close family members was frequently articulated, particularly for those who were ill or disabled, or who had family members that needed their support.

There was also a consistent narrative where people had been in difficult situations had been assisted by specialist advice services (Citizens' Advice Bureau, Law Centres), or charitable organisations which had helped them resolve housing problems, difficulties with benefits claims, and debt, or assisted them gain access to some type of charitable funding. Some felt without this assistance they would have been evicted from their current homes.

### **Health and well-being**

For the most part the physical fabric of participants' current homes was not perceived to have a significantly negative impact on their own health or the health of others in the household, although damp was certainly a problem in many properties and many people did not keep their homes as warm as they would like. Other problems include poor security, for example, ill-fitting doors, or locks that were not strong. However, many of the participants are or have experienced considerable levels of stress related to their living environment. Over-crowding was a problem for some. Other stressors appear to be more related to uncertainty, and issues of control and affordability, or were related to the local neighbourhood.



Living in the private rented sector on a short term lease, particularly in areas of high demand, created on-going uncertainty and anxiety for some of the participants, even when people had been in the same property for a number of years. Would the lease be renewed? Would the rent go up? Would they be able to afford any rent increase? Would they be able to find another property that they could afford? Participants also noted the costs of moving, particularly the costs of a finding a deposit for a new property, and associated agents' fees.

*I'm one rent review away, one complaint away from being homeless. It's as simple as that.... it's exactly how it feels. It can't be felt any other way; that's the situation and I feel terribly, terribly vulnerable, I really do.....Absolutely, the overriding threat that hangs dark over my head; I wake up with it every day, I go to sleep with it every night. There's no getting away from it; I'm that far away from my whole world being turned upside-down."*

Nick, older cohort, single, PRS, London

Nevertheless, there were also participants living in the PRS who spoke highly of their landlord. Some participants had lived in the same PRS property for many years without any difficulties. Others, usually students or young people, were happy not to have a long term rental commitment as they expected their circumstance would change over time.

There was a level of frustration among some in the private rented sector that the terms of their lease meant they could not decorate or make the property 'home' even in small ways (for example, wall papering a child's bedroom, or putting a nail in the wall to hang a picture):

*"The condition's spot on. We can't do things like make it – if it was my house, it'd be different, if you know what I mean, but you've got to live in the boundaries, if you know what I mean."*

David, young cohort, couple, PRS, Wales

The time and tenacity required to navigate the various processes and procedures to gain access to social housing had caused considerable stress often over prolonged periods of time for a number of our participants, even if in the end they had accessed a decent, secure home. In areas of high demand, people might wait many years to gain access to suitable housing, and have to live in temporary hostels or unsuitable accommodation while they were waiting. Once accommodated there could be additional stresses while benefits claims were assessed, or properties cleaned and decorated.

*"Then it took us 13 years to get this house. I went through a lot, 13 years of bidding, fighting up against it, letters from everywhere, from the school, my boy's school, doctors, psychiatrists, mental health unit, the hospitals .... I didn't really have a choice but to move here. This was it for me. I was told this was it, there was no help going to be given anywhere else. Then when I applied for help for things ... there was no money for decorating. I'm really moaning about it all and I shouldn't moan because there are a lot of people a lot, lot worse off than me. There is. But I just think these debts are doing my head in. I don't feel I'm getting anywhere with them. Does that make sense? They're moving but ..."*

Melanie, mid cohort, single parent, SRS, London

One participant, Sheila, a woman in her early 20s with a young son, was living in a domestic violence hostel. She was exhausted and distressed by her situation. The hostel environment was stressful and volatile. The hostel did not allow visitors, so her mother could not collect her son from school and wait with him in their room. As a consequence Sheila had to give up the two part time jobs she had, and her benefits had been stopped. Her only weekly income was Child Benefit.

She had also given up her University course as she had to attend domestic violence awareness sessions in the hostel which clashed with her course timetable.

