

**Policy briefings on
coronavirus and inequalities**

Housing, Gender and Covid-19

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A policy briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group

Key points

- *At the start of the Covid-19 crisis, the government suspended evictions for rental tenants. **Local authorities have identified nearly 500,000 people at high risk of being evicted** following end of this measure in September.*
- *Housing is a known public health issue. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, **poor housing cost the NHS upwards of £1.4 billion per year.***
- ***Women's housing situation differs from that of men, and is generally poorer, in terms of affordability, ownership, feeling safe and overcrowding.***
- *On average, **private renters spend 33% on rent**, however due in part to the gender pay gap, there is a distinctly gendered difference; **average rents use up 43% of a woman's median earnings and only 28% of men's.***
- *In terms of home ownership, the **median home in England costs over 12 times women's median wages** (8 times for men).*
- *The Help to Buy initiative seems to serve the already relatively privileged; in March 2020 **average household income for those using the Help to Buy scheme was £53,322.***
- ***The treatment of housing assets, rental income and imputed rents** (the flow of benefits homeowners get from their homes) in the taxation system is generous, and **has been an overlooked option for fiscal and housing policy goals.***
- *Female lone-parent households have consistently been the largest type **at risk of homelessness at 28% of all households and make up 17% of all homeless households** (compared to 3% and 2% for male lone-parent households respectively).*

Housing is central to people's daily lives. Housing can contribute to living standards, opportunities and wellbeing. However, housing can also contribute to poverty, to disadvantage and poor health.

The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have caused an economic crisis impacting all areas of life, including housing. It has exposed structural weaknesses in the UK housing system which impact vulnerable and poorer households. Early in the crisis, the government implemented several policies to protect sections of society. However, many that supported the most vulnerable have ended, removing a vital safety net as we see a second lockdown and large waves of redundancies across the UK.

Covid-19 and housing inequality

Housing is a known public health issue. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, poor housing cost the NHS over £1.4 billion per year.¹ However the pandemic has highlighted the impact socio-economic inequalities can have on health, with inadequate housing a part of this debate. Areas with larger numbers of overcrowded housing have the highest Covid-19 mortality rates.² Overcrowding disproportionately impacts particular communities.³ In England, Bangladeshi (24%), Pakistani (18%), Black African (16%) and Arab (15%) households are much more likely to experience overcrowding than White British households (2%).⁴ Housing charities have criticised the government for not protecting BAME communities more at the height of the

¹ Building Research Establishment (2016) The cost of poor housing to the NHS (<https://bit.ly/2ZmSt3V>)

² Inside Housing (May 2020) The housing pandemic: four graphs showing the link between Covid-19 deaths and the housing crisis (<https://bit.ly/2GHXc9I>)

³ Ibid.

⁴ ONS (September 2020) Overcrowded houses (<https://bit.ly/2ZvdIR3>)

crisis.⁵ In 2015/16, women ‘household reference persons’⁶ (HRPs) were more likely to be in overcrowded homes.⁷

Women and the housing system

Understanding of housing differences between women and men remains limited.⁸ Official data provides few breakdowns of women’s and men’s housing needs and circumstances.⁹ The majority of individuals live in households with others and most data sources do not distinguish between experiences of individuals or sexes within households.

A few studies have found areas where men are disadvantaged in housing. Notably, single men dominate the numbers of people sleeping rough.¹⁰ In 2016/17, women HRPs were less likely than male HRPs to be in homes affected by damp.¹¹ Lone-parent households, (90% of which are female),¹² are as likely or more likely than average to have good quality housing.¹³ However, in 2018/19 lone-parent households consistently feel the least safe in their homes of all household types.¹⁴

Women experience housing disadvantage in many ways. On average, women have lower incomes and less capital than men. As a result, they tend to be disadvantaged in a housing system where access to housing is largely determined through the market.¹⁵ Women HRPs¹⁶, lone-parent households, and single women are overrepresented in poorer housing circumstances.

