



Chartered  
Institute of  
Housing  
Cymru

# Public attitudes to social housing in Wales

Report for the Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru on opinion research

**Prof Roger Awan-Scully**  
Cardiff University

November 2020

## Introduction

Opinion surveys were commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) to be run in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The content of those surveys was designed in extensive consultation with officers from CIH in the respective nations, and with the commissioned survey agency Deltapoll. The surveys were carried out via the internet between 24-29 September 2020. The sample in Wales was of 1,011 adults aged eighteen and over; the sample was weighted to be representative of the adult population within Wales. This survey is the source for all tables below.

In addition to getting full responses on all the questions asked, the results provided by Deltapoll provide detailed breakdowns by various social categories. Thus, we can analyse results according to a number of factors, including:

- Gender
- Age
- Social Class
- Working Status
- Region within Wales
- Housing status
- Educational Level; and
- Whether or not respondents had young children at the time of the survey.

These comparisons will be discussed in the report below where they are relevant to an analysis of the findings.



## Government responsibility for housing

One of the first areas that was explored in the survey concerned the responsibilities of government. Respondents were asked:

“Do you think the government should or should not be responsible for ensuring that each of the following are provided to a decent standard for every citizen, no matter what their income?”

Respondents were then presented with a set of possibilities. Table 1 below summarises the overall patterns of answers given. As can be seen from the table, a majority of respondents responded positively with regard to all of the matters asked about: all of them were seen as proper responsibilities for government to provide by most of our sample. But there was clearly overwhelming endorsement for the idea that government should be responsible for ensuring the provision of decent housing for all: more than four-fifths of respondents agreed with this notion, with only health, policing and defence receiving greater support. Once again, respondents' own housing tenure was related to how people reacted to this question. Some 80 percent of home owners said that housing should be a government responsibility to provide, but 89 percent of those renting and 96 percent of those renting privately agreed that it should be a government responsibility.

Item	Should	Should not	Don't know
Health service	94	3	3
Housing	83	10	6
Defence	89	6	5
Public transport	82	13	5
Policing	92	5	3
Broadband	55	33	12
Access to outside space	71	20	9

**In short, a majority of respondents did view it as a government responsibility to provide housing to a decent standard. This indeed was the majority view across all age groups and social grades, as well as all main categories of housing tenure.**

A later question in the survey asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the single statement that **“Everyone should have the legal right to an adequate home”**. Respondents were allowed to strongly agree or disagree with this statement, simply agree or disagree, or indicate 'neither' or a Don't Know response. **Some 77 percent agreed with the statement, with forty percent agreeing strongly**; fourteen percent responded 'neither'; only seven percent disagreed (with only a single percent or respondents strongly disagreeing); and another one percent chose Don't Know. Agreement with the statement was particularly high among younger respondents (with 49 percent of those 34 and younger choosing 'strongly agree', compared to only 32 percent of those 55 and older); agreement was also particularly strong among those living in housing that they rent from their local council (some 53 percent of these respondents strongly agreed with the statement) and among those renting privately (where fully 62 percent chose 'strongly agree'). Overall, though, responses to this question support our earlier finding: **there is clear majority support, across all social groups, for the idea of a legal right to an adequate home.**

## The importance of housing

Another question asked early in our survey was an adapted version of a standard question format on major issues that has been asked in many previous surveys - in Wales, for instance, in many of the regular Welsh Political Barometer polls. Respondents are asked to select a small number of the 'most important issues' from a lengthy list. The specific question format used on this occasion was:

*"Which, if any, of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time?"*

Respondents were invited to select up to five issues. (They were also able to select 'None of these' and 'Don't Know'.) A more standard approach is to allow respondents to select up to three responses; that was altered on this occasion because of the strong likelihood that the COVID-19 crisis and Brexit issue might 'crowd out' the space for other responses to be chosen. No respondent was compelled to choose multiple responses.

The table below summarises the most commonly-chosen replies. (Because respondents can choose up to three issues, the percentages reported below add up to well over 100). As can be seen, the public 'issue-space' was dominated by COVID and Brexit, along with the related economic and health concerns. After those issues, which have dominated media news coverage in the UK for the last few years - and especially the last few months - the environment and immigration/asylum were clearly the most commonly-cited matters. Housing concerns are then to the fore in a group of issues that also include perennial concerns such as crime and education. Housing was also well ahead of traditionally-prominent matters such as Defence and Taxation. Overall, while it has not been to the fore of the media news agenda in recent times, our evidence shows that housing is clearly recognised as a significant concern by much of the Welsh public.

