8. Housing
Homes, planning and changing policies

Public opinion affects the direction and consequences of housing policies and may become even more influential following the government's decision to allow greater local control over planning decisions. At a time of regional housing shortages, people's views could prove critical in deciding whether and what type of new development goes ahead.

Opposition to new homes is strongest in the south of England, where housing shortages are most severe. However, most people accept that some new homes are needed and those who initially say they would not support development can be swayed if plans include new amenities for their community.

45%
Oppose new homes

Across Britain people who oppose more **homes being built** in their area outnumber supporters by 45% to 30%. In the south of England, opposition is higher (50%) – and support lower (27%).

Developments that include side benefits like new employment, parks, schools and transport links would achieve a more even division of opinion in towns and suburbs of the south of England – although opponents would still outnumber supporters in rural areas.

While rising house prices and restricted access to mortgages have seen falling levels of home ownership in recent years, it remains the tenure of choice for the vast majority.

86%
Would buy
SOLD

32%
Say high rents a disadvantage

Given a free choice, 86 per cent would **buy their own home**, rather than rent. One in five (19%) say the main disadvantage of home ownership is the expense.

The perceived **disadvantages of renting** depend on the landlord. High rents are the most commonly cited disadvantage of renting from a private landlord, mentioned by 32%, while 39% say the main disadvantage of renting from a local authority or housing association is anti-social behaviour on estates.

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Public attitudes play an important part in the formation of housing policies and in determining their consequences. People's views about the desirability of building new houses and the places where they are prepared to accept development can strongly influence their elected MPs and councillors. Widespread controversy about the possible consequences of the Draft National Planning Policy Framework (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011b) illustrates the strength of opinion and emotion over this. However, the key feature of planning in Britain, reinforced by the government's decentralisation measures, is that the decisions about new development are predominantly in the hands of local elected representatives.

Known preferences between the three main types of tenure – home ownership (usually achieved through mortgage borrowing), 'social' renting from a local authority or housing association, and renting from a private landlord – are also influential. The electoral dividend that Margaret Thatcher's government enjoyed after giving social housing tenants the 'Right to Buy' their properties at discounts remains an outstanding example of this.

The social and economic context in which this chapter examines attitudes related to housing policy issues is, however, very different to 30 years ago. The housing market has experienced growing instability and uncertainties in recent years. Since housing questions were last included in the *British Social Attitudes* survey in 2005 a property boom has given way to a banking crisis and credit crunch characterised by mortgage rationing. A decline in the proportion and number of owner-occupied homes that started in 2003 has accelerated.

Recession and its aftermath have, meanwhile, exacerbated a decline in house building and sales from which recovery remains uncertain. The number of new homes completed in 201011 in England was the lowest since the 1920s (Oxford Economics, 2011). There are housing shortages across the South, both for 'affordable' social renting and to buy. House prices, despite a recessionary dip, remain at historically high levels. The counter-cyclical boost to public spending by the outgoing Labour government has, meanwhile, been replaced by the coalition government's focus on deficit reduction. Post-election budgets have seen cutbacks in the grants available for new social house building, while Housing Benefit paid to low-income tenants (in private as well as social housing) is being reduced.

In England, at least, the coalition government has signalled changes in the nature and function of social housing by questioning its current security of tenure and rights of access for homeless families. It argued that social housing should provide homes for those who need them most, but only for as long as they need them (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010b, p.5). They also want to see greater use made of private rented housing for homeless households and other groups in need.

Against this background, we explore how public opinion may help or hinder efforts to increase the housing supply by asking people whether they support or oppose

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new housing being built in their local area. To discover how far their opinions might be swayed we also find out whether those who are negative or non-committal about development are prepared to support new house building if it includes extra amenities or economic opportunities for the community. Recognising that the acceptability of new housing may also depend on the kind of property being proposed, we also investigate whether people perceive a greater need for some types of home and tenure than others.

The chapter then looks at attitudes concerning tenure itself. While the continued popularity of home ownership can be easily predicted, we know that policy makers and housing providers are having to take increasing account of households who would like to set foot on the ownership ladder, but are prevented by high local prices or restricted access to mortgages. We, therefore, report on people's views about the advantages and disadvantages of social and private renting and consider how these accord with the government's current efforts to reshape state support for tenants.

