



# Supported housing in global austerity: Local providers fears for the future in Gloucestershire, England



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## ABSTRACT

Shelter is a key component of an individual's well-being and as a consequence is an area of policy development that cuts across national policies including welfare, health and social. Supported housing is a sub-set of the wider category of social housing, offering support services intended to help people with a range of challenges live as independently as possible. This paper is based on case study research in an English county that has a diverse range of rural and urban contexts. The analysis draws on evidence gathered mainly from interviews with decision-makers representing the largest supported housing providers in the region across a range of specialisms and needs provision. The research demonstrates that supported housing professionals have a range of concerns for the future of supported housing provision. Respondents reported that reforms to welfare payments and funding of housing support is creating great concern for the organisations and the fracturing of services meant it was increasingly difficult to offer comprehensive coverage in the county. However, the housing professionals also discussed a range of innovative and entrepreneurial responses to these uncertainties. This paper concludes that on the one hand there is a real and pressing threat of increased residualisation within the sector and within services for these most vulnerable groups reduced in both their scope and coverage. While on the other hand, those organisations able to operate more flexibly, and who were communicating effectively with local authorities, felt they had the best chance to respond to uncertainty in the policy landscape.

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## 1. Introduction

Access to shelter is a right enshrined in the international Convention on Human Rights and explained by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN Habitat, 2009). Shelter is a key component of an individual's and a household's wellbeing and as a consequence is an area of policy development that often cuts across a number of ministries and government departments. The UK is not an exception. Provision of shelter for the most vulnerable groups in society overlaps with welfare, health and social support. Consequently, those accessing this support are much more susceptible to political and economic uncertainty. Although this vulnerability is an issue intrinsic to this complicated and multilayered support for these at risk individuals, it was made particularly evident through changes to welfare provisions during the period following Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and the austerity measures put into place in many countries, including the United Kingdom.

It is our contention in this paper that reductions in funding and reforms in welfare provisions have an overlapping effect on housing and living support, and that those who are at risk or in need in society are often most exposed to the impacts of these changes. However, it is often not until these changes have had an impact that key agents working in this sector have a chance to reflect on the impacts these changes have had, how they have responded and in retrospect how *best* to respond. This paper focuses on the perspectives of the professionals working on the provision of housing to vulnerable groups in a county of the UK. It gathers evidence from these professions to explore their fears and concerns around changes, particularly in the context of the global financial crisis (GFC). As such, it acts as a scoping exercise that outlines key areas of concern for professionals working in supported housing in the UK. These key concerns offer a guide for future research that can detail the ongoing and changing impacts for both providers and for the individuals that access this support.

Uncertainty is part of modern politics and policy change is nothing new. However, the significant policies of austerity that were part of the UK government's response to the GFC have heightened this uncertainty and has, more importantly, led to a range of policy changes that impact on the different services involved in housing

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and support. A particular concern, and the primary focus of this paper, are the impacts of these policy changes on supported housing: that is, the particular branch of social housing that incorporates higher levels of subsidised support for those judged to be most at-risk in society. As a result, Jacobs & Manzi argue that recent reforms in welfare policy, particularly in relation to social housing, merit research attention:

'a key feature of the contemporary housing landscape is the accentuation of policies to encourage local government agencies to disengage from service delivery and the implementation of new mechanisms to enable private sector agencies to provide and manage social housing. These processes are enabling fundamental shifts in the governance of housing, yet they have been subjected to limited empirical research' (Jacobs & Manzi, 2013; p. 7).

Jacobs & Manzi assert that there is therefore a significant 'gap in knowledge' (2013: 10) around the changes that are shaping housing policy and provision, which has become particularly important at a time when changes are taking place in the sector that are profound. Similarly, Beer et al. (2011; p. 1189) note that the GFC 'has created both the need and the opportunity for innovation in housing policies across nations.' However, the link between cuts in housing investment and other aspects of welfare appear not to be a straightforward linear relationship. In France, Wong and Goldblum (2016) highlight complexities in the relationship between social housing and public welfare on the one hand and public expenditure on the other that are not linear. While research in Australia shows that:

'... such concerns are misplaced and that the imagined risks to public sector borrowing capacity are more than negated by improvements in population wellbeing and, potentially, consequent reductions in public sector outlays on health and other social services.' (Beer et al., 2011; p. 1190).

