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DRIVERS OF RESIDENTIAL SATISFACTION AND ASPIRATIONS IN IRELAND

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DRIVERS OF RESIDENTIAL SATISFACTION AND ASPIRATIONS IN IRELAND

WORKING PAPER

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ABSTRACT:

This paper presents the results of a literature review on residential satisfaction and housing aspirations and the findings from exploratory focus groups carried out as part of a wider study to understand housing experiences, attitudes and aspirations.

A theme emerging from the focus groups was the importance of 'family'. Location was more important than the physical dwelling, and access to amenities, services, family and security were critical for quality of life. Homeowners felt a strong sense of neighbourhood and were more satisfied with their current housing.

Aspirations were anchored by childhood and renters desired to live close to where they grew up. Homeowners aspired to increase the comfort of their home. The 'forever home' was an aspiration of renters. The three-bedroom semi-detached with a garden, still defines the view of 'home', while apartment living was not an aspiration

The influence of family had not been noted in the literature review.

Keywords: Residential Satisfaction, Housing Aspirations, Neighbourhood Satisfaction, Housing Satisfaction

1 Background and overview of research study

The Housing Agency was set up in May 2010 with a vision to enable everyone to live in good quality, affordable homes in sustainable communities; one of the ways of making a difference is through the Agency's objective to be a knowledge centre for housing policy and practice. An understanding of Irish people's housing situation is crucial to help develop sustainable communities and lead to an improvement in living conditions. In 2017 the Housing Agency commissioned a study into housing experiences, attitudes and aspirations and appointed Amárach Research as research partners with responsibility, alongside the Housing Agency for undertaking research activities.

This study has two broad research questions; the first is what are current levels of residential satisfaction in Ireland; the second question relates to Irish householders' aspirations for their future housing needs. The study aims to provide descriptive data on housing in Ireland, which will be used to inform current housing policy and provide information to help develop policies into the future. The research objectives are to:

- Provide data on trends in residential satisfaction over time.
- Provide data on residential aspirations among Irish householders.
- Provide information on housing costs, affordability, housing quality, barriers to different tenures, location, residential features etc.
- Provide information which will input to national and regional housing policy.
- Track expectations/aspiration, aspirations by age groups over time, shifts in population needs.
- Collect information to help with assessing future housing requirements.

This study has been planned as a mixed mode (qualitative and quantitative) research methods cross-sectional design, to be carried out at regular intervals and will consist of:

- A nationally representative sample survey of 1,200 householders aged 18 plus, with a booster sample of 200 householders living in the rented sector (in the first year).
- A further qualitative element will be included with a minimum of four and maximum of eight focus groups held to discuss in more detail key themes emerging from the nationally representative survey.

As part of the development of this study a literature review was completed and two exploratory focus groups were run to discuss the main themes which had emerged from the literature review. These both informed the development of the survey questionnaire for the national quantitative survey. This paper provides the results of the literature review in section two and the results from the two exploratory focus groups in section three.

2 Review of the literature

2.1 Introduction

A literature review was carried out to explore and define the concepts of residential satisfaction, housing aspirations and drivers of decision making. Key areas covered in the literature review were:

- Measures, predictors and definitions of residential satisfaction
- Measurements and definition of housing aspiration
- Perceptions and definitions of housing affordability

2.2 Residential satisfaction

Residential satisfaction is a complex theory drawing on satisfaction with housing, the neighbourhood and life in general. Sam *et al.* (2012) believe there is no concrete or unique definition of residential satisfaction, while Balaestra & Sultan (2013) state that “residential satisfaction is a broad concept and is associated with multidimensional aspects including physical, social, and neighbourhood factors, as well as psychological and socio-demographic characteristics of the residents”. Diaz-Serrano (2006) drawing on Galster (1987), theorised residential satisfaction as the gap between the actual and desired housing situation of an individual. It can be argued that a positive residential satisfaction indicates an absence of complaints and a high degree of alignment between actual and desired housing situations (Lu 1999).

