SPECIAL COLLECTION: HOUSING ADAPTABILITY

RESEARCH

Sharing a home under lockdown in London

Fanny Blanc   0000-0002-5835-6507

Kath Scanlon   0000 0001 9957 4853

Corresponding author:
Fanny Blanc, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK
f.blanc@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been a wave of research into the interaction of Covid-19 and housing. This study examines the experience of adult sharers, using qualitative evidence from an online survey, during the early months of the pandemic. This contributes to the evidence about housing quality particularly the adaptability and flexibility of the dwelling and wellbeing under the pressures of lockdown. Few homes were built to perform the multiple functions leisure and work, particularly London homes-- which are the smallest in the country in terms of floor area per inhabitant. As office-based work shifted to the home in the early stages of lockdown, adult sharers faced a range of practical and spatial challenges. Those working from home had to reconsider (and sometimes reconfigure) their homes as workspaces, and negotiate the use of space with fellow residents. Many 'solutions' were deemed inadequate and lockdown conditions generated interpersonal tensions in many sharer households, but strengthened bonds in others. The pandemic changed sharers' aspirations for their future housing. The findings are relevant for planning and housing policy, including standards for new-build residential units and the requirements for existing Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO).

Policy relevance

New evidence is provided on how homes were used under conditions of stress: both the Covid pandemic and the consequent shift of homes into workplaces were unexpected shocks. The effect of these shocks was magnified for adult sharers. Their experience underlines the importance of designing quality homes whose size and spatial configuration permits flexible arrangements of furniture and uses. Planning policy and design approaches should reflect this need for flexible and varied uses. The evidence also suggests the need to review overall space standards (not just bedroom sizes) in HMOs.

Keywords: adaptability, Covid-19, flexibility, housing, housing quality, lockdown, sharing, working from home, wellbeing, London

1. Introduction and research questions

Sharing a home is extremely common in London, especially for young people, and is often the only option because of the unaffordability of housing in the capital. In normal times, most working-age Londoners spend their days away from their homes, but lockdown changed that overnight.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been a wave of research into the interaction of Covid-19 and housing (Rogers & Power, 2020). Studies have explored a wide array of topics from housing instability and its impact on racial and ethnic minorities (Jones & Grigsby-Toussaint, 2020), the role that poor housing conditions play in Covid-19 mortality (Ahmad et al., 2020) and the virus' impact on the housing market (Qian et al., 2021). The present study is one of a subset looking at housing quality (particularly the adaptability and flexibility of the dwelling) and wellbeing (Atlaş & Özsoy,1998) under the pressures of lockdown (Amerio et al., 2020). It also makes a novel contribution to the literature on home-based work (Holliss, 2015).

This paper uses the extraordinary natural experiment of the Covid pandemic to explore how London's single sharers and their homes coped with enforced near-continual occupation of the residential space. Three research questions are explored:

- physical: how did the material features of homes and their layout affect their use as working spaces?
- social: how were sharers' relationships affected and how did they negotiate the use of space?
- attitudinal: how did the experience affect sharers' housing aspirations and attitudes to home?

The term House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) is used here to designate the shared accommodation. In England, an HMO is a 'property rented out by at least three people who are not from one 'household' (for example a family) but share facilities like the bathroom and kitchen'. (Gov.UK, 2022) This paper draws on empirical data from an online survey of London adult sharers (n = 302) conducted during the first lockdown (March - June 2020).

2. Conceptual framework: home-based work and house sharing

Working from home is not a new phenomenon. In England as elsewhere, much work was carried on in and around the home in pre-industrial times. As the country became industrialised more work was carried out in factories, many of which were unpleasant, dirty and dangerous. Planning policy in the twentieth century thus increasingly insisted on a strict separation between residential and employment uses. Nevertheless, home-based work continued to be common in many sectors. Some of this was regular and recognised (farming, for example); in other cases home-based workers had to disguise their activities because they were not formally permitted in residential neighbourhoods (Hollis, 2015). Scholars of live/work (or, as Fran Hollis prefers to call it, home-based work) have mainly concerned themselves with intentional, anticipated (albeit sometimes unauthorised) use of the home as a workspace. Many of these hybrid places are easy to identify: historical examples include the home-based weaver's studios of East London, and many newsagents live above their shops. But Hollis notes that:

> 'most contemporary home-based workers do not live and work in purpose-designed premises. Instead, they squeeze home into workspace or work into home. We do not know much about this' (ibid p. 8).

The advent of the internet facilitated a new type of home-based work, initially called 'teleworking' (Gurstein, 1996), from the 1980s onward. Hollis notes that 'in the context of the information revolution and a global environmental crisis, [the work/home] is ripe for rediscovery' (Hollis, 2015 p. 2).

In one sense the move to widespread working from home at the beginning of the pandemic merely represented an expansion of the existing practice of teleworking—albeit an abrupt one. However, teleworking had hitherto been (mostly) a choice; the pandemic turned it into a requirement. Pre-Covid, teleworkers could generally select dwellings that would accommodate this work practice, with features that might include spare rooms or studies. In addition, in couples or multi-adult households it was likely that only one person worked from home (although we lack good statistics about this), reducing the likelihood of conflict over space, noise or organisation of working time. In their major ethnographic study of sharers in England, Heath et al (2018) explore various arrangements used in shared households for allocating space and time for showering, cooking and relaxing in common areas—but not for working. This omission suggests that working from home was, at least for their sample, relatively infrequent. Under Covid it suddenly became common for all adults in a household to work from home, creating new challenges for sharers.

