

# HOME TRUTHS

How to change attitudes  
to housing benefit

**Natan Doron & Robert Tinker**

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Fabian Society  
11 Dartmouth Street  
London SW1H 9BN  
[www.fabians.org.uk](http://www.fabians.org.uk)

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## About the authors

Natan Doron is a Senior Researcher at the Fabian Society. He is the author of a number of publications including the co-author of the report *Climate change and sustainable consumption: What do the public think is fair?* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2011) and *For The Public Good* (Fabian Society, 2012)

Robert Tinker is a Researcher at the Fabian Society. He works across the Fabian Society research programme and is currently researcher to the Fabian Commission on Future Spending Choices.

## About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change. Our innovative education, employment, housing and well-being services address individual needs and help homeless people to transform their lives. We measure our success and can demonstrate tangible results and value for money. We are determined campaigners, working to prevent people from becoming homeless and advocating solutions informed by research and our direct experience. We have ambitious plans for the future and are committed to help more people in more places across the UK. We know we won't end homelessness overnight or on our own. But we take a lead, collaborate with others and together make change happen. For more information about our work go to <http://www.crisis.org.uk/>

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# FOREWORD

Leslie Morphy OBE

Chief Executive, Crisis

**A**t Crisis, as the national charity for single homeless people, we live and breathe the realities faced by those who are homeless and vulnerably housed and who therefore need help through the benefits system to put or keep a roof over their heads.

The system of supporting people to pay for their housing costs through housing benefit is a lifeline for the thousands of people we work with each year and millions more households across the UK. We were therefore very concerned when the coalition government earmarked the benefit for major cuts as part of its first budget in June 2010. Since then, a series of further cuts, caps and changes have been introduced, all with the intention of reducing the level of benefit paid out to individual households.

At Crisis, we have highlighted the consequences the cuts have had and will have, to the government, MPs, the media and the public. Directly and working with others we have had some limited success getting the government to introduce greater transitional support and to abandon a couple of its most extreme suggestions.

The political debate about housing benefit and cuts, however, has been conducted against a backdrop of hostile media coverage, which has both reflected and driven negative public attitudes. Whilst much of this coverage has focused on exceptional cases it is clear that there are wider public concerns, as has been reflected in surveys and polls.

We wanted to understand more about the views the public hold towards housing benefit and where these come from, and to explore whether sharing more information on the facts and realities of who claims, how much and why would improve understanding and shape or change those attitudes. The focus groups and polling carried out by the Fabian Society for this report make for interesting reading.

What is clear and heartening is that the British public does indeed want to live in a country that helps those who need support and there remains deep public sympathy for the poor and vulnerable. It recognises that there are root causes to poverty and high housing costs, of which the housing benefit bill is a symptom. A majority agree that the government should tackle these root causes. But facts and stats only take us so far and this report is clear that attitudes are also shaped by stories and personal experiences. Therefore, we also need to acknowledge and engage with people's views about what they consider to be fair.

For those who want to ensure that there is a social security system in Britain that helps those who have suffered the effects of homelessness or other short or long-term damaging life circumstances, this report is important and timely. It should inform but also inspire us to get out there and talk to our friends, neighbours and to the wider public and media to make a positive case for the value of social security in general and support for housing costs in particular.

## Summary

*Home Truths* examines new public attitudes research from the Fabian Society into an area of social security where the politics are perhaps the most challenging: housing benefit. The research confirms that antipathy towards housing benefit is deeply ingrained and finds that politicians and campaigners must understand that facts in and of themselves will not change hearts and minds, but stories and emotions do.

The report identifies six key findings:

### 1) The importance of deliberation

The deliberative process of forwarding views and opening them to challenge can itself help shift views towards housing benefit. In particular it shifts the focus of discussion to socioeconomic factors and away from seeing individual claimants as being at fault.

### 2) The role of stories and personal experiences

People's views on housing benefit can be deeply emotional and often draw on personal experiences or anecdotes picked up from friends, family or media sources.

### 3) The strength and persistence of negative views

Some views are strongly held and persist in the face of evidence that challenges them. These negative views are often associated with strong emotional responses to housing benefit.

### 4) The 'support' argument taps into the care ethic

The most popular argument in favour of spending public money on housing benefit, that we should support people in need, taps into what we call 'the care ethic'. The care ethic denotes a strong sense that people collectively have a duty to look after those who are the most vulnerable in our society.

### 5) How people view poverty affects how they view claimants

There were two distinct views of how poverty is created in our focus group discussions. One saw poverty as the fault of the individual while the other saw socioeconomic structures driving poverty. People more convinced by the former account generally take a less favourable view of housing benefit claimants.

### 6) The popularity of addressing root causes

People support the idea of government programmes that seek to tackle the root causes of housing benefit such as a shortfall in housing supply and low wages.

The report draws on these findings to make five recommendations for anti-poverty campaigners concerned about low levels of support for housing benefit:

### **Recommendations**

The key findings outlined above suggest a range of recommendations for both politicians and anti-poverty campaigners seeking to defend housing benefit. These recommendations are provided in order to assist the design of future campaigns to defend the principle of support for housing costs.

#### **1) Tap into the strength of emotions and stories**

Campaigns should seek to elicit emotional responses to housing benefit by generating stories based on easy to relate to accounts of poverty and homelessness in the UK.

#### **2) Foster conversations, not the dispensing of facts**

Given the importance of the deliberative process for shifting attitudes, campaigns should seek to generate conversations about housing benefit and poverty in the UK. In particular, those without experiences of poverty and housing insecurity must be given more opportunities to consider the perspective of those that do.

#### **3) Seek to understand and work with public anxieties**

Negative views about housing benefit can be strongly held and are often deeply emotional in nature. These will take time to address and campaigns must recognise that people will often hold contradictory views.

#### **4) We need to talk about poverty**

Campaigns need to do more in order to highlight the nature of poverty in the UK including causes as well as more 'hidden' forms of poverty such as in-work cases.

#### **5) Root causes, not symptoms**

Given the popularity of addressing root causes of housing benefit, campaigns should frame housing benefit as a symptom which distracts from the need to tackle such root causes.

This research confirms that the public politics of housing benefit is complicated and dominated by negative attitudes towards claimants. But the research also demonstrates ways in which a more nuanced and positive debate can be fostered. This more positive debate is crucial for the fight against homelessness and poverty in the coming years.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of housing benefit in much of the mainstream press is toxic, with no shortage of articles about workless immigrants in expensive houses being paid for by the taxpayer.<sup>1</sup> This report demonstrates the extent to which such media narratives impact on public opinion on housing benefit.

In-depth public attitudes work, conducted by the Fabian Society, found a large proportion of people are concerned that we spend too much money subsidising the housing costs of people who come from outside of the UK. Many are also worried that housing benefit makes people lazy and dependent on the state for support. Moreover, we found that some of these concerns remain unchanged even when people were presented with information that challenged the core beliefs underpinning them.

All of this makes for difficult and uncomfortable news for anti-poverty campaigners. This is because despite its poor press, housing benefit serves as one of the most effective barriers against homelessness and poverty in the UK. But this research also suggests that a deeper reading of public attitudes can provide cause for optimism.

Firstly, people are enthusiastic about the principle of government action that attempts to tackle rising housing benefit spending at its root causes. This would involve addressing the UK's critical shortfall in housing supply and making it easier and more affordable for those who wish to get on the housing ladder.

Second, there is hope to be found in the way people think about poverty. It comes as no surprise that people who believe poverty is the result of poor individual choices are far less favourable in their views of housing benefit claimants. But our research shows that only a minority of people in the UK actually think about poverty in this way. When forced to choose between an individual and a more structural account of what causes poverty, around 60 per cent of people opt for the latter.

This understanding that poverty is often caused by forces beyond the control of the individual is the well of public opinion from which what we call the 'care ethic' is drawn. The care ethic is a source of strong support for the principle of looking after those who are vulnerable or experience bad luck in our society. Despite the deluge of negative headlines about social security, the British people are not unconcerned about the poor. However, they must believe the need is genuine in order to unlock the care ethic.

The challenge ahead is to connect this more nuanced view of how poverty is created with the political debate around housing benefit. In order to rebuild faith and support in our social security system, discussion about housing benefit will need to be placed in a wider conversation about what causes



poverty in the UK and how it can be tackled over the long term.

