

Response to the consultation on the English Housing Survey by the Highbury Group

The DCLG is consulting about proposed cutbacks to the English Survey of Housing and is posing various options to achieve savings. The Highbury Group is a group of people who 'wear different hats' but have come together with an interest in how more (affordable) housing could be delivered, usually with reference to the planning system.

This response is made on behalf of the Highbury Group *but does not necessarily represent the views of **all** the members*. It contains comments from some housing association colleagues who are not members of the Group and some members of the Group may be contributing responses on behalf of other organisations.

We are predominantly users of the English Housing Survey (EHS) for housing policy development, research and planning. This means we are also not expert on the technical aspects of social and physical survey design, costing and conduct.

We are aware from other sources, for example the Social Research Association, that the consultation has attracted attention from the UK statistics authority and National Statistician who has written to the DCLG permanent secretary urging him to consider the implications of the cuts at a time of *'heightened interest and rapid change in the housing market'*. Other contacts with us from within the housing association sector in London have also made us aware of their concern about possible changes to the survey *"as it is one of the few longitudinal housing data sets that remain to give any deeper understanding other than bland housing starts and completion figures"*.

It is increasingly the case that local authorities are no longer able to afford to carry out local housing surveys of needs and aspirations or of the physical conditions of the housing stock. It is also the case that local authorities have no or fewer staff to analyse survey and other data and it is noticeable that many local housing strategies are out of date and the development of local plans is slow.

At the same time, Government guidance contained in the Assessment of Housing and Economic Development Needs refers to the requirement in the National Planning Policy Framework (S159), 2012 for a Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) to inform the development of spatial housing policies. A Ministerial letter dated 23rd December 2014 was issued to ensure that the government's existing policy position on emerging evidence in the form of a SHMA is clear. The SHMA forms the first stage of developing local plans.

SHMAs are dependent on a range of sources of information on housing needs including the Office for National Statistics, House Price Index, Land Registry House Price Index and Price Paid data (including sales), Department for Communities and Local Government Statistics including Live Tables on Affordability (lower quartile house prices/lower quartile earnings), Neighbourhood data from the Census, Internal Migration Statistics, and NHS registration data. Data from estate agents and local

newspapers contain information about the geographical coverage of houses advertised for sale and rent.

However, it is also accepted by government that establishing future need for housing is not an exact science, the government advises that *“plan makers should avoid expending significant resources on primary research (information that is collected through surveys, focus groups or interviews etc and analysed to produce a new set of findings) as this will in many cases be a disproportionate way of establishing an evidence base. They should instead look to rely predominantly on secondary data (e.g. Census, **national surveys**) to inform their assessment”* Guidance on Housing and Economic Development Needs Assessments, 2014.

In the current housing market we need to understand trends in the private rented sector for which a major source of evidence is the English Housing Survey. The private rented sector is the ‘no choice’ option for many households now and costs and condition information are vital for policy and planning. In quantifying the unmet (gross) need for affordable housing and information on households in need, including those concealed or overcrowded, local authorities are advised to use their own data and also *“use should be made of the Census which can be compared with trends contained in the English Housing Survey”*.

While it is acknowledged that the EHS is a key source of information on housing experience and aspirations, information on trends in tenure change and the condition of the housing stock is also vital. The EHS is important for planning **new** housing but knowledge of the cost, availability, condition and use of **existing** housing assumes greater importance when there is insufficient new [affordable] housing actually being built.

We are also very concerned that changes in the welfare system require that local authorities have data on the dwellings in which households are living in terms of tenure, costs and amenities; condition and safety; energy performance and efficiency.

The consultation questions

1. What cost-effective solutions are there to redesign the survey? We are open to any innovative ideas for improving the delivery and/or cost effectiveness of the survey. Please describe your ideas, detailing how the approach would meet your analytical needs, including running the survey every two years or pausing in 2015/16

Some of our housing association colleagues and others doubt that there would be substantial savings from going to a two-yearly cycle and are concerned that the other alternatives – reducing the scope or any other decoupling aspect of the survey for industry ‘crowd sourcing’ would undermine its rigour and trustworthiness.

In the past London-wide housing needs and condition surveys have been funded in different ways: the first by the Greater London Council and the second housing needs survey in part by the then Housing Corporation and ‘passing the hat around’ the London boroughs. If the EHS costs £4m how much would each local authority in the country, HCA and any other bodies have to contribute?

