

**Cambridge** Centre  
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Planning Research

# Non-resident parents and shared housing

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# Non-resident parents and shared housing

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## Executive summary

The demographics of families have changed dramatically in recent decades due to increases in family breakdown and re-partnering. This has resulted in an increase in the number of 'non-resident parents', usually fathers, living separately from their children.

In many cases non-resident parents have a high amount of involvement with their children, with care being shared between the resident and non-resident parents. However, welfare rules and housing provision only recognise one parent as having any responsibility for caring for the child. This means that the non-resident parent may only have the resources to secure housing where kitchens and bathrooms are shared with other people. Shared housing may raise particular challenges for non-resident parents, but so far there has been little research into the needs of this group.

This research analysed existing data, and drew on interviews with housing providers and non-resident parents themselves in order to explore how shared housing solutions may better meet their needs.

### Context

The number of non-resident parents living in shared housing is not known. We do, however, know that:

- It is estimated that five percent of men in the UK aged 16-64 are the father to non-resident children, totalling 980,000 men.
- The Department for Work and Pensions estimated that eighteen per cent of 25-34 year old single Housing Benefit claimants without dependent children are non-resident parents, and that over half of these children have contact at least once a fortnight
- The 2011 census showed that there were 3.1 million people living in shared housing other than student housing
- Non-resident parents in shared housing are less likely than those in self-contained housing to have overnight contact with their child(ren)

### The views of non-resident parents

From the interviews it was clear that shared housing poses a variety of challenges for non-resident parents. Key issues raised included:

- Difficult behaviour of other housemates
- Children disturbing housemates
- A lack of space for children to sleep (often sharing the parent's room)
- Substandard properties
- Landlord rules banning children from visiting properties or staying overnight

The non-resident parents interviewed responded to the issues above in different ways. Some did not have any contact with their children in the property, or only daytime contact. Others were continuing overnight contact in challenging circumstances, for example sharing beds with children, or breaking the rules of their tenancy to have children to stay.

### **The views of housing providers**

A very small number of housing providers offered specialist housing for non-resident parents. More commonly non-resident parents lived in general shared housing. Providers of such housing differed greatly in their approach to visiting children. Whilst some allowed children to stay overnight, others allowed daytime visits only, or no visits at any time. Reasons given for restricting overnight contact or not letting to non-resident parents included:

- Safeguarding concerns
- Protecting the interest of other tenants
- Views about the appropriateness of this arrangement (e.g. sharing a room)
- Insurance or licensing issues
- A lack of demand

Features that housing providers identified as making contact with children possible in shared housing:

- Smaller shared properties (fewer housemates)
- Larger bedrooms
- Safeguarding checks
- Rules and boundaries
- Allowing tenants to choose their housemates

### **Different models of shared housing**

Certain models of shared housing have features that were identified as facilitating contact with children.

#### *Specialist models:*

- Accommodate non-resident parents together, providing support, and allowing for a child-friendly environment to be maintained
- Offer a spare bedroom for visiting children to stay in on a rota basis

#### *Taking a lodger in a house the non-resident parent owns:*

- The non-resident parent has control over the living environment
- Positive relationships can develop between the lodger and visiting children

#### *Being a lodger in someone else's house*

- Positive relationships can develop between landlord and visiting children
- May work well with owners that have certain characteristics – e.g. experience of bring up own children

### *Child-friendly shared housing projects*

- In projects such as housing cooperatives, residents may be sharing partly due to their values, rather than only practical reasons. There was some suggestion that in housing projects with this ethos, positive relationships may build up between children and other residents.

### **Conclusions**

Overall, this research has found **that shared housing poses a variety of challenges** for non-resident parents. For a minority of parents, there are also some benefits of shared living, but for most it is a less than ideal option, limiting their ability to parent their children. This in turn has an **impact upon those children**, who are unable to have friends over when staying with their other parent, lack privacy and may find their relationship with their non-resident parent damaged. The child's resident parent is likely also to be affected, with most or all of the overnight care falling to them.

With small children in particular, there are clearly **risks** associated in living in an environment that is not set up for their needs, and where the parent has limited ability to make it safe for them. Older children may have fewer needs to keep them physically safe, but they have more need for privacy, which is hard to achieve if they share a room with their parent.

Underlying all this, few parents would choose to live in a single room in a shared house with their child visiting regularly – for most, it is a financial necessity. This may be a short-term problem whilst they get back on their feet after separation, but for some on low incomes, it may be long-term.

The less than ideal nature of shared housing for non-resident parents means that **housing providers are often reluctant to facilitate shared housing for this group**. A small number of providers are actively trying to help this group, and while some landlords are willing to accept non-resident parents in their shared housing, others, including most supported housing providers, explicitly forbid overnight contact with children.

For some housing providers, the reluctance stems from a desire not to normalise this type of housing or make it acceptable. **For non-resident parents who cannot afford self-contained housing, however, the lack of shared housing provision is unhelpful.**

This research also found that – although rarely ideal – **shared housing can work**, at least for some non-resident parents.

**Allowing tenants some choice over who they share with appears critical.** This approach appears preferable to taking a more active role in “matching” tenants (according to age, interests, etc) as it leaves the responsibility for decisions firmly with the tenant/parent and avoids housing providers feeling that they are responsible for ensuring that other tenants are not a risk to the child.

Some amount of **tenancy support**, including matching tenants and offering ongoing management, was viewed to be helpful in making shared housing a success. However, there are difficulties associated with a heavy degree of housing management: support

comes at a cost, and would not be able to be covered by the Shared Accommodation Rate, undoing the potential financial savings of shared housing. Social housing providers who offer a high degree of support also felt that the obligation to safeguard children fell on them, leading them to forbid tenants from having their children visit. There is a need, therefore, to balance the benefits of having someone external to help instigate and enforce house rules, with the need to recognise parents as being responsible for their own children, and lead groups of tenants sharing a house to negotiate what works between them. Approaches along the lines of a peer landlord scheme<sup>1</sup> could offer a cost-effective alternative to more heavily managed schemes.

There is also a need for clearer guidance on whether shared housing is or is not suitable for situations where parents are in dispute around contact arrangements. This would be useful for those working with separated parents, and also for parents themselves to understand what is or is not suitable, as well as for other agencies involved.

This research focused on those with experience living in shared housing, many of whom were doing so because they were unable to meet the cost of individual accommodation. Ultimately, shared housing is being used because self-contained housing is unaffordable for many people, and **the benefits system does not recognise shared parenting arrangements for what they are**. The resident parent can claim child benefit, Universal Credit for a family, housing benefit for a two bedroom home and also some child support from the other parent. The other parent can claim Universal Credit for a single person, and Housing Benefit only for a room in a shared housing, and must also pay a proportion of earnings to the other parent in the form of child support. This setup appears designed for situations where children live only with one parent, but also operates in situations where one parent has the child four days a week and the other three days a week – even though the child is spending very similar amounts of time in each household. Non-resident parents have limited ability to move to a cheaper area, or to move for a better paid job, because of having to live near their child.

Measures of child poverty that assess a child's household income as that of their resident parent are blind to the impact on the child of spending much of their time in potentially a much poorer household where their needs are unrecognised by the benefits system.

Overall, the research found that non-resident parents are a diverse group, with a **wide range of contact arrangements and housing situations**. What works for one situation may not work for another. Some find it impossible to maintain meaningful relationships with their children in housing that falls so far short of the level of space required for a family. For others, shared housing can work, at least for periods of their life, and there is much that housing providers and others can do to improve the way in which it works for them.

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<sup>1</sup> A peer landlord scheme is where one tenant within a shared house is trained to act as a 'lead tenant'. Their role is to ensure the property is managed appropriately and be the first point of contact for enquiries and issues. Catch22 run a peer landlord scheme in partnership with Commonweal housing: <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/services/london-peer-landlord-scheme/>

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for housing providers

- Ensure that non-resident parents who live in shared housing are supported in taking an active role in parenting, including having their children visit wherever practical.
- Ensure that tenants in shared housing are able to exercise some choice over who they live with – this can include whether or not they are willing to share with a tenant who is a non-resident parent.
- Consider providing specialist housing geared at non-resident parents, so that they can share with other people in a similar position, in a child-friendly environment. This kind of project is most likely to be viable in pressured, urban, housing environments where there are substantial numbers of potential tenants. Otherwise, it may be too specialist and fail to fill voids in an economically viable timescale.
- Provide general shared housing that is child-friendly, allowing tenants choice over who they live with and meeting children's needs alongside everyone else's. The cooperative models appeared to be the best at this approach from those looked at in this report.
- Provide good quality housing management with warm, safe housing.
- Ban smoking in shared housing and ensure strong action against other types of antisocial behaviour that are particularly problematic for parents and children (such as late-night noise, heavy drinking or drug-taking).
- Focus on smaller house shares for non-resident parents.
- Offer longer tenancies, to improve security for the parent and child, and reduce the turnover of other housemates.
- Consider housing with interconnected bedrooms, larger bedrooms or ensuite bathrooms as being particular suitable for non-resident parents.
- Ensure that parents in shared housing are aware that it is their responsibility to care for their child and are aware that the housing provider cannot remove risks posed by other tenants.

### Wider recommendations

- The housing sector and benefits system should better recognise the reality of shared care arrangements between separated parents, including the need for the child to be accommodated by each of their parents when in their care.
- The approach taken by the Government and other agencies in measuring and understanding child poverty should take into account the levels of household income experienced by both households, in situations where separated parents share care.
- Local authorities should consider prioritising Discretionary Housing Payments to non-resident parents who are struggling to afford the rent on a one bedroom home,

especially those for whom shared housing is particularly inappropriate – for instance because they have several children, or have their child(ren) to visit for significant amounts of the week.

- Improving facilities for parents to find others to share with in the private rented sector may help them choose suitable housemates (with or without children of their own).



# Non-resident parents and shared housing

## Introduction

Since the 1970s, increases in family breakdown and re-partnering have changed the demographics of families. In the UK, the proportion of single parent households has tripled in the past 30 years<sup>2</sup> and there has been an accompanying increase in ‘non-resident parents’, usually fathers, living separately from their children.<sup>3</sup>

Shared-care, where the care of the children is split between both parents, is increasingly common and increasingly recognised as beneficial to children. Welfare rules and housing provision, however, only recognise one parent as having any responsibility for caring for the child, meaning the non-resident parent may end up with housing more suitable for a single person.

Shared housing is becoming more common for young people in the UK in general, as a result of the reduced availability of affordable accommodation, insecure incomes and recent cuts to benefits. Shared housing may raise particular challenges for non-resident parents, but so far there has been little research into this group. This research seeks to explore non-resident parents’ experience of living in shared housing, to inform housing providers about the needs of this group, and how shared housing solutions may better meet these needs.

## Aims

This research aims to explore new solutions to meet the requirements of non-resident parents whose children have overnight contact through:

- examining existing evidence of the need for shared housing solutions for non-resident parents;
- exploring the experiences and views of non-resident parents of shared housing;
- identifying possible housing solutions that Commonweal or other housing providers might wish to develop;
- identifying the key challenges in developing such housing, and suggesting ways in which they might be tackled.

