Public Attitudes to Social Housing in Scotland

Report for the Chartered Institute of Housing on Opinion Research

Prof Roger Awan-Scully
Cardiff University

Introduction

Opinion surveys were commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH). The content of those surveys was designed in extensive consultation with officers from CIH in the respective nations, and with the commissioned survey agency Deltapoll. The surveys were carried out via the internet between 24-29 September 2020. The sample in Scotland was of 1,023 adults aged eighteen and over; the sample was weighted to be representative of the adult population within Scotland. This survey is the source for all tables in the remainder of this report.

In addition to getting full responses on all the questions asked, the results provided by Deltapoll provide detailed breakdowns by various social categories. Thus, we can analyse results according to a number of factors, including:

- Gender
- Age
- Social Class
- Working Status
- Region within Scotland
- Housing status
- Educational Level; and
- Whether or not respondents had young children at the time of the survey

These comparisons will be discussed in the report below where they are relevant to an analysis of the findings.

Key Findings:

- 89% of Scots believe the government should be responsible for ensuring housing is provided to a decent standard for every citizen.
- 84% agree that 'everyone should have the legal right to an adequate home'.
- 70% want more affordable housing in their community.
- 58% would be happy to see more social housing built near their home.

1. Government responsibility for housing

One of the first areas that was explored in the survey concerned the responsibilities of government. Respondents were asked:

"Do you think the government should or should not be responsible for ensuring that each of the following are provided to a decent standard for every citizen, no matter what their income?"

Respondents were then presented with a set of possibilities. As can be seen from the table,there was endorsement for the idea that government should be responsible for ensuring the provision of decent housing for all: **nearly ninety percent of respondents agreed with this notion, with only health and policing receiving greater support.**

Interestingly, in Scotland, respondents' own housing tenure was not related to how people reacted to this question: we saw more-or-less identical percentages agreeing housing should be a government responsibility to provide among home-owners, those renting privately and those renting social housing.

Table 1: 'government responsible for providing?' (%)			
Item	Should	Should not	Don't know
Health service	96	2	2
Housing	89	8	3
Defence	87	6	6
Public transport	86	9	5
Policing	93	4	3
Broadband	56	33	10
Access to outside space	71	18	10

An overwhelming majority of respondents did view it as a government responsibility to provide housing to a decent standard. This indeed was the majority view across all age groups and social grades, as well as all main categories of housing tenure.

A later question in the survey asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the single statement that "Everyone should have the legal right to an adequate home'. Respondents were allowed to strongly agree or disagree with this statement, simply agree or disagree, or indicate 'neither' or a Don't Know response.
- 84% agreed with the statement, with 47 percent agreeing strongly;
- 12% responded 'neither' and
- 4% disagreed (with only a single percent of respondents strongly disagreeing).

Agreement with the statement was particularly high among younger respondents (with 58 percent of those 34 and younger choosing 'strongly agree', compared to only 39 percent of those 55 and older); agreement was also particularly strong among those living in rented. Overall, though, responses to this question support our earlier finding: **there is clear majority support, across all social groups, for the idea of a legal right to an adequate home**.

2. The importance of housing

Another question was:

"Which, if any, of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time?"

The table below summarises the most commonly-chosen replies. (Because respondents can choose up to five issues, the percentages reported below add up to well over 100). As can be seen, the public 'issue-space' was dominated by COVID and Brexit, along with the related economic and health concerns.

After those issues the environment was then clearly the most commonly-cited matter. Housing concerns are then prominent in a group of issues that also include immigration/asylum, as well as perennial concerns such as education and crime

Table 2: 'most important issues facing the country/you and your family', %		
Issue	Country	You and family
COVID-19	83	73
Economy	69	47
Brexit	54	35
Health	41	41
Environment	29	21
Education	23	17
Immigration/Asylum	22	7
Welfare benefits	20	16
Housing	17	14
Crime	15	8
Family life/childcare	11	18
Pensions	11	19
Tax	9	14
Defence and security	7	3
Transport	2	4
None/Don't Know	1	3

Looking at the details of the results, housing was identified as a particular national concern by younger respondents – among those aged 34 and below, housing was the seventh most prominent issue, identified by 21 percent of such respondents. It is also striking that housing was chosen far more often as an issue by those living in local authority and housing association rented accommodation (24 percent of whom named it as one of their top five issues) than by home owners (among whom only 14 percent listed housing). Housing was also more likely to be listed as a major issue by unemployed respondents than by any other respondents.

