Housing and Wellbeing
Community Views and Experience

Commission on Housing and Wellbeing

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Introduction

Shelter commissioned the Poverty Alliance to undertake community engagement across Scotland on the subject of Housing and Wellbeing as a contribution to the Commission on Housing and Welling. The work involved a series of workshops, focus groups and case studies. A total of 212 people have been engaged in this work. The workshops and focus groups used participatory methods to encourage discussions amongst the participants.

Participants in the focus groups and workshops were identified through the Poverty Alliance's existing network of community and voluntary organisations. The aim was to ensure that a range of voices and views could be accessed as part of the work, with a particular emphasis on engaging with those whose experiences may not always be captured and for whom housing issues were of critical importance. In addition, we sought to ensure that a diverse range of participants were involved in the research, including people with experience of mental ill-health, refugees, women with experience of domestic violence, young people, and people living in rural areas.

It should be noted that with regard to recruitment of individuals for the focus groups and workshops the approach adopted was a deliberate attempt to identify those whose experiences could have been problematic in relation to housing and its impact on their wellbeing. This approach has undoubtedly meant that we have focused on some of the more negative aspects of their housing experience.

The following organisations were involved in discussions:

- Bridging the Gap, Glasgow Gorbals
- Scottish Refugee Council
- Cumbernauld Locality Network
- Cope Drumchapel
- Motherwell Locality Network
- Dundee Young Parents project
- Poverty Alliance Community Activists Advisory Group

- Womens Aid North Ayrshire
- Fife Gingerbread
- Airdrie Locality Network
- Friends of Volunteering Clydesdale
- Grassmarket Community Project, Edinburgh

The Poverty Alliance would like to thank all of those who took part in workshops, focus groups and case studies for their engagement and support in this work.

Section One: Housing, Health and Wellbeing

Importance of relationships

Across all areas of activity, housing was recognised as being essential to the physical and emotional well being of individuals and their families. People linked safe, secure and affordable accommodation as essential to positive health outcomes in relation to physical and mental wellbeing. On the other hand housing that was unsuitable in terms of affordability, location and quality was argued to contribute to negative outcomes for people. People in both workshops and focus groups highlighted the negative impact on mental health as a result of inadequate housing. This was as a result of stress, anxiety and depression, isolation for individuals and their families. Physical health outcomes highlighted included respiratory problems, cold related illness, and other impacts such as food poverty.

Housing was a central linchpin to well being, where people could achieve positive outcomes for health through their daily lives. People discussed housing in the importance of 'home' a space where they could rest and relax, a space where they could have family and friends visit which would promote social interaction. A place where care needs could be met and families could grow and develop. Whilst poor housing had the negative impacts described above, it was clear to participants that decent housing was central to their wellbeing.

Secure affordable housing, was seen as important for all and important to ensuring that people were able to live healthy and happy lives in terms of both physical and emotional needs.

Austerity

Many participants highlighted the challenges households faced in regards to physical and mental wellbeing as a result of welfare reform and austerity. Pressures on

household incomes were felt to be increasing in regards to rising fuel prices, rising food prices and other living costs. For low income households ways of mitigating this impact were felt to be limited or in some cases non existent.

It was emphasised the cumulative pressures households were facing, meant it was increasingly difficult to meet their housing costs in particular, there were challenges faced by those across all different types of housing tenure: within the private rented sector, mortgages and within social housing as a result of under occupancy or the 'bedroom tax'.

People discussed different mechanisms and strategies for dealing with shortfalls in this income and the sacrifices they were making. This included reducing consumption for example food or fuel; many examples were highlighted of people making the choice to have a meal or to heat their homes. It was anticipated this pressure was likely to increase on households within winter months.

Specific groups were at particular risk of pressure, families with children, and people with disabilities. The groups that contained individuals with mental health problems all spoke of the fear of sanctions, and the stress and worry that this brought. For users of these groups the support provided by a range of community based initiatives was critical in helping them deal with the impact of welfare change and the sense of insecurity it brought. The role of community and voluntary organisation support is an issue we return to below.