Issue	Country	You and family
COVID-19	83	72
Economy	57	43
Brexit	49	30
Health	41	39
Environment	33	22
Immigration/Asylum	30	11
Housing	19	13
Crime	19	9
Welfare benefits	15	15
Education	15	14
Family life/childcare	10	15
Defence and security	9	5
Pensions	7	17
Tax	5	11
Transport	3	3
None/Don't Know	2	5

Looking at the details of the results, housing was particularly identified as a national concern by younger respondents – among those aged 34 and below, housing was the sixth most prominent issue, ahead of immigration and asylum. It is also striking that housing was chosen far more often as an issue by those living in rented dwellings (27 percent of whom named it as one of their top five issues) than by home owners (among whom only 15 percent listed housing). Those renting privately were particularly likely to identify housing as a concern – thirty percent of all such respondents listed housing in their top five issues. Housing was also more likely to be listed as a major issue by unemployed respondents than by any other respondents.

This question about issues facing the country was immediately followed by one asking respondents to consider the same set of issues (and with them again allowed to select up to five choices) but this time to choose the most important ones ‘facing you and your family’. As the second column in Table 2 demonstrates, for the most part the issues named as important for the country were also identified by most respondents as important to them personally. There were a few differences: Brexit was less commonly included as a personal concern; Pensions were more often raised as a personal issue priority. Housing remained quite prominent as a concern on this second question, remaining in the ten most commonly listed issues. Examining the details of the results once more, we see that age differentials on this question are even more stark than for the one about issues facing ‘the country’: some 21 percent of respondents aged 34 and younger listed housing as one of their top five issues, whereas only seven percent of those aged 55 and older did so. The other very substantial factor differentiating respondents in this regard is current housing tenure: 24 percent of those renting (and 29 percent of those renting privately) listed housing as one of their personal issue concerns, compared to only 8 of respondents who are home owners.

## Housing and health

A key arguments often made by advocates of increased spending on social housing is that, by providing people with decent housing other social problems can be avoided or minimised later on: in short, that spending on social housing should be seen as an investment that can reap numerous rewards, including avoiding having to spend more later on dealing with the problems that lack of, or poor, housing can generate.

With this in mind, the poll framed one question around the relative priority of spending on social housing versus another key priority, the NHS:

*“Some people think that, with the NHS under pressure, we should prioritise spending on the health service to ensure people get the treatment they need. Other people think that it would be better to prioritise spending on things like housing, because if people were better housed we could stop them getting ill in the first place; this would reduce pressures on the NHS. On a 0-10 scale, where 0 means spending much more money on the NHS and 10 means spending much more money for things like housing, where do you think Government’s priorities should lie?”*

Respondents were also able to select a Don’t Know option for this question, although only one percent of them actually did so.

Given that this question was fielded during the middle of a global pandemic (and one where governments in the UK have heavily emphasised ‘protecting the NHS’), we should probably expect responses to this question to lean towards prioritising the NHS. That is indeed what we see, with 41 percent of respondents selecting between 0 and 3 on the scale, indicating that they thought resources should be pushed primarily towards the health service. **However, virtually half of the entire sample (49 percent) chose 5 or above on the scale, showing that there was also considerable public sentiment behind at least some balance between competing priorities in public spending. Those living in social housing were particularly likely to emphasise the importance of housing: among those renting from housing associations, some twenty percent of them actually scored above the mid-point of 5 on this scale.**

## Who should be helped with housing?

A further question in the poll asked people about the sorts of people who respondents believed “should be eligible for help from the state to meet their housing needs?” A list of different types of people was provided to respondents, and they were asked to tick all those groups whom they believed should receive help. Four percent of respondents suggested that no categories of people should receive help, while another four percent chose a Don’t Know option. Table 3 shows the percentage who indicated that each respective category should be eligible to receive some state support: as can be seen from the table, there was clear majority, or near majority, support for several categories of people who would be classified as ‘homeless’ to be eligible for such support. But for some groups of people, such as those currently living with their parents or those living a distance from work or family, endorsement of them receiving support with their housing needs was much more limited.

