

SHELTER



MORE THAN BRICKS: STORIES OF HOME

Qualitative longitudinal research findings
on the benefits of social homes

JULY 2026



More than Bricks: Stories of Home

Moving into a social home provides families and individuals with a stable foundation to thrive and contribute to society. Shelter's longitudinal research project, in partnership with IKEA, has highlighted the immediate benefits of moving into a social rent home.

Shelter commissioned HACT (Housing Associations' Charitable Trust) to deliver research into the impact of moving into a social rent home. Since the project began in 2024, we have been hearing directly from social tenants about their experiences of moving into a social rent home. Over 1,000 social tenants have taken part in the longitudinal surveys. So far 44 people have taken part in interviews, including 25 people who have taken part in two interviews and 13 who have taken part in three interviews, to explore how their lives have changed up to a year after moving into their social home (see Appendix 1).

Many of the social tenants who have taken part in the project were previously privately renting or experiencing homelessness. This includes people living in temporary accommodation or staying with friends or family. This briefing summarises the key emerging findings from the qualitative longitudinal interviews. The results give us an early insight into the final research findings from the longitudinal survey, including the medium- and longer-term benefits of moving into a social rent home.

This research project is a pivotal step in our partnership with IKEA that sees our two organisations joining forces to defend the one thing we value most: home. Together, we're calling for the delivery of 90,000 social rent homes per year over 10 years to end the housing emergency. To achieve this, we need a comprehensive plan to get councils building again, including removing historic council housing debt and boosting the funding for social homes to the scale the housing emergency demands.

Key findings

- Many of the benefits of moving into a social rent home are experienced immediately and sustained over time, including the positive impacts on people's health and wellbeing.
- Although many people experience immediate improvements to their ability to afford rent, the upfront cost of moving and the need to buy new furniture can mean that some of the initial financial benefits are dampened.
- Some impacts take a longer time to fully develop, including improvements to people's sense of community and belonging.



'I've never had somewhere to look forward to coming home to. So when I was on holiday, I could never understand why people would miss home and this is the first place I felt that.' Peter

The immediate benefits to people's health are sustained

The 'More than Bricks' interim report highlighted the many immediate improvements to people's health and wellbeing after moving into a social rent home.¹ Within three months of moving in, six in ten (61%) tenants have seen a meaningful improvement to their mental health due to moving into a social home. The initial survey results show that moving into a social home quickly improves people's health and wellbeing.

The qualitative research findings reinforce the immediate improvements to people's health and wellbeing, and develop our understanding around why we're seeing these changes sustain over time. People told us that their health immediately improved due to four key reasons:

1. More stability and privacy
2. Reduced stress and better sleep
3. Being able to better manage their health
4. Improved cooking and eating habits

Social homes provide more stability and privacy compared to people's previous living situations, particularly for those who were previously homeless. Social tenants experience immediate improvements to their stress and anxiety due to feeling more secure. Indeed, our previous report found that a third (36%) of tenants say their mental health has improved within just three months due to less stress about becoming homeless or losing their home.² This is unsurprising as the vast majority of social rent homes are let as lifetime tenancies, giving people more certainty about their future.³ Some tenants moving from temporary accommodation also talked about the mental health benefits of having greater privacy and lower levels of noise. This is particularly important for families with neurodivergent children, as Cecilia's story shows.

The reduced stress due to greater stability and privacy has a positive knock-on effect on people's sleep. Three in ten (30%) social

tenants say their mental health has improved in just three months due to sleeping better.⁴ Interviewees who had moved from temporary accommodation were most likely to talk about the immediate impact of greater stability and privacy on their sleep. Improved sleep among children is also often experienced immediately. The majority of parents we spoke to reported that their children's mental health had improved shortly after moving in. Parents commonly talked about improved sleep quality due to having more space alongside greater stability.