Housing Quality

Quality of housing was seen as underpinning much discussion on the individuals feeling of wellbeing in relation to health. Poor housing quality had serious impacts on wellbeing. Two key problems were presented- dampness and poorly insulated properties. Both impacted on households in terms of physical and mental health problems.

Information on rights and support available to address with damp or poorly insulated housing issues was highlighted. Examples of energy inefficient heating were raised such as storage heaters.

People spoke of being unsure where to get help or what their rights were. This was particularly prominent amongst those in private accommodation. Some participants discussed repeatedly highlighting issues to landlords but these concerns not being adhered to. In such situations tenants often described feeling powerless and this had effects such as stress, depression, anxiety. Physical health impacts highlighted had been severe for example respiratory illness, depression as a result of damp or cold housing. Households also reported higher costs and money spent for example trying to deal or mitigate the effects of poor quality housing.

The experiences around damp and fuel inefficient housing were widely discussed. For those in the private sector appeared to be more vulnerable than those in social housing were often able to access more resources to assist with fuel poverty. Some participants, the young parents for example, highlighted that living within damp housing had severe consequences in terms of impacts on family life for example disruption to school attendance and performance.

Access to Housing

Appropriate access to housing was deemed to be critical. Many discussed long waiting lists for social housing. Frustration and lack of information was highlighted over allocation policies. The pressure for housing within certain areas was very high. Some spoke of limited choice as a result of income and being forced to take accommodation they were unsatisfied with or didn't meet their needs.

The under occupancy or bedroom tax was felt to have exacerbated the problems within social housing providers as people were looking to move to properties that were often unavailable.

Refugee and asylum seekers had specific points about the accommodation they were offered. It was perceived that they were offered sub standard accommodation or accommodation where individuals were allocated accommodation that might be against their cultural and religious preferences. For example being housed in shared accommodation with Muslims being asked to share accommodation with communal cooking facilities with non Muslims who may cook and eat pork products within shared facilities.

> *"For asylum seekers accommodation there should be more regular inspections to ensure that the house is fit for purpose"* *(*Voice of participant*)*

Lack of specialist housing provision was highlighted for specific needs such as sheltered housing for the elderly. Within an ageing population within Scotland this was highlighted as a current need and one that was likely to face further pressure. Participants discussed that an ageing population had different health needs that would require adapted and suitable accommodation for example to deal with conditions such as dementia and other care needs.

The 'Bedroom Tax'

Under occupancy or the 'bedroom tax' was mentioned across almost all the engagement activity carried out within this project. This was seen as a significant threat to households and communities. A variety of issues were raised in connection to the bedroom tax from the 'coping mechanisms' applied by households (reducing expenditure on items such as food and fuel), issues accessing discretionary housing payment, the issue of rent arrears and the difficulties finding appropriate alternative

accommodation. In relation to wellbeing, it was clear that the bedroom tax was having a real impact on individual health, particularly on their mental health.

Under occupancy or the 'bedroom tax' applied to tenants within social rented housing and affects the amount of the housing benefit a household is allocated for the property they live in. If a household is classed as 'under occupying' then they will be subject to a shortfall in the housing benefit which will be based on a sliding scale dependent on the number of bedrooms they are classed as under occupying.[i]

The under occupancy was felt across the board to be unfair and targeted at vulnerable households. Many examples were given of the difficult circumstances that households classed as under occupying were facing such as people with disabilities who were being penalised for having a spare room.

Financial implications of meeting the bedroom tax had presented severe distress and anxiety for households. People discussed the challenges of finding the money to meet the payments required of them. Mechanisms included skipping meals, reducing social and leisure activities.

Some participants spoke of the collection of payments. One participant had been given a programme by their local housing provider. This outlined when payments were due and included a payment due Boxing Day. They discussed how stressful this was on their social wellbeing knowing they would have to find extra money. People discussed the problems of being unable to find the money and knowing that they were accumulating arrears. This caused worry and fear around the long term implications of this such as evictions. Participants discussed being aware of increased likelihood of arrears or already incurring arrears.