**Table 3: percentage agreement that group should receive help with housing needs**

People sleeping rough on the streets	72
People being housed in temporary Bed and Breakfast accommodation, paid for by their local authority	57
People sleeping on a friend’s couch one night and then moving onto another friend’s couch the next night	53
People living in overcrowded accommodation	49
People living in a home that is not easily accessible for them	39
People who have to live with their parents because they cannot afford to buy or rent somewhere on their own	26
People living far from their work or family	15



## Responses to statements on social housing

Our survey also fielded a lengthy set of statements about social housing. As is common practice in social surveys, respondents were given a series of (often quite pointed) statements, and asked to indicate their extent of agreement or disagreement with each, on a scale running from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'.

The series of statements were as follows:

*I would never want to live in social housing*

*All young people should aspire to become home owners*

*I would be happy to see more social housing built near my own home*

*We need more affordable housing in my local community*

*Social housing estates suffer from high levels of anti-social behaviour and crime*

*Social housing is of a low quality*

*People who grew up in social housing are less likely to attain educational success*

*Social housing should be a tenure of choice for families and young people*

*Social housing is where we hide people with problems*

*A vast majority of people in social housing are on benefits*

*Social housing offers rents which are lower than rents in the private sector*

*There are more people living in social housing than there were five years ago*

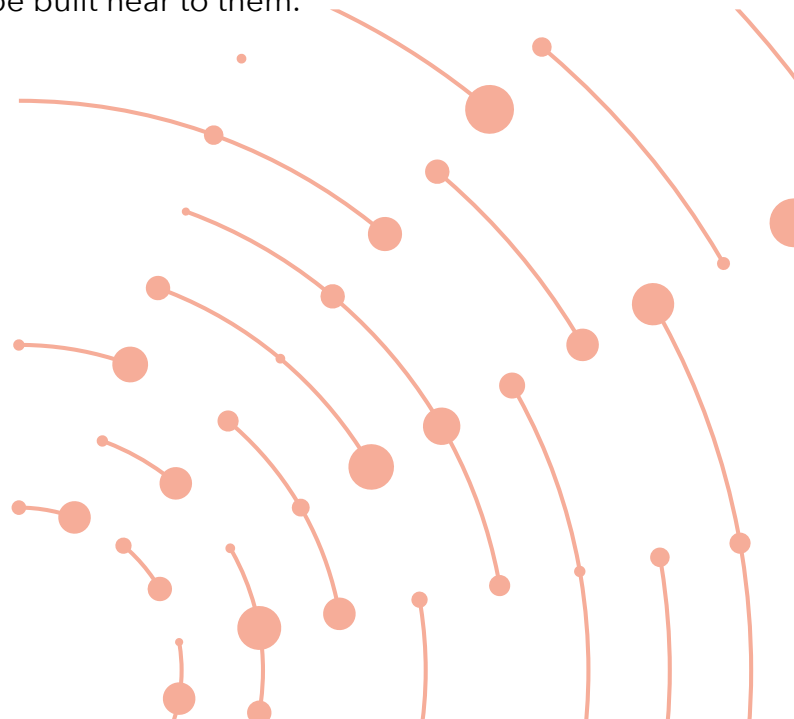
*As well as homes, local councils and housing associations provide other services which help tenants e.g. finding work*

*Once someone becomes a tenant in social housing, they are a tenant for life*

*Anyone can apply for social housing*

As can be seen, and in line with standard practice in social surveys, the statements included ones that were both positive and negative with regard to social housing. There was important to avoid having a set of questions that consistently pushed people to respond in a particular direction.

Table 4 below summarises the overall pattern of results for these statements. Overall, this pattern of responses reveals a mixed set of attitudes towards social housing. There is significant public recognition of the need for social housing in communities throughout Wales. There is also awareness of some of its advantages for many, such as affordability. However, there are also some distinctly negative public perceptions of social housing evident in our data. Social housing is not generally seen as desirable - home ownership still remains widely valued - and social housing estates (and the people who live on them) are seen as problematic by many. There is also evidence of some NIMBY-ism in attitudes, with at least some respondents recognising the need for social housing yet not wishing for it to be built near to them.