Attitudes to new house building

The outgoing Labour government sought to promote new housing and more affordable homes through targets determined by a regional planning system (Barker, 2004; Bramley, 2007). The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government has swept away those 'top down' mechanisms as part of a cross-cutting 'localist' approach, where policies are made a matter of local choice. Despite some new financial incentives that the government has introduced for authorities that support new development (Conservatives, 2010; Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010a), local planning authorities have greater autonomy to decide how much housing to allow in their area. However, they must set that decision in an adopted plan backed by appropriate evidence if they are to be confident it will prevail over the broader planning principle of 'the presumption in favour of sustainable development' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011b).

Even under Labour, many local authorities proved reluctant to increase their planned levels of new homes; especially in the south of England where the pressures on the existing housing stock are greatest. While making it questionable whether the government's new financial incentives will succeed (Bramley, 2010), this suggests that residents holding NIMBY ("Not In My Back Yard") views may be in an even stronger position to sway local planning decisions under the new arrangements. But how far is that hypothesis supported by the latest evidence concerning public opinion?

A new survey question in 2010 asked people:

Would you support or oppose more homes being built in your local area?
[Strongly support, support, neither support nor oppose, oppose, oppose strongly]

45%   oppose more homes being built in their area

Table 8.1 shows that across Britain as a whole those opposed to more homes outnumber supporters by three to two (45 per cent versus 30 per cent).[1] While not quite forming a majority among all respondents, the opponents of local house building are in the majority among those who express a definite opinion, and especially among those who hold strong views (15 per cent strongly oppose local house building, while five per cent strongly support it).

Table 8.1 Support and opposition for more homes being built in local area, by tenure

	Housing tenure			
	Owners	Social Renters	Private Renters	All
	%	%	%	%
Support	24	48	36	30
Neither support nor oppose	23	18	25	22
Oppose	51	32	35	45
Base	*2220*	*599*	*443*	*3297*

Not unexpectedly, opposition to local house building is strongest among existing homeowners, (51 per cent compared with 24 per cent) who account for more than two-thirds of all households. By contrast, those who rent in the private sector are almost equally likely to support new homes as oppose them (36 per cent compared with 35 per cent), while those renting from a local authority or housing association are substantially in favour (48 per cent compared with 32 per cent). Given the public's general preference for home ownership (see below), support among tenants for development is likely to be driven by frustrated aspirations to buy, as well as a desire to see more homes being built for rent.

Regional differences
To better understand the implications of the opinions expressed nationally we next examine the findings by region.[2] This is because the availability of housing and its affordability in relation to local incomes varies widely by area, with the greatest need for new properties occurring in the south of England (Bramley and Karley, 2005; National Housing and Planning Advice Unit (NHPAU), 2009). The broad regional analysis in Table 8.2 shows that opposition to development is notably strongest in the South (excluding London) (50 per cent) and outer London (58 per cent). Within London, the equivalent figures reveal a striking contrast between the capital's outer areas and the more deprived boroughs of inner London, where the concentrations of rented housing are higher. In the former, opposition to new housing is particularly strong at 58 per cent, whereas in the latter the supporters of local development are in a clear majority (49 per cent compared with 31 per cent).

Across the rest of England – the Midlands and the North – positive support for development stands at 29 per cent, but the level of opposition is lower than in the South at 43 per cent.

Table 8.2 Support and opposition to more homes being built in local area, by region

	England				Wales	Scotland	All
	North & Midlands	South	Inner London	Outer London			
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Support	29	27	49	25	31	43	30
Neither support nor oppose	25	21	19	16	21	21	22
Oppose	43	50	31	58	47	34	45
Base	*1432*	*1057*	*117*	*189*	*189*	*313*	*3297*

Scotland stands out for showing overall positive support for new local house building (43 per cent compared with 34 per cent), while in Wales the levels of opposition (47 per cent) and support (31 per cent) are much the same as for Britain as a whole. This suggests that the devolved government in Scotland will tend to face less pressure from public opinion when determining housing policy than its Welsh counterpart.