Due to their lower earnings, women find it more difficult to afford appropriate housing. Women’s

Budget Group¹⁷ found that no region in England is affordable to rent privately on women’s median earnings, whereas men can afford every region except London. As for buying property, the median home in England costs over 12 times women’s median salary (8 times for men), with housing affordability in different regions ranging from nearly 8 to 18 times women’s median salary (5 to 14 times men’s median salary).

Whether or not they are part of a household including men, women may have distinctive housing needs. On average they have greater caring roles, lower wages, and greater risk of intimate partner violence. These affect housing needs in terms of location, tenure, built form, design, cost, housing-related support and accessibility.

The changing UK housing system

The UK housing system has undergone significant changes marked by a shift in tenure balance, increasing volatility and regional variations. Since the 1990s, each cohort of adults has been slower and less likely to enter home ownership. At times, change has been so rapid that siblings might have different odds of entering ownership.¹⁸ Despite Government’s professed support for working class home ownership, the tenure has been increasingly dominated by the middle classes since the 1980s.¹⁹

Housing affordability, whether rented or purchased, is one of the biggest contemporary public policy issues.²⁰ Households spending more than one third of their income on housing are often said to be in ‘unaffordable’ housing. By this

⁵ Inside Housing (June 2020) BAME communities have not been protected during the Covid-19 outbreak, say housing groups (<https://bit.ly/3ioPrDQ>)

⁶ This term replaces ‘heads of household’.

⁷ MHCLG Livetables FA5211 (S706), FA5321

⁸ eg Watson, S (1986) ‘Women and housing or feminist housing analysis?’, *Housing Studies* 1(1):1-10; Kennett, P and Chan, KW (eds) *Women and Housing: An International Analysis*, London: Routledge

⁹ Women’s Budget Group (2017) *Women, Safety and the Housing Crisis: Engagement with Policy Makers: Report of a workshop hosted by the Women’s Budget Group at City Hall, Monday 3rd July 2017*, London: WBG

¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, S; Pawson, H; Bramley, G; Wilcox, S; Watts, B and Wood, J (2018) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2018* London: Crisis

¹¹ MHCLG (2018a) *ibid*

¹² ONS (2019) *Families and households in the UK* (<https://bit.ly/33iiHpi>)

¹³ MHCLG Livetables DA3203 (SST3.4), (SST4.3), (SST2.12), DA2103 (SST2.3), DA7103 (SS7.3), DA6103 (SST6.3)

¹⁴ MHCLG Livetables (2020) FA5211 (S706), FA5361 (<https://bit.ly/3hjaFl1>)

¹⁵ Eg Watson *ibid*; Kennet and Chan *ibid*; *The Guardian* (6 March 2017)

‘Housing is a women’s issue: the facts’ (<http://bit.ly/2ymRtiP>)

¹⁶ ‘Household reference person’, this term replaces ‘heads of household’

¹⁷ WBG (2019) *A home of her own – Housing and women*

(<http://bit.ly/2P6EwEB>)

¹⁸ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2014) *What will the housing market look like in 2040?* (<http://bit.ly/2zMXg2H>)

¹⁹ Wallace, A. (2017) ‘Financial resilience and security: the impacts of the housing market downturn on low-income home owners in Northern Ireland’ pp.135-158 in eds. Dewilde, C. and Ronald, R. *Housing, Wealth and Welfare*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar (p.144)

²⁰ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2017) *The cost of housing for low-income renters* (<http://bit.ly/2zQZZGa>)

definition, 17% of households cannot afford their homes, twice the proportion of twenty years ago.