Neighbourhood could be a cause of stress for some, and was a major determinant of housing choice and satisfaction (rather than just the property where people lived). Many participants wanted to remain living in the area where they currently lived and often had lived for many years. Family ties and other social networks – crucial for many in terms of support - were the main driver. The wider neighbourhood too played a role – and “better” neighbourhoods were understandably preferred. “Better” mainly reflected concerns about crime and anti-social behaviour, and obvious signs of neglect and incivilities. In Belfast, people were reluctant to move even a few streets away, often because extended family was living nearby, but also for issues of personal safety. Many could remember the times when to go outside your “area” was highly dangerous. Convenient access to shops, schools, and services, including transport services were important, as well as access to work and training opportunities.

## Conclusion

Many of those on low incomes lived in various states of precariousness, juggling limited incomes to meet the costs of making a home. For some this might have been a temporary phase, notably some of the younger participants who hoped to progress in the workplace. For others, particularly some of the mid-life and older participants, and those with chronic health problems or disabilities, or on-going caring responsibilities, it seems likely that their situation will remain much the same over time, with few opportunities to increase their income significantly. Further interviews with the qualitative longitudinal panel will track actual change over time. Secure and affordable SRS housing offered the possibility of stability to some at least, although making a comfortable home was a challenge even for those with relatively stable housing. For others, notably older and midlife people in the PRS, the insecurity of the tenure, alongside the stresses of juggling a low income created considerable anxiety. Some of those who owned properties also faced uncertainties, usually related to the costs of maintenance and repair, but also interest only mortgages. Key to most people’s ability to get by were the informal support networks of family, as well as for some, imploded or “living apart together” household arrangements.

## Chapter 4: Future Aspirations

This chapter provides an overview of participant's reflections on their future housing directions, including their views of different types of tenure, as well as any apparent risks to their current circumstances. A short section on employment ambitions is also provided.

### Tenure: perceptions and ambitions

There were some common perceptions about tenure borne out by study participants' experiences. Social housing was associated with security, with landlords who largely assume responsibility for repairs and affordability, but also with neighbourhoods that contained nuisance neighbours or anti-social behaviour. Private renting offered mobility, choice, and ease of access but was expensive and insecure, and properties were sometimes in poor condition. Homeownership was aspirational, associated with social mobility, greater control, an opportunity to accrue equity and something to leave to children, but was also viewed by many as unaffordable and represented a great risk. The tenure preferences for different households, however, represented trade-offs between different attributes and their financial situation.

Owning was desirable for the security it offered particularly for those with experience of the PRS. It was also seen to have future benefits once (and if) the mortgage was paid off, as well as great security. But there were barriers to owning for those on low incomes as incomes were too low or precarious, they considered themselves too old to take on an affordable loan and wanted to avoid paying a mortgage into retirement, or it was hard to pay private rent and save for a deposit.

Reflecting on the extension of the Right to Buy to housing association properties, Tony, a self-employed single parent living in London considered the likelihood of being able to purchase his flat:

*"The houses like this, I think £1.8 or £1.9 million, a house there, those two. This is worth £900,000 or something, £800,000. It's a two bedroom flat, it's ridiculous. ... It's nice but it's a two bedroom flat. ... I would love to buy this but realistically, who would give me a mortgage for that sort of money?"*

Tony, mid cohort, single parent, SRS, London

The right-to-buy offered access to ownership for some participants in social rented homes, although others had experienced mixed outcomes from exercising their right to buy with repossessions and limited funds to undertake repairs.

*"I'd give anything to be able to rent"*

Louisa, older cohort, right to buy owner Northern Ireland

There were mixed views on shared ownership arrangements, and they were mentioned very infrequently as an option. Only one participant, Simon in Hull, was currently in shared ownership; he spoke highly of this arrangement as it had enabled him to own 25 per cent of the property, and provided housing security, although he felt that it was unfair that he was liable for 100 per cent of the repairs and maintenance issues.

Social renting was important to many participants and was largely although not exclusively preferred to private renting, as their low-incomes meant that similar levels of security, responses to

requests for repairs, and affordability would be hard to find in the PRS, and ownership was beyond their means. Some also valued the additional support offered to tenants from social landlords, although there were also instances of private landlords offering support for tenants at critical moments. Participants also reported that private renting had a negative impact on communities, with transient households weakening social ties in neighbourhoods. A small minority of private renters preferred private renting, and had good landlords, properties in proximity to family and in a good area. They noted that in contrast to social rented property private rented properties offered more choice and, importantly, came decorated, sometimes furnished and with carpets in place, removing the need to take on unaffordable debt which many social renters had done to refurbish their new homes.