Coalition ministers, and indeed the prime minister, David Cameron, have contributed to the ongoing stigmatisation of people who rely on social security. At the same time, their policies have served to accentuate levels of poverty in the UK. This makes it ever the more urgent to open up a new kind of debate about social security in the UK – a debate that is about poverty and the collective choice we have to fight it.

## Research and aims

The research aimed of better understanding public attitudes to housing benefit in Britain. The research aimed to do this by testing how people responded to major arguments for and against housing benefit as well as understanding how people reacted to evidence and deliberation on this area of social security spending.

The research sought to understand which arguments for and against housing benefit people find most and least persuasive, and in particular whether any of the arguments ‘for’ had the potential to shift the public narrative on housing benefit. Further issues guiding this research related to people’s impressions of housing benefit and housing benefit claimants; understanding how these impressions are influenced by media and political portrayals; the interaction between public attitudes and existing evidence about housing benefit; and the impact of deliberation and whether it could change attitudes.

As the research developed, the data from our initial focus groups suggested that views on housing benefit were bound up with attitudes to the social security system more broadly. The research therefore also offered an opportunity to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the public views and the constraints to effective political messages on social security reform in general.

# 2 HOUSING SUPPORT AND SOCIAL SECURITY

## Housing benefit today

**H**ousing benefit has come to play a symbolic role in British politics: it is a flashpoint for popular anxieties about the legitimacy and sustainability of the UK social security system. This report explores the beliefs motivating these views by presenting the findings of public attitudes research into housing benefit and asks what, if anything, can be done to change them.

Housing benefit is a subsidy available to households both in and out of work, and plays an important role in supporting those who cannot afford to meet their housing costs alone. Housing benefit is not time limited and recipients are able to claim at the point at which they require support. In practice this makes housing benefit an efficient and flexible system.

However, both the cost and the caseload of housing benefit have risen over the last two decades and these rises have been especially dramatic in recent years. So it seemed inevitable that the £20bn housing benefit bill would be considered as part of the coalition's austerity programme.

In 2010, reductions to the rate of housing benefit were announced as part of the government's first budget<sup>2</sup>. In part this was presented as a cost-saving exercise, but the budget report also noted that the current system of housing benefit was "unfair to the millions of families on low income who do not depend on social security"<sup>3</sup>.

The coalition has sought to paint a picture that housing benefit is unfair in its attempts to justify cuts. This has been accompanied by a tabloid media campaign which has seized on a handful of extreme examples to shape the public debate around housing benefit.<sup>4</sup> This has, in turn, been actively encouraged by politicians seeking to justify cuts, perpetuating a circle by which each feeds off a greater sense of outrage.<sup>5</sup>

There are reasons to be cautious about the way in which the media selects extreme cases when reporting stories on housing benefit, as well as claims that housing benefit is 'spiralling' without justification.<sup>6</sup> As this report outlines below, there is good evidence to show that the rise in housing benefit expenditure is connected to the UK's deep recession and its impact on jobs and earnings. But regardless of the reality, what seems clear is the ubiquity

and force of the view that housing benefit is too expensive and unfair.

For those concerned with poverty prevention in the UK, this state of affairs is concerning and problematic. As *Homelessness Monitor England* reported in December 2012, there has been a rise in homelessness as a result of the cuts to housing benefit combined with the ongoing economic downturn.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the report authors note that, as the cuts continue to bite, the situation for homelessness and housing outcomes in general is set to worsen. The current low levels of support for housing benefit means that it is imperative for anti-poverty advocates to understand the complex and multiple roots of this negative public perception.

At this critical juncture for the UK benefits system, that is what this report attempts to do. Through a presentation and analysis of data gathered in focus groups and opinion polling, we explore attitudes to housing benefit in detail with the aim of understanding not only what people know and think about the UK's system of housing subsidy in principle, but also to understand the factors influencing these attitudes and whether they are susceptible to change.

## The long view of housing support and social security

There is nothing new to political debate about housing subsidy and how it should interact with other areas of social policy. Beveridge grappled with what he termed “the problem of rent”: how to reconcile geographic and household variations in housing costs with the principle of flat-rate social insurance.<sup>8</sup> His solution, in the form of an additional housing allowance, was manageable in an era of private sector rent controls and heavily subsidised social housing, but began to break down after the deregulation of the housing market in the 1980s. Indeed, it is possible to see many of the pressures on housing subsidy in the last 70 years as a manifestation of wider inconsistencies and failings in British social provision.

The profile of subsidies to support housing costs has shifted over the past 30 years from supply-side policies such as housing investment to demand-side measures such as support for rental costs. The current extent of housing benefit spending is the consequence. This shift means spending levels are not entirely within government control, because while housing capital spending is planned, benefit payments are demand-led entitlements. The government is able to change rules on the eligibility and rate of benefit payments – as it has recently – but it has far less control over caseload or rent inflation.<sup>9</sup>

During the 1980s large amounts of council housing in the UK were sold under right-to-buy legislation. This was accompanied by private rental market deregulation and the introduction of housing benefit. The latter had the explicit goal of taking ‘the strain’ of costs that were predicted to rise with the removal of rent controls in the private rented sector.<sup>10</sup> At the point of its introduction, 85 per cent of support for housing costs was on the supply side.

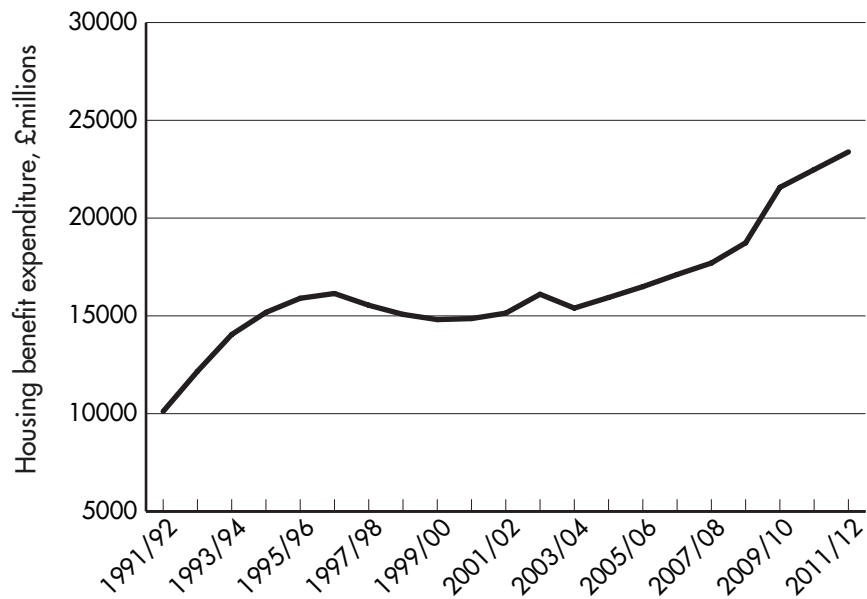
By 2000 this ratio had reversed.<sup>11</sup>

At the political level, the aspiration to reduce the reach of the state was seen as incompatible with a traditional supply-side approach to financing house building. It was felt that the UK was on the path to becoming a 'home-owning society', and the decision to move investment from 'bricks to benefits' (as it has subsequently been termed) should be understood in this context.<sup>12</sup> In the prevailing culture of right-to-buy it was not seen as unreasonable to think that providing individual subsidies to families was the most appropriate solution to the problem of housing costs.