This question about issues facing the country was immediately followed by one asking respondents to consider the same set of issues (and with them again allowed to select up to five choices) but this time to choose the most important ones 'facing you and your family'. Housing remained quite prominent as a concern on this second question, remaining in the ten most commonly listed issues. Examining the details of the results once more, we see that age differentials on this question are even more stark than for the one about issues facing 'the country': some twenty percent of respondents aged 34 and younger listed housing as one of their top five issues, whereas only six percent of those aged 55 and older did so. The other very substantial factor differentiating respondents in this regard is current housing tenure: 24 percent of those renting (and 31 percent of those renting privately) listed housing as one of their personal issue concerns, compared to only seven percent of respondents who are home owners.

3. Housing and health

The poll framed one question around the relative priority of spending on social housing versus another key priority, the NHS:

"Some people think that, with the NHS under pressure, we should prioritise spending on the health service to ensure people get the treatment they need. Other people think that it would be better to prioritise spending on things like housing, because if people were better housed we could stop them getting ill in the first place; this would reduce pressures on the NHS. On a 0-10 scale, where 0 means spending much more money on the NHS and 10 means spending much more money for things like housing, where do you think Government's priorities should lie?"

Respondents were also able to select a Don't Know option for this question, although only one percent of them actually did so.

Virtually half of the entire sample (48 percent) chose 5 or above on the scale, showing that there was also considerable public sentiment behind at least some balance between competing priorities in public spending. Those living in local authority housing were particularly likely to emphasise the importance of housing: among those renting from housing associations, some sixteen percent of them actually scored above the mid-point of 5 on this scale.

4. Who should be helped with housing?

A further question in the poll asked people about the sorts of people who respondents believed

"Who should be eligible for help from the state to meet their housing needs?"

A list of different types of people was provided to respondents, and they were asked to tick all those groups whom they believed should receive help.
- 4% of respondents suggested that no categories of people should receive help,
- 4% chose a 'Don't Know' option.

Table 3 shows the percentage who indicated that each respective category should be eligible to receive some state support: as can be seen from the table, there was clear majority, or near majority, support for several categories of people who would be classified as 'homeless' to be eligible for such support. But for some groups of people, such as those currently living with their parents or those living a distance from work or family, endorsement of them receiving support with their housing needs was much more limited.

Table 3: percentage agreement that group should receive help with housing needs	
People sleeping rough on the streets	79
People being housed in temporary Bed and Breakfast accommodation, paid for by their local authority	65
People living in overcrowded accommodation	59
People sleeping on a friend's couch one night and then moving onto another friend's couch the next night	58
People living in a home that is not easily accessible for them	45
People who have to live with their parents because they cannot afford to buy or rent somewhere on their own	28
People living far from their work or family	17

5. Responses to statements on social housing

Our survey also fielded a lengthy set of statements about social housing. As is common practice, respondents were given a series of statements, and asked to give their level of agreement or disagreement with each, on a scale running from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'.

The series of statements were as follows:

- *I would never want to live in social housing*
- *All young people should aspire to become home owners*
- *I would be happy to see more social housing built near my own home*
- *We need more affordable housing in my local community*
- *Social housing estates suffer from high levels of anti-social behaviour and crime*
- *Social housing is of a low quality*
- *People who grew up in social housing are less likely to attain educational success*
- *Social housing should be a tenure of choice for families and young people*
- *Social housing is where we hide people with problems*
- *A vast majority of people in social housing are on benefits*
- *Social housing offers rents which are lower than rents in the private sector*
- *There are more people living in social housing than there were five years ago*
- *As well as homes, local councils and housing associations provide other services which help tenants e.g. finding work*
- *Once someone becomes a tenant in social housing, they are a tenant for life*
- *Anyone can apply for social housing*

Table 4 below summarises the overall pattern of results for these statements. There is significant public recognition of the need for social housing in communities throughout Scotland. There is also awareness of some of its advantages for many, such as affordability. However, there are also some distinctly negative public perceptions of social housing evident in our data. Social housing is not generally seen as desirable - home ownership still remains widely valued – and social housing estates (and the people who live on them) are seen as problematic by many. There is also evidence of some NIMBY-ism in attitudes, with at least some respondents recognising the need for social housing yet not wishing for it to be built near to them.

Table 4: agreement/disagreement with statements on social housing, %			
Statement	% Agree	% Disagree	% Neither/don't know
I would never want to live in social housing	34	41	25
All young people should aspire to become home owners	53	14	33
I would be happy to see more social housing built near my own home	58	17	26
We need more affordable housing in my local community	70	10	20
Social housing estates suffer from high levels of anti-social behaviour and crime	49	18	32
Social housing is of a low quality	28	41	31
People who grew up in social housing are less likely to attain educational success	26	49	25
Social housing should be a tenure of choice for families and young people	51	11	37
Social housing is where we hide people with problems	33	41	25
A vast majority of people in social housing are on benefits	40	29	32
Social housing offers rents which are lower than rents in the private sector	76	6	19
There are more people living in social housing than there were five years ago	41	16	44
As well as homes, local councils and housing associations provide other services which help tenants e.g. finding work	50	12	38
Once someone becomes a tenant in social housing, they are a tenant for life	23	47	30
Anyone can apply for social housing	47	20	33

People who actually have some experience of living in social housing tend to have rather more positive perceptions of it, and of the people who live in it, than home owners or private renters.