## Secure housing

A key issue was that some households in the PRS lacked security of tenure and had concerns about their futures, as although they might not be anticipating moving, their landlords could sell the home, put the rent up, or ask them to leave at any moment. Several had experienced this already, including some households with children, and others in the PRS were well aware of the insecurity of the tenure, even if their experience had been positive. Although such anxieties were mostly felt by private renters, one social renter had an introductory tenancy which was a concern.

Private renters made efforts to remain on the right side of their landlord by doing odd jobs or avoiding requesting repairs to limit the opportunity for the landlord to end their tenancy. While some younger private renters without children were unconcerned as the flexibility of the tenure suited their need for mobility, several participants expressed concern about the future, not least families or older people. Nick, in his 50s was acutely aware his rent was low and affordable and that demand side pressures in his local London housing market meant his landlord could attract a higher rent or sell with large capital gains. He tried to help his landlord by being an informal caretaker and not complaining or requesting repairs. His ideal, at this point in his life, would be social housing:

*"I'd love to be in the situation when I could remotely get on their radar because this is just ... The time in life and your circumstances and the situation through ill health I now can't be as dynamic and do what I've done before, that's [social housing] what would suit me down to the ground now. It's... Before it's always been my responsibility; I had children, I bring children up, I house them, my responsibility, right? But I can't help myself now and so I would die for that security."*

Nick, older cohort, single person, PRS, London

Several participants had family arrangements that meant they were living in homes where they were not on the tenancy, so should the arrangements break down or change in some way, they could be at risk of homelessness. Some of these arrangements were mutually beneficial, in that housing costs were reduced, and there was support for children or vulnerable adults. But such arrangements could be fragile and liable to change with the potential in the future to leave some in vulnerable positions, particularly those people moving in with partners who already owned homes or held tenancies but were not on the deeds of the house or tenancy, leaving them vulnerable with no security should the relationship end. Where divorces involved rented housing the presence of an ex-partner on the tenancy also constrained some housing choices and could complicate moves or exchange tenancies in the future.

In contrast to multiple adult households, as mentioned in Chapter 3, other arrangements kept partners apart as living together would mean lower benefits and be harder for a couple or family unit to make ends meet, despite many wishing to cohabit.

## Residential mobility

Most participants did not envisage a move in the future, being largely satisfied with their present arrangements. Some participants had notions that it might be desirable to one day have a larger home, or a garden, or quieter neighbourhood, for example, but it was not something that was likely to happen as moving meant incurring costs, or was unlikely to be supported by social housing transfer procedures. As a general point, many participants reflected on their own housing experience but also on the experiences of people they knew, what they saw or read in the media. While their own housing situation may not have been in some cases ideal, some reflected that there were others in much worse situations, and they felt fortunate in comparison to have a place to call home.

*"I wouldn't say I'm overjoyed [with living situation], but, as I say, there's people out there worse off than us. At least we've got a roof over our - you know, somewhere to live. We're not on the streets. It's not my ideal, but, as I say, there's people worse off. You should be thankful".*

Dorothy, older cohort, living with extended family, SRS, London

Josh living in the PRS with his girlfriend anticipated owning at the next interview but he and his partner were just finishing higher education and closer to the labour market than others who expressed preferences for homeownership, many of which appeared unrealisable as they had very low incomes, were out of work, or had long term caring responsibilities.