Since then, however, rising rents have increased the pressure on the housing benefit system. Research by the charity Shelter has shown that rents rose one and a half times faster than incomes in the 10 years up to 2007.<sup>13</sup>

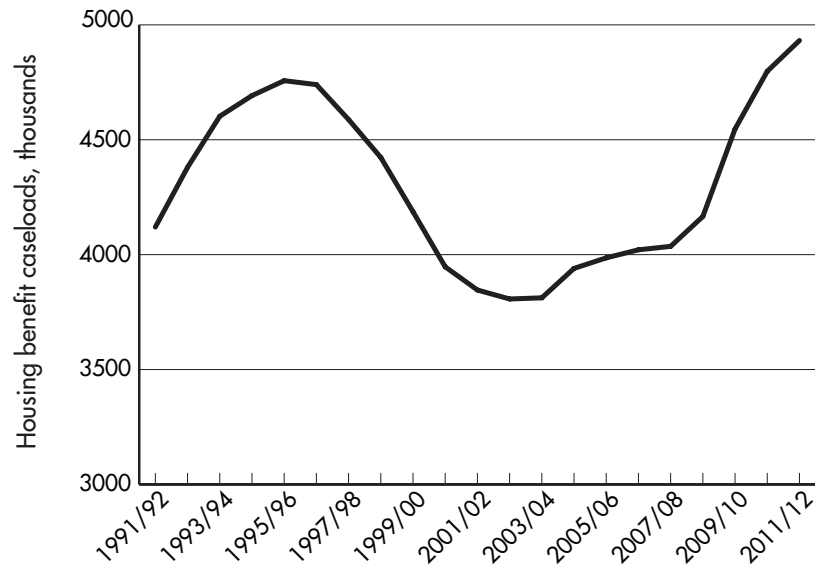
With the financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent recession in the UK, rents outstripped wages and unemployment as well as underemployment increased.<sup>14</sup> More households experienced a shortfall between earnings and housing costs, and the housing benefit caseload has risen accordingly.<sup>15</sup> Figure 1 demonstrates the rise in real-terms spending on housing benefit following the financial crisis and Figure 2 shows the rise in caseload numbers.

Figure 1: Total expenditure on housing benefit in Great Britain, 1991/1992 - 2011/2012



Source: DWP expenditure tables

Figure 2 Housing benefit claimant numbers, Great Britain, 1991/1992 to 2011/2012 <sup>16</sup>



It is also important to recognise the changing role of the private sector. Private renting has nearly doubled over the past decade.<sup>17</sup> This is likely to continue in the future, meaning that more and more households will be exposed to the volatility of rents in this sector.<sup>18</sup>

There is a powerful case for increasing housing investment in the hope that this reduces pressure on social security expenditure over the coming decades. But the fiscal climate presents real challenges to this approach in the short term. While this report does not attempt to offer solutions to this difficulty, clearly supply-side investment, while beneficial in the future, comes with immediate costs in the present.

But a second set of challenges, arguably more difficult to navigate, relate to cultural questions about the place of housing in British national life. The large majority of the British public still aspire to own their own home. It is a goal rooted in the culture of asset ownership, which dates back to the inter-war period, but reached its zenith with the introduction of right-to-buy in the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> This cultural significance makes the public politics of housing more sensitive and complicated than it is sometimes presented.<sup>20</sup>

The existence and depth of these cultural challenges make it all the more important to understand the place of public attitudes in the debate over reforming housing subsidies. Furthermore, as data from the most recent British Social Attitudes surveys indicates, attitudes towards those who are deemed to be 'dependent' on state support are hardening, and the falsely divisive language of 'shirkers' and 'strivers' risks exacerbating this trend further.<sup>21</sup> In an era of dramatically constrained public spending, creating social entitlements and institutions which are inclusive and promote solidarity is one of the key challenges facing campaigners for social justice.

# 3 EXISTING ATTITUDES TO HOUSING BENEFIT

We looked at four arguments in favour and four arguments against spending public money on housing benefit. These arguments were discussed in our focus groups as well as put to our nationally representative survey. The results from the survey are listed in Tables 1 and 2, ranked in terms of how convincing people found them. These tables paint a vivid portrait of existing attitudes to housing benefit.

Overwhelmingly, the public is most concerned about the amount of money spent on housing benefit for immigrants and those with large families. But the public also feel that it is important to protect those that are vulnerable and that experience bad luck in society. Similarly, the public are convinced that housing benefit encourages dependency but are also concerned that without housing benefit, we would see more homelessness on our streets.

So clearly, the public hold views about housing benefit which point in different directions. This chapter explores the basis of these attitudes and demonstrates the characteristics according to which views polarise.

Table 1: The arguments in favour of housing benefit spending ranked in order of most convincing (%)

The following are a list of arguments in favour of spending public money on housing benefit. How convincing or unconvincing do you find each of the following statements?	Very convincing/ fairly convincing	Very unconvincing/ fairly unconvincing	Net convincing <sup>22</sup>
Housing benefit is important because we should look after those who are more vulnerable or experience bad luck in our society	56	16	40
If we didn't have housing benefit, we would see more people without a roof over their heads	55	19	36
Housing benefit is important because it allows people to stay in their home and community who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford their rent	41	28	13
Housing benefit enables people to live near to places where there are jobs, which helps them get jobs and is good for the economy	36	33	3

(Total sample size 1746 UK adults)

Table 2: The arguments against spending on housing benefit ranked in order of most convincing (%)

The following are a list of arguments against spending public money on housing benefit. How convincing or unconvincing do you find each of the following statements?	Very convincing/ fairly convincing	Very unconvincing/ fairly unconvincing	Net convincing
Too much housing benefit is spent subsidising housing costs for groups such as immigrants and those with too many children	67	16	51
Housing benefit makes people dependent on the state and discourages them from improving their personal situation	58	21	37
Housing benefit helps support poorer people who want to live in rich areas but if you can't afford it, you shouldn't live there	55	23	32
Housing benefit is out of control. We spend too much public money supporting people who cannot afford their own rent	48	25	23
Total sample size 1746 UK adults)			

### Media narratives, contribution and stories

The deliberative process of discussing the arguments for and against housing benefit highlighted a number of themes that re-occurred across our focus groups. Popular media narratives were dominant in the opening remarks of each focus group and often set the tone for the rest of the discussion. The following opening response captures a feeling present to some degree throughout the qualitative stage of our work.

**Female:** Yeah, I'm quite aggrieved by all that. The constant that you see in the papers in London about their giving thousands and thousands of pounds a week to house people in these luxury houses and they're being destroyed. And I know, obviously, you don't get the whole picture. But I just think in my mind: "How can it have to come to – that we're paying for people to – and then people are struggling with their mortgages, people that have full-time jobs, or have maybe been made redundant or whatever, and they don't seem to be able to get any help whatsoever with their mortgage, but the government are giving money away to house people who aren't contributing to the economy.  
[Birmingham group without current claimants]

This quote features a number of themes that dominated in the focus groups, such as contribution and eligibility. Moreover, the quote underscores a tendency among a number of participants to be self-reflective about their use of media and its role in shaping culturally sensitive debates.

**Male:** [Male] was saying he's a victim of media hype, and I am as well... The media hype has led me to believe that every man, woman and their dog is claiming benefits.  
[London group without current claimants]

A strong degree of misinformation combined with a lack of knowledge

around eligibility criteria and calculation made debating the principle of housing benefit difficult. It also created space for anecdotal evidence to take over. Where some participants referenced the sensationalist way in which the tabloid media present these issues, others directly inferred universal claims about housing benefit and the social security system from particular examples found in these outlets. For instance, one participant in Birmingham noted that:

**Male:** Again there was one in the paper at the weekend, they caught him running. He was playing for the local football side, and he'd been claiming thousands of pounds of benefits per year.  
[Birmingham group without current claimants]

Immigration featured very strongly in the minds of participants and was an obstacle to objective debate.

**Male:** I agree with that [argument against housing benefit drawing on immigration] actually, yeah. That is how I feel, personally, if I'm honest. It's how a lot of people feel. Yeah, there's enough people in England, in Britain, as it says there, that need help on their own, without us compounding the problem by bringing more people in from abroad.  
[London group without current claimants]

In contrast to the government's current policy, which aims to reduce net migration as an end in itself, participants in these groups were more concerned about the relationship between migration and contribution. In some cases participants demonstrated a respect for the energy with which some migrant groups had entered the labour market, on a number of occasions referring to them as 'grafters'. These findings corroborate other recent attitudinal studies of immigration in the UK.<sup>23</sup>

In the groups an interesting split emerged between participants in Birmingham and London according to their views about immigration. The participants in London expressed views more at ease with the cultural diversity arising from immigration. In this case, the issue of housing benefits for migrants was typically viewed as secondary to that of whether the UK's net migration levels are appropriate. But this familiarity also had consequences which served to consolidate rather than rebut the popular anecdotal connections between migration and contribution.

