SILENT MAJORITY

How the public will support a new wave of social housing

By Natan Doron & Robert Tinker

home group

ABOUT THE FABIAN SOCIETY

The Fabian Society is Britain's oldest political think tank. Since 1884 the society has played a central role in developing political ideas and public policy on the left. It aims to promote greater equality of power and opportunity; the value of collective public action; a vibrant, tolerant and accountable democracy; citizenship, liberty and human rights; sustainable development; and multilateral international co-operation.

Through a wide range of publications and events the society influences political and public thinking, but also provides a space for broad and open-minded debate, drawing on an unrivalled external network and its own expert research and analysis. Its programme offers a unique breadth, encompassing national conferences and expert seminars; periodicals, books, reports and digital communications; and commissioned and in-house research and comment.

The Society is alone among think tanks in being a democratically-constituted membership organisation, with almost 7,000 members. Over time our membership has included many of the key thinkers on the British left and every Labour prime minister. Today we count over 200 parliamentarians in our number. The voluntary society includes 70 local societies, the Fabian Women's Network and the Young Fabians, which is itself the leading organisation on the left for young people to debate and influence political ideas.

The society was one of the original founders of the Labour party and is constitutionally affiliated to the party. We are however editorially, organisationally and financially independent and work with a wide range of partners from all political persuasions and none.

CONTENTS

About the authors

Natan Doron was the senior researcher at the Fabian Society until August 2014. He led the organisation's Environment & Citizenship Programme and authored the reports *Green Europe: Reconciling the local and the global* and *Here Today: the uncertain future of the Post Office network.* He also co-authored *Home Truths: how to change attitudes to housing benefit.* Prior to working at the Fabian Society, Natan worked in the Greenpeace China office in Beijing where he contributed to a number of campaigns including the Road to Copenhagen public engagement programme.

Robert Tinker joined the Fabian Society as a researcher in 2012. He is the lead researcher on the society's Next Economy programme as well as working across our Environment & Citizenship and Next State projects. He was researcher to the Fabian Commission on Future Spending Choices, and was co-author of the Fabian reports *Home Truths* and *Measure for Measure.* He is a graduate of the University of Durham.

Acknowledgements

Summary

There are many reasons for the failure of consecutive governments to build enough homes in the UK, but an often-cited explanation is that there is not widespread public support for social housing. However, this report gives lie to the claim that the majority of the general public do not support building more social housing. Although there is still considerable stigma attached to this type of tenure, this itself does not equate with opposition to building more social housing. Failure to understand this important distinction has constrained housing policy and contributed to the current housing crisis.

The national survey and focus groups found that:

New social housing in the UK is a popular idea: only 15 per cent of the population are opposed to more of it being built in the UK. A clear majority of 57 per cent say they would support more being built.

Local social housing can be popular too: a modest 27 per cent of respondents opposed more social housing if it was to be built in their area.

People agree there are problems with housing: 93 per cent of respondents said they believed there are 'major/some problems with housing in Britain today'. Most respondents were critical of the private rented sector, refusing to say that it is working (84 per cent).

Most people see social housing as essential social security: only 19 per cent of respondents took the view that government should not be involved in housing, but most saw it as a service for other people, not 'for me'.

Stigma attached to people who live in social housing was real, but stigma did not equate to opposition to social housing.

The report concludes that:

1. The public know there are problems with housing in the UK and could be ready to accept a new wave of social housing: 87 per cent of survey respondents thought that government could do something to address problems with the housing market. A majority of people see the principle of social housing as legitimate.

2. But people don't clearly connect social house building with affordability across the housing market. The public are aware of the deep-seated problems with the housing market, but passionate politicians need to invest more time in defining these problems in a way that presents a new generation of social housing as a solution.

3. Private renting could be the platform on which more support for new social housing is won. The perceived plight of private tenants could help grow the level of public support for new social house building, as long as it's clear that some new social homes will be available for current private tenants.

4. There must be a new focus on addressing stigma, not on placating NIMBYs. The public are concerned that the social housing 'system' is being abused, so policy should be tilted a bit more in favour of some of the groups seen as more 'deserving' of support such as young or local people.

5. Government should reduce the physical differences between tenure types. The majority of participants in our focus groups thought that social housing should be built to a high standard of quality, largely because they saw this as a wise future investment, and also because a visibly low standard of social housing was viewed as stigmatising for tenants.

THE POLLING

In general, to what extent would you support or oppose more social housing being built in the UK?

25% Strongly support
32% Tend to support
22% Neither support nor oppose
10% Tend to oppose
5% Strongly oppose
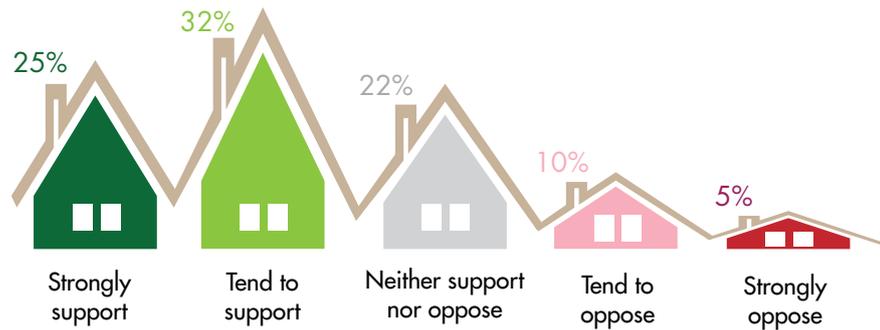
And to what extent would you support or oppose new social housing being built in your area?