2.2.1 MEASURING RESIDENTIAL SATISFACTION

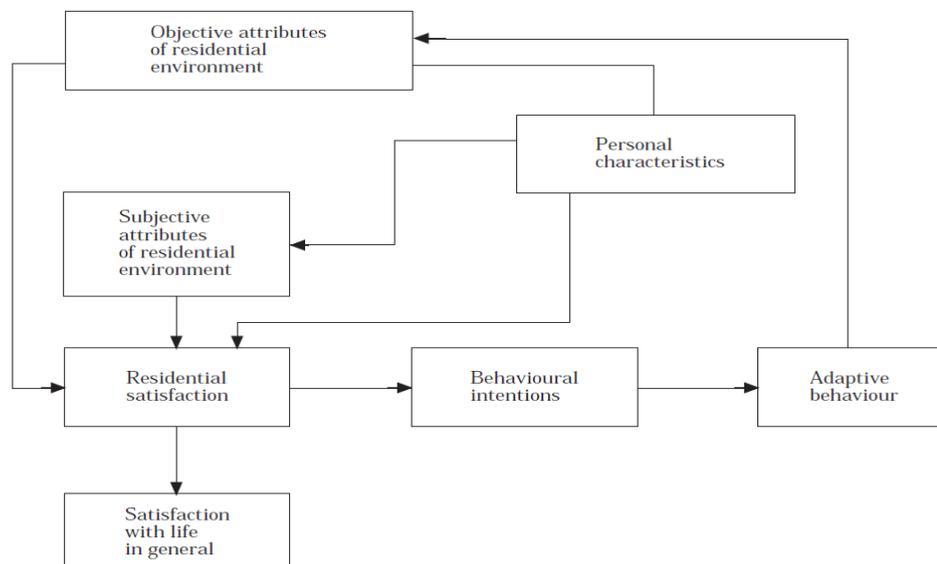
When designing a research survey to examine residential satisfaction, it is necessary to clearly define the parameters and unit(s) of measurement. Dwelling satisfaction and neighbourhood satisfaction are different concepts, but closely related. For example, an evaluation of a person’s house is likely to include the immediate surrounding and neighbours (Lu 1999). Each concept can be measured separately, and within an overall measurement of residential satisfaction.

Some studies use a single-item measure of residential satisfaction, such measures include, for example: “Is this neighbourhood, better, worse or the same as your last neighbourhood?” or “How satisfied are you with your current residential situation?” and respondents rate these measures on a 5-

point Likert scale. Other single-item measurements of satisfaction with a neighbourhood can allow for an exploration of the more subtle, nuanced drivers of decision making, for example, “how you would rate this neighbourhood as a place to raise children” (Grinstein-Weiss *et al.* 2011).

A measurement of residential satisfaction can also be constructed through several questions. Adriaanse (2007) asked several questions relating to ‘internal neighbourhood reputation’, ‘social climate’ and ‘dwelling satisfaction’, with respondents, again, answering on a 5-point Likert scale. These questions were used to construct a measure of residential satisfaction. Amerigo & Aragonés (1997) provided a systematic model which illustrated the range of factors that feed into residential satisfaction as well as the relationship between residential satisfaction and intentions/ behaviours.

Figure 1: A systematic model of residential satisfaction



Source: Amerigo and Aragonés 1997

Residential satisfaction can be viewed as a way of predicting housing behaviour and changes in housing demand. When housing satisfaction is low, households can consider some form of adjustment behaviour (Crull *et al.* 1991). This does not necessarily mean a move from one property to another, based on the property alone but can mean a transition from renting to owning for example (Diaz-Serrano 2006). Residential satisfaction levels may drive decisions to move to a new property or location or make home improvements. Accordingly, residential mobility research uses residential satisfaction as a predictor of moving/ coping behaviour (Adriaanse 2007, Herfert *et al.* 2012). For the purposes of this research, predictors of residential satisfaction can be grouped into three main categories; subjective measures, objective measures and socio-demographic characteristics.

2.2.2 SUBJECTIVE PREDICTORS OF RESIDENTIAL SATISFACTION

Much of the literature states that subjective evaluations of neighbourhood attributes, such as social capital and interactions, beliefs, perceptions and aspirations are much more significant in explaining residential satisfaction than personal or household characteristics and objective neighbourhood attributes (Permentier *et al.* 2011; Esperanza & Ateca-Amestoy 2008; Diaz-Serrano 2009; Weidemann & Anderson, 1985)

Some key explanatory factors of residential satisfaction are open to interpretation; for example, the social structure of the environment, neighbourhood management, and use of the neighbourhood by its residents (Adriaanse 2007). Further, Amerigo & Aragonés (1997) suggest that “psycho-social aspects such as relationships with neighbours and the degree of attachment to the residential environment are stronger predictors than those relative to physical features, such as infrastructure and equipment of the house and neighbourhood”. Positive residential satisfaction is also seen to have a positive impact on the quality of the neighbourhood. Residents who are satisfied with the residential environment are likely to exhibit behaviour consistent with this, such as maintenance of the house and neighbourhood and good relationships with neighbours (Amerigo & Aragonés 1997).