**Female:** So when you're in the street like we are in Camden and in Fulham, when you are one of the only white people there, you assume they've all got to be on benefits. They don't seem to be going out to work.  
[London group without current claimants]

**Female:** So for me, I am stigmatising and being judgemental here, but I thought it was a lot higher because of what I'm seeing around me as opposed to what I know.  
[London group without current claimants]



This quote, from a participant in London, illustrates a common finding during this research that local and everyday forms of experience can shape views that resist information that challenges or contradicts them. The quotes demonstrate the power of storytelling and narrative in the discussion of issues such as migration and contribution. This finding was recurring and presents an important lesson for policy makers as it shows that housing benefit and associated social security questions are as much cultural and emotional issues as technical, economic questions. The two quotes below from Birmingham and London illustrate the way in which these topics were articulated through narrative accounts:

**Male:** I drive past someone everyday, who's sitting on their doorstep, in their dressing gown, waves their kids goodbye...When I go past of a night, they're still on the doorstep, in their dressing gown.  
[Birmingham group with current claimants and non-claimants]

**Male:** I've got a family member who had a child, husband left, went on to housing benefit. Then had another baby by another husband who left, another man who left. And she's stuck in it now'.  
[London group with current claimants and non-claimants]

Many of the views reflected a wider tension between contribution and dependency in participants' attitude to housing benefit and the wider social security system.

This distinction between what the social security system, and in this case housing benefit, should provide in principle and what it delivers in practice was a prominent theme throughout the focus groups. In a number of groups, a principled care ethic was combined with an almost patriotic attitude towards the system and principle of social security in the UK and a rejection of the individualism observed elsewhere in the world.

Almost all of the participants in the focus groups recognised the need to care for those who cannot support themselves:

**Moderator:** Just quickly, you mentioned the words 'vulnerable' and 'needy'. Any ideas on what that would be, in your opinion?

**Female 1:** The elderly, disabled, the homeless, or out of immediate employment, so may have been in employment or...

**Male 1:** What about reforming addicts? I think people that are showing that they want to turn their life around, whatever situation, I think you give them a pat on the back and help them out.

**Female 2:** And people who have been in abusive relationships, that kind of thing.

**Female 3:** And people who have maybe come from another country, where they've lost, completely, everything...

[London group without current claimants]

There was a pride taken in the fact that the UK cared for these people and indeed, according to one participant, that it was the "duty of the state... to support people when they need it". Nevertheless, many participants felt these principles were no longer reflected in the social security system, or that an imbalance had emerged between these priorities and others.

**Male:** The original idea of – well any benefit, is to help people who fell out of work or who got injured at work and they could no longer work or something. Then you looked after them. But like everything, people learn about the system, learn how to abuse the system.  
[Birmingham group without current claimants]

Beyond fraud and a feeling that vulnerability was too broadly constituted, the key concern among participants was the extent to which the care function of the social security system encouraged dependency. This was explicitly linked to the view that the social security system no longer encouraged contribution, with housing benefit regularly cited as a case in point. Importantly, this concern with dependency was seen as compatible with a benign view of the state's social security function in principle. One participant envisaged a spectrum whereby benefits for some groups over a certain length of time promoted dependency, in part because the system fails to make work pay.

**Female:** You need help. You get assistance, and then when you've been on the assistance for a while, if you are one of these people, it kind of leads to a dependency, because you're on it, you're given it. But then if you tried to get off it, for some people it's, "oh you'll be worse off."  
[London group with current claimants and non-claimants]

Dependency was often associated with lengthy claims. A number of participants argued they would be much happier if receipt of housing benefit was a stopgap, arguing this would provide support for legitimate groups such as the short-term unemployed while avoiding what they saw as perverse incentives in the current system.

**Male:** It's circumstances, exactly, and it's a stopgap, housing benefit, to get them back on track, then take the housing benefit away.  
[London group without current claimants]

Length of claim was deemed especially important in relation to the role that housing benefit plays in keeping people in their communities. Many participants acknowledged the importance of local networks in providing people, particularly those regarded as vulnerable, with support. A view often expressed in the groups was that it was therefore legitimate to seek to keep people in their communities but that this only remained true 'up to a point'.

**Male:** There shouldn't be any reason why you should have to move out of your home if you've lived there for a number of years? You've got a family, you've got friends, you've got local family, local connections. I think some of the application comes into things that. Local connections, things like that. Bit like schools, if it comes to a point where – they can only pay so much out. It's not an ever-lasting pot of money. If your rent's a lot more than the same standard council house, then why shouldn't you be asked to move? You're asking for help, so why should you be able to say: "I'm asking for help, but I'm not moving, or I'm not moving there, I'm not moving there."  
[Birmingham group with current claimants and non-claimants]

Length of claim was used by participants as a tool to attempt to distinguish between need and dependency. In the London group, which had a mix of claimants and non-claimants, these feelings were confirmed by a housing benefit recipient who reflected that she had experienced dependency.

**Female:** Saying people get dependent on the state doesn't mean they want to stay there, but they do get in a rut about it.  
[London group with current claimants and non-claimants]

While this participant was not explicit about her personal circumstances (she was a current housing benefit claimant), other participants that had received or were in receipt of this payment displayed similar attitudes. Participants in receipt of housing benefit were concerned about contribution and dependency in both the groups where they were included.

This concern was illustrated in participant discussion of the statement 'Housing benefit is important because we should look after those who are vulnerable or experience bad luck in our society. Everybody has a right to housing'.

**Male:** The line that grates as well is the line – rights. Everyone has a right to everything now. It's not. You've got to earn it. You've got to go out and work. I think what's quite frustrating as well, when it talks about dependency in the against argument, it seems to be all or nothing. Either you work, and you rent, and you pay your bills and you don't get anything. Or you sit in a house, and you buy yourself a 50" TV which I can't afford, because I've got to pay my rent. But they can afford it because they're not paying anything.  
[Birmingham group without current claimants]

This emotive image evoked a view of poverty present in much of our qualitative research, in which poverty and vulnerability were of the individual's making and could easily be reversed through hard work. In some groups this 'individual' view of poverty led participants to deny that families experience 'real' financial hardship which impacted heavily their view of housing benefit.

**Male 1:** It's not normally families, no. I'm not saying that some of these haven't come from a family and they're homeless but they're living somewhere else. But, I just don't see, walking the streets, husband and wife and two or three kids. It's normally a lad and his dog, or a girl and her dog, or a man on his own.

**Male 2:** Is it not their own circumstances that cause them to be homeless though? You look at the people that – as you say, if you've come from a solid background, and a loving family, and hard-working...Even if you can't afford housing, and it is difficult to get on the housing market. I'm 26 and I only moved out of my parent's last year, because it's difficult. It's difficult to get money together. But that's the one that really grates when you say about young mothers getting pregnant, and having to house them. But as you said, the majority that you see – I work in Walsall quite a lot, and the number of drug addicts that you see walking around. It's just frightening. It's not individuals, well it is individuals that cause it. I just

don't see how you become homeless otherwise, unless you force yourself out of your own parents' house.  
[Birmingham group without current claimants]

We found a widespread feeling that, compared to the support for tenants in the form of housing benefit, those trying to buy their home were allowed to struggle. But more than this, home ownership was viewed as a more legitimate enterprise, perhaps because it was less clearly associated with the dependency referred to above. In contrast to the negative attitudes surrounding housing benefit recipients, attitudes were sympathetic to those trying to start on the housing ladder and it was felt that 'The youngsters today just haven't got a chance'.

This was interesting because many of the economic conditions participants cited in discussion of how difficult it was for young people to accumulate assets are the very factors which have driven the recent rise in housing benefit.<sup>24</sup> An implicit distinction operated between those young people saving for a deposit and people, such as young mothers, that some saw as receiving housing subsidies illegitimately. This demonstrated the extent to which aspiration and housing remain closely linked.

### Follow-up survey

The second phase of our research featured the commissioning of a nationally representative survey, conducted by YouGov.<sup>25</sup> The survey was designed in order to stress test some of the findings emerging from the focus groups. As a result, we put all eight of our arguments for and against housing benefit. The results of how convincing people found these arguments are presented above in Tables 1 and 2. We also asked a range of further questions pertaining to:

- the extent to which people supported or opposed cuts to housing benefit
- how people viewed the causes of poverty in the UK today
- the extent to which people supported an approach to social policy that aimed to tackle the root causes of housing benefit
- views on the relationship between the public finances and the need to provide people with support for housing costs

The findings from the focus groups reinforce the impression from our survey that responses to arguments for and against housing benefit are complex, although clearly weighted towards the negative. Often participants in our focus groups held views that, if not contradictory, seemed to point in different directions. In other areas though, there was disagreement between participants. The survey results provide more detail on how views differ. In particular, views diverged between population groups, according to tenure type, voting intention, age and claimant status.