19% Strongly support
25% Tend to support
23% Neither support nor oppose
15% Tend to oppose
12% Strongly oppose
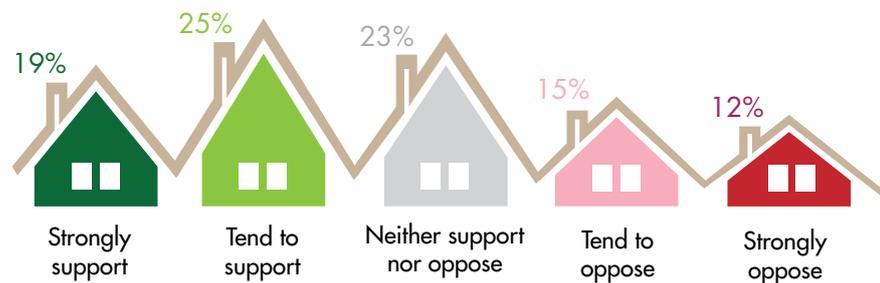
Net support for new social housing in general (voting intention)

+66
+62
+27
+16
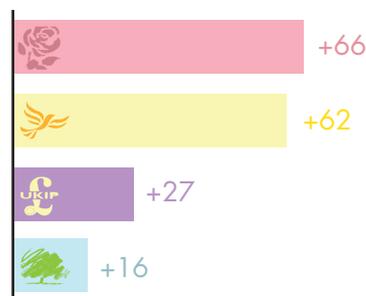
Net support for new social housing in area (voting intention)

+43
+32
-2
-16
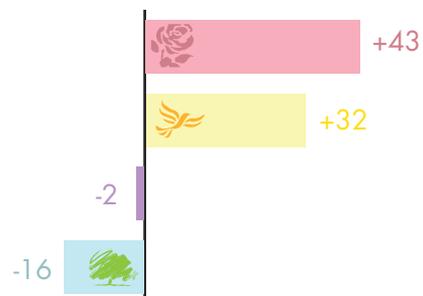
How happy or unhappy would you be for you and/or your family to live in social housing?

Home owners

27% HAPPY

63% UNHAPPY

Private renters

36% HAPPY

51% UNHAPPY
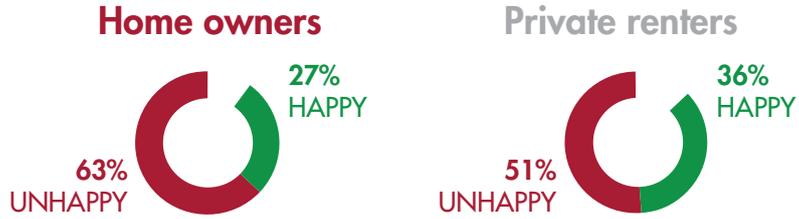
Which two or three of the below words or phrases do you most strongly associate with social housing?

Home owners   Private renters   Social tenants

Benefits 49%
53%
50%
29%

Affordability 40%
39%
39%
57%

Reducing homelessness 32%
33%
27%
38%

Immigration 24%
28%
19%
17%

Low quality 23%
20%
34%
24%

Worklessness 21%
23%
22%
6%

Crime 16%
16%
17%
9%

Community 14%
13%
14%
18%
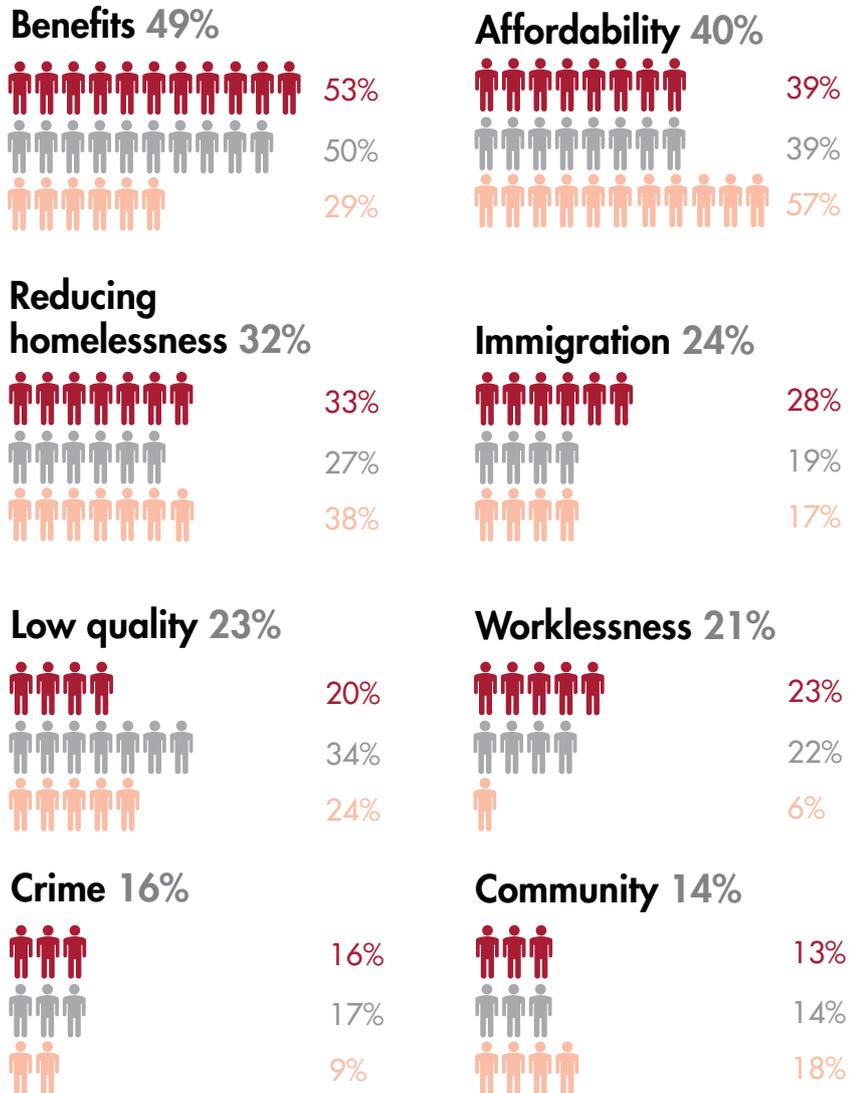
Would you say that there are or are not any problems with housing in Britain today?