Further, satisfaction with certain neighbourhood attributes is found to be strongly correlated to overall residential satisfaction – satisfaction with public services, schools, the general appearance of the neighbourhood, perceived safety and nuisance of noise have all been found to be important predictors of residential/ neighbourhood satisfaction (Permentier *et al.* 2009).

2.2.3 OBJECTIVE PREDICTORS OF RESIDENTIAL SATISFACTION

Objective measures are also used as a means of predicting residential satisfaction. These relate to the physical dwelling conditions, location, amenities and environment. For the physical dwelling, Davis & Fine-Davis (1981) used information such as the date the dwelling was built, in addition to internal housing characteristics such as kitchen and bathroom facilities and central heating. Other objective dwelling factors used include architectural style, spatial structure, amount of green space, geographic location and the type of property (apartment versus a house) (Adriaanse 2007, Diaz-Serrano 2006). Fernandez-Portero *et al.* (2016) use very specific objective dwelling measures such as interior illuminations, ventilation (dampness), stairs and lifts amongst others¹. It was found that positive internal and external assessments of physical dwelling conditions significantly improve residential satisfaction and physiological well-being.

¹ The measures of physical dwelling satisfaction discussed is not meant as an exhaustive list.

Location and neighbourhood characteristics are important aspects in assessing residential satisfaction such as the availability of amenities and accessibility. Thomas *et al.* (2015) found the importance of certain amenities varied depending on an individual's stage of life. For example, for people aged 25-34, proximity to workplace and restaurants, leisure and cultural facilities was a priority. Conversely, the over 55 cohort prioritised closeness to the countryside and green spaces. While older cohorts considered the cost of housing less of a burden, compared with the younger generation.

Home ownership is another key factor found to determine residential satisfaction, with home owners more likely to be satisfied than renters. Home ownership is also thought to lead to more positive outcomes for the neighbourhood as owners are economically motivated to protect the value of their home by being good neighbours. Further, length of tenure is a factor that influences residential satisfaction (Grinstein-Weiss *et al.* 2011). Living in a neighbourhood long-term, positively influenced residential satisfaction.

2.2.4 SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PREDICTORS OF RESIDENTIAL SATISFACTION

Socio-demographic variables, such as income, education level and the presence of children have also found to be strong predictors. Higher income and educational levels as well as the presence of children have been found to have a positive effect on residential satisfaction (Permentier *et al.* 2011). People from higher socio-economic groups generally have higher levels of residential satisfactions compared to those from lower socio-economic groups (Grinstein-Weiss *et al.* 2011).

Further, Lu (1999) posits that life stage plays an important role in residential satisfaction, arguing that changing household needs and aspirations through life, at times place households out of conformity with their housing and neighbourhood conditions.

2.2.5 RESIDENTIAL SATISFACTION AND GENERAL WELL-BEING

Important in understanding the housing needs of people is knowing the degree of satisfaction with their residential situation. Having satisfactory accommodation is also at the top of people's primary human needs and a core factor in overall well-being and life satisfaction. Balaestra & Sultan (2013) argue that the state of housing is a key determinant of human physical and mental health. Housing it can be argued, plays a central role in happiness over the course of people's lives. Diaz-Serrano (2008), citing Easterlin (2006), found life-cycle happiness was shaped by an individual's satisfaction

in their main domains – of which a house is one – and this was dependent not only on objective conditions of that domain, but also on an individual’s goals and aspirations.

Residential satisfaction can also be described as the fulfilment of the individual residential conditions (home, district and community) in relation to the needs, expectations and objectives of the resident” (Fernandez- Portero *et al.* 2016). Going further, Diaz-Serrano (2006) believed homeownership to be a sign of personal success, which contributes to an increased sense of well-being. Psychological well-being can increase when residential satisfaction increases. Improving interior and external conditions were found to have a positive effect on psychological well-being (Fernandez-Portero *et al.* 2016).