In outer London and the south of England, where high house prices offer continuing testimony to an excess of demand over supply, it is apparent that residents do not generally favour new house building in their locality despite the evidence of need. Inner London appears a notable exception, but in this case there is little spare land to build on.

On the evidence of people's immediate responses to the possibility of new homes in their locality, the prospects for new building to address housing shortages in the south of England appear bleak. This, however, assumes that people who oppose development – alongside the one in five who say they neither support nor oppose it – cannot be persuaded to change their minds.

Incentives for supporting development
To find out how far incentives might serve to reduce opposition to local house building, we invited those who were uncommitted or actively opposed to development to consider some "advantages to local residents" that can occur when new homes are built. Shown a list of improvements to local amenities or economic opportunities, they were asked to say which, if any, would be "the main thing to make you support new homes".

Scotland stands out for showing overall positive support for new local house building

Table 8.3 suggests that side benefits – known as 'planning gain' – do have the potential to secure greater support for housing developments, provided the incentives are realistically promised and delivered. While less than half those who were strongly opposed to development responded positively to the listed incentives, two-thirds of those less strongly opposed and nearly four-fifths of those without a clear initial view showed they could potentially be swayed.

The most persuasive single advantage identified is more employment opportunities, which 17 per cent of all those originally opposed to development or uncommitted give as a main reason to support new homes. However, new employment opportunities may prove more difficult for developers and local authorities to deliver than improved amenities such as green space and parks, which is the next most attractive incentive selected (11 per cent). The same proportion gives priority to new or improved transport links, followed by schools (eight per cent), leisure facilities (six per cent) and shops (five per cent). Relatively few people say they would support development on the basis of "financial incentives to existing residents" (two per cent).

Table 8.3 Incentives that could persuade those initially opposed to local house building (or uncommitted) to support it, by level of opposition

	Initial view on house building			
	Neither support nor oppose	Oppose	Oppose strongly	All
Main reason would support new homes	%	%	%	%
Employment opportunities	21	18	9	17
Green spaces and parks	15	9	9	11
Transport links	11	12	7	11
Schools	9	9	7	8
Leisure facilities	7	7	5	6
Shops or supermarkets	6	5	3	5
Medical facilities	4	5	4	4
Financial incentives to existing residents	2	2	2	2
None of these	22	31	54	23
Base	732	1000	498	2230

Question only put to those initially opposed to new homes in their area or uncommitted
Response options with less than two per cent of response were not included in this table

Given the range of views expressed, it seems that developers and local authorities should negotiate to assemble packages that consist of several side benefits. But this still begs the question of whether those packages would sway enough potential objectors and create a climate of local opinion where planning permission was more likely to be given. To find out some indication of the impact such planning gain incentives could achieve in different regions, we have used the opinion data to calculate potential levels of support for two different 'planning gain' packages.

One is focused on additional public services and facilities and the other on employment, transport and commercial facilities.[3] Our analysis[4] shows that either package is capable of securing majorities for new housing in most areas of the North and inner London. Both also seem likely to have a significant impact in the South and outer London. Even so, it seems probable that the opponents of development would continue to outnumber the supporters, albeit narrowly. For example, in the South and outer London, numbers supporting or opposing development would be equal in suburban and town locations, while in rural areas people were still more likely to oppose development than support it by between three and 14 per cent (depending on the package). Employment and transport improvements would sway more residents to support development in rural locations than public service improvements. In other words, 'planning gain' incentives may be crucial to securing public support for new housing in many localities where it is objectively needed, but they are probably not sufficient to overcome local objections in the most sensitive areas of the South.

Perceptions of housing need

Public perceptions of the types of new housing that are most needed are another important source of information for planners and for those seeking to influence planning decisions in favour of development. We showed people a list of property types and asked them:

If new homes were to be built in your local area, which, if any, of these types of homes do you think are most needed?

We then showed respondents a list of different types of tenure and asked them the same question.

