

Date of Meeting 21 January 2021

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

---

## Your Home Your Wellbeing Research Report

### **Report summary:**

This report presents the results and conclusions of a three year research partnership between East Devon District Council's (EDDC) housing department, the University of Birmingham's Research Centre on Household Assets and Saving Management (CHASM), and LiveWest.

The objective of the partnership was to build a richer understanding of people's experience of their home and the relationship between their home, landlord and wellbeing.

Over 3,500 social tenants, private renters (those on the Devon Home Choice housing register) and those in shared ownership responded to the survey. 58 respondents were also interviewed, some of whom were contacted over all three years of the study.

The key findings are below and a comprehensive report can be found as an appendix to this report.

- Having a good home matters to life overall life satisfaction and happiness
- Social housing has a positive impact on all aspects of wellbeing. It helps to reduce levels of anxiety, particularly for those facing mental health challenges, are less likely to report that they are struggling financially and are more likely to report that they are satisfied with their life.
- Respondents who do not feel safe or who feel they have no control in their home are more likely to report lower levels of life-satisfaction and are more likely to be anxious. Respondents who feel that they have privacy and control in their homes are more likely to report being happy.
- Satisfaction with the local area in which a home is situated is associated with higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction, and with lower levels of anxiety
- Half of all of those who we surveyed report that they are struggling to make ends meet. Those struggling to make ends meet are more likely to be anxious and less likely to be happy or satisfied with their life
- Respondents were likely to report that they experience poor mental health if they are less than 65 years old, are living alone, are living with non dependent children or feel like their home affects their wellbeing in a negative way
- Universal Credit is not working well for everyone and, in particular, it has a negative impact on the wellbeing of claimants with mental health challenges

What is at the heart of this research is a home is truly more than bricks and mortar.

As a social landlord what we do really does make a difference to the lives of our tenants from ensuring our stock is maintained to a high level to the additional support services we provide to our tenants as a social landlord.

The report also supports the growing national consensus that something needs to be 'done' about housing for many people living in East Devon. It is well documented that there is not just a shortage of housing across all tenures but for many people they are living in unsuitable and unaffordable homes and with few options for how to improve their housing situation. The result for many people is housing insecurity and financial struggle, with resultant negative impacts on wellbeing.

### **Recommendation:**

1. Where appropriate to use evidence from this research to support housing's decision making and service planning
2. Ensure all teams within housing have access to the advice and expertise of the mental health specialist for supporting East Devon tenants
3. Better understand the housing needs of those on the Devon Home Choice register and support them on their housing journey
4. Continue to invest in our homes and neighbourhoods and ensure repairs and the programme works done to our properties are of a high standard
5. Support our universal credit claimants by helping them to maintain their tenancies and offer budgetary and financial advice where necessary
6. Continue to work with others to provide more housing opportunities and choices for people living in East Devon.

### **Reason for recommendation:**

As a social landlord we must continue to provide a good quality housing service to our tenants but also remember East Devon's housing situation is no different to the national picture with many people continuing to be in housing need or with limited housing choices. We must work with partners and within our Council to address the housing situation faced by many whilst also celebrating social housing successes.

Officer: Natalie Brown, [nabrown@eastdevon.gov.uk](mailto:nabrown@eastdevon.gov.uk), 01395 515783

---

Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action
- Corporate Services and COVID-19 Response and Recovery
- Democracy and Transparency
- Economy and Assets
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Finance
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities

### **Financial implications:**

There are no financial implications

## Legal implications:

There are no legal implications on which to comment.

## Equalities impact Low Impact

## Climate change Low Impact

**Risk:** Choose a risk level; [Click here](#) to enter text on risk considerations relating to your report.

**Links to background information** [Your Home Your Wellbeing Final Report](#)

[Your Home Your Wellbeing Year 2](#)

[Housing and Wellbeing Summary](#)

[Housing and Wellbeing Summary Final](#)

## Link to [Council Plan](#):

Priorities (check which apply)

- Outstanding Place and Environment
- Outstanding Homes and Communities
- Outstanding Economic Growth, Productivity, and Prosperity
- Outstanding Council and Council Services

## 1 Purpose of the research

1.1 To provide better data about the homes and services we, and others, provide and the relationship a home has on wellbeing.

1.2 Understanding customer experiences and satisfaction is pivotal to any service provider. We take pride in knowing how our tenants rate our services and we use satisfaction and performance information to benchmark how we are doing compared to others and to tell us about areas which need improvement.

1.3 Major change in policy from rent reductions to welfare reform has started to challenge housing providers and tenants in new ways. Now is the time to put in place research which can measure these changes. If not, we will not be able to properly interpret our satisfaction data and will land up making unsatisfactory inferences about the data.

