Social tenants' access to homeworking opportunities

Homeworking is expanding rapidly in the UK, assisted by new technology and the Internet. More and more people, especially school children, are enjoying the benefits – including skills development, flexible working and affordable business start up. But a new study, by Tim Dwelly, concludes that social housing tenants risk being excluded from these opportunities. The research, based on a survey of housing associations and a review of housing policy and practice, found:

- **Housing association and local authority allocation policies generally take no account of a household's need to work or study from home.**

- **Social tenants are rarely allocated a home with a spare room.**

- **Most social landlords' tenancy agreements discourage or forbid use of the home for business.**

- **A survey of 25 housing associations found that few had ever granted tenants permission to work from home. However, one in 20 council tenants and one in 14 working housing association tenants are already mainly working at home.**

- **Initiatives to 'wire up' deprived communities are primarily about improved service delivery. Few have considered the potential to enable home-based work.**

- **Landlord attitudes to tenants' potential to be self-employed are often dismissive, despite the fact that starting a business from home is often the only way tenants can afford to begin an enterprise. Two-thirds of homeworking social tenants are self-employed.**

- **In areas of low demand for social housing, landlords have shown little awareness of the opportunity to use homework/study space as a selling point for hard-to-let property.**

- **Some housing associations are running innovative live/work schemes for particular groups of clients but are not applying the principles to the bulk of their existing tenants.**

- **Housing Benefit rules discourage the provision of an extra room which could make employment and educational advance more likely.**

- **With IT-based study a growing element in school work, children who lack access to home-based IT or a quiet space to use it are at a disadvantage.**

This research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Housing Corporation was conducted by public policy consultancy Tim Dwelly in Partnership. Although its emphasis is on IT-related work, many of the findings and proposals relating to tenancy conditions, space standards etc. also apply to other forms of homeworking.

Background

In Britain, 43 per cent of homes have Internet access and 52 per cent have PCs. Largely as a result of this technological revolution, there has been a homeworking revolution. One in four of the workforce now carries out some work from home. However, figures from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) show a clear divide: working home-owners are 100 per cent more likely to work mainly from home than working council tenants.

The figures for homeworking are not insignificant for social tenants, however. One in 14 working housing association tenants and one in 20 council tenants work mainly from home. If the number of those who work at least part-time at home are included, the numbers rise again.

Barriers to homeworking

A survey of 25 housing associations, which together manage over 20 per cent of all housing association stock, revealed a lack of action on homeworking for tenants, but a growing interest in tackling the issue. It also uncovered a series of policies and practices that are clearly making home-based work/study difficult for social tenants.

Most associations had tenancy agreements that discouraged or forbade 'running a business' from their properties. None had allocations procedures which checked the needs of tenants or their children to have an extra room for work or study. One association said it told local authorities it was better to provide a spare room but funders put pressure on it to deal with short-term problems. Another association said it was easier to under-occupy in the north than in the south:

> "There is oversupply in the North West and we could provide spare rooms if asked." (Housing association representative)

Few social landlords surveyed had considered their tenants' self-employment prospects. There was an assumption that this was inappropriate. Yet 69 per cent of housing association and 62 per cent of council tenants working from home are self-employed (LFS, August 2001).

Many associations are considering homeworking for their own employees. A growing number are also developing and managing properties tailor-made for homeworking – 'live/work' schemes. But these schemes are usually targeted at groups who would not be eligible for social housing but struggle to afford to both buy a home and run a business. However, associations have done little to apply the thinking behind these initiatives to most of the 1.4 million households they house.

The survey found:

- None of those surveyed had any kind of policy on enabling tenants or their children to work from home. One said it would review its approach.

  > "There is still a perception among tenants that working at home is not allowed. We have to do more to change that. The size of property is a major issue. There is not much spare room in our homes." (Housing association representative)

- Twenty-four associations said tenants needed written permission to work from home. All said permission would be granted if the work did not disturb neighbours. But there were few examples of anyone asking for permission.

- None had conducted research into the levels of tenant homeworking or tenants' interest in this. Four said they would ask the question in their next survey. One said it was not the business of landlords to know whether tenants worked at home.

- Only two had asked about tenants' employment prospects and aspirations in a survey and a third was planning to do so. But ten had been actively involved in one form or another in this area. They had either provided training for tenants and their children or supported community facilities equipped with PCs and access to the Internet. One was considering how to provide low-income tenants with PCs.

  > "A recent survey asked about employment status, educational attainment and career aspirations. Most tenants rated knowing about IT the most important among their aspirations." (Housing association representative)

- One in five had looked at providing accommodation that enables homeworking or were already providing it. There is a growing interest in this market, but it is seen as specialist (e.g. city/town centre business start-ups). There was no apparent relationship with the 'live/work' prospects of their general needs tenants.

