



Not enough left for food: the impossible cost of private renting

Summary of Shelter research:

- Among private renters on the lowest incomes (the bottom 20%), over half (54%) spend more than 50% of their net household income on rent, and nearly a quarter (24%) spend more than 70%
- For the bottom 40% of private renters by income, over a third (35%) spend more than 50% of their net household income on rent, and over a half (56%) spend more than 40%
- Nearly four in ten of those on the lowest incomes have under £50 left after paying rent and essential household bills each week – less than the cost of a week's food shop
- Over one third of renters on the lowest incomes have less than £100 a week after rent – far below the level required to purchase all of life's necessities

Private renters face a crisis of affordability. Many households are spending huge portions of their take-home pay (or net income, after tax) on rent, with little left for food and other essentials. People on low incomes have no alternative but to rely on the private rented sector. While the Renters' Rights Act brought in a series of long-overdue reforms, including the abolition of Section 21 'no fault' evictions, the Act falls short of delivering genuinely affordable homes for the thousands of low-income households living in the private rented sector. Private rents remain largely unregulated, and landlords have the ongoing ability to discriminate based on income, for example through guarantor requests and often stringent affordability screening.ⁱ

This briefing outlines Shelter's latest research into the affordability pressures faced by private renters in the bottom 40% of the population by income. We found that a large proportion of this group face unsustainable rent burdens and are left with so little of their income after rent and essential bills that they do not have enough for food. This further highlights the inability of the private rented sector to provide safe, secure homes that are also affordable.

Solving this challenge will require action from government in the private sector, including consideration of calls for better regulation of private rents, and uprating local housing allowance. **But to make a significant, lasting impact the government must start delivering a new generation of genuinely affordable social homes, now.**

Social rent homes represent a truly affordable alternative to the private sector – social rents are based on a formula that factors in local earnings, rather than being set by a profit-driven market. Social rents are typically a third (33%) of private rents.ⁱⁱ However, there has long been an undersupply of social rent homes, and over 1.3 million households were on local authority housing registers in 2025ⁱⁱⁱ, with many stuck in an unaffordable private rented home.

While the government's £39bn Social and Affordable Homes Programme is a big step in the right direction, it is only forecast to deliver around 180,000 social rent homes over a decade. It is widely accepted that the only way to solve the housing emergency is with the delivery of 90,000 social homes each year for 10 years. In the post-war period, councils built millions of social homes, delivering on average over 120,000 homes per year between 1950 and 1979.^{iv}

This autumn the government has a historic opportunity to get councils building again. The keys to unlock a council housing revolution are:

- a financial package to get councils building, including cancelling Housing Revenue Account debt in full and realigning the fiscal framework to unlock grant and loan financing for council-built social homes
- establish a national council housing mission, backed with a social rent target and greater support and resources for councils to align planning and housing objectives
- prioritise land for council homes with a duty for public land to be used to maximise public good, including for delivery of social rent homes, and backing for councils to use their compulsory purchase powers to disapply 'hope value' for low-cost land assembly
- a council-led programme to acquire empty and neglected homes and convert them for social rent, with the aim of reducing the number of low-income households living in expensive and low-quality private rented sector homes

Research questions

In this research we investigated the financial impact of renting on lower-income private renters. Our research questions were:

1. What proportion of take-home pay do private renters in the bottom two income quintiles spend on the rent (i.e. what is their 'rent burden')?
2. How much residual income do private renters in the bottom 20% and 40% of earners have left after paying for rent?
3. How much residual income do private renters in the bottom 20% and 40% of earners have left after paying for rent and essential bills (council tax, water, energy)?
4. How has the financial impact of private renting changed over time?

Methodology

Unlike other measures of affordability, which focus on rent as a portion of gross income (e.g. the Office for National Statistics, private rental affordability^v), this study looks at rent as a portion of take-home pay (net income, after tax). This is because take-home pay provides an understanding of affordability that reflects the actual lived experience of renters.^{vi} We are only able to get a true picture of how much money renters have left to spend on essentials like food by looking at the actual money they have to spend – in other words, their net rather than gross income.

Accordingly, we used data from the English Housing Survey (EHS), an annual survey about people's housing circumstances and conditions, commissioned by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Our principal analysis was conducted with the 2023/24 EHS dataset,^{vii} the most recently available cohort, with a secondary analysis conducted with the 2021/22 dataset to enable a comparison over time.^{viii} The EHS was selected as it provides a representative sample of England, and includes variables on net income, housing benefit, and weekly rent (excluding charges for utilities and services).

The EHS net income variable combines the take-home pay of the household reference person (HRP) and their partner. This meant that households with other incomes (e.g. multi-family households, or those with non-dependent children) would not be represented accurately within this research, because they may have a seemingly high rent burden. Therefore, for our analysis we excluded households other than those with a single HRP or an HRP and partner (with and without dependent children). We also excluded households that were entirely comprised of students as their rent and income situations are unique and risked distorting our findings.