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<sup>2</sup> Poole et al. 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Collins Dictionary of Law, 2006, defines a non-resident parent as “the parent who is not the main day-to-day carer of the children. If the child stays with both parents, the non-resident parent is the one who spends fewer nights with the children. If the children spend an equal number of nights with each parent, normally the non-resident parent is the one who is not getting child benefit for the children.”

## Methods

To address the objectives of the research, we:

- Explored secondary datasets<sup>4</sup> to examine the characteristics and household circumstances of non-resident parents, including the numbers who may be affected (currently or in the future) by the Shared Accommodation Rate.
- Conducted expert interviews with umbrella organisations relevant to family courts and social services, to gain understanding about how living in shared housing may affect access arrangements for non-resident parents<sup>5</sup>.
- Conducted eleven interviews with housing providers to explore what non-resident parent tenants do in shared housing circumstances to maintain access with their children.
  - Interviews were conducted with the following organisations who run specific housing schemes for non-resident parents:
    - Decorum Emergency Night Shelter (DENS)
    - SmartMove
    - Dads House
  - Interviews were also conducted with a range of organisations who provide general shared housing, including:
    - Cambridge Youth Foyer
    - Newydd Housing Association (Rooms4U)
    - Nomad Sheffield
    - Origin Housing (Enfield Single Housing)
    - Sanford Walk Housing Cooperative
    - ThamesReach
    - The Collective
    - St Mungos
- Conducted interviews with fifteen non-resident parents about their experiences and views of shared housing and its impact on their parenting and family life<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Data from the 2011 Census and 'Understanding Society' – a representative, UK household panel survey.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews were conducted with representatives from Gingerbread, The Family Justice Council, Family Matters and Families need Fathers.

<sup>6</sup> One of the interviewees was a resident parent, but she was included because she had had experience of living in a shared house with her daughter.

- Conducted online research into discussion of this issue on the following forums:
  - Netmums: <https://www.netmums.com/>
  - Mumsnet: <https://www.mumsnet.com/>
  - Only Mums: <http://www.onlymums.org/>
  - Only Dads: <http://www.onlydads.org/>
  - Wikivorce: <https://www.wikivorce.com/divorce/>
- Researched online sites offering parents the ability to match up with others looking for houseshares:
  - Space Children (Single Parent Accommodation and Childcare Exchange) [www.spacechildren.co.uk/index.php?p=viewpage&id=pricesfaq](http://www.spacechildren.co.uk/index.php?p=viewpage&id=pricesfaq)
  - MoveThat.com : [www.movethat.co.uk/London/Forum/Single\\_Parents](http://www.movethat.co.uk/London/Forum/Single_Parents)
  - Dads pads [www.dadspads.co.uk](http://www.dadspads.co.uk)
  - Trovit: <https://homes.trovit.co.uk/flatshare-single-parent>
- Facilitated a round-table discussion, with relevant stakeholders, about the challenges of shared housing for non-resident parents and possible housing solutions. This was held on 14 September 2017 in London.

## Context

Many non-resident parents have a high amount of involvement with their children. Shared-care, where the care of the children is split between both parents, is increasingly common and is encouraged by agencies such as the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass, 2009)<sup>7</sup>. This reflects broader social, cultural and legislative change, including greater knowledge of the importance of father involvement and family courts that increasingly encourage shared parenting<sup>8</sup>. Shared care does not necessarily involve an equal division of time in the care of each parent, but does mean “that each child spends a significant amount of time with each parent regularly”, with “significant overnight contact”.

In spite of the increase in shared care arrangements, the housing and welfare regime in the UK continues to recognise only one parent as having real responsibility for their child’s day to day care. Entitlement to social housing and benefits is based on one parent being the ‘primary carer’. Only one parent can receive child benefit for each child, and this is then used to define that parent as eligible to claim housing benefit to cover accommodation for themselves and their children, alongside other benefits, such as tax credits. The other parent cannot claim any benefits for this child, even if they provide a substantial amount of their care. When applying for benefits or (usually) social housing, non-resident parents are

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<sup>7</sup> Cafcass represents children in family court cases, including disputes between separated parents regarding residency.

<sup>8</sup> Smyth et al (2016).

assessed as single people. If they are single, under 35 and renting privately, this usually results in them only being eligible for Housing Benefit to cover a room in a shared house (the 'shared accommodation rate').

### *Why shared housing?*

Recent economic, social and political change has resulted in uncertainty in the housing options of young adults. Young people were particularly affected by the economic downturn resulting from the global financial crisis in 2008, and the accompanying growth in low-paid, insecure and often part-time employment<sup>9</sup>.

This economic insecurity has coincided with property prices becoming increasingly unaffordable. Research by the Office for National Statistics<sup>10</sup> found that the median price paid for residential property in England and Wales increased by 259% between 1997 and 2016, while median individual annual earnings increased by only 68% in the same time period. The same report found that, on average, working people could expect to pay around 7.6 times their annual earnings on purchasing a home in England and Wales in 2016, up from 3.6 times earnings in 1997.

The average house price paid by first-time buyers in 2016 was the highest on record at £205,170 (UK average, £402,692 in London). The high cost of buying a home is delaying young people from becoming homeowners, with the average age of a first-time buyer now being 30 (nationally; 32 in London). The three main barriers to homeownership cited by 20-45 year olds who do not own a property are the size of the deposit, high property prices and low income.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that buying a property is unachievable for many young people in the UK. Additionally, access to social housing is very limited for single people who do not have any additional needs. Due to the shortage of social housing available, local authorities prioritise those who are homeless, eligible for help and in 'priority need'. Usually single applicants would not be in priority need unless they were pregnant, a young care leaver or a vulnerable person<sup>12</sup>.

The difficulty of buying a property and the shortage of social housing means that a growing number of young people are renting in the private rental sector. While this does have some benefits in terms of flexibility, private rented accommodation is often very expensive. Forty-three percent of private renters spend more than 30 percent of their monthly income on rent, and one in seven private renters spend half their monthly income on rent<sup>13</sup>. The expense of private rented accommodation means that often shared housing is the only

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<sup>9</sup> Berrington et. al (2014)

<sup>10</sup> Office for National Statistics (2017)

<sup>11</sup> Halifax (2015)

<sup>12</sup> Shelter (2017)

<sup>13</sup> Local Government Association (2017)

option for those on low incomes or living in expensive areas, as it means the rent, bills and council tax can be split with others<sup>14</sup>.

## *Non-resident parents and shared housing*

### **How many non-resident parents are there?**

There are a growing number of parents (mainly fathers) in the UK whose children live – or are classed as living – primarily with their other parent, as a result of parental separation. Poole et al. (2013) estimate that, in total, five percent of men in the UK aged 16-64 are the father to non-resident children, totalling **980,000 men**.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) (2011b) estimated that **eighteen per cent of 25-34 year old single Housing Benefit claimants without dependent children are non-resident parents**<sup>15</sup>, and that over half of these children have contact at least once a fortnight, but they do not know the extent to which this involves overnight stays<sup>16</sup>.

### **How many non-resident parents live in shared accommodation?**

There is little data on the number of non-resident parents living in shared accommodation, nor on the level of contact they have with their children. We do, however, have some data on shared accommodation more generally. **The 2011 census showed that there were 3.1 million people living in shared housing other than student housing, out of 44.5 million people in total (aged 16 and over)**.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> O'Connell (2014)

<sup>15</sup> This figure is based on the 2008/09 Family Resources Survey, so includes households of all tenures. The DWP state that the result should be treated with some caution, as the sample size is small, and 2008/09 was the first year that this question was asked in the Family Resources Survey.

<sup>16</sup> This figure is based on the 2008 Families and Children Survey.

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that the 'other shared housing' category is broad, and includes households with related as well as unrelated adults (excluding couples, families with children and households where all residents are over 65 years of age).

**Table 1 Numbers in shared housing in England and Wales, 2011**

		Men	Women
Total population aged 16 or over	44,533,150	21,691,475	22,841,675
Shared housing (students)	499,132	262,059	237,073
Other shared housing	3,140,926	1,766,042	1,374,884

Source: 2011 census

The proportion of people in shared housing varies substantially between regions and by sex. There is a higher proportion of men than women in shared housing – likely due to women cohabiting or marrying at a younger age, and being more likely to be single parents. Rates of shared housing are also very much higher in London – more than a third of young men aged 25-34 living in London are in shared housing.

**Table 2 Proportions of adults living in shared housing, by age group and region, 2011**

	Men				Women			
	16-24	25-34	35-49	50+	16-24	25-34	35-49	50+
North East	17.9%	11.0%	3.5%	3.2%	15.4%	5.7%	2.5%	2.8%
North West	14.8%	13.1%	4.5%	3.9%	13.9%	7.3%	3.0%	3.6%
Yorkshire & Humber	19.4%	13.3%	4.3%	3.6%	18.2%	7.3%	2.9%	3.3%
East Midlands	18.2%	13.8%	4.6%	3.9%	16.7%	7.4%	3.1%	3.6%
West Midlands	15.3%	14.2%	4.9%	4.3%	12.9%	7.4%	3.2%	4.0%
East	13.7%	15.0%	4.9%	4.0%	12.3%	8.5%	3.1%	3.9%
London	26.7%	33.8%	11.2%	8.1%	24.1%	24.2%	6.8%	7.6%
South East	18.8%	17.4%	5.6%	4.7%	17.4%	10.3%	3.5%	4.4%
South West	20.5%	16.1%	5.3%	4.4%	19.3%	9.9%	3.4%	4.2%
Wales	17.8%	12.4%	4.5%	4.2%	16.0%	6.7%	3.1%	3.9%
England & Wales	18.7%	18.7%	5.8%	4.5%	17.1%	11.6%	3.7%	4.2%

Source: 2011 census

### How often do non-resident parents in shared accommodation have contact with and care of their children?

A study by the Office for National Statistics in 2007-2008<sup>18</sup> conducted interviews with 170 non-resident parents. Half of their children had direct contact with them at least once a week, and 69 per cent had some form of contact (including by letter, phone or email) with them at least once a week. The majority of children (77 percent) had contact at their non-

<sup>18</sup> Lader, D (2008)

resident parent's home. Thirty per cent of children stayed overnight with their non-resident parent at least once a week.<sup>19</sup>

Several factors influence how often non-resident parents have contact with their children. It is known that non-resident fathers who are in more disadvantaged economic positions have less involvement with their children. Frequency of contact has also been found to be related to the distance the child lives from the father (Poole, 2016).

