

# The Social Impact of Approved Housing Bodies in Ireland

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Introducing the Social Impact  
Measurement Framework (SIMF)



*This research was jointly commissioned by Clúid Housing through the Adrian Norridge Bursary, in partnership with Respond and Circle Voluntary Housing Association. The research was conducted by independent researchers Just Economics.*



July 2023

## Foreword

As CEOs of three Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) in Ireland – Clúid Housing, Respond, and Circle Voluntary Housing Association – we are pleased to present this research on the social impact of the AHB sector.

Our organisations are not just providers of homes; we are also agents of social change. AHBs are driven by a shared purpose: to offer secure and affordable homes to those in housing need. In doing so, we recognise that our responsibility extends beyond the physical structures of the homes we build and manage.

A common goal for AHBs is to provide members of society in housing need with access to quality homes that enable them to participate fully in society. Therefore, AHBs are invested in the welfare of the residents that live in the homes we provide and positively contribute to neighbourhood and community development.

In collaboration, Clúid, through the Adrian Norridge Bursary, Respond, and Circle Voluntary Housing Association commissioned Just Economics to develop a bespoke measurement framework to capture the broad reaching activities and social impact of AHBs in Ireland, to track their potential role in creating and supporting sustainable communities beyond the homes that are delivered.

We intend that this tool will not just be for our use but is open for use by the wider AHB sector, contributing to the creation of a robust body of evidence that captures the real impact and benefits of social housing for residents and communities. In the future such data will be invaluable in improving services and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of a safe and affordable home to provide the stability necessary to participate in all significant aspects of life.

As we share the initial findings of our work, we will do more than present data; we will share the stories of resilience, courage, and success that have emerged from our collective efforts. These stories underscore the vital role of AHBs and the life-changing potential of safe and affordable housing.

With this research, we mark a new beginning. We three organisations are commencing a journey to measure the profound work and impact of AHBs. We are happy to share our progress and findings with you all in the hopes that you will join us along the way. Together, we can continue building communities where every individual has the chance to thrive and fully live their life, contributing to a fair and equitable society.

**Declan Dunne**  
**Respond**

**John Hannigan**  
**Circle VHA**

**Brian O’Gorman**  
**Clúid Housing**

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# 1. Introduction

Although housing is consistently among the most important issues to voters in Ireland, there is little research on the impact that housing has in an Irish context. The evidence gap is especially large for social housing.<sup>i</sup> In particular, there is a lack of sector-wide data that is comparable across tenures, organisations and geographies.

Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) are independent, not-for-profit organisations that are becoming increasingly important within the Irish housing sector. In 2022, they delivered 44% of all new social homes and 69% of all cost rental properties,<sup>1</sup> and policy envisages a larger role for AHBs within the sector.<sup>2</sup> Yet not enough is known about the profile of tenants that live in AHB housing and how acquiring a home impacts them.

In recognition of these data gaps, three of the largest AHBs – Clúid Housing, Respond and Circle VHA – commissioned Just Economics to identify common outcomes across the AHB sector and a methodology for measuring those outcomes and determining social impact. The resulting measurement framework was informed by both international best practice and stakeholder views on the things that tenants value.

The longer-term goal of the framework is for it to be adopted more widely throughout the AHB sector, and in the wider housing sector, in order to support the development of a more robust evidence base that can inform future housing policy.

To this end, the purpose of this report is to share the measurement framework with the wider sector. The report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** sets out why measurement matters and the case for strengthening the evidence base
- **Chapter 3** describes how the measurement framework was developed
- **Chapter 4** provides an overview of the Theories of Change for tenants in AHB housing
- **Chapter 5** presents the measurement framework
- **Chapter 6** concludes with call to action for others that would like to participate in this project.

An Evidence Summary containing the findings from the background research that underpins the framework is available online at [www.cluid.ie/publication](http://www.cluid.ie/publication).

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<sup>i</sup> Social housing refers to affordable rented housing for people on the housing list who cannot afford to pay private sector rents or buy their own homes and meet the qualifying criteria for social housing.