We also focused our analysis on groups of private renters based on income, and to do this we used income bracket variables from the EHS. Within this briefing, 'lowest-income' households are those within the bottom 20% by household income, and 'lower-income' households are

those within the bottom 40% as a whole. The data was weighted using the EHS weights to provide a representation of lowest and lower-income households across the country.

In our analysis, 'essential bills' are water, council tax, and energy. These are not available in the EHS and so were modelled using data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Family Spending in the UK tables^{ix} to give an approximation. These tables are based on a survey of actual spending, rather than an estimate of necessary spending. Nevertheless, they provide an evidence base for the levels of spending that could reasonably be expected by different groups. Water and council tax were taken from Family Spending Workbook 5 – "Housing"^x and were applied based on household composition (permutations of retired, non-retired, one person, two-person, with and without children). The weekly costs applied were:

Household composition	2024/25		2021/22	
	Water	Council tax	Water	Council tax
One adult, retired	£7.00	£22.50	£5.90	£20.90
Two adults, retired	£9.20	£42.20	£8.40	£35.50
One adult, non-retired	£6.90	£21.40	£5.90	£18.80
Two adults, non-retired	£9.60	£36.60	£8.40	£31.60
One adult with children	£8.70	£19.80	£8.00	£16.90
Two adults with children	£11.00	£36.70	£9.70	£32.70

Table 1 – modelled water and council tax costs

Energy costs were not available by household composition, so we selected a weekly cost figure from Family Spending Workbook 1 – 'Detailed Expenditure trends and time series'^{xi} and generalised this across all households. Given our focus on the bottom two income quintiles, we applied an energy figure from the second decile group, which was £30.20 per week in 2024/25 and £20.70 per week in 2021/22.

The most recent EHS data available was from financial year 2023/24. To align it with the ONS data from 2024/25, it was necessary to uplift rents and incomes. For incomes we used the ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) data^{xii}, taking the mean annual pay increase for England of 5.3%, which we applied to all households. For private rent we used the ONS 'Price Index of Private Rents, UK: monthly price statistics', which showed an annual increase of 7.5% to April 2025.^{xiii} For social rents we used the Regulator of Social Housing, 'Registered Provider Social Housing Stock and Rents in England 2024 to 2025, Additional Tables', which showed an annual increase of 8% from 2024 to 2025.^{xiv}

Findings

Many private renters face a rent burden of at least half their take-home pay

We began by examining the rent burden faced by private renters, which is the portion of their household's take-home pay that is used to pay rent. Among the lowest-income private renters the median rent burden was 53%, while for lower-income private renters it was 42%.

Chart 1 shows the spread of rent burden within lowest and lower-income private renters. In the lowest-income bracket nearly a quarter of renters (24%) spend 70% or more of their net household income on rent, and over half spend 50% or more. Among lower-income households, over a third spend 50% or more of their take-home pay on rent, and over half spend 40% or more.