"*How am I going to find that extra money at Christmas*?" (Voice of participant)

Discretionary housing payments (DHP) are available to provide financial assistance for households who are 'unable to meet housing costs from their available income.'[ii] Some individuals indicted they had been limited in been unaware of discretionary housing payments or had problems accessing information on how to apply and eligibility criteria for this. Criticism were made that people have received detailed information about how to pay the under occupancy but a lack of provision on concessions and exemptions.

> *"The bedroom tax needs scrapped, why are they doing this to people?" (*Voice of participant)

It was highlighted that people who had indicated to their housing provider that they would like to swap or move from their property had been unable to do so as there was a shortfall of available properties.

> *"Bedroom tax takes £ 53 out of my money, I can't eat a healthy diet, I do not have enough money and this hit really hard on the vulnerable." (*Voice of participant)

Across households the anxiety around meeting the payment of the under occupancy was extensive. People spoke of the stress and worry about meeting the costs of the bedroom tax. It was felt to be a disproportionate tax on the poorest and most vulnerable within society.

> *"In response to welfare reform people were willing to swap their homes but there was no swap list available locally. People are worried sick about how they meet the shortfall to cover the rent*"   (*Voice of participant)

Case study: Under Occupancy and Accessing Discretionary Housing Benefits

Julie, aged, 49 is affected by the under occupancy charge or the bedroom tax. Julie is affected by a chronic bowel disorder, osteoarthritis, depression and lives in an adapted property for her illness.

Julie was aware in October 2012, in advance of the bedroom tax, approximately five months before the policy was due to be enacted. Julie was expected to pay £ 10 per week as a result of the under occupancy charge. In total this would be an additional £ 40 per month she would have to contribute on top of her rent. She tried to contact her local housing to get assistance with this. She was told she wouldn't be able to apply for assistance until the 1st of April 2013. Julie was extremely worried about the implications of finding the extra money. She was worried about the threat of eviction. This impacted greatly on her health. Her health condition is exacerbated by stress.

She tried to contact the housing association with support in January 2013. She again failed to get help from them. Julie was hospitalised in March with her chronic condition. She was also suffering with depression during this time. An appointment was then made with local charitable advice centre. She waited 8 weeks for this appointment. At the end of March she had her first appointment with this service.

The advice service was appalled at the lack of support she had received with her situation. They said she should have been treated as a priority case given her situation. They applied for discretionary housing payment on her behalf. In the interim she had to pay the under occupancy charge. This meant she had to cut back on food, she skipped meals for herself for two days a week to pay it.

She received the award in mid June. The payment however was not backdated till August. She had to pay the bedroom tax until August. The Discretionary Housing Payment award ran out in September and Julie needs to reapply.

Julie's Discretionary Payment only partially covered under occupancy charge of the £10 per week she is expected to cover £ 4.00 of this, the DHP covers £6.00 which means Julie still has to find £ 16.00 per month. The backdated payment is now covering Julie, for the following 2 and half months. Julie now faces re applying for the discretionary payment again. This is in addition to applying for Disability Living Allowance which she has been in receipt for 15 years and Employment Support Allowance meaning the next few months will bring additional stress and financial insecurity for Julie.

Housing tenure

Several issues arose in relation to housing tenure. The types of tenure people had, owner occupier, private rented, rented from local authority, rented from housing association, affected the choices and issues they faced in regards to their housing.

For those who were in private rented accommodation, insecurity of accommodation was highlighted and participants discussed having to move from properties at short notice. This had repercussions in terms of stress and anxiety. Issues of repairs were also prominent.

For those within social housing, some raised the issues of being unable to make changes to the property without prior permission. Within one workshop an issue was raised on the repair procedures by their local housing provider.

> *"It is stressful for me at the minute; I had to empty my kitchenette as housing said they were going to refurbish them. They can't tell when they are coming, everything is now in boxes in the hall. It is a fire hazard"* (Voice of participant)

Types of properties were also seen as problematic for example tower block accommodation was viewed as creating exclusion and was viewed as less desirable to live in.

Private landlords

Those within private landlord accommodation raised several key issues on housing. Many tenants of private landlords highlighted lack of rights in regards to their accommodation. Issues were wide ranging including security of property, quality of accommodation, repairs and maintenance of property, dealing with the landlord, fees and charges.