Several older participants recognised their homes were ill equipped to support them into later life, both in private renting and outright ownership, due to the expense of heating or property maintenance, property size, or the stairs and that a move may therefore be necessary. Gerrard, a retired outright owner was resentful that he felt unable to remain in his home forever, but was resistant to equity release to increase his income and so felt compelled to downsize to a more affordable home. Some social and private renters wished to move as poor property conditions – lack of heating or damp, for example - impacted upon their wellbeing. Angela had experienced a troubled life and moved around a lot mainly within the SRS. Her current home was very damp, and very dark:

*"It'd be I hope a nice place, nice, warm, no damp. No condensation. Be happy."*

Angela, older cohort, single parent, SRS, London

Other older people reported that they would like to be nearer family members or that family members would like them to move nearer to them for care, and were weighing up their independence, current security of tenure and costs.

## Home finance

Several participants were facing financial uncertainty in the near futures, and these related to issues to mortgage finance, divorce settlements and forthcoming benefits changes.

Several homeowners had uncertain mortgage finance that may be problematic within the stringent mortgage regulation that now exists as compared to when they first entered the tenure. Two mortgagors held interest-only mortgages with no plans for repayment, with inertia and an unresolved divorce settlement inhibiting any resolution. One was (hopefully) young enough to re-mortgage on affordable terms, but the other may be challenged as she needs to put mortgage in her sole name after a divorce, receives in-work benefits, and needs higher cost repayment terms. Another mortgagor wants to access his pension funds when he turns 55 and repay an unpaid tax bill and his mortgage and invest the remainder for his retirement. There may be trade-offs to be made in terms of lower housing costs and less repayment risk for his mortgage as well as any consequences of unpaid tax but this appears to be a risky long term strategy for someone without other resources. While tighter mortgage regulation was designed to limit financial harm, pension liberalisation may be problematic. Another mortgagor who had previous experience of repossessions, Chris, had a mortgage that would only be repaid when he was 75, which also appeared to be on a high interest rate. Both he and his partner will have secure local authority pensions, but their employment is low paid so these will not provide a very high income. This couple valued the security of homeownership, despite past experience, but such a long term loan may prove difficult to refinance under present rules and may represent another risk in the long term.

A number of participants were awaiting terms of divorce settlements that involved the legal title to the house and/or the equity stored in the home. This represented uncertainty as to how their housing and finances may change in the coming period.

Lastly, anticipated benefit changes arising from children turning 18 gave rise to anxieties in several participants' households. The uncertainty of whether or not the non-dependent children will be able to top up the housing benefit to meet the rent payments were a cause of concern. Combined with uncertainty about how long non-dependent children will stay in the home and whether the bedroom tax would then apply increased the financial stress on some people.

## **Employment ambitions**

Many of our participants were working, and of those who were not, many had aspirations to be in employment in the near future, having undertaken education or training to enhance their employment prospects. Some wanted more hours when they were already employed part time, but not all wanted to take this opportunity as working or taking on additional hours was balanced with childcare or other commitments. Childcare costs were seen as prohibitive to some re-entering the labour market. Other participants were already out of the workforce due to retirement, caring for family members with ill-health or mental health problems, or because of their own ill-health and were unlikely to regain employment, although some were trying to find employment that better suited them, or to do some part time work.

## **Conclusion**

Participant's future housing prospects were influenced by both push and pull factors, moves or ambitions that were positive and desired, and moves that were necessary by force of circumstance or unwanted. Young currently low-income households on educational and career trajectories that moved away from flexible private renting to higher earning employment with ambitions for homeownership, contrasted with participants who had spent a long time on low-incomes and

feared future moves would be determined not by them but by landlords wishing to sell or increase the rent. Ageing meant tenures or housing circumstances that once were satisfactory were no longer. Further threats to current housing circumstances came from unresolved financial settlements through divorce or requirements to re-mortgage with uncertain outcomes, or partnering or complex familial arrangements where people lacked security or a stake in the home or tenancy.



## Chapter 5: Conclusions

This final section draws together the conclusions of the second JRF housing and poverty interim report. It begins by providing a synthesis of the key findings from our three key chapters, “housing histories”, “housing now” and “housing aspirations”. This highlights the lack of progression in people’s housing pathways. The chapter then draws together the key findings on where housing has mitigated, and exacerbated poverty, in the lives of our participants to date.

### Poverty and housing: The experiences of our participants

Our first wave of interviews included people on low incomes in different tenures, at different stages of their lives, in and different parts of the UK.

