



Summary Report

No place like home

Poverty and Furnished Tenancy Provision in Social Housing

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Foreword

In the summer of 1980, my wife and I began married life in an unfurnished flat. There was a certain romantic quality to slowly, over a period of months, scouring the bargain stores and second hand furniture shops of Birmingham as we assembled the things we needed. We acquired a mattress, and a few months later, a bed to put it on. Eventually our modest possessions moved out of their boxes and into a mix of homemade and self assembly drawers and shelves. The day finally dawned when we had chairs and a sofa to sit on, not just cushions on the floor.

We were able to manage our way out of furniture poverty because Sue had already found a job with a start date just a few weeks after our wedding, and I had a student grant. But what for a young couple with no dependents was a manageable gap, whilst we earned our way to accumulating the basics, presents a very different prospect to households with a more precarious perch on the jobs market.

Furniture poverty sits alongside food and fuel poverty as a consequence two of the UK's most woeful societal failures: a benefits system that particularly fails children, their careers and the sick, and an employment structure which leaves many reliant on fragile, low paid, part time or zero hours contract work. It is a much underreported scandal that the majority of working age households in poverty in Britain contain at least one working adult.

In the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, it is a sad but safe assumption that all dimensions of poverty will increase over the next few years, even if a fresh will can be found to tackle the underlying causes. Specific remediations for particular aspects of poverty, including food banks and debt advice programmes, will continue to be necessary. Furnished social tenancies can play a vital part in mitigating the consequences of being poor.

This timely and well researched report suggests one way in which social landlords can make a difference. The fact that some 29% of private tenancies are fully or partly furnished, compared with only 2% of social tenancies, should be in itself a clear indicator that we in the social housing sector are failing to tailor the services and products we offer to the needs of the types of households we are set up to serve. I commend it to senior executives, front line workers, and board members in social housing, and hope that together we can make an impact to reduce furniture poverty from the blight it is on so many lives.



**The Rt Revd Dr David Walker,
Bishop of Manchester, &
Chair of Wythenshawe
Community Housing Group**

About End Furniture Poverty

End Furniture Poverty is the campaigning and research arm of FRC Group, a group of 100% not-for-profit charities. FRC Group has been providing furniture, both new and preloved, to people living in Furniture Poverty for over 30 years, and reducing and ultimately eradicating Furniture Poverty is FRC Group's core mission.

End Furniture Poverty was created in 2015 to raise awareness of the issue of Furniture Poverty; to improve our understanding of the consequences and the reality of living in Furniture Poverty; and to develop potential evidence based solutions to ensure that everyone has access to the essential furniture items that they need to lead a secure life.



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Summary and Key Findings

This report is the result of extensive research carried out across England with the aim to better understand the reasons behind the lack of furniture provision in the social housing sector, what furniture support is currently available, and what impact increased provision can have on the lives of tenants. Its findings are derived from a mixed methods approach. In addition to analyses of large survey data sets, we have carried out 25 in-depth qualitative face-to-face and telephone interviews with both tenants and senior Registered Social Landlord (RSL) staff.

This research has gathered sufficient evidence indicating that social housing tenants, with little or no furniture, have to rely on a patchwork of options to acquire it (primarily local authority grants, charity grants, discretionary funds by the RSL, friends and family, social security advances, and moderate to high interest lenders). This collage of options, however, appears to be significantly failing to provide adequate material support for those most in need. This insufficiency has been compounded by austerity measures and cuts to Local Welfare Assistance Schemes, and the social housing sector, over the past decade. Our follow-up interviews with RSL staff indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic has placed additional strain on the sector and the patchwork of options.

Our analysis of Understanding Society data (an annual UK survey of 40,000 households) (2018) indicates that 2% of social rented properties are let as furnished or partly furnished (i.e. floor coverings/curtains) in comparison to 29% of private rented properties (see page 12 for in-depth analysis).

This report shows that there are a number of barriers in place which are preventing the expansion of furniture provision in social housing. However, our findings also indicate that these barriers are not insurmountable, and have been overcome by RSLs with a furnished tenancy scheme. Our interviews with tenants, who were on low incomes and in receipt of regular social security payments at the time of the interview, suggested that increased provision can have multifaceted positive benefits with regards to their mental health, financial stability, and social wellbeing. Despite the challenges ahead, and the current economic crisis, we show that there is room for optimism, and great potential to help tenants on low incomes and have a profound and lasting impact on their lives.

