

Shared living – What works in supported housing

A social and business review of the role and perceptions of shared housing models for people with support requirements

This study highlights what residents believe is important for shared housing to be a success, and also suggests how organisations can use these findings, and the evaluation framework used, in shaping the future of their own shared housing portfolio.

This In Brief summarises the findings of the research report commissioned by Carr-Gomm housing association. The study was carried out by Lynn Vickery and Veronica Mole of the Housing and Regeneration Research Group (HARRG), London South Bank University, as part of the Housing Corporation's Innovation and Good Practice (IGP) programme.

Key findings

The key findings from the full report can be found in this paper. They have been split into the following headings:

- views of residents;
- views of Supporting People teams;
- views of Chief Executives; and
- way forward.

The research project

Shared housing has been a widely used model associated with supported housing for many years. It is the subject of debate amongst providers and commissioners who may regard it as old fashioned and not conducive to independent living. For some clients and organisations it continues to offer a positive option in helping alleviate loneliness and isolation.

Current growth in the work of social landlords and their agents includes a wider range of client groups with a variety of aspirations and support needs. Shared housing may offer new opportunities to these wider groups. With the new emphasis on neighbourhoods and inclusion, does the shared housing model possess attributes that commend it to communities in new ways or is it a model of the past?

The research report, commissioned by Carr-Gomm and supported by a Housing Corporation Innovation and Good Practice (IGP) grant, highlights what works in shared housing, some suggestions on why it works, as voiced by residents themselves, and how organisations can take the findings and the evaluation framework into consideration

when compiling their own responses to the future of their shared housing portfolio.

In addition to this summary, the research project has produced two reports:

- a summary report – which can be used as a basis for discussion inside organisations with residents and staff; and
- a full report – including the development of shared housing, the research methodology, case studies and other interviews.

Purpose of the research

The purpose of the research was to:

- provide a strong evidence base for the effectiveness of shared supported housing that will enable providers to improve outcomes for clients by adapting services to better meet their needs; and
- influence policy makers and commissioners with authoritative, evidence-based guidance.

Research objectives

The research objectives were to evaluate:

- the impact of shared living on positive outcomes, e.g. development of individual skills and sense of independence, strengthening social networks;
- the impact of shared living on mixed needs groups in terms of positive outcomes;
- the influence of external factors, e.g. location, availability of other services and other factors, such as existing social

networks, stigmatisation, peer/informal support;

- the diversity implications with regard to gender, sexuality, age and ethnicity; and
- the differences in outcomes for each need subgroup, e.g. mental health, learning disability, substance misuse, offending behaviour.

The research involved residents from six social landlords (Carr-Gomm, Ekaya, Look Ahead, Stonham, MacIntyre Homes [Aragon Group] and Tuntum). These housing organisations were selected to provide a range of geographical locations, size and structure of organisation, expertise in a number of supported housing needs groups, and importantly, a range of organisational viewpoints on the efficacy of shared supported housing.

From the evidence of interviews and meetings with nearly 100 residents from 25 housing projects, staff, Supporting People teams, other associated professional and policy influencers the research was able to offer some insight into the impact shared supported housing has on people and policy.

Findings: Key themes

Views of residents

The research suggested the following themes run through residents' responses to shared housing in terms of 'what works' and 'what doesn't work', i.e. the impacts made by living and experiencing shared supported housing:

Theme 1: Buildings matter

“I don’t like saying I live in a hostel.” “I say I live in a flat.” “I say I flat share.”

- Residents value good quality buildings that are clean, tidy, safe and well managed;
- Shared space must always have a function. ‘Dead’ space in a shared living environment is detrimental to successful outcomes for residents;
- Circulation areas are crucial for some groups. People like to see and hear people moving around a building even if they wish to remain private and not join any activity;
- The wish to have a private toilet is by far the most desired facility across all groups. This can be couched in gender and cultural terms where different habits can cause considerable distress to those who share a toilet;
- Most groups of residents, when asked to prioritise sole use of a kitchen or bathroom say that a private bathroom is more important;
- Residents like clean and well-equipped and frequently used communal kitchens. There should always be somewhere to sit round a table. Communal kitchens are still valued even if residents have their own kitchen; and
- Location of buildings is particularly important for all groups. Residents wish to be in safe locations with good transport links to areas where they can extend their life and networks. Being near cafés and shops and places of entertainment is seen as important.

Theme 2: People – The challenge of on-site management

“At the end of the day it’s the people who you are living with who make or break a place. [The RSL] chooses people and sometimes that is good but sometimes there is a mismatch – getting the right mix is important, then it’s fun.”