Despite the levels of opposition to local development so far identified, Table 8.4 shows that only one in five respondents maintain that no new housing is needed in their area. However, at a time when the proportion of flats built in England has risen rapidly (Bramley *et al*., 2010a) it is interesting that relatively few respondents (14 per cent) believe that more flats or maisonettes are what is needed most in their area. There is more support (35 per cent) for building new one and two-bedroom houses – typical 'starter' homes – and this may reflect a rising proportion of one and two-person households nationally, although there is similar support for family-sized three and four-bedroom homes. There is contrastingly little support (three per cent) for building large houses with five or more bedrooms, even though it is a market that some developers currently favour.

35% would choose new houses in the area to be one and two-bedroom houses

Table 8.4 Type and tenure of new housing needed locally

	All
Types of new homes needed	**%**
No new homes needed	20
Flats/maisonettes	14
1–2 bedroom houses	35
3–4 bedroom houses	37
5+ bedroom houses	3
Bungalows	12
Base	*3297*
Tenures of new homes needed	**%**
No new homes needed	20
Homes to buy	27
Homes to rent from private landlords	8
Homes to rent from local authorities or housing associations	39
Homes to part-own and part-rent	25
Base	*3297*

Asked about tenures, more than a quarter of the public think the type of housing most needed locally is homes to buy, with a similar level of support for part-own/part-rent homes. But they are outnumbered by nearly four in ten (39 per cent) who consider that social housing for rent is the priority. Private renting is seen as the prime need by fewer than one in ten. Further analysis, not included in the table, shows that while social housing tenants are most likely to prioritise more of the same (66 per cent), a similar proportion of home owners give priority to homes for social renting (32 per cent) rather than to more housing for sale (31 per cent).

These findings suggest opportunities to garner support for new development by ensuring the proposed mix of tenure and housing types is matched to local needs and preferences. Doing this would require an emphasis on providing new council or housing association homes for rent. It also seems to imply a more interventionist approach at national or regional level than the deregulatory approach advocated by part of government (HM Treasury, 2011a).

Policies for affordable housing
Given the large minority who see subsidised social housing as a priority for their area, it is interesting to know whether people hold complementary views about the government's role in making housing more affordable. Respondents were asked:

If the government were going to do something to make homes more affordable, what do you think the most useful action would be?

Giving "some sort of financial assistance to first-time buyers" is the most popular choice (30 per cent) from a list of actions that government might take, although general across-the-board subsidy would be costly and could just push up prices. Shared ownership is a more targeted form of subsidy and this attracts moderate support at 11 per cent. Another 22 per cent say government should "get banks to increase access to mortgages", quite rightly highlighting the most critical current difficulty in the market. We can, therefore, see that the public's priorities are focused mainly on getting government help to would-be home owners.

In contrast with the previously-expressed views about a priority need for more social housing, only 19 per cent think government could most usefully "give more money to housing associations and local authorities to build social homes for those on low incomes". It is also worth highlighting how relatively few respondents (five per cent) think government should simply "allow developers to build more homes". This poses a challenge to the current consensus among many economists that increasing the supply of housing is important in the long term to make it more affordable (Barker, 2004; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005; National Housing and Planning Advice Unit, 2009).

Views about tenure

We now turn from the supply of new housing to the existing stock; and people's attitudes towards different forms of tenure. Policy makers, planners and housing providers have a self-evident interest in knowing whether the existing range of homes and tenures meets public expectations and aspirations. In recent years, for example, they have needed to take account of a growing number of people who would like to embark on home ownership but cannot afford it. Beyond this, the government's plans to reform social housing tenancies and Housing Benefit, referred to at the start of this chapter, add resonance and policy relevance to our findings about the perceived advantages and disadvantages of home ownership, private renting and tenancies in social housing.

Home ownership

For a quarter of a century, *British Social Attitudes* has charted the public's strong preference for living in homes that they own themselves. Yet, as previously noted, the actual level of home ownership has gone into decline. Since 2003 the proportion of owner-occupied homes has fallen from 71 per cent to 68 per cent in England, while an accelerating trend has seen an absolute decline of 280,000 owner-occupier households between 2007 and 2010 (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011c). The suggested reasons include high prices, mortgage rationing and high deposit requirements for first-time buyers, as well as negative price expectations and perceptions of risk. But how far do results from the 2010 survey support this interpretation?