2.3 Housing aspirations

Housing aspirations can be described as the gap between a person’s current housing circumstances and their ideal circumstances. Jansen *et al.* (2011) theorise that a person’s life is a continuous attempt to find unity between their current housing situation and their aspirations, determined by considering the available practical possibilities. However, they argue that in practice the ideal dwelling is not achievable for most people, instead people search for the dwelling that supplies the highest possible amount of housing satisfaction. Aspirations and choices are a product of a household’s constraints and are obviously dependent on the housing types available in desired locations at affordable prices. Societal expectations or social norms, coming from friends and family also help shape expectations (Montgomery & Curtis 2006). Jansen *et al.* (2011) put forward that the Theory of Planned Behaviour, can be used as a conceptual framework for studying housing preference and choice. This model of behaviour is based on attitude, social norm, and perceived behavioural control.

Housing is not simply defined by housing structure and its contents. As with residential and neighbourhood satisfaction it is multi-layered, incorporating subjective, objective and socio-demographic criteria. Aspirations are also strongly linked to residential satisfaction, with those having a higher level of residential satisfaction more likely to be already living in their preferred, or ideal, housing. Conversely, those with lower residential satisfaction are more likely to see a significant gap between their current and ideal housing situations.

2.3.1 MEASURING ASPIRATION

One way to measure aspirations is to compare stated versus revealed preferences. Stated preferences are found by asking people directly about how they would prefer to live and why. The revealed

preferences are found by examining how people actually live and that housing market dynamics and cognitive biases mean there can be significant variations between households (Hans-Skifter 2011). Some households have a realistic picture of their capacity to buy in the housing market while others may not.

Aspirations are a key factor in choosing a house to rent or buy. Firstly, people must establish preferences and identify the broad areas or sectors of the housing market in which these may be fulfilled. Secondly, they must personally visit houses to assess in situ whether these houses and locations are likely to fulfil aspirations. Finally, they must evaluate the options based on how well they fulfil their initial aspirations. The decision to cease searching may be taken at any stage when it becomes apparent that there is no alternative available that meets the individual aspirations more adequately than their current dwelling. This is driven by the realisation that their aspirations are unrealistic or unachievable. Further, Marsh & Gibb (2011) describe the stages of the search process where people will have a set of aspirations regarding the desired physical housing characteristics and social and neighbourhood amenities.

“The household is also likely to have a set of preferences over the area in which they wish to reside. We can distinguish at least two possibilities. First, area preferences may be a function of the aspirations for physical characteristics – for example, the need to consider suburban locations if a garden is seen as essential – but, if so, such aspirations are likely to be fulfilled by properties in a number of locations. In this instance, area preferences are only partially determined by such aspirations. Alternatively, area preferences may be independent of dwelling type aspirations, or the two may conflict.”

2.3.2 HOUSING CHOICE – PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

Due to the nature of the housing market, people’s preferences are limited by the choices available to them in particular locations. There are both push and pull factors in play when people are choosing to move home or neighbourhood. Ubani *et al.* (2017) state that reasons for residential choice are divided into those which pertain to a choice to move out of the current home – ‘pushes’ – and those pertaining to the choice among places to move to – ‘pulls’.

Thomas *et al.* (2015), measured such factors by asking respondents for the three primary reasons why they chose to live in their neighbourhood, and for the three least favourite aspects of the neighbourhood they live in. Housing preference can be understood as a trade-off between a set of choices. City centre residents for example, gain proximity to restaurants, leisure and cultural facilities – which they may value highly. However, they pay a premium in terms of the cost and the distance from countryside/ green spaces.

Thomas *et al.* (2015) found that the push and pull factors influencing housing choice change with life stage. For example, the 25-34 age cohort were most likely to choose proximity to work a key pull reason for choosing to live where they do, with housing size and type of much less importance. While, those aged 35-54, place greater emphasis on the size and type of the house and proximity to good schools. Overall, they found the amenity offer of city centres aligns more closely to young people's preferences, with suburbs providing the space and houses needed by families.

2.4 Housing affordability

Housing affordability is a key factor when examining the gap between people's current housing circumstances and their preferred circumstances (aspirations). It is also a key contributor to residential satisfaction and significantly affects people's residential mobility. Those who cannot afford a house of their preference are more likely to see a gap between circumstance and aspiration and have lower residential satisfaction. This is especially relevant to lower socio-economic groups.

Balaestra & Sultan (2013) (2013) state that "housing affordability is a tenure-neutral term that denotes the relationship between household income and household expenditure relating to housing. They go on further to explain several measures of housing affordability. The primary measure being an income-to-expenditure ratio which is a measure used by many OECD countries that no more than 30% of household income is spent on housing.