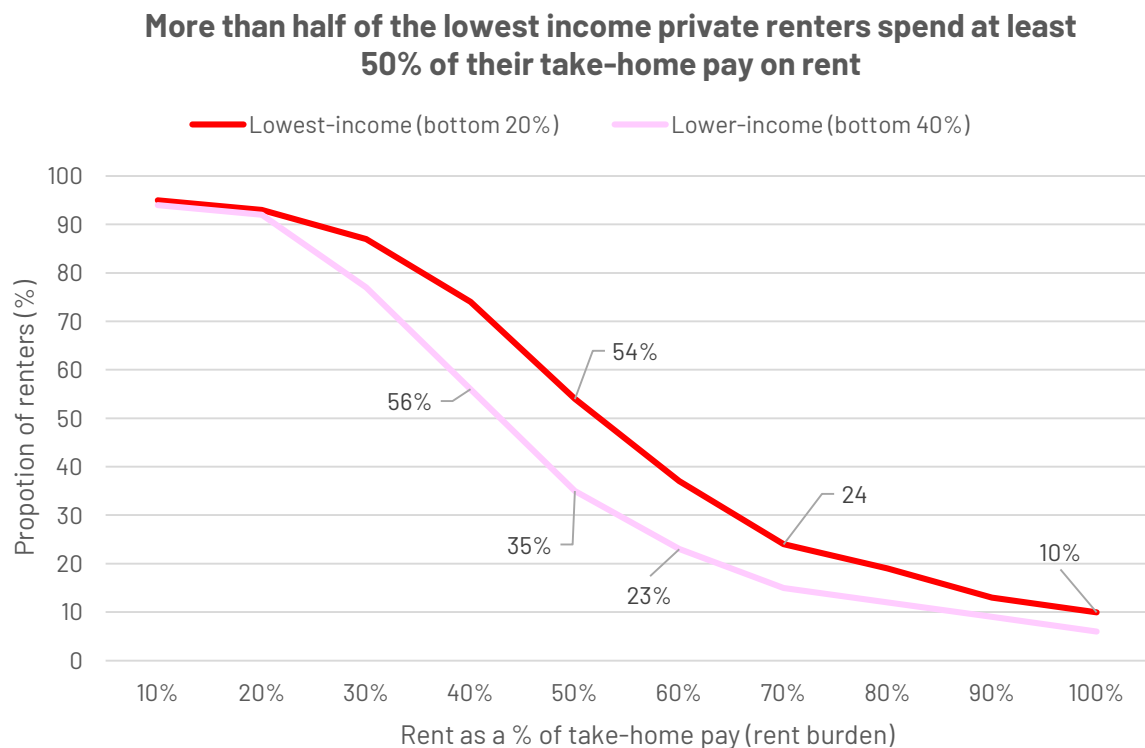


Chart 1 - rent burden for private renters in the bottom 20% and the bottom 40% of incomes.

Rent and essential bills place a huge burden on most private renters

We also examined the combined burden of rent and essential bills. On average (median), lowest-income renters spent 71% of their take-home pay on rent and essential bills, and those in the lower-income bracket spent 58%.

Among lowest-income private renting households, more than eight in ten spend over half their net household income on rent and essential bills. For over a quarter of these renters the burden is at least 90%. Even among lower-income households there are still two-thirds (66%) who spend half of their net household income on rent and essential bills, and nearly one third (30%) who spend 70%.

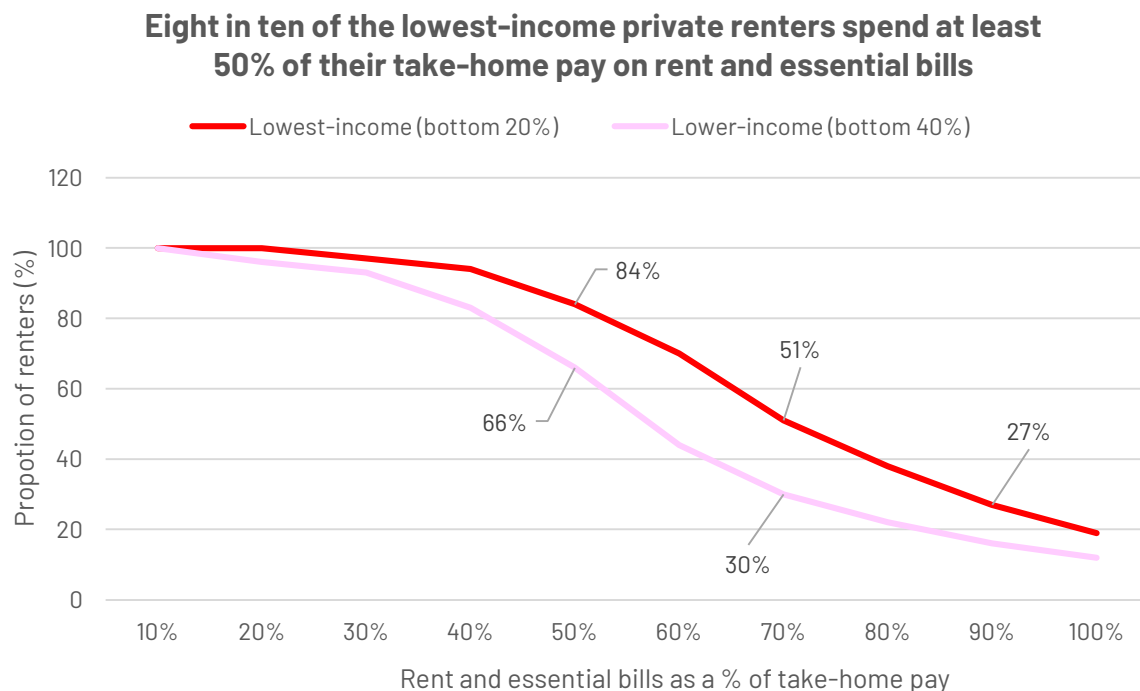


Chart 2 - the proportion of take-home pay spent on rent and essential bills for private renters in the bottom 20% and the bottom 40% of incomes

These figures paint a clear picture of private rents that are far too high relative to incomes, with the vast majority of lower-income private renters having to devote huge portions of their take-home pay to the cost of renting.

The cost of rent leaves many without enough for essentials

Having established the extent to which private renters face massive rent and housing cost burdens, we wanted to understand what households are left with to spend on other essentials like food, clothes and travel (their 'residual income'), as well as how this had changed over time.