## 2. The case for strengthening the evidence base in social housing

The housing context in Ireland is characterised by high, and rising, levels of unmet need. Preliminary census data for 2022 show that there has been a 6% increase in housing stock since 2016 (120,945 units) but that the population has risen by 7.6% over the same period (387,274).<sup>3</sup>

This increase in housing demand comes on top of a large backlog of households in housing need: in 2022, there were 57,842 households on the housing list.<sup>4</sup> Around 40% of these have been waiting for accommodation for 2 years or more and 25% have been waiting more than 7 years.

Beyond the housing list, there is substantial hidden need. Although Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) tenants are deemed to have their housing need met, this type of tenancy has been linked to significant housing precarity by the government's own advisory body.<sup>5</sup> Research also suggests affordability issues amongst low-/middle-income unsupported renters in the private rented sector (up to 60% of renters in one report).<sup>6</sup>

Against this backdrop, AHBs have the potential to make a significant difference by providing quality, affordable housing. A robust measurement framework can support this by ensuring that the voice of tenants is informing the design and delivery of housing, thereby supporting continuous improvement.





## 2.1 Why measurement matters

Even though people invest more financial and non-financial resources in their homes than in any other material entity, academic research on the social impact of housing is limited.<sup>7</sup> An even greater gap exists for social housing. Yet, our research has found that the effects of poor-quality housing can be significant at the individual-, community-, and international-level, you can find out more in the Evidence Summary which you can view online at [www.cluid.ie/publication](http://www.cluid.ie/publication).

The purpose of the measurement framework is to systematically evidence the outcomes for tenants in AHB social housing. The framework has four objectives:

- 1 Provide a richer picture of who lives in social housing, what their needs are and their satisfaction with their tenancies
- 2 Enable AHBs to evidence their impact as individual organisations and as a sector
- 3 Support continuous improvement by providing timely data on strengths and weaknesses in the design, delivery or management of housing
- 4 Influence the wider AHB/social housing sector to work towards a common framework for the sector in order to build a robust sector-wide evidence base that can inform future housing policy.

The next section describes the methodology for the development of the framework.

# 3. Development of the measurement framework

The development of the measurement framework consisted of three phases:

- › **Knowledge gathering** via a review of existing literature and expert interviews
- › **Stakeholder engagement** to develop Theories of Change (ToC)
- › **Development of the measurement framework** with AHB staff.

Although Cost Rental is an area of growing importance within the AHB portfolio, as a first step, this research has focused solely on traditional social housing. Further research will be required to adapt the tools presented here for Cost Rental tenancies. This will provide a deeper understanding of AHB impact as well as contribute to the evidence base on this form of housing tenure in an Irish context.

This section describes each phase in more detail.

## Phase 1: Knowledge gathering

The research began with a review of the international literature on social housing and housing measurement frameworks.

Following this, a total of 22 interviews were carried out with experts in the housing sector. This included academics, policy-makers, regulators, NGOs and individuals with knowledge of measuring social housing outcomes from other jurisdictions. The specific aims of these interviews were to:

- › Gain an understanding of the wider housing context and the need for measurement within the sector
- › Explore the impact and added value of AHB housing in Ireland
- › Gain an understanding of the barriers that AHBs are experiencing in improving outcomes for tenants.

## Phase 2: Stakeholder engagement to develop ToCs

It is generally considered best practice to start the development of any measurement framework by constructing a Theory of Change (ToC). The ToC sets out how resources are used to deliver activities that lead to change in the short-, medium-, and long-term. It acts as the backbone of evaluation activities by setting out what needs to be measured.

ToC development should involve key stakeholders, including beneficiaries and staff. This recognises that those experiencing change, or involved in making change happen, have a unique vantage point.



Engagement took the form of tenant interviews (n=27) and staff workshops/interviews (n=9). Three site visits also took place to AHB developments (one to each organisation). Tenants were interviewed, either in person or over the telephone, with each interview taking about 30 minutes.

During ToC development, the objective is to hear from a diverse, rather than representative, sample of stakeholders. The aim is to reach saturation, which is the point where no further material changes are emerging. As such we included a combination of a) people in general needs social housing (single people and families), and b) older people in specialist social housing with a good geographical spread.

Following the engagement, separate Theories of Change were developed for tenants in general and specialist social housing. These are presented in full in the Evidence Summary, which you can view online at [www.cluid.ie/publication](http://www.cluid.ie/publication), and in summary form in Chapter 4 of this report.

