



Housing Research Summary

Applying for Social Housing in Newport: perceptions, policies and practices

There are widespread concerns about the ways in which the demand for social housing is changing. The evidence points to a number of reasons for changing demand across the sector as a whole and at regional level, including an ageing tenant profile, population movements and the effects of management policies and practices. However, at local level, the picture is more complex. In some local authority areas there are relatively long waiting lists in total, yet big differences in demand for different estates, neighbourhoods and types of property.

The Welsh Assembly Government commissioned the Centre for Housing Management and Development at Cardiff University, working with Opinion Research Services, to investigate the circumstances and perceptions of those on social housing registers in one Welsh local authority (the County Borough of Newport) to gain some insight into this phenomenon, whilst also examining local social landlords' perceptions and responses. The researchers' main findings were that:

- The housing registers showed continuing significant expressed demand for social housing in Newport, but this includes many whose applications are either deferred (often from choice) or suspended.
- For the great majority of applicants the key factor in rehousing was choice of location, much more so than either the design of individual properties or the availability of services.
- In general, applicants thought that they were given little choice over where they could live.
- Landlords saw social housing as a temporary solution to many people's housing need and not a long term preferred tenure. This was borne out by the views of applicants.
- Elderly applicants are more likely to wish to rent from the council, whilst families and younger people prefer housing associations or the private rented sector.





- Applicants in general had a negative view of council housing, because it was seen to consist mainly of large estates. In contrast, housing association properties were perceived more positively, because of the small scale of estates and the better condition of properties.
- Areas of first preference reflected strongly the area of current residence.
- In the face of changing demand, Newport's social landlords are changing their lettings policies. Whilst still seeking to address need, and to restrict access to those perceived as bringing problems to an area, they are attempting to widen access to a broader cross-section of households and to offer enhanced choice.
- Changing perceptions of social housing (and demand for the product) is much more than just a housing issue. Choice of housing reflects not merely its location, physical attributes, quality and environment but also wider issues such as the availability of good public services and perceived low levels of crime and anti-social behaviour.

About the Study

Background

The study was undertaken in the context of the shifting nature of local housing markets in Wales, the factors influencing changing demand, and the impact of these changes on the future demand for social rented housing. In the context of the Welsh Assembly Government's emerging policies for housing and community regeneration, there is a need for a clearer understanding of these issues and for appropriate local responses.

Aims of the Research

The study was designed to:-

- describe the housing context in Newport within which applicants express their interest in, or demand for, social housing;
- elicit the views of the four main social housing organisations in the area (Newport County Borough Council and Charter, Glamorgan and Gwent and Gwerin Housing Associations) on what they considered was driving changes in demand;
- analyse the housing register of each of the selected social landlords, according to expressed demand for re-housing in specific sub-areas within Newport;
- examine the lettings policies and practices of the social landlords and applicants' views of the social re-housing process;
- develop insights into the views and perceptions of those applying for social rented housing in Newport, in terms of their views of the tenure, their appraisal of other housing options, and their perceptions of particular types of property and specific localities.

Methods

The research was conducted in a number of discrete stages. These included desk-based analysis of the social housing sector in Newport and the make-up of the housing register of each of the four main social landlords operating in the Borough, interviews with officers in each of these organisations to examine their context for operation, the symptoms and underlying causes of changing demand, responses developed to these problems and emerging

issues and, also, face-to-face interviews with 250 social housing applicants currently living in Newport. These examined applicants' housing circumstances, housing options considered, their views of social housing and local neighbourhoods, their experiences of the rehousing process and longer term housing aspirations.

Key Findings

Newport and its Social Housing

Newport's social housing is spatially concentrated, with 60% of the council's stock being located in just eight areas. The housing association stock is more scattered, but there are still particular concentrations, for example, in Pill, Somerton and Barrackswood/Barracksfield.

The proportion of lettings varies quite considerably between areas. In the council sector (in areas with a significant number of lettings) the proportion of lettings to stock varied from 6.6% to 17.4%. In Charter, turnover rates ranged from 7% to 25%, and in Gwerin's case from 9.2% to 21%.

All landlords had experienced symptoms of changing, and of low, demand, but the housing associations noted that it was not as prevalent in Newport as in some other areas where they had properties. Each landlord thought that changing demand was a significant issue which required them to change the way they worked. Responses already implemented ranged from specific marketing initiatives to ensuring that the services provided to tenants and the properties themselves were of high quality. Information gathering was also seen as important, with all landlords having implemented tenant exit surveys.

Applying for Social Housing

The most important factor for the most applicants was choice, in particular about the location of the property. This was far more important than the characteristics of the property or the presence of various facilities nearby. Few applicants said that the landlords had given them a choice over where they could live. This supports a concern raised by landlords' staff that messages about choice were not being conveyed effectively. At the time of the study, all of the landlords were examining their lettings practices, with a view to increasing flexibility and providing better information to applicants, as well as increasing social stability on new estates.

Housing Registers and Applicants

The housing registers showed that there was significant expressed demand for social housing in the Borough, but the total number on each landlord's register obscures the fact that many applications are either deferred or suspended. Mainly this is at the applicant's own request, because of arrears or because of outstanding rechargeables for work to repair the property. There is also considerable demand, particularly on the Council's register, from elderly people, some of which is for specific accommodation or as a form of "safety net".