There are no published tables from the census on contact with non-resident children in shared housing. There were, however, some questions asked in the UK-wide survey, *Understanding Society*<sup>20</sup>. It is possible to use this to compare the experiences of non-resident parents in shared housing from those in self-contained housing. Both groups reported similar frequencies of contact with their children, lived at a similar distance and reported being similarly close to their children:

**Table 3 Frequency of contact**

	Not in shared housing	Shared housing
Never	12%	8%
Once a month or less	14%	12%
Several times a month or more	74%	80%

Source: *Understanding Society 2015, Wave 6*

**Table 4 Distance from where child lives**

	Not in shared housing	Shared housing
Less than 15 minutes	43%	38%
15 minutes to an hour	34%	38%
More than an hour	20%	25%

Source: *Understanding Society 2015, Wave 6*

**Table 5 Self-reported closeness of relationship with child**

	Not in shared housing	Shared housing
Very close	64%	76%
Quite close	20%	16%
Not very close/not close at all	16%	8%

Source: *Understanding Society 2015, Wave 6*

<sup>19</sup> Percentages are out of number of children, as parents were asked about each child individually.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>

There were, however, significant differences in how often parents in shared and self-contained housing had their child to stay:

**Table 6 Frequency of overnight contact**

	Not in shared housing	Shared housing
Regular basis	55%	35%
Irregular basis	18%	4%
Not at all	28%	61%

*Source: Understanding Society 2015, Wave 6*

This suggests that non-resident parents in shared housing do keep up contact with their children, remain close to them, and live nearby in most cases. However, they are less likely to have them to stay overnight.

### **Contact between non-resident parents and their children**

There has been an increased emphasis in recent years on children maintaining a relationship with both parents, following separation or divorce. Written advice from Cafcass states that ongoing contact with both parents is good for children.

*“Cafcass believes children have happier, more successful lives after family break up if they continue to be loved and cared for by both their parents and other members of their extended family.”*

*“Children do best when they have good relationships with both their parents. Fathers and mothers are of equal importance to children.”<sup>21</sup>*

When looking at the impact of ongoing contact with the non-resident parent there has been a shift in emphasis away from *quantity of contact* to *quality of contact*. (This followed from several studies that found that there was no significant association between the frequency of non-resident father-child contact and more positive child outcomes). Ongoing quality contact with the non-resident parent has been found to have positive impacts on children. A meta-analysis of 63 studies<sup>22</sup> found that children feeling close to their non-resident fathers and experiencing authoritative parenting were positively associated with academic achievement, and negatively associated with both externalising problems (such as misbehaviour at home or school, aggression and delinquency), and internalising problems (such as depression, anxiety and low self-esteem).

Cafcass advice reiterates the importance of quality contact, and explains what this involves:

<sup>21</sup> Cafcass (no date)

<sup>22</sup> Amato and Gilbreth (1999)



*“Researchers, and children themselves, tell us that the ‘quality’ factor is about children getting the warm, positive and authoritative caring that builds and maintains important relationships with parents and carers.”<sup>23</sup>*

It has been highlighted that a non-resident father’s involvement with his children is often contingent upon the mother allowing this, therefore higher levels of contact indicates more collaboration between parents, which in turn could positively affect children’s well-being and adjustment <sup>24</sup> rather than necessarily resulting from the contact itself.

Clearly, where there is a risk of harm from the non-resident parent, continued contact is not advisable. Similarly, some research suggests that if there is a very high level of conflict between separated parents, children may not benefit from continued contact with both parents.<sup>25</sup>

### **Overnight contact**

Having regular overnight stays may be one way of enabling quality contact between non-resident parents and their children (although there are very few studies that specifically investigate the impacts of overnight stays on children). One study<sup>26</sup> found that children who stayed overnight with their non-resident parent reported greater closeness and better quality relationships with this parent than those who had daytime-only contact.

It has been suggested that overnight stays allow a different form of parenting from daytime-only contact. Having children stay overnight involves participating in their daily routine: providing meals, monitoring their activities, preparing them for bed and comforting them in the night. It is suggested that: ‘these everyday activities promote and maintain trust and confidence in the parents while deepening and strengthening child-parent attachments’.<sup>27</sup>

In the past, research found non-resident parents tended to engage in largely social and recreational activities with their children, rather than assuming any parenting responsibilities, leading one American researcher to label them ‘Disneyland Dads’ or ‘Disneyland Moms’<sup>28</sup>. Caring for children overnight necessitates a move beyond a superficial relationship to one of active parenting, which may explain the greater closeness and stronger relationships that result from this.

There is currently disagreement about whether overnight contact is appropriate for infants and young children. Conventional wisdom, based on developmental psychology and attachment theory, was that overnight stays with the ‘non-primary carer’ should be avoided until the child was three years old, as this would maximise children’s potential to develop

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<sup>23</sup> Cafcass (no date)

<sup>24</sup> Goisis et al. (2016) and Pruett et al (2016)

<sup>25</sup> Lamb (2012)

<sup>26</sup> Cashmore et al (2009)

<sup>27</sup> Kelly and Lamb (2000)

<sup>28</sup> Stewart (1999)

secure attachment to the primary care giver and maintain their sense of safety and comfort. However, some more recent commentators argue that children are capable of adjusting to overnights with both parents and may benefit from this experience, if the context has been taken into account<sup>29</sup>.

Overall, the research concludes that regular participation by both parents in a broad array of social contexts fosters meaningful and committed parent-child relationships. 'Brief dinners and occasional weekend visits do not provide a broad enough or extensive enough basis for such relationships to be fostered... weekday and weekend daytime and night-time activities are important'<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Pruett et al (2016)

<sup>30</sup> Lamb (2016)

### *Known issues with non-resident parents and shared housing*

There is a small amount of literature outlining potential issues with children having overnight stays in shared accommodation. The main issues raised can be categorised into concerns about **other housemates**, concerns about **physical space** and **landlord rules**.

Some researchers have raised concerns that children could be put at risk in shared housing from other housemates. The main concerns raised were safeguarding concerns about the backgrounds of other residents, and worry about noise levels and the cleanliness of communal areas<sup>31</sup>. Seven non-resident parents living in shared housing were interviewed as part of a research project by the University of York into the extension of the Shared Accommodation Rate<sup>32</sup>. Five of the seven interviewees did not have overnight contact with their children due to concerns about noise, cleanliness and the backgrounds of other tenants.

Concerns were also raised that living in shared accommodation could be detrimental to the wellbeing of both parents and children, as a lack of privacy may prevent parents from building close relationships with their children<sup>33</sup>. Another study found that parents living in shared accommodation have a lack of control over the internal environment, including the people and behaviours their children are exposed to, which results in greater parental anxiety. It also highlights the increased risks that children may be exposed to in shared houses:

*“In multiply occupied accommodation, stair gates to both the stairs and kitchen areas are inappropriate. Play space is at a premium and difficult to supervise, with children often left to play in hallways and on stairs and landings, with increased risks of falls. If you are forced to share kitchens then children are deliberately taken to these areas rather than left in the bed-sit rooms thus bringing them closer to dangerous areas.”<sup>34</sup>*

Some of the interviewees in the University of York research said that they were prevented from having their children to stay by rules set by their landlord that banned any overnight guests.

### *Welfare cuts*

Housing Benefit (and the housing element of Universal Credit) is paid to people who are out of work or on a low income to help with housing costs. It can cover up to their entire rent, depending on the level of rent and their income. In 2012, changes to Housing Benefit increased the age limit for the Shared Accommodation Rate from 25 to 35. This change means that people aged under 35 renting in the private rental sector are now only eligible

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<sup>31</sup> Unison (2014)

<sup>32</sup> Rugg (2011)

<sup>33</sup> Barratt et al. (2012)

<sup>34</sup> Page (2002)

for enough Housing Benefit to rent a room in a shared house or flat. Previously, people aged 25 and over could potentially claim enough to rent a one-bedroom property. Several organisations raised concerns at the time of this change that it would result in non-resident parents living in shared housing, which will make it more difficult for them to maintain contact with their children<sup>35</sup>. Data from the DWP shows that, in July 2015, there were a total of 86,036 private renting tenants aged under 35 only eligible for the shared accommodation rate of housing benefit.

**Table 7 Single person households renting privately in receipt of housing benefit, Great Britain, July 2015**

Age	Total	Entitled to		
		Shared accommodation rate	1+ bedroom	Unknown
<b>Under 25</b>	35,379	26,304	8,453	622
<b>25-34</b>	76,000	59,732	15,336	932
<b>Total under 35</b>	111,379	86,036	23,789	1,554

Source: DWP, Statxplor<sup>36</sup>.

In 2015 the government announced that Local Housing Allowance rates would also be applied to social sector renters, meaning that those aged under 35 and renting in the social sector would only receive enough benefit to rent a room in a shared house. This caused great concern amongst social sector landlords who anticipated rent arrears, damage to their revenue schemes and increased homelessness. Some expressed interest in exploring shared housing options for this group. In October this year, however, Theresa May announced that the government was cancelling these plans. Therefore, for the foreseeable future, the shared housing rate of housing benefit will continue to apply to single non-resident parents in private rented accommodation, but will not extend to those in social rented housing.

<sup>35</sup> Cundy (2012) and Newis (2011)

<sup>36</sup> NB: single = no dependent children and no non-dependent children in the household (benefit unit). A single person living in a shared house would normally constitute their own benefit unit. July 2015 data has been used because more recent data includes significant numbers of people on Universal Credit, and the data available on Universal Credit does not allow analysis by both tenure and age group.

## The views of non-resident parents

Our interviews with non-resident parents and housing providers found many concerns for non-resident parents, and issues that were a barrier to overnight contact.

**Table 8 Non-resident parents interviewed**

<p><b>Tom*</b> was living with the parents of his friend. He had overnight contact with his daughter, aged five, on alternate weekends. He and his daughter each had their own bedroom. He had previous experience of overnight contact in a shared house, when he remained in the family home after separation, and took on a lodger. His daughter came for overnight stays some weekends when the lodger was there.</p>
<p><b>Hamad*</b> was living in private rented shared housing, which he accessed through a specialist scheme for homeless fathers. He shared with five other people, and had a private bathroom but a shared kitchen. He had overnight contact with his son, aged 16, quite regularly, on an ad-hoc basis.</p>
<p><b>Adam*</b> was currently living in a two-bedroom property with one of his sons (who now lived with him full-time). Prior to this, he had lived in three shared houses, where he had daytime contact with his four children, now aged 20, 19, 16 and 13. One of the properties was a lodging arrangement with a friend, the other two were larger house shares. He could not have overnight contact with his children in any of these properties; in some properties this was not allowed, in others it was impractical.</p>
<p><b>Terry*</b> currently lived in his own property, but had previously lived in a large shared house for three years. He had daytime contact only with his two sons, then aged five and eight, as he did not think overnight contact was appropriate in a shared house.</p>
<p><b>Craig*</b> lived in his own property, and took on lodgers to help with the mortgage. He had daytime contact with his son and daughter, aged four and eight when he separated, until recently. The children's mother was objecting to overnight contact.</p>
<p><b>Stuart*</b> lived in his own property. He was previously living in a specialist shared house for non-resident fathers, with a separate inter-linked bedroom that fathers could stay in with their children when they had contact. He had overnight contact with his three young children in this house, then aged three, four and eight.</p>
<p><b>Jake*</b> lived in housing cooperative which consisted of shared housing. He had his son and daughter, aged ten and twelve, to stay around half of the time. He was very positive about them growing up in a shared environment, even though they shared his bedroom.</p>
<p><b>Katie*</b> had lived in housing cooperative with her partner and baby (full-time). She shared a house with partner, baby and three other male housemates. They had three interlinking bedrooms to use as a family, but the kitchen and bathrooms were shared. They stayed until the baby was 14 months old.</p>
<p><b>Ben*</b> lived in shared accommodation with five other people, which was supported housing run by a housing association. His two children, aged three and one, were not allowed to visit in the daytime or overnight, but he did have them to stay overnight.</p>

**Martin\*** lived in shared supported accommodation with five other people. His three children, aged five, two and six months, were not allowed in the property during the daytime or overnight, but, like Ben, he did have them to stay overnight.