### **Phase 3: Development of the measurement framework**

The purpose of the measurement framework is to gather evidence relating to the outcomes set out in the Theories of Change.

Indicators were identified for each outcome area. Wherever possible, validated measures (e.g. those related to wellbeing) or items from standardised scales were used. This provides additional robustness to the framework and also enables benchmarking against existing data sets. Additional questions were added to assess attribution (i.e. the extent to which any change is due to the AHB tenancy as opposed to another factor).

In line with the Theories of Change, separate surveys were developed for individuals in general social housing and older people in specialist social housing. To ascertain the outcomes for children of general housing tenants, parental reporting is used. Outcomes for the State are inferred from outcomes for direct beneficiaries.

The surveys were designed in Qualtrics, a fully GDPR-compliant online platform. All surveys were constructed in line with best practice guidance on survey design as set out in Appendix 1. Examples of best practice include a) seeking informed consent and b) asking only for data that is necessary for the purposes of the research.

The survey tools were reviewed by staff from each of the three partners and then piloted with tenants (n=25). As part of the pilot, tenants were asked to report on their experience of completing the survey. The responses to these questions were very positive and minimal changes were made to the survey following the pilot. Links to the surveys can be found in Chapter 4.

## Box 1: Capturing additionality

Additionality is a key concept in evaluation. It describes the net benefit of an organisational activity or intervention beyond what would have happened anyway. It should take account of attribution (i.e. the extent to which any observed benefit was attributable to the intervention being evaluated rather than other extraneous factors) and deadweight (what would have happened anyway without the intervention).

To fully capture additionality an experimental research design is required (i.e. the use of a control group). Potential control groups would include those on the housing waiting list and tenants in other tenures such as local authority or HAP. A limitation of the proposed framework is that it is only possible to measure change for tenants that accept an AHB tenancy and real-world research constraints mean that no control group was available.

However, rather than assume all observed outcomes are additional, we have sought to make an assessment of additionality in the following ways:

- 1 During development of the framework in the interviews with the housing experts
- 2 Within the framework by systematically asking survey participants to report on the extent to which the AHB has contributed to outcomes in key areas like finances, health, wellbeing, and housing.

The perspective of the housing experts is presented in more detail in the Evidence Summary, which you can view online at [www.cluid.ie/publication](http://www.cluid.ie/publication).

In summary, there was a consensus among interviewees that financial additionality would have been high historically, as AHBs were addressing gaps in State housing provision. More recent builds, however, are likely to have lower financial additionality as the State has moved towards shared targets.

Experts tended to agree that there was additionality in relation to effectiveness additionality. Key reasons given for this included the following:

- AHBs – as specialists in housing – are better placed to be good quality tenant managers, asset managers and rent collectors
- AHBs are particularly good at managing mixed developments
- Specialist social housing for older people was identified as particularly valuable with the potential to reduce public sector costs
- There is limited data on the relative cost of builds, but some interviewees argued that AHBs can build more cheaply and more quickly, and that their national presence brings about economies of scale
- AHBs can potentially add value as holistic providers of early intervention and family/adult services to disadvantaged tenants that can support the breaking of cycles of disadvantage
- There is limited tenant purchase or succession rights and as such, the stock of social housing will stay in perpetuity when built by an AHB.

## 4. The Theory of Change for AHBs

The engagement with tenants, expert interviews and review of existing evidence provided a picture of how AHBs make a difference to their tenants and wider society. This was captured in the form of Theory of Change diagrams with an accompanying narrative and these are set out fully in the accompanying report.

As the measurement framework is designed to evidence the outcomes in the Theories of Change, the diagrams are presented here in summary form.

Figure 1 sets out the Theory of Change for adults and children in AHB tenancies. This is referred to from here on as 'General Needs Social Housing'.

An additional Theory of Change was developed for the impact of specialist social housing, which is designed and managed by AHBs specifically for older people. This type of housing includes features like full accessibility (e.g. dementia-friendly designs), automatic doors, supports, social activities, convenient, safe locations and availability of assistive technology. Specialist social housing is designed to facilitate positive ageing-in-place and delay, or avoid, the need for institutional care.

The Theory of Change for specialist social housing is depicted in Figure 2.