The areas of highest demand for council housing are St Julians, Caerleon, Maindee, Gaer and Pill, but (except for St Julians and Pill) these contain relatively few homes and (except for Caerleon and Pill) produced few lettings in 1999-2000. The areas of highest demand for Charter housing are Maindee, the Civic Centre and Corporation Road, but these had very few vacancies in 1999-2000. In contrast, demand for

council housing in Ringland, Bettws, Duffryn and Alway is much more modest, although there are many vacancies in these areas.

The survey of applicants confirms that a high proportion of Council applicants are elderly people and relatively few are young single people. Whilst over a third of those interviewed were currently renting (over half from private landlords), and almost a quarter living with family, almost two fifths (mainly elderly) were homeowners.

Views of Social Housing

The main issues emerging from the interviews with staff were the perceived poor reputation of the sector, questions of supply and demand, and evidence of competition within and beyond the social sector. Social housing was perceived increasingly as a temporary solution to many people's housing needs. Staff questioned whether the estate management services provided were appropriate to the needs of different groups of tenants, and whether their rapport with their customers could be improved.

Young single persons and couples were more likely to wish to rent from housing associations or from private landlords. Families and older single persons were more likely to consider renting from housing associations, whilst the elderly were much more likely to want to rent from the Council.

Applicants' views of who social housing was for varied, but in general, it was seen as meeting the needs of those on low incomes, or in desperate need. Social rented housing was also seen as being for specific groups such as single parents and

older people with particular needs. Choice of area was seen as a positive attribute of council housing, although respondents thought that waiting times were long. The upkeep of both council and housing association properties was perceived as being of mixed quality, housing association properties in general were considered to be in better condition. At the same time, housing association developments were seen positively as being relatively small scale whilst council housing was viewed negatively because of the preponderance of large estates. Applicants associated a number of other general problems with both sectors. These included violence and crime, vandalism, noise and high child densities.

Just over a fifth of applicants felt that council housing had improved during the time that they had lived in Newport. Slightly fewer thought it had got worse. In comparison, a similar proportion of applicants considered that housing association properties had got better, whilst just 2% felt that it had worsened.

When asked about how they felt about moving into council housing, applicants often qualified their response. Many said that whether they decided to accept a specific offer or not would depend upon the particular estate or area.

Views of Neighbourhoods

The vast majority (90%) of applicants were satisfied with the areas in which they currently lived and just 12% indicated that they would consider moving anywhere within Newport. Location is, therefore, of paramount importance. Most had clear views about where they would move to and over two-fifths said that there was one specific area in which they wished to live.

St Julians, Maindee and Gaer were the most popular areas of first preference, with demand particularly strong from those applicants already living in these areas. Conversely, more than half of applicants specified five areas where they would not choose to live; Ringland, Duffryn, Alway, Pill and Bettws, most of which comprise large estates. The main reasons given were perceived neighbour problems, vandalism, graffiti and their location.

Whilst housing staff had a general perception that demand varied by location, this had rarely been explored objectively. However, Charter had developed an index of area popularity with the intention of using this to inform changes to the nomination agreement with the Council.

Future Directions for Policy and Practice

This study has shown that location is the main factor influencing applicants' decisions and that areas of low expressed demand tend to be areas ranked highly on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. Improving the quality of neighbourhoods may therefore be the key challenge facing Newport's social landlords in responding to low demand. Tackling neighbourhood problems such as crime and vandalism, raising the visibility of estate wardens and wider issues such as improving public transport between areas of social housing and employment opportunities and other services could do much to heighten the attractiveness of areas held in low repute. In some localities, particularly those dominated by Council housing, more drastic action may be needed, including localised stock clearance.

Newport's social landlords need to develop a better understanding of the overall demand for both rented housing and

affordable owner-occupation. Detailed local housing market analysis needs to accompany an awareness of the choices available at a local level and the trade-offs which individuals make between alternatives.

Applicants will need to be matched to particular properties in specific locations with more care and tenancy conditions enforced to ensure greater responsibility by individual tenants. This suggests that potential tenants need to be vetted carefully before letting, whilst avoiding policies which are unnecessarily exclusionary. There may also be a need for increased support to new tenants, not only through social services, but also perhaps from tenancy support officers.

However, changing demand for housing is much more than just a housing issue. Many of the factors which shape applicants' (and indeed tenants') perceptions of social housing, and their decisions as to whether to move to, or stay in, a particular area are beyond the control of either the Council or housing associations. Responding to changing demand, consumer perceptions and household mobility will not be sufficient by itself. Social landlords need to think ahead about the nature of the housing product on offer and what is wanted by their customers, and how these needs and aspirations can best be met.

There may also be scope to improve the quality and transmission of information about the re-housing process. Better information about the range of opportunities available, together with better information about the prospects of being offered housing in specific areas, may increase demand in those areas where

there are greater prospects of being re-housed.

Whilst improving public services at neighbourhood level is the key to preventing their further decline, the image of the social rented sector in general, and certain estates in particular, makes it difficult to address the problems of low demand. Given the evidence that some kinds of applicants (notably younger people) prefer private rented housing,

there is a strong argument in favour of a much more positive approach to marketing social housing, focusing on its availability, affordability, relative security and the quality of the services available. At the same time, social landlords should not lose sight of the need to take notice of what current residents say they want, to ensure that as many of these as possible remain in the sector, receiving a quality of product and service appropriate to their needs and expectations.



The report [Applying for Social Housing in Newport](#) and further copies of this summary can be obtained from:

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