Major problems
52%

60%	51%
61%	38%

Some problems
41%

35%	40%
32%	56%
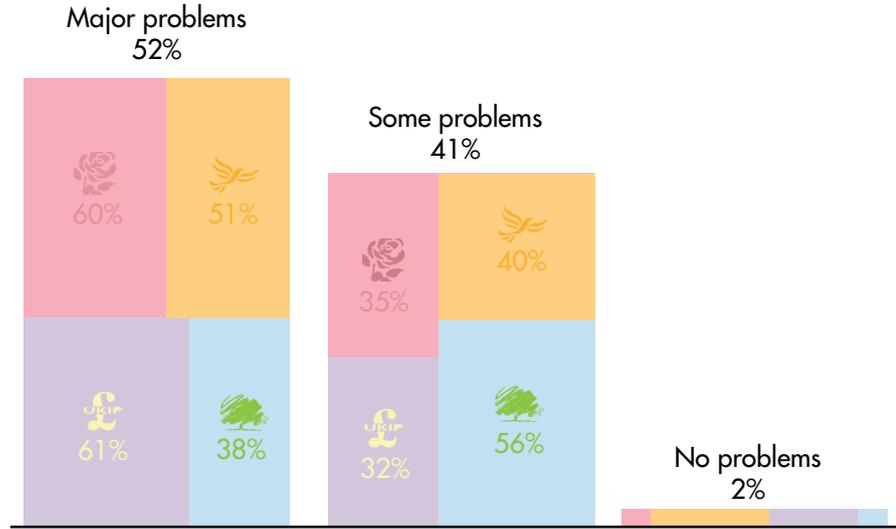
No problems
2%

You said there were problems with housing in Britain today… Do you think the government can or cannot do anything to help solve these problems?

87%

Percentage of respondents who responded
"Yes, government can do something"
Overall and by voting intention

91%

90%

88%

82%
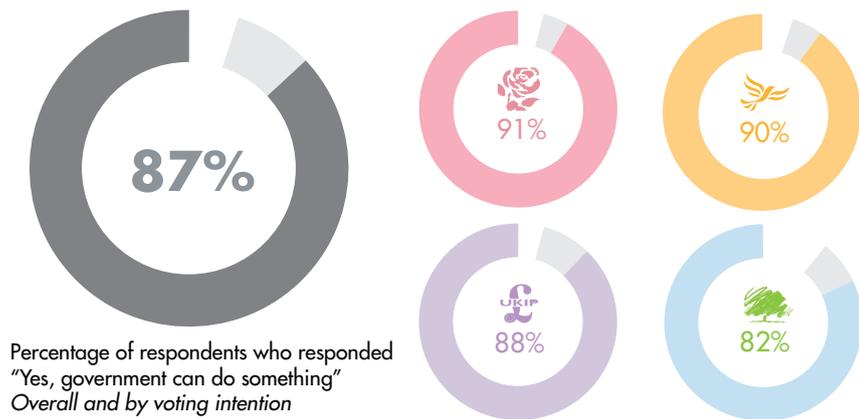
Which statement about the private rented sector comes closest to your view?

The private rented sector is not providing a stable, affordable option for many and the government should look to **regulate it more** to protect renters

Don't know

The private rented sector is functioning well and should be left as it is

The private rented sector is not providing a stable, affordable option for many and the government should **reduce regulation** to help property owners

1 INTRODUCTION

That England needs new homes is something all political parties agree on. Labour has already pledged to build 200,000 homes a year by 2020. The Liberal Democrats have gone further, calling for 300,000 homes to be built a year over the next parliament. David Cameron has spoken of the need to build new towns and garden cities with what he called a 'Victorian swagger'.[i]

But what explains the failure of consecutive governments to build enough homes in England up till now? There are many reasons but this report considers one frequently used explanation: the constricting hold of public opinion against social housing being built in their local area.[ii] [iii]

The research presented in this report shows that in fact there is no public majority against social housing in the UK. Only 15 per cent of the public oppose new social housing being built. The figure rises at the prospect of social housing being built in the places where people live, but only to 27 per cent.

The research results also demonstrate that the public are aware that there are deep-seated problems with the housing market. While there is confusion over what the precise problems are, most people agree that the private rented sector is failing to provide a stable and affordable option for those who are locked out of home ownership or ineligible for social housing.

Politicians who wish to see ambitious reforms of the housing market should feel confident that a mandate for change is there for the taking. But the results from this research illustrate that for any party to win this mandate, much more needs to be done. Politicians need to define the housing crisis in popular terms and set the parameters of the problem they wish to address.

While the findings show that there is still considerable stigma attached to social housing this itself does not equate with opposition to the building of new social housing nor the principle of social housing itself. The failure to understand this distinction has led to a perception that the public will not support new social housing.

This perception has been a constraint for those politicians who have wanted to see public money spent on new social housing. It has also acted as a useful cover for politicians who have not.

Housing will be a prominent theme of forthcoming elections. This report challenges a longstanding misconception that has held back previous political debates about housing: there is no public majority against new social housing.

Context

It is estimated that England needs to build approximately 250, 000 homes per year for supply to meet demand for housing.[iv] In 2010 only 115,000 new

homes were built in England. Numbers have risen since then but they still fall short of the 150,000 mark. The last time over 200,000 homes a year were built in England was 1988. You have to go back as far as 1970 to find the last time over 300,000 homes were built.

The data tell a clear story. Where the burden of building homes in England was once shared between private enterprise and government, today it is carried by the private sector almost exclusively. In 1918 one per cent of house holds in England and Wales were socially rented. This peaked at 31 per cent in 1981 but has reduced to around 18 per cent today as much of the social housing stock was sold off under the right to buy policy introduced in 1980.