This is illustrated in Table 5 below, which presents results for each of our statements disaggregated by housing tenure. Fewer than two-fifths of those in social housing, for instance, agree that 'Social housing estates suffer from high levels of anti-social behaviour and crime', compared to around over half of others. Similarly, far fewer of them are likely to endorse the unfair stereotype that the 'majority of people in social housing are on benefits', or to feel that 'I would never want to live in social housing'. However, those with experience of social housing are also perhaps more aware of some negatives: while the vast majority of those renting privately believe that social housing costs are much lower, those actually in social housing are a little less likely to believe this to be true.

Table 5: % agreement with statements on social housing			
Statement	Home-owners	Private renters	Social housing occupants
I would never want to live in social housing	42	12	39
All young people should aspire to become home owners	58	44	46
I would be happy to see more social housing built near my own home	49	77	58
We need more affordable housing in my local community	64	82	78
Social housing estates suffer from high levels of anti-social behaviour and crime	52	39	51
Social housing is of a low quality	26	23	43
People who grew up in social housing are less likely to attain educational success	29	16	29
Social housing should be a tenure of choice for families and young people	48	58	52
Social housing is where we hide people with problems	36	25	34
A vast majority of people in social housing are on benefits	42	28	49
Social housing offers rents which are lower than rents in the private sector	73	76	83
There are more people living in social housing than there were five years ago	38	44	41
As well as homes, local councils and housing associations provide other services which help tenants e.g. finding work	48	50	57
Once someone becomes a tenant in social housing, they are a tenant for life	21	25	23
Anyone can apply for social housing	41	62	45

Negative perceptions of social housing, where they exist, are strongly concentrated among those people who do not actually live in such housing. Those who do live there generally have rather more positive attitudes – although far from wholly uncritical ones.

6. The desirability of social housing

Several questions in our survey explored the desirability of social housing. First, we asked respondents whether, if they had a free choice, they would prefer to rent or to buy their housing.

- 79 percent preferred to buy.
- 17 percent to rent – with the vast majority of both current home owners and those now renting privately seeing being a home owner as desirable.

However, the split among current local authority renters was much more even - some 46 percent indicting they would prefer to buy and 43 percent to rent. This does suggest that, the experience of many of those renting from local authorities in Scotland is sufficiently positive as to make them prefer this option.

A second question in this section of the survey enquired as to whether, if they were to rent, respondents would prefer to rent privately or from social housing.
- 42 percent of respondents indicated that they would prefer to rent socially.
- 41 percent who chose private renting (with the remainder selecting Don't Know).

Interestingly, there were large differences on this question between respondents currently in different types of rented housing as to whether social or private were more desirable; those currently renting socially much preferred this option (with over seventy percent of those currently in both local authority and housing association accommodation selecting this option), whereas 64 percent of current private renters said they would choose to rent privately.

Finally, in this section of the survey, respondents were asked to choose which, out of social housing or private renting, they believed was best placed to provide certain desirable characteristics. Table 6 below summarises responses. Social housing is evaluated much more positively in terms of
- affordability
- its suitability for the vulnerable
- the promptness of repairs and
- the sense of community

But social housing is seen less positively that private renting for quality and choice, as well as for privacy and family life. These findings do suggest some degree of 'image problem' for social housing among many people.

Table 6: better form of rented housing for… (%)			
Item	Social	Private	No difference/don't know
Most affordable housing	81	7	12
Most suitable for vulnerable people	59	13	28
Prompt repairs when needed	50	22	27
Area with a sense of community	38	15	44
Best quality housing	22	39	39
Best choice of types of housing	21	49	30
Best place to bring up a child	18	32	50
Privacy and peace from neighbours	10	42	48

7. Who lives in social housing?

One of the final questions in the poll asked respondents about the sort of people who occupy social housing:

"What sort of people do you believe typically occupy the social housing that is provided in your area and other local authorities?"

Respondents were then asked to indicate which the relevant types of people from a long list. Table 7 below shows the percentage of our survey's sample who chose each option. (Because respondents could legitimately choose multiple options, the percentages in the table sum to well above 100).