**Alexander\*** lived in a privately rented three-bedroom flat which he shared with two other people. He did not bring his daughter, aged four, to the flat because the conditions were bad. He once rented Airbnb accommodation to have contact with his daughter.

**Stephen\*** lived in a privately rented four-bedroom house which he shared with three other people. He would not take his children, aged three and five, to the house because of the conditions. At the time of the interview, he was trying to secure alternative accommodation.

**John\*** owned his own property where his children had overnight contact. After separation, he rented out a room in his house to a lodger to improve his financial situation. He had a lodger for about one year when his children were aged one and four.

**Barry\*** lived with his sister and brother in law. He had regular overnight contact with his daughter, aged six.

**Sarah\*** currently lived in the property she used to share with ex-partner but was planning to move out soon for financial reasons. She was considering moving into shared housing. Her adult son, aged 23, lived with her half of the time, and she has overnight contact with teenage daughter, aged 16, every other weekend and in the holidays.

*Source: Telephone interviews*

\* Pseudonyms have been used throughout

As can be seen, there were a variety of different living situations experienced by the parents we spoke to, which gave rise to different challenges.

## *Issues with other housemates*

### **Safety concerns**

Many of the interviewees expressed uneasiness about sharing with housemates that they did not know prior to moving into the property. In particular, some were worried about safeguarding children from abuse, due to a lack of knowledge about housemates' backgrounds:

*"It's that thing about not knowing the past of the individuals concerned. You don't know if they've got a criminal record for child abuse. You just don't know."* **Terry**

**Adam** had several experiences of sharing houses with strangers. Due to his low income, he was not able to be particularly selective about the rooms he rented, and this resulted in him renting with people he did not consider desirable. He was not able to know anything about the housemates before moving into the property:

*"It was just a case of 'oh, somebody's renting a place', or looking at the newsagent's windows... or the local paper, which is not particularly savoury people usually."*

But some interviewees stressed that the safety of their children was not a concern as they would protect them from harm and never leave them unattended with housemates.

*"Obviously if I felt that the other housemates were doing things to put my children at risk I would do the responsible thing and remove my child from that situation immediately."* **Martin**

Several of the interviewees had examples of where the lifestyles of their housemates had conflicted with the needs of their children. This related to noise, cleanliness, drinking, smoking and drug-taking in the property. **Katie** had found this extremely uncomfortable when living in shared housing:

*"It was difficult, people living different lifestyles, so drinking very heavily, taking drugs, sometimes having their friends over to stay up very late partying... and then I would need to get up at 6am to come downstairs with the baby... I was often cleaning up beer bottles and all that kind of stuff first thing in the morning, just so I could use the communal space."*

Certain types of housemates were seen as more suitable by those with visiting children:

*"Living with students or something...it could work just for me, but it would be really inappropriate for my daughter to be with those people."* **Sarah**

Housemates who had no prior experience of children or how they behaved were felt to pose most difficulties, as did those with mental health or substance abuse issues.

Others were concerned not so much about the direct behaviour of their housemates, but by the fears their ex-partner may have about people she deemed to be a risk:

*"It'd probably be easier if it's women, because of public perception that all men are monsters and rapists and murders. Whereas women are deemed as normal human beings, men aren't. So [it would be best] if it was all 50-year-old women who do knitting."* **Adam**

Overall, the interviewees expressed his frustration at not being able to control his living environment. **Hamad**, for example, described how one of his housemates would regularly bring people back to the property very late at night and have loud arguments with them in the hallway, which would waken his son and frighten him. His housemates would also smoke in the kitchen when his son was there:

*“Sometimes they’re smoking a cigarette he’s like ‘Oh, why are they doing that?’. I open the window and tell him ‘It’s not our place. There’s not much I can do about it.’”*

The sense that a shared house was not really home was shared by others:

*“The flat itself is not suitable to have a child around to be honest. I do my part of cleaning. I really emphasise that because I can’t live in a mess. But I can’t picture my child coming here... All I want is a place I can call home, with a little space for her with her toys, a clean bathroom where I can give her a bath.” **Alexander***

A high turnover of other tenants was also felt to be a challenge to living successfully in a shared house with children:

*“I imagine if you had a nice communal set-up and people were staying there for longer periods of time, that would be a more stable home environment for the non-resident children than a place where the other people who live in the house are constantly moving in and out and you’re having to establish new relationships with those people.” **Sarah***

### Housemates being disturbed by children

Interviewees expressed concern that their housemates would become irritated by their children. For instance, **Adam** found that his housemates were unhappy if his children went into the living room when they were there, or touched any of their belongings. He found that they would blame his children if they could not find their possessions:

*“If something’s missing, it’s ‘Oh, have your kids had that?’. If something’s been moved, the first point of call would be my kids, which did cause an argument.”*

**Katie** found that a lot of tension was caused by having a child in the property. The fact that her daughter was so young was particularly problematic because she had higher needs and would disturb her housemates at night:

*“If they heard her crying in the night they found that pretty irritating... Things that were causing tension were all around the fact that there was a baby in the house. They felt like it really impinged upon their lifestyle.”*

**Ben** shared that his visiting children had caused tension in the property because it was particularly painful for one of his housemates, who had his own children that he was not able to see due to domestic violence issues:

*“He wasn’t able to see his child because he used to beat up the mum, so he did complain a bit.”*



However, we also found evidence of residents without children being happy to share with children, as discussed later.

A commonly shared problem, even in house-shares that were generally working well, was that parents were not able to fully relax, because they were conscious of their children not disturbing their housemates:

*“You have to be a bit more aware of other people. You don’t want to take over the whole house.” **Barry***

When **Adam** was living in house shares he avoided ever eating meals in the house with his children for this reason. He always pre-prepared meals, then took the children out for the day, as he found preparing food and eating with them in the house too difficult:

*“There wasn’t enough space... it was too much pressure as well. You couldn’t relax.”*

Others suggested that, while they had to be conscious of noise levels and keeping their children under control, overall this was manageable.

A particular concern for **Sarah** when organising shared accommodation was that if her teenage children did not feel happy or relaxed with the housemates, they would refuse to visit the property.

*“I know my daughter wouldn’t be happy at all visiting a place, unless she really approved of those people she basically wouldn’t come, so that’s quite difficult.”*

## Space issues

The lack of space in shared housing was a major issue for most of the parents we spoke to. Others had overnight contact but this was not enjoyable due to the cramped environment.

*“The room I had was really tiny to be fair. I got a double bed in there at one point but then that took up literally all the room, there was nowhere to walk. So it’s really small and cramped.” **Ben***

*“It’s literally one sharing a bed with me and one on a mattress on the floor, and them alternating. It’s been a real squash and a squeeze in that sense.” **Jake***

*“When my son comes to me he has to bring his own clothes, when he leaves he has to take them with him. There’s nowhere to put them, even his trainers, there’s nowhere to put them. So he doesn’t feel that he’s at home, he feels like he’s just coming to stay for one or two days.” **Hamad***

The extent to which it was a barrier to contact was affected by the number and age of the children, as well as the parent’s own views on what was an acceptable sleeping arrangement.

**Adam** had four children and only a single room so overnight contact was impossible.

**Katie** suggested parents of very young children would particularly struggle with small living environments:

*“The amount of stuff you need for a baby, to fit into one bedroom, to have all of your stuff and then have a cot and a place to change a baby, that’s a hell of a lot of stuff to cram into one bedroom.”*

As children got older, new issues arose, such as inviting their friends over to the house:

*“My daughter will share with me, but if she wanted to have friends round, her and her friends wouldn’t want to sleep in the same room”*

**Sarah**

As children became teenagers, sharing bedrooms became harder. **Jake** was currently applying to have another room for his 12 year old daughter to use when she stays. While he did not feel sharing a room has been an issue up until this point, he now felt that his daughter needed more space and privacy as she was getting older. She had stopped inviting any friends to visit when she was staying with her dad, and he felt this may be due to the shared room:

*“I’m aware that she maybe feels uncomfortable showing her new friends she shares this space with her dad and brother. Or maybe she just wants more privacy but hasn’t been able to express that.”*

Some issues were also related to children’s specific health issues. **Hamad** shared a double bed with his son. This posed problems in terms of affecting his quality of sleep, as his son has bad eczema, which he scratched in the night without realising. Hamad kept an eye on him as he slept to check he wasn’t hurting himself, but this then meant he did not get much sleep himself. The situation was further complicated by Hamad having a girlfriend, and there not being space for the three of them to sleep in the room.

*“If he stays with me...in the half term for two weeks, my girlfriend will get upset ‘What, you don’t want to see me, you don’t want me to come over’ I say, ‘Where are you going to sleep? In the fridge? Where?’ What can we do? It’s no life! It creates other problems somewhere else, you know.”*

In other cases, the feasibility of maintaining contact in shared housing appeared to relate more to the parent’s views on what was an acceptable sleeping arrangement. **Alexander** said that he felt unable to have contact because his room was not big enough for him to fit in a spare bed, and he thought sharing a bed with his daughter was inappropriate.

*“My room is a broom cupboard, there’s a space for one bed, a wardrobe, and that’s about it... There’s no space to get an extra mattress on the floor. She’s four years old, I can’t really have her in my bed.”*

In contrast, some other parents felt that sharing a bed was acceptable for children of this age.

## *Property issues*

### **Substandard properties**

Some of the issues raised were not solely about interviewees being non-resident parents, nor about shared housing, but because they were in a poor financial position and therefore renting homes at the bottom end of the private rented sector. There is, however, a link between being a non-resident parent and financial difficulties. Divorce and separation put a strain on everyone's finances, as two properties are needed rather than one. In many cases, the non-resident parent has to rent a home, whilst also paying towards the former family home where the resident parent still lives. As discussed above, it is also due to non-resident parents not being able to receive any benefits on behalf of their children, as well as having to pay child maintenance for their children. The child maintenance system makes no specific allowance for housing costs – meaning that those on a low income in high rent areas are often forced to take properties that are low quality, which may be unsafe and unsuitable for visiting children.

*“At the lower end of the market there are many sub-standard properties rented by dodgy landlords who don't really care about people, they just care about money, they don't care about health and safety, they don't care about law, they try and get away with whatever they can”. Adam*

**Adam** described a particularly negative experience he had had in a shared house:

*“It was a house full of people and there were rats in the kitchen... but at the time I just had to grin and bear it because that's all I could get my hands on.”*

**Ben** described safety issues at his shared property where an oven had fallen on his foot, and his fridge had broken down. He was also concerned about having his children to stay because of the flooring of the property:

*“It's not really safe. They don't ever put carpet down in some of the places, it's all concrete flooring. That's a main worry for me as well, because if my daughter... had fallen off the bed, it would have caused problems.”*

**Stephen's** property had a leaking bathroom which he thought was dangerous:

*“The ceiling is leaking because of the bathroom. It's just been a botch job and every now and then there's water leaking over.”*

Although problems of poor housing conditions are not limited to shared housing, it was clear that living in shared housing meant landlords were responsible for furnishings (at least in communal areas), increasing the potential for poor upkeep and giving tenants very little control over their living environment.

