

# Residents' views of new forms of high-density affordable living

Findings  
Informing change

April 2008

New forms of high-density, affordable housing are often advocated as a response to current policy concerns related to housing shortages, containing suburban sprawl, and the desire to promote an 'urban renaissance' in some cities. This study explored residents' views about living in new affordable higher density housing and how far residents' expectations of living in high-density developments were met.

## The research

By Joanne Bretherton and Nicholas Pleace at the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York, looking at residents' perspectives in eight high-density housing developments in England and Scotland.

## Key points

- Residents often reported that they did not feel that they lived at 'high densities', even though this was the case. They appreciated the innovative architecture and design that offered a sense of space and light within the homes.
- Low cost home ownership (LCHO) respondents sometimes struggled to pay the cumulative costs of mortgage, rent and service charges. Some social rented tenants also found it hard to make ends meet.
- Both owner occupiers and LCHO respondents felt that the scheme was made a less desirable place to live because of the presence of social rented tenants. Conversely, social rented tenants and LCHO respondents felt stigmatised within schemes where their homes were physically separate from 'market price' owner occupied housing.
- The schemes had introduced greater socio-economic diversity into the areas where they were situated, but they were not always well integrated within those areas. Residents often reported feeling 'separate' from their neighbourhood. And although they felt safe in their developments, they often felt threatened by the surrounding neighbourhood.
- Many of the residents felt housing management and maintenance were unsatisfactory and expensive.
- Most residents either intended or wanted to move. This was usually because of the area in which the scheme was situated, rather than the scheme itself.
- The research suggests that the Government objective of delivering more affordable homes in mixed communities will only succeed if close attention is paid to their management, how 'affordable' they are for LCHO residents, and the placement of the affordable properties within the scheme. The development also has to fit correctly within the surrounding neighbourhood and community.

# Background

Over the last 20 years the UK has experienced rapid house price inflation. The Barker Review reported that an additional 120,000 private sector homes per annum would need to be built in England to reduce the trend in real house prices to the European average, and recent Government announcements have increased this target. Some key professionals, such as teachers and nurses, cannot afford to live and work in most cities. Increased rates of household formation, as more people live alone, is one factor that has increased the demand for housing.

At the same time, cities are becoming socio-economically polarised, with extremes of wealth existing alongside economically poor populations living in social housing and a relative absence of middle class households. There is a widely presumed need for greater social diversity and cohesion through 'mixed' communities. As John Hills (2007) notes, there has been a 'residualisation' of social rented housing over the last 20 years; the poorest groups have been concentrated in this tenure, and it has been seen as an unattractive housing option. Thus there exists a central policy concern to break up this concentration of poverty and exclusion in the tenure, largely through the promotion of mixed neighbourhoods.

New types of affordable high-density mixed tenure housing could be one way of addressing some of these issues, by increasing housing options, making affordable properties available via low cost home ownership, and increasing socio-economic diversity. However, high-density housing and inner city living are potentially unattractive to some sections of society.

This study focused specifically on resident perceptions of these new forms of high-density affordable housing in eight new housing schemes in England and Scotland. The research explored:

- why residents chose to move into the schemes;
- positive and negative aspects of living there;
- their medium- and long-term housing aspirations.

The views of different household types were sought, including young single people, key workers and households containing children. All eight schemes:

- provided affordable housing and/or mixed tenure housing some of which was affordable;
- were less than five years old, and used new architectural ideas rather than traditional design;
- were built at a relatively high density of between 90 and 100 dwellings per hectare.

They had to fulfil a mix of:

- location within an urban area;
- developed on a brownfield site;
- location within an area with high housing costs.

## Why residents chose to move into the schemes

The tenure of the respondent affected the degree of choice they had about where to live. 'Full market price' owner occupiers had the greatest capacity to choose, as they had the option to buy alternative accommodation at an equivalent price. Other social rented tenants and LCHO tenants/owners had more constrained choices.

For LCHO residents, owning a stake in an affordable property took a higher priority than other factors, such as location. However, all tenants, regardless of their tenure, were influenced by interior space standards and design when it came to overall satisfaction with their homes. Other issues such as car parking, and crime and safety in the neighbourhood, were also of concern when considering whether to move into the development.

## Living in the case study schemes

A key finding of the research was that modern architecture could produce a sense of 'space' within high-density developments and their design and architecture was seen as a positive factor by many of the respondents. In fact, most respondents did not think of themselves as living at high densities.

Design issues that residents were most satisfied with were the amount of natural light and the level of heat insulation in their property. However, residents were less satisfied about other aspects of design, most notably inadequate soundproofing, a lack of green areas and, to a lesser extent, factors that were seen as reducing site security. Poor provision of parking space,

particularly for visitors, was a source of dissatisfaction for residents across most schemes.

Many respondents were particularly concerned about crime in the surrounding area.

Although most felt safe within their homes, they sometimes felt unsafe within the development.

Respondents were often critical of housing management, including good site maintenance and high service charges.

Some LCHO respondents and some social rented tenants reported problems with affordability, for example with service charges. Few owner occupiers reported any difficulties in affording their homes.