Number of affordable homes. Source: DCLG
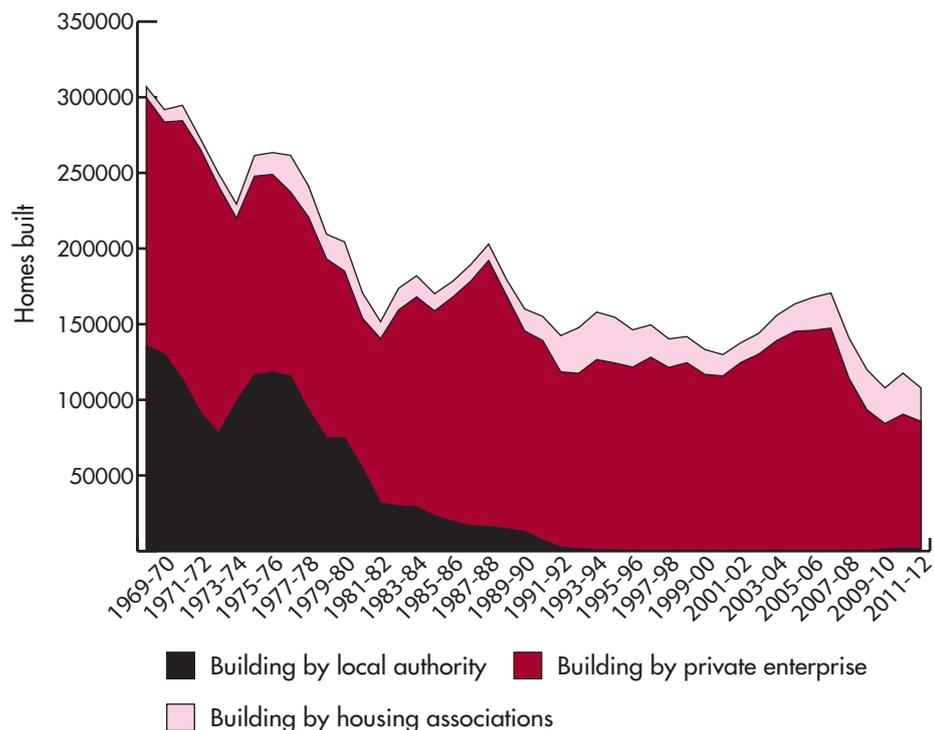
The amount of homes built by the private market has rarely reached more than 100,000-150,000 per year.[v] In the light of recent trends it is difficult to imagine the private sector building the amount of homes England needs in the coming decades. Politicians often express the ambition to build sufficient homes for the future. But if this ambition is to be realised, then the current trend will need to be turned on its head: the public and non-profit sector will need to build homes at a scale not seen for many decades.

The public sector doesn't just need to build more homes to meet supply. It will also need to ensure more low-cost homes for ownership and rental are built. In 2012, the waiting list for social housing in England stood at around 1.8 million households. This represents an increase of 81 per cent since 1997. Figures from the Department for Communities and Local Government confirm that the supply of affordable homes has been in decline. In 2012-12 the total supply of additional affordable homes fell by 26 per cent on the previous year, and by over half in the social rented sector.
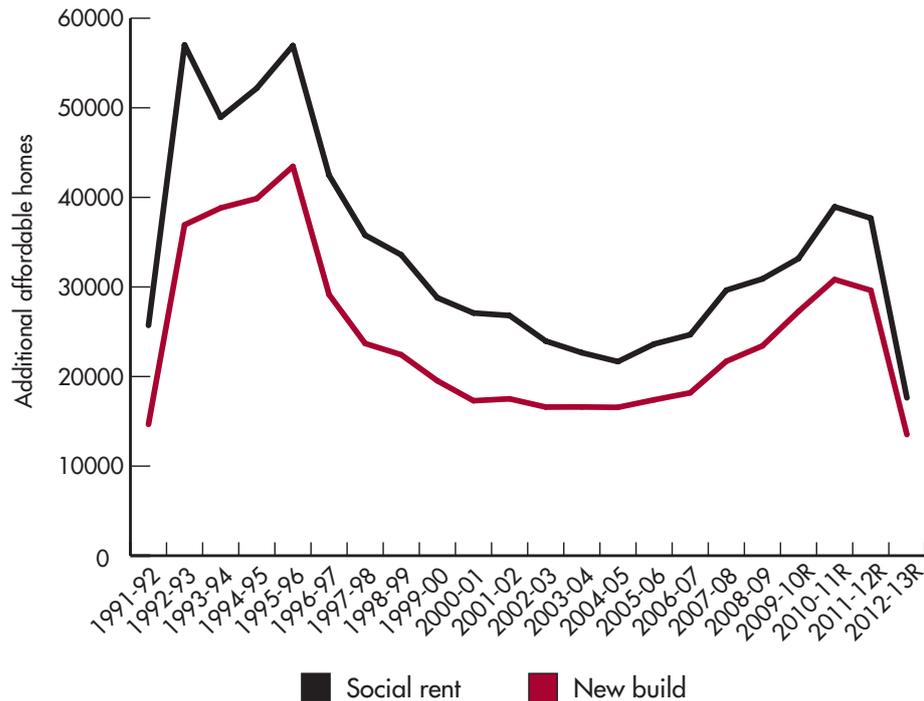
The language of social housing

If new house building is seen as unpopular, then new social housing is often viewed as too controversial to mention. In recent years the language around this tenure has gradually shifted away from social towards 'affordable' housing. But increasingly, even affordable homes are considered a step too far.vi In the Conservative party's new policy proposals on garden cities, George Osborne has announced in his 2014 budget that Ebbsfleet will not be required to contain a single affordable home in their plans.vii

But is the assumption that the public will be hostile to new social house-building grounded in a realistic assessment of attitudes? As in so many policy areas, debate about house building is dominated by those whose interests are directly affected - in this case, developers on the one side and well-organised opponents to local housing developments on the other. This polarisation distracts from a more measured position the wider public is likely to occupy.

This report presents results from primary research which show that an alternative public view about social housing does indeed exist. Of course, the research uncovered many significant challenges for advocates of social housing, but it presents evidence to show that the public is not opposed to more social housing being built. In fact, the opposite may be true.

The received wisdom, however, is that the public will not tolerate new homes. In a 2013 report on the politics of housing, the Social Market Foundation highlighted the barrier of public attitudes to increased house building. The authors state that "overcoming or finding ways of circumventing local opposition to housing has been a perennial problem facing governments in recent decades."viii

It is a premise from which many think tank reports on housing begin. When Policy Exchange recommended boosting support for people to build their own homes (self-builds), it warned that "the alternative is trying to force more homes through a broken and politically toxic system."[ix]

The focus groups

The work combined qualitative and quantitative techniques to arrive at a picture of public attitudes to social housing in England. The qualitative research comprised four deliberative focus groups on the theme of social housing in the UK undertaken in December 2013. The groups took place in St Albans, Winchester, Leicester and Leeds and contained 6-7 participants selected to provide a range of socioeconomic status, a 50 per cent gender split and a tenure split representative of the UK (four home owners, one private and one social renter).[x]

Each focus group lasted three hours and sought to elicit participants' views on key features of the debate over social housing, which was defined as 'housing built by government or housing associations provided at rent lower than those in the private sector'. Throughout the sessions, participants completed a number of exercises aimed at uncovering their attitudes to a number of broad areas related to the housing market and social housing in particular. We attempted to test and interrogate how far they were opposed to more social housing and why this might be. We also wanted to see if any particular arguments or information had the power to change their views.