The current level of need in our society and social housing in particular

- Poverty and material deprivation (including furniture poverty) remain at very high levels in the UK.
- While not all social housing tenants experience poverty and material deprivation, they appear to be more likely to experience it than private renters and home owners.
- Austerity measures have compounded the above situation. In particular, cuts to local authority budgets, combined with a lack of ring-fenced funding, are gradually eroding the local welfare safety net in England. This has resulted in a geographically uneven patchwork of support for people on low incomes.

Finding 1: Furniture provision can have a positive impact on tenants' lives

- Tenant and social landlord participants consistently underlined how the provision of furniture has a considerable positive impact on mental health, financial security, and social wellbeing. Our findings suggest that reducing furniture poverty is likely to reduce social exclusion. This complements previous research which underlined the negative physical impact of living without essential furniture items.²

Finding II: Obtaining furniture, a patchwork of inadequate options

- We found that social landlords relied on a patchwork of options to help their tenants acquire furniture. This primarily consisted of applications for crisis grants, with some social landlords having their own discretionary funds. Applying for grants is presumably a time-consuming process for RSL staff. Furnished tenancies, by a significant margin, were in the minority.
- Tenants also relied on their own complex personalised patchwork to acquire furniture which included applications for grants, in addition to items given by their friends/family, moderate to high interest credit, and saving their social security payments.
- We found that the current approach is significantly failing to help tenants obtain furniture, with many living without one or more essential item(s).

Finding III: The barriers preventing the establishment of more furniture provision in social housing

Our interviews with staff revealed the following barriers which are preventing increased furniture provision.

- A general lack of understanding and awareness within the sector with regards to how a furnished tenancy (FT) scheme would work in practice. This included queries around policy development and logistical planning and, in particular, many had concerns relating to the eligibility of furniture as a service charge and the amount that would be approved by a local benefits office.
- The financial pressures facing social housing providers, and the need to convince their respective management structures that providing FTs is financially viable.
- There was a disparity between those who did and did not provide FTs with regards to the existence of a perceived 'poverty trap'. While non-FT providers saw it as an issue, FT providers did not consider it to be a significant problem, provided that there is sufficient flexibility embedded within a scheme. Tenant participants did not consider this to be an issue, again, provided that there is flexibility embedded within a scheme.

Finding IV: Furniture provision is likely to improve tenancy sustainability

- RSL staff and tenants indicated that furniture provision can improve tenancy sustainability. The reasons behind this are closely related to the positive benefits presented in Finding I and the ability to get rest, wash one's clothes, a reduced feeling of stigma, and the ability to be more financially secure (i.e. because they have not had to borrow at high interest rates to acquire furniture). This finding complements a plethora of other reports which have also suggested that the provision of furniture can improve tenancy sustainability.^{3 4 5 6 7}

Recommendations

We strongly recommend that social landlords:

- Appoint a 'Furnished Tenancy Champion' who will work to increase their organisation's understanding and awareness of furnished tenancy schemes and how they can be delivered, including relevant Government policy, i.e. the eligibility of furniture as a benefits eligible service charge.
- The Furnished Tenancy Champion should 'register' with End Furniture Poverty to commit to fully explore the provision of furnished tenancies and to allow us to support them in their task.
- Survey their tenants to hear their views on the provision of furnished tenancies and End Furniture Poverty will again support them in this undertaking by interviewing tenants on their behalf.
- RSLs should see that the provision of furniture can have a positive impact on tenancy sustainability (which benefits providers).
- RSLs should also see furnished tenancy schemes as a way to improve the mental health, financial position, physical health, and social wellbeing of their tenants, rather than as a purely financial endeavour.
- Establish a furnished tenancy scheme and ensure that the impact of the scheme on the lives of their tenants, in addition to tenancy sustainability and financial elements, are measured and monitored.

We recommend that the Government:

- Provide clarity for social landlords with regards to the eligibility of furniture as a service charge, and the amounts that are permissible, including reassurance that furniture will remain as a service charge in the future.
- Provide financial support for social landlords with insufficient capital to enable them to establish furnished tenancy schemes and consider incentives for those looking to create schemes.
- Provide updated guidance for local benefits offices on the setting of service charge levels to ensure that there is a geographically even framework.
- Reintroduce adequate ring-fenced funding for Local Welfare Assistance Schemes.
- Provide updated guidance and support to local authorities to ensure local welfare provision is more geographically even and fair.