## Tenure

In many of the survey responses, a hardened attitude to housing benefit recipients was apparent among those who own a house or have a mortgage. This home-owning group formed one cluster of opinion. Another cluster of opinion was represented by the similar views of those renting from local authorities and housing associations. These two clusters – those who own their own homes and those who live in social housing – were usually on the two opposite extremes of opinion, with those in the private rented sector representing a kind of mid-way point. Table 3 shows that around half of home owners did not think that the UK was rich enough to protect everyone from homelessness.

Table 3: Views on whether we can afford to prevent homelessness broken down according to tenure status (%)

Which one of the following statements do you agree with more?	Total (n= 1746)	Own outright (n= 633)	Paying mortgage (n = 590)	Private Rental Sector (n = 265)	Local authority rented (n = 105)	Housing association (n = 93)	Don't know (n = 54)
Despite our economic problems, the UK is still rich enough to prevent people being homeless. We should take care of such groups even if it may be expensive	41	32	39	54	45	60	30
While we should take care of people who need it, our economic situation means that we cannot be as generous as we would like. We simply cannot afford to protect everyone from homelessness	43	54	46	31	29	20	33
Neither	9	9	9	7	8	14	3
Don't know	7	4	6	7	19	6	33

## Voting intention

Voting intention was another indicator of very different views, most dramatically when comparing those intending to vote Conservative with those intending to vote Labour. The contrast between Labour and Conservative voters in their reactions to the pro-housing benefit arguments in Table 4 were particularly striking. There was a 61 percentage point gap between Conservative and Labour voters' 'net convincing' scores on the argument that linked housing benefit to reducing homelessness.

There was also a 69 percentage point gap between Conservative and Labour voters' 'net convincing' scores on the argument that stressed the importance of housing benefit for keeping communities together.

Table 4: 'Net convincing' scores of arguments in favour of housing benefit broken down according to voting intention (%)

<b>The following are a list of arguments in favour of spending public money on housing benefit. How convincing or unconvincing do you find each of the following?</b>	<b>Total (n=1746)</b>	<b>Con (n = 446)</b>	<b>Lab (n = 526)</b>	<b>Lib Dem (n = 100)</b>
If we didn't have housing benefit, we would see more people without a roof over their heads	36	2	63	52
Housing benefit is important because we should look after those who are more vulnerable or experience bad luck in our society	40	11	57	54
Housing benefit is important because it allows people to stay in their home and community who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford their rent	13	-26	43	9
Housing benefit enables people to live near to places where there are jobs, which helps them get jobs and is good for the economy	3	-26	26	-20

The differences in response to the anti-arguments were just as pronounced, with a 74 percentage point gap between Conservative and Labour voters' 'net convincing' scores on the argument that housing benefit is out of control from the perspective of public spending.

Table 5: 'Net convincing' scores of arguments against housing benefit broken down by voting intention (%)

<b>The following are a list of arguments against spending public money on housing benefit. How convincing or unconvincing do you find each of the following?</b>	<b>Total (n=1746)</b>	<b>Con (n = 446)</b>	<b>Lab (n = 526)</b>	<b>Lib Dem (n = 100)</b>
Housing benefit is out of control. We spend too much public money supporting people who cannot afford their own rent	23	67	-7	18
Housing benefit makes people dependent on the state and discourages them from improving their personal situation	37	78	8	23
Housing benefit helps support poorer people who want to live in rich areas but if you can't afford it, you shouldn't live there	32	65	4	39
Too much housing benefit is spent subsidising housing costs for groups such as immigrants and those with too many children	51	83	31	15

## Age

Recent and forthcoming work by Ipsos MORI looks at the different generations in the UK and their varying attitudes towards the social security system.<sup>26</sup> The basic premise of this research holds that younger generations are less supportive of redistributive measures. Our research confirms this analysis in places but challenges it in others.

When it came to the different views of poverty, older age groups (40-60+) took a more structural view. Younger age groups in our sample consistently took a view poverty as something which could be escaped thorough hard work. Older age groups were also more decisive: considerably fewer stated they either didn't know or couldn't choose between one view or the other.

Table 6: Views of poverty broken down according to age (%)

Which one of the following statements do you agree with more?	Total (n= 1746)	18-24 (n= 112)	25-39 (n = 413)	40 - 59 (n= 671)	60+ (n=550)
People who hit hard times can escape poverty if they work hard enough and try to improve their situation	25	32	30	21	23
There are many causes of poverty such as people's backgrounds and the health of the economy. Individuals are often unable to achieve a better standard of living through no fault of their own	59	43	48	69	63
Neither	10	11	14	6	9
Don't know	6	14	8	3	4

It would seem plausible to suggest that, because older people in our survey take a more structural view of poverty they would be more likely to support measures such as housing benefit, which provide support for those most affected by such structures. But Table 7 shows that respondents in age group 18-24 were 15 percentage points more likely to agree that we should prevent homelessness even if it is expensive than those in the 60+ cohort. Over half of respondents in the 60+ cohorts thought that we could not afford to protect everyone from homelessness. This represented a 19 percentage point difference to those in the 18-24 group.

Table 7: Can we afford to protect people from homelessness? (Broken down according to age) (%)

Which one of the following statements do you agree with more?	Total (n= 1746)	18-24 (n= 112)	25-39 (n = 413)	40 - 59 (n= 671)	60+ (n=550)
Despite our economic problems, the UK is still rich enough to prevent people being homeless. We should take care of such groups even if it may be expensive	41	47	42	45	32
While we should take care of people who need it, our economic situation means that we cannot be as generous as we would like. We simply cannot afford to protect everyone from homelessness	43	34	40	40	53
Neither	9	3	9	9	10
Don't know	7	16	9	5	5

### People receiving housing benefit

The previous analysis has shown where the views of different groups diverge – often strikingly so. It is worth mentioning one area, however, where the opposite is the case: claimant status.

We asked our respondents whether they have ever claimed housing benefit. In all of the questions, the difference in views between current claimants, former claimants and those who have never claimed was, as would be expected, very dramatic. There was only one question in which the difference between current and non-claimants was within a few percentage points. This was the question of how convincing the argument against public spending on housing benefit because of immigration and large families was. As can be seen in Table 8, whether you currently or have ever claimed housing benefit is not an indication of significantly different views on the question of how much public money is spent on housing benefit for immigrants and large families.



Table 8: Net findings for arguments against housing benefit (broken down according to claimant status) (%)

<b>The following are a list of arguments against spending public money on housing benefit. How convincing or unconvincing do you find each of the following?</b>	<b>Total (n= 1746)</b>	<b>Currently claim housing benefit (n = 173)</b>	<b>Used to claim housing benefit (n = 130)</b>	<b>Never claimed housing benefit (n = 1394)</b>	<b>Don't know (n = 49)</b>
Housing benefit is out of control. We spend too much public money supporting people who cannot afford their own rent	25	-32	-7	35	14
Housing benefit makes people dependent on the state and discourages them from improving their personal situation	37	-29	10	50	30
Housing benefit helps support poorer people who want to live in rich areas but if you can't afford it, you shouldn't live there	32	5	21	38	24
Too much housing benefit is spent subsidising housing costs for groups such as immigrants and those with too many children	51	47	49	53	38

This finding demonstrates how widely some of the tabloid media narratives prevail. The next chapter explores the extent to which these and other attitudes revealed in our research are open to change.

# 4

## CAN ATTITUDES CHANGE?

After analysing the data collected in focus groups and survey, the research began to build a snapshot of where attitudes to housing benefit might shift as well as those areas which are more resistant to change. There is a complex interaction between evidence and everyday experience, which conditions and reinforces existing attitudes to housing benefit and the social security system. It is therefore important for activists, politicians and anyone who wishes to influence attitudes in this area of public policy to better engage with the interaction between these factors.

### What changed attitudes?

Where receipt of housing benefit was linked to those in work, attitudes were more open to change. The statistic of how much of the growth in housing benefit caseload between 2010 and 2011 could be accounted for by households in work, for example, seemed particularly effective at shifting existing attitudes. Participants expressed open surprise at the high figure of 93 percent.<sup>27</sup> Some participants found the statistic ‘encouraging’ in that it challenged a view that working people do not receive support from the social security system. But many others found it difficult to believe that a proportion of the population were in work and poor. This insight helped counter the idea that all claimants were necessarily ‘skivers’, a view which predominated in the early stages of our focus groups.