The focus groups also incorporated a quiz which presented information about housing to each group. In addition to the exercises and quiz, participants discussed six statements, three in support of social housing and three against. These were intended to stimulate discussion about different attitudes towards the principles for and against social housing. Following the qualitative phase of the work, a nationally representative poll was used to test our initial findings.

In particular, the rise in stigma associated with social housing is well known and associated with the 'residualisation' of the tenure, or the increasing concentration of households with limited economic opportunities and high needs. To better understand the salience of this issue both phases of the research looked at attitudes about social housing tenants, and again sought to uncover the reasons driving these views.[xi]

Finally, the qualitative and quantitative work investigated a set of broader issues to do with housing in the UK, the performance of the housing market, and what could be done to improve the experience of housing. Recently politicians of all parties have made attempts to stamp their own mark on the politics of housing, and we sought to understand how successful these attempts had been. Interestingly we find that there remains much more work to be done to win the public argument regarding the key features of the UK's housing crisis.

Housing policy should not be made on the basis of public attitudes alone. But with a better understanding of what the public think, political parties can be more successful in gaining popular consent for a new generation of homes in the UK and making sure house building programmes are inclusive. The findings presented in the next chapter show that while many challenges lie ahead, there are a number of opportunities for politicians in future housing strategies. We also hope that the conclusions will be of use to housing cam-

paigners and advocates, particularly for social housing, who will be better able to direct campaigns aimed at demonstrating the public value of the social rented sector.

2 FINDINGS

New social housing in the UK is a popular idea

Much has been made of the NIMBY ('not in my back yard') effect in British politics. Wind farms, railway lines, roads and housing estates are things that people are assumed to oppose and therefore communities have to be bribed if they are to be built.[xii]

It's unclear what evidence this view is based on. Our research shows that when it comes to social housing only 15 per cent of the population are opposed to more of it being built in the UK. A clear majority of 57 per cent say they would support new social housing being built in the UK. 28 per cent neither support nor oppose or say they don't know.

We also looked at how many people proactively identified the lack of social house building as a cause for concern. In a different question, people were asked to identify one or more problems with the British housing market, by choosing from a long list. 20 per cent of people in the survey picked the option 'not enough social housing being built', twice as many as the number concerned about insufficient private house building (nine per cent).

These are not the numbers of mass public opposition. They give lie to the claim that the British public oppose more social housing being built.

Local social housing can be popular too

While new social housing might be popular in the abstract, it might be assumed that opposition would drastically increase once people considered it being built in their local area. One participant in the focus groups likened this phenomenon to support for wind farms in the abstract:

> I think the trouble is a lot of it's like wind farms. You think you want them but you don't really want them in your back garden because of the noise and the eyesore or whatever way you want to view it.
> I was talking just now about we've just bought a puppy and I walk him up these woods where I am. If they decide they're going to chop the woods down to build social housing, I'd be a little bit disappointed by that because I think you need somewhere to you[rself]. But I think we all know that we need the social housing as well, so it's a bit of a difficult situation that we find ourselves in. [Male respondent, Winchester]

Our survey backed up this sentiment by demonstrating higher opposition to new social housing 'in your area'. However, opposition did not increase dramatically. The percentage of respondents saying they opposed more social housing being built in their area increased to 27 per cent. This is an important challenge to received wisdom about negative attitudes to new social housing.

Characteristics of the opposition to new social housing

The survey provides a clear steer on the characteristics of people more likely to oppose new social housing in their area. They are people in rural areas; people in the south of England; home owners; and those intending to vote for the Conservative party or the UK Independence Party (UKIP) at the next general election.

These final two groups were the only ones in our survey that showed a greater number of people opposed to rather than in support of new social housing in their area. This can be seen in the table below:

Table 1 Conservative and UKIP voters are more opposed to social housing in their area than Labour and Liberal Democrat voters

And to what extent would you support or oppose more social housing being built in your area?					
	Total	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	UKIP
Total support	**44**	28	58	55	34
Neither support nor oppose	23	24	24	21	27
Total oppose	**27**	44	15	23	36
Don't know	5	4	3	2	2

People agree there are problems with housing

93 per cent of respondents said they believed there are major/some 'problems with housing in Britain today'. Perhaps for this reason the trends discussed during the focus groups (presented in a quiz format), while unfamiliar to many of the participants, did not come as a surprise.

> *Moderator: So we've looked at a lot of arguments, a lot of information from this quiz, and thank you for bearing with us. Before we take a break for food, any last thoughts about the quiz, any information that really stuck out?*
>
> *Male respondent 1: None of it's really surprising.*
>
> *Male respondent 2: No*
> [St Albans]
>
> *It's not surprising, is it, because that's what we hear all the time that people cannot afford to get on the housing market and that just confirms that really. 83 months. How many years is that?*
> [Female respondent, Winchester]

But there is little agreement on precisely what those problems are

Our focus groups found little consensus among the public about what kind

of problem the housing crisis in England was. This was backed up in our survey showing that people do not consistently identify the same problems, with public opinion divided on some key issues. For example, 40 per cent say there is too much regulation while 33 per cent say planning laws are not restrictive enough.

Table 2

Which, if any, of the below do you think are the biggest problems with housing in Britain today?	
Too much lending from banks	46
Too much regulation (e.g. making it too expensive to build houses or rent out their properties)	40
Immigration	35
Not restrictive enough planning laws (e.g. allowing landowners to sit on vacant land)	33
Not enough social housing being built	20
Not enough lending from banks	16
Not enough regulation in the private rented sector (e.g. lack of rent controls)	15
Too restrictive planning laws (e.g. not allowing building on greenfield sites)	13
Not enough private housing being built	9
Increased demand for housing from family breakups, people living longer and marrying later	8
Poor quality housing	8
Regions without enough jobs so low demand for housing	5

One reason for the difficulty in reaching consensus on the parameters of the housing problem is the different ways in which people experience housing according to their type of tenure. Participants in the focus groups suggested as much.