Relatively little is known about the internal dynamics of house shares, or about how sharers use their dwelling space. Of the sparse academic literature on the subject, much discusses the potential of house shares to address the problems of homeless, older or otherwise vulnerable people (Green & McCarthy 2015), or positions house shares as one aspect of the 'sharing economy', aimed at achieving a more sustainable lifestyle. Despite the increasing prevalence of adult house sharing in London and other major cities, the phenomenon of working adults in house shares is little explored in the academic literature; Heath et al (2018), Richards (2013) and Heath and Kenyon (2001) are among the few authors to address the question.

Kenyon and Heath (2001) pointed out that sharing amongst young professionals had increased not only because of economic pressures. Instead, the model had become a lifestyle choice for the period after university and before settling down with a partner. More than a decade later, Richards (2013, p. 19) noted that

> the actual household practices and issues of sharing that are encompassed within shared living are left largely unexplored (p. 15)... The shortage of work on 'sharing' is so marked that…the current literature in fact contains a number of calls for more research to address this lack of attention.

Researchers draw a distinction between house shares based on friendship groups and those formed by individuals coming together specifically for housing through websites such as Gumtree or SpareRoom (what Richards calls 'randoms'). Richards describes in detail the selection processes for shared houses, in which existing residents looked for evidence (usually through interviews) that a new applicant would be suitable in terms of income, taste and general lifestyle. Practical issues faced by adult sharers include dealing with bills and finances, the treatment of food and other household supplies (whether jointly or individually purchased), and cleaning. The Richards paper notably omits any discussion of resident working practices (both in terms of roommate selection processes and general household issues)—as the assumption was presumably that most sharers were working outside the home most of the time.

Heath and Kenyon (2001) do explore the interface between sharers' living arrangements and their careers, but the discussion centres around the contribution of shared living to the labour mobility of

young professionals, with sharing seen as enabling a move to another city in pursuit of career opportunities. Here again, the norm was that work took place outside the home.

> Most people share with 'strangers' although a significant proportion do share with friends, or a mixture of the two. (p44)

Heath et al (2018), in their study of the social dynamics of shared housing, based on in-depth qualitative research involving 64 sharers in the UK, found two typical patterns of internal social relations. Some households chose to 'get on':

> …creating "family-like" and "friendship-like" relations with the people (they share) with, such that a sense of stability, security and belonging was produced. (p. 106)

Those living in such households arranged their daily life so as to ensure some shared activities and routines, much as family households do. The second pattern was that of 'getting through', which

> involved the often conscious planning and management of daily time to ensure minimal overlap in the schedules of housemates, keeping shared time both inside and outside to a minimum. (p. 109)

In shared households the allocation to residents of tasks and responsibilities, as of privileges and spaces, is a matter for negotiation (Belk, 2010). Intriguingly, though, research suggests that this negotiation is often silent and tacit rather than explicit—in part because residents are wary of raising topics that will lead to resentment or bad feelings in the household. Richards (2013, p. 155) writes,

> there is an observable reluctance to avoid approaching issues of disagreement and grievance, or where the coordination of practices appears to be less successful than at least one party would hope. This reluctance, driven by a concern over creating a 'sticky situation' (Sabini et al., 2000), is about avoiding perceived conflicts with housemates…

Under Covid the practicalities of coordinating multiple residents working simultaneously from home may have challenged these tacit cooperation models, especially as there is generally no authority structure or hierarchy in shared households (at least formally) and residents are not necessarily bound by any ties other than that of sharing a physical space.

Heath et al (2018, p. 2) explore in detail the nature and quality of relationships between sharers, and note that these are conditioned not only by the characters and expectations of the sharers themselves but also by the physical form of the dwelling:

> (T)he physical architecture of shared housing can have a profound effect on the nature of the relationships and daily practices that emerge.

Housing typologies such as cohousing are intentionally designed to foster social interaction amongst residents, and there is a sizeable body of literature specifically about how the design of the 'common house' can contribute to a sense of community. But most sharers live in homes that were not designed for adult sharers, and the physical layout (original or after modification), far from enabling social interaction, can make it more difficult. Heath et al (2018, p. 82-83) say:

> Very few homes are built with the needs of sharers in mind, and even when landlords 'retrofit' a family home for multiple adults to live in they rarely do so in ways that enhance the space. For example, rather than adding additional bathrooms or enlarging the kitchen, they are more likely to turn an existing living room into an additional bedroom, thus removing a communal space and upsetting the spatial dynamics of the house…. Participants living in privately rented house shares were particularly likely to lament the lack of communal space available

to them, with many complaining that communal areas, predominantly living rooms, had been converted into bedrooms.

3. London context

The pandemic highlighted tendencies that had been present for years in the capital, including the extent of housing precarity for many younger (but not always young) Londoners, the affordability crisis, and the importance of designing quality homes with the potential for flexible configurations and uses.

3.1. Supply shortage

In London, the affordability crisis is often attributed to two main factors: a failure in building enough adequate homes and a continuously growing population, with large inflows of young people coming from within and outside the UK to study or build a career.

Historically this inflow has been offset by outflows of older households, often families. However, since the mid-2000s the pattern has changed somewhat, with outflows from London slowing. Because of these changes in internal migration and increased international flows (at least until recently), overall population has risen rapidly, from 8.2 million at the 2011 census to the current estimate of 9.2 million (a 12% increase). Population is projected to increase to 9.8 million by 2031, and 10.2 million in 2039 (GLA 2021a).