Figure 1: General needs social housing: Theory of Change

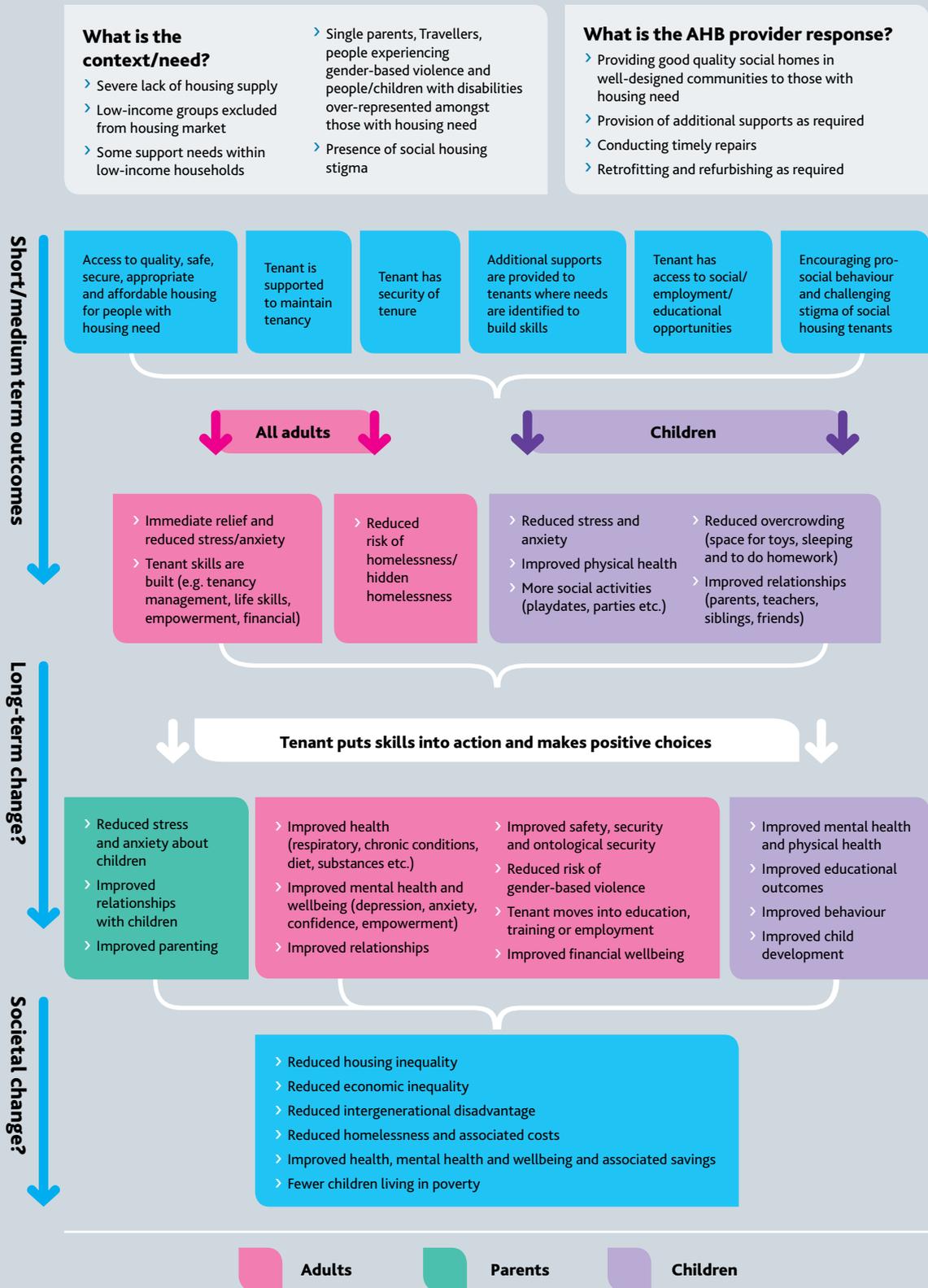
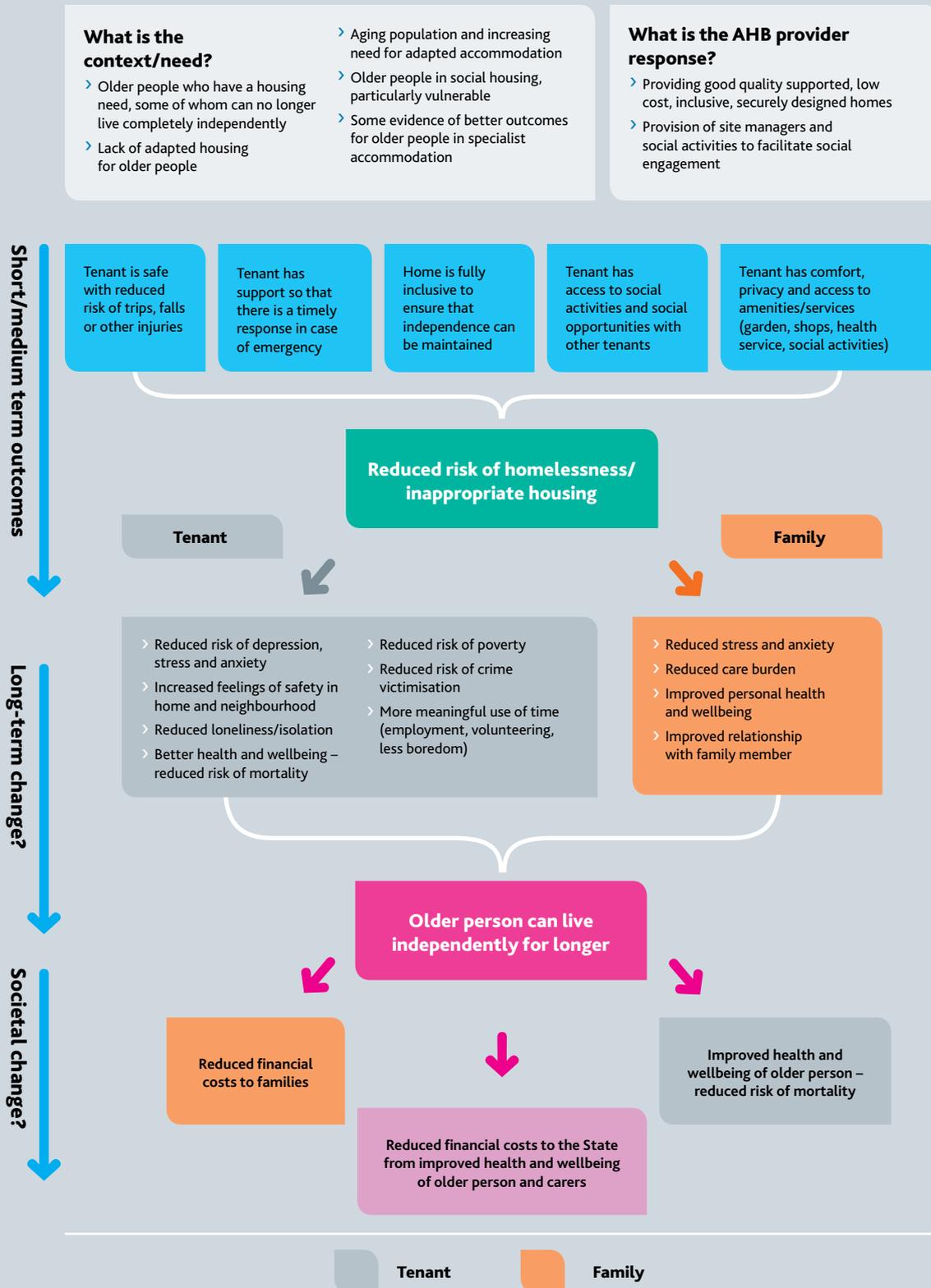