### **Landlords not allowing children**

Several of the interviewees had encountered landlord rules that prevented them from having their children visit. The reasons for these rules are discussed in Chapter 4. Several

felt that they had been discriminated against when applying to rent properties because they were turned down when they stated that their children would be visiting them:

*“I think what I discovered is a lot of prejudice with regards to renting properties.... When you say ‘oh I’ve got children visiting’ you get turned down to rent properties.”*

**Adam**

After having this experience, **Stephen** took this information off his application:

*“I did say to the agency, just make sure that on my application you haven’t got information that I live with kids, because that was the reason that I was rejected last time... I’ve taken that off and I’m hoping for the best.”*

Other interviewees had experience of landlords banning contact in the properties where they were staying. Some parents were unhappy about this rule, and did not think it was fair:

*“To get told: ‘Oh there’s a place for you, but also your kids can’t come there’, it’s a bit of a kick in the teeth sort of thing... I think it’s bizarre. Because what’s a 6-year-old and a two-year-old and a six-month old, what could they possibly do to damage the property? I can’t see it!”* **Martin**

Some interviewees abided by rules barring children from visiting the property, others did not. **Martin** described how he has to hide his visiting children from his case worker, as he is living in supported housing:

*“Obviously I have to move slyly. When I know I’ve got appointments... when [housing case-worker] calls me, and tells me that he’s coming to do a session with me, I have to make sure my kids ain’t there. That’s the way I have to live at the moment.”*

### ***Resident parent views affecting contact***

Some interviewees shared experiences of their ex-partners preventing contact with the children in shared accommodation. Non-resident parents can apply for a court order if they and their ex-partner cannot agree on contact. Some may decide against doing this (on grounds of cost, or avoiding further conflict). In other situations, court orders may not be adequately enforced, meaning that maintaining regular contact against the wishes of the resident parent can be difficult. An expert interviewee explained how “everything becomes weaponised” – when separating parents go to court things like housing are used as arguments against contact.

**Adam** described the amount of influence that the resident parent could have to prevent contact because they were unhappy with any aspect of the accommodation, whether or not this was justified:

*“Of course she can then use that, say... ‘Oh you can’t have them because you’re renting’ ... or ‘there’s people there who I don’t like’. The power that a mother has in that instance regards contact - she can scream ‘fire’ and everybody comes running”.*

The gender of the housemates can also be significant. **Craig** described how his ex-partner initially allowed contact, but prevented it when his first (female) lodger left and was replaced by a male lodger:

*“It’s sexist as well, she was perfectly happy with [...] being a lodger, but has not let my son stay or visit since. I assume it’s because of the male lodger. She was OK with a female lodger. I’m [now] having no contact with my son whatsoever.”*

It was clear from the review of forums and expert interviews that the non-resident parent’s housing situation can arise as an issue in agreeing contact arrangements between parents.

We gained an insight into the perspective of the resident parent group through analysis of online forums commonly used by separated parents (both resident and non-resident), namely Netmums, Mumsnet, Only Mums, Only Dads and Wikivorce.

Overall, there were mixed views from resident parents on whether living in shared housing was a reason to try to reduce contact. There were examples of resident parents who successfully opposed contact because their ex-partner was living in a shared house:

*“You can stop overnight contact, I did, my ex shared a house with 3 blokes, who I did not know at all, I didn’t want my kids going around for even a minute never mind overnights, the judge also agreed.” [Netmums]*

*“If you’re not happy, and I wouldn’t be, go with your instinct. Your ex is either naive or incredibly selfish and stupid or she could be lying and it could be the new BF [boyfriend].” [Wikivorce]*

Others, when asking advice, were advised to trust the judgement of their ex on the matter:

*“[Ex-husband] has 3 bedroomed house and not coping financially so has decided to move a male lodger aged mid 40’s in. Our children stay there one day and one night a week. This lodger is someone he works with and doesn’t know very well. My concerns are for the safety of the children with this man around, can I request a CRB check or similar? I am tempted to tell my [ex-husband] that the children won’t be staying overnight when the lodger is there.” [Mumsnet]*

*“What has made you feel this man will be a threat to your children? Not all men in their 40s are paedophiles you know. Do you trust your ex to keep your kids safe and looked after? If not, you shouldn’t be allowing unsupervised contact. If so, then there’s no problem is there.” [Mumsnet]*

*“You obviously trusted your ex enough to have children with him. Now you have to trust him to look after your children when you are not around. You have no rights to stop contact and should not barring actual risk of danger. And I do mean actual, difference of opinion over parenting is not one of them.” [Mumsnet]*

The response was similar to a male resident parent who was concerned about his ex-wife taking a male lodger:

*“Panicking and raising this as an issue is a colossal vote of no-confidence in your ex’s parenting and opens the door to her questioning the bona fides of anyone you bring the children into contact with.” [Wikivorce]*

Other respondents shared their own experiences to show that male lodgers are not necessarily a problem:

*“My parents had male lodgers until I was about eleven and they were generally delightful and a great bonus in the family.” [Wikivorce]*

It is clear that resident parents differ in their perceptions of what is and is not suitable for their children.

If parents cannot agree on contact, they must go to mediation, or if that fails, to the courts to adjudicate. In these situations, Cafcass would make recommendations about the best interests of the child. There appears, however, no clear view from Cafcass around what kinds of accommodation is acceptable for children to stay in when with their non-resident parent. Cafcass produce a range of guidance on working with children, including an 87-page Operating Framework (Cafcass, 2014), which makes no mention of housing as a factor to consider. Cafcass were, unfortunately, unable to contribute to this research.

Other experts involved in supporting separated parents interviewed for this research generally felt that the presumption would be in favour of contact, unless it could be demonstrated that the accommodation posed a risk to the child. There were, however, many examples given of when shared accommodation might pose a risk, and little clarity over when such risks would be deemed sufficient to prevent or limit contact:

*“[The courts] would be looking at checks and balances in terms of the child’s welfare. I don’t know what the reaction would be to shared housing.”*

*“It’s hard to say to what extent shared housing would pose a risk to children.... We would say it was concerning if sharing a bedroom with the non-resident parent became the norm. It would make contact unsustainable.” **Expert interviews***

## **Shame and embarrassment**

Some non-resident parents described feeling embarrassed about having their children to visit, because their children did not understand the situation. This could be a barrier to some parents having their children to visit, as **Adam** describes:

*“It’s quite degrading as well. You’re bringing your kids into a room... children don’t understand the concept of boundaries and land... they don’t understand any of that principle of this is Dad’s sort of space. It’s ‘Why don’t you own this house, Dad?’”*

*“When they’re younger you can turn it into an adventure for them, you can influence... how they perceive the events that are happening around them. When they get older they know the reality of the situation and they’re not happy... When they hit seven... they see through all the crap”.*

For **Stephen**, his embarrassment about what his children would think of his shared house was also mixed with fear about what they would tell his ex-partner about it:

*“I would feel I am letting them down. I would feel embarrassed to let them in. Because they will just say to mother, how I live, and knowing her she will be using that against me again. She will say they are not proper conditions for children to live in.”*

Interviewees varied in the extent to which they felt shared housing was an acceptable option. Those coming from a difficult background were relieved to have somewhere to live, and some were able to make the best of the situation, relieved at least to have a stable base. For older men and those coming from established family households, in contrast, moving to shared housing was highly stigmatising and embarrassing.

## Housing provider views

### *Accommodation specifically for non-resident parents*

We interviewed two organisations that were directly managing specialist accommodation for non-resident parents and one which helped non-resident fathers (the project is only open to men) find suitable accommodation:

**SmartMove** runs one specific property for non-resident parents, which can house four parents and up to two visiting children at a time. Nine non-resident parents have stayed in the specialist property so far (all men, although the project is also open to women).

**DENS** runs three specific properties for non-resident parents, which can each house two parents at a time. The project started in 2015, and over 20 fathers have been housed to date (all men, although the project is also open to women).

**Dads House** does not provide housing directly, but finds accommodation for fathers in the private rental sector through links with landlords. To date, Dads House has housed 17 fathers, 14 of whom have regular contact with their children.

### Layout

The property run by **SmartMove** is a five-bedroom house which the organisation leases from a local charity at a low rate. Four of the bedrooms are used to house non-resident parents, and the fifth bedroom is used to accommodate their visiting children on a rota system. All of the bedrooms are en suite, and the fifth bedroom also has an interconnected annexe room, where the fathers sleep when their children are staying there. There is a large shared living room, kitchen and garden.

The three properties run by **DENS** are three-bedroom houses which the organisation leases from the local council on a peppercorn rent. Non-resident parents live in two of the bedrooms, and their visiting children stay in the third bedroom on a rota basis. This spare room accommodates two children, but extra beds can be added if needed. Each house has a shared bathroom, and a large shared living room and kitchen.

**Dads House** provides links to ordinary accommodation in the private rented sector in London. Each house has been converted into a five or six-bedroom shared house, with

shared kitchens. Some bedrooms have ensembles and some have shared bathrooms. Visiting children stay with their fathers in their bedrooms (which tend to be large single rooms), either sharing their bed or staying on a camp bed.

## Management

**SmartMove** carries out enhanced police checks of all potential residents in the specialist property. They also ensure that the children's other (resident) parent visits the property and signs an agreement that they are happy for the children to stay there. They do not allow any adult visitors to the property. A support worker runs weekly "house meetings" with the housemates making sure they're adhering to their tenancy agreements, and building their general living skills. (Similar house meetings are run in all of the organisation's shared housing projects).

**DENS** carries out enhanced police checks of all potential residents, and the three properties are also registered with the local police as potentially having vulnerable children living there. The organisation selects new residents and arranges for new residents to meet their housemates before they move in. They try to match housemates according to personality and the age of their children. Non-resident parents organise their children's visits themselves

**Dads House** processes applications for accommodation, and chooses who would be suited for each house. This information is then passed on to the private landlord who makes the final choice about who they accommodate (following an interview process). Support beyond this is informal, from other fathers.

## *General shared housing*

A variety of housing providers who provided shared housing were interviewed for this research. The housing providers we interviewed had a wide spectrum of approaches to visiting children. Some housing providers allowed children to visit as often as the parents wanted, as long as this was negotiated with their housemates. Other housing providers treated visiting children in the same way as adult guests, so would allow them to stay two or three nights a week, but not more than that. Other properties allowed children to visit in the daytime, but not overnight. In other properties, the children were not allowed to visit in the daytime either. These differences are summarised below:



**Table 9 Differences in visiting arrangements**

	Type	Approximate number of shared housing tenancies	Approximate number of non-resident parents within these	Allows daytime visits from children	Allows overnight visits from children
Smartmove	Shared housing (excluding the specialist unit)	30	7	No	No
DENS (shared housing) <sup>37</sup>	No	50	Many	No	No
Rooms4U	Shared housing	15	0	Yes	Yes
Riverside Cambridge Youth Foyer	Semi-supported shared housing for 16-25 year olds	16	1-2	Yes	No
Origin Housing	Shared housing	300	Some	Yes	Yes
Nomad Sheffield	Shared housing, some with support	75	1-2	Yes	No/at landlord's discretion
Sanford Walk Housing Co-operative	Shared housing	122	Some	Yes	Yes
Thamesreach	Shared housing	25	A few	Yes	At housemates' discretion
The Collective	Shared housing	546	5	Yes	No
Private landlord	Shared housing	20	4	Yes	Yes, if pre-arranged

Source: Telephone interviews, 2017

The interviews sought to understand why some providers were happy to house non-resident parents and allow contact with their children and others were not.