New housebuilding in the capital has not risen as rapidly, creating a lack of adequate homes to accommodate an increase in population. The current London Plan has a target figure of 52,000 new homes per year (Mayor of London 2021a), although this would still fall short of assessed housing need. According to the most recent figures, there were 41,718 net completions in London in 2019/20 (Mayor of London 2021b)—the most for many years but still some way below the target figure. The gap between the number of households and the number of homes continues to widen, and the resultant affordability pressures channel many young people into house shares.

Most sharers rent their homes. The private rented sector in London has grown from 18.8% of households in 2008 to 25% in 2018, the most recent year for which data are available (GLA 2021b). In 2020, lone sharers were overrepresented in the private sector compared to any other tenure (MHCLG, 2020).

Because of these pressures, homes for younger working households are far less available - and more costly - than before the financial crisis. The high price of housing in London as well as the lack of adequate and affordable one-bedroom flats have constrained people's ability to form independent households. In particular there has been a fall in the proportion of young people living alone, and an even bigger rise in the proportion of young people sharing with other adults - up by more than a quarter in the decade from 2001 to 2011 (

Table *1*). The 2021 census is expected to show a continuation of this trend.

Table 1 Housing situation of Londoners aged 16-34, 2001 - 2011

Household Type	2001	2011	Change	Percent change
Single living alone	225,978	202,525	-23,453	-10%
Single living in multi-adult household	130,315	166,588	36,273	+28%

Source: ONS 2016

There is also evidence that shared homes are regularly 'over occupied'; one newspaper reported that 90% of living rooms in shared rental accommodation in London had been converted into bedrooms (Ellson 2019), and a September 2021 search of spareroom.co.uk showed that of 8360 ads for rooms in shared homes in London, 35% did not indicate there was any shared living space.

3.2. Licensing of shared homes

Mandatory licensing of large houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) was introduced in 2006. Across England, privately rented homes that are occupied by five or more unrelated people who share facilities such as bathroom and kitchen require a license from the local authority. At the same time, however, local authorities have been able to institute their own more restrictive additional licensing schemes for HMOs, and most London boroughs have done so, either across the whole of their area or for specific neighbourhoods (London Property Licensing, 2021). These schemes require licensing for private rented properties occupied by three or more unrelated people (as opposed to five for the national rule).

The requirements for licensing are mainly around physical safety, so landlords must provide proof of fire safety, gas safety, and electrical safety, as well as appropriate cooking and washing facilities. There are minimum sizes for bedrooms, but no minimum space standards overall and no requirement that any communal space be provided apart from kitchen and bathroom. The aims of HMO licensing commonly given by London boroughs include improving housing standards for HMOs and protecting private tenants from the negative social and health effects of poorly managed and maintained properties. Licensing is targeted mainly at the lower end of the private rented sector rather than at the homes occupied by our research sample, albeit the regulations apply to homes at all rent levels.

The number of homes with HMO licenses in London more than doubled between 2012 and 2019 to nearly 12,000 (0.33% of the housing stock). This is due in part to the tightening of national regulation and the adoption of additional licensing by many boroughs; it likely also reflects an absolute increase in the number of properties occupied by sharers.

Even so, a high proportion of shared homes in London that require licenses do not have them. Some landlords, especially small amateur investors, do not realise that they are needed; others want to avoid the fee (currently over £1100 on average in London [NALS, 2018]) or the required safety certificates. While it is a criminal offence if a landlord fails to license a property that requires a licence, or allows it to be occupied by more people than it is licensed for, prosecutions are rare. Local authorities understandably concentrate their HMO enforcement activity on the bottom of the market, where dwellings may be illegal and/or unfit for human habitation. There is thus relatively little effective oversight of the upper end of the HMO market in London.

4. The pandemic and Working from Home

The fieldwork for this paper was undertaken in May and June 2020, during the initial phase of the coronavirus pandemic. On 20 March the government had closed down pubs, gyms and restaurants. On 23 March, prime minister Boris Johnson announced a UK-wide lockdown, introducing the slogan 'Stay at home/Protect the NHS/Save lives'. People were only allowed out of their homes to buy food or medicine, to exercise (alone or with another member of the household, for a maximum of one hour) or to travel to work if absolutely necessary (Cabinet Office, 2020). Nonessential shops were closed, as were facilities where people were likely to mix including playgrounds and libraries. Schools remained open for the children of 'critical workers' but most other pupils began remote learning. People were only permitted to meet with one other person from another household, including family members; these meetings had to take place outdoors with social distancing. Those with serious health conditions were advised to 'shield' in their homes.

These regulations brought an abrupt stop to most of the country's public life, but the government guidance stressed the need for work to carry on—from home where possible:

> With the exception of [pubs, hotels, restaurants, etc.] …the government has not required any other businesses to close to the public—indeed, it is important for business to carry on. Employers and employees should discuss their working arrangements, and employers should take every possible step to facilitate their employees working from home, including providing suitable IT and equipment to enable remote working.

Public transport services continued to operate on a reduced schedule, but the government and London Mayor Sadiq Khan urged Londoners to avoid using buses and tubes and to travel by car, bike or walking. London's office employers drastically reduced the number of staff required to work from the office, and many central London offices closed down completely. Popular expectation in March 2020 was that the restrictions might last for a few weeks, but relatively strict lockdown conditions lasted until June 2020 with further lockdown episodes in the following year, and some restrictions remained in place 19 months later.

