

# Rethinking social housing: the view from the inside





## Rethinking social housing - what have we learned from our workshops and online surveys?

### Setting the scene

Since the Grenfell Tower fire, social housing has commanded a lot of attention. Questions are being raised about the way we manage and maintain our housing; how, as a sector, we are governed and regulated, and also who should social housing be for?

Alongside this sits an acute shortage of genuinely affordable homes to rent and a growing recognition that focusing on increasing supply alone is not enough. New homes must be the right type, in the right place, at prices people on the lowest incomes can afford and flexible enough to meet the changing needs of residents and their families.

There is a growing disconnect and contradiction between housing, welfare and other areas of public policy. We also know that social housing's role and contribution is not well understood or recognised by government or indeed often by the wider public.

With all of this in mind, it is the right time to reflect on where we are now and to ask some fundamental

questions about what the role and purpose of social housing is now and might be in the future. Our Rethinking social housing project poses four key questions:

- What is social housing?
- What does social housing do?
- Who is social housing for?
- What should the role and purpose of social housing be?

By using the term "social housing" we mean both the homes and the services provided by landlords. While we did not specify this to respondents, their responses reflect this understanding.

We have used a range of methods to gather evidence including interactive workshops, surveys, interviews, social attitude surveys, secondary data analysis and a review of existing literature in this area.

This short report draws together the findings from our workshops and online survey.



## What did we do?

We wanted to stimulate a far reaching national debate around the four key questions. We developed a toolkit so that people could organise and run their own local workshops and then send us the results. We backed up the workshops with an online survey posing the same questions to ensure that everyone who wanted to could have their say. The questions were deliberately simple and respondents were given a free rein in the answers they gave.

During January, February and March 2018 a total of 199 workshops and 766 surveys were completed across England. Responses were received from all regions of England and from tenants, housing workers, mixed groups, local politicians and representatives, and partners for both the survey and workshops. We also saw a good mix of organisation types, size and focus – for example co-ops and supported housing, and urban and rural settings. The diagrams below show the higher level detail of who took part in the workshops and who completed the online survey.

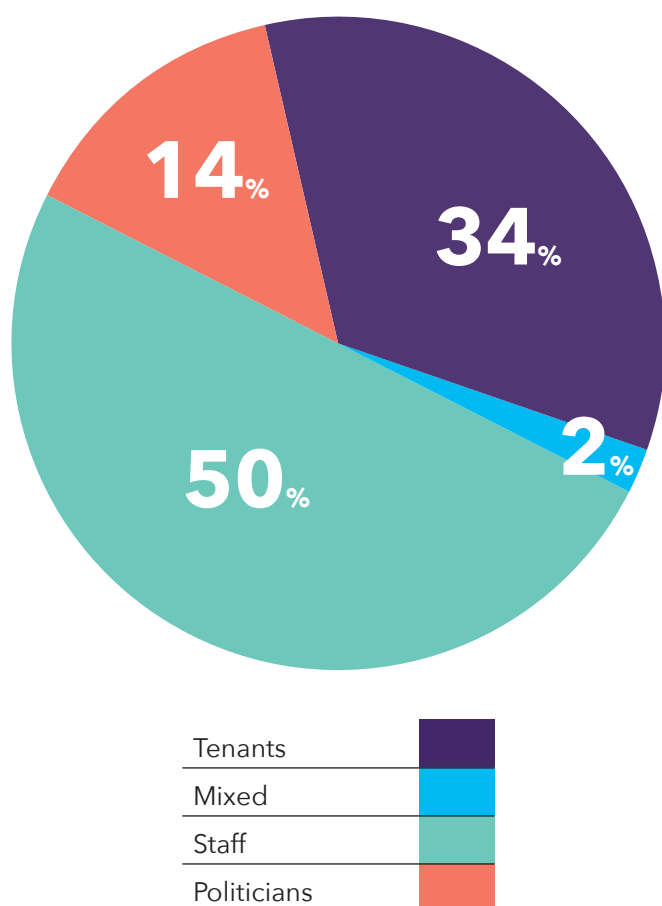


Figure 1 - Total responses by group

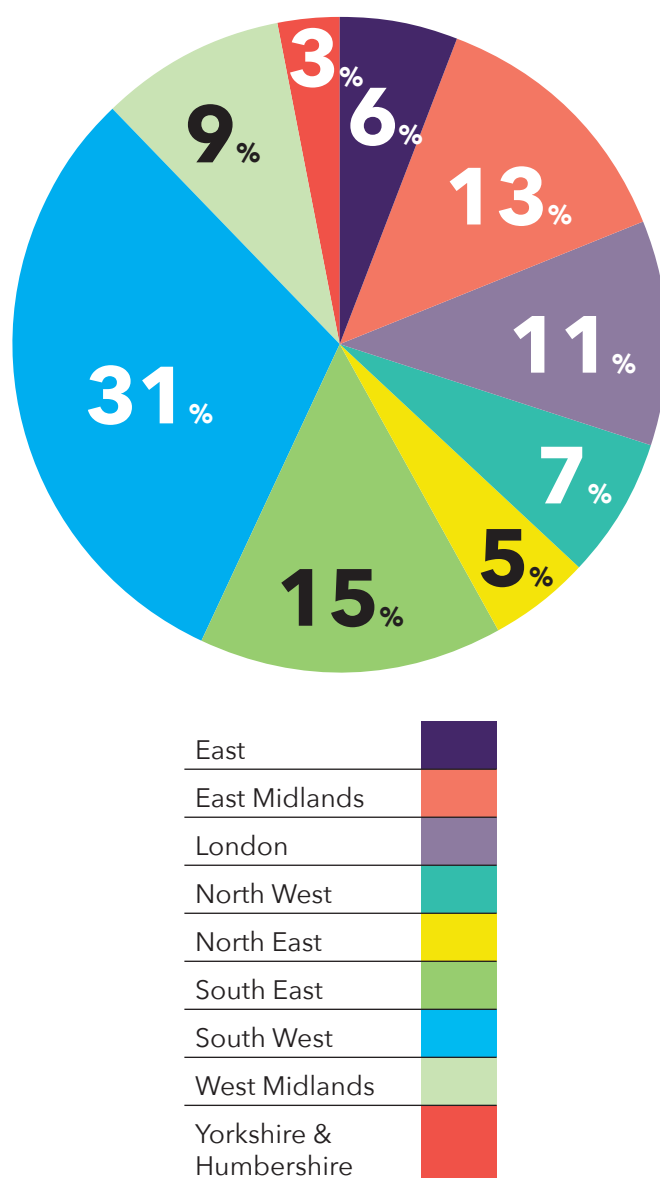


Figure 2 - Total responses by region



## What do the results tell us?

The headline messages from the workshops and online survey include:

- Social housing is overwhelmingly thought of as positive and as a benefit to both individual tenants and society as a whole by all respondents
- It is seen as an affordable alternative to home ownership or private renting with higher quality standards than the latter
- The meeting of standards and regulation is thought of as a key attribute of social housing that separates it from other tenures – the private rented sector (PRS) in particular
- Being well housed is seen as the “bedrock” of people’s lives – social housing is seen as fulfilling a valuable role in this
- Responses often refer to social housing as “enabling” or “empowering” and associated with positive impacts on other important areas of life such as health and education
- Responses referred to social housing as being “more than a roof” and about the role of social landlords and tenants in “building and sustaining strong communities”
- There is a split between those who say that a social tenancy should be for life and those that say it should be for a fixed term and that moving into other sectors should be an expectation when affordable
- There is also a split between those who support rationing of social housing as a scarce resource and those who support building new social homes to expand the sector so that rationing is not needed/needed less
- Although many responses said that social housing should be for “anyone” most also accepted that rationing was currently necessary with low income and needs such as disability or “vulnerability” featuring as being key factors in determining who should be accessing/living in social housing – the term “safety net” featured strongly in responses
- Although there are some regional differences on some topics, views about social housing across England are consistent – this is interesting given the huge variations in local housing markets in different parts of the country
- Words like “stigma” and “stereotyping” featured in a minority of responses although this was attributed to government policy and social housing shrinking in supply while demand increases rather than being associated with the people who live there



## What people told us

*"Social housing is there to provide a safe and secure foundation stone that brings family and community together. This supports local people who are striving for a better life."* – Tenant workshop, London

*"Social housing provide[s] affordable, safe and secure accommodation meeting the expectations of customers and allowing them to live a decent quality of life, with access to good education, health services, transport and amenities."*  
– Tenant workshop, North East

*"Social housing is a fantastic and fundamental way to address poverty."*  
– Online survey response

*"Good home - reflecting a society that values ALL its members, regardless of income bracket. Good housing = good mental health = good health and well-being = enhances life chances."*  
– Online survey response

*"Social housing is there to support and upskill people by providing education to encourage independent living and for people to be self sufficient; stop having the parent/child relationship between landlord and tenant."* – Housing worker workshop, East Midlands

*"Social housing provides secure, long term aspirational homes. A regulated, ethical alternative to private renting."*  
– Tenant and housing worker workshop, South West

*"Social housing is there to ensure everyone who wants a safe, secure home has one, despite their income or means, and from a landlord they can trust and rely on who is invested in the local area and communities."*  
– Online survey

*"Social housing is stigmatised, people assume we are all on benefits. Community housing is a better description, it's about community."* – Tenant workshop, Yorkshire and Humberside

*"I believe social housing should not be a full stop where there is no more movement but should be a stepping out of whatever situation one may find themselves with the understanding this is not permanent. It really should be a revolving door but obviously exclusions will apply for those who need the stability e.g. disabled and extenuating circumstances etc."* – Online survey response

*"[I] think a review/overhaul of the system is called for, and is still open to abuse. I think the tenants should be periodically financially reviewed and those whose circumstances change, should not be able to keep it if they can afford private sector housing. Assured and longer term tenancies should be a thing of the past. Reviews from the housing providers should be undertaken yearly to prevent subletting of properties."* – Online survey response



## Workshop responses

The following gives an overview of the results from the workshops.

### What is social housing?

We asked this question to find out what people understood by the term "social housing" and what the key concepts they associated with it were.

- Affordability was raised most frequently (in 80% of workshops)
- Meeting need was mentioned nearly as frequently (79%)
- Security was the third most frequently cited concept (59%) – this was used to describe both tenure and physical security
- Provision of quality or well maintained properties was seen to be a key facet of social housing (46%)
- Building/maintaining communities was mentioned in a third of responses
- Public provision was also mentioned in around a third of workshops
- Similarly Social purpose was also mentioned in around a third of responses
- The provision of support was cited in 14% of responses

### What people told us

"Social Housing holds a stigma." – Tenant workshop, West Midlands

"Social housing is the backbone of society!" – Tenant workshop, South East

"Social housing is an essential component of a civilised society." – Housing worker workshop, South West

"A foundation stone." – Tenant and housing worker workshop, South East

"housing that meets a certain standard, gives security of tenure and which people can afford and is secure." – Tenant workshop, East Midlands

"Demonised in the media!" – Housing worker workshop, North West

### What does social housing do?

We asked this to understand what people saw the function of social housing as being.

- Simply provides a home was the most popular answer (70%)
- This was followed by providing security or a safety net (55%)
- Building/promoting community was mentioned in 52% of responses
- Provision of support/coaching/financial advice came up in 45% of responses
- 31% of responses identified the provision of good quality, well designed homes
- Assisting with social mobility was mentioned in 19% of responses
- Helping with homelessness was also mentioned in 19% of responses

### What people told us

"Social housing is ...a force for good!" – Tenant workshop, East Midlands

"Stops social cleansing, attempts to prevent social cleansing." – Tenant workshop, London

"Provides a lifeline for some, a sense of entitlement for others." – Housing worker workshop, East Midlands

"Enables independent living and gives choices and opportunities." – Tenant and housing worker workshop, North West

"Be used as a yardstick to bring the private sector in line." – Housing worker workshop, South East

## Who is social housing for?

We asked this to establish people's views about who lives or should live in social housing.

- 35% said that social housing should be for anyone who wishes to live in it
- Even so, nearly everyone said that in the current climate allocations should be done on the basis of need – whether this is related to being unable to afford any other housing option or some other type of vulnerability
- 32% of responses said that social housing had a role in dealing with homelessness
- Other responses included current priority need groups (18%), key-workers (14%) and local people (12%)

## What people told us

*"Anyone who needs affordable housing."*  
– Tenant workshop, East Midlands

*"We will end up excluding vulnerable people as we move forwards using insight and credit checks!"* – Housing worker workshop, Yorkshire and Humberside

*"It is moving away from those it used to help by going more business-like and restricting access to some. And accordingly it is becoming available for those determined as able to afford rents and sustain tenancies."*  
– Housing worker workshop, South East

*"Mixed communities – building a cultural and intergenerational mix."* – Tenant workshop, East

## What should the role and purpose of social housing be?

We asked this to get a sense of what people thought social housing could and should be, as distinct from what it is now. Responses to this question were very diverse in nature.

- There was strong feeling that the role of social housing was about providing affordable and safe places to live for people not able to afford housing in the private market
- There was also a feeling that part of social housing's role is to act as a safety net so no one "falls through the cracks"
- Responses spoke about the role of social housing in building communities and supporting social mobility
- Social housing was also thought to have a strong role in challenging the negative stereotypes and stigma around social housing and social housing tenants
- There is also seen to be a role for social housing in providing support and training to tenants to enable them to gain new skills and, for those who are not working, access employment

*"Social housing should be about creating balanced, resilient, successful and sustainable communities that support social mobility. If we achieve all of these we can challenge the stigmatisation of the sector and of social housing tenants."* – Housing worker workshop, West Midlands

*"The sector needs clarity and a focused vision because it has too often been seen as an individual entitlement or a way to outsource complex cases and we need to ensure that every resident gets the appropriate support they need."* – Tenant and housing worker workshop, London

*"It should be seen as a valuable contributor to social infrastructure, 'social good' in the long term and the benefit to society as a whole."* – Housing worker workshop, West Midlands

## Regional variations

We asked workshop respondents to tell us which area of the country they were in to enable us to look for regional variations in responses. There were significant variations in some depending on location as shown in the graphs below.