Residents felt that there was not much community cohesion within the schemes, and some would have liked a greater sense of, and greater opportunity for, interaction. However, other residents did not view this as a problem, preferring general good neighbourliness to participation in communal activities.

There were tensions within mixed tenure schemes between different resident groups; for instance, some LCHO respondents and 'market price' owner occupiers believed that sole 'responsibility' for damage, anti-social behaviour and other problems within a scheme lay with social rented tenants. Owner occupiers and LCHO respondents felt that the scheme was made a less desirable place to live because of the presence of social rented tenants. Conversely, social rented tenants and LCHO respondents felt stigmatised within schemes where their homes were physically separate from owner occupied housing.

## People's relationship with their homes

While residents often felt strongly about objective factors such as affordability, design, architecture and tenure mix, they also had strong subjective 'emotional' responses to where they lived. For many, some aspect of their home gave them a sense of 'delight' about where they lived. This could be anything from a bay window to a view of the communal pond area.

Many residents were very concerned about wider environmental issues, such as crime and anti-social behaviour, which they felt good design alone would not counteract. However, design and architecture, as well as space standards, played important roles in producing very positive feelings about living space.

## Residents' futures in the schemes

A large minority of respondents in the study wished to move in the near future. In addition, more than half did not expect to stay in their current homes for a further five years or more.

The reasons why people wanted to move varied. They included affordability issues and a lack of fit between their current housing and the changing composition of a respondent's household. However, the key reasons why people wanted to move related to crime, anti-social behaviour and neighbour disputes, and the neighbourhood in which their development had been built.

Looking to the future, only a few residents wanted to live in a detached home in suburbia or a rural area. Many preferred to live in a city and this was often one of the reasons why they chose to live in their current home.

## Policy implications and lessons for new developments

Innovative architecture and design, which gave a sense of space and light, was one of the key achievements of all these schemes; most residents did not feel that they were living in high-density housing. Given the negative connotations with which 'high-density housing' has traditionally been viewed, this can be counted a considerable success. Future developments can overcome instinctive reservations that some people have about living at higher densities through drawing on new architecture that emphasises space and light, and prevents residents feeling they are living in cramped or overcrowded environments.

Many residents were attracted to their homes because they were near amenities and public transport was good. In fact the urban setting was viewed by many as an attractive point, and it is where developments had been largely successful.

Although the schemes had introduced greater socio-economic diversity into the areas where they were situated, they were often not well integrated within those areas, with little interaction between the schemes and surrounding neighbourhoods. Some residents felt separate from the local area, and feared their development might experience more crime as a result of 'encroachment' into their development by people living in local area.

Tenure mix was not perceived in a positive light by some residents, with owner occupiers and low cost home ownership residents viewing the schemes as less desirable places, because of the presence of social rented residents and feelings of stigmatisation when differing tenures were in distinct, separate areas of the development. This is of concern to the current mixed communities agenda.

An intention or desire to move seemed to be quite prevalent across the schemes, especially for owner occupiers and LCHO residents. Residents often said that the development itself was pleasing and a good place to live, but the environment in which it was situated influenced their desire to move.

LCHO housing evoked positive reactions among its residents, especially in terms of a chance to join the 'property ladder' and offering a higher standard of housing than could otherwise have been afforded. However, LCHO residents in particular found it difficult to afford the cost of living in their homes. Furthermore, LCHO residents generally reported most frustration with the schemes, and expressed strong resentment when grouped with social rented tenants.

## About the project

The research was undertaken by Joanne Bretherton and Nicholas Pleace from the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York. It involved the following components: a literature review; a survey of 240 residents in eight new housing schemes; focus groups and interviews with residents in those schemes; residents' seven-day 'diaries' on their use and perception of their homes; and interviews with housing managers and developers.

The case studies were located in England and Scotland – three in London, one in north-west England, two in south-east England, one in the south of England and one in Scotland. They were diverse and varied in size, design, density, and the percentage of affordable housing and tenure mix. While the eight case studies were broadly comparable in many respects, they had a variety of design, ethos and purpose. The research took place from April 2006 to February 2007. Findings from the survey are indicative rather than representative of the wider population.

For more information on the research contact Joanne Bretherton at the Centre for Housing Policy (01904 321480 [jb527@york.ac.uk](mailto:jb527@york.ac.uk) <http://www.york.ac.uk/chp/>).

---

## For further information

The full report, **Residents' views of new forms of high-density affordable living** by Joanne Bretherton and Nicholas Pleace, is published for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation by the Chartered Institute of Housing (price £14.95, ISBN 978 1 905018 54 3). You can also download this report free from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

It is available from the Chartered Institute of Housing, Octavia House, Westwood Way, Coventry CV4 8JP, Tel: 024 7685 1752/64; Fax: 024 7642 2022; email: [pubs@cih.org](mailto:pubs@cih.org) (please add £3.00 p&p).

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

[Read more Findings at www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

Other formats available.

Tel: 01904 615905 email: [info@jrf.org.uk](mailto:info@jrf.org.uk)