- Good management can overcome poor locations but poor management cannot be overcome by a good location and/or a good building;
- Residents understand the roles that on-site staff play in fostering independence and are generally aware that the intention is that move-on is one of the key outcomes;
- Most buildings had an office for on-site staff. These spaces were used in a variety of ways – as locked offices private to staff through to a place where residents sit and talk informally to staff. On balance, residents say that they prefer to have an office on site in preference to peripatetic staffing, even if the office is only staffed for a part of the day;
- Young people’s schemes need highly managed shared environments and mutually agreed expectations of how they should be used and looked after;
- Having a clean communal environment is important to residents. Cleaning should not be subject to ‘cuts’ in service, or if resident rotas are used they have to be seen to be fair and managed by staff;
- Residents express the wish to ‘be involved’ in the decision as to who lives in the shared house: either by directly being involved in the letting, e.g. prospective residents viewing and meeting those in the house, or by being involved in setting criteria that reflect a requirement for the new person to

enhance the life of the scheme not detract from it; and

- Residents express a fear of any possibility of violent people or those on drugs coming to live with them and depend on staff to manage these situations.

Theme 3: Lifestyle – Different groups need different things from shared supported housing

“There are benefits to sharing if you are new to the UK... then it’s good. It helps integrate and improve English. You meet people across age range, make friends and get to know people and can have a laugh together so it’s a bit like a family.”

“I eat in my own room. I would like a cooker in my own room to cook and eat when I like. I like an element of sharing – and it’s nice to meet people and talk so you are not entirely on your own... you can surface and see who’s about.”

- There are transitional groups (mothers and babies, ex-offenders, women fleeing domestic violence) and more permanent groups (people with mental health issues or learning disabilities) who have differing needs from their accommodation. Some need the sense of a stable ‘home’ whilst others need to feel that their stay will be minimal. The way in which such differing expectations are managed have an impact on residents’ motivation to develop and move forward; and
- People are either drawn to shared supported housing in a positive way, e.g. the expectation of companionship and security, or are repelled by it (not wanting to be living in it but it was the only accommodation on offer). How a person arrives at a project and whether they had

a choice impacts on their attitude to the staff and other residents.

“Looking back, it is a roof over our heads, kept us off the streets... It helps in lots of ways to prepare you to move to a self-contained place... know how to pay bills and networks. We’ve met a lot of people who can do things. Everyone has got talents and can help you with your CV, painting and decorating, building jobs. You can call on them when you have our own place.”

- Some groups expressed the attitude of tolerating perceived restrictions in order to benefit their position in the longer term (learning new skills, getting on with people, having access to onward housing); and
- The research team observed behaviours that could be termed ‘communality’ which is different from sharing. Communality is about people ‘knowing’ people, having some empathy and acting as a household for the common good. The power of peer support was evident in most of the case studies albeit to varying degrees.

Views of Supporting People teams

Supporting People personnel were contacted in most areas where the case studies were located. The key themes running through Supporting People responses were:

- **the strategic view versus pragmatism** – whilst some Supporting People authorities had a policy-based statement, based on the principle that self-contained accommodation was the best option and therefore the model of the future, most respondents indicated that they were dependent on the current number of shared supported housing

schemes and in the most part were keen to see them continue to offer a service;

- **value for money, scale and location** – in areas where Supporting People services were stretched due to geography, it was important that shared supported housing in areas of concentrated population should be used as bases for outreach-type services;
- **the problem of move-on** – securing adequate move-on accommodation was an issue for all respondents. This has prompted a number of initiatives to ensure that the detrimental effects of residents ‘outstaying’ their optimal time in a shared house is minimised;
- **suitability of client groups** – the majority of Supporting People respondents mentioned the benefits of peer support that they perceived came directly from the shared model. There was an acknowledgment that people with different support requirements derived different benefits from the shared nature of projects and that the most pronounced division is between those that intend the accommodation to be short stay from the outset (e.g. those fleeing domestic violence, ex-offenders and young people) and those who derive security from the notion of a longer-term stay (e.g. people with mental health issues or learning disabilities); and
- **supporting new developments and best practice** – for example:
 - o supporting bids for refurbishment of existing properties or the development of new projects where the element of sharing was carefully constructed to retain the peer group and communal support but where private living space was defined as self-contained, i.e. the best of both worlds;
 - o interest in the overall standard of accommodation and that this did not

preclude new shared accommodation per se. The preference for smaller unit size of projects is generally seen as beneficial (up to eight people), although this depended on client groups and the practicality of development costs; and

- o using client feedback on design and service delivery for new developments conducted formally through Supporting People teams where the overwhelming requirement from clients is to obtain self-contained accommodation with continued support and access to facilities/mechanisms that help retain valuable social networks. Core and cluster developments were felt to be a useful and fundable design for new developments.