> "We successfully secured RDA funding to help us develop the Creative Lofts live/work scheme in Huddersfield. This is pioneering a new approach to linking jobs and housing. It is a model we may be able to replicate elsewhere." (Housing association representative)

When asked what the government and the Housing Corporation might do to make it easier for tenants to work from home, housing association respondents suggested revisions to the rules on space standards and under-occupation; better links between government policy on IT, education and social housing; changes to benefit and tax rules; and more encouragement for tenants to undertake homeworking.

Technology initiatives

Nearly 12,000 homes in six neighbourhoods across England have received funding under the £10 million Wired up Communities programme, launched in 2001. However, these initiatives have so far emphasised online service delivery and training. Few have integrated attempts to support home-based employment and enterprise.

The educational impact

For the 1.44 million families with children in social housing, the ability to use a PC for study in an appropriate space is an immediate concern. As government gears up to an IT-based curriculum, children are increasingly expected to do homework online from home, often from an extra room. It is well established that children who have use of a PC in a quiet room at home are more likely to do well at school. On this basis, children in social housing are likely to be increasingly excluded from educational advance compared to their counterparts in home-ownership. The scarcity of spare rooms in the social housing sector (especially for households with children) has not been considered for its impact on educational achievement. This is exacerbated by PC ownership: only 45 per cent of 7- to 14-year-olds

from social groups D and E have access to home computers, compared with 71 per cent of C2s, 78 per cent of C1s and 85 per cent of ABs.

Although 70 per cent of the housing associations surveyed said they allocated on the basis of need only – mostly under pressure from local authorities – a number had moved or were moving towards a more flexible lettings policy.

> "Our policy is based on need and takes no account of spare rooms for leisure or educational use. But this should be an aspiration for social landlords. The opportunities should be the same as those in the private sector." (Housing association representative)

Moat Housing Society has distributed recycled computers for its Greenwich Homes scheme. Apart from that, no association surveyed was directly involved in helping provide PCs for children to work on at home. Eight associations, however, were involved in community-based projects and/or in providing computer training for young people.

Possible ways forward

The researcher concludes that social landlords have not yet responded to the new way that homes work. They have made some advances on helping to provide web access, but have tended to see this as an opportunity to improve welfare services rather than to enable employment/enterprise.

He suggests that both central and local housing policy needs to review the basic assumption that homes are only for housing. The following policy options, which draw in part on suggestions from housing association representatives, could help address the 'digital divide' between social housing tenants and owner-occupiers:

Central government
- Redefine space standards to incorporate modern aspirations and the impact of new technology, including accepting that one extra room can be used for work/study.
- Consider developing a new right for secure and assured tenants to use their home for work, subject to compliance with nuisance obligations.
- Revise Housing Benefit rules to ensure they do not penalise those with a 'spare' room used for work/study.
- Review the Wired up Communities programme to ensure that opportunities to boost employment

and enterprise from the home are better integrated within projects.

- Create better links between education and housing policies in government to ensure that attempts to encourage home-based PC/web homework by pupils are not held back by social housing allocation policies, tenancy conditions etc.

Social landlords

- Consider imaginative approaches to encouraging employment, enterprise and education based at home.
- Review allocations policies, ensuring that applicants can express a preference for a work room for their children and/or their own employment prospects.
- In areas of low demand, use homeworking as a positive selling point to potential tenants.
- Review assumptions that employment initiatives are about tenants going to work for an employer.
- Recognise that starting a business from home is often the only way a tenant can afford to do this.
- Revise tenancy agreements to positively encourage use of home for business and end the onus on tenants to seek permission to work from home where no nuisance occurs.
- Learn from other social landlords that are helping tenants and their children work from home.
- Work closely with local schools to ensure that housing management policies help tenants' children to do homework at home.
- Ensure that wired up projects address work and enterprise as well as access to welfare services.
- Ensure that 'live/work' as a concept is not restricted to new developments and non core target groups.

The Housing Corporation

- Review national guidelines on development and housing management to ensure that the potential of tenants to work and learn from home is encouraged.
- Issue guidance to registered social landlords on homeworking issues.
- Work with the Charity Commission to ensure that restrictions on the use of housing association homes are reviewed and modernised. Explore ways that new regeneration aims can be used to boost homeworking opportunities.

About the project

The research was supported by the Housing Corporation's Innovation and Good Practice Programme and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The sample of 25 housing associations was chosen to represent a broad mix of associations by size and region. Interviews were conducted in late 2001 and early 2002 by phone.

How to get further information

The full report, **Disconnected: Social housing tenants and the home working revolution** by Tim Dwelly, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 064 4, price £12.95).