Privately rented accommodation

The number of people in private rental properties has steadily increased over the past decade. It has slowly overtaken social housing, with privately rented housing having doubled since 2001 to 4.7 million homes in England (19.4% of the total),²¹ 15% in Scotland, 13% in Wales²² and Northern Ireland has seen the biggest expansion in a decade, rising from 13% in 2007 to 21% in 2017.²³ Home ownership has dropped significantly between 25-44 year-olds due to lack of affordability, pushing them towards private renting.²⁴

The cost of privately rented accommodation varies hugely across the UK; in London, rents have increased by 43% in the last 15 years, whereas this is only 19% for the North East of England.²⁵ In 2018/19 the mean weekly housing cost for a private renter was £200; compared with £172 for those with a mortgage £96 for local authority renters and £106 for housing association tenants.²⁶ On average, private renters spend 33% on rent,²⁷ however due in part to the gender pay gap, there is a distinctly gendered difference; average rents use up 43% of a woman's median earnings and only 28% of men's.²⁸

Changes to social housing

Since the 1970s, social housing has been targeted at those on low incomes. By 2000, it was by far the most targeted and redistributive aspect of the entire welfare state.²⁹ Women are overrepresented amongst social renters, largely because they are overrepresented amongst those on lower incomes, and amongst homeless

families. In 2017/18, lone-parent households made up 16% of all social renters, and 42% of all social renters under 30.³⁰

From 2012, council landlords were no longer required to offer lifetime tenancies, which had been standard since 1980, offering two- to ten-year tenancies instead. This reduced the housing security of many social renters.

In 2012, the level of housing benefit paid to social tenants deemed to have more bedrooms than necessary for their household size was reduced. This reform, known as the 'bedroom tax', received widespread criticism due to the hardship it caused.³¹ The Scottish government chose to fund the shortfall, protecting Scottish tenants from the penalty, and the reform was not applied in Northern Ireland.

In 2015, only just over half of housing associations, local authorities and Arms-length Management Organisations (ALMOs)³² said they focused on housing the neediest.³³ A third of social landlords refused at least some tenants because they might be unable to afford social or 'affordable' housing.

Social housing stock has decreased markedly in recent years. From 2012-19 there was a net loss totalling 181,000 in England with shortages of up to half a million homes forecast by 2025.³⁴ There is a huge disparity in the number of social houses currently being built across the UK. In England only 11% of new homes have genuinely affordable social rents, compared with 70% for Scotland and over 80% in Wales.³⁵

Changes over the past ten years have weakened the housing safety net, transferring risk to tenants and social housing providers. These are

²¹ Affordable Housing Commission (July 2020) Making Housing Affordable After Covid-19 (<https://bit.ly/3iqNsyU>)

²² ONS (2019) UK private rented sector: 2018 (<https://bit.ly/3k7F2ge>)

²³ ONS (2019) UK private rented sector: 2018 (<https://bit.ly/3k7F2ge>)

²⁴ Affordable Housing Commission (July 2020) Making Housing Affordable After Covid-19 (<https://bit.ly/3iqNsyU>)

²⁵ IFS (August 2020) Geographical inequality in incomes has been falling but wealth inequalities are rising (<https://bit.ly/2Zr946C>)

²⁶ MHCLG (2020) English Housing Survey: Housing Costs and Affordability 2018-19 (<https://bit.ly/35oXsVp>)

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ WBG (2019) A Home of Her Own: Housing and Women (<https://bit.ly/2y0k3Jc>)

²⁹ Sefton, T. (2002) *Recent Changes in the Distribution of the Social Wage* (<http://bit.ly/2z2xNyX>)

³⁰ MHCLG Livetables FA310(S418), FA311(419)

³¹ The Guardian (2014) Bedroom tax has failed on every count (<https://bit.ly/3kq3jvi>)

³² Arm's length management organisations working with local authority owners of council housing

³³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2015) *How do landlords address poverty?* (<http://bit.ly/2j5AKO>)

³⁴ Affordable Housing Commission (July 2020) Making Housing Affordable After Covid-19 (<https://bit.ly/3iqNsyU>)

³⁵ Ibid.

likely to have an ongoing negative effect on the most vulnerable women.