The restrictions on movement and required closures rendered many businesses unviable. To avoid massive job losses the government instituted a furlough programme. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (HMRC, 2020a) paid 80% of the wages of employees unable to work because of Covid restrictions, up to a maximum of £2,500/month. As of June 2020, when our survey was conducted, there were 1.1 million furloughed employees in London (HMRC, 2020b). This scheme remained in place for the following year, and was gradually phased out from July 2021.

In the early stages of the pandemic the understanding was that the virus could be spread by touching surfaces, and the authorities advised extra cleaning procedures in the home; UNICEF for example recommended regular disinfection of 'door handles, tables, chairs, handrails, kitchen and bathroom surfaces, taps, toilets' and eight other categories of item (UNICEF, 2020). Food and other items brought into the home were to be washed or wiped, and some households 'quarantined' post and parcels for 72 hours before touching them. The rules about employing outside cleaners in the home were ambiguous; although it was never expressly forbidden many households stopped using a cleaner—and many cleaners decided it was safer not to work in other people's homes.

On 10 May 2020 Johnson announced a conditional plan for a staged relaxation of lockdown conditions if certain conditions were met. He said those who could not work from home should return

to the workplace but avoid public transport; even so, many employers—particularly central London offices—allowed or indeed required staff to continue to work from home.

This, then, was the situation for our survey respondents in late May/early June 2020: like other Londoners they were mainly confined to their homes and their immediate neighbourhoods and could only socialise with other members of their household (although this rule was unevenly observed). Office-based workers were mainly working from home; many others were furloughed but effectively also confined to their residences. Fear of virus transmission, and official advice, made people much more concerned about cleanliness in the home.

5. Methods

This paper draws on findings from an online survey carried out in collaboration with Pocket Living, a London-based developer of affordable homes for first-time buyers. This survey ran during the first lockdown (from mid-May to early June 2020). There were 697 respondents to this survey, of whom 302 were sharers. This survey contained 51 questions and asked about respondents' living situations during the pandemic, their working practices during lockdown, the practical challenges of working from home and their relations with fellow sharers.

For this survey email links were distributed by Pocket Living to people who had registered interest in purchasing one of their properties, so were thus considering buying their first home in London. Registration is open to those working and/or living in London, who earn up to £90,000 and do not own a home already (Pocket Living, 2019).

The survey contained a mix of multiple-choice and free-text questions. Descriptive statistics were produced using Excel, while the qualitative material was coded and analysed using a grounded-theory approach, where the topics emerged through in-depth consideration of the data.

6. The respondents

Respondents were not representative of Londoners or sharers in general. All were potential clients of Pocket Living and were mostly affluent, mostly single and mostly young. They were also financially savvy as they knew about this specialist local housing provider and had taken the initiative to go through the process of securing a home. None were homeowners, as Pocket sells only to first-time buyers. 92% were private renters. This group—young professional sharers living in the private rented sector--tends to be understudied, partly because of the difficulty of identifying them: Heath et al (2018, p. 12), who conducted a major study of sharers in all tenures, found that:

> Sharers living in …house shares in the PRS were more challenging to locate as there are no sampling frames as such to use.

Using the Pocket database gave us access to a large pool of sharers, mostly in the private rented sector, that would otherwise have been difficult to identify.

59% of the survey respondents were women, 85% were single and 69% were between 20 and 35 years old. Most of the respondents were sharing with one to three other people (82%) and properties tended to have between two to three bedrooms (74%). On the whole the number of people occupying the home did not exceed the number of bedrooms—that is, the homes were not technically overcrowded.

Most of the respondents (71%) were in employment and working full-time when they completed the survey. The main employment sectors were not for profit, education and media. Of those working full- or part-time, freelance or self-employed, some 79% were doing all or some of their work from home at the time the survey was conducted, a few months after the first lockdown was instituted. Of these, 43% said they had never worked from home before so this new arrangement was a major change. 79% of respondents said some or all of the other people in the house were working from home as well, raising a range of issues about the use of space, noise and daily household routine. Whilst most respondents were employed or self-employed, some 19% were furloughed or out of work in May/June 2020—the same proportion as for London's employed population as a whole in July 2020 (Trust for London 2021).

7. Findings

Findings are reported below for the three research questions:

- How did the material features of homes and their layout affect their use as working spaces?
- How were sharers' relationships affected and how did they negotiate the use of space?
- How did the experience affect sharers' housing aspirations and attitudes to home?

These findings draw heavily on qualitative material from the free-text answers to the survey, and the authors are not always able to estimate the incidence of particular experiences or views amongst our respondent cohort.

7.1 Physical findings: Material features of the home

London's housing stock is dominated by terraced and semi-detached houses, and many older homes have been subdivided into flats. Some 55% of respondents lived in houses or in flats in converted housing, whilst a third of respondents lived in purpose-built flats.
The pandemic required residents to adapt normally domestic spaces to accommodate work as well. This was made difficult by the fact that respondents' private spaces were typically restricted (the average reported bedroom size was 10m²). 77% of our respondents said they were in homes that did have living rooms; in most shared homes, such rooms are communal, shared spaces. About a quarter of the cohort lived in homes where the former living rooms were used as bedrooms for affordability reasons, meaning the only shared spaces were kitchens and bathrooms.
Respondents were asked about the main challenges of working from home, including those related to the characteristics of the dwellings. Amongst physical difficulties experienced by those working from home, 'shortage of suitable work surfaces (tables, desks)' and 'not enough space in the home' were seen to be problematic by 47% and 45% of respondents respectively.