In an Irish context, the EBS/ DKM Irish Housing Affordability Index (2017) uses a first-time buyer's ability to fund a mortgage. Influencing factors on affordability are mortgage rates, disposable incomes, property prices and loan-to-value rates. The Housing Agency (2016) uses a 'Median Multiple' model – the ratio of the median house price to median gross annual household income.

2.5 Conclusion

Overall, this literature suggests that the main drivers of housing satisfaction are separated into subjective, objective and socio-demographic measures of satisfaction and that they have strong context setting effects for the formation of aspiration. However, aspiration is also driven by ideals of quality of life based on significant push and pull factors as well as subjective and objective societal and cultural norms. This literature review suggests that any study design examining satisfaction and

aspiration should include an exploration of socio-demographic characteristics, subjective and objective factors in decision making.

3 Exploratory focus groups

For this phase of the research two exploratory focus groups were undertaken. The focus groups took place in March 2018 and lasted for 90 minutes each.

3.1 Aims

The purpose of the focus groups was to explore the main themes that had emerged from the literature review and in turn inform the design of the questionnaire for the quantitative phase of the project. A discussion guide was developed which explored the four key themes covered in the literature review with the two groups:

- General well-being
- Residential satisfaction
- Housing Aspirations
- Affordability

3.2 Sample design & recruitment

The sample design divided householders by housing tenure into renters and homeowners. The group structures were as follows:

Figure 2: Focus Groups Sample Design

Gender	Profile/ Tenure type	Type of house	Age	Tenure status	Region
Male: 4 Female: 4	1. Long-term renters (couples/ single) 2. Long-term renters (families) 3. Short-term renters 4. First time buyers with mortgage approval (not yet bought)	Mixed	Mixed	Renters	Dublin/ commuter towns
Male: 4 Female: 4	1. First time buyer – recently purchased house 2. Family – looking to move house	Mixed	Mixed	Owners	Dublin/ commuter towns

	<p>3. No children – looking to move house (young couple/ empty nesters)</p> <p>4. Households who are settled in location long-term</p>				
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Participants were recruited by Amárach Research, and an incentive of €50 in cash per participant assisted with the recruitment. Fourteen of the sixteen participants completed a short questionnaire about their living situation before the focus group discussion started. From these questionnaires it was found that the length of time living in their homes varied ranging from less than one year to more than 21 years. Almost 60% lived in semi-detached houses, 29% lived in terraced houses and 14% lived in an apartment block. Over 70% rated their standard of housing as being of either a good standard or a very good standard. The average amount of household income spent on rent or mortgages was 28% and just over half of the participants said that they never had difficulties meeting their rent or mortgage obligations each month. The majority of focus group participants (57%) believed they lived in a really desirable place to live.

3.3 Discussion framework topics

Participants were asked to discuss the term ‘well-being’ and what were the factors that contribute to their general well-being. Reasons that were probed were economic, socio-economic, health and quality of life. Participants were also asked how much does where they live impact on their general well-being.

The second theme for discussion was residential satisfaction and participants discussed different areas under this theme:

- the definition of a house, a home and a neighbourhood;
- what was important in terms of the physical characteristics of a home for satisfaction levels;
- what were the important factors in terms of the neighbourhood;
- what was more important in terms of residential satisfaction; the physical house or the neighbourhood;
- and the key reasons of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their current living situation.

The third theme explored was participants’ housing aspirations. This was explored through a discussion of previous experiences and future ambitions. Participants were asked to explore differences in housing and neighbourhood between where they live now and where they have lived in the past, their experiences searching for housing and what factors were important in this search, and if their ‘found’ housing met their aspirations. If they did not match then reasons for this were probed (price, location, type of housing) and a discussion on whether their housing aspirations were realistic.

Participants were asked to think about where they currently live and where they would aspire to live in the future. If there were differences were these to do with the physical building or the neighbourhood, or something else. The barriers which were stopping people meeting their aspirations so far; internal factors (income, family size, emigration etc) and external factors (affordability, supply).

The final theme discussed was housing affordability. Participants were asked what determines affordability for them, what measures and advice do they look for making this determination and what costs would be included such as travel or utilities when weighing up affordability.