Changes to Housing Benefit

Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates determine the maximum amount of Housing Benefit that a private renter can claim to help them pay their rent. In the past, Housing Benefit met all the rent of those on low incomes. The number of social renters on Housing Benefit whose rent is fully covered by the benefit has fallen from 70% in 2010-12 to 50% in 2020.³⁶

Prior to Covid-19, 38% of renting households received Housing Benefit: 57% of social housing and 20% of private renters.³⁷ Renting households (social or private) were more likely to struggle to pay their housing costs; 28% compared to 5% of homeowners paying a mortgage.³⁸

From its introduction in 2008 to 2011, LHA was based on the 50th percentile of local rented accommodation. In 2012, LHA rates were cut to the 30th percentile of local private rents among non-housing benefit recipients. From 2012 to 2016 LHA rates were uprated in line with the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) rather than in line with actual rents, and in 2016 they were frozen (falling in real terms). Recent reforms, such as the changes to LHAs, have broken the link between rent and benefit levels, creating a large group of people facing shortfalls.³⁹ Governmental support for housing at the start of the Covid-19 crisis has restored this link (see Government Response to Covid-19 section below).

In 2013, the overall benefit payable to working-age households was capped, and the cap was reduced in 2016 to £20,000 per year (£23,000 in London, and £15,000 for single adults). Households in high-rent areas and those with several children were most affected.

Furthermore, Housing Benefit is being subsumed into Universal Credit which has been criticised for delays in initial payments.

In March responding to the Covid-19 crisis, the government updated the LHA for Housing Benefit to match the 30th percentile of local housing rents. However, Shelter argues almost 2 million of those claiming Universal Credit are still struggling to pay their rent despite the additional benefit.⁴⁰ It is calling on the government to remove the benefit cap and raise it to match the 50th percentile of rents.⁴¹

These changes are likely to disproportionately affect women as they are more likely than men to be in receipt of Housing Benefit. 60% of adults in households claiming Housing Benefit are women.⁴² In addition, 30% of households claiming Housing Benefit are women living on their own and another 22% are female lone-parent households.

Building new housing

For over two decades, new housing completions have been insufficient to meet actual and predicted need for additional homes,⁴³ and demand continues to grow. Between 2008 and 2015 there were half a million more new households than there were new homes built.⁴⁴ The government often refers to building 'affordable' housing. However, the exact parameters of the term are contested, leading some in parliament to request its usage be abandoned.⁴⁵

Policymakers also tend to assume that increased housing supply will necessarily limit house price increases, reduce affordability problems, and help disadvantaged groups.⁴⁶ However, new housing may have no effect on those on low incomes, including poorer women. They will not

³⁶ Affordable Housing Commission (July 2020) Making Housing Affordable After Covid-19 (<https://bit.ly/3iqNsyU>)

³⁷ MHCLG (2020) English Housing Survey: Housing Costs and Affordability 2018-19 (<https://bit.ly/35oXsVp>)

³⁸ MHCLG (2020) English Housing Survey: Housing Costs and Affordability 2018-19 (<https://bit.ly/35oXsVp>)

³⁹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2015) *How do landlords address poverty?* (<http://bit.ly/2j7SAKO>)

⁴⁰ BBC (May 2020) Coronavirus: Private renters need more help to 'ride out crisis' (<https://bbc.in/2ZsLxSP>)

⁴¹ Shelter (March 2020) New LHA rates: what do they mean? (<https://bit.ly/32gf1VQ>)

⁴² (Assuming couple household claimants include an equal total number of men and women) Department of Work and Pensions (2017) *Housing Benefit Caseload Statistics: Data to May 2018*

⁴³ Chartered Institute of Housing (2017) *UK housing review 2017* (<http://bit.ly/2AWOb5e>)

⁴⁴ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2017) *Tackling poverty through housing and planning policy in city regions* (<http://bit.ly/2A7EiVi>)

⁴⁵ House of Commons Library (2019) What is affordable housing? (<https://bit.ly/3klclHe>)

⁴⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2017) *Tackling poverty through housing and planning policy in city regions* (<http://bit.ly/2A7EiVi>)

be able to live in most, if any, new housing.⁴⁷ For example, new house building in England and Wales between 1981 and 2011 did not result in extra space for the least-spaciously housed tenth of the population.⁴⁸ Building new social housing, on the other hand, is more likely to ensure improved access to housing for disadvantaged people.