Table 2 Dwelling characteristics presenting difficulties when working from home

(multiple responses permitted)

Shortage of suitable work surfaces (tables, desks)	47%
Not enough space in the home	45%
Inadequate Wi-Fi	32%

Relatively few of these homes had existing dedicated workspace. Most respondents engaged in working from home (WFH) said they were working from their bedrooms (53%) or their living rooms (29%). Several said they worked sitting cross-legged on their beds using a laptop, suggesting that their bedrooms did not have desks—perhaps because they were not large enough to accommodate one.

Not having a dedicated room for work meant there was no physical separation between respondents' work and personal lives. The need to identify a workspace within the home (or several spaces—one for each person) led to some complex and suboptimal arrangements.

> *I have to build my desk every morning and disassemble it every evening because I'm located in front of the TV in the living room. I work a lot of overtime but this means working overtime in my bed because I can't be working after hours in my housemates' living space[i].*

Although three-quarters of respondents had shared living rooms, not all used this space for work. This might be because others in the household were using the space, or the living area was too noisy. Some respondents commented that it was especially difficult to work in open-plan arrangements with no division between the living room and kitchen. Thus even in houses that did have shared lounges, 48% of respondents were working in their bedrooms. They were spending most of their waking hours, and all of their sleeping hours, in the same, often small, room. Several respondents said this had engendered mental and physical health problems. For example:

> *Having to work in your bedroom is hard. It's a space that you associate with rest and relaxing, but when it becomes the space where you're meant to be focused and creative and efficient, and also host meetings, and also exercise, and also relax, it becomes extremely difficult to do any of these activities well. Work lacks productivity and bleeds into relaxation time. Additionally, without a suitable desk space, working, resting, and sleeping are all done from bed, which leads to body aches.*

Table 4 Challenges faced by sharers working from home (related to physical layout)

(multiple responses permitted)

Lack of privacy (e.g. for video calls)	42%
Noise	42%
Needing to use the same room for work	34%
Needing to use the same work surface (table, desk)	25%

Issues inevitably arose when multiple adults were working from homes with restricted space. Those most often cited were noise, lack of privacy and the need to share a room or even a work surface with someone else while working. (This latter was surprisingly common, with 25% of respondents saying they had to use the same table, usually in the kitchen, as it was the only suitable surface in the home (Table 4).) One respondent said working from a home with restricted space:

> *…is really challenging especially as my flatmate is on calls all day without headphones. I have to take more sensitive calls from my bedroom sitting on my bed as there is no other space to sit. This feels really embarrassing when all my colleagues have more professional set ups.*

7.2. Social findings: Relations with fellow residents under Covid

About a quarter of respondents said lockdown had intensified the challenges of sharing by increasing interpersonal contacts and/or because of incompatible daily routines or working hours. (Table 4).

Table 5 Challenges faced by sharers working from home (related to social interaction layout)

(multiple responses permitted)

Incompatible daily routines/working hours	24%
Interpersonal conflicts	21%

In sharer households, the adjustment to Covid conditions and widespread working from home not only required repurposing physical space but also reframing relationships with other household members. This could be particularly challenging for sharers in 'getting through' households (using the categorisation of Heath et al [2018]), who might have had relatively little interaction before lockdown began on 23 March 2020, but afterwards had to coordinate schedules, negotiate the use of space and maintain domestic harmony. Rather than cohabiting just during the evenings and at night they were now spending *all* their time together: not only flatmates but office colleagues and life companions.

> *For many people living in shared accommodation in London (is) made bearable by the fact that you live in one of the most exciting cities in the world with lots to do OUTSIDE of your home. Lockdown has forced a lot of flatmates to spend more time with each other than they necessarily would like to.*

In households with two or more sharers working from home, respondents were rarely alone within their homes. Nor could they necessarily find privacy elsewhere: in these early days of lockdown there were limited opportunities to escape. Pubs, restaurants and cinemas were closed, as were all but essential shops, and outdoor exercise was limited to a maximum of an hour a day. This enforced togetherness affected relationships within shared households and challenged some respondents' mental health.

> *Before lockdown we would both have the small flat to ourselves regularly when one of us was working ie. I worked weekends. But now we are home at the same time often and it's a strain on our friendship as flatmates.*

> *As I usually work from home (before Covid-19) I was used to being alone and running the house as I see fit while the other person I live with ate lunch and dinner out most days. Since we are both home together all the time we have to coordinate use of the kitchen, bathroom and grocery shopping and there is now double the amount of mess to clean up. Coupled with being forced into an enclosed space in a stressful pandemic has been a recipe for disaster. Privacy and alone time is missed!*

On the other hand, for some, one benefit of lockdown was to deepen relationships with flatmates. Many sharer households had started out as complete strangers; lockdown was an opportunity to get to know each other for the first time, and some formed unexpectedly strong relationships. In Heath's (2018) categorisation, 'getting through' households began to turn into 'getting on' households.