### What is social housing?

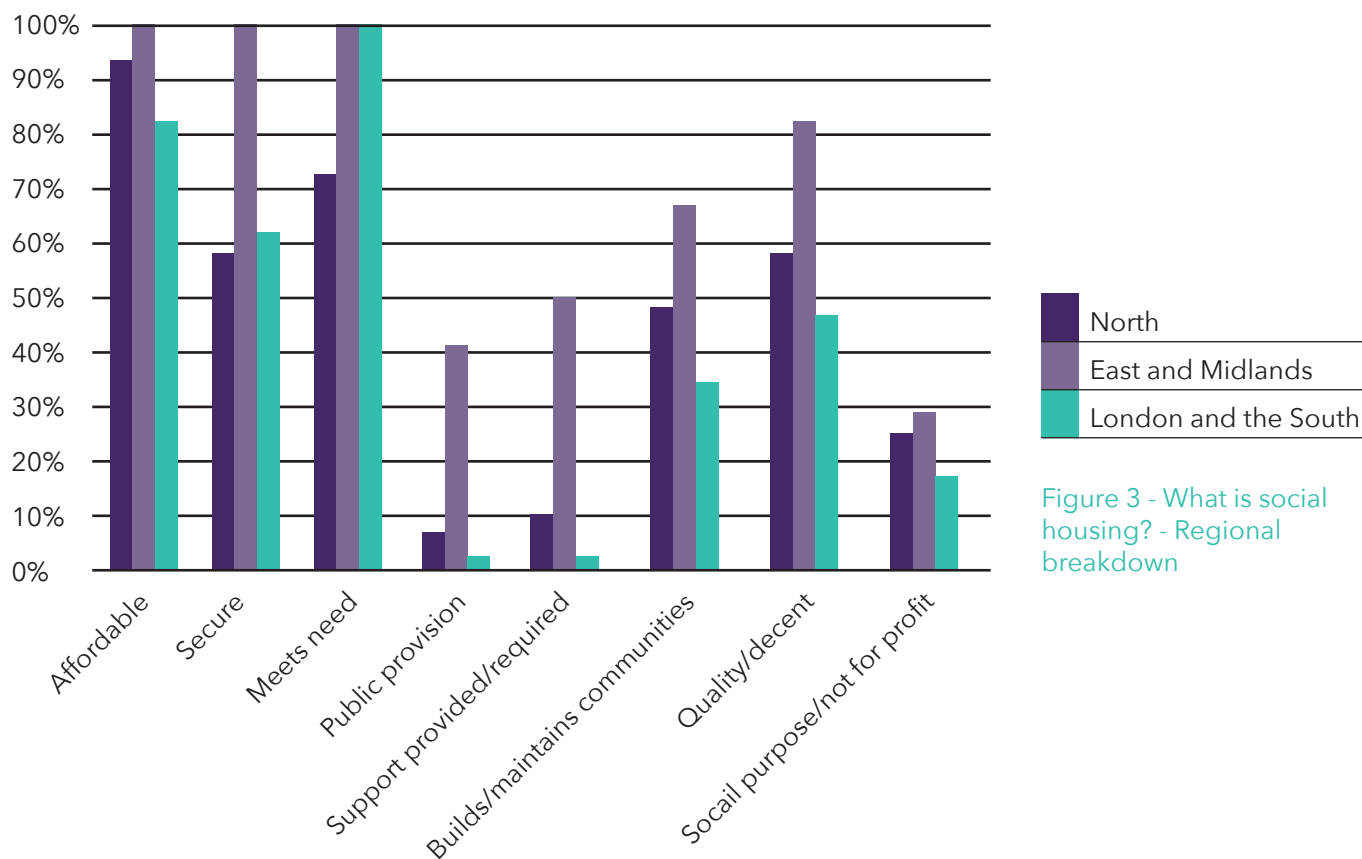


Figure 3 - What is social housing? - Regional breakdown





## What does social housing do?

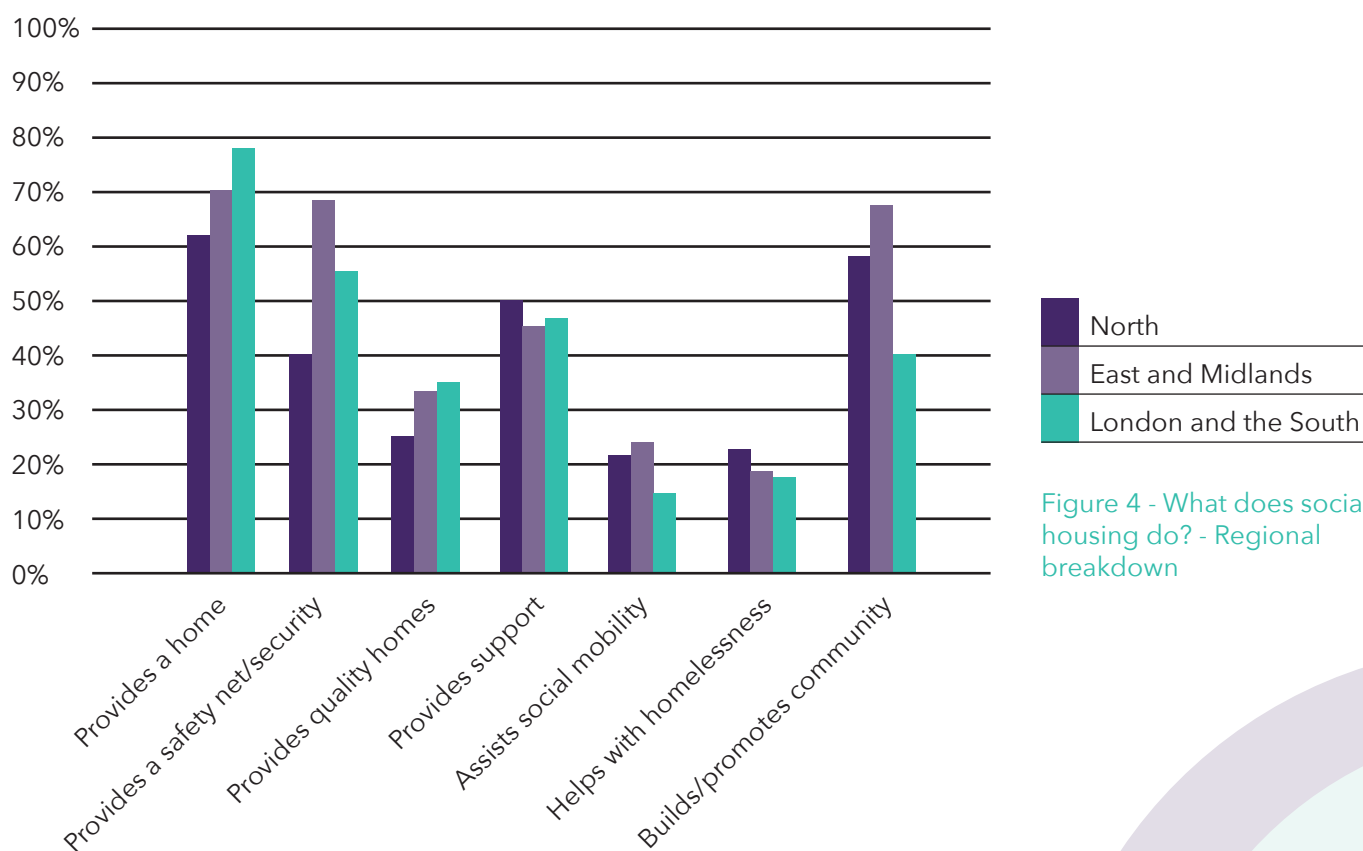


Figure 4 - What does social housing do? - Regional breakdown

## Who is social housing for?

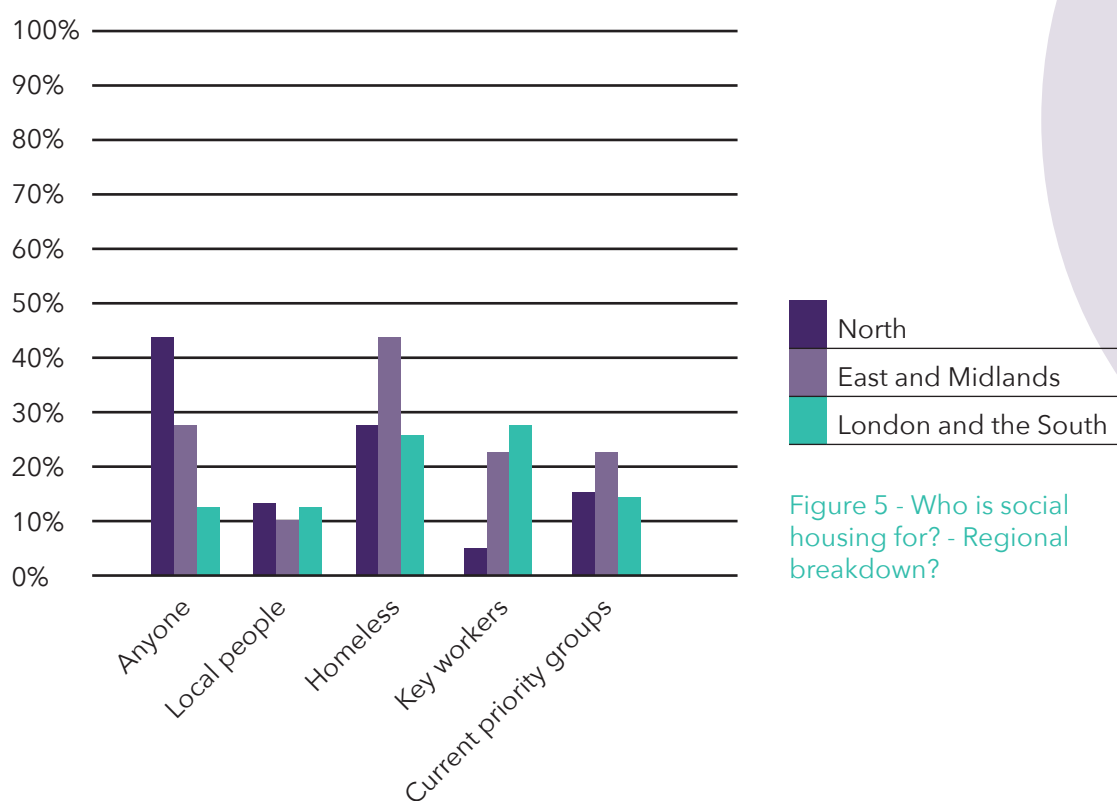


Figure 5 - Who is social housing for? - Regional breakdown?

## Group variations

We also asked the people submitting workshop feedback to tell us about who was in their group. The three main categories were groups made of solely of tenants or housing workers and there were also mixed groups. We have broken the results down by these also as shown in the graphs below.