Many social tenants report being better able to manage their health over the longer term, including living in a safe and more suitable home that is closer to healthcare appointments. The majority of the people we spoke to reported improved mental health due to being better able to manage their mobility or health problems. This includes people living in a more suitable home that is closer to healthcare appointments.

Improvements to people's eating and cooking habits are also often immediate, particularly for people who previously lived in temporary accommodation or did not have adequate facilities to cook because they were staying with friends and family. Around six in ten people we spoke to said their ability to cook and eat improved immediately after moving in.⁵ As we found in our previous report, social rent homes provide facilities to develop healthier eating routines and habits.⁶

The improvements to people's health and wellbeing are experienced immediately and sustained over the longer term. As soon as people move into a social rent home, they report reduced stress, improved sleep and being better able to manage their health. Many people also experience immediate improvements to their cooking and eating habits. But these are not short-lived benefits. Social homes provide people with the foundation to thrive into the future.

Cecilia's story: greater stability, improved eating habits and financial impacts

Before social housing

Cecilia and her two children moved into social housing after experiencing domestic abuse and receiving a Section 21 eviction notice while renting privately. Over the following two years, they lived in temporary accommodation, moving between different placements, including a single room where they lacked privacy and access to suitable cooking facilities. The instability caused significant stress and anxiety for Cecilia and had a particular impact on her son, who has autism and ADHD and struggled with the frequent moves and lack of routine.

Immediate impact

Moving into a permanent social home brought an immediate sense of relief, security and stability. Although the move involved upfront costs for furniture and household items, Cecilia soon noticed improvements in her mental wellbeing and sleep as the stress of housing insecurity reduced.

The children benefited from having their own bedrooms and private space, helping them to feel settled after a prolonged period of instability and upheaval. Family meals improved as Cecilia was able to cook more regularly at home, and both children quickly began making friends in the neighbourhood. Lower housing costs and a new job also helped Cecilia manage her finances more effectively and plan ahead.

'It [living in a social home] just makes you feel so much safer and secure and it's affordable as well with the rent so I don't have to worry about any like big rent increases I can budget a lot better now.'

Progression

Six months after moving, Cecilia reported continued improvements in her wellbeing, financial stability and sense of control over the future. She was able to save money, plan holidays and manage larger expenses more confidently.

The family became increasingly connected to their local community, forming positive relationships with neighbours. Her son had settled into a specialist school and had become much calmer, with fewer behavioural difficulties, while her daughter had established strong friendships at her new school.

Long-term outcomes

A year after moving, Cecilia remained very positive about the impact of her social home. Healthy cooking habits had become established, and the family's sense of belonging continued to grow through friendships, local activities and community involvement.

Both children were settled socially and educationally, and Cecilia had been able to pursue goals that were previously out of reach, including learning to drive. She saw this as an important step towards greater independence and future employment opportunities. Overall, social housing provided the stability that enabled Cecilia and her children to rebuild their wellbeing, strengthen community ties and plan confidently for the future.

'I did want to do my driving lessons. I couldn't afford it, and so when we moved here and once we were settled here, I was able to save up for lessons. So yeah, so that's another positive impact I've been able to save for driving lessons.'

Positive financial impacts emerge more fully over time

Social rent homes are the only genuinely affordable homes with rents tied to local incomes. We know that social rents are, on average, a third of private rents.⁷ Almost nine in ten (87%) homeless households struggle with the cost of their temporary accommodation.⁸ This means that moving into a social home usually results in lower, more manageable housing costs. Many interviewees were struggling to save and afford essentials in their previous home.⁹

The interviews point to three key findings around the financial impact of moving into a social rent home:

1. Immediate improvements due to cheaper rent and being able to cook
2. Upfront costs of moving can undermine these benefits
3. The ability to save and plan for the future increases over the longer term

Our previous report found that there are significant immediate improvements to people's financial situations after moving into a social rent home.¹⁰ We found that half (52%) of new social tenants report a meaningful improvement to their ability to afford rent within just three months of moving in. Cheaper social rent has a knock-on effect on other essential spending, including utility bills.¹¹ Indeed, around half of interviewees reported an improved financial situation after moving in and most of these changes are due to lower rent or bills.¹² Improved finances have a positive impact on people's health too, with many tenants reporting improved health due to being in a better financial situation.¹³

Some tenants also report immediate improvements to their finances due to being able to cook and save money on takeaways, as Liam's story shows.