> *We are random people living in a houseshare and previously spent most of our time out of the house, so hadn't really spent any time together. Now we are watching TV together every night.*

Because respondents were spending most of their time at home including eating all meals there, and because in the early days of the pandemic there was a fear the virus could be spread through surfaces, domestic hygiene became a higher priority for many respondents. Agreeing who was responsible for cleaning was a source of irritation for many (echoing Heath et al [2018], who found that disputes and resentments about cleaning were common in shared households). Several female respondents stated they had taken on a disproportionate share of domestic work in comparison to their male flatmates—a pattern observed in shared households in pre-Covid times as well (Natalier 2004). Others said that there was an expectation (explicit or tacit) that housemates who had been furloughed should do the housework.

> *I live with strangers, who are all lovely, but without a communal space to hang out, we hardly know each other. We used to get a cleaner once a month, but due to Covid losses of income, we can no longer afford to and it's also not safe to. No one wants to send passive aggressive messages to the house WhatsApp, but also no one wants to clean up after whoever keeps leaving the stove and kitchen table a mess. So the dirt and resentment all build together.*

> *Everyone co-living has different standards and expectations for the house, furloughed housemates have been relegated to unpaid cleaning and maintenance staff.*

Most respondents stated they took the lockdown restrictions seriously (81% only leaving the house for exercise, essentials and/or medical purposes and 50% stating it was the same for everyone they lived with). But in households where sharers had different attitudes to lockdown, this could be the source of tension:

> *I am more strictly following lockdown where one of my flat mates isn't and I'm sure they are meeting multiple people from different households.*

Among respondents, 22% were key workers (including medical professionals and teachers), the same proportion as nationally (Farquharson et al., 2020). Many key workers continued going to their usual workplaces, and some households with a mix of key and non-key workers reported tensions. Some non-key-worker respondents worried that their key-worker housemates could might expose the rest of the household to the virus, while key workers themselves reported that they could not relax at home because formerly communal space was being used for work:

> *[There have been] Concerns about safety as I am a key worker. This has caused further issues and tension in the house and arguments purposefully started.*

> *I want to chill in the lounge when I get home from working for the emergency services but they are using it as a home office. Trying to sleep when I work nights is hard now they are all home most of the day.*

> *Flatmates were very angry that I left the house to go to work and used public transport as they were worried about their own health. I am a scientist volunteering with the covid 19 testing programme and they are healthy white males under the age of 30.*

7.3. Attitudinal findings: Effects on housing aspirations

At the time of the survey, the great majority of respondents were in work: 81% were employed or self-employed, and 19% were furloughed or unemployed. Even so, job fears were high in the early months

of the pandemic and 41% of respondents expressed concern that either they or their flatmate(s) would be unable to pay the rent, or that they might be evicted when that became possible.

Whilst house sharing can be an affirmative lifestyle choice for young professionals, the literature is clear that for most sharers a key motivation, if not the main one, is economic. Rents on rooms in shared houses or flats are lower than for unshared accommodation and money saved on rent could go towards the down payment on a first home—a key concern of our study cohort, all of whom had registered interest in new homes for first-time buyers.

Some worried that the effects of the pandemic might extinguish forever their hopes of becoming a homeowner.

> *I've been forced to use savings to live on during the lockdown as my work has completely dried up (events). I have too much in savings to apply for Universal Credit but my savings were to buy my own place. That won't ever happen now as it's set me back and replacing those savings will be impossible now with rising unemployment and my industry struggling to recover and operate. Home ownership is no longer a possibility for me so I've resigned myself to renting for the rest of my life.*

Lockdown spurred some sharers to re-evaluate their housing goals and expectations. By registering with Pocket, all of the survey cohort had already taken steps towards buying their first home, and nearly a quarter said the experience of lockdown made them more motivated to save for this (Table 6), while 18% said they were more motivated to leave shared accommodation On the other hand, the (anticipated) economic impact of Covid made some respondents conclude that home ownership was now out of reach for them: 9% felt they were less likely to become home owners, and 4% said they were less likely to be able to leave shared accommodation.

In the early days of the pandemic there was widespread media reporting about households relocating out of cities, especially London, to homes in the country. In this context it is perhaps surprising that only a small percentage (9%) of our respondents said the pandemic made them want to leave the capital. The desire to leave the city could relate to other issues—especially affordability—as well as to the pandemic.

> *I am fed up of housing uncertainty and trying to stay one step ahead from disaster. But I would need to relocate back to Scotland to be able to afford a home. I haven't lived there for many years and all my friends and support network are here but I simply can't afford it.*

Table 6 How lockdown affected sharers' housing aspirations/expectations

(multiple responses permitted)

I am more motivated to save for home ownership	23%
I am more motivated to leave shared accommodation	18%
I would now prioritise having a garden/outdoor space in my next home	16%
I expect to be in shared accommodation for longer	14%
I am less likely to become a home owner	9%
I want to leave London as soon as possible	9%
I am less likely to be able to leave shared accommodation	4%
I would now prioritise living in a house rather than a flat	3%

Having reconsidered what they wanted from a permanent home, 16% of respondents said they would now prioritise having a garden or outdoor space. For example:

> *I have been saving for years to buy my own place. Outdoor space is now an essential requirement that I am not willing to compromise on, this can even be a simple balcony where a chair can be placed (Juliette balcony doesn't count). I would now be more inclined to look further out to meet this requirement rather than sacrifice outdoor space to be more central.*

8. Discussion and conclusions

The group studied was not representative of all London sharers: they had registered to purchase a new home, suggesting that they were relatively financially sophisticated as well as motivated to change their housing situation. Broadly speaking they were young professionals, for whom sharing has become both a lifestyle choice post-university as well as an economic necessity. This group represents an important component of the capital's population and workforce.

