

One Housing submission to the APPG on Housing and Employment

We are a housing association and a not for profit organisation with a strong social purpose. We believe in building lasting homes and communities. We manage over 17,000 homes and have plans to build 5,000 over the next ten years. We work hard through our Foundation to make a positive difference to our residents' lives by promoting aspiration, independence and well-being. We also provide quality care and support to over 8,000 people to help them live independently.

2020 Inquiry into social housing and employment

1. What is the relationship between social housing and employment?

What factors affect social renters' work chances? What do we know from specific places, experts and organisations about the employment gap? What are the causes or key drivers and to what extent do these relate to personal characteristics, local markets, the demand-side and other factors that impact on employment chances? Can we combine and synthesise local, UK and international evidence across quantitative and qualitative knowledge, information and expertise – to build as compelling picture?

We have found that common barriers to gaining good, well-paid employment for social housing tenants are mainly a lack of work experience (other than entry level jobs), a lack of educational qualifications other than basic GCSEs, low levels of self-confidence and self-belief, and issues around affordable childcare or caring responsibilities. In addition, research carried out by the Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit, commissioned by Give us a Chance (GUAC), a group of social landlords helping people into work, found that common barriers to work experienced by individuals included ill health, caring responsibilities, a lack of work experience, and digital exclusion.¹

Member employees of GUAC who were surveyed in their research reported that employment related support was considered to have wider benefits, including helping to reduce antisocial behaviour, setting a positive example in the community, helping people become better tenants and boosting the local economy.² The research noted that these are largely personal characteristics but are compounded by a lack of opportunities in the local labour market and poor transport infrastructure, particularly in rural and old industrial areas.³

2. To what extent are social housing tenants more likely to be in lower paid and unstable employment than people living in other tenures? What factors affect social renter's work choices, and what positive interventions can be adopted to support wider work choices? What is the quality of the evidence relating to these questions, both the causes and subsequent interventions? Do we understand why outcomes vary?

¹ Mark Wilding, Katy Jones, Philip Martin and Lisa Scullion, 'Housing Works: Assessing the Impact of Housing Association Employment Support,' *Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit* (May 2019), p.26.

² Wilding, M. et al., 'Housing Works', p.2.

³ Wilding, M. et al., 'Housing Works', p.26.

We have found that a lot of the work that needs to be done with customers to support them is enable them to believe they can, and should, apply for jobs other than entry-level ones, especially if most of their family and friends are doing that sort of work. It becomes the norm and the expectation. Employees of GUAC surveyed in the research recognised that recent welfare reform changes – Universal Credit, the spare bedroom subsidy (the bedroom tax) and benefit caps – had added impetus across all organisations, and consequently that significant challenges were facing customers as a result, as well as the associated push to move more people with poor health conditions into work.⁴ Often, while we have noted in our evidence that we need to have the space to give long-term support without the worry about not achieving job targets, it can also often be the case that the customer just wants to get into work quickly for financial reasons and is not interested in more long-term self-development.

In terms of the lack of qualifications, that is not the case for everyone we see by any means but there is obviously a correlation between not having access to a good basic education or not being motivated to do well at school to then ending up in low-paid entry-level employment, which is often not secure. The result is often our customers have a lot of short-term roles on their CV and this does not always give a good impression to prospective employers, so hard it is difficult to break that cycle.

3. How can the social housing sector be the catalyst for closing the social housing employment and earnings gap? How do we best deliver support that enables the whole social housing sector to get more tenants and residents into good quality, sustained employment that secures the livelihoods of households in the long term. Can we review and synthesise the types of interventions being carried out by housing providers and other actors or stakeholders working with communities and disadvantaged places? What works, why (and for whom), and can effective intervention be scaled up to work in different contexts?