**Table 4: agreement/disagreement with statements on social housing, %**

Statement	% Agree	% Disagree	% Neither/don't know
<i>I would never want to live in social housing</i>	43	28	29
<i>All young people should aspire to become home owners</i>	63	10	27
<i>I would be happy to see more social housing built near my own home</i>	47	25	28
<i>We need more affordable housing in my local community</i>	66	13	22
<i>Social housing estates suffer from high levels of anti-social behaviour and crime</i>	57	12	30
<i>Social housing is of a low quality</i>	30	33	36
<i>People who grew up in social housing are less likely to attain educational success</i>	28	42	30
<i>Social housing should be a tenure of choice for families and young people</i>	48	12	40
<i>Social housing is where we hide people with problems</i>	38	33	29
<i>A vast majority of people in social housing are on benefits</i>	48	16	35
<i>Social housing offers rents which are lower than rents in the private sector</i>	68	6	26
<i>There are more people living in social housing than there were five years ago</i>	47	10	42
<i>As well as homes, local councils and housing associations provide other services which help tenants e.g. finding work</i>	51	11	38
<i>Once someone becomes a tenant in social housing, they are a tenant for life</i>	28	36	35
<i>Anyone can apply for social housing</i>	41	27	32

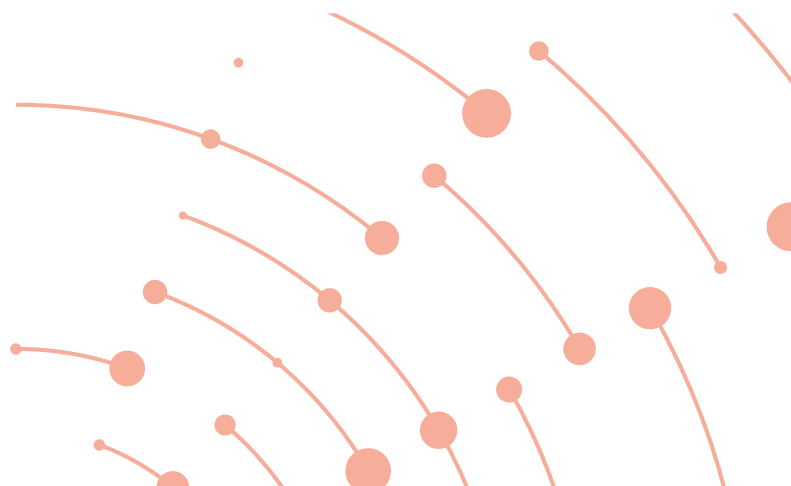
These overall patterns, however, in some respects conceal as much as they reveal. For there are substantial differences in responses on many of these items within the sample. These differences are not primarily along lines of age group or gender, but by social class and - most obviously of all - by housing tenure. **In particular, people who actually have some experience of living in social housing tend to have rather more positive perceptions of it, and of the people who live in it, than home owners or private renters.** This is illustrated in Table 5 below, which presents results for each of our statements disaggregated by housing tenure. Fewer than half of in social housing, for instance, agree that 'Social housing estates suffer from high levels of anti-social behaviour and crime', compared to around three-fifths of others. Similarly, far fewer of them are likely to endorse the unfair stereotype that the 'majority of people in social housing are on benefits'. However, those with experience of social housing are also perhaps more aware of some negatives: while the vast majority of those living elsewhere believe that social housing costs are much lower, those actually in social housing are less likely to believe this to be true.



**Table 5: % agreement with statements on social housing**

Statement	Home-owners	Private renters	Social housing occupants
<i>I would never want to live in social housing</i>	41	43	46
<i>All young people should aspire to become home owners</i>	69	66	44
<i>I would be happy to see more social housing built near my own home</i>	39	59	65
<i>We need more affordable housing in my local community</i>	65	78	76
<i>Social housing estates suffer from high levels of anti-social behaviour and crime</i>	63	58	47
<i>Social housing is of a low quality</i>	30	41	34
<i>People who grew up in social housing are less likely to attain educational success</i>	33	28	22
<i>Social housing should be a tenure of choice for families and young people</i>	50	57	54
<i>Social housing is where we hide people with problems</i>	35	45	37
<i>A vast majority of people in social housing are on benefits</i>	57	53	41
<i>Social housing offers rents which are lower than rents in the private sector</i>	79	73	59
<i>There are more people living in social housing than there were five years ago</i>	49	53	48
<i>As well as homes, local councils and housing associations provide other services which help tenants e.g. finding work</i>	57	55	51
<i>Once someone becomes a tenant in social housing, they are a tenant for life</i>	34	23	37
<i>Anyone can apply for social housing</i>	39	30	61

The overall message, then seems to be that negative perceptions of social housing, where they exist, are strongly concentrated among those people who do not actually live in such housing. Those who do live there generally have rather more positive attitudes - although far from wholly uncritical ones.