Within the lowest-income group, 303,940 households – nearly four in ten (38%) – had under £50 left each week after rent and essential bills; less than the amount that a household reasonably needs to buy food.^{xv} In 2022 this was 221,647 households (31%), meaning there has been an increase of 37% over the last three years in the number of households with less than £50 left each week.

Residual incomes remain small within lower-income households. 372,652 households – over a fifth (21%) – had less than the cost of a weekly food shop after rent and essential bills, up from 285,294 in 2022 – an increase of 31%.

To look at the effect of rent only, we ran analysis on the cost of rent in isolation and looked at the number of households who were left with less than £100 per week after rent. This amount was chosen for simplicity, and is below estimates of the minimum that a household needs each week.^{xvi}

Among the lowest-income group, over a third (34%) have less than £100 weekly residual income, which equates to 270,090 households. In 2022 this was 238,872 (33%). Within the lower-income group, nearly one in five (19%) are left with under £100 per week – 327,195 households. In 2022 this was 301,673 (18%).

These figures again point to a sector that is struggling to accommodate renters on low incomes, leaving households with potentially impossible choices to make between which of life's essentials they spend their money on.

Conclusion

Our research shows that large numbers of households spend more than half their take-home pay on rent, with many being left without enough money for an average weekly food shop. This underlines the fact that private rented homes are inappropriate for many households on low incomes.

Despite reforms under the Renters' Rights Act, which have provided important safeguards to private renters, the private rented sector continues to fail to provide safe, secure homes that are affordable to everyone.

Only social rent homes can provide genuine affordability, but decades of underinvestment by successive governments have pushed more and more people into the private sector and exacerbated the housing emergency.

The government has already laid important foundations for change. It has boosted grant funding, limited Right to Buy discounts, agreed a long-term rent settlement, and returned focus to social rent as a tenure. Social housing delivery has begun to improve as a result, but nowhere near enough to meet the scale of the crisis.

Ending the housing emergency requires a council housing revolution, and the government must take bold action to get councils building again, so that we can ramp up to delivering the 90,000 genuinely affordable social rent homes a year the country desperately needs.

Sources

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- ⁱⁱ Shelter analysis of MHCLG and ONS data. MHCLG, Social housing lettings in England, April 2022 to March 2023, Table 2di, [Social housing lettings in England, April 2022 to March 2023 – GOV.UK](#); ONS, Price Index of Private Rents, UK: monthly price statistics, Table 1, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/datasets/priceindexofprivaterentsukmonthlypricestatistics>
- ⁱⁱⁱ MHCLG, [Live tables on rents, lettings and tenancies](#), Table 600, accessed 24 April 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-rents-lettings-and-tenancies>
- ^{iv} MHCLG, Live tables on housing supply: indicators of new supply, Table 244, accessed 25 September 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-house-building>
- ^v ONS, Private rental affordability, England, Wales and Northern Ireland: 2024, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/bulletins/privaterentalaffordabilityengland/2024>
- ^{vi} The disconnect between measures based on gross income and lived experience has been explored by Shelter Cymru, including through a Private Rented Sector Advisory Panel, a forum of people with lived experience. See Lauren Caley, 'Understanding Affordability: who does the private rented sector in Wales work for? And how do we change it' Shelter Cymru, May 2026, <https://sheltercymru.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Understanding-Affordability-May-2026.pdf>
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- ^x Office for National Statistics, [Family spending in the UK: April 2024 to March 2025](#), workbook 5, table 2.7. Office for National Statistics, [Family spending in the UK: April 2021 to March 2022](#), workbook 5, table 2.7. Both accessed 3 August 2026.
- ^{xi} Office for National Statistics, Family spending in the UK, workbook 1, table A6, accessed 3 August 2026, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/expenditure/bulletins/familyspendingintheuk/latest#data-on-family-spending>
- ^{xii} ONS, ASHE tables – Home Geography, table 8.7a, accessed 11 August 2026, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/datasets/placeofresidencebylocalauthorityashtable8>
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- ^{xiv} Regulator of Social Housing, Registered Provider Social Housing Stock and Rents in England 2024 to 2025, Additional Tables, table 1.15, accessed 11 August 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/registered-provider-social-housing-stock-and-rents-in-england-2024-to-2025>
- ^{xv} In the ONS Family Spending in the UK 2025, households in the second decile spent an average of £50.60 per week on food, which represents a reasonable (and conservative) minimum to apply across households in our analysis.
- ^{xvi} Work by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that that the weekly minimum needed to afford essentials for the adult members of a household in 2026/27 is £120 for a single person and £205 for a couple. As such our figure of £100 is very conservative. Lucy Bannister and others, 'Guarantee our Essentials: reforming Universal Credit to ensure we can all afford the essentials in hard times' Russell and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2026 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/guarantee-our-essentials-reforming-universal-credit-to-ensure-we-can-all-afford-the>.