Figure 2: Specialist social housing: Theory of Change



## 5. Overview of the measurement framework

The Social Impact Measurement Framework (SIMF) is designed to gather data to evidence the impact of an AHB tenancy.

The framework consists of a series of surveys developed in consultation with staff, tenants and other stakeholders (see Chapter 3). There is an emphasis on measuring 'distance-travelled'. That is, on measures at repeated points in time.

The scope of this framework is around **effectiveness** and **impact**. AHBs will have additional data requirements, such as for compliance purposes, tenant satisfaction and so on. It is important that organisations continue to monitor for these purposes as required.



## 5.1 About the surveys

The framework sets out to capture outcomes for three groups:

- › Adults in general social housing
- › Children in general social housing
- › Older people in specialist social housing.

However, data collection only takes place directly with adults, which means that parents will answer questions about outcomes for their children.

Tenants are asked to complete a minimum of three surveys at the following time points:

- 1 Before move-in once an offer has been made to a tenant. This survey will focus on the tenant experience in the three months before they were offered housing. It will also ask about some wider life experiences such as a history of homelessness. This is known as the **baseline** survey
- 2 Six months following move-in. This will focus on experiences in the new tenancy. This is known as the **six-month survey**
- 3 The final survey will be disseminated 18 months after the tenant has been housed. This is known as the **annual survey**.

For tenants that opt to continue to participate, they will be asked to complete a similar survey annually.

### How do tenants complete the surveys?

The surveys have been developed in an online platform called Qualtrics. This means that most tenants will be given an online link to the survey, either by SMS or email, so they can fill the survey in on their smartphone, tablet or laptop.

The surveys should take around 15 minutes to complete. The questions are user-friendly with lots of checkboxes. The surveys are designed to be completed anonymously for data protection reasons and to encourage honest and truthful responses.

Online completion of surveys will not be appropriate for some tenants, particularly those in specialist social housing. Where this is the case, the following adjustments should be considered:

- 1 Computer tablets are made available, and a support worker shows the tenant how to complete the survey using the touch screen. If necessary, they will read out the questions and answer options. They should look away when the service user is putting in their response to allow them to answer honestly and freely
- 2 Telephone surveys for tenants where that is deemed the most appropriate due to digital exclusion, issues of literacy or a disability that may prevent online completion of the surveys.

The three AHBs are also currently considering how translations can be made available for tenants that do not have English as their first language.

## What questions are in the survey?

The survey starts with a series of demographic questions. These are designed to get a better understanding of each AHB tenant profile and to enable data to be analysed to understand outcomes for different groups of tenants.

The remaining questions relate to satisfaction with their AHB home and the key outcome areas identified in the Theories of Change: wellbeing, physical health, safety, sense of connectedness/community, financial inclusion, and child outcomes.

The baseline survey includes additional questions about the tenant's prior housing situation.

The surveys can be previewed here by following the links in Table 1.

**Table 1: Survey preview links**

Stakeholder	Survey	Preview link
General needs social housing	Baseline	<a href="https://qualtricsxml3xn6r32m.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6Ax8o2oWjrCySfs">https://qualtricsxml3xn6r32m.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6Ax8o2oWjrCySfs</a>
General needs social housing	Six-month and annual	<a href="https://qualtricsxml3xn6r32m.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9QwfokqEYOSoSSW">https://qualtricsxml3xn6r32m.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9QwfokqEYOSoSSW</a>
Specialist social housing	Baseline	<a href="https://qualtricsxml3xn6r32m.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7zGJvdMBOOjyXzo">https://qualtricsxml3xn6r32m.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7zGJvdMBOOjyXzo</a>
Specialist social housing	Six-month and annual	<a href="https://qualtricsxml3xn6r32m.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1MqgcBqRgOS4LoW">https://qualtricsxml3xn6r32m.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1MqgcBqRgOS4LoW</a>

## What about data protection and confidentiality?

Each survey begins with a data protection statement. This sets out the purpose of the survey and how the data will be used and stored. Tenants are asked to consent to participate.

The data protection statement clearly states that participation in the survey is entirely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate, and none of the questions are mandatory; respondents can skip any question that they do not want to complete.

Respondents complete the survey anonymously. Data is only ever reported in aggregate and never passed to a third party. Qualtrics is a fully GDPR-compliant platform.

## 5.2 Implementing the measurement framework

The SIMF was designed to minimise the burden on both the tenants that are completing the surveys and AHBs.

Just Economics has worked with the three partners to identify how implementation of the framework can be automated through the use of existing customer relationship management (CRM) systems and other software already in use.

Table 2 sets out the generic implementation process for the surveys that organisations can tailor to fit their existing systems.