## What is social housing?

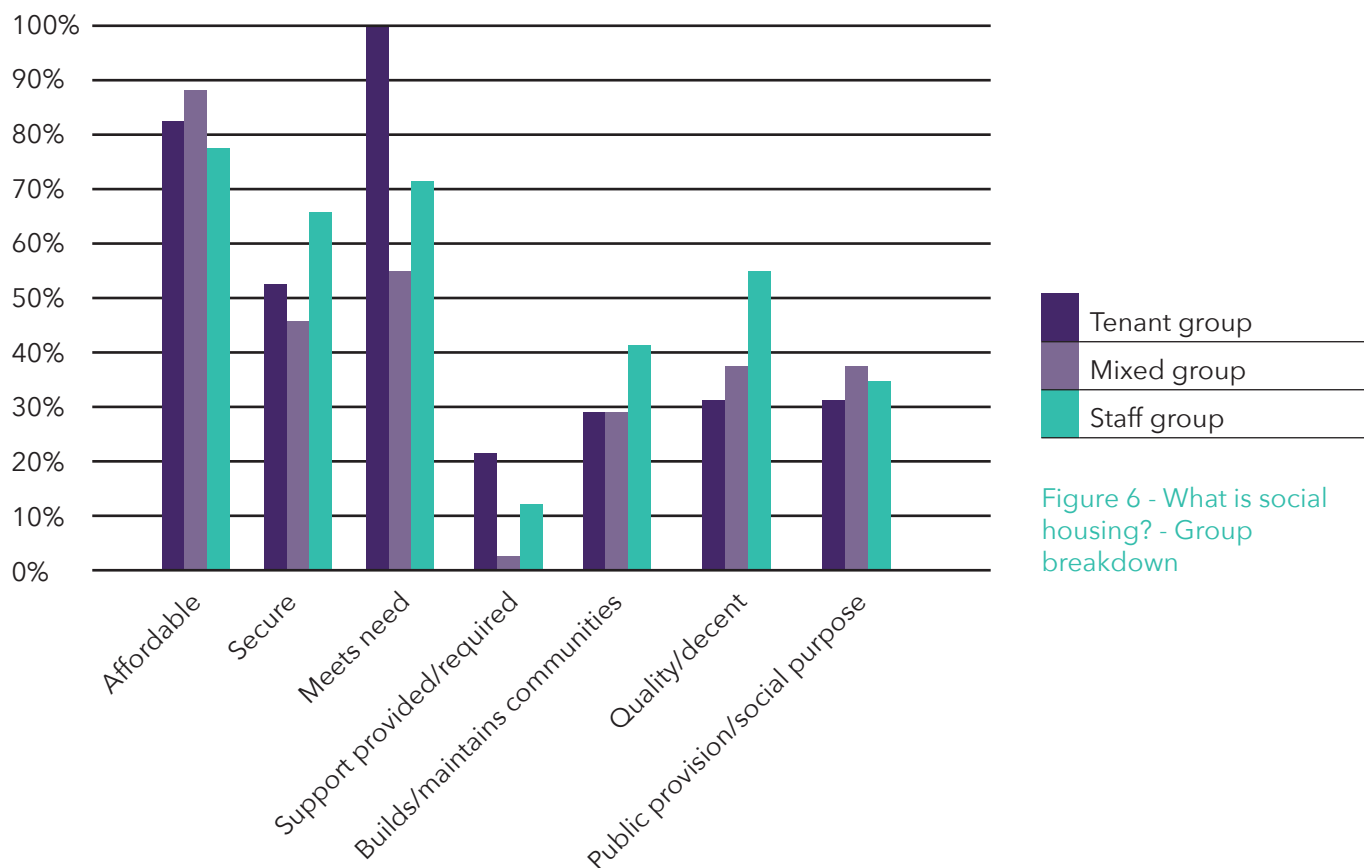


Figure 6 - What is social housing? - Group breakdown





## What does social housing do?

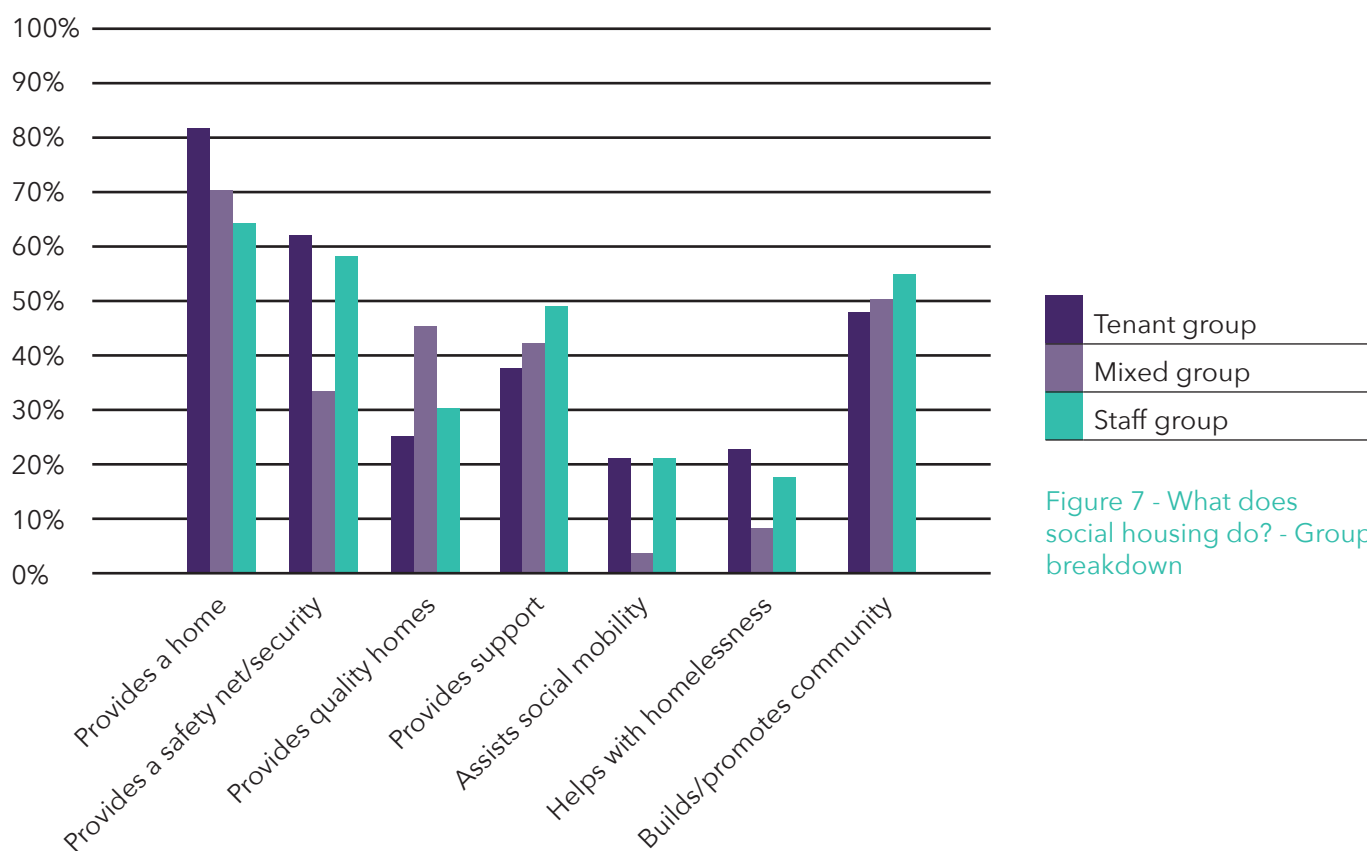


Figure 7 - What does social housing do? - Group breakdown

## Who is social housing for?

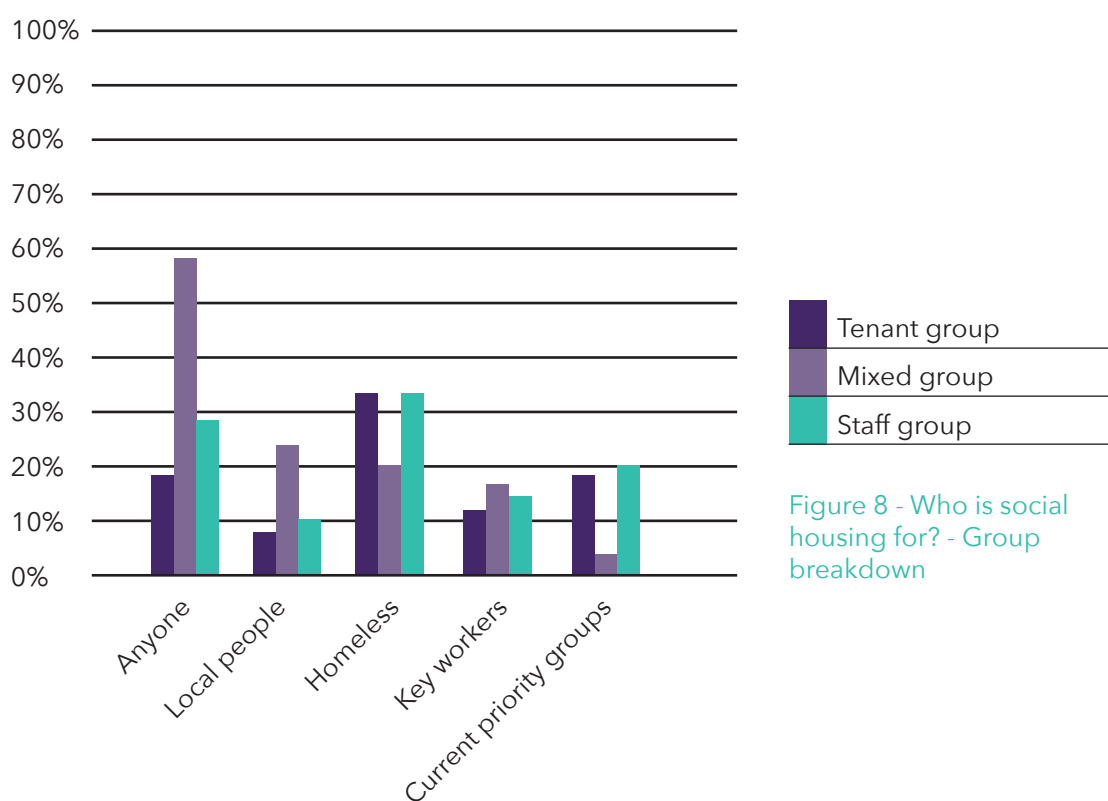


Figure 8 - Who is social housing for? - Group breakdown

## Survey responses

We carried out an online survey based around the same questions as the workshops to enable people who perhaps were not able to attend a workshop to give their views.