More needs to be done to ensure new housing is accessible. Those with disabilities⁴⁹ are less likely to own their own home than non-disabled people (42% compared to 53%) and are over three times as likely to live in social housing (25% compared with 8%).⁵⁰ 68% of local authorities report that developers do not always comply with disabled accessibility requirements, and currently only 7% of English homes offer 'minimal accessibility' features.⁵¹

An August White Paper outlines significant changes to the planning system.⁵² Local authorities will be required to split land into 'protected', 'renewal' and 'growth'. If designated for growth, developers will be granted automatic planning permission. This could see a deterioration of housing stock, preferencing volume over quality. Proposals to scrap the Community Infrastructure Levy and replace them with a flat-rate Levy could mean less funds for social and affordable housing.⁵³

Government funding for housing

Housing has fared worse than almost any government spending area since 2010 and it is likely that the cutbacks have had a disproportionate effect on women. Local authority spending on housing in England fell by

45.6% between 2010/11 and 2017/18, and there were greater absolute reductions in more deprived areas.⁵⁴ This rose slightly by 4% in 2018/19⁵⁵ and the number of completed 'affordable homes' in England increased by 22% from 2017/18- 2018/19.⁵⁶

In 2012, despite cuts overall, DCLG⁵⁷ received among the largest absolute increases in capital budgets of any department to underwrite Help to Buy.⁵⁸ Originally intended as a temporary housing market boost after the financial crisis, it has persisted. By March 2020, 272,852 households had used the Help to Buy equity scheme.⁵⁹ Whilst 82% were first-time buyers, they were mostly relatively advantaged.⁶⁰ The mean price of homes bought under the scheme rose from £184,000 in 2013 to £268,533 by March 2020, and purchasers' median household income was £53,322.⁶¹

On 14th June 2017, a fire at Grenfell Tower in North Kensington, London became out of control, causing 72 deaths. The fire spread due to cheap and unsafe ACM cladding used to cut costs despite the building owners Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (TMO) being an arm of one of the richest councils in Britain.⁶² An ongoing inquiry has heard how the cladding contractor repeatedly failed to respond to concerns and appoint fire safety officers. The government estimates 2,000 further buildings need dangerous cladding removed which MHCLG has pledged £600 million for.⁶³ However, the June 2020 completion target has already been extended to the end of 2021, the delay causing increased mental health strain to residents.⁶⁴

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Tunstall, R. (2015) 'Relative housing space inequality in England and Wales, and its recent rapid resurgence', *International Journal of Housing Policy* (<http://bit.ly/2zRmxGY>)

⁴⁹ A person is considered to be disabled if they report a long-standing illness, disability or impairment which causes substantial difficulty with day-to-day activities, as defined by the Equality Act 2010. Both the Family Resources Survey and the Labour Market Survey identify individuals with disability through self-reporting against a set of criteria based on this definition.

⁵⁰ House of Commons Library (November 2020) The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: UK implementation (<https://bit.ly/3pPz7QH>)

⁵¹ Equality and Human Rights Commission (2018) Housing and disabled people: Britain's Hidden Crisis (<https://bit.ly/2ZpdGtN>)

⁵² MHCLG (August 2020) Planning for the Future: White Paper August 2020 (<https://bit.ly/33oZzpU>)

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ National Audit Office (2018) Financial Stability of local authorities 2018 (<https://bit.ly/35qyt4b>)

⁵⁵ MHCLG (March 2020) Local authority capital expenditure and receipts (<https://bit.ly/3bNEcCr>)

⁵⁶ MHCLG (2019) Affordable Housing Supply: April 2018 to March 2019 England (<https://bit.ly/2RgAeIW>)

⁵⁷ Now Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ MHCLG (March 2020) Local authority capital expenditure and receipts (<https://bit.ly/3bNEcCr>)

⁶⁰ MHCLG (2020) Help to buy: Data to 31 March 2020, England (<https://bit.ly/2FInlup>)

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² The Guardian (September 2020) Grenfell Tower inquiry: what we have learned since July (<https://bit.ly/35WRcEu>)

⁶³ The Guardian (September 2020) UK Government has failed to deliver on cladding promises (<https://bit.ly/2ZRgJeL>)

⁶⁴ Ibid.