'I'm able to save more because I'm not spending money on takeaways constantly. Cooking saves a lot of money.' Liam

Although new social tenants often see their rent go down immediately, the upfront cost of moving and the need to buy new furniture can mean that some of the initial financial benefits are dampened. Around eight in ten of the people we spoke to report some initial financial difficulties due to moving expenses.¹⁴ Interviewees mentioned spending more money upfront on furniture, carpeting and white goods, sometimes leading people to borrow money or go into an overdraft. Some social tenants also talked about having legacy bill payments from their previous home. This means that even if their rent and bills are now significantly lower, these lower costs can take time to trickle down to their everyday lives.

Social tenants start to think about longer term plans after they've had a few months to settle into their new homes. This is due to living in a more stable housing situation and being able to save. Indeed, over a third (35%) of social tenants were better able to save due to moving into their social rent home after just three months.¹⁵ Perhaps even more surprisingly, half (51%) of tenants who were in debt before moving into a social rent home are no longer in debt within just three months.¹⁶ This ability to save and reduce their debt increases over the longer term which helps people to plan for their future. This could include exploring different employment or training opportunities. It could also include learning to drive, as Cecilia's story shows.

'Financially it's been really good because... before I was in private renting and then that's obviously a lot more expensive than living in social housing so that's been really good for budgeting and so [being] able to like save up for things which been really good.' Cecilia

Social tenants experience the full benefits of cheaper rent and an improved ability to afford bills as the financial pressures of moving ease. Interviewees report that the financial benefits of moving into social homes emerge more fully and substantially over the longer term.

Carol's story: greater stability and financial benefits

Before social housing

After a relationship breakdown, Carol spent almost two years living in a caravan while coping with serious health conditions, including open-heart surgery and cancer treatment. High utility costs and financial insecurity left her regularly relying on her overdraft to cover essential expenses.

Immediate impact

Moving into a social home brought immediate improvements to Carol's quality of life. Her new home was warm, secure and allowed her to cook properly again. Importantly, she was rehoused in the same area, enabling her to remain with her GP and maintain continuity of care for her complex health needs.

Carol valued the independence her new home provided. Initially, however, the costs of furnishing the property meant she did not experience immediate financial gains. Over time, her finances became more stable, and she began to feel the benefits of lower housing costs. She estimated she was saving £300-£400 per month and felt more confident about managing everyday expenses and facing the winter without needing to borrow money for bills.

'I feel much more settled here... I've not got to worry about moving out in January and February, or even having to borrow money to pay my bills because it's so cold.'

The move also strengthened her social connections. Neighbours introduced themselves and exchanged contact details, giving her reassurance that support was nearby if needed. Reflecting on her experience, Carol felt social housing had made a significant difference to her life.

'I know I've got some neighbours here... we already exchanged telephone numbers between us in case we need something.'

Progression

Six months later, Carol spoke positively about the safety, affordability, and stability of her home, as well as its proximity to her family. She was pleased to be able to host her sons and grandchildren, and buy Christmas presents without worrying about debt or heating costs.

Carol felt increasingly settled. She had developed stronger friendships with neighbours, which enhanced her sense of belonging. Carol expressed a clear desire to remain in the her home long term, valuing the independence, security, and stability that social housing had provided.