The British public have a continued strong preference for living in homes that they own themselves

One question that has been repeatedly asked over time is whether people, given a free choice would "choose to rent their accommodation or buy". Comparing the response in 2010 with previous surveys in the 1990s, we find remarkable stability with 86 per cent expressing a theoretical preference for home ownership, compared with 87 per cent in 1999 and 84 per cent in 1996. However, the answers to a different question provide what is arguably a more sensitive barometer of people's pragmatic assessment of the housing market. This asks people:

Suppose a newly-married young couple, both with steady jobs, asked your advice about whether to buy or rent a home. If they had the choice, what would you advise them to do?

Figure 8.1 shows how proportions advising the young couple to "buy a home as soon as possible" or, more cautiously, to "wait a bit then try to buy a home" have fluctuated since 1986. It demonstrates how a peak of confidence in making an early purchase in the mid-1980s gave way to greater caution following the house-price slump of the early 1990s. Advice then became more positive up to 2004, when more than seven in ten respondents (71 per cent) recommended an early purchase and fewer than a quarter (24 per cent) thought it better to wait a bit. In 2008, amid the credit crisis and market downturn, there was a dramatic fall among those suggesting the couple should buy as soon as they could to a minority 45 per cent. The proportion urging delay rose to 40 per cent.

Figure 8.1 Advice for a young married couple (both working) about housing, 1986–2010

■ Buy a home as soon as possible
▲ Wait a bit, then try to buy a home
● Not plan to buy a home at all
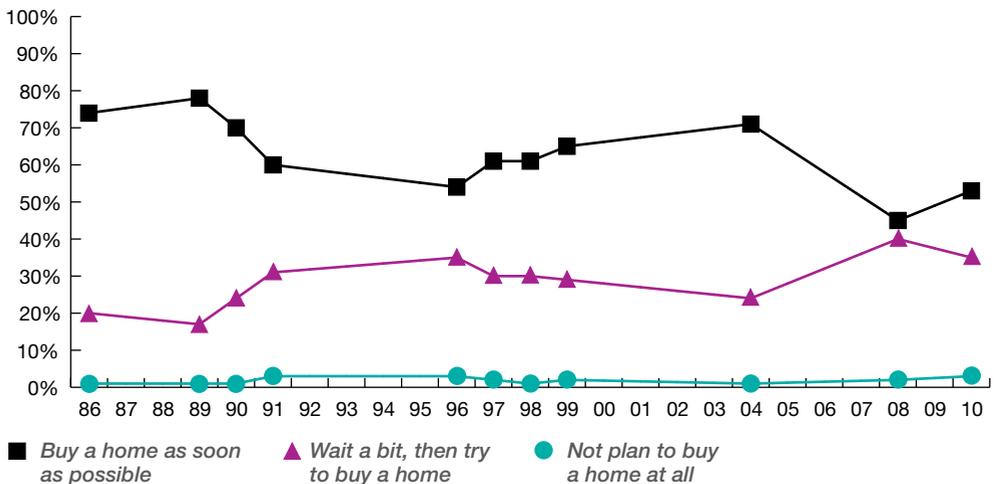
The data on which Figure 8.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

The 2010 survey shows a slight recovery in public confidence, with 53 per cent advising early entry into the housing market. But with 35 per cent encouraging the young couple to wait, there is still considerable caution.

Advantages and disadvantages of ownership
Another notable feature of the response to the 'advice' question is that even when market conditions have been at their most difficult, those guiding the newly-weds "not to plan to buy a home at all" have never exceeded three per cent.

This raises further questions about the reasons why people so determinedly choose ownership over other tenures. Launching a sequence of similar questions about different tenures, we began by asking people to identify:

…the main advantage of owning a home rather than renting it

 followed by:

…the main disadvantage of owning a home rather than renting it

The answers based on choices presented on a card indicate that the most often perceived advantage of home ownership, cited by 26 per cent, is that it represents a good investment. Current home owners are rather more likely than those who rent to share this opinion. The next most popular choice is that home ownership "is more secure in the long term than renting" (23 per cent) and that it gives people "the freedom to do what you want" with a property (21 per cent). The suggestions that ownership "works out less expensive than paying the rent" (15 per cent) and that a property "is something to leave to your family" (12 per cent) are less frequently cited.