An intention of the study was to explore whether the variations in policy in the four nations of the UK made any difference to the housing circumstances of the participants. It is difficult to discern the impact of policy differences, as there appeared to be few differences and more common themes in the six case study areas when people reflected generally about their current and past housing. With the exception of one participant in Scotland who remarked that people in Scotland got more help with the Bedroom Tax than in England, there were no observations about differences in policy among the participants. There were, however, some local contextual differences that were reflected in the participants’ narratives. In Belfast the housing market recession in Northern Ireland had left many homeowners in negative equity. There was also the history of sectarian violence, and for reasons of personal safety many participants were unwilling to move any further than a few streets away from where they lived, and where usually their extended family lived as well. Some Belfast participants were anxious about the Bedroom Tax (coming into effect in Northern Ireland in February 2017). In North Wales participants felt that housing costs were inflated by the demand for second homes and holiday lets. In Fife, the town’s status as a satellite to Edinburgh and rapidly increasing population meant increasing pressure on housing and other local services. A similar concern was noted in an outer London borough, as increasing housing costs in more central London areas created additional demands in the outer boroughs. While rents in the SRS were recognised to be lower than the PRS generally, in London these differences were very marked.

There was, however, a striking similarity in people’s stories of housing. There were sometimes degrees of scale, particularly around affordability and access to housing in London. However, many of the same issues resonated throughout people’s accounts.

Drawing on our narratives, there was little evidence from our study of a housing ladder that people mount towards an ever better standard of living, underpinned by their housing assets that will support them through any difficult times. Rather, housing was often a struggle for people to obtain and sustain throughout the life course. Some stayed put for longer periods of time than others in the same property. However, many had moved often, sometimes gaining small benefits, but rarely anything more than that, with the closest analogy being a housing merry-go-round rather than a ladder.

Our analysis demonstrates that the British housing system poorly supports key life transitions and life events (both expected and unexpected) for those on low incomes. The narratives of our participants as they reflected on their housing circumstances now, and in the past, demonstrate



how key life events – divorce, separation, the onset of chronic health problems, accident and injury, bereavement, bankruptcy, the need to take up caring responsibilities for other family members both young and old – can disrupt people's lives very suddenly, and for the most part with long term consequences. Even positive life events such as leaving home and family formation were difficult transitions to achieve on low incomes in the current housing system.

People's housing needs often changed quickly but there was little support for any housing difficulties, and such support as there was, was usually quite slow. This slow response of the housing system meant that people's housing needs and what was available to them was often at a mismatch for some time. In contrast, across the tenures, the response to people in financial difficulties who cannot meet their housing costs was often much quicker - and often punitive in nature.

Different tenures offered different advantages and disadvantages. There were many accounts of people moving back and forth between tenures, in response to life events and the relative (non)-availability of housing depending upon their circumstances. Transitional costs were significant in all tenures. In the social rented sector, properties were often offered in a poor state of decoration; agents' fees/deposits were often significant in the PRS (but decoration often better than social housing); and home ownership entry required a deposit.

For those on low incomes, with poor purchasing power, rarely were people able to maximise their utility in any tenure. An established secure tenancy in social housing offered some people stability and security at key times of change. The path to social housing, however, was tortuous, preceded for some by long periods in temporary accommodation, or in overcrowding PRS properties, and it was inaccessible to many, notably single people.

Almost all of the participants in our study had spent some time in the PRS. Meeting housing needs at the point where individuals were making more planned transitions in life – setting up your own home, establishing a new relationship, moving to a new job – was problematic. Here the PRS was usually more accessible in comparison to other tenures, in as much as there were no waiting lists, and frontloaded payments (deposits, agents' fees) were at least less than what is required as a deposit on purchasing a home. The PRS was however also perceived to be expensive and insecure (even by those who appear to have been settled in their PRS homes for a long period). For those who were working, and not in receipt of housing benefit, PRS rent and other housing costs, were a significant drain on their income, preventing them from saving towards the purchase of their own home (if that was an aspiration), and, unless there was the prospect of a significant increase in income, effectively locking them into "managing just" for the long term. For single people on low incomes, the PRS was often their only option. Experiences of housing standards were very mixed, some positive, and some not so.