Many private tenants highlighted problems within their property. This ranged from dampness to broken appliances. One tenant described being told to stay away from the electricity box as there was asbestos in the cupboard. They were unaware of if they had any rights in regards to this. Information on asbestos states that it can be dangerous if the asbestos used within the property is damaged in any way. Asbestos within a property should also be monitored in case of dangerous dust[1].

Under rules for private landlord rental under the Repairing Standard, contained in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006, brings together statutory and contractual repairing obligations of private landlords. Within this there is a requirement that landlord must ensure the house is wind and water tight and reasonably fit for human habitation. The structure and exterior, various installations, fixtures, fittings and appliances must be satisfactory.[2] Furnishings provided must be safe. Smoke alarms are also required. Landlords must inform tenants in writing about the standard before the start of any new tenancy.

Despite the rights outlined above tenants had often not had those rights exercised in practice. Several spoke of not having smoke alarms within the property that were working. This was despite them living in property with children.

> *"We did not have any fire alarms in the house at all which made me panic. I said to the landlord that this was illegal and he said rubbish"* (Voice of participant)

> *" I had the council out to check as part of a safety check, they came and told me that the fire alarms that were there were absolutely useless and put new ones up for me"* (Voice of participant)

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[1] Shelter Scotland (2013) 'Asbestos in the home'
http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/advice_topics/repairs_and_bad_conditions/home_safety/asbestos_in_the_home
[2] Scottish government (2013) 'The rules'

Several also spoke of dampness within their property. This had huge impacts on wider wellbeing as well as resulting in high levels of costs for participants to deal with replacing things damaged by the dampness. One participant described having to replace children's clothing, curtains blinds, children's beds and other things as a result of the dampness in property. Participants described being under financial pressure trying to meet these costs and having to cut back on other living expenses. Higher heating costs were also reported as a result of trying to keep property drier. Participants also reported issues with safety of properties for example doors that didn't close tightly and had spaces between door frame and door.

Tenancy agreements were also a key issue. Private landlord tenants spoke of being given, for example, verbal agreements for changes or alterations to a property and then being told that changes they had made would be subject for a charge. Some landlords withheld deposits.

Tenants reported being charges in regard to renewal of leases. In addition there were concerning issues reported of landlords misleading tenants to sign over their housing benefit rights within tenancy agreements which then exempted them from being able to deal with their housing benefit and gave further control to the landlord. In one particular case where this happened the landlord was then able to increase the rent and therefore gain additional housing benefit. Some tenants also reported threats including verbally aggressive or emotionally manipulative behaviour from their landlord. This included behaviour that was extremely distressing to female tenants.

> *"I would never go back to a private let ever. No matter how desperate was, I would never go back to a private let"* (Voice of participant)

Leaving a private tenancy was also highlighted as problematic. Moving on was financially difficult as deposit were often withheld which had knock on impacts in terms of things such as removal costs.

Section Two: Housing and Social Wellbeing

Employment and Housing

Question around employment and unemployment were central to issues of social wellbeing for many of the participants of the workshops and focus groups. Accessing decently paid employment underpinned the kinds of housing choices that could be made. Participants argued that lack of income impacted greatly on housing choice and security. Without security and adequacy of income housing choices were constrained many individuals felt vulnerable either vulnerable to eviction or trapped within accommodation and unable to leave it despite for example changing needs i.e. requiring a larger property. As in so many of the other discussions around wellbeing, the issue of choice was central. Without access to decent employment some individuals felt that they were unable to exercise effective choices regarding their housing, and that this lack of choice had an impact on their individual wellbeing.

Poor quality employment, including issues such as low pay, temporary work, inflexible hours and in particular zero hour contracts, were seen as contributing to the insecurity of housing. Some participants expressed concern about the use of zero hours contracts. This left one participant on a very irregular income, with significant shortfalls in his income on a month to month basis. People felt that more should be done to address the widespread use of zero hours contracts, particularly in the way that this could impact on the ability to pay rents and the access to welfare benefits.