## The desirability of social housing

Several questions in our survey explored the desirability of social housing. First, we asked respondents whether, if they had a free choice, they would prefer to rent or to buy their housing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some 84 percent preferred to buy and only 12 percent to rent - with even the vast majority of those currently living in private and social rented housing seeing being a home owner as desirable. The notion of home ownership as being ultimately desirable is pervasive across society.

A second question in this section of the survey enquired as to whether, if they were to rent, respondents would prefer to rent privately or from social housing. Here the split of opinion was much closer. Overall, some 32 percent of respondents indicated that they would prefer to rent socially compared to 51 percent who chose private renting (with the remainder selecting Don't Know). Interestingly, there were few significant differences on this question between respondents currently in different types of rented housing as to whether social or private were more desirable; attitudes were broadly common on this item.

Finally, in this section of the survey, respondents were asked to choose which, out of social housing or private renting, they believed was best placed to provide certain desirable characteristics. Table 6 below summarises responses. Social housing is evaluated much more positively in terms of affordability, its suitability for the vulnerable, the promptness of repairs and, to some extent, the sense of community. But social housing is seen less positively than private renting for quality and choice, as well as for privacy and family life. These findings do suggest some degree of 'image problem' for social housing among many people.

<b>Item</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Private</b>	<b>No difference/don't know</b>
<b>Most affordable housing</b>	75	7	18
<b>Most suitable for vulnerable people</b>	55	13	32
<b>Prompt repairs when needed</b>	49	20	31
<b>Area with a sense of community</b>	30	23	47
<b>Best quality housing</b>	18	46	37
<b>Best choice of types of housing</b>	18	49	33
<b>Best place to bring up a child</b>	13	41	46
<b>Privacy and peace from neighbours</b>	10	46	44



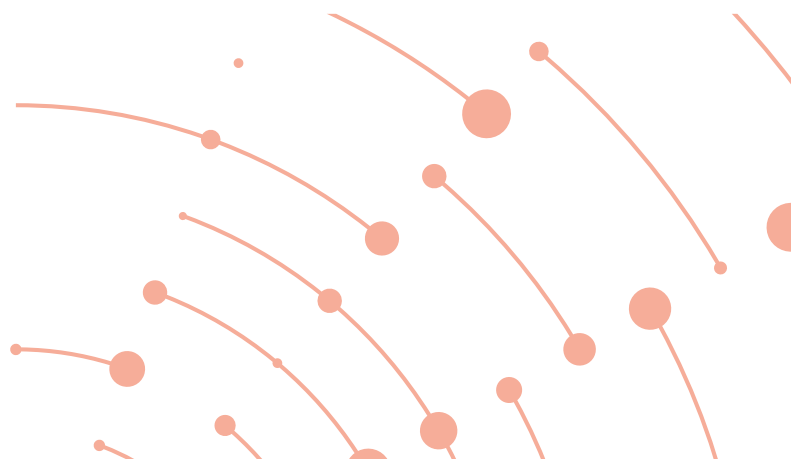
## Who lives in social housing?

One of the final questions in the poll asked respondents about the sort of people who occupy social housing: "What sort of people do you believe typically occupy the social housing that is provided in your area and other local authorities?"

Respondents were then asked to indicate which the relevant types of people from a long list. Table 7 below shows the percentage of our surveys sample who chose each option. (Twelve percent of the sample simply selected the Don't Know option; because respondents could legitimately choose multiple options, the percentages in the table sum to well above 100).