## What is social housing?

We asked this to understand what people saw the function of social housing as being.

The survey found that:

- Affordability was the main term associated with social housing with nearly three-quarters (73%) saying this
- Security was also important (31%) - social housing was thought to be a place of safety and permanence
- The idea that social housing is required to meet standards or that it is regulated was mentioned in 25% of responses - social housing was thought to be of a higher standard because of this
- The concept of decent was also mentioned (12%) giving the clear message that standards or quality are of significance
- A small number of people (0.6%) answered that social housing is stigmatising

## What people told us

*"Accommodation for the masses."*  
- Tenant, West Midlands

*"Social housing is the proof that society knows everyone needs a secure place in which to thrive regardless of their financial status."* - Tenant, East Midlands

*"For me it's high value affordable housing for those people that cannot afford their own home nor choose to rent in the private rented sector."* - Housing worker, North West

*"A landlord company that provides housing not just for profit but the cohesion of society, helping those that need extra help, either long or short term."* - Tenant, East

## What does social housing do?

We asked this to understand what people saw the function of social housing as being.

The survey found that:

- The most popular response was that it provides an affordable home (45%)
- Social housing was also thought to provide a feeling of security for tenants - a basis for them to build their lives upon
- Building communities (15%), meeting quality standards (14%) and meeting need (11%) were also amongst the most popular answers
- There were small numbers of people who answered that it gives dignity (3.8%), helps with homelessness (3.6%) or houses local people (2.5%)

## What people told us

*"Gives you a chance to provide a nice home for your family."* - Tenant, South East

*"A stable home is the bedrock of people's lives and therefore an essential building block of a civilised society."* - Board Member, South West

*"Provides an affordable stable home for people unlikely to be able to afford owner occupation."* - Housing worker, London

*"A route back to civilisation."* - Housing worker, West Midlands

*"No creepy landlords harassing me, letting themselves into my flat whilst I'm out, or rifling through my belongings."*



## Who is social housing for?

We asked this to establish people's views about who lives or should live in social housing.

- People on low incomes was the most popular response (54%)
- People with some type of housing need was the next most stated response (36%)
- Anyone/everyone was also a popular response (20%)
- Other responses largely named specific groups e.g. families (8%), older people (6%), or young people (3%)

## What people told us

*"Social housing should be the first choice housing for the majority of people in a local area, (there should be no stigma attached to it), so that it genuinely represents the communities in which it is situated."*

*"To provide affordable, decent accommodation providing support for tenants to sustain their tenancy" - Housing worker, North East*

*"Housing is a fundamental right, which should be provided by society to anyone regardless of background or circumstances." - Housing worker, London*

*"Social Housing should be available to those with the greatest need; to provide an opportunity to support and stabilise those who are unable to access services without a stable home that will provide better life chances for them and their household."*

*"Social housing should be for anyone who wants it. In reality it is for single parents, the disabled, immigrants." - Housing worker, London*

## What should the role and purpose of social housing be?

We asked this to get a sense of what people thought social housing could and should be, as distinct from what it is now. Responses to this question were very diverse in nature, a flavour of what respondents told us is given here

## What people told us

*"Social housing should be prioritised to people who have lived and contributed to the UK for at least 5 years. It should continue to be affordable and not 'a % of market rent affordable.'" - Respondent, London*

*"History shows that good secure housing provides a community and safe way of life for all people in society. Fundamentally housing and home is the hub of the society, without it society can't work. People don't get to work, children don't go to school. There is no society, no community, no commerce without people." - Tenant, North East*

*"The role and purpose of social housing is to contribute an element of breaking the cycle of disadvantage for millions of people, i.e. a warm comfortable, affordable home." Respondent, South East*

*"To provide homes in an often intensely competitive and hard business arena of society so that all members can live and work in that society." - Tenant, South West*

## Regional Variations

What is social housing? (Please note that due to the nature of the data this information was extracted from the survey using a different method to that above and is therefore not directly comparable).