The survey was conducted in the early days of the pandemic, when much about the virus was still unknown. Nearly two years on, we know for example that coronavirus less likely to be transmitted by contact with surfaces, so worries about household cleanliness seem in retrospect overblown. But some of the other issues explored—in particular the challenges of working from home in shared households—clearly have continuing relevance.

Some of our survey respondents lived in homes that had studies, home offices or unused bedrooms that could be purposed as offices, and those who had or could create dedicated workspaces in their homes seemed to find WFH easier. In many homes, though, this simply not possible, for reasons of space and the number of residents, but also because of design. New-build homes (especially flats) seem particularly poorly suited to more than one person working from home. The design of these homes reflects not only the historic bifurcation of living space and workspace, but also the current fashion for open-plan kitchen/living areas. Having multiple workers in open-plan spaces makes private conversation and focused work difficult. It also may mean that other residents cannot use the space to cook, watch TV, etc., which can lead to conflict and resentments.

The abrupt shift to widespread WFH during the pandemic may have catalysed a long-lasting change in the relationship between home and workplace. Even before Covid, Fran Holliss argued that the assumption that domestic life and work are physically separate was too simplistic, but it now seems we may be moving into a new paradigm for the split between home and work. Advances in information technology have for some time meant that it is technically possible for many to work not in dedicated office buildings but in 'offices' at home. The experience of Covid has shown that such 'flexible working' is not only technically possible but feasible in practice. Many workers prefer it, and it is cheaper for employers. After lockdown ended, a number of major UK employers reduced the proportion of time staff were expected to be in the workplace: Deloitte (a large consultancy), for example, announced in 2021 that all staff could continue to work permanently from home, choosing for themselves when and how often to come into the office (Bourke 2021). The implications of such a shift for the future of city centres, office rentals and transport networks are exercising policymakers and analysts across the globe.

There are also important implications for the future of our housing. A move to greater WFH would in historic terms represent a return to the situation that prevailed before the Industrial Revolution, when (as Holliss and others point out) domestic life and work often happened in the same space. But most

of our homes were designed and built under another understanding of the world. Implicit in sharing practices, planning rules and HMO regulations is the assumption that for the most part, work does not take place in the home, and that dedicated workspace in the home is nice to have but not essential. If home working is to be normalised and expected (or required), then our homes need to reflect this reality. The challenge for designers of new homes is to create flexible spaces that function both as communal areas and as temporarily private spaces for work. Entirely open-plan living areas are not the best way to do this. But new homes account for only a tiny fraction of the housing stock: there is a much bigger challenge around ensuring that existing homes are suitable for our future lifestyles. Future housing planning policy needs to reflect these considerations.

Current HMO regulations cover bedroom size but not overall dwelling size, and the minimum bedroom sizes are small. This evidence in the present study shows inadequacies and it may be time to re-examine HMO regulations to ensure they respond to the anticipated increase in working from home. The pandemic changed our day-to-day domestic experience almost overnight. This change was particularly marked in London house shares, whose residents often spent little time in their homes or in the company of their housemates. Our research indicates that the experience affected the dynamics in many shared homes, changing them from 'getting through' to 'getting on' households, in the language of Heath et al (2018).

A widespread shift to flexible working could affect the expectations of professional sharers about their housemates and the relationships with them. A permanent increase in the amount of time spent working from home may mean that potential sharers rebalance their criteria for choosing shared accommodation, perhaps giving more weight to interpersonal compatibility than previously and asking about patterns of use in shared spaces. Equally, the experience of sharing during lockdown was strongly negative for some of this cohort, and about a fifth of our respondents said it made them want to leave shared accommodation.

Living in shared housing will remain a common accommodation strategy for young Londoners for the foreseeable future. As the consequences of Covid play out, continued research is needed into the way that sharers respond and the ways that shared homes—particularly those in the existing housing stock—are adapted to the new reality.

Author affiliations

Fanny Blanc   0000-0002-5835-6507

LSE London, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

Kath Scanlon   0000 0001 9957 4853

LSE London, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

Data availability

The survey responses on which this study is based were inputs to research on behalf of a private company (Pocket Living), and respondents were drawn from individuals registered on the Pocket waiting list. The authors do not have permission to share the anonymised responses.

Ethical consent

This research was conducted in accordance with LSE's ethics policy. Research participants gave informed consent, including agreeing to the use of their responses in academic papers. All responses were anonymised.

Funding

References

Ahmad, K., Erqou, S., Shah, N., Nazir, U., Morrison, A.R., Choudhary, G., et al. (2020). Association of poor housing conditions with COVID-19 incidence and mortality across US counties. *PLoS ONE* 15(11).

Altaş, N. E., Özsoy, A. (1998). Spatial adaptability and flexibility as parameters of user satisfaction for quality housing, *Building and Environment*, 33 (5), pp. 315-323.

Amerio, A., Brambilla, A.,Morganti, A., Aguglia, A., et al. (2020). *COVID-19 Lockdown: Housing Built Environment's Effects on Mental Health*. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health, 17, 5973.

Belk, R. (2010). Sharing. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36.