	Overall sample	Social housing residents
People on low incomes	71	63
Single mothers	62	55
Immigrants and Asylum Seekers	45	33
Victims of domestic abuse	45	39
Drug addicts	40	37
Ex offenders	39	31
Working families	38	50
Retired people	25	36
Care leavers	20	21
Students	14	20
Young professionals	11	19
People working in professions like teaching, the law or medicine	8	16

The general perception, therefore, is that social housing occupancy is concentrated to some extent among the poor and single mothers, with many also believing that drug addicts, domestic abuse victims, ex-offenders and those coming into the UK are frequent users of it. Thus, many people regard social housing as primarily for those in particular and pressing need. However, nearly two-fifths of our sample also suggested that working families typically occupy social housing - so the overall perception is certainly not that social housing is dominated exclusively by people linked to major social problems. And, once more, there are distinct differences in perception by housing tenure. As the final column of the table demonstrates, those who actually live in social housing were much more likely than others to believe that it is commonly occupied by working families and professionals, and much less likely to think that the typical tenant in such housing is an immigrant, asylum seeker or part of some other negatively-stereotyped social demographic.



## Housing and the environment

The final section of our survey explored perceptions of the environmental dimensions of housing. First, there were two questions that asked about respondents' perceptions. The first one asked about the percentage of carbon emissions in the UK that come from households (rather than other sources). The mean average estimate given by respondents was 31 percent; however, there was huge variation around this average, while fully 30 percent of respondents simply selected the Don't Know option.

A second question asked respondents about the amount that the average UK household might be able to cut their energy bills each year through measures such as additional insulation. Again there was huge variation in responses around the mean average of £123, with sixteen percent of respondents also simply choosing the Don't Know option.

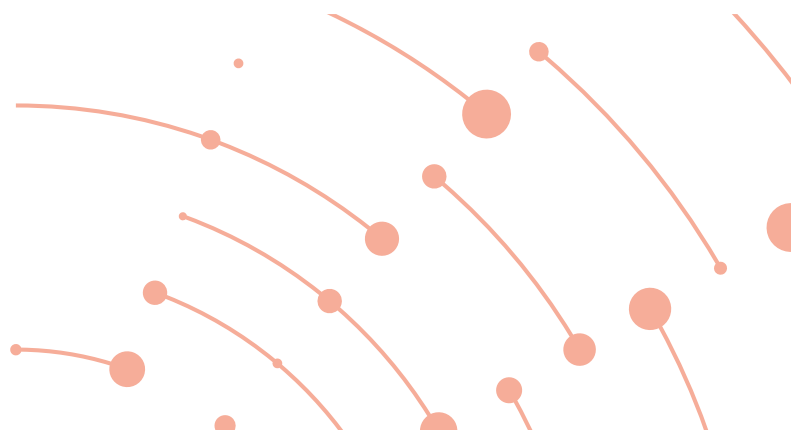
Finally, respondents were asked the following:

*"If you knew that fitting additional insulation in your own home could reduce your yearly bills by £500 and cut your household's carbon emissions by 90%, what is the maximum amount that you would be willing to pay to undertake this work on your own home?"*

Once more, responses to this question demonstrated a large amount of variation. Some eight percent of respondents actually chose the 'nothing' option, while another fifteen percent simply chose Don't Know. The mean average was £494, very close to the £500 mentioned in the question. However, some 21 percent were not willing to pay more than £100, while at the other end of the spectrum some nine percent of respondents were willing to pay more than £1000. Perhaps unsurprisingly, home owners expressed the willingness to pay the most on average, at £531 (although there was still huge variation within home owners); those renting from housing associations, who would include many low income households, expressed a willingness to pay, on average, only £253.

## Conclusion

The survey work conducted in this project has provided detailed and up-to-date evidence on attitudes towards social housing in Wales today. That evidence demonstrates a mixed picture with regards to the CIH's core interests. There is some recognition among the public of the importance of housing as an issue - but, amidst a media agenda that has been dominated in recent times by COVID-19 and Brexit, housing is some way down the issue concerns of much of the Welsh public. There is substantial public support for the idea that the provision of decent housing for all should be the responsibility of government, and specific recognition of the need for many groups of people to receive help with housing. There is also - to an extent that is perhaps surprising in data from a survey conducted during the middle of a global health pandemic - significant public recognition of the importance of housing, even when directly compared to the NHS. At the same time, however, at least some negative perceptions of social housing, and the people who typically live in it, certainly persist.





Chartered  
Institute of  
Housing  
Cymru

To discuss any matters relating to the work of CIH Cymru and how we can support your organisation please contact:

**Matthew Dicks**, national director Wales  
[matthew.dicks@cih.org](mailto:matthew.dicks@cih.org)  
029 2074 1131