**Female:** I didn’t think it was that high, I’ve got to be honest, 93 per cent, that’s really [cut off]

**Male:** I’m surprised it’s that high, but that’s good isn’t it?

**Male:** It shatters the idea that – a housing benefit, or any sort of claimant, are necessarily skivers.

**Female:** It takes that idea away, straight away, doesn’t it?  
[London group without current claimants]

The level of surprise expressed in this quote was typical of the reactions in our focus groups. Our quantitative data and other studies complement this finding and show that people vastly underestimate the increase in housing benefit claims accounted for by claimants in work. 90 per cent of people surveyed in our nationally representative poll either thought that the increase in housing benefit caseload attributable to those in work was under half the true figure, didn’t know or thought that housing benefit could only be claimed by those who were out of work.

This information reduced the ‘othering’ effect often evident in attitudes to benefit claimants – especially when presented alongside information about changes in wage and rents. One participant, a young professional living in the private rental sector in London, reacted to the information about new claimants being in work by reflecting on her own position. She remarked that, “It’s opening my eyes a bit, because I’m not on a big wage”. This also went some way to challenging the view of poverty referred to earlier and had the effect of causing group participants to think about poverty and financial hardship in a more ‘structural’ way. Whereas earlier most participants discussed poverty as something principally brought about by individual choice or circumstance, debating this information raised awareness of factors beyond the control of the individual, including stagnating wages and rising housing costs. The following exchange was typical:

**Female 1:** Because 93 per cent of people were not able to pay their rent. With an income. So they’re in work. And are not able to pay for their home. To me, when you’re working, usually two people at least in a household, or, okay, some people don’t work, it doesn’t matter, whatever – but the basics are to be able to pay your rent, bills, food. Those are the basics. And if they can’t pay that, if that can’t pay their rent, if 93 per cent of people cannot pay their rent [cut off]

**Female 2:** They’re in the wrong job.

**Female 1:** But there aren’t any other jobs.

**Female 2:** Yeah, that’s what I mean, and the jobs you can get, the pay’s no good. That’s why they need it. That’s why they need to top it up with the housing benefit.

**Female 1:** But that’s shocking really. Absolutely shocking. I’m amazed.  
[London group with current claimants and non-claimants]

The multiple and complex sources of poverty and economic insecurity that this information highlighted were reflected in the way participants began to think about the social security system and public spending as a whole. One participant in another group drew an analogy between the benefits system and a balloon which when squeezed in one area inflates in another. Cutting a particular source of support such as housing benefit would more than likely lead to equivalent spending in another, and underlined the need to think about spending in a holistic way.

**Male:** As a general comment, I realise this research is focused on housing benefit, but really the whole thing’s got to be seen as a whole. All this is symptoms of other things. It’s symptoms of pensions deficits, mishandling – in my opinion – of housing policy, lack of social housing, not enough new build, so and so forth. All these pressures converge don’t they? And something’s got to give. What’s the weakest point that gives? It’s the benefits system. Otherwise, you’ve got people on the streets, or if you’re being really cynical about it, health bills, NHS bills going up.

**Female:** Like America. We’ll end up with America health system over here now. We’ll get nothing.

**Male:** Because poverty means people get ill. It’s like a squashy balloon, isn’t it? You squeeze it in one place, and it balloons out in another.

[London group without current claimants]

Previous research has found that conceptions of poverty can determine levels of support for redistribution.<sup>28</sup> We used our quantitative survey to test the extent to which competing views about causes of poverty were distributed across the population. Our survey asked people to choose between individual or structural accounts of the drivers of poverty, and revealed a majority of support for the latter position.

Thinking about poverty in the UK... Which ONE of the following statements comes closest to your view?<sup>29</sup>

63%

**There are many causes of poverty such as people's backgrounds and the health of the economy. Individuals are often unable to achieve a better standard of living through no fault of their own**

27%

**People who hit hard times can escape poverty if they work hard enough and try to improve their situation**

10%

**Neither**

This data is particularly striking because it broadly united different demographic groups and those with different voting intentions. This data is also surprising given the prevalence of comments outlining an individual explanation of poverty in our focus groups. It may be that this finding is accounted for by the wording or the question design but the results are very clear: forcing respondents to choose between one of two accounts of poverty produces a majority favouring a structural as opposed to an individual account.

Participants were quick to draw out the conclusions when presented with evidence which challenged the view that poverty was self-made. While participants did not disregard concerns over responsibility and dependency, evidence around the extent of in-work poverty in the UK led to their views about housing subsidies evolving markedly. One London home owner, for example, felt that housing benefit was distorting the market and concealing certain trends in the economy:

**Male:** Are we, or are tax-payers, subsidising employers? Employers aren't paying enough, or are house prices just too high? It's distorting a market by paying benefits.

[London group without current claimants]

Increasingly the importance of tackling root causes is being recognised. Figures within the Labour party have broached the question of whether policymakers should seek to prevent unfavorable market outcomes rather than allow the benefits system to compensate for them. The term 'predistribution' is used to refer to such public policy interventions that attempt to address negative outcomes of the market economy before they arise, with the aim of limiting the extent to which redistribution through tax and benefits is required. Our survey tested the extent to which people did agree with tackling the root causes behind people needing support with their housing costs. The question we asked emphasised the increased costs as well as the long timescales involved in such an approach.

Table 10: Support for tackling root causes (%)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? The size of the housing benefit bill has risen because there are more people claiming due to unemployment, low wages and rents rising quickly. Instead of planning further cuts, the government should be focusing on solving these underlying problems. The government should do this even if it took a long time and meant tax rises or spending cuts elsewhere.	Total (n=1746)
Strongly agree	28
Tend to agree	38
<b>TOTAL AGREE</b>	<b>66</b>
Neither	17
Tend to disagree	9
Strongly disagree	3
<b>TOTAL DISAGREE</b>	<b>12</b>
Don't know	5

In the two survey questions presented in Table 9 and Table 10, between 17 and 23 per cent chose 'don't know' or 'neither' as answers. This was fairly common of the survey data and shows that a significant number of people are undecided in their views on housing benefit. The extent to which the group of undecided respondents' views are open to influence is hard to gauge but it does indicate that there is a large part of the population whose attitudes are less fixed than others.

### Where were attitudes resistant to change?

While there were issues that elicited fixed attitudes throughout this research, other views were more open to change where participants were able to share their own experiences and stories.

Views on waste in public spending and benefit fraud remained sticky. But the attitudes which were most entrenched in spite of argument and/or information were those on immigration

Participants were told that 13 per cent of housing benefit claimants were born outside of the UK and most were surprised the figure was not higher. However despite this, participants often attempted to reinterpret the figure in a way that confirmed their existing attitudes. The examples below are illustrative:

**Moderator:** Approximately 13 per cent of housing benefit claimants were born outside of the UK. Is that surprising?

**Male:** Yes.

**Female:** I thought it would be more.

**Male:** I thought it would be higher. Though we said on there, when you asked us before, I thought it would be higher. Again, they're a minority aren't they?

**Female:** But you have to look at it – why aren't people from outside the UK claiming housing benefit? Are they working illegally or are they getting money from whatever hours god sends and not declaring it? Or so they can't get housing benefit because they aren't paying any tax or – we said there's car washes and everything. I passed a hairdressers the other day, cash only. And I thought, well – [cut off]

**Moderator:** It is worth saying, that number will include people who are British citizens as well. But they might have been born outside the UK.

**Female:** It is still quite high. That is quite high really.  
[Birmingham group without current claimants]

**Male:** I think that's misleading, because if you look at the ratio of say – we use the word 'asylum seekers' right? Look at the ratio of asylum seekers on housing benefit against the ratio of British citizens that are on housing benefit, you'll probably find that the asylum seeker ratio is higher. Because if you think about it, there's a lot less people in that category than there is British people. So make 13 per cent up of a smaller community of people, is got to be a high percentage of people, otherwise you don't get to 13 per cent of the overall total.<sup>30</sup>

[London group without current claimants]

One participant directly confronted the contradiction between her views and the relatively low number of claimants born outside of the UK (compared to her guess) by stating that she knew she was 'not being fair'. The following exchange is in response to the following statement: 'Housing benefit is used to help people who have just come to this country. When British people are facing so much hardship we shouldn't be using public money to subsidise housing costs for people from abroad.'