Housing associations need to develop the right mind set so training around building up self-belief and getting rid of negative thought patterns is very important. This needs to be done just as much as creating a good CV. One of the problems for all employment services, including those run by housing associations, is that they have targets for getting people into work which sometimes work against giving someone long term, intensive support. More importance needs to be given to the quality of the support rather than just the job outcomes.

The GUAC research showed a relationship between customer employment and reduced rent arrears, with rent arrears decreasing as full-time employment rates increase.⁵ This relationship was shown to be less straightforward for part-time employment, which may be due to the under-employment or low incomes of some people in part-time employment. The findings presented in the research suggest that there is a business case for efforts to increase employment and to help those looking for additional hours into full time work.⁶ GUAC's finding that full-time and part-time employment both increased in line with annual investment in employment related support up to £30 and £25 per housing unit, respectively, above the average investment of £21, suggests there may be a case for housing associations to increase their investment in employment related support.⁷

⁴ Wilding, M. et al., 'Housing Works', p.29.

⁵ Wilding, M. et al., 'Housing Works', p.2.

⁶ Wilding, M. et al., 'Housing Works', p.23.

⁷ Wilding, M. et al., 'Housing Works', p.23.

- 4. What can different tiers of Government do to support the social housing sector and tenants, to reduce the social housing employment and earnings employment gap? And what positive interventions can be adopted to close the employment gap? What works, why (and for whom) and how do we know (what is the evidence base)? Are effective interventions scalable and transferable across different contexts. We are very keen to hear examples of good practice and successful initiatives, as well as to learn lessons why other interventions were less effective.**

Many of the barriers to work are felt to revolve around welfare benefits or affordability. For many of our female customers, for example, accessing affordable childcare and/or part time work that would fit in around childcare responsibilities is a major barrier to finding work. They may want a role that is 10.00am to 2.00pm, three days a week in a location closer to their home – this is perfectly understandable but it can be very difficult to find employment with so many conditions attached to it.

Non-personal barriers, such as poor transport infrastructure, could be addressed by regional transport authorities, like TFL in London. Many surveyed tenants of GUAC felt that housing associations were better placed than other organisations to deliver employment and training support; they felt housing associations were uniquely placed to offer employment related support owing to the existing relationship they had with their tenants, in comparison to, for example, the Jobcentre. It was also felt that as they were not part of the formal employment support sector, they had more flexibility. In GUAC's research other providers (Jobcentre or local providers) were negatively contrasted, mainly due to conditions, eligibility criteria, benefit status, cost threshold, impersonal and inflexible approach, the feeling they were target- and money-driven.⁸

- 5. Cross-cutting the above four questions, we want to hear about how the voice of residents' lived experience was heard and was engaged with? To what extent were residents involved in the design, delivery and consumption of initiatives by providers and government agencies? How have policies and practices been accountable to the people they are designed for? What lessons can we learn for future employment innovation that will embed tenants and engage with them fully and effectively?**

In our experience, for many of our customers it can be a nerve-wracking experience just coming into a corporate-looking office to speak to an advisor, so we approach it by first putting them at ease on the first meeting and work to build up rapport. Participants of the GUAC research spoke about the benefits flexibility afforded by core-funded provision – free to develop provision around needs of tenants, not possible with the demands associated with external funding sources, which were often narrowly focused on defined target groups.⁹

Similarly, housing association employees indicated that 'off-the-shelf' tools are not always appropriate when applied to their residents owing to the wide-ranging circumstances and goals of tenants. There is a need for housing associations to use or develop tools that they feel best capture their specific contexts. The GUAC research stressed that although there are mixed views on the effectiveness of the tools available at present, their use could be optimised by a more tailored approach.¹⁰ Residents therefore, while not involved in the design or delivery of the services, appreciated the personal, tailored and flexible support.

⁸ Wilding, M. et al., 'Housing Works', pp.27-8.

⁹ Wilding, M. et al., 'Housing Works', p.29.

¹⁰ Wilding, M. et al., 'Housing Works', p.3.