### Reasons for not allowing overnight contact:

One issue raised was that non-resident parents didn't tend to want to live in shared housing, and there was therefore little need to make provision:

*"They don't want it because...they don't know who else is going to be in there."*

**General housing provider**

<sup>37</sup> DENS run a large emergency night shelter but also provide general shared accommodation in HMOs with 3-4 tenants

Another housing provider explained that when non-resident parents contact the organisation, when they find out only shared accommodation is on offer, they decline the housing.

Safeguarding concerns were also one of the reasons why some housing providers did not allow children to stay overnight:

*“We can’t [allow overnight contact], partly because of insurance, partly because of safeguarding, which is always the big issue.”* **General housing provider**

*“It’s down to the risk posed to children... it’s because of the other people in the house. You don’t know who they are, what their backgrounds are. You might get heavy drinkers or drug users; those things would worry me.”* **General housing provider**

*“On the whole landlords don’t carry out these kind of checks – how do you get that information? If someone is a sex offender, they’re not going to tell their landlord.”* **General housing provider**

Some housing providers also felt a duty towards protecting the interests of their other tenants:

*“Other residents don’t want children running around.”* **General housing provider**

*“You may have tenants that may think it’s disturbing or it’s being a nuisance having their kids around.”* **General housing provider**

One housing provider gave an example of a non-resident father whose housemate was unhappy because the shared living room was full of his daughter’s toys, which had overflowed from his bedroom.

They also felt that other residents would not be willing to live in shared accommodation with non-resident parents, as there would then be restrictions on them having guests over themselves:

*“If you’re saying to people in your general shared accommodation, ‘you can’t have visitors over as there may be children staying there’, you’re then risking people not going into those properties, so you’re looking at voids and it all kind of stacks up against you really then.”* **General housing provider**

## Parenting issues

An area of conflict that two housing providers had experienced was that of housemates feeling obliged to help care for visiting children, because they did not feel the non-resident parents were caring for them adequately. This caused conflict, and in one case the organisation stopped overnight contact being allowed in any of their properties as a result of this situation.

*“The issue has been that the parent hasn’t been looking after their child properly ... people have said ‘it’s not on that this child isn’t being properly looked after in the*

*property. This child might not be safe' ... because the parent responsible hasn't always been available or easy for the child to find."* **General housing provider**

One did not think it was practical for children to share a room with their parent:

*"How big are the rooms in shared houses?... I suppose you've got a mattress on the floor, it just doesn't seem great really. It just seems a bit like a shoddy solution to the problem doesn't it, mattress on the floor... and then what about the bathroom? Sharing the bathroom with lots of other people."* **Specialist housing provider**

One housing provider felt that when children reach a certain age, they start to become aware of the situation and embarrassed for their parents:

*"When a kid's younger they don't really care they just want to be with their mum or their dad. It's not until kids reach 7,8,9 that they kind of know what's what, they're quite savvy about what's going on. And that's the stage where embarrassment kicks in isn't it. They don't want to be embarrassed for their dad."* **Specialist housing provider**

Two housing providers said that insurance or licensing issues were a barrier to allowing overnight contact in their properties. One provider of shared housing (who managed one very large housing block) was unable to have overnight guests under the age of 18 because they served alcohol on the premises. Another explained that their insurance did not cover under 18 year olds being in the property:

*"We offer temporary move on accommodation for single people, we are only insured for that group of people as a housing provider. If we were to allow children to stay over then we would have to make sure we were insured if the child was injured in the property."* **General housing provider**

At least two of the parents we interviewed had been told that the reason they couldn't have their children to stay was because of insurance issues.

## **Ways to accommodate non-resident parents within general shared housing**

Other providers, were more supportive of the need to accommodate non-resident parents in shared housing, recognising that it can work and may be needed. They were able to identify features that could make it work best:

### **Smaller shared properties**

Some housing providers felt that smaller shared houses, with two or three tenants, would be more likely to create a suitable atmosphere for a visiting child.

*"If it's a smaller unit, that can be a better situation... I think when it's a large unit there are other issues, safeguarding issues, because we get some residents that don't behave as they should do and it's perhaps not the best environment for kids."* **General housing provider**

## Rules and boundaries

Housing providers suggested that for shared houses with non-resident parents to work successfully there have to be clear rules in place:

*“Making sure... that they understand what the rules are and that if the children misbehave and they cause a nuisance then it’s going to be a breach of tenancy, so it’s just about educating them right from the very beginning on what’s acceptable I suppose.”* **General housing provider**

*“We have to set clear boundaries basically.”* **General housing provider**

The extension of this point is that you need to be able to evict people quickly if they do not adhere to the rules:

*“You just have to be careful on who you get, if you’ve got a bad apple you have to get them out within five minutes.”* **Specialist housing provider**

This interviewee thought that there needed to be new regulations written up for shared housing in terms of eviction, balancing the rights of tenants facing eviction with the needs of the other tenants.

## Housemates happy to share with children?

Some felt that housemates were generally very happy to share with people with children:

*“I don’t think it would be an issue to have people living in the house that didn’t have children, as long as they were happy for children to stay overnight...it’s probably quite good for them actually to have children around, it might make them behave more acceptably, because they know that they’re there as a role model maybe.”* **General housing provider**

One reported that he has worked in shared in housing for a long time and felt it had never been an issue to allow children to stay:

*“I don’t think anyone would really object for anyone, for their kids to come around and visit their parents. And if they do object they will stay quiet. I haven’t experienced that before.”* **General housing provider**

One reported that they had asked everyone signing up for shared accommodation whether they would be happy for children to stay overnight in the house, and everyone said that they would be happy:

*“I think because it’s not a case that the children would be living there. They would be visiting, and they’re not going to be there all day... that they’re just going to be having overnight visits and possibly a couple of hours here and there in the day. It hasn’t been an issue at all. And it’s been mainly men that we’ve been assessing as well, and they don’t seem to have an issue.”* **General housing provider**

## Safeguarding checks

At the moment the checks that housing providers do (even where they allow children to stay overnight) rely on the applicant's honesty or previous references rather than police checks:

*"We looked into police checks...but it would just take too long so we rely on their honesty. We have an assessment form where we ask them all sorts of questions, previous criminal convictions and the like, but... if they don't tell the truth they might slip through the net."* **General housing provider**

Referencing undertaken by housing providers can include contacting hostels, probation officers etc, but normally does not involve a full criminal records check.

The two specialist organisations for non-resident parents who directly provided accommodation did undertake police checks. An enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check was not practicable for people not directly employed by the scheme. Instead, the projects reached an agreement with local police to run a criminal record check on prospective tenants.

Others thought that this would likely prove impractical due to the high turnover of tenants in shared housing, and the fact that police checks are not designed to be undertaken by landlords.

It was generally recognised that running criminal record checks on other tenants was something that would only ever be appropriate in specialist shared housing for parents. Providers of general shared housing who allowed non-resident parents to have children stay were not checking tenants on the grounds that it was ultimately the parent's responsibility to ensure that their child was safe, and decide who, if anyone, to leave them in the care of:

*"If the parent has a track record of caring for their children, they are going to take care of their kids in that situation."* **General housing provider**

## How can shared housing work for non-resident parents?

Housing providers, experts and parents themselves all identified a range of ways in which shared housing could be made to work better for people with children:

### *Addressing space issues*

Interviewees gave several suggestions about the layout of the property that would make it better meet the needs of visiting children:

*"It's the simple thing of having near access to bathrooms and toilets, especially with children."* **Jake**

*"They should make the rooms more live-able and bigger for children who do actually*

*want to stay with their parents... I mean, they have all these mother and baby units that have really big rooms, you know, and they don't have the same thing for dads."*

**Ben**

*"Having the space to store their things... having an open space for them to play whether that's outside or inside the house itself."* **Jake**

*"With babies, its important that where the baby sleeps is far from the other housemates because of the noise transfer at night."* **Katie**

One of the housing providers suggested that properties could be built with non-resident parents in mind, to meet their needs:

*"We're looking at new builds at the moment, so maybe development teams could get involved in producing something that would be suitable for non-resident parents, so it might be providing adjacent rooms to bedrooms, so having a double room for the parent and then a small area where the child could go so that they're all in a sort of self-contained area rather than having to knock down walls and put locks on, and all of the sort of things you'd have to consider. So having a bit like a walk in wardrobe for the child!"* **General housing provider**

Another housing provider suggested how they might make it work:

*"The trick would probably be to have a room put aside, and then that room is used alternately by different parents and they could organise it... most parents only have alternate weekends or overnight stays one or two nights a week.... If one room cycled between different people that might work."* **General housing provider**

*"Children could potentially share a room as well, depending on their ages and things like that I think that would be permissible under the regulations... that might be acceptable."* **General housing provider**

Lastly, a private housing provider suggested that, if more awareness was made of the needs of non-resident parents, that private landlords may rent out rooms that are large enough to accommodate a visiting child. At the moment, landlords make rooms as small as possible, to maximise their income, as they only design them for single people:

*"From a landlording perspective... you're going to maximise the number of bedrooms to maximise your profit ultimately... It would be highly unlikely that I would be making them of such a size that two people could share the room."* **General housing provider**

He suggested that awareness of non-resident parents could be raised by housing bodies such as the Residential Landlords Association. He added that there would need to be financial incentives for private landlords to consider providing this type of accommodation (for example, tax breaks or a scheme where social housing providers guarantee the rent).

*"It would only make sense to a business person if there was something in there as an incentive from... .government or a housing provider that organises a scheme."* **General housing provider**

## *Benefits of specialist models*

Housing providers emphasised the support that non-resident parents were able to gain by living with others in the same situation:

*“It doesn’t matter if you have your kids three days a week or three hours a week, everyone knows exactly what everyone’s going through... dads do help each other, it’s very organic, and that’s the beauty of it.”* **Specialist housing provider**

*“People going through a difficult time, you’ve got a group of people that have either been through it or are going through it at that time, and it’s sharing experiences... and giving support.”* **Specialist housing provider**

Non-resident parents themselves supported this idea. Many of those who had not experienced living in this type of accommodation said that it would be desirable for this reason. One interviewee, **Stuart**, had experience of living in specialist accommodation. He explained that because he and his housemates were all fathers, they understood and respected each other’s children and their needs.