No front-runner emerges from people's perceptions of the main disadvantage of home ownership, but 19 per cent say "it is expensive" and the same proportion refer to the "need to have a steady job". Another 18 per cent mention the "need to make repairs yourself". Difficulties "keeping up with mortgage payments" are mentioned by eight per cent overall as is the view that ownership is restrictive and makes it "hard to move". Another five per cent cite difficulties buying "in a nice area". While scarcely surprising, it is also worth noting that one in four private tenants (25 per cent) and more than one in five social housing tenants (22 per cent), view expense as the major drawback to ownership.

Perhaps the biggest change in the perceived advantages of owning since the 1980s is the big drop in the proportion who cite "easier to move", probably reflecting difficulties experienced in the recessions of the early 1990s and late 2000s. This also points up a key comparative advantage of the resurgent private rented sector.

Advantages and affordability of renting
To explore people's views about tenancy, we reversed the previous question to ask about "the main advantage of renting a home rather than owning it". Notwithstanding the fact that most people are owner-occupiers, the vast majority are prepared to acknowledge that renting can carry practical advantages. As seen in Table 8.5, only one in nine current owners and less than one in ten respondents overall insist there is no advantage in renting.

Perhaps the biggest change in the perceived advantages of owning since the 1980s is the big drop in the proportion who say it is "easier to move"

Table 8.5 Main advantages of renting over owning, by tenure

	Housing tenure			
	Owners	Social Renters	Private Renters	All
Advantages of renting over owning	%	%	%	%
Flexibility to move at short notice	28	14	28	25
Someone else is responsible for repairs and maintenance	23	37	22	25
Greater choice over where to live	9	9	12	10
Don't have to worry about taking on a mortgage	8	13	11	10
Less risky than owning a home	7	11	9	8
Less responsibility than owning a home	9	6	6	8
Less upfront costs	3	4	4	4
No advantage	11	4	7	9
Base	*2231*	*548*	*485*	*3297*

Response options with less than two per cent of response were not included in this table

By contrast, one in four see flexibility to move home at short notice as the main advantage, while another quarter say it is the lack of personal responsibility for repairs and maintenance. One in ten refer to having greater choice over where to live, with private renters the most enthusiastic. Another 10 per cent mention a lack of worry about taking on a mortgage. Social renters are prominent among those insisting it is less risky than owning a home, while owners are more likely to suggest that renting carries a lower level of responsibility (both cited by eight per cent overall). A much smaller proportion (four per cent) think the main advantage of renting is having fewer upfront costs.

On the issue of costs we also asked current tenants:

How easy or difficult is it for your household to afford the rent?

This revealed that while two-thirds find their payments relatively easy to meet, there are 24 per cent who say it is "fairly difficult" and another seven per cent who find it "very difficult". Private sector tenants (35 per cent) are more likely to report difficulties than those in social housing (29 per cent).

35%

of private sector tenants find it difficult to afford their rent

Advantages and disadvantages of private renting

Written off a quarter of a century ago as a shrinking, residual sector, private renting has undergone a revival in England, expanding rapidly by 80 per cent between 1988 and 2008–2009. The transformation was triggered by rent deregulation policies and has been fuelled by the popularity of 'Buy-to-Let' property investment. Rising house prices and growth in the number of students and single person households have simultaneously boosted demand for private rented accommodation.

These market changes, though dramatic, tell us little about the public's perceptions and preferences concerning the private rental sector. The responses to questions about the major 'pros' and 'cons' of private renting help to fill that gap. We asked people "from what you know or have heard" to identify from a list of possible answers:

…the main advantage of renting a home privately as opposed to renting it from a local authority or housing association

Opinion proves to be split with people pointing to several different benefits. A "wider choice of location" is specified by 21 per cent making it the most popular choice. This is followed by a "better choice of types of properties available" (16 per cent) and by a view that privately rented properties "are in better condition" than those in social housing (10 per cent). However, private renters (14 per cent) are more likely to take this latter view than those who live in council (11 per cent) or housing association (six per cent) properties. Another 10 per cent refer to properties being "more easily available" followed by nine per cent who cite "getting repairs done" and "less responsibility for upkeep". Others see the main advantage as "no social stigma" (eight per cent) or "more flexible tenancy arrangements".