1.4 It is also timely to start considering a different approach to how and what we ask our tenants. For too long satisfaction questions have been landlord driven with tenants being asked to rate our services but it is time to put the tenant rather than the landlord at the heart of our research. Finding out about the effects our homes and services may have on our tenants should be the research priority. This would allow us to reach a deeper understanding of tenant experience, going beyond snap shot satisfaction surveys and looking at the relationship between social housing and longer term life chances and opportunities.

1.5 Housing affects us all and for too long we have only focused on our social tenants without understanding what the housing situation and aspirations are for others living in East Devon.

## 2 Background

2.1 As a landlord we have a responsibility to ensure we provide a decent home and service for all our tenants. Over the years the role of social housing providers has changed and we now no longer just provide housing but we offer additional support services that we believe are of benefit to our tenants and communities. As our remit grows and changes it becomes increasingly important we understand what our role is and the impact our housing and our services have on our tenant's quality of life now and for the future. Recent evidence suggests housing tenure can impact on individual social, economic and psychological well being. It has explored whether housing could do more to reduce the disadvantage of those who spend time living in it, what the

actual effect social housing tenure may have on its residents, how these effects might be created, when and on whom the effects might be strongest and what the implications are for all involved.

2.2 Traditionally, we have relied on one off pieces of research (eg. STAR survey) to measure our tenants experiences and satisfaction with our services. This kind of research is useful to monitor the 'standard' of our services and benchmark satisfaction levels with those of other housing providers. However, there are disadvantages and questions are being asked about whether these surveys remain fit for purpose. There is a sense of frustration amongst some providers around how experiences of particular services affect overall reported satisfaction and the fact that a landlord might be meeting all service targets but tenants are still dissatisfied with the service, and the organisation overall (HCAT, 2015). Understanding what else might be going on and what other factors might be influencing and determining tenant satisfaction is becoming an increasingly more attractive research proposition.

2.3 A longitudinal study is an observational research method in which data is repeatedly gathered from the same subjects over a period of time. The advantage of this methodology is that it can measure the impact of policy change and can map our tenants' journey providing us with a deeper understanding of what the relationship is between tenant wellbeing and home helping us to shape our future approach for social housing service delivery. It can also help us to measure change and make more accurate inferences about our tenants experiences and expectations. The practical insights would also provide original and important contribution to the current policy and research debate, and provide us with an opportunity to influence the national debate.

2.4 Birmingham University and LiveWest agreed to partner us on this project. Amongst many benefits it brings the research quados, objectiveness and an academic robustness to the study. It was also be a great opportunity to work in partnership with a local social housing provider and academic institution providing us with information about those living in different tenures across East Devon.

### **3 Key Findings**

3.1 Our three years of data strongly suggests that social housing has a positive impact on individual wellbeing relative to other tenure options examined. Of our 4 wellbeing items, the most noticeable differences between social tenants and DHC registrants is in the levels of anxiety; the proportion of EDDC/LiveWest renters or shared owners who feel anxious are 12 percentage points (pp) (34% v 46%) lower than DHC registrants, and also those less satisfied with their lives at 13.9 pp (66.3% v 52.4%) lower. This data strongly suggests that social housing as a tenure has an important (positive) influence on wellbeing. This headline result is also maintained once a range of differing personal characteristics were controlled for as part of the multivariate analysis.

3.2 The value of security of tenure in social housing was also important. One interviewee, who was a recovering drug user and who used to sleep rough, moved into a social home in 2018. He told us that "*Getting a flat has made such a difference to my life, it's made a huge difference..... I now feel safe, you know I go home, lock the door, if I don't want to answer the door if someone knocks, I don't have to, but I generally do because I feel safe there, 'cos I am*". In subsequent interviews the stability of the social home continued to feature highly as an important factor in this participant's wellbeing.

3.3 There is a strong relationship between wellbeing and experiences of the home and that good experiences of the home translated to improved personal wellbeing and with landlord. Respondents who are satisfied with their landlords are 3.4 pp more likely to report being satisfied with life. Respondents who do not feel safe in their home are 3.4 pp less likely to report that they are satisfied with life.

3.4 Respondents who are satisfied with their local area are 13.2 pp more likely to report being happy, 8.5 pp more likely to report being satisfied with life, and 4.1 pp less likely to report being anxious. Positive perceptions of neighbourhood cohesion are related to higher levels of wellbeing. More specifically, respondents who hold positive perceptions of neighbourhood cohesion are 4.4 pp more likely to feel happy and 7.4 pp more likely to be satisfied with life.