Bourke, J. (2021) 'Deloitte boss says UK staff can choose how often they come to the office' *Evening Standard* 18 June 2021 https://www.standard.co.uk/business/deloitte-uk-office-working-from-home-flexible-working-b941405.html

Cabinet Office. (2020). *Staying at home and away from others (social distancing).* Government Guidance. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others

DCLG. (2017) Houses in Multiple Occupation and residential property licensing reforms. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/670536/HMO_licensing_reforms_response.pdf

Ellson, A. (2019) *Landlords kill off the house-share living room.* The Times. Available at: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/landlords-kill-off-the-house-share-living-room-9krrwm977

Farquharson, C., Rasul, I. and Sibieta, L. (2020). *Key workers: key facts and questio*ns. Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/14763

Gov.UK(2022) House in multiple occupation licence. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/house-in-multiple-occupation-licence

Greater London Authority (2021a) Population by borough 1939 to 2039 Available at: https://data.london.gov.uk/download/population-change-1939-2015/6fb637cf-d3c1-4456-a561-85cd995c020f/Population%20by%20borough%201939%20to%202039.xlsx

Greater London Authority (2021b) Housing tenure by borough Available at: https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/housing-tenure-borough

Greater London Authority (2017) *The 2017 London Strategic Housing Market Assessment.* Part of the London Plan Evidence base. Available here: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london_shma_2017.pdf

Greater London Authority. (2020). *Housing in London 2020. The evidence base for the London Housing Strategy.* Available at: https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/housing-london

Green, S., & McCarthy, L. (2015). Is sharing the solution?: exploring the opportunities and challenges of privately rented shared accommodation for single people in housing need. *People, place and policy*, *9*(3), 159-178.

Gurstein, P. (1996). Planning for telework and home-based employment: Reconsidering the home/work separation. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, *15*(3), 212-224.

Heath, S., Davies, K., Edwards, G. & Scicluna, R. (2018) *Shared Housing, Shared Lives: Everyday Experiences across the Lifecourse* Abingdon: Routledge

Heath, S., & Kenyon, L. (2001). Single young professionals and shared household living. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *4*(1), 83-100.

Holliss, F. (2015). Beyond Live/Work: The architecture of home-based work. Routledge Ellen, I. G. (2015). Housing low-income households: lessons from the sharing economy?. *Housing Policy Debate*, *25*(4),

783-784.Greater London Authority (2020) *Housing in London 2020 Report.* Available here: https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/housing-london

HMRC (2020a) *Check if you can claim for your employees' wages through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.* Webpage. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-for-wage-costs-through-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme

HMRC (2020b) *Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) Statistics: May 2020*. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20210126175543mp_/https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/891607/Coronavirus_Job_Retention_Scheme_Statistics_Tables_June_2020.xlsx

Jones, A. & Grigsby-Toussaint, D., S. (2020). Housing stability and the residential context of the COVID-19 pandemic*, Cities & Health*.

Kenyon, E., & Heath, S. (2001). Choosing this life: narratives of choice amongst house sharers. *Housing Studies*, *16*(5), 619-635.

London Property Licensing. (2019). *Understanding Additional Licensing.* Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/670536/HMO_licensing_reforms_response.pdf

Mayor of London (2021a) *London Plan: The spatial development strategy for Greater London March 2021* Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/the_london_plan_2021.pdf

Mayor of London (2021b) *London Plan annual monitoring report 2018/19* https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/amr_16_final.pdf

MHCLG. (2020). *English housing survey, Private Rented Sector 2019-20.* Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1000052/EHS_19-20_PRS_report.pdf.

NALS (2018) Analysis of Property Licence Fees in London. Report. Available at: https://www.londonpropertylicensing.co.uk/sites/default/files/pdfs/NALS-licensing-fees-research%20FINAL%20January%202018.pdf

Natalier, K. (2004). Avoiding the housework: Domestic Labour and Gender in Group Living Contexts. *Electronic Journal of Sociology*. [online]. Available from: http://www.sociology.org/content/2004/tier1/natalier.html

Office for National Statistics (2016) CT0637_2011 Census—Age of Household Reference Person (HRP) by household composition by sex of HRP by country of birth of HRP—Regions London Boroughs Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/adhocs/006237ct06372011censusageofhouseholdreferencepersonhrpbyhouseholdcompositionbysexofhrpbycountryofbirthofhrpregionslondonboroughs

Pocket Living (2019) Owning an affordable Pocket home. *Pocket Living website.* Available at: https://www.pocketliving.com/buying/pocket-homes

Qian, X., Qiu, S., Zhang, G. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on housing price: Evidence from *China*, *Finance Research Letters*.

Rogers, D. & Power, E. (2020). Housing policy and the COVID-19 pandemic: the importance of housing research during this health emergency, *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 20:2, 177-183.

Richards, J. (2013). Shared accommodations: Experiences of houses of multiple occupation in south Manchester.

Sabini, J. et al. (2000). Who is Embarrassed by What? *Cognition & Emotion,* 14(2), pp.213–240.

Safe Agent (2020). Analysis of London property licensing schemes 2019. Available at: https://safeagents.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/London-Property-Licensing-Survey-2019.pdf

Scanlon, K.J., Blanc, F. et al. (2019) *A portrait of aspirant homeowners in London.* Report. Available at : https://www.lse.ac.uk/geography-and-environment/research/lse-london/documents/Reports/Pocket-Living-Research-2020.pdf

Trust for London (2021) London's Poverty Profile 2021: COVID-19 and poverty in London. Available at: https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/londons-poverty-profile-2021-covid-19-and-poverty-in-london/work/

UNICEF. (2020) *Cleaning tips to help keep COVID-19 out of your home*. Webpage. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/cleaning-and-hygiene-tips-help-keep-coronavirus-covid-19-out-your-home#cleaning-home