One group discussed the lack of job opportunities for young people in their community. This was seen as having a negative impact not only on the young people themselves but also on the wider community. Some of the participants also felt that this left young people open to exploitation, with examples given of young people who were being paid less than the minimum wage and were not aware of their rights. When discussion alternatives this group talked of the need for 'real training' for young people that gave

them hope. One grandparent spoke favourably of a scheme in Glasgow (organised by the City Council) which had allowed her grandson to move into an apprenticeship after school. This kind of real support was felt to be needed for more young people.

The question of the interaction between employment and particular places was also discussed in one group. It was felt that high rental costs in some areas would prevent people from relocating to find employment.

> *"My husband cannot find a suitable job, he is so depressed and employment opportunities are so interlinked to where we live"* (Voice of participant).

Once again this comment highlights the interconnectedness of many of the issues of individual and community wellbeing and the links between health and social wellbeing. It also highlights again the importance of choice for some people so their sense of wellbeing.

Housing, Place and Educational Attainment

Households that were overcrowded in particular housing that were overcrowded with children living within them had a higher likelihood of poorer educational attainment. Overcrowding impacted on the ability of children to study and do their homework. This meant those in poorer households were at greater risk of falling behind more affluent peers.

Aspirations of people experiencing poverty were also discussed. It was felt that disadvantaged areas or communities were often limited in choice in terms of schools. Households in poverty were unable to send children to schools in more affluent areas that had better facilities or attainment levels due to being prohibited by travel costs. In addition it was felt that areas of social deprivation where often stigmatised and this also led to lower aspirations.

Within one discussion point highlighted were school closures and the amalgamation of schools. This resulted in pupils having to travel further to reach the nearest school and having a longer day as a result of the extra travel time. This also limited opportunities in extra circular activities as parents were reluctant to allow their children to attend activities within a different area due to fears about how they would get home in particular during winter weather. This limited their children's ability to grow and develop through extra curricular programmes.

Nursery provision was a key concern raised in one workshop. The support for early year's provision was felt to be insufficient for the needs of pre school children. This contrasted with views of school provision within this area which was felt to be excellent.

Discussion was also highlighted on the costs of wider extra curricular activities. Some parents spoke of recognising that it was beneficial for their children to be able to attend such activities however payment of sessions and additional costs such as uniform meant that children were unable to take part. The discussion of wider consumer culture was seen as problematic. People discussed that parents on a low income came under a lot of pressure to provide their children with consumer goods.

Persistent Poverty

The persistence of poverty was recognised by some participants across the engagement proce**ss.** Persistent poverty was linked to low pay, employment opportunities, being a carer, disability or health conditions and lone parenthood.

Inflexibility of the supporting structured and provisions within wider society were interconnected with experiences of households experiencing persistent poverty. The set up of the welfare system and the benefit rates were widely cited as a reason for demographics groups such as lone parents remaining in poverty.

The care system in regards to formal and informal care was also subject to criticism. It was highlighted that current problems and pressures related to this were likely to increase with an ageing population. People spoke of the lack of supported or sheltered housing accommodation for older people. In addition specialists care and support to enable people to remain in their own home was also discussed. Points were raised about preventative spend and the impact of savings to wider society if this was better supported and encouraged.

Care also impacted on those with children with physical or learning disabilities. Those who were full time carers were unable to access employment as a result of being carers.

Stigma and discrimination was highlighted as another contributing issue to people being in persistent poverty for example due to having experienced long term physical or mental ill health. Employment that was suitable or flexible enough for the transition to work was often unavailable. In particular in a pressurised labour market this was even more difficult.

Debt and poverty was also discussed. Those who had engaged with pay day lenders became trapped in a vicious cycle of managing and mitigating the impact of the debt. People often never recovered the costs of what was originally an often small loan due to the charges and high APRs people were subject. Financial literary was also a problem linked to this and low pay / wage levels as a contributing factor. Knowledge of other credit facilities such as credit unions was often not widely known particularly by those demographics that would be targeted by pay day lenders. Their visible and high profile marketing was widespread in low income communities.

Housing and Access to services

Integration of communities and services was seen as important to societal wellbeing. Some within workshops discussed the need to be ensuring community voices in the development and improvement of local areas.

"*We desperately need a local community centre and shops*" (Voice of participant).