3.4 Results

3.4.1 GENERAL WELL-BEING

Discussion with both groups of renters and owners concurred with the literature that where people lived greatly impacts on their general sense of well-being. Participants viewed the accessibility of nearby amenities as strongly contributing to their quality of life. The majority felt it was very important to live near to where they worked, especially renters. There was a discussion on how feeling safe and secure in one's house and neighbourhood was very important to people's well-being. The security of owning one's home also increased the sense of well-being for homeowners.

There was a difference found between what a 'home' and a 'house' meant to people. A house was seen as a physical structure, whereas a home was a social construct defined by the cultural ideology of family and a sense of belonging. A factor contributing to the meaning of 'home' was proximity to where one grew up and family. The discussion was that 'home' would always be where one had grown up, for those living in Dublin but having grown up outside Dublin – home would always be where they had grown up. It was found that proximity to family was a crucial factor in shaping people's aspirations on housing and choice about where they were to live.

3.4.2 RESIDENTIAL SATISFACTION

Home ownership was found to strongly influence satisfaction levels and a sense of well-being, and the view that where one lived was a 'home'. The group of homeowners spoke about the sense of security they felt owning their own home, they viewed the home as a sanctuary – somewhere they could relax

and ‘close the door to the outside world’ if they wanted to. Owners spoke about the feelings of personal achievement and security that came with owning their home. Homeowners used the imagery of turning the key and knowing they could close the door and the house was theirs. They relished the fact that they could, within reason, do what they wanted to the house, as one homeowner described here:

“Something very, very simple but it’s mine, after ten years of banging around in the Dublin rental market it’s mine, I can do what I like with it, I can fix that thing that’s irritating me, I can paint the colour of the rooms whatever way my daughter wants, if she wants pink she can have pink. That’s a very simple thing but that can come right back to that wellbeing. Once I can keep the mortgage paid no one can take it off me.”

There was no single feature of the physical dwelling that was universally considered as ‘most’ important. However, having private outside space did emerge as a core aspiration and seen as having a very positive contribution to people’s well-being. Having a garden/private outside space was considered one of the benefits of owning rather than renting. It was also anchored with people’s past experiences with what they had grown up in.

When people spoke about the type of house most mentioned a three-bedroom semi-detached house, however the house type and size was clearly of less importance than the location.

“Yeah, so I suppose we had a child, I suppose we had a fairly good budget to buy somewhere and I suppose we could have bought a bigger house in the suburbs further out or somewhere much closer to town slightly smaller house, but for us it was the commute, the location, that was a bigger factor for us than the actual space of the house.”

There was a view that the physical dwelling can be altered to personal tastes over time – and in some ways buying a second-hand house allowed more scope for alternations – as they often came with greater internal and external space. Though opinions differed among the respondents with some viewing a new home built to a high specification and a high energy rating as their preference and others an older property with ‘character’ being theirs.

- The benefits of new builds were cleanliness and having new electrics and piping. This inspired a confidence in the building and a reassurance that few repairs would be required.
- Older houses were considered better quality in terms of structure (thicker walls) – although not as energy efficient.
- Due to importance of private outside space, new houses were generally thought not to have as large private outside space.

There were few mentions of apartments as a desirable long-term option as a place to live. The belief was that apartments as they are currently being provided for in Ireland are not created for families, with little storage and few with enough space for a family. While people believed apartments could be a good option for Irish society as a whole, few were interested in living in them themselves, as for the most part the view was that they had not been developed with families in mind.

“I think if there were family friendly apartments, like the one you were talking about that you have the lock-up downstairs. Then that would be an absolute minimum for me. Somewhere for the washing machine, to leave the surf board, bikes, buggies. A friend of mine had a bike, €2,000 racing bike, stolen off his fourth floor balcony recently. That’s where you have to leave it if you are in a small apartment.” (homeowner)

Within the home the focus on the communal spaces was important – where the family can gather –this focus is reflective of the central role family plans in Irish society. The kitchen and the living room were regarded as the most important rooms in the house, they were the focal point of family activity and the kitchen was linked to memories of growing up. Another area of agreement was the importance of having a central fire or stove to gather around.