Views about the major disadvantage are less mixed, with almost one third (32 per cent) in all tenures responding that "rents are too high". This appears consistent with the responses we received about finding the rent difficult to afford (see above) as well as other evidence that affordability problems are becoming more prevalent in the private rented sector (Bramley *et al*., 2010b; Bramley, 2011). However, while private tenants (34 per cent) select this answer more often than home owners (29 per cent), an even higher proportion of social housing tenants (43 per cent) view cost as the major drawback to becoming a private tenant.

The next most commonly stated drawbacks are "problems with landlords or letting agents" (21 per cent, including 17 per cent of private tenants) followed – at a distance – by "little choice over what happens to the property" (12 per cent). Another 12 per cent cite "restrictions around the length of time you can stay living in the property". Interestingly, social housing tenants are considerably more likely (16 per cent) to choose this as the main disadvantage than their private sector counterparts (nine per cent). Most private tenancies are short term (six months to one year), but concern about this lack of security is not very common in the sector itself, while being a greater concern for those currently in social tenure.

Rising house prices and growth in the number of students and growth in the number of students and single person households have simultaneously boosted demand for private rented accommodation

The balance of attitudes suggests that while tenants may be attracted to private renting by the choice of locations and properties, a large minority are unhappy with the level of rents. Social housing tenants – who include a higher concentration of lower income households – are even more worried by rent levels in the private sector and by the limitations on security of tenure. So, at a time when government is challenging the need for social tenancies to last a lifetime, it appears that many who rent from councils and housing associations regard private renting a housing alternative which is both unaffordable and insecure.

Advantages and disadvantages of social renting

To gain a direct perspective on the way the public views social housing, we reversed the direction of the previous questions by asking people to say what they thought were the main advantage and disadvantage of:

…renting from a local authority or housing association as opposed to renting a home privately

The answers reveal that the most popular main advantage is "the option to purchase property through a scheme such as the Right to Buy". That it is cited by 29 per cent is a rather surprising finding given that higher prices and restrictions on discounts have made Right to Buy arrangements less affordable in recent years and sales have fallen to a low level. However, we note that social housing tenants are considerably less likely to cite the Right to Buy (18 per cent) than private tenants or owner-occupiers, suggesting that people outside the sector are less aware than insiders that this option has been curtailed in recent years. The next most frequently cited advantages are having "more secure tenancy arrangements" and "low/affordable rents" (18 per cent each). Existing social tenants particularly value tenure security (24 per cent).

Strikingly, when it comes to specifying the main disadvantage of social housing compared with private renting, much the most common reply is "anti-social behaviour problems on estates". This is cited by 39 per cent of all respondents, including 31 per cent of social renters themselves. Another seven per cent across all tenures select "anti-social neighbours". Taken together, these replies suggest that approaching half the population, and a large minority of social housing tenants, see anti-social behaviour and neighbour nuisance as the main drawback to renting from a local authority or housing association. This is despite the evidence from researchers in the late-2000s that the quality of social housing had improved and that heavy concentrations of social disadvantage had begun to recede (Fitzpatrick and Stephens, 2008), albeit with continuing difficulties in some areas (Hill, 2007). However, the continued prominence of anti-social behaviour issues in political debate about social housing is, given the strength of public opinion in our survey, unsurprising.

39%

say the main disadvantage of social housing is anti-social behaviour problems on estates

Next in importance, though a much less commonly mentioned disadvantage, is having "little choice over location" (12 per cent). This is followed by it being "difficult to move to other types of property when needs change" (eight per cent). These reflect acknowledged difficulties within the sector, where mobility and choice is constrained by a limited stock of properties.

Who is social renting for?