Female respondent: Yes, they need to regulate the private sector more.

Male respondent: Yes, and cut. House prices are going up ridiculous and they need to stop it, they need to cut it.

Female respondent: They just started going up again though.

Male respondent: Because it's outrageous, it's absolutely outrageous. Then bringing down the interest rate for everyone, they've done it just to throw

it back up again. They did the same with the VAT didn't they? It went from 17.5 per cent down to 15 per cent for a year, was it, or two years? Then we went to 20 per cent, so they just got back everything they'd put down. They just keep you all the time. But then I would say that because I don't own a property. If I was a homeowner, then obviously I would be saying, "No, keep those prices rising because I want my retirement." So it depends on your situation, doesn't it?
[St. Albans]

People do agree that the private rented sector isn't working

In all our focus groups, participants living in the private rented sector described a cycle of high housing costs which left them unable to save money for a deposit on a house.

I can only talk from experience here, we privately rent and we save and we have a child and we're saving not only for a house but as well as getting married. We've been saving properly shall I say for about two years and we are nowhere near, even with all the benefit schemes, not benefit schemes but housing schemes that are available. It's just impossible with the rising price of everything, food, electric, gas, water, it's impossible and it's horrible.
[Female respondent, Winchester]

This drew empathy from other participants. We tested the extent of this empathy in our survey. Although only 18 per cent of the population of England rent their homes from private landlords,[xiii] the results demonstrate that 84 per cent of respondents refused to say that the private rented sector was functioning well and should be left as it is.

We also used our survey to help paint a picture of what life in the private rented sector is like. We found that private renters were more likely to see affordability and being near jobs or employment opportunities as the most important factor in deciding where to live, compared with other tenures. Owners and social renters also placed more importance than private renters on factors such as public services or access to green spaces in the area when deciding where to live. 29 per cent of people in the private rented sector said they did not expect to be in their current property a year from now, compared with only eight per cent of home owners and 11 per cent of social renters.

Most people see social housing as essential social security, but not 'for me'

On the whole, the focus group participants thought the function of social housing was to provide housing for the less fortunate or people who otherwise would not be able to afford housing of a decent standard.

Moderator: In terms of the idea of what people think social housing is, if we think through what the original purpose of social housing was, what comes to mind?

Female respondent: Homes for the needy.

Male respondent: Ensure everyone has a home and are relatively comfortable.

Female respondent: People who can't afford, wouldn't be able to afford one otherwise can have their own home and have it subsidised by those who can afford it, really.
[Winchester]

Responses of this kind were reflected in the poll findings. Only 19 per cent of people in our survey took the view that government should not be involved in housing.

Table 3

Which, if any, of the below do you think are the biggest problems with housing in Britain today?	
Government has a duty to ensure everybody has access to housing	53
It is the responsibility of individuals to provide housing for themselves and/or their families – government should not be involved in housing	19
Neither	21
Don't know	7

Only 28 per cent of people stated that they would be happy for themselves or their family to live in social housing. This is perhaps unsurprising given that people in our focus groups viewed social housing as part of the social security system. Viewed in this way asking people if they would happy to live in social housing is similar to asking if they would be happy to be in receipt of social security payments.

Stigma attached to people who live in social housing was real

Another explanation for why people would be unhappy living in social housing is likely to be stigma. Stigma came up repeatedly in our focus groups. It was overwhelmingly associated with the residents of social housing, not the homes themselves.

In our focus groups, participants were concerned about the behaviour of individual tenants, displaying stigmatising views that confirm the findings of previous studies. In our survey, over half of respondents (52 per cent) agreed that people living in social housing were stigmatised because of it. And when people were asked what would make them more favourable to the idea of living in social housing, the most popular option was stricter eligibility criteria (41 per cent).

Participants in the focus groups were exercised by a view that the social housing 'system' was subject to abuse, leaving some legitimate cases unable to access the accommodation they needed. In some extreme instances this led participants to argue that building more social housing would be unneces-

sary if governments could tighten eligibility criteria and discriminate more effectively between legitimate and illegitimate cases.

> *I don't think it's about building more, I think it's about having a clear out of who is already in there.*
> [Male respondent, St Albans]

But stigma does not mean opposition to social housing

However this was an exception. For the most part, while negative views about tenants were prevalent, they did not override principled support for social housing. Even where participants expressed concerns about eligibility in the social rented sector very few saw this as reason to reject social housing.

> *Until you find a way of assessing people really properly and then again, it comes back to the unemployment business and helping people get a job. Until you do that, I believe it would be very wrong to take the whole system away on account of there will always be people who will abuse the system and take advantage of it. But to punish those that genuinely are desperately in need on account of those, I personally think it's something, until they find a way of dealing with those people who are wrong, you have to be prepared to put up with them.*
> [Female respondent, Winchester]

Indeed, the focus group findings revealed how participants struggled to reconcile their local experiences with their support for social housing in principle.

> *Basically, all that's down there is right and we all know, being decent people probably, that everyone should be looked after. But there's a big difference [between] being written there and then walking through a bad area of [part of Leicester] and seeing it for yourself. That's the thing. We all agree with that, everyone should be looked after, but we all probably know areas where people had had social housing and, as you said, took the piss. That's why that stigma is always there.*
> [Male respondent, Leicester]

The mixed attitude to stigma was also apparent in the findings from the poll. While the phrase most strongly associated with social housing was 'benefits' at 49 per cent, this was closely followed by 'affordability' (40 per cent) and 'reducing homelessness' (32 per cent).

People want the physical differences between tenure types reduced

The majority of participants in our focus groups thought that social housing should be built to a high standard of quality. This was largely for two reasons. First, participants saw high quality social housing as a wise future investment. Second, a visibly low standard of social housing was viewed as stigmatising for tenants.