**Moderator:** So if we're going to give this argument a mark out of 10, how convincing is this argument against housing benefit?

**Male:** I agree with it to a point, and I think there needs to be a cap. I think there needs to be – there's definitely some weight behind it.

**Female:** I have to be honest and give it a high score. This is me being honest. It doesn't mean that I have all the information. I'm not being fair. I know I'm not being fair but – [cut off]

**Male:** What you know and believe.

**Female:** From what I see, in my area and south London.

**Male:** Where do you live?

**Female:** Southwark.

**Male:** Okay.

**Female:** That's prejudice. I'm prejudiced. I don't think it's entirely based on reality, I have to be honest about that. I shall say six.

**Male:** Do you believe what you see? Surely you must.

**Female:** I see people driving around great big four wheel [drive] 'bimmers' [a term to describe BMW cars], you know, and I'd never get that. That's all I can tell you.

[London group with current claimants and non-claimants]

It is perhaps interesting to note that this participant was also a housing benefit claimant at the time of the focus group. This might also suggest that

claimants are also angered by perceptions of others with rewards they feel are undeserved, in this case expensive cars.

Our groups also revealed hardened attitudes to young single mothers and, to a lesser extent, other vulnerable groups. One participant in London spontaneously provided an account of a relative who he suggested had had children just to claim higher benefits. The effect was to reinforce views held by others in the group.

Behind many of these attitudes to different groups and beliefs about who is more or less deserving, the role of media coverage was clearly very important. Participants regularly cited newspaper articles, particularly when discussing what were regarded as 'fake' disabilities. Again, in principle, participants were proud of a social security system that protected those in need. But participants were far more sceptical about the actual incidence of vulnerability.

In all of these attitudes, local evidence gathered in day-to-day experiences was felt to be more compelling than data to the contrary. Often articulated through storytelling and anecdote, these attitudes were particularly resistant to change.<sup>31</sup> It was widely remarked that this more emotional narrative was far more immediate and relevant to participants than abstract statistical refutations. We consider the possible implications of this finding for policymakers in the next chapter.

This effect was compounded by some participants stating a difficulty with engaging the high numbers and percentages involved in discussing social security spending. As one participant put it:

**Male:** For me, when people start putting percentages on stuff, it loses the impact anyway. I think that's why government, that's why all political parties use percentages, and they never talk about hard facts. 'Cause that you can actually think and see. You can see a pound coin, you can't see 10 per cent of £10. And that's like doing that. When you start talking about £700bn, again, that means nothing to me. It's too much. Not the sort of figure we can deal with. But this sort of figure, that [other participant] just said there. We can see that, can't we? We can see £250, £500.

[Birmingham group without current claimants]

Having a more diverse range of experiences to draw on in a conversation about housing benefit can have an effect on attitudes. The groups that included current claimants provided an opportunity for non-claimants to understand a bit more about the experiences of claiming housing benefit. In some regards, this helped to accelerate the shift towards a consideration of the wider socioeconomic context of housing benefit claims and away from a focus on the individual. This effect was particularly pronounced when comparing the two groups in Birmingham.

The accounts in this chapter of the areas where attitudes were fixed and where they were potentially more open to influence has strong implications for politicians and anti-poverty campaigners concerned about the future of housing support and social security.

# 5 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Key findings

### The importance of deliberation

The deliberative process observed in our groups had the effect of shifting the focus of views on housing benefit.

As the discussions in the groups progressed, we observed some promising shifts in attitudes away from particular cases of individuals claiming, towards a reflection on the circumstances and socioeconomic factors that might drive a housing benefit claim in the first place. This often featured sophisticated dialogue about the relationship between high rents, low wages and a malfunctioning housing market.

While some of this discussion was driven by the information-giving process included in the focus groups, on a number of occasions participants referenced issues of this kind unprompted. The deliberative process expanded the space for such references to draw deeper consideration from the groups.

### The role of stories and personal experiences

Stories gathered from anecdotes in the tabloid media, from friends and from personal experiences, featured strongly throughout the groups. The role played by such stories was varied and had complex effects on the discussions. It was clear, however, that stories and anecdotes played a key role in shaping and reinforcing views and that in many instances these experiences were more powerful than purely factual information.

This was evident based on the views of what represented genuine need for and desert of housing support present in the focus groups, which were clearly influenced by the personal experiences of participants. For example in Birmingham group three, a lone parent participant understandably made a strong case for lone parents being regarded as genuinely 'in need'. This group did not feature the kind of negative attitudes to lone parents that predominated in an earlier Birmingham group, which goes some way to explaining the importance of personal experience. This finding may point to the more general conclusion that, in order to change attitudes to benefit recipients and prevent the 'othering' process explored in this research, supporting the 'voice' of those living in poverty is essential.



## The strength and persistence of negative views

Our research found that negative views about abuse of the system, particularly by those who have come to the UK from abroad, were strongly held by participants. These views were also persistently held: while the focus of discussions shifted from the individual to the wider context, negative views remained prevalent. These views were accompanied by, and delivered with, a strong degree of emotion. In many cases this meant that such views were resilient to contrary evidence. In some cases the most strongly held negative views about benefits abuse and concern at the level of migrants claiming benefits were by current or former housing benefit claimants and those not of white British ethnic origin. This was borne out in the survey data collected, which demonstrated the resonance of both the immigration issue and the issue of large families among current housing benefit claimants.

Just as importantly, dependency played a strong role in determining participants' attitude to housing benefit and the social security system in the UK as a whole. It is also significant to note that participants views about dependency were compatible with a recognition that the economy and housing market can contribute to people needing to claim benefits.

In many cases dependency was associated with the length of claim and used to distinguish between genuine need (short-term support with unemployment) and a 'lifestyle choice' of being on state support.

Every group expressed a view that it was important to know how long people claim housing benefit for. With this in mind, it is regrettable that the government do not publish data on the length of housing benefit claims, as our research demonstrates that this is central to public perceptions of housing benefit.<sup>32</sup>

## The support argument taps into the care ethic

The care ethic was shown to be strong in our research. This may appear contradictory to a lot of the other findings which suggest the public are largely occupied with determining if claimants are genuine or not but as the survey data demonstrates, people are as convinced by the need to protect those who are vulnerable or experience bad luck as they are about such protection fuelling dependency.

The key point is that once genuine need is established, the care ethic ensures that the need to support the individual is seen as genuine too.<sup>33</sup>

Initially, the argument which stated that society should support those who are vulnerable and in need, drew unenthusiastic responses in the groups. As discussions progressed views clearly shifted. At the end of the groups, participants were asked to select the arguments they found the most convincing. The argument drawing on the principle of supporting the vulnerable was almost always selected.

How is this shift explained? At times participants made clear links to the information and discussions that had gone on and at other times it was simply a matter of principle. One participant in Birmingham described supporting people in need as "a duty of the state".

This finding supports what earlier Fabian research has called the care ethic, which runs deep in attitudes towards social security spending and public services.<sup>34</sup> While angry about abuse in the system and the effects of immigra-

tion, it is clear that a care ethic endures in the way people view these issues. Housing benefit is no exception.

### How people view poverty affects how they view claimants

There were two distinct views on what caused poverty in our focus groups. There was one account that individuals made sets of choices which led them to be poor and dependent on the state. We term this the 'individual' account of poverty. The other account of poverty we termed 'structural'. The structural account saw poverty as something often caused by factors external to the individual such as someone's background, the health of the economy or the labour market.

Certain information in the groups acted to dissolve the clear division between these two views of poverty. For example, the fact that 93 per cent of the increase in claims between 2010 and 2011 could be accounted for by working households had a very powerful effect in this regard.

Our survey showed that when forced to choose, a majority of people in the UK take a structural view of poverty as opposed to an individual one. Perhaps most encouragingly, this view united those of different tenure types and voting intention. This provides some of the most encouraging evidence that a different and more positive conversation about social security can emerge in the UK.

### The popularity of addressing root causes

Both in the focus groups and the polling, the popularity of measures that seek to address the root causes of what is driving housing benefit was clear. In the groups, as discussion shifted from a focus on the individual to a focus on the wider socioeconomic context driving housing benefit claims, participants increasingly called for solutions to address this context.

We were careful when designing our survey to stress that addressing root causes would take a very long time and also be expensive – meaning tax rises or spending cuts elsewhere. Despite this, a clear majority agreed with the sentiment of tackling the root causes of housing benefit claims. What is particularly encouraging is that this question united those of different voting intention and tenure types. This suggests public appetite for big transformative projects that address housing benefit and perhaps social security more generally.