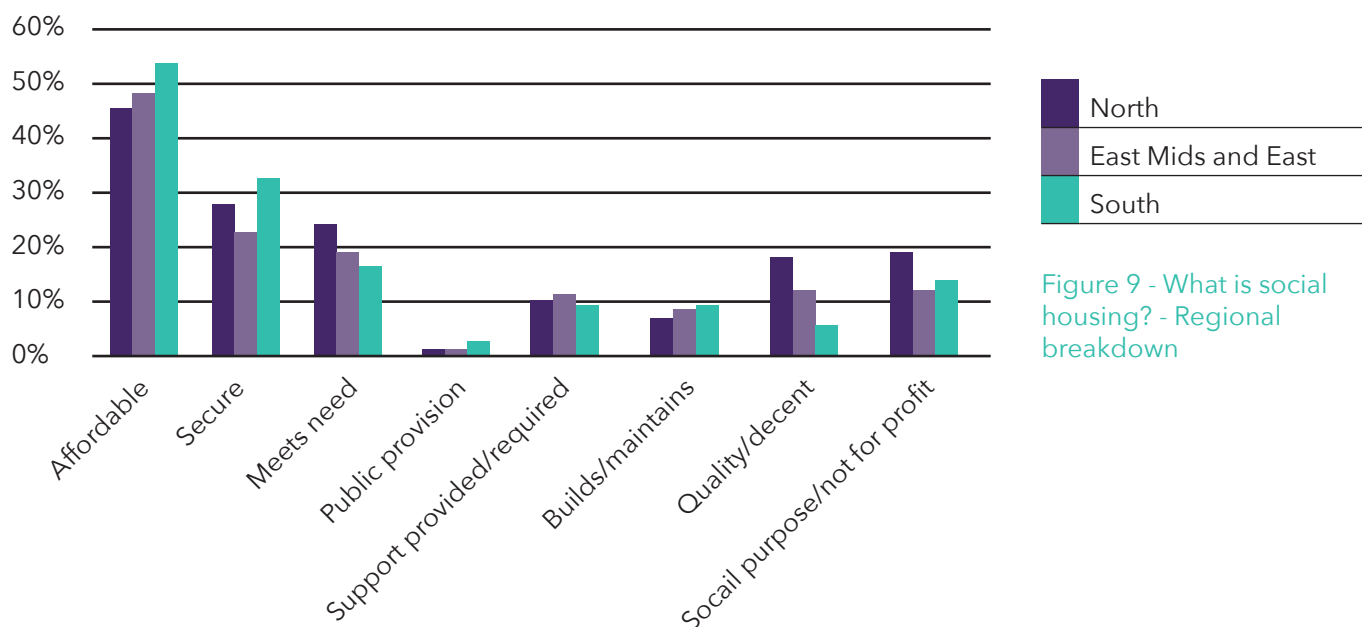


Figure 9 - What is social housing? - Regional breakdown

## What does social housing do?

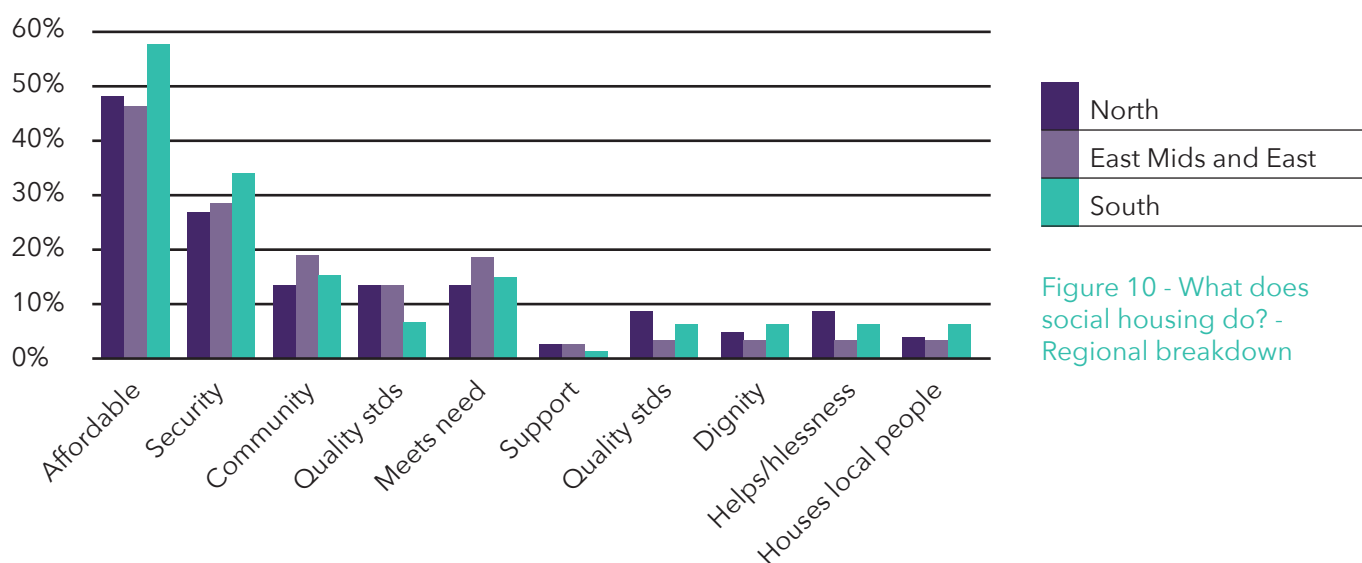
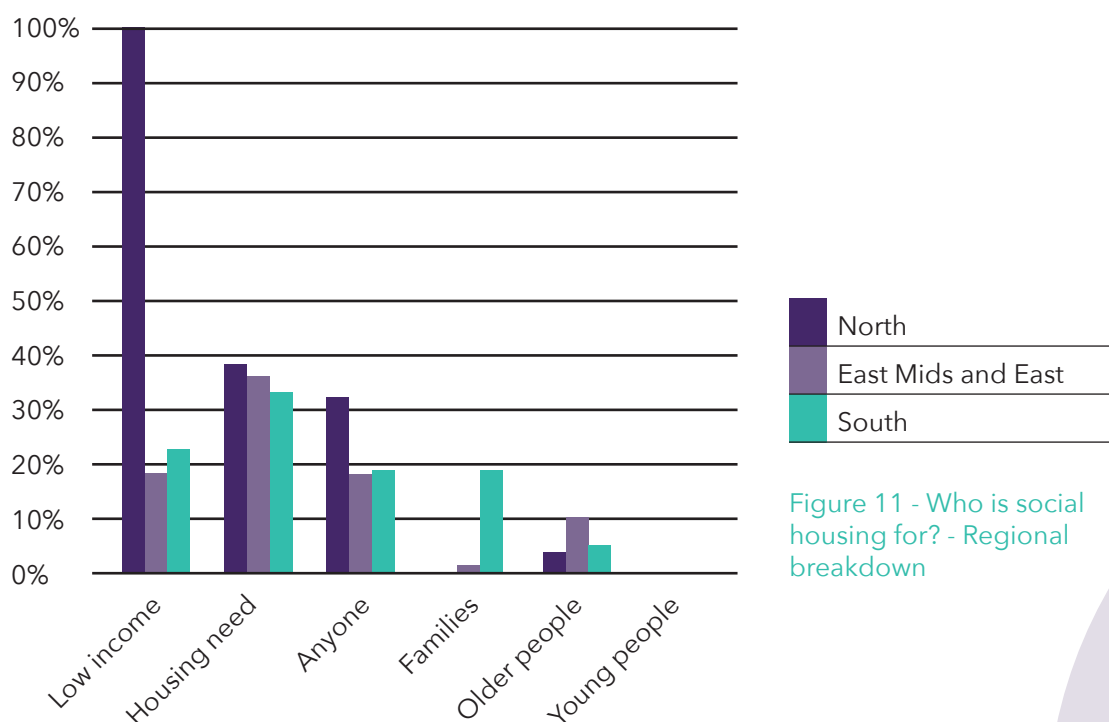