Connections with the local community strengthen in the longer term

Social homes can foster a sense of belonging for adults and children due to the long-term stability they provide. The 'More than Bricks' interim report found that many tenants feel more connected to their local community shortly after moving into a social home. Indeed, we found that almost half (46%) of social tenants felt a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood within just three months of moving into their new social home. In contrast, they did not feel a sense of belonging in their previous accommodation. Social tenants also reported more regularly talking with their neighbours, as Carol's story shows. This suggests there are some immediate improvements to people's sense of belonging.

'I have made a lot of wonderful friends, 15 to 20 of the people here now I know their names and I'm talking to on a regular basis. [...] If you're feeling down, you go and speak to a few of them, that has been a huge, huge help. [...] Before, it could be very, very lonely and not having friends there. That was bad. It was very, very hard.' Freddie

HACT have now carried out 25 wave two interviews to capture people's experiences six to nine months after moving into their new social home, and 13 wave three interviews to capture people's experiences around a year after the move. Emerging findings from these interviews suggest that people's connections with neighbours and their wider community are strengthened over time. Although social tenants report some immediate improvements to their sense of belonging, the interviews suggest that connections with their local community are significantly deepened over a longer timeframe. This is often because people have embedded their routines, are more settled in their community and have started new activities, hobbies or volunteering, as Clifford's story shows.

'I think just by being outside in your space, you then belong, so then you form a bond with it... So then being able to walk into a village and then you see the church, you go to the pub. Or you can [go to] the shop, the doctors... You just haven't had that for such a long time.'

Peter



Clifford's story: improved health, new hobbies and new training opportunities

Before social housing

Before moving into social housing, Clifford experienced a prolonged period of housing insecurity following the death of his mother. He had been living in a severely damp property that worsened his existing health conditions, which included lung cancer, brain tumours, chronic back problems and a lengthy hospital recovery. After seeking help from the council, he spent around 18 months in a hotel provided by the local authority as temporary accommodation. The lack of cooking facilities in the hotel and uncertainty about his future caused significant stress.

Immediate impact

Moving into social housing provided Clifford with a safe, warm and secure home, as well as the stability of a long-term tenancy. The improved housing conditions had an immediate positive effect on his physical and mental health, while lower living costs and the ability to cook at home improved his financial situation. He reported feeling more independent, in control of his life and able to think about the future again.

Progression

Over time, Clifford became more involved in his local community through social groups, church lunches and learning activities. Clifford has also started to think about his hobbies again. His mental wellbeing continued to improve, supported by the security of having a permanent home. He also began working towards a new career as a private investigator with support from the Jobcentre.

'For the first time in years, I'm starting to think about hobbies. I used to do a lot of photography [...] So I was starting to think about starting up again.'

Long-term impact

Just over a year after moving in, Clifford felt fully settled. His health and sleep had improved significantly, his partner had moved in permanently and he was close to completing his professional training. For Clifford, social housing provided the foundation to rebuild his health, finances, independence and future aspirations.

Over time, Clifford formed community links, rediscovered old interests and is now pursuing new professional goals. As he put it: 'I can do what I want, where I want.'





Conclusion

Shelter's IKEA-funded ground-breaking longitudinal research project highlights the transformative impact of moving into a social rent home. While the research is still ongoing, the emerging qualitative findings paint a clear picture. Good-quality social housing has immediate positive effects on people's health and wellbeing that are sustained over time.

The longitudinal interviews show that moving into a social home leads to meaningful improvements in people's lives. Many people report experiencing immediate improvements to their health and wellbeing due to moving into a stable long-term home. Tenants also report that their rent and bills have gone down which has a further positive impact on their mental health due to reduced stress about their finances.

Although people start to save due to lower rent and reduced bills within just a few months, some of the financial benefits emerge more fully over time due to the upfront costs of moving and furnishing their new home. In the medium to long term, people start to plan for the future, including looking for new training and employment opportunities, starting new

hobbies, and learning new skills. Over the longer-term, tenants start to form deeper connections with their communities, and a stronger sense of belonging.