Some demographic groups were unheard or felt there were ignored in regards to the communities development and growth in particular this was a strong theme across the refugee and asylum seekers workshop who felt that they were invisible within this process.

Across all workshops, there was a general consensus for a need for holistic provision of services within the community that served people at all points in the life course and a needed to be listening to voices on the ground. Planning processes within communities needed to be open and transparent.

Where services were well placed within a community this was seen as beneficial to community wellbeing and obtaining a positive quality of life.

"*We have handy schools, play areas for the kids, community centres and a health centre on our door step*"   (Voice of participant).

For communities, services within their local areas included the need for affordable social and leisure activities, good quality accommodation for all, support services for community needs such as older people, families and young people. Employment support was raised as a key issue for young people and several workshops highlighted problems with this.

Section Three: Housing and Community Wellbeing

Legislation and Housing

A number of issues were raised on the subject of legislation and policy around housing. Housing was viewed as an issue for central importance for politicians. It was argued that was an increased need to inform people of their rights around housing. The introduction of the welfare reforms, the bedroom tax, Universal Credit, were changes of which many tenants were still unaware. Private rented accommodation was highlighted as an area that was in need of greater regulation.

Community Needs and Diversity

Demographic changes were discussed such as the increased number of single people requiring tenancies, lone parents and migration and immigration. It was felt that communities were increasingly diverse and that competing needs and priorities arose as a result of this.

There was a need for appropriate community facilities to allow people to meet and integrate with different demographics within areas.

Housing allocation polices were viewed as putting people with different complex needs and it was perceived that there was a need to balance different needs across communities. To ensure better community cohesion there was a need for a greater focus on schemes that encourage mixing within communities.

Community Safety

Crime and Anti social behaviour within communities was viewed as detrimental to how people viewed the area where they lived and the desirability of housing within the area.

Fear of crime as well as actual crime was reported as limiting the activity to interactions for households within their local area. For specific groups such as refugees and asylum seekers fears of hostile and negative interactions as well as physical attacks were reported within communities.

Territorialism and gangs were reported in some areas within the engagement activity. Activities to build community cohesion in communities with higher rates of crime and anti social behaviour were limited and it was argued there was a need to create bridges and reduce isolation within such communities.

Certain types of crime such as drug abuse and drug dealing were viewed as entrenched problems and that police and other statutory services were failing to tackle the issue.

> *"We need more police on the beat especially at night; the guys that congregate around the library are very intimidating. I can understand that they need their methadone from the chemist but they don't have to hang around the library"*
>
> (Voice of participant)

It was argued that greater resources should be spent in addressing community space. Participants raised the issue of derelict properties within communities which were often spaces seen as negative. One participant suggested that these should be used by communities for purposes determined by the community. The example was given of community gardens or facilities for young people.

Issues were highlighted with temporary accommodation and the transient nature of the type of property. Due to the high turnover of occupants people reported feeling unsafe living near such properties. Some participants reported that there was often anti social behaviour within such properties.

'Notorious' families were also highlighted as problematic. People described certain streets or areas having a reputation and being unable to leave their area once they had been housed within them. One participant spoke of requiring a move due to the bedroom tax but no one was interested in a swap with their locality. People spoke of violent and aggressive street battles over territory and other issues.

People described some households committing anti social behaviour as "above the law" as it appeared there was little that could be done unless people spoke out which they were often too afraid to do so.

Other individuals reported wider issues in regards to the safety within their community. One participant described being housed in social housing with a garden however there child found a syringe within the garden space and on inspecting the site further the occupant was forced to remove three other syringes. Issues were also reported of gardens being unfenced but people being unable to deal with that.

Specific demographic groups emphasised more the importance of community safety and well being. Some refuges and asylum seekers reported racial attacks and harassment. Other groups were at risk of hate crime such as disabled people. In addition women who had experienced domestic violence often face heightened fear in properties on leaving refuge for example.

Case Study – Anti Social Behaviour and Mental Wellbeing

Laura* a lone parent suffered from severe stress and depression as a result of anti social behaviour from her neighbours. Threats to Laura had resulted in her developing anxiety in participating in daily life. She worried about leaving the house and the potential risk of conflict. This resulted in her gradually becoming fearful of leaving her home. Her depression worsened as the situation continued.