Home ownership was possible for some families/couples with access to reasonably stable jobs, and usually significant family support. Whilst financial sacrifices were often required for younger households, most participants felt this was a worthwhile trade-off. However, some households faced uncertainties related to interest only mortgages and/or the prospect of servicing mortgages into later life; some had faced repossession. For all participants, but particularly older ones, maintenance costs were substantial.

Our participants' future housing prospects were influenced by both push and pull factors, moves or ambitions that were positive and desired, and moves that were necessary by force of circumstance or unwanted. Young currently low-income households on educational and career

trajectories with ambitions for homeownership, contrasted with participants who had spent a long time on low-incomes and feared future moves would be determined by landlords rather than themselves. Key life events such as divorce, caring responsibilities or other complex familial responsibilities, heavily constrained future housing options. Ageing meant tenures or housing circumstances that once were satisfactory were often no longer meeting needs.

## **The role of housing in exacerbating, or mitigating, poverty**

Our first round of interviews with low income participants across the UK revealed that poor housing exacerbated poverty in a number of ways:

- Regular and often substantial rent increases in the PRS was a problem for many low income households; others were very concerned about possible future increases which could effectively price themselves out of their home.
- Housing Benefit short-falls was a significant financial issue for those affected by them; disability benefits and/or family assistance were being used to make up shortfalls where possible; problems were often encountered at the point that children became adults and their benefit eligibility changed.
- Housing costs related to both moving and making a house a “comfortable” home (decoration; furniture etc.) stretched people’s limited financial resources.
- The poor physical condition of some properties, including examples of damp and mould, as well as having an impact on health and well-being, also often meant higher fuel bills.
- The cost of maintenance/repairs in home ownership was often difficult for households on low incomes, particularly major structural problems.
- Poor location/neighbourhood had a broader impact on people’s financial situation in terms of accessing and maintaining work; being close to family for support, including child-care; and impacting adversely on health.

The interviews also demonstrated that appropriate housing mitigated against the effects of poverty for some low income households:

- Housing Benefit, when it met housing costs, was a key means of assistance to those on low incomes.
- Supportive landlords (both in the PRS and SRS) could make the difference between being able to cope financially (and emotionally) at times of difficulty (for example, in finding other properties, not increasing rents, forbearing if in arrears).
- Homes in a decent condition and state of repair:
  - at the point of starting a new tenancy (or at point of sale) to reduce transactional costs;
  - social and private landlords carrying out regular repairs and maintenance resulting in reduced costs and related costs (for example, heating).

- Sufficient space which enabled families to share housing costs or take in paying guests in a minority of cases.
- Sufficient space to offer a home to family members who have no home of their own in an emergency, or to enable (younger) family members to save up for their own home (whether rent deposit or deposit for a mortgage).
- Energy efficient homes which led to reduced heating bills (and a more comfortable home/health benefits).
- Suitable location – ease of access to schools, work and crucially enabling the maintenance of family and social networks – that facilitated employment, and savings on costs related to child care and travelling etc.
- Home ownership - but only at such a time as when mortgage is paid off or where people have been “gifted” properties, or if equity has accrued in a property.

The study, to date, has demonstrated that housing has a significant role to play in helping people to manage on low incomes, but that housing often falls short in achieving its potential in the mitigation of poverty, and in some cases, exacerbates poverty amongst households who are often also trying to cope with difficult life events. For our sample of people, family (even where constrained financially themselves) was the main safety net for people where housing did not fulfil this potential.

## Next steps

This study has presented some of the results from the first round of interviews in a qualitative longitudinal panel study of low income households, their housing and life experiences conducted for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Two further rounds of interviews are scheduled. At the time of writing, researchers are conducting a telephone follow-up interview at 9-12 months. In summer 2017, interviewers will once again visit participants and conduct an in-depth interview on their housing and life experiences, looking at both life events and how housing policies and practices have impacted on their lives. A final report will be available in late 2017, and will be published alongside a suite of policy solutions commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in response to our findings.

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