Views of Chief Executives

We spoke with five of the Chief Executives/ Senior Officers of the housing associations participating in the research who gave their perspective on shared supported housing within their organisation.

Re-thinking the business case

Most housing associations’ business plans included strategies to reduce and/or develop shared supported housing, designed to:

- reduce the dependence on Supporting People funding where there was doubt over current projects being re-commissioned;
- reduce stock as part of an investment-led asset management strategy;
- plan for organisational change in advance of expected changes in revenue;
- respond to aspirations as seen in resident feedback exercises demanding more

access to self-contained accommodation and move-on;

- look for savings in management costs by linking projects; and
- reduce catering costs by building in kitchens (within the individual unit or by training kitchens) to enable residents to cater for themselves.

Not all redevelopment plans involved total overhaul of buildings, e.g. partial upgrades with a minimum standard for individual units to offer en-suite bathrooms were popular.

New development and upgrading of stock

All five housing associations anticipated or were involved in new development for their traditional client groups and were using their experience of shared housing (positive and negative) to think through new approaches that sought to continue the benefits of sharing (peer support, space for communal activity, security) whilst maximising the degree of self-containment. Models such as core and cluster to self-contained units with communal shared facilities, such as training kitchens, meeting areas and computer/homework areas, were very much 'on the agenda'. Whilst some associations wished to increase their turnover by contracting for 'support only' contracts, their property base continues to be crucial to the long-term business profile and identity.

The growing dependence on mutual understanding and partnerships

Specialist supported housing providers are, in the main, dependent on other housing organisations to secure move-on accommodation. As with the comments from Supporting People representatives, this is cited as a key strategic business development and operational factor, which

is preventing some projects from achieving their best outcomes.

The way forward

Evaluation model

The report offers an evaluation model that brings together the strategic and operational facets of an organisation wishing to review and act on the future of its shared supported housing. The key to this approach is systematically to ask questions that build up a confident business answer to whether each shared supported housing scheme has a place in the 21st century.

The model is based on the simple process of SWOT analysis (the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) and/or PEST analysis (Political, Economic, Social and Technological) approaches focused on shared supported housing. Most organisations will be familiar with these analytical tools and SWOT can usefully be applied at a scheme level whilst more strategic staff might wish to use PEST to broaden their business thinking.

Contextual issues

There are a number of issues that organisations should consider in the next period, say 2008-12:

- economic factors on new build costs to provide new housing under the Government's growth targets;
- projects that are revenue neutral or result in revenue savings through saving on overheads;
- asset improvement to the social rented stock; and
- proven added value through partnerships.

This study was funded by the Housing Corporation's Innovation and Good Practice (IGP) grant programme, which is administered by the Centre for Research and Market Intelligence (CRMI). The views expressed in it are not necessarily those of the Housing Corporation or CRMI.

In order to ensure continued commissioning and survival under the Local Area Agreements, devolved governance and budgetary arrangements, shared supported housing will have to show that:

- it is an understood and accepted model for specific vulnerable groups
- it is increasingly associated with a better quality of life for all; and
- it provides a consistent standard of facility and management.

For residents, it will have to show that it is a model of choice within a range of options.

Finally

Remembering the focus of this study – that of the impact of shared supported housing on those who live in it – the research suggests that the way forward must be based on rigorous, imaginative and inclusive evaluation for every housing organisation with shared supported housing. That means focusing on this housing type in a comprehensive way.

If shared supported housing is to become as accepted as, say, sheltered housing for older people, it has to have a makeover in terms of brand. The brand has to have integrity and provide what the customer wants.

If shared supported housing is to survive and develop, there needs to be definition of the model and clarity on what it offers as distinct from other forms of housing and support. Saying or believing it is a second best option does not reflect the best the model can offer.

Housing organisations need to make a robust, well-informed, comprehensive business case for the model, before making decisions to dispose or develop.

Ironically, it is perhaps the new approaches to individual budget holding that will determine both the next phase of shared housing and who will choose to leave and who will choose to stay. It will perhaps also provide the impetus and encouragement for new designs and innovative forms of management to mark out this model as a real housing choice.

“Looking back, you get some independence before living completely on your own and that gives you confidence and sense that you can cope when you move on.”