Despite being offered mediation as a resolution to dealing with the neighbours involved by her local housing provider. Laura instead opted to deal with the situation by moving. She made this decision it had greatly impacted on her well being and she did not wish to continue living there. Laura has incurred financial uncertainty as a result of this move and is worrying about dealing with the debt due to the financial implications of moving. This continues to have impacts on her well being and her family

Some good practice was highlighted in regards to community safety. For example this included home safety changes made for women who had experienced domestic violence for example fitting alarms to properties and lights and safety chains to doors and so on. This included cases with non-recorded incidents which was important as it provided a support structure for a range of women.

Greenspace and the Community

The importance of greenspace was emphasised by some participants across this work. Clean and well cared for areas were reported to improve well being. Areas with litter and vandalism were seen as negatively reflecting on communities and peoples sense of pride of the areas. Some participants reported poor maintenance of community outdoor spaces such as play parks which were seen as having wider impacts on children living within the area.

> *"We have two play areas that have not been maintained or painted for 20 years. The housing association say it's not their responsibility"* (Voice of participant)

Sustainability and Housing

Sustainability provoked mixed reactions from participants. It was discussed that some social housing providers seemed focused on the promotion of environmentally friendly housing and it was not always clear how this would help individuals. It was felt by some that the tenant's needs were marginalised, and that the desire to be environmentally sustainable was more important than the tenant's preferences. It was clear from this discussion that for some tenants in social housing, providers need to do more to explain the rationale and benefits of the improved environmental aspects of their approaches, such as fuel efficiency, improvements in green space, etc.

The link to wider sustainability issues was highlighted in discussions related to transport. Effective public transport was seen as essential to enable people to access not only employment but a range of other services (including leisure) out side their own immediate community. Investment in transport was argued to be a priority to enable people to engage fully with their wider community and allow them to access employment. High transport costs were a barrier for many across the workshops. Highlighted was the need for better transports for mothers with young children and accessible transport for people with disabilities.

> "*For people in rural communities, we feel very disenfranchised as there is little investment in building new homes in our area, poor transport links affects access to services to amenities*"   (Voice of participant)

Transition points and housing was also raised in regards to sustainable tenancies. Some workshops highlighted that young people; in particular young people who had previously been within the care system need greater assistance with the transition to their first tenancy. Several points were raised on the life skills required for managing and tenancies. Support around maintaining tenancies when for example a household faced a significant life change such as sudden illness or loss of employment was also

required and was felt to be limited in particular for those within specific types of accommodation.

Participation and Housing

Many within this engagement process felt that there were limited opportunities for people to get their issues heard on housing. People perceived housing as being a central issue in their lives. For those who had previously been involved in engagement work with for example local authorities highlighted lack of feedback and apathy at change it was felt that changes within communities took time and that this could be frustrating for those involved.   Some highlighted that there was a need for greater engagement on future house building.

Some participants felt that there needed to be a greater responsibility for people to engage with housing providers and housing organisations in order to assist them with identifying and responding to key issues. In particular with changing demographic changes within Scotland such as older people.

Welfare Reform and Sustainability

The impact of welfare reform was also highlighted as a factor that would impact on sustainable communities.

> *"People living in poverty are having it rough with the government reforms, universal credit is a disaster"*   (Voice of participant)

One example given was the anticipated dispersal effect that the bedroom tax was likely to have in terms of people, moving into different sized properties and effecting neighbourhood relations and family relations. This was anticipated to have problems in the long term wellbeing of communities.

Many participants raised communities being more fragmented and less unified than previously. This was raised in relation to welfare reform but it can be seen as part of broader trends identified by some of the participants. Changes in employment patterns, with more people in part-time and temporary employment, and some communities continuing to be impacted by high unemployment, were seen as changing the character of some communities. They were thought to be less cohesive and supportive than in the past, and that welfare reform was part of this process of fragmentation.