3.4.3 NEIGHBOURHOOD

When participants were asked what is the first word that comes to mind when thinking of the term neighbourhood the words community and friends were spoken about first. One participant went on to explain a community as *“people linking up and amenities and schools close by, the closeness of it all.”* Neighbourhoods and communities were seen as being created by people, often sharing similar interests, with children often being this common interest initially. For some a neighbourhood means a community with friends, one participant said he felt a sense of belonging when he was asked by neighbours to join them in the local pub and watch a sports match, as described here by the homeowner: *“The first time I fit in, I’m from Galway originally, but the first time I really felt our new house was home was when some neighbours invited me to go for a pint..... Just having neighbours and going for a pint.”*

However, renters and homeowners remarked on a decline in the community element of neighbourhoods in Irish society. Some homeowners felt that one reason for this was the increasing number of rental properties in areas had reduced the ‘neighbourhood’ feel. This was further evidenced by some of the renters who spoke of having little connection to the community they lived in. Another reason given was the number of working couples living in an area: *“The people who are just professionals living, they’re in and they’re out, they’re gone to work and back, it’s very like that closed door thing.” (renter).*

There was a division seen between owners and renters in the discussion on neighbourhoods. Homeowners were more likely to consider where they lived as a neighbourhood in the context of it being a community of people and relationships. With homeowners the bond with where they lived increased over time. While renters felt they were ‘passing through’ the area they lived in currently. This meant they often were less inclined to create relationships with their neighbours or engage in the community. An interesting insight given by one participant was the idea that if one was going to buy a house one would knock on neighbours’ doors before buying to introduce oneself and get a view of what the neighbours were like, whereas if renting one would never do this. One renter described his relationship with his neighbourhood as *“I don’t know anyone but the guys I live with and I’ve lived there for years. Just come home, go out at weekends, for me it’s just rows of houses....there’s no spirit..”*

The important factors when choosing a neighbourhood also differed between renters and owners. For renters, proximity to the city and the presence of amenities were the main drivers of ‘current satisfaction’ with a neighbourhood and location. Amenities that were important were public transport, shops, restaurants, cafes and pubs. Feeling safe and secure were important aspects of a neighbourhood, particularly for renters.

Location was a very important factor determining levels of residential satisfaction for both renters and homeowners. Most felt that whereas the physical house could be altered to suit personal preference the location couldn’t and so there seemed to be more flexibility around the type of house than the location for people. Proximity to the city centre or family was not as important to homeowners when choosing a location, perhaps due to the realisation that it was not affordable or achievable. While the presence of ‘good’ schools was the most important amenity mentioned by homeowners probably reflecting their life stage.

3.4.4 HOUSING ASPIRATIONS

There were again differences seen between homeowners and renters in their housing aspirations. Ownership was considered the next logical step for renters and, though mostly satisfied with their current home, renters did not aspire to rent long-term. Aspirations were linked to achieving the type of house and neighbourhood that they had grown up in. For renters aspirations were ideally to move back to the area that they had grown up in, close to their family. These areas were considered as good areas to raise a child, which was found to be a key driver of wanting to move to an area and very linked to their one experiences of a ‘happy childhood’.

Renters also spoke about a desire to buy in the current area they were living in, but some expressed the view that this would not be an affordable option for them, and that when it came to buying a home there would be less choice open to them than renting and less possibility of living in the desired area.

“I suppose the other end of that now is when I eventually go to buy a house I won’t be able to afford a house in that area and I’ll actually miss that area. But I suppose I’ll enjoy it while I can.” (renter)

Another renter described the problem she and her partner faced when coming to buy a home.

“I think it’s very demoralising to know that I’ve a partner and we’ve both very good jobs, you know and we can’t afford to live in quite a large radius of our area where we both grew up. You know and I think like that’s not fair, you know that you should, we work, we pay tax, you know all you want to do is live near your family and you can’t.” (renter)

Homeowners who had already made the housing purchase had different aspirations. As a result of the buying process they had often bought in locations not necessarily close to where they had grown up, or where their family lived, affordability was given as one reason or employment choices.

Homeowners spoke about creating their own, new communities and neighbourhoods for their families in the areas they lived, and on the whole there were very positive experiences found moving to new areas. They had aimed to provide a similar type childhood environment to their own when buying.

“I think I’ve very much aimed for something similar to what I grew up in. Small estate, lots of other kids for my kids to play with, green space. I think a lot of us do aim for what you had as a child. If you had a happy childhood it’s enough.” (homeowner)

This aspiration to provide a similar type environment to what one had growing up was given as one reason why apartments were not an aspiration for families.