The tax treatment of housing income and wealth

Private homeowners and landlords benefit from net tax benefits from their housing relative to other investments, including the absence of tax on their imputed income, and the tax relief on rental income and capital gains.

The main tax on housing in terms of income is stamp duty, paid by house buyers. In 2015/16 the net tax benefits of housing ownership amounted to almost £22 billion, a dramatic 40% increase on 2014/15.⁶⁵

Home ownership rates have fallen from 58% in 2003 to 50% in 2016. Unequal distribution in inherited wealth for people born in the 1980s will have a significant impact on home ownership for this generation going forward. 20% of those born in the 1980s have parents with wealth 'per heir' of less than £10,000, whereas 25% will inherit £300,000 and 10% more than £530,000.⁶⁶

Housing is the main source of wealth for individuals and households, and of wealth inequality. In 2016, mean net wealth among women was £176,000, 29% lower than for men (£248,000).⁶⁷ This partly reflects gender differences in home-ownership rates. There is little difference in personal wealth between men and women up to the age of 40, when home ownership rates are lowest. After this, a gap starts to develop, and in their late 60's the median man has £100,000 more wealth than the median woman.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Chartered Institute of Housing (2017) *UK housing review 2017* (<http://bit.ly/2AWOb5e>)

⁶⁶ IFS (July 2020) Inheritances and inequality within generations (<https://bit.ly/3ilQuUO>)

⁶⁷ Resolution Foundation (2017) *The generation of wealth: Asset accumulation across and within cohorts* (<http://bit.ly/2zaacjQ>)

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ WBG (2019) A home of her own – Housing and women (<http://bit.ly/2P6EwEB>)

⁷⁰ The Guardian (12 Apr 2020) Revealed: surge in domestic violence during Covid-19 crisis (<https://bit.ly/3cyMTz7>)

⁷¹ The Guardian (August 2020) Domestic abuse surges in lockdown, Panorama investigation finds (<https://bit.ly/2RcQB9v>)

⁷² House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (April 2020) Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus) domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home (<https://bit.ly/2AO5ytw>)

Supported housing

Supported accommodation used by women has been affected by cuts to local government funding. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis one in five refuges were already having to turn women away due to lack of capacity.⁶⁹ During the pandemic there has been a significant increase in domestic violence. In early April, Refuge reported a 700% increase in calls to its helpline⁷⁰ and two-thirds of women in abusive relationships have suffered increased violence.⁷¹ With long-term underfunding of the sector and limited refuge spaces, the government recognises that organisations are left with inadequate resources to respond to growing demand.⁷²

Homelessness

Street homelessness doubled from 2009/10 to 2016/17 to almost 5,000 in England and almost 6,000 across the UK.⁷³ The number of women sleeping rough grew slightly faster. Women make up a minority of street homeless people.⁷⁴ 85% of people counted sleeping rough in London in 2016/17 were men.⁷⁵

Homeless women tend to be younger than homeless men and are more likely to be suffering from mental health problems.⁷⁶ Black British women are overrepresented in homeless populations, representing 20% of homeless UK citizens.⁷⁷

Homeless women have tended to be overlooked in statistics, research and policy.⁷⁸ Recent research shows that women's homelessness may be underestimated, as women rough sleepers make particular efforts to be inconspicuous. It has distinct causes, including abuse as children and domestic violence.⁷⁹

⁷³ Fitzpatrick et al. *ibid*

⁷⁴ Mayor of London (2017) *CHAIN Annual Bulletin Greater London 2016/17* (<http://bit.ly/2zjRWgK>)

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ University of York (2018) *Women and Rough Sleeping* (<https://bit.ly/3kb2Srt>)

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Pleace, N. (2016) 'Exclusion by Definition: The Under-representation of Women in European Homelessness Statistics' pp.105-126 in eds. Pleace, N. and Bretherton, J. *Women and homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan

⁷⁹ Reeve, K (2018). *Women and homelessness: putting gender back on the agenda. People, Place and Policy Online*, 11 (3), 165-174

Despite men making up the majority of street homeless people, women are more likely to experience homelessness at some point in their life.⁸⁰ At the start of 2020, female lone-parent households were 41% of all households in temporary accommodation (compared with 4% of male lone-parent households)⁸¹. Single mothers are two-thirds (66%) of all statutory homeless families with children (they are just one quarter of all families with dependent children).⁸²

Government response to Covid-19

Renting

At the start of the Covid-19 crisis, the government suspended evictions for rental tenants. This meant in practice that landlords had to provide three months' eviction notice before beginning court proceedings. In England and Wales this ended in mid-September with the resumption of possessions, to be replaced by a 6-month notice requirement for tenants 'in all bar those cases raising other serious issues'.⁸³ Scotland⁸⁴ and Northern Ireland⁸⁵ have extended the three-month eviction notice until the end of March 2021. The Scottish government also provided landlords with a short-term emergency loan if tenants were having difficulty making rental payments.⁸⁶

Following the announcement of a second lockdown in November, there has been a temporary halt on evictions by bailiffs between 17th November and 11th January, except in extreme circumstances.⁸⁷ However, eviction court proceedings have been allowed to continue.

Local authorities have identified nearly 500,000 people at high risk of being evicted following the

resumption of court proceedings to remove tenants.⁸⁸ 63% of private renters don't have savings to pay for housing or living costs if they were to lose income during the crisis.⁸⁹ Citizens Advice Bureau estimated in October that 1.2 million people have already fallen behind on rental payments as a result of the pandemic.⁹⁰

Women (52.1%) and in particular, young women (18-24: 53.1%) are more likely to have been furloughed than their male counterparts, making them potentially more likely to encounter difficulties paying rent. A higher level of furloughing means women are more vulnerable to redundancy after the scheme ends,⁹¹ exposing them to greater financial insecurity, and further risk of struggling with rental payments.

Homeowners

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the government implemented two significant policies for homeowners. The first was a three 'mortgage holiday' which could be extended to 6 months if needed and was implemented across the four nations. Announced in March, it was extended for 'struggling borrowers' that had yet to claim until 31st October. Following the announcement of a second lockdown in November, the scheme was extended until March 2021 for those yet to claim 6-months holiday since the scheme began. As of November, 2.6 million mortgage deferrals had been approved, with just under 140,000 still in place at the end of October.⁹² Once payment holidays end, and higher mortgage payments are instated, homeowners may face greater household debt to cover the additional costs.

The second policy change was announced in July, cutting Stamp Duty in England and Northern

⁸⁰ University of York (2018) Women and Rough Sleeping (<https://bit.ly/3kb2Srt>)

⁸¹ MHCLG (August 2020) Statutory Homelessness live tables A5P and A5R (<https://bit.ly/33DmihZ>)

⁸² The Independent (2018) 'Number of single homeless mothers soars to highest level since financial crash' (<https://ind.pn/2HTqfGY>)

⁸³ Gov.uk (August 2020) Jenrick extends ban on evictions and notice periods (<https://bit.ly/3m9Us1V>)

⁸⁴ BBC (August 2020) Coronavirus: Charities welcome extended eviction ban in Scotland (<https://bbc.in/33dR51c>)

⁸⁵ Department for Communities, Northern Ireland (2020) Coronavirus: Housing guidance for private rented landlords and tenants (<https://bit.ly/3bODIMo>)

⁸⁶ Gov.scot (September 2020) Coronavirus (Covid-19): guidance for private landlords and letting agents (<https://bit.ly/3h1IPo6>)

⁸⁷ Gov.uk (November 2020) New protections for renters over duration of national restrictions (<https://bit.ly/3kCFYc3>)

⁸⁸ Local.gov (August 2020) Councils warn of 'avalanche' of evictions (<https://bit.ly/2E4ym2T>)