The research project will continue to gather evidence on the medium and long-term benefits of moving into a social home. The emerging qualitative findings provide early insight into the final research findings from the longitudinal survey which will be published in Spring 2027.

The research project is a pivotal step in Shelter and IKEA's partnership that sees our two organisations joining forces to defend the thing we value most: home. Together, we're calling for the delivery of 90,000 social rent homes per year over 10 years to end the housing emergency.

Building social homes at scale will also avoid unnecessary costs associated with people remaining homeless or staying in poor-quality and expensive accommodation. To do that we need a comprehensive plan to get councils building again, including removing historic council housing debt and boosting the funding for social homes to the scale housing emergency demands.

Appendix I: Method

Shelter commissioned HACT to deliver a longitudinal research project on the impact of moving into a social home. The evidence is being collected through a longitudinal survey of new social tenants. HACT is also conducting interviews to explore people's experiences in more detail.¹⁷

HACT has partnered with over 50 landlords to date, who have offered to disseminate the survey to households that are new to social housing. So far, over 1,000 new social tenants have completed a wave 1 survey. Social landlords disseminate the pre-occupancy survey, which asks tenants about their experience of where they were living before. HACT follows up with survey waves 2-4 to measure change due to moving into a social rent home.

HACT has carried out interviews with 44 people who have taken part in the survey. 25 of these people have taken part in two interviews and 13 people have taken part in three interviews to explore medium- and longer-term impacts (see diagram 1). The interviews provide an opportunity to delve into the survey findings in more detail and explore why we're seeing particular impacts over time.

About four in ten interviewees were previously privately renting, over a third

have experience of temporary accommodation and three in ten were living temporarily with friends or family.

HACT established two advisory groups at the start of the project: a lived experience panel and a learnt experience panel. The lived experience panel is made up of 12 social housing tenants from different backgrounds and geographies. The learnt experience panel brings together sector organisations. There are currently nine member organisations.¹⁸

Shelter, HACT and the two panels worked collaboratively to develop an impact framework. The impact framework set out the outcomes and impact we expect to see as a result of moving into a social rent home. The framework informed both the survey design and the interview guide.

The interviews were semi-structured, which means that the interviewer was able to probe different themes within each interview dependent on the interviewee's experience and survey response. The interviews lasted around 45 minutes and Interviewees were offered a £15 voucher to thank them for taking part in each interview. All interviewee names in the report are pseudonyms.

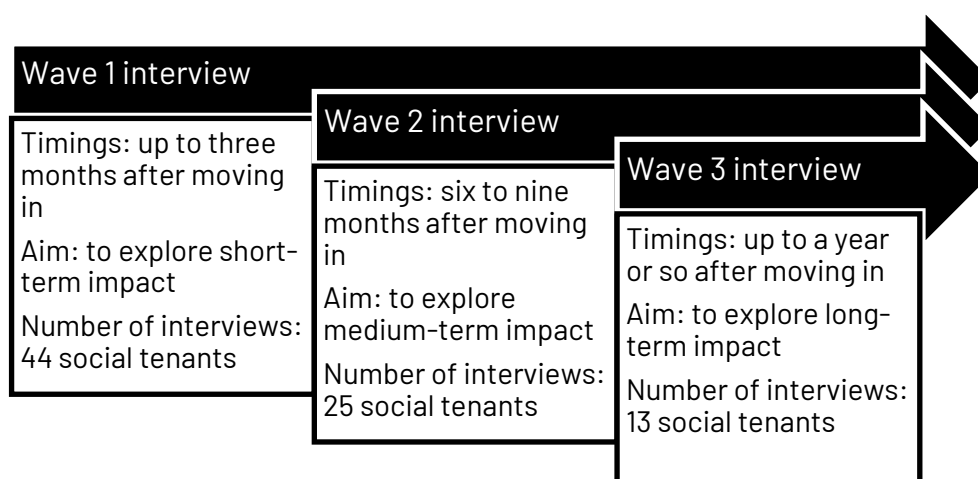


Figure 1 HACT qualitative longitudinal method

Appendix II: Sources

¹ Rich, H. More than Bricks: the Human and Economic Impact of Social Homes, Shelter, September 2025. Available at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/more_than_bricks_interim_report