Subsidised social housing has for most of the past half-century been the principal provider of longer-term decent quality housing for people who cannot afford to buy on the open market. However, given the re-evaluation of its purpose under the coalition government, we posed a further question inviting people to say which of four possible factors on a list:

…should be treated as a priority in deciding who should be allocated housing rented from a local authority or housing association

This found that the strongest support (30 per cent) is for people "living in overcrowded accommodation", which may reflect objective evidence that overcrowding has increased in recent years (Bramley *et al*., 2010b). Close behind comes "being on a very low income" (28 per cent) with an implied suggestion that social housing should primarily provide a 'safety net' for the poor. However, nearly as many respondents (26 per cent) select "not being able to afford to buy or rent independently", suggesting a much wider range of eligibility for social housing. The fourth factor, "being a key worker such as a nurse or a teacher", is supported by fewer people (14 per cent).

These views offer some support for the government's emphasis on targeting social housing on the most 'needy' groups, including those on very low incomes; notwithstanding the fact that one in four show support for social housing as a broader provider of affordable housing.

Conclusions

Past experience and recent studies both suggest that a 'localist' planning system will tend to further restrict new housing supply (Bramley 2010, 2011a, 2011b; National Housing Federation, 2010). This is particularly true in southern England where the need for extra housing is greatest. People's opinions, presented here, reinforce existing evidence by showing that a substantially greater number of people in England and Wales (but not Scotland) are minded to oppose new housing in their locality than support it, especially in the South.

There is, nevertheless, some evidence that indirect 'planning gain' benefits from permitting new housing – whether in terms of improved public facilities or local economic opportunities – would persuade more people to support development. This is an important message for policy makers, planners and would-be developers.

30%
think those living in overcrowded accommodation should be given priority in allocating social housing

Yet even assuming that these different types of side-benefit could be offered on a wide enough scale, our findings suggest that the opponents of development could still be expected to prevail in sensitive areas. Those seeking to counter local NIMBYism can, however, take some encouragement from the priority need that people see for new social housing and helping first-time buyers, and perhaps from seeing more local control over the type of housing built.

In the private rented sector, planned restrictions on Housing Benefit can be expected to increase difficulties that a significant minority of tenants already report in affording their rent. Looking at government intentions, it also seems likely that two major perceived advantages of social renting – relative low cost and secure tenure – will also be eroded by higher rents for many new tenants and less long-term security.

Since the Right to Buy – although the most frequently perceived advantage of social housing – has been much curtailed in recent years, it seems that social renting may come to be seen less as a 'tenure of choice' and more a 'tenure of necessity'. Increasingly, it will become a transitional option rather than one that the tenant can expect to last a lifetime. Restricting social housing to a more transient population of those considered 'needy' may, in turn, make it harder to tackle the problems of anti-social behaviour that are already viewed as the major drawback to social renting.

Notes

1. Note that the fieldwork for the 2010 *British Social Attitudes* survey was conducted during the summer months of 2010. As this was prior to the full scope of planning reforms being announced by the new government, respondents may have answered these questions with the current system in mind.

2. Most references to policy changes in this chapter refer specifically to England, although some 'reserved matters' including benefits policies apply throughout the United Kingdom. However, the *British Social Attitudes* survey data cover Britain and we report on some of the differences found in the devolved nations where policies and market conditions may differ, particularly in Scotland.

3. Package 1 consists of new or improved green space, schools, medical facilities, library and leisure facilities; package 2 involves improved transport links, more employment opportunities and more and better shops or supermarkets.

4. The level of support versus opposition with different packages was calculated by adding those who said they would change their view and support housing development to those who generally supported development, and (if the respondent had previously been opposed) subtracting them from the opposition. The regions singled out for comparison are those with the strongest differences in attitudes to new house building, for example the South and outer London are the most negative.

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Acknowledgements

Appendix
The data for Figure 8.1 are shown below.

Table A.1 Advice for a young married couple (both working) about housing, 1986–2010

	86	89	90	91	96	97	98	99	04	08	10
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Buy a home as soon as possible	74	78	70	60	54	61	61	65	71	45	53
Wait a bit, then try to buy a home	20	17	24	31	35	30	30	29	24	40	35
Not plan to buy a home at all	1	1	3	2	3	2	1	2	1	2	3
Base	*1416*	*1297*	*1233*	*1224*	*3085*	*1080*	*2531*	*2450*	*2609*	*1012*	*1870*