3.5 Good social landlords play a significant role in the wellbeing of social tenants – over and above the material outcomes of the services and work they undertake. After controlling for a wide range of other factors, respondents who are satisfied with their landlords are 25.7 pp less likely to say there is a problem with their home that negatively affects their wellbeing. Satisfaction with maintenance and repairs are both associated with more happiness and less anxiety.

3.6 There are many factors that influence a person's sense of wellbeing. In our analysis we also sought to control for a number of such influences that are well documented in wellbeing research beyond the core features and physical aspects of the home that were our primary focus in this study. These include things such as physical health, marital status and employment history. But there are also other influences on wellbeing that intersect with social housing and which are not as well understood in the existing evidence and research base. A key example of this is financial wellbeing, and in particular in the context of this study's focus; the impact of housing costs and the benefits system. Across all of our sample, 49% of respondents say that they are struggling to make ends meet and the survey was able to identify the most prevalent characteristics of individuals who are most likely to report that they are struggling to make ends meet - female respondents, those with dependent children, respondents who are claiming universal credit and those who reported poor mental health. Overall respondents struggling to make ends meet are 10.1 pp more likely to be anxious, 10.1 pp less likely to be happy and 10.7 pp less likely to feel satisfied with life. Compared to the general population, the respondents to our survey are disproportionately from low income groups. But the results we have presented above point to a more complex set of interactions occurring in this population that create financial issues that go beyond the fact that this is lower income group than the average UK population

3.7 The richness of the data has also given us insights into respondents' experiences of home. Top problems for social tenants were paying bills, keeping warm and noisy neighbours and for those on the register it was the cost of rent, paying bills and having a suitable home. Women, those reporting poor mental health.

3.8 Being able to interview a number of the respondents over a number of years for the duration of the research has supported the findings of our quantitative data that having a secure and affordable home has huge benefits for positive wellbeing. Those who had moved into a social home during the study or just before it began spoke of the huge impact it had on their, and in some cases their family's quality of life. a working age man who had lost his well-paying job after some serious health difficulties, and who had been living in a social home for nearly a year when we interviewed him, for the first time, in the third year of the project. Describing a private landlord who refused to make important repairs and threatened retaliatory eviction, he told us he was in a "very bad place". The first impression on moving into a social home was being "*thankful for a clean place with straight walls*".

3.9 Attached to this report is a longer and more in depth report of the study. Three infographics for each year of the study are also included which presents the key results in an interesting and more visual way.

## **4 Conclusions**

4.1 The research has provided us with better data about the homes and services we provide and their impact on the wellbeing of our tenants and others living in East Devon.

4.2 Understanding customer experiences and satisfaction is pivotal to any service provider. This 3 years study has shown a reduction in satisfaction amongst our own tenants with our service and this is something we need to listen to and improve upon. However, it has also shed light on a group of people living in East Devon who are really struggling and where we can we must try to act. We can, for example, continue putting pressure on private landlords to improve their homes and maintain standards, further understand those on the Devon Home Choice waiting list and

ensure the right people are being housed in the right homes at the right time and for those who might not be eligible for a social home to find innovative ways to help them in their housing journey.

4.3 With cuts and the closure of local temporary housing solutions, we are seeing an increasing number of people who are vulnerable and with highly complex needs needing to be housed. Support for them is falling to the landlord which, as the research has found, is a hugely important factor in improving their wellbeing. However, this presents challenges for the service from finding the right home in the right place to extra resource into helping maintain tenancies to officers needing expertise to deal with some of the issues. The research has provided additional evidence supporting what officers have been saying are the difficulties for the last couple of years and as such a new mental health specialist is going to be recruited to support the teams. Officers are also continuing to refer tenants and work closely with partner agencies, like homemaker, who can provide financial support. Many officers (such as our rental officers) are also offering this support. Whether more additional support is needed in this area is something that might be worth looking into.

4.4 Continuing to ensure we manage our repairs contract to a high standard remains a priority since a good home is associated with happiness and less anxiety. The results of this survey could also support an opportunity to look at planned works in a different and more flexible way taking into account the impact not doing a certain job might be having on the tenant rather than making decisions based on when upgrades or new planned work is due.

4.5 Finally, social housing in England has often been treated as a tenure of last resort. As a result, much of the political and policy debate about social housing has revolved around negative narratives of dependency and social disadvantage, with social tenants labelled and stigmatised. Even when social housing is not treated in this negative way, policy makers can be still guilty of discussing social housing like it is missing something important. When the social tenant is at the heart of the conversation the focus is often on hard metric measurements, such as employment and educational outcomes which disproportionately represents social housing in a negative light. However, this research measures life outcomes and success in a different way: what kind of home makes for a happy and fulfilled life? And in asking this we realise that social housing has much to offer society and to celebrate.