“But equally I think what we all want to do is aspire to what our parents provided for us and we want to provide the same thing or similar. So like apartment living is not part of our nature, so the Irish people aspire to have their own homes, with front and back garden. The apartment might be only a temporary thing when you are a student or you are trying to get on, but most people would, most Irish people would, like we are normal and we would probably all aspire to have our own homes.” (homeowner)

Renters spoke of finding the ‘forever home’ and this idea was much stronger for renters than homeowners. Whereas for the present homeowners’ housing aspirations centred around increasing the comfort of their current home, some were considering downsizing in the future. Moving to a smaller house in a more scenic or desirable location was discussed as an option, but only to be considered when children had left the home.

“I’d be the same, I don’t think I’ll definitely be there to the end of my days. I would like to think I could move, if I felt it was the right thing. I don’t like to say that’s it, I’m here till the end, I don’t see it, maybe the next stage and then a retirement stage. It might be something before retirement.”
(homeowner)

An interesting finding was around location aspirations. Both groups had strong views that moving outside Dublin was not a move they aspired to. The suburban sprawl into “commuter towns”, like Portlaoise and Mullingar during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ was deemed a mistake reducing the quality of life for most - due to an extended commute. The following discussion among homeowners describes some views on housing decisions made during the boom time in Ireland:

Participant A “I had a niece and nephew and they went, you know a stage where they had to get on the property ladder and they panicked and bought in Portarlinton and you know on the train route. Within 2 years they moved out of it. It was just such a hell hole in a sense. The commute was too long. Then they couldn’t really you know get their price back. So that kind of, now where you are saying Swords, it’s nearer but like a lot of people got caught buying out at ridiculous commutes. Only 90minutes from Dublin, you know.”

Participant B “Yeah by helicopter.”

Participant C “Yeah, on a Sunday in a ferrari with no cops around.”

Participant A “It was sold so well to a lot of people, you have these ghost towns now. But they sold it so well, or it was nearly the dream and everything.”

Participant B “It was desperation.”

3.4.5 AFFORDABILITY

When asked about how participants measure housing affordability it was widely accepted among homeowners that approximately 30% of household income is a conventional rule to use to assess housing affordability. Within this 30% utility bills, insurance, property tax etc. was included.

Renters were less certain about exact measures of affordability and more likely to believe that housing in general was unaffordable. This may be due to an information deficit as a result of not having gone through the property buying process. In this way it may be difficult for renters to judge affordability in the same way as homeowners.

3.5 Conclusions from focus groups

The exploratory discussions in the focus groups reinforced many of the findings in the literature review. When considering levels of residential satisfaction housing tenure was a key determinant, with the homeowners expressing generally greater feelings of satisfaction and feelings of contentment and even a sense of personal achievement with their housing situation.

The majority of respondents thought the location of the house was far more important than the physical dwelling itself. The perception was that the properties could be altered to personal preferences while the location could not be changed. Respondents would prefer a smaller house in a better location.

Some important factors relating to the house, were having a garden and an expectation of being able to purchase a three-bedroom semi-detached home. Communal family living space was mentioned more often as being important in the physical structure, as opposed to extra bedrooms or bathrooms for example.

Neighbourhoods and a sense of community were very important for renters and homeowners. Renters though felt less connection to their current neighbourhoods, believing they were simply passing through. The needs for amenities and services differed between the two groups.

- Schools and public transport were most important for homeowners – fully reflective of their life stage.
- Shops, cafés, restaurants and many other recreational amenities being the most important amenities to renters – facilitating their desired social life.

Housing aspirations were strongly anchored to past experiences and strongly related to where people grew up, being especially pronounced for renters. Proximity to family was the most important factor in shaping renters' aspirations – but this was not as significant for homeowners. Some renters perceived themselves to have unattainable aspirations, specifically in terms of desired location.

People's needs and wants from a house and neighbourhood change over time. Long-term renting was not desirable for most renters, their expectation was to own a home eventually. While for some homeowners a future move in the form of downsizing was expected by some, suggesting an additional phase in the house buying process.

Apartment living was viewed as suitable for renting, but there was little appeal for apartments when it came to long-term living and bringing up a family. This was partly due to aspirations based on childhood experiences, but also the view that apartments in Ireland were not designed for families or long-term living.

Spending approximately 30% of household income on mortgage/ rent was the measure for most respondents when it came to determining the affordability of their housing choice – this included bills and associated costs (property tax, house insurance etc.).

4 Next Steps

The literature review and the focus groups have helped inform the next stage of this research project. The survey questionnaire is now in the field and over June and July 2018 over 1,400 face-to-face interviews are taking place in people's homes around the country. Initial results are due early Autumn.

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