> *If they do build a lot more houses, why don't they build them to the standard that private sector house is, so they look like private sector house would look*

and then there's no stigma attached to housing association houses because they look like a housing association house? Why not build it for the future so that if they do one of these 'buy to own' schemes that they've actually got something they can sell at the end of the day and bring them up into the community rather than build a box with four windows and a door so that it's quite obviously a cheap built house which no one's going to want to buy in 15 years' time.
[Male respondent, Winchester]

But if you build more and build better quality, the stigma would slowly, I think, disappear. If there were better quality houses, no, it'd be 50 years, but eventually, all those people who couldn't afford houses who have got this nice social housing on nice little estates that are turning into all these nice little societies, then that stigma is going to go eventually, isn't it?
[Male respondent, Leicester]

Our focus groups showed that people want social housing in the future to 'fit' or 'blend in' with its local environment more. In many instances the issue of aesthetics arose, primarily out of a concern with stigmatisation and social housing tenants being labelled.

I think the main thing is not to make the housing look different. They make the blooming social housing look different which segregates people straight away.
[Female respondent, Leicester]

3 CONCLUSIONS

1. The public know there are problems with housing in the UK and could be ready to accept a new wave of social housing

Only seven per cent of people taking part in our survey thought there were no problems with housing in the UK. This indicates that the vast majority are open to innovation in the housing market. Huge numbers also believe the public sector should be part of the solution. 87 per cent of survey respondents thought that government could do something to address problems with the housing market.

This is the context which leads 57 per cent of people to support more social house building in the UK. It is not necessary for large numbers of people to state they are happy to live in social housing. The important point is that a majority of people see the principle of social housing as legitimate.

A further 28 per cent of people neither support nor oppose new social house building or say that they don't know. Our research provides a steer on how to convince people who do not hold a strong opinion on housing policy to get behind new social housing.

2. But people don't clearly connect social house building with affordability across the housing market

People understand that there are problems with housing and they believe in the government's ability to come up with solutions. But this doesn't automatically add up to an argument for more social housing, because the public 'framing' of the housing problem is still undefined. Consensus that there is a problem does not extend to consensus about what the main solutions might be.

This perhaps reflects the wisdom of the great British public. The housing market is characterised by complex problems that manifest themselves in many different ways and it is experienced by people in diverse ways according to their circumstances.

This suggests though that passionate politicians need to invest more time in defining the problems, in a way that shows the relevance of the answers they present.

Our research also shows that relying on facts alone to win your argument is insufficient. We found that the participants in the focus groups rarely made a connection between information they were provided about housing supply, affordability and prices with the need to build more houses. The received economic wisdom of the policy community is not established in the minds of the electorate.

But no one in the focus groups defended the housing market as it currently functions. Those that considered themselves to have done well often described their experience in terms of luck.

I agree with the first bit [of quote about individuals being responsible for housing] purely because if I hadn't have taken responsibility myself, as I said to you, I think I probably would still be living on the street or with my parents. My parents were council tenants, when they were alive were original council tenants, so really, we would be nowhere without the help. It's just a shame that there are so many people that have jumped on the bandwagon and given the genuine people the bad press.

I don't suppose it would be prudent to talk of individual cases but we have a person near us, he's in a three-bedroomed house, he come there with his wife, apparently an altercation with his wife or whatever, but now he's in the house and she's in some refuge somewhere. I just keep worrying about the expense, and that's why I think that we're in a bit of a state at the moment because there doesn't seem to be anyone monitoring this sort of thing. We're just in such a mess at the moment.

Obviously there's not enough houses being made and a lot of the council houses that got sold off have caused a bit of a problem as well. I do agree with, I think it is the individual's responsibility and not the government. But I'm talking from, I was in a fortunate position where I managed to get a house, we were just looking and I bought a flat which was repossessed or whatever, and I bought it at a reasonable price and sold it a reasonable price so then I got on the ladder and managed to move on.

But I can appreciate that not everyone's lucky.
[Male respondent, Winchester]

3. Private renting could be the platform on which more support for new social housing is won

Our research shows that one area where there is clear agreement is that the private rented sector is not working. The survey results paint a picture of an increasing number of people living in a tenure characterised by instability and anxiety over increased costs.

Only 16 per cent of people in our poll thought the private rented sector was functioning properly and should be left as it is. This suggests that reforms to the private rented sector to ensure longer term tenancies and more predictable price increases recently proposed by the Labour leader Ed Miliband are likely to be popular.

The consensus about a failing private rented sector could also be channelled to support new social housing. The most recent English Housing Survey shows that in 2012-13 the private rented sector overtook the social rented sector as the largest tenure in England after home ownership.[xiv] At the same time the taxpayer is spending greater and greater amounts subsidising the housing benefit of those tenants who cannot afford renting privately.

The perceived plight of private tenants could help grow the level of public support for new social house building, as long as it's clear that new social

homes will be available for current private tenants.

> *Can I have one, please, a social house? Because I'm not allowed to have one. I can't have one, and I think it's unfair that you could be earning a certain bracket amount of money but you're not earning enough to buy because you can't save any money because you're paying such a high rent, but because you're working you're not eligible for social housing. So that's my view. [Male respondent, St Albans]*

4. Focus on addressing stigma, not on placating NIMBYs

The NIMBY problem in British politics attracts much attention in the media. But our research shows that while they are certainly loud, they are also undoubtedly a minority. In the rural parts of southern England where more people own homes and more people vote Conservative or UKIP, NIMBYs are likely to be more powerful. But even in those areas our research suggests that there is a silent plurality that can be won over to support new social housing.

One way in which to do this is to address stigma. The research suggests that the public are concerned about the ways in which the social housing 'system' is being abused, and the key idea underlying this concern is eligibility. Our research revealed that groups seen as more deserving of social housing were generally categorised as one or more of the following: younger people who can't get on the housing ladder; local people who now cannot afford to rent or buy in the area where they grew up; those who have temporarily hit hard times or who have circumstances which mean they will always have trouble finding work.