*“We all kept an eye on each other’s kids if one of us weren’t around. It was all a good atmosphere, and also, you all know that you’re fathers, you all respect no drinking, no smoking in the house, no parties... they would respect if you had your kids, I’d respect if they had their kids for the weekend.”*

One provider of specialist housing for non-resident parents suggested that minor conflicts around parenting were one of the main challenges of making shared accommodation work for non-resident parents:

*“You know, some people let their kids run round and go crazy and others don’t, others are a little bit more strict, so it’s that different approach really.”* **Specialist housing provider**

However, the overall benefits of socialising together were also emphasised by both parents and housing providers:

*“We had BBQs and set fireworks off, that kind of thing. And all sat down and watched telly.”* **Stuart**

The value of peer support, particularly at the early stages of separation were also highlighted:

*“When you’re in that situation it’s very difficult to know who you can turn to, for help. It’s not very obvious whether you are entitled to anything... It should be kind of like a guide for separated parents, what you can do, what the options are, obviously apart from privately rented.”* **Stephen**

An **expert interview** confirmed the need for support at the early stages of separation:

*“Divorce is traumatic, and society underestimates the impact on the dad. I think that sort of peer support is a good thing. For most people it’s the hardest thing they ever live through... Literally overnight, you lose your home, your kids, your partner, very often your social network.”* **Expert interview**

Non-resident fathers and housing providers shared the importance of the specialist accommodation being a safe, stable place for children to visit. **Stuart** spoke about his experience of the implications of this for making the courts and mothers comfortable for visits to take place. He had previously been sofa surfing, so found the housing a vast improvement:

*"I was more stable there. When I went to court I could tell them I had a place that the kids could come to... it's peace of mind, at least the mums know that the kids are going to a safe place."*

He compared this specialist accommodation to other, more mainstream shared housing:

*"A lot of the fathers are helpless, once they haven't really got homes their hands are tied behind their back, because they know that their ex-partner will hold that against them, that they haven't got a safe place to take their kids, but [his shared house] is very safe, everybody gets on, there's good people in there."*

One provider said that some female resident parents were initially suspicious of the property, and of men living together:

*"Although they know it's all dads they're still... wary of a group of men living together... especially with everything in the news with the paedophiles and the predators."*

It was also suggested that accommodation could be made more child-friendly when all the residents were parents. For instance, one provided toys and games for the children. Another had also equipped the children's bedroom with Playstations and bean bags.

*"The kids also had freedom, they were quite happy there. There was a lot for them to do... quite a lot of toys and games and puzzles for the kids... there was enough to keep them entertained." **Stuart***

The value of management support was also recognised:

*"We never had any problems but [support worker] used to come in every week...if you have any problems just leave her a note on the board or just speak to her." **Stuart***

### **Making it 'stack up' financially**

A key challenge for this model is that it may be difficult to expand or replicate as it was difficult to make it 'stack up' financially. This is partly because of the need (in two of the three projects) for a spare room for children to stay in, and partly because the specialist nature of the client-group meant that it was hard to maintain full occupancy levels.

One of the current providers of specialist housing said that they were having to financially support the project through their other properties. This was particularly the case because there were often voids in the property while they were finding the right tenant to move in:

*"My Chief Executive is clear that maybe some of the other properties prop it up a bit financially, because it is such a specific project. So it's definitely not a case of you can move someone out and move someone else in straightaway. We have got a*



*couple of vacancies at the moment because it's got to be the right person. It doesn't happen really quickly.*” **Specialist housing provider**

Other organisations thinking of setting up or expanding this type of accommodation were more optimistic about models and funding streams they could use:

*“I would have thought that as long as it's over a two bed we could probably make it stack up, because we could use the lounge as a bedroom, so taking out the communal area and using that as a bedroom for the children to stay overnight, and it would just about stack up financially so we wouldn't have to subsidise it.”* **General housing provider (thinking of setting up specialist accommodation)**

*“There would be other ways of funding it, for example Discretionary Housing Payments through the local council would be one way of paying for the cost of that third bedroom, but because we don't have to do that at this stage it isn't something we've applied to.”* **Specialist housing provider (considering expanding their specialist housing provision)**

One provider of shared housing (including a scheme for non-resident parents) explained that sometimes it was difficult to acquire properties, because the properties they were seeking were the same size as those that would be used to house a family:

*“Most local councils have their own private rented housing schemes, and they would be looking to snap up the 3-4 bedroom properties, because then they can house families. So when we're looking at housing 4 single people in a property, trying to find that 4 bed property to start with is the issue.”* **Specialist housing provider in South East England**

It may also be a difficult model to replicate in all types of housing markets. A lack of demand from non-resident parents caused a trial project run by Shelter in Great Yarmouth to fail to get off the ground. There was a reluctance among non-resident parents in this area to consider living in shared accommodation.

## *Lodgers*

### **Taking a lodger in a house the non-resident parent owns**

Three of the interviewees had experience of renting a room to a lodger within a house they owned (**Craig, Tom and John**). This was shared housing on a small scale, as they only rented out one room at a time.

Interviewees explained that they did not have any concerns about safeguarding in these situations, because they owned the property they had control over the environment:

*“In my situation, there's no problem at all because the environment is controlled.”*  
**Craig**

**Katie** had not had this experience herself, but several of her friends had, and she explained how the situation was very different from someone bringing a visiting child into a more traditional house share:

*“[When friends took a lodger]... their housemate moves in on the understanding that children live here, and that there may be toys in the living room, that the shared spaces can also be considered child friendly....so they kind of hold control of the house... they’ve taken the house and gone “this is my family home... [the lodgers] basically have to live by our rules, like we have set the tone of what goes in this house.”*

Those who lived with lodgers identified the children’s interaction with the lodgers as a real advantage of this type of set up, as the children could learn from them:

*“It’s like having a really old big sister/brother with skills they can introduce to kids...it’s a different perspective on life. They’re a bit different to me. It’s good for kids to be around these people, with the security of their father being around as well. It’s not as if they’re going to be alone with them.” **Craig***

*“[My Daughter] got on well with him and was disappointed after he moved out.”*  
**Tom**

**Katie** outlined one of the main risks of relying on lodgers to cover your rent, experienced by her friends:

*“It puts a big burden on you... when people move in or out, it’s really on you to make sure you can find a suitable person to move in, otherwise you’re left with a rent you can’t pay. So even though it gives you control it can leave you quite vulnerable as well.”*

**Tom** explained how it took him a long time to find a suitable person to move in. He was very selective about who he would have as a lodger because his daughter would be visiting the property:

*“I did advertise around for about two years... I was just so, I suppose, wary. I didn’t want a complete stranger, I wanted somebody with some sort of connection. Which is often hard to come by so it does make it difficult.”*

Overall, this model offers the most security, and affords the parent the most control over who they live with. Its potential is, however, limited to those who own a house, or can manage to rent an entire property with the right to sublet a room within it.

## **Being a lodger in someone else’s house**

Two of the interviewees had had experience of renting a room in someone else’s house. **Tom** was currently living with the parents of one of his friends, who he knew in advance of moving in. **Adam** had rented a room from an acquaintance a few years ago.

Tom shared that there were several advantages in renting a room with the parents of his friends. They were comfortable around his daughter because they had children and grandchildren of their own.

*“Older people who have had kids... are quite happy being around kids because they’ve been there and done it themselves... my daughter likes being sociable with*

*them, and they've got grandchildren of their own, my friend's kids, so they quite like having her around the house as well."*

One clear limitation of this situation was that it is someone else's house, so you have to abide by their rules. **Adam** had previously rented a room from his acquaintance who was very house-proud:

*"It was a really nice place, a really expensive place, and white carpets... [the children] were only allowed in my room, they weren't allowed in the house... That was quite tricky, obviously when you've got three youngsters...all wanting to run around, there's not a lot you can do."*

It's clear that from the interviews that this kind of arrangement benefits from discussions before the non-resident parent moves in around how visits from children would work.

Different physical layouts of the property may determine how integrated lodgers are with the household that they are renting a room from. A third interviewee described that he was considering renting an annexe onto a larger property. This space would have a separate entrance and bathroom, so the only shared area would be the kitchen.

### ***Child-friendly shared housing projects***

As noted earlier, most parents living in Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) generally described the relationship between their children and their housemates as difficult at times. There were, however, two interviewees that had experience of living in the same housing cooperative which specialised in shared housing and was accommodating to parents within that. These housing arrangements were characterised by having large shared houses – the parents interviewed were sharing houses with eight or nine other people, and were part of a larger community of people sharing together, with a shared garden.

The two interviewees felt that a real benefit of having children visit them in the housing cooperative was the other adults in the property that they could build relationships with. This was the same as other property types, but to a much greater degree because of the large number of people that were part of the community:

*"For kids, having good ongoing relationships with lots of different adults can be such a valuable thing – they learn different things from different people and I think everyone can support each other." **Katie***

**Jake** gave the last time his son visited as an example of the amount of different interactions his children have, and the relationships they have built up:

*"He played a game of chess with one neighbour... and then was playing football with another child who lived in another house, and then went upstairs to one of our housemates and watched football on the TV with him and a couple of his friends. As we were walking down the stairs afterwards to go to bed he said 'I love it here Dad'."*

In addition to providing positive role models for their children, **Katie** also highlighted how shared living provided her with a source of support and company:

*“Sometimes having young children can be so isolating that it’s nice, even if it’s someone who’s not like your best mate, having someone to just have a bit of a chat with a couple of times a day, that you don’t actually have to go out to interact with other people. That can definitely mitigate that kind of isolated feeling.”*

**Jake** said that he would trust his housemate to keep an eye on his children if he had to go out for a while:

*“There’s times when I’ve had to go to a meeting, so I’ve said to my children ‘I’m going there’, and I’ve said to my housemate who lives next door ‘they may knock on your door’. There is trust there I’d say.”*

Unlike several of the interviews in private rented shared housing, both of the housing co-operative interviewees had had experiences of their housemates reacting positively to having children around.

**Jake** described how his housemates had made adjustments to their lifestyle to accommodate his children moving in. He had not had to specifically ask his housemates to make these changes, they had done it without being prompted:

*“It soon became apparent that they needed to make some sort of changes when they were there. In the sense of there was still smoking going on in communal areas and that obviously stopped. And I suppose a sense of things become cleaner, more tidy. That sort of thing.”*

The accommodation being used by parents here was intended for single people – the children were sharing their parent’s bedroom, which gave rise to the space issues discussed earlier. The proportion of cooperatives and social landlords offering shared housing is currently very low, meaning that there is limited potential for non-resident parents to find this kind of housing at present.

It is also hard to know from the small number of interviews undertaken here whether the positive views on children’s interaction with housemates are found more generally, or whether these particular interviews were unusually lucky or successful in finding positive interaction.

### ***DIY options - matching housemates***

There is a variety of information available online that offers information, advice or views on shared housing for non-resident parents, and resident parents. The following websites offered opportunities for parents to contact others they may wish to share with:

- SPACEchildren (Single Parent Accommodation and Childcare Exchange) [www.spacechildren.co.uk/index.php?p=viewpage&id=pricesfaq](http://www.spacechildren.co.uk/index.php?p=viewpage&id=pricesfaq)
- MoveThat: [www.movethat.co.uk/London/Forum/Single\\_Parents](http://www.movethat.co.uk/London/Forum/Single_Parents)
- Dads Pads [www.dadspads.co.uk](http://www.dadspads.co.uk)
- Trovit: <https://homes.trovit.co.uk/flatshare-single-parent>

We did not speak to any parents who had set up this type of arrangement, but the level of activity on the sites listed here suggests it may be not uncommon, although most of the activity was resident parents seeking to live with other resident parents and their children.