This paper is a scoping exercise that explores some of these key issues of supported housing service provision at a time of uncertainty. It begins with a review of the role that supported housing plays in the United Kingdom and the context of uncertainty which has become heightened in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. Then, through a case-study of supported housing providers in Gloucestershire based on a range of interviews, the paper explores the fears and concerns of service providers in Gloucestershire, examining the emerging strategies they are considering and using in order to mitigate some of these issues. A discussion of key themes emerging from this localised case-study illustrates how specific policy changes are impacting on the sector in the UK and how the concepts raised speak to parallel change further afield.

The authors have a history of working in relation to supported housing, including running joint projects in concert with local supported housing organisations; managing student-led research projects on aspects of housing including social housing and in the past working directly for supported housing bodies. Consequently they bring a wide range of industry experience to the research in the project, but they are now university-based researchers independent of any supported housing provider.

## 2. Understanding uncertainty and supported housing

There is a need for more research and evidence in the social and supported housing sectors, particularly in the context of uncertainty (O'Malley, 2004) and at a time of austerity. This section considers several key themes around supported housing and the impacts of uncertainty, austerity driven changes, including the link between austerity and housing support, the role supported housing

plays in contemporary societies, and the ways in which this paper is assessing the challenges facing the sector.

### 2.1. Supported housing in the UK

There are several different types of housing provision that are commonly misunderstood or confused with one another: social housing; supported housing; and emergency housing. The confusion is, in many cases, understandable as there are significant overlaps between the three. Broadly speaking, social housing refers to what might have once been referred to as council housing, that is, housing that is provided at a reduced rate, or built as affordable housing for those who have limited—or vulnerable—economic means.

In the United Kingdom, social housing is defined in the *Housing and Regeneration Act (2008; section 68)* as 'low cost rental accommodation ... and ... low cost home ownership accommodation'. Similarly, the national housing charity, Shelter, describe social housing as that which is 'let at low rents on a secure basis to those who are most in need or struggling with their housing costs' (Shelter, 2015 p1).

In the UK, social housing is generally divided into two main categories: 'council' housing and housing association dwellings. The majority of council properties, of which there are around 2.2 million, were built in the early- to mid-twentieth century by local authorities with significant levels of state subsidy. On the other hand housing associations, which are now the predominant builder of social accommodation, account for around 2.7 million residences and fund their construction using a mixture of subsidies and other resources including private finance (Pawson and Wilcox, 2012; Ferrari, 2015).

At the other end of the scale from social housing, emergency housing is the provision of short term temporary accommodation for those in extreme need. Emergency housing in recent times has been in the public attention with the amount of money being spent by local councils on B&B (ref/evidence). Other types of emergency housing include day or night shelters that take people on day-to-day basis. In a report on Homelessness and emergency accommodation, the Local government Ombudsman states that '55,300 households were in temporary accommodation on 31 March 2013, a 14 percent increase on the same date in 2011', and of these, 4500 were in bed and breakfast accommodation (LGO, 2013: 2).

Supported housing sits in between social and emergency housing, often involving people in both types of accommodation. A government-commissioned report defined Supported Housing as housing that 'provides strategically planned housing related services which are typically parts of packages of support and potentially other services (which may be provided by the public, private or third sector)' (Ashton & Hempenstall, 2009; p. 5).

Supported housing provision has typically been paid for in a combination of ways. Central funding from local government and the Supporting People Agency provided a portion of the expenses, however in most cases, the majority of funding came from individual claims through housing benefit, occasionally supplemented with small weekly additional payments from this money. The NHF reported that reduced allocation of funds to this programme is 'putting the very existence of supported housing at risk' (NHF, 2015; p. 7). The NHF reported that the National Audit Office estimated Supporting People budget cuts to be 45% between 2010/11 and 2014/15.

The National Housing Federation, an alliance of UK organisations that provide social and supported housing, describe supported housing as including 'some of the most vulnerable people in society who face barriers that go far beyond housing. Those receiving support can be socially isolated, have physical and mental health

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