The Fabian Society's 2009 report *The Solidarity Society* showed that tightly targeted social support legitimises and heightens concerns about eligibility.[xv] How far allocating social housing should be determined by public concerns about eligibility is ultimately a political decision. But making no changes to allocations policy would be unwise, if significant new social house building is in prospect. Instead, policy should be tilted a bit more in favour of some of the groups seen as more 'deserving' of support. It is crucial that the primary purpose of social housing remains to provide housing for those who would otherwise be homeless, but setting aside a fixed share of new homes for other deserving groups would be symbolically important.

One way in which this could be done would be to explicitly link new social housing to the problem of the private rented sector. Such an approach would see a programme of new social house building announced alongside a guarantee to increase the percentage of priority places for the young and/or local people who are struggling to buy a home or to afford to rent in the place where they live.

5. Reduce the physical differences between tenure types

The final conclusion is that new social housing is more likely to be supported if it doesn't look visibly different to private housing. This is related to addressing the stigma currently attached to social housing. If new social housing is indistinguishable from new private housing, as it already is in many new developments, then people feel more comfortable with the idea.

Already social housing and owner-occupied housing are often developed

side-by-side, although developers don't always honour the spirit of mixed communities in their plans. In future, new schemes could combine a complete mix of homeownership, shared ownership, social tenancies, market-rent tenancies and the new 'affordable' tenancies. Social landlords or reputable housing developers managing new private rental properties might also encourage other local landlords to improve their standards.

A further way to collapse the distinction between tenure types would be to explore new ways for residents to move between social renting, private renting and various degrees of ownership without moving home. For example new developments could come with a 'right to share' giving social tenants the ability to move into shared ownership tenure, by owning a small proportion of their home. Tenants would then be able to 'staircase' up and down, as their circumstances changed, while social landlords would share in any capital gains unlike under right to buy scheme.

This approach could feasibly replace right to buy which has led to a large scale shifting of social housing assets to private housing assets and often at extreme discounts which represent poor value to the taxpayer. The replacement of right to buy with a flexible model of shared ownership would avoid new social housing of high quality being quickly sold off. It would also emphasise the extent to which a functioning housing market is ultimately reliant on effective partnerships between households, developers and government.

Conclusion

This report should be a huge encouragement to those who advocate more social housing being built in the UK. The myth that the public will not tolerate large scale house building funded by the public purse is just that: a myth, and one that for decades has constrained politicians who have wanted to improve social housing stock in the UK, while acting as a convenient excuse for politicians who have no interest in doing so.

The amount of housing developments that have faced opposition suggest that those who are opposed to new social housing are very well organised. Although only 27 per cent of people oppose new social housing in their area it is likely that these people are exerting a disproportionate amount of influence on local politicians.

The challenge for politicians and campaigners in the coming years will be to give voice to the silent majority in support of new social housing in the UK.

ENDNOTES

i   'I'm prepared to risk unpopularity over developing the countryside, says David Cameron', *The Telegraph,* 19.03.2012 http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/hands-off-our-land/9154150/Im-prepared-to-risk-unpopularity-over-developing-the-country side-says-David-Cameron.html

ii   Social housing refers to housing built by government or housing associations provided at rent lower than those found in the private sector.

iii   The National Housing Federation have launched a campaign called 'yes to homes' to counter the problem presented by public opposition to new housing.
The following text from the campaign website provides a neat summary of how the problem is defined:

  Just a small handful of people can block the new homes that are a lifeline for many. When they are the only people putting pressure on local politicians their views are heard loud and clear. All too often the people who actually need homes are missing from local debates.

  As this definition of the problem suggests, all it takes to stop new homes be ing built is a small handful of well-organised people. This report set out to uncover where the wider public sit on issues of new homes being built. In particular, we explore views on a new wave of social housebuilding.

iv   Shelter & KPMG. *Building the Homes we Need* (2014)

v   Europe Economics. *How to Increase Competition, Diversity and Resilience in the Housebuilding Market? (*2014)

vi   Even the definition of affordable housing has shifted under the coalition. Housing was previously defined as affordable if at 60 per cent of the market rate. Housing is now considered affordable at 80 per cent of the market rate.

vii   'New garden cities not required to include low-cost homes, minister says', *The Guardian,* 21.04.2013 http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/apr/21/new-garden-cities-low-cost-homes

viii   Keohane, N and Broughton, N. *The Politics of Housing*, Social Market Foundation (2013)

ix   Morton, A. *The Right to Build: Local homes for local people,* Policy Exchange (2013)

x   The group in Leeds had two social renters present and seven participants in total

xi   Social housing once incorporated a broad range of tenants from all backgrounds. These days it is allocated on the basis of need.

xii   The LSE Growth Commission published in 2013 includes the follow ing recommendation: "We need to institute generous compensation schemes to extend the benefits of infrastructure projects to those who might otherwise stand to lose, either due to disruption caused by the construction phase or by the long-term impact on land and/or property values." See, Aghion, P et al. *Investing for Prosperity: Skills, Infrastructure and Innovation,* LSE Growth Commission report (2013)

xiii   Office for National Statistics. 'Home ownership and renting in England and Wales – Detailed Characteristics', in *2011 Census, Detailed Characteristics on Housing for Local Authorities in England and Wales* (2013)

xiv   Department for Communities and Local Government. English Housing Survey 2012-13 (2014)

xv   Horton, T and Gregory, J. *The Solidarity Society,* Fabian Society (2012)

SILENT MAJORITY |

HOW THE PUBLIC WILL SUPPORT A NEW WAVE OF SOCIAL HOUSING

By Natan Doron and Robert Tinker

That Britain needs new homes is something all political parties can agree on. There are many reasons for the failure of consecutive governments to build enough homes in the UK, but an often-cited explanation is that there is not widespread public support for social housing.

Silent Majority reveals that in fact the majority of the general public are in support of building more social housing. This research confirms that there is still considerable stigma attached to this type of tenure, but this itself does not equate with opposition to building more social housing. The authors argue that the failure to understand this important distinction has constrained housing policy and contributed to the current housing crisis.

The report also demonstrates that the public are aware of the deep-seated problems with the housing market, although there is confusion over what the precise problems are. There is a real mandate for change, but politicians and campaigners must first define the housing crisis in popular terms, giving voice to the silent majority in support of social housing.