Sustainable communities could be seen as typified by a set of particular characteristics: decent and affordable housing, sustained and fulfilling employment, and supportive social networks. In relation to the last point, the role of community and voluntary organisations was once again raised. For many of the people engaged in this work, the support and advice, and the connectedness, that their engagement in community based initiatives was vital for their personal well being. However, it was also seen as part of sense of community. One participant highlighted the importance of community organisations providing a sense of connectedness, even in communities that were deemed as 'bad'.

> *"This place went into decline in the 70s. We have high rates of poverty and poor health. But I'm proud of where I live. Community people help out, will do anything to help you…but all you ever hear is bad stories. But I am proud of living here." (Voice of participant)*

This view reflected others expressed during the workshops and focus groups. The support provided by community and voluntary organisations was important in not only helping individuals, but also in building a sense of community and contributing to a wider sense of community wellbeing.

Section 4: Conclusions

This report has sought to highlight key themes to emerge from the engagement with a number of different groups across Scotland. In engaging with these groups the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing has allowed these groups to have discussions that would not normally have taken place, or that would not normally have taken place in such a structured way.

In relation to the three themes identified by the Commission (health, social and community wellbeing) the workshops and focus groups have uncovered a range of concerns about current practices and trends. Many of these trends and issues are interconnected, some of them are as a result of particular recent policy changes, but most are long term in nature.

- **Health:** housing was clearly seen as being central to providing a basis good health. This is not simply about the absence of illness (although this was undoubtedly an issue in relation to issues such as dampness), but also about on-going good health. In particular, many participants raised issues of mental health, seeing stability of housing and decent homes as being central to their mental wellbeing. Mental health was perhaps the issue that was raised most regularly and was clearly linked to a variety of issues – bedroom tax and wider welfare issues, security of housing and type of tenure. It was clear from the discussions that pressures around housing could have a real impact on individuals' mental wellbeing.

- **Social:** Questions of employment and unemployment were important for most participants. They were concerned about access to employment for themselves and for their children and grandchildren. A key issue was also the quality of employment, with the question of zero hours contracts provoking much

discussion. Being able to access and sustain decent employment was linked for many people to their ability to live in decent houses. Social wellbeing was not simply about whether individuals were in employment. Throughout the discussions, as can be seen in this report, welfare reform issues were repeatedly raised. It is hard to underestimate the negative impact that current changes were seen to be having on social wellbeing. In many ways this provides confirmation for the priority that many organisations have placed on responding to the issue. However, in the context of the current changes it does raise important issues about how social wellbeing can be improved. Accessible services were seen as important, not simply as part of a response to welfare change, but also as a way of building social wellbeing.

- **Community:** issues of sustainability were contested. When referring to the fabric of housing, for example, it was clear that many participants wanted change that ensured that they lived in water-tight and adequately heated homes. However there was a perception (at least some) that 'environmental concerns' should not come above those of tenants. That said, the importance of green space in communities was highlighted by most groups. Issues of community safety were also very important. These issues were at the heart, for many, of what community wellbeing meant in practice. If communities did not feel safe, or did not have sufficient well-tended green space, then it clearly had a negative impact on community wellbeing.

The above is a very brief summary of some of the key issues that have emerged. What is clear from the discussions that have taken place in the workshops and focus groups is that issues of health, social and community wellbeing are inextricably linked. Finding solutions in one area requires solutions in all. Some of these solutions will require change at the Scottish or UK level, but other changes will need to take place at the community level. Whilst housing issues are clearly central to wellbeing, simply

improving housing (in all the areas that have been identified in this report) will not be sufficient to improve wellbeing. Community level activity will be required to make the kind of sustainable changes required. Relationships need to be developed between and within communities, between those providing services and those using them, between those in employment and those not, between communities.

This type of change suggests a central role for community and voluntary organisations, and wider civil society in improving wellbeing in disadvantaged communities in Scotland. Fundamentally, it means engaging with and listening to the kinds of voices that have been raised as part of this phase of the work of the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing.

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[i] Department of Work and Pensions (2013) '*Housing Benefit Reform and the removal of the spare room subsidy: fact sheet*'

[ii] Department of Work and Pensions (2013) '*Discretionary Housing payments Guidance Manual*'