2. Pausing the English Housing Survey for one year in 2015-16 and/or running the survey on a biennial basis are possible approaches to deliver cost savings. Would you be affected if the department were to adopt either or both of those approaches? If so, please explain how, using examples on the way you use the data to illustrate your response.

We would not support proposals for either a pause or biennial survey. The former would fuel concern of discontinuation entirely and would lead to increased costs if reinstated. There is a continuing trend by government to provide less data on housing as the overall housing situation worsens. Only six years ago there were separate national household and condition surveys.

We explain above the use of the survey for the development of local plans, specifically in the required SHMA that precede these plans. While the EHS is a reference source for housing, planning and policy research purposes its use in the SHMA depends on the stage that individual or regional housing and planning authorities have reached in developing their local plans.

*The Survey becomes increasingly important as Census data ages; and, while it is important for planning **new** housing, up to date information about the cost, availability, condition and use of **existing** housing assumes greater importance when there is insufficient new [affordable] housing.*

The housing market in many areas is changing rapidly, especially in cities. There is an inevitable lag between the conduct of the survey and the availability of the data, which would be exacerbated in changing to a biennial survey.

3. If the department were to run the survey on a biennial basis, what would be the best approach to carry out a robust and cost effective survey? We are particularly interested in views and suggestions on set up costs, feasibility of a biennial survey, sample size options, ideas for following up respondents from the earlier surveys in the series and data collection methods.

It is not clear what level of savings is aimed for or what would be acceptable in the Department's view. Some suggestions are made in Q2 but most responders will not have information about set-up costs. Presumably, new questionnaires are not designed or tested each time the EHS is done. Is full use made of hand held technology in the field? It is possible that some adjustment to the size of the samples might save some costs but not if this is to the detriment to any regional analysis of the data.

Sampling and survey organisation [recruitment of interviewers and their fieldwork costs] are new costs each time and this might lead thinking into having some kind of suitably selected 'fixed' panel of addresses across the country. Following up previous respondents sounds promising as long as their permissions were sought in previous surveys for follow-up purposes.

The most expensive part of the survey is the physical condition survey. In the past surveyors, architects or other technical people have been employed and trained on a 'consultancy' basis and who tend to be paid more than the household survey interviewers. Is there any way of changing this?

4. Which topics in the survey are of most and least value to you?
5. Are there any questions that you would consider removing?

For both Qs 4&5 it is not possible to identify specifics. While some might think parking not important or not gathering floor area in every survey important, for others these might be vital data. Every survey shows that under occupation in the owner occupied sector is high but it is not apparent how useful these data are. However, in terms of overall costs shortening the questionnaires is likely to have minimal effect.

HIGHBURY GROUP ON HOUSING DELIVERY

The Highbury Group is an independent group of specialists from public, private and independent sectors from housing, planning and related professions which prepares proposals for Government and other agencies on responses to the current 'credit crunch' aimed at maintaining the output of housing including affordable housing.

The Group was established in 2008 as the Highbury Group on housing and the credit crunch and met at London Metropolitan University in Highbury Grove, Islington, London. The Group's name was changed in September 2010 and it now meets at the University of Westminster, 35 Marylebone Road, London NW1. It comprises the following core members:

- [Duncan Bowie](#) - University of Westminster (convener)
- Stephen Ashworth - Denton Wilde Sapte
- Julia Atkins - London Metropolitan University
- Andy von Bradsky - PRP
- Bob Colenutt - Northampton Institute for Urban Affairs
- Kathleen Dunmore - Three Dragons
- Michael Edwards - Bartlett School of Planning, UCL
- Nicholas Falk - URBED
- Deborah Garvie - SHELTER
- Stephen Hill - C20 Futureplanners
- Angela Housham - Consultant
- Seema Manchanda - L B Wandsworth
- Kelvin McDonald - Consultant
- [Dr Tony Manzi](#) - University of Westminster
- Pippa Read - National Housing Federation
- Peter Redman - Housing Futures
- Richard Simmonds - Consultant
- Eric Sorensen - Consultant
- James Stephens - HomeBuilders Federation
- Peter Studdert - Planning Consultant
- Janet Sutherland - JTP Cities

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