² Rich, H. More than Bricks: the Human and Economic Impact of Social Homes, Shelter, September 2025. Available at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/more_than_bricks_interim_report

³ In 2024/25 79% of new general needs and supported housing social rent lettings were lifetime tenancies, including 91% of general needs social rent lettings. Of the general needs lifetime tenancies, 39% were secure lifetime tenancies and 61% were assured lifetime tenancies. Most councils offer secure tenancies, and most housing associations offer assured tenancies. Source: MHCLG, Social housing lettings in England, April 2023 to March 2024, Table 2ai, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/social-housing-lettings-in-england-april-2023-to-march-2024>

⁴ Rich, H. More than Bricks: the Human and Economic Impact of Social Homes, Shelter, September 2025. Available at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/more_than_bricks_interim_report

⁵ 26 out of 41 people said their ability to cook and eat improved immediately after moving in (wave 1 interview).

⁶ Rich, H. More than Bricks: the Human and Economic Impact of Social Homes, Shelter, September 2025. Available at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/more_than_bricks_interim_report

⁷ Shelter analysis of MHCLG and ONS data. MHCLG, Social housing lettings in England, April 2024 to March 2025, Table 2dii, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/social-housing-lettings-in-england-april-2024-to-march-2025> and ONS, Price Index of Private Rents, UK: monthly price statistics, Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/datasets/priceindexofprivaterents>

⁸ Garvie, D., Pennington, J., Rich, H. and Schofield, M., Still Living in Limbo: Why the use of temporary accommodation must end, Shelter, March 2023, Available at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/still_living_in_limbo

⁹ This was particularly the case for single parent households and single adults living alone. HACT,

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https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/impact_of_social_rent_homes_interim_findings

¹⁰ Rich, H. More than Bricks: the Human and Economic Impact of Social Homes, Shelter, September 2025. Available at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/more_than_bricks_interim_report

¹¹ Over two-fifths (45%) of tenants surveyed reported that moving into a social home means they are better able to afford utility bills. Rich, H. More than Bricks: the Human and Economic Impact of Social Homes, Shelter, September 2025. Available at:

https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/more_than_bricks_interim_report

¹² 19 out of 41 people reported an improved financial situation after moving into their social rent homes. Most of this improvement is due to lower rent and/or bills (wave 1 interview).

¹³ 19 out of 37 tenants reported improved mental health due to better finances in their new social home (wave 1 interview).

¹⁴ 30 out of 37 people we spoke to reported short term financial difficulties linked to moving expenses, including moving costs, sourcing furniture or carpets and painting the new home (wave 1 interview).

¹⁵ Rich, H. More than Bricks: the Human and Economic Impact of Social Homes, Shelter, September 2025. Available at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/more_than_bricks_interim_report

¹⁶ Rich, H. More than Bricks: the Human and Economic Impact of Social Homes, Shelter, September 2025. Available at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/more_than_bricks_interim_report

¹⁷ See HACT interim report for the full research findings. HACT, Impact of Social Rent Homes: Interim Findings from a Longitudinal Study, September 2025, Available at:

https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/impact_of_social_rent_homes_interim_findings

¹⁸ See the full list of organisations. HACT, Impact of Social Rent Homes: Interim Findings from a Longitudinal Study, September 2025, Available at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/impact_of_social_rent_homes_interim_findings

We exist to defend the right to a safe home and fight the devastating impact the housing emergency has on people and society.

We do this with campaigns, advice and support – and we never give up. We believe that home is everything.

SHELTER



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