**Table 2: Sample implementation process**

Stage	Action 1	Action 2	Action 3	Action 4
<b>Baseline</b>	Survey is triggered when offer of new tenancy is accepted; Qualtrics link sent automatically using CRM via SMS and email and included in new tenant letter	Reminder (e.g. via tenant induction video)	Staff check in with tenant during their induction to ask whether they have completed the survey	Final automated SMS and email reminder (triggered automatically in CRM one-week after first link is sent)
<b>Six-month</b>	Staff flag verbally when communicating probation outcome that they will shortly be receiving a survey link and explain why the data is important	Completion of probationary period triggers automated SMS and email from CRM with survey link to six-month follow up	One-week later, automated SMS and email reminder to complete survey	
<b>Annual</b>	During annual inspections, staff flag verbally that link will be coming via email and SMS	Completion of inspection triggers automated SMS and email with survey link to annual survey	One-week later, automated SMS and email reminder to complete survey is sent	

### 5.3 Reporting

Each organisation will hold data from its own respondents. This can be used internally to support continuous improvement by identifying where the AHB is working effectively and areas where, or groups of tenants for whom, improvements might be needed. This kind of evidence will have significant value.

The framework was also developed with a broader advocacy objective, namely, to strengthen the evidence base for a greater role for AHBs within the wider housing sector.

This advocacy goal will be served most effectively by AHBs agreeing standard reporting on their outcomes. The partners will explore joint reporting possibilities that aggregates data from across their organisations.



## 6. Getting involved

Consistent data on outcomes and impact across AHBs has the potential to build up a strong evidence base for the role of AHBs within the wider housing sector in Ireland.

In encouraging other organisations in the sector to take up implementation of the framework, the commissioning partners would be happy to provide information and feedback of their experience of implementing the framework and developing any related reporting mechanisms.

To find out more and support this effort, contact:

- Clúid Housing policy team by emailing:  
[policy@cluid.ie](mailto:policy@cluid.ie)
- Respond policy team by emailing:  
[info@respond.ie](mailto:info@respond.ie)
- Circle Voluntary Housing Association policy team by emailing:  
[info@circlevha.ie](mailto:info@circlevha.ie)



# Appendix 1: Principles for survey development and use

The surveys were designed to abide by best practice research and ethics principles as set out in Table 3.

**Table 3: Best practice principles for survey design and implementation and how they have been accommodated**

Principle	What this means	How we will address this
<b>Consent</b>	A request for consent is made at the outset. This makes clear that the participant is under no obligation to take part in the survey, and that choosing not to take part will have no bearing on their tenancy in any way. Also, that they may withdraw this consent at any time.	Each tool begins with participant information statement and request for consent.
<b>Anonymity</b>	Each respondent's anonymity is respected, and systems are created to support this, including where individuals need to be tracked over time. This must comply with GDPR policies.	All surveys are distributed by hyperlink. No identifying details or IP addresses will be captured.

Principle	What this means	How we will address this
<b>Only collect necessary information</b>	There is a clear rationale for each question, and the surveys are designed on the principle of requesting the minimum information needed for a robust evaluation.	<p>The rationale for each question falls into one of the following categories. Those that enable:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Analysis of factors that may influence the achievement of outcomes (e.g. age, gender, level of need)</li> <li>2 Assessment of the outputs</li> <li>3 Assessment of whether/when the expected outcomes occur (e.g. increased wellbeing) and the extent to which these can be attributed to the AHB tenancy</li> <li>4 Additional open-ended feedback and comments.</li> </ol> <p>Several questions occur in more than one survey. This is so that changes in response can be tracked over time.</p>
<b>Minimising burden</b>	Questions are written in plain English, with any technical or jargon terms clearly defined, and structured in a way that is easy to answer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Multi-choice questions and scales are used wherever possible. These enable participants to complete the survey quickly and support efficient analysis of the results.</li> <li>&gt; Comment boxes are used where appropriate, as these can be a useful way of gathering nuanced responses or relevant context when interpreting the responses.</li> <li>&gt; Using similar designs for many questions also reduces the overall time taken for completion.</li> </ul>

# Endnotes

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- 2 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2021) Housing for All – a New Housing Plan for Ireland <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ef5ec-housing-for-all-a-new-housing-plan-for-ireland/>
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- 7 Evans, G. W., Wells, N. M., & Moch, A. (2003). Housing and mental health: a review of the evidence and a methodological and conceptual critique. *Journal of social issues*, 59(3), 475–500

*This report sets out the findings of research carried out by Just Economics. Views expressed therein do not purport to represent the opinions or official policy positions of the commissioners of the research (Clúid, Respond, Circle VHA).*



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