⁸⁹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (August 2020) Build, build, build social housing (<https://bit.ly/2FilkOB>)

⁹⁰ Citizens Advice (2020) Excess debt – who has fallen behind on their household bills due to coronavirus? (<https://bit.ly/2lpLZMm>)

⁹¹ WBG (forthcoming) HMRC data prompts concern of 'gender furlough gap'

⁹² House of Commons Library (November 2020) Mortgage Arrears and Repossessions (England) (<https://bit.ly/3IHtZGW>)

Ireland from 20% to 0% for properties under £500,000, rising from 5-12% on the remaining amount for properties above this.⁹³ Scotland and Wales⁹⁴ implemented a similar measure on properties up to £250,000. In Scotland this exempts 80% of buyers from the tax.⁹⁵ All changes are in place until 31st March 2021. Whilst this tax break will be welcomed by many, it serves to create an even greater division between asset-owning homeowners and the renting class.

Tackling homelessness

In response to the worsening Covid-19 crisis, in March the government instructed all local authorities in England to house all rough sleepers and announced £3.2 million to fund the initiative. This was an unprecedented effort to end rough sleeping during a global health crisis. Local authorities were tasked with securing hotel rooms, B&Bs, student accommodation and holiday rentals to house people. By May, over 14,500 people who had been, or were at risk of rough sleeping had been housed in England. The Government announced a specialist task force in May to lead the next phase of support. An additional £3.2 billion has been announced for local authorities to support their communities. However as there are increasing needs across all strata of society, the lack of a dedicated, ring-fenced fund for this population risks seeing it de-prioritised and underfunded.⁹⁶

At the start of the second lockdown in early November, MHCLG launched 'Protect Programme', pledging an additional £15 million to protect the most vulnerable, including rough sleepers.⁹⁷ It requires councils to offer shelter for rough sleepers, targeting those with high levels of homelessness and will operate alongside the 'Everyone In' campaign launched in September and the Cold Weather Fund for housing rough sleepers over winter.⁹⁸

⁹³ Gov.uk (July 2020) Stamp Duty Land Tax: temporary reduced rates (<https://bit.ly/32hckmY>)

⁹⁴ Gov.wales (July 2020) Guidance: Land Transaction Tax (<https://bit.ly/2Fj541b>)

⁹⁵ Gov.scot (July 2020) Help for homebuyers and employment support (<https://bit.ly/2Zatlt9>)

Recommendations

- **Prioritise the building of more social housing:** Social housing stock has decreased markedly in recent years. The government must pledge to increase this to ensure there is enough affordable housing for those in need.
- **Restore the link between LHA and actual rental prices, and raise LHA to the 50th percentile:** Social renters on Housing Benefit whose rent is fully covered by the benefit has fallen from 70% in 2010-12 to 50% in 2020.⁹⁹ LHA needs to be raised to ensure the most vulnerable are protected.
- **Increase the number of women's Refuges:** Prior to the Covid-19 crisis one in five refuges were turning women away due to lack of capacity. More refuges are needed to meet growing demand.

Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the deep structural failings and inequalities within the housing sector. Government interventions during the crisis such as the changes to Stamp Duty and mortgage payment moratoria appear to preference the asset-owning class. Whilst the prime minister is determined to 'build build build', it is unlikely this will come close to levelling the playing field.

Women have distinct tenure circumstances and housing needs, because on average they have lower wages, greater caring roles, and greater risk of intimate partner violence. Distinctive needs, combined with different wealth circumstances, reflect the need for housing policy to be gender-sensitive.

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⁹⁶ Gov.uk (May 2020) Dame Louise Casey to spearhead government taskforce on rough sleeping during pandemic (<https://bit.ly/3k7G0Ji>)

⁹⁷ Gov.uk (November 2020) Jenrick Launches 'Protect Programme': the next step in winter rough sleeping plan (<https://bit.ly/32Ulncd>)

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Affordable Housing Commission (July 2020) Making Housing Affordable After Covid-19 (<https://bit.ly/3iqNsyU>)