

Generation Rent consultation Response: Consultation on the future shape of the English Housing Survey

Generation Rent is the national campaign for private renters, working for a fair and sustainable private rented sector. The organisation aims to improve the affordability, security, management, and conditions of the sector through political lobbying, public campaigning and grassroots campaigns. To this latter end we support local private renters' groups and encourage community organising around housing issues.

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

To our knowledge there are no really cost-effective alternatives to data collection that would retain the survey in its current form. The English Housing Survey was redesigned radically in 2011-13, pushing the robustness of the data to the limit. The current continuous format should be retained, as one that is working well and also allows ongoing analysis and implementation of changes in reaction to the data, at the earliest possible opportunity.

If the survey is to be reformed, then there should be a further consultation that looks specifically at this question and brings together data collectors and sources to understand the most respected and cost-effective ways of collecting a data set of this kind. Efforts should therefore be made to reach out to statisticians, government authorities and the like, rather than just expecting responses to this survey, which may not be part of their general remit but for which they could have good insight into new and innovative methods.

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

Nothing like the English Housing Survey exists elsewhere in the world; it is unique in providing data on the impact of housing policies and in understanding how central and local government should plan their future housing strategies. This also feeds in to many other areas of government such as social care and health planning. Furthermore, the survey provides a valuable sociological snapshot that is not captured by other data sources in this country.

In the private rented sector (PRS) in particular, where the lack of data has long been a barrier to evidence-based and informed policymaking, the English Housing Survey is the key data source. Given that we know we have a changing and growing PRS, but which has a high turnover that requires monitoring, it appears short-sighted to consider reducing the frequency of the survey. With ongoing initiatives to rapidly increase housebuilding too, the nation's housing stock will potentially change dramatically in coming years. Reducing the frequency of the survey will only mean this changes cannot be properly monitored and the effects of these new policies will not be known.

The proposal to collect data on a biennial basis does not consider the way that the survey currently functions. The current sample is a rolling programme that means two years' worth of data are combined to produce the figures on housing and health and regional analysis (that is, everything other than the headline figures). To continue to report in the same way (and to be able to make comparisons over time), it would be necessary to double the current survey size every two years. This would not therefore produce any cost savings as suggested. Alternatively, using the current annual sample every other year would mean that it would take four years before it would be possible to report on health and safety matters.

Generation Rent would be hugely affected if the Department for Communities and Local Government decided to adopt either of the approaches listed above. We write policy and campaign around the effects of housing type and policy on health and the English Housing survey remains the sole source of information about the risks to health from housing in England and a key source for analysing the extent of overcrowding and under-occupation and policies to address these.

We also work on fuel poverty in the private rented sector and the survey is used to produce annual estimates and monitor progress, as well providing the main evidence informing discussions around the Winter Fuel Payment. The complex nature of data collection under the EHS means that reporting on fuel poverty is currently lagged by approximately 18 months. A decision not to run the Survey in 2015/16 will mean that in 2018, the best information available on fuel poverty will by then be three years out of date.

Another area of focus for us is affordability in housing, and the survey supports analysis of this in a number of ways. It is used in the derivation of annual dwelling stock weights used in the compilation of the Index of Private Housing Rental Prices (IPHRP) and the owner occupied housing (OOH) component of CPIH. In addition, data is used to weight the Private Rented Property component that forms part of the CPI, CPIH, RPI, RPIJ (and other variants of the indices).

In the context of choosing one of the above options, though, pausing the survey for one year may be preferable on the understanding that this would be a one-off, rather than a regular action, though this again would produce a one-time saving as opposed to an ongoing one. Equally, as mentioned above in particular reference to the PRS, even a one-year pause would be extremely detrimental for policy and analysis in such a changing and evolving tenure.

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

As mentioned above, changing its frequency to biennially is not an economical option, because of the costs of retraining the surveyors and at least two sets of data collected would need to be combined and analysed.

There must also be some concerns about the impact on quality of the survey becoming a biennial survey. One of the advantages that a continuous survey offers is that a pool of surveyors is easier to

retain as they are offered continuity of work, by doing regular surveys they also stay familiar with what is a complex survey form. This high quality, properly remunerated, well trained and motivated surveyor work force is part of what sets the EHS apart and it will be more difficult to assemble such a team on a biennial basis.

4. Which topics in the survey are of most and least value to you?

Data gathered and analysed through the English Housing Survey provides vital information and can work to reduce potential negative impacts on health and well-being as well as offering the most cost effective responses.

The topics of most value to Generation Rent would be those dealing with household characteristics, tenure, energy use, the breakdown of housing conditions (decent homes standard, EPC and SAP, HHSRS Hazards), and the cost of remedial works.

However, we really need to understand the survey as whole, in the same way we should view the housing stock and market. That is, it is useful to have statistics across all areas of housing, even if they are not immediately relevant to work we do, as a way to analyse housing in the round, and acknowledging the inter-connected nature of different tenures.

5. Are there any questions that you would consider removing?

As previously mentioned, the reduction of scope and in the number of questions in the last review (2011-2013), means that there is actually a case for restoring some of the previous questions that existed, as opposed to removing any more. Now that results have been analysed from recent surveys, a review of how well the survey is working with a lower sample size and fewer questions is needed.

For further information about this response or the work of Generation Rent, please contact Seb Klier, Policy and Campaigns Manager, Generation Rent

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