Table 7: who typically lives in social housing? (%)	Overall sample	Social housing residents
People on low incomes	72	72
Single mothers	66	66
Immigrants and Asylum Seekers	54	49
Working families	51	65
Victims of domestic abuse	45	38
Drug addicts	45	43
Ex offenders	40	37
Retired people	34	48
Care leavers	23	25
Students	17	25
Young professionals	17	27
People working in professions like teaching, the law or medicine	11	17

The general perception, therefore, is that social housing occupancy is concentrated to some extent among the poor and single mothers, with many also believing that drug addicts, domestic abuse victims, ex-offenders and those coming into the UK are frequent users of it. Thus, many people regard social housing as primarily for those in particular and pressing need.

However, nearly two-fifths of our sample also suggested that working families typically occupy social housing – so the overall perception is certainly not that social housing is dominated exclusively by people linked to major social problems. And, once more, there are distinct differences in perception by housing tenure. As the final column of the table demonstrates, those who actually live in social housing were much more likely than others to believe that it is commonly occupied by working families and professionals, and much less likely to think that the typical tenant in such housing is an immigrant, asylum seeker or part of some other negatively-stereotyped social demographic.

8. Housing and the environment

The final section of our survey explored perceptions of the environmental dimensions of housing. First, there were two questions that asked about respondents' perceptions. The first one asked about the percentage of carbon emissions in the UK that come from households (rather than other sources). The mean average estimate given by respondents was 28 percent; however, there was huge variation around this average, while fully 28 percent of respondents simply selected the Don't Know option.

A second question asked respondents about the amount that the average UK household might be able to cut their energy bills each year through measures such as additional insulation. Again there was huge variation in responses around the mean average of £124, with sixteen percent of respondents also simply choosing the Don't Know option.

Finally, respondents were asked the following:
"If you knew that fitting additional insulation in your own home could reduce your yearly bills by £500 and cut your household's carbon emissions by 90%, what is the maximum amount that you would be willing to pay to undertake this work on your own home?"

Once more, responses to this question demonstrated a large amount of variation. Some eight percent of respondents actually chose the 'nothing' option, while another fifteen percent simply chose Don't Know. The mean average was £552, very close to the £500 mentioned in the question. However, some 30 percent were not willing to pay more than £100, while at the other end of the spectrum some 13 percent of respondents were willing to pay more than £1000. Perhaps unsurprisingly, home owners expressed the willingness to pay the most on average, at £574 (although there was still huge variation within home owners); those renting from local authorities, who would include many low income households, expressed a willingness to pay, on average, only £314.

Conclusion

The survey work conducted in this project has provided detailed and up-to-date evidence on attitudes towards social housing in Scotland today. That evidence demonstrates a mixed picture with regards to the CIH's core interests. There is some recognition among the public of the importance of housing as an issue – but, amidst a media agenda that has been dominated in recent times by COVID-19 and Brexit, housing is some way down the issue concerns of much of the Scottish public. There is substantial public support for the idea that the provision of decent housing for all should be the responsibility of government, and specific recognition of the need for many groups of people to received help with housing. There is also – to an extent that is perhaps surprising in data from a survey conducted during the middle of a global health pandemic – significant public recognition of the importance of housing, even when directly compared to the NHS. At the same time, however, at least some negative perceptions of social housing, and the people who typically live in it, certainly persist.
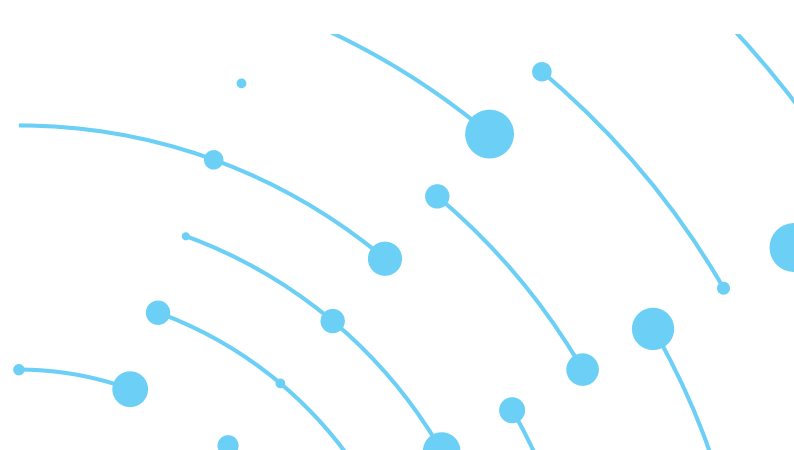
Chartered Institute of Housing
Scotland

To discuss any matters relating to the work
of CIH Scotland and how we can support
your organisation please contact:

Callum Chomczuk, national director Scotland
callum.chomczuk@cih.org