## Recommendations

The key findings outlined above suggest a range of recommendations for both politicians and anti-poverty campaigners. These recommendations are provided in order to assist the design of future campaigns to defend the principle of support for housing costs.

### Tap into the strength of emotions and stories

The emotional basis of attitudes to housing benefit, rooted in strongly held

local experience of community life, means that campaigns cannot rely solely on the evidence in order to make the case for housing support. Our research indicates that, in many cases, facts designed to counter negative views are unsuitable and ineffective on their own.

Rather, people make sense of the world around them through stories. This work shows that people use narrative accounts to rationalise, explain and justify their attitudes to housing benefit.

### Foster conversations, don't just dispense facts

This research highlights the importance of the deliberative process. It suggests campaigns should seek to maximise the extent to which they can resemble deliberative discussions. Social media will only be part of the solution.

Campaigns should set out to engage the public in real life conversations about poverty and the realities of our benefits system. Such conversations could then be captured on film or through engaging online content to increase the efficacy of campaigning. This could involve a series of public meetings. If the deliberative process is in itself an effective way to change attitudes, campaigners should seek to recreate it as faithfully as possible in campaign strategies.

### Seek to understand and work with public anxieties

One of the most important recommendations for future campaigns is to attempt to understand and work with the public anxieties towards housing benefit outlined in this report. Our research has shown that people often hold, if not strictly contradictory views, a multiplicity of opinions about social security.

If negative views are strongly held and resistant to influence, then campaigns must seek to work with this insight. This includes looking at how best to reassure the public about the genuine nature of most claims. This sense of legitimacy can be derived from highlighting the root causes at play but also by illustrating the reality of poverty in its many forms.

This research shows that when the public are assured an individual claimant is in genuine need of help, the care ethic is a strong well of support for measures to provide such help. Housing benefit is no exception. A key challenge for anti-poverty campaigners will be to recognise this point while keeping a focus on the pressures external to the social security system in the UK which have driven up the claimant count in recent years.

### We need to talk about poverty

Conversations about support for people's housing costs should not be separated from a conversation about poverty. Campaigns should be grounded in a wider conversation about the routes into poverty and particularly the scale of vulnerability and hardship in the UK.

In particular, there is a need to focus more attention on 'disguised' varieties such as in-work poverty which the findings from our focus groups suggest the public are largely unaware of. As long as a view of poverty as something based on poor choices and only afflicting individuals predominates, a more

realistic discussion about who gets what from the social security system will be out of reach.

### Root causes, not symptoms

By situating housing in a wider discussion about poverty, we may be able to illustrate that housing benefit claims are symptoms of deeper problems.

In our research participants were receptive to and could appreciate the idea that the housing benefit bill has a complex set of causes that cannot be reduced to individual discretion. A call for a strategy for tackling these root causes should be part of a conversation about how reforms to our economy are part of a credible long-term plan for bringing down claimant numbers.

This research confirms that the public politics of housing benefit are complicated and dominated by negative attitudes towards claimants. But the research also demonstrates ways in which a more nuanced and positive debate can be fostered. This more positive debate is crucial for the fight against homelessness and poverty in the coming years. If the UK is to avoid a perfect storm of an increasingly malfunctioning housing market and a far less effective social security system, then the fight for public opinion has to be fought and won.

## Appendix

We conducted four focus groups in total, two in London and two in Birmingham, over a two week period in September 2012. The groups were composed of between five and six participants from a range of socio-economic groups and tenure types in order to gather a cross-section of attitudes and to study the interaction between the beliefs we uncovered.

The first two groups excluded current housing benefit claimants from the discussions and the second two groups included a mix of both current claimants and non-claimants of housing benefit.

Each group began with an initial discussion in which participants were given the opportunity to express their thoughts about housing benefit in general and then progressed to a more in-depth discussion of arguments for and against housing benefit. After this discussion participants were asked to consider information relating to housing benefit mainly drawn from official DWP sources including: a breakdown of who claims; the value of average claims; and what percentage of housing benefit claimants were born outside of the UK. Participants were then invited to reassess the arguments in favour and against spending public money on housing benefit in the light of the information.

Following the groups, we commissioned a nationally representative survey to quantify some of the findings from the focus groups as well as to generate additional insight into current attitudes to housing benefit and social security more widely.

## Endnotes

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- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Table reproduced from Pattison, B. *The Growth of In-Work Housing Benefit Claimants: Evidence and policy implications* (Building and Social Housing Foundation, 2012)
- 17 DCLG (2011) *English Housing Survey: Headline report 2009-10*. London: DCLG.
- 18 For a more detailed overview on the drivers of housing benefit expenditure see *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: the early impact of welfare reform on London* CPAG (October, 2012)
- 19 Stuart Lowe argues that 'the home owning society' was entrenched before the second world war.
- 20 On these questions see Horton, T and Gregory, J. *The Solidarity Society* (2009)

- 21 Indeed, during the recent recession the UK has witnessed a historical alteration of attitudes about inequality and many have become less sympathetic towards government measures to support the disadvantaged. Data from the latest British Attitudes Survey (2012) shows that while during previous recessions solidarity with the position of the disadvantaged increased this no longer appears to be the case
- 22 The percentage of very/fairly convincing minus the percentage of very fairly unconvincing responses
- 23 Jolley, R *State of the nation*, British Future, 2012 <http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/State-of-the-Nation-2013.pdf>
- 24 Declan Gaffney Op Cit
- 25 The survey was carried out in mid November 2012 with a sample size of 1746 adults in Great Britain.
- 26 <http://www.ipsos-mori-generations.com/Assets/Docs/ipsos-mori-the-generation-frame.pdf>
- 27 Analysis has shown however that over 90 per cent of the increase in new claimants between 2010 and 2011 could be accounted for by people in work. Though some have subsequently challenged this figure, this report accepts the position of The Building and Social Housing Foundation (Pattison, B. *The growth of In-Work Housing Benefit Claimants: Evidence and policy implications*, 2012) whose work on the growth of in-work housing benefit claimants lays out the rationale for this analysis <http://www.bshf.org/published-information/publication.cfm?thePubID=5E017604-15C5-F4C0-99F1DFE5F12DBC2A>
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- 31 This finding complements other research which shows that anecdotes are important in forming opinions about the benefits system. See Baumberg et al. *Benefits Stigma in Britain* (Turn2us, 2012) <http://www.turn2us.org.uk/PDF/Benefits%20Stigma%20in%20Britain.pdf>
- 32 Due to the scale of on- and off-flows from benefits, examining the duration of claims for housing benefit can be difficult. See further <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/economics/2012/07/telegraph-and-mail-should-stop-buying-dwp-press-releases-hook-line-and-sinke>
- 33 This finding complements other research on the UK benefits system (Ibid.)
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## About the Fabian Society Next State programme

How we view the state defines our politics and gives rise to different policy approaches. Throughout its 128 year history the Fabian Society has been associated with the creation and evolution of the British state: from the birth of social security and modern public services to constitutional reform and our place in Europe. The Next State is a major programme, which will bring coherence to the contested territory of left and right thinking on the state. The work will reach across party politics, seeking to inform the thinking of all the main parties as they prepare for the next general election.

For more information about the Fabian Society's Next State programme, visit our website: [www.fabians.org.uk/programmes/next-state](http://www.fabians.org.uk/programmes/next-state)







# HOME TRUTHS |

## HOW TO CHANGE ATTITUDES TO HOUSING BENEFIT

Natan Doron & Robert Tinker

Protecting social security is central to many of the progressive ends dear to campaigners: poverty prevention and alleviation; collective insurance against bad luck; providing support for young, elderly and disabled people. But the public politics of social security have grown increasingly toxic, leaving those who wish to see it sustained unsure how to talk about it to an ever more hostile public.

*Home Truths* examines new public attitudes research from the Fabian Society into an area of social security where politics are perhaps the most challenging: housing benefit. The research confirms that antipathy towards housing benefit is deeply ingrained and finds that politicians and campaigners must understand that facts in and of themselves will not change hearts and minds, but stories and emotions do.

To rebuild faith in our social security system, discussion about housing benefit will need to be placed in a wider conversation about what causes poverty in the UK, how it can be tackled over the long term and the collective choice we have to fight it.