

Cambridge Centre
for Housing &
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Non-resident parents and shared housing

An executive summary

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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 scheme¹ 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

¹ 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/>

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.
- 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).