Figure 10 - What does social housing do? - Regional breakdown

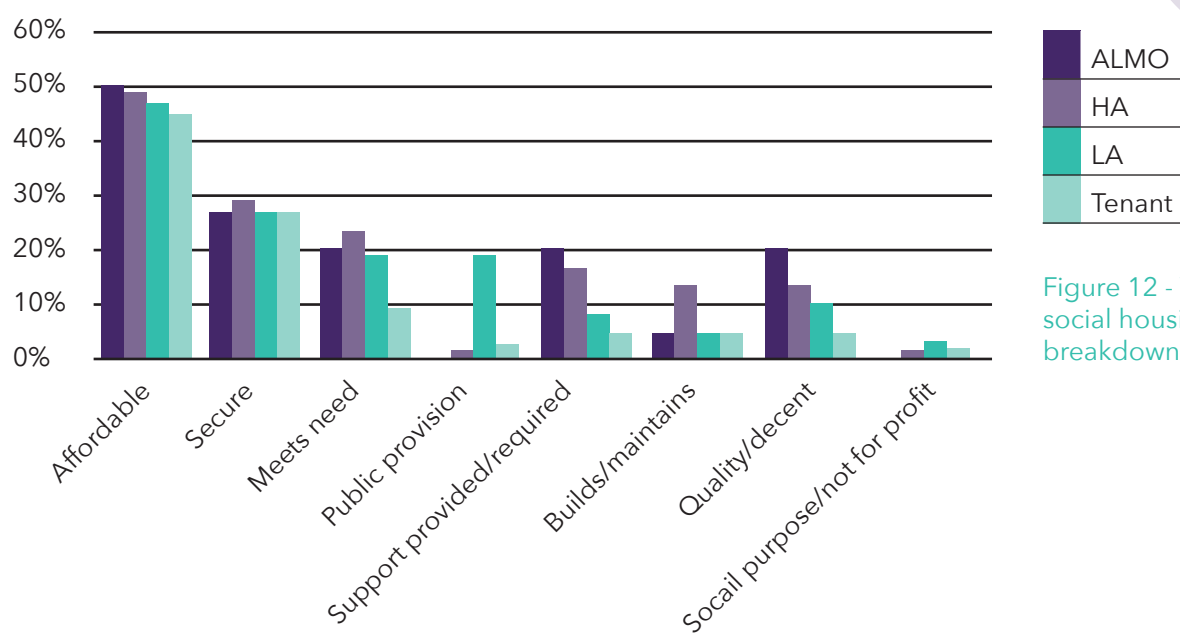


## Who is social housing for?



## Group variations

### What is social housing?



## What does social housing do?

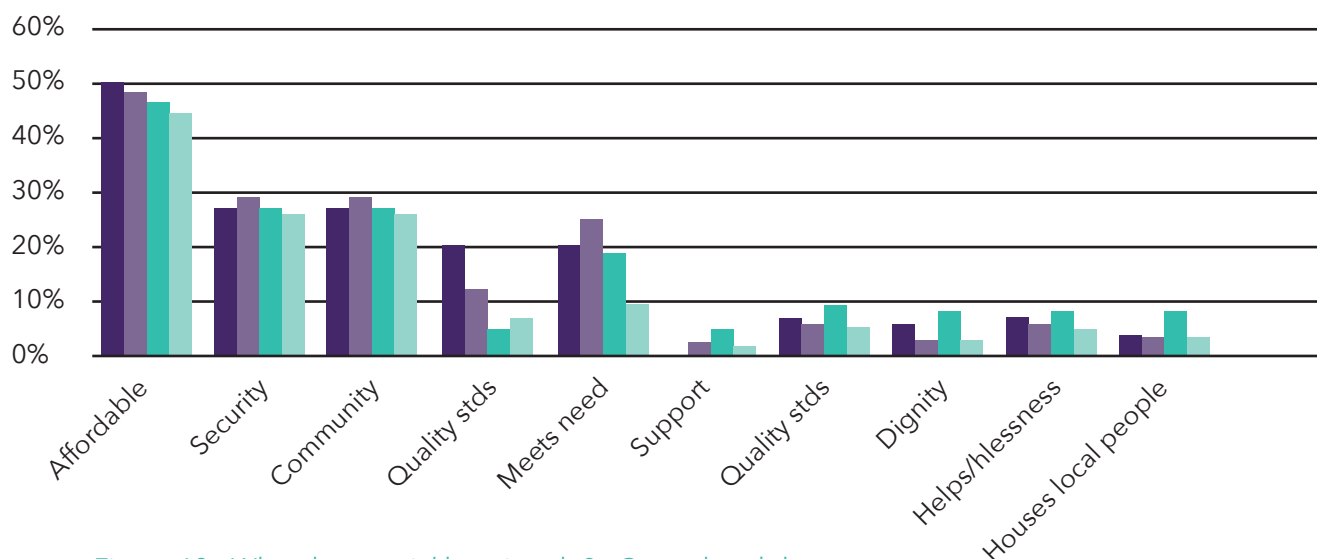


Figure 13 - What does social housing do? - Group breakdown

## Who is social housing for?

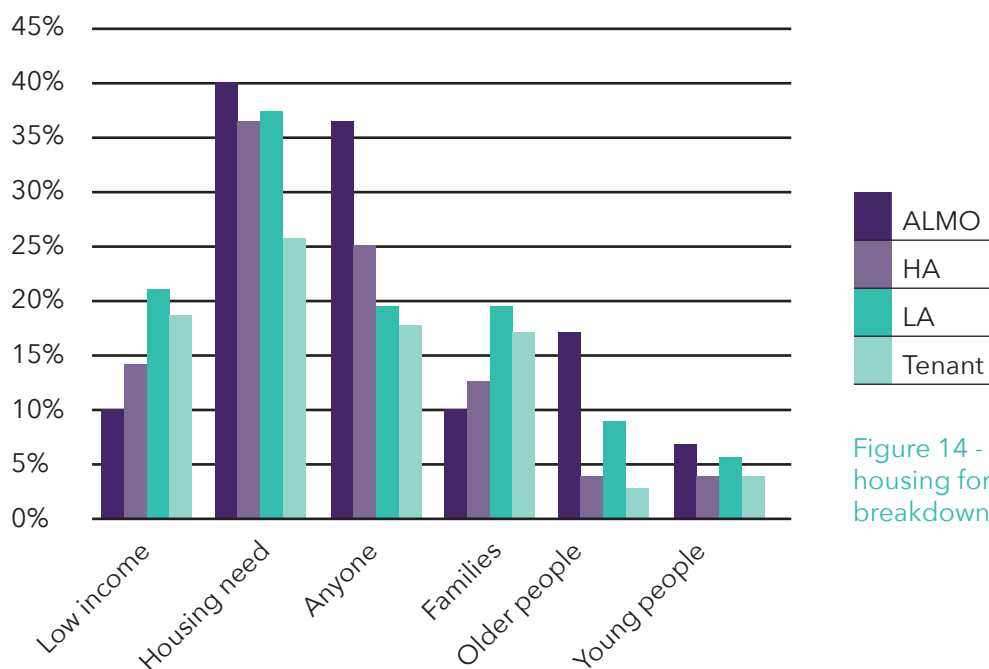


Figure 14 - Who is social housing for? - Group breakdown

## What happens next?

In addition to the workshops and online survey, we are:

- Working with Ipsos MORI to carry out social perception surveys to help us to understand what the general public thinks and understands about social housing
- Building a picture of who is living in social housing now with support from CaCHE (UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence)
- Running an online survey aimed at people working in health and social care to gain their perspective on social housing and how it is relevant to them in their roles
- We are interviewing people who are waiting to become tenants to understand what social housing means to them

The results from all of these activities will inform our final Rethinking social housing report which will be launched at our annual conference - Housing 2018 - which takes place in Manchester on the 26, 27 and 28 June 2018.

Finally, we would like to thank everyone who supported the Rethinking social housing project by running and/or attending a workshop or completing an online survey. We also thank our sponsors and advisory group for supporting this project.







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