## Conclusions

Overall, this research has found **that shared housing poses a variety of challenges** for non-resident parents. For a minority of parents, there are also some benefits of shared living, but for most it is a less than ideal option, limiting their ability to parent their children. This in turn has an **impact upon those children**, who are unable to have friends over when staying with their other parent, lack privacy and may find their relationship with their non-resident parent damaged. The child's resident parent is likely also to be affected, with most or all of the overnight care falling to them.

With small children in particular, there are clearly **risks** associated in living in an environment that is not set up for their needs, and where the parent has limited ability to make it safe for them. Older children may have fewer needs to keep them physically safe, but they have more need for privacy, which is hard to achieve if they share a room with their parent.

Underlying all this, few parents would choose to live in a single room in a shared house with their child visiting regularly – for most, it is a financial necessity. This may be a short-term problem whilst they get back on their feet after separation, but for some on low incomes, it may be long-term.

The less than ideal nature of shared housing for non-resident parents means that **housing providers are often reluctant to facilitate shared housing for this group**. A small number of providers are actively trying to help this group, and while some landlords are willing to accept non-resident parents in their shared housing, others, including most supported housing providers, explicitly forbid overnight contact with children.

For some housing providers, the reluctance stems from a desire not to normalise this type of housing or make it acceptable. **For non-resident parents who cannot afford self-contained housing, however, the lack of shared housing provision is unhelpful.**

This research also found that – although rarely ideal – **shared housing can work**, at least for some non-resident parents.

**Allowing tenants some choice over who they share with appears critical.** This approach appears preferable to taking a more active role in “matching” tenants (according to age, interests, etc) as it leaves the responsibility for decisions firmly with the tenant/parent and avoids housing providers feeling that they are responsible for ensuring that other tenants are not a risk to the child.

Some amount of **tenancy support**, including matching tenants and offering ongoing management, was viewed to be helpful in making shared housing a success. However, there are difficulties associated with a heavy degree of housing management: support comes at a cost, and would not be able to be covered by the Shared Accommodation Rate, undoing the potential financial savings of shared housing. Social housing providers who offer a high degree of support also felt that the obligation to safeguard children fell on them, leading them to forbid tenants from having their children visit. There is a need, therefore, to balance the benefits of having someone external to help instigate and enforce house rules, with the need to recognise parents as being responsible for their own children, and lead

groups of tenants sharing a house to negotiate what works between them. Approaches along the lines of a peer landlord scheme<sup>38</sup> could offer a cost-effective alternative to more heavily managed schemes.

There is also a need for clearer guidance on whether shared housing is or is not suitable for situations where parents are in dispute around contact arrangements. This would be useful for those working with separated parents, and also for parents themselves to understand what is or is not suitable, as well as for other agencies involved.

This research focused on those with experience living in shared housing, many of whom were doing so because they were unable to meet the cost of individual accommodation. Ultimately, shared housing is being used because self-contained housing is unaffordable for many people, and **the benefits system does not recognise shared parenting arrangements for what they are**. The resident parent can claim child benefit, Universal Credit for a family, housing benefit for a two bedroom home and also some child support from the other parent. The other parent can claim Universal Credit for a single person, and Housing Benefit only for a room in a shared housing, and must also pay a proportion of earnings to the other parent in the form of child support. This setup appears designed for situations where children live only with one parent, but also operates in situations where one parent has the child four days a week and the other three days a week – even though the child is spending very similar amounts of time in each household. Non-resident parents have limited ability to move to a cheaper area, or to move for a better paid job, because of having to live near their child.

Measures of child poverty that assess a child's household income as that of their resident parent are blind to the impact on the child of spending much of their time in potentially a much poorer household where their needs are unrecognised by the benefits system.

Overall, the research found that non-resident parents are a diverse group, with a **wide range of contact arrangements and housing situations**. What works for one situation may not work for another. Some find it impossible to maintain meaningful relationships with their children in housing that falls so far short of the level of space required for a family. For others, shared housing can work, at least for periods of their life, and there is much that housing providers and others can do to improve the way in which it works for them.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for housing providers

- Ensure that non-resident parents who live in shared housing are supported in taking an active role in parenting, including having their children visit wherever practical.

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<sup>38</sup> A peer landlord scheme is where one tenant within a shared house is trained to act as a 'lead tenant'. Their role is to ensure the property is managed appropriately and be the first point of contact for enquiries and issues. Catch22 run a peer landlord scheme in partnership with Commonweal housing: <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/services/london-peer-landlord-scheme/>

- Ensure that tenants in shared housing are able to exercise some choice over who they live with – this can include whether or not they are willing to share with a tenant who is a non-resident parent.
- Consider providing specialist housing geared at non-resident parents, so that they can share with other people in a similar position, in a child-friendly environment. This kind of project is most likely to be viable in pressured, urban, housing environments where there are substantial numbers of potential tenants. Otherwise, it may be too specialist and fail to fill voids in an economically viable timescale.
- Provide general shared housing that is child-friendly, allowing tenants choice over who they live with and meeting children's needs alongside everyone else's. The cooperative models appeared to be the best at this approach from those looked at in this report.
- Provide good quality housing management with warm, safe housing.
- Ban smoking in shared housing and ensure strong action against other types of antisocial behaviour that are particularly problematic for parents and children (such as late-night noise, heavy drinking or drug-taking).
- Focus on smaller house shares for non-resident parents.
- Offer longer tenancies, to improve security for the parent and child, and reduce the turnover of other housemates.
- Consider housing with interconnected bedrooms, larger bedrooms or ensuite bathrooms as being particular suitable for non-resident parents.
- Ensure that parents in shared housing are aware that it is their responsibility to care for their child and are aware that the housing provider cannot remove risks posed by other tenants.

### **Wider recommendations**

- The housing sector and benefits system should better recognise the reality of shared care arrangements between separated parents, including the need for the child to be accommodated by each of their parents when in their care.
- Non-resident parents living in unsuitable shared housing should be prioritised for social housing above other single person households in similar circumstances.
- The approach taken by the Government and other agencies in measuring and understanding child poverty should take into account the levels of household income experienced by both households, in situations where separated parents share care.
- Local authorities should consider prioritising Discretionary Housing Payments to non-resident parents who are struggling to afford the rent on a one bedroom home, especially those for whom shared housing is particularly inappropriate – for instance because they have several children, or have their child(ren) to visit for significant amounts of the week.



- Improving facilities for parents to find others to share with in the private rented sector may help them choose suitable housemates (with or without children of their own).

## Appendix One: General shared accommodation providers interviewed

**1. SmartMove** have seven general shared properties (in addition to the specialist non-resident parent property). These range from two-bedroom to six-bedroom properties. They have shared bathrooms, living rooms and kitchens.

Non-resident parents: They estimate that there are seven non-resident parents living in these properties at the moment and they have accommodated nine non-resident parents in general shared accommodation in total.

Visiting children: Contact with non-resident children is not allowed in the general shared accommodation (neither daytime contact nor overnight contact is allowed).

**2. DENS** provides accommodation in twelve shared properties (in addition to three specialist non-resident parent properties). All of the properties are three or four bedroom HMOs. They have shared kitchens and bathrooms and some also have shared living rooms.

Non-resident parents: There are many non-resident parents living in their general shared accommodation.

Visiting children: Contact with non-resident children is not allowed in the general shared accommodation (neither daytime contact nor overnight contact is allowed).

**3. Rooms4U** is a partnership between four housing associations and the local council to set up shared housing (as there currently isn't any in the area). They have set up five shared houses so far, ranging from two bedroom to four bedroom properties.

Non-resident parents: None of the current residents of shared properties are non-resident parents, but they expect future residents will be.

Visiting children: They would allow overnight contact with children in general shared accommodation.

As part of the project, they are hoping to trial a property specifically for non-resident parents as they have identified a need for this.

**4. Riverside** run Cambridge Youth Foyer, specialist accommodation for 16-25 year olds who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and who want to engage in education, training or employment. As part of this project, they house 16 young people in shared houses. Each house accommodates four people.

Non-resident parents: They estimate one or two residents are non-resident parents at any one time.

Visiting children: They allow daytime contact with children in the shared houses, but not overnight contact because of insurance and safeguarding issues.

**5. Origin Housing** provides shared accommodation for 300 single people with no or low support needs across the borough of Enfield. Residents are housed in shared flats which range from 2-6 bedrooms.

Non-resident parents: They have some non-resident parents staying in the shared accommodation.

Visiting children: Residents are allowed to have their children to stay overnight in the shared accommodation, but Riverside say that nobody should have guests stay more than 2-3 nights a week, as this can cause conflict with other housemates.

**6. Nomad Sheffield** accommodates around 75 single people per year. Some are housed in training flats that the organisation manages directly, and others are housed in shared houses in the private rented sector, which they work with private landlords to provide. The private sector houses accommodate an average of four people, the training flats each house two or three people.

Non-resident parents: Very few of the people they have accommodated have been non-resident parents, they estimate only eight people out of the approximately 250 people they have accommodated over five years were non-resident parents.

Visiting children: In the directly-run training flats, Nomad do not allow non-resident children to stay overnight because of safeguarding concerns and the impact on other residents. They also advise parents in the privately rented accommodation not to have overnight contact with their children, although the landlords do not have a formal ban.

**7. Sanford Walk Housing Cooperative** is a private, fully mutual cooperative made up of 14 shared houses which each accommodate 8 people, sharing a living room and kitchen.

Non-resident parents: Some of their residents are non-resident parents but they do not collect information on this.

Visiting children: They allow non-resident parents to have their children to have overnight contact in the accommodation and treat them as they would any other visitor.

**8. Thamesreach** provides shared accommodation for people who are currently, or who have been, homeless, and are actively searching for a job. They have seven properties with 3-4 bedrooms each. In each property, one resident is a designated 'peer landlord' and coordinates utility bills and any maintenance issues.

Non-resident parents: They have had a few non-resident parents in the shared houses, but most tenants tend to be older, with adult children.

Visiting children: They allow each shared house to decide amongst themselves whether non-resident children are able to stay overnight (as with other types of visitors).

**9. The Collective** are a co-living provider, providing shared accommodation in a large property with 546 units. Each person rents an en suite bedroom and shares a small kitchenette with up to one other person. They then have access to a large shared kitchen per floor, and large common spaces including a cinema, library and sauna. The accommodation is targeted at young professionals.

Non-resident parents: Estimate they have about 5 non-resident parents living in the property.

Visiting children: Children are able to visit during the daytime, but no overnight contact is allowed for people aged under 18, due to licensing restrictions.

**10. Private landlord (anonymous).** They rent numerous units, including shared housed to students and working tenants.

Non-resident parents: The landlord has around 4 non-resident parents living in their shared properties.

Visiting children: Tenants are allowed to have their children to stay over for a few nights a week, but they should let the property manager know in advance, and should communicate with the other housemates about this (the rules are the same as for any other guests).

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