



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions

# Housing costs for tenants in social housing: awareness and consideration of options

Research report August 2014

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# Background and methodology

Changes to housing benefit rules from April 2013 mean that the amount claimants in social housing receive is now based on the number of people in their household. If they have more bedrooms than the rules say they need, then their housing benefit will be reduced. This brought the rules into line with those that applied to those renting privately.

The changes will help make better use of the social housing available, by helping match homes to the families that need them. This change helps families who live in overcrowded accommodation to find a new home and helps reduce the number of people on waiting lists.

Earlier communication activity has focused on raising awareness of the changes to Housing Benefit.

One year on from the introduction of the policy, with high levels of awareness amongst Housing Benefit recipients, our communications objectives focussed on raising awareness of the practical ways in which claimants could meet any shortfall.

The communications objective is to ensure that housing benefit claimants who are affected by the Removal of Spare Room Subsidy (RSRS) understand the facts, support and potential options available to them and take appropriate action.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned YouGov to conduct three waves of research as follows:

- Baseline pre campaign (wave 1)
- Mid campaign activity (wave 2)
- Post campaign activity (wave 3)

The research would establish:

- if affected claimants are aware of the options that may be available to help them manage the changes in their finances;
- if affected claimants know how to find information about these options;
- if affected claimants have considered any of these options

In order to meet the research objectives, a bespoke survey was implemented which drew a sample from YouGov's online research panel.

In wave 1 (17<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> January) 749 responses were achieved in wave 2 (3<sup>rd</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> February) 750 responses were achieved and in wave 3 (24<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> March) 751 responses were achieved.

In total 2250 completed online interviews were achieved among adults from England, Scotland and Wales.

Screening criteria within the questionnaire ensured that all respondents who contributed to the results of the survey were:

- currently receiving housing benefits;
- renting their accommodation from their local authority or renting their accommodation from a housing association;

The sample framework matches the incidence of those receiving housing benefits within Great Britain and was controlled using quotas across age, gender (interlocking) and region (Government Office Region). Weighting is implemented on the final data across these specific demographics. Statistics used to weight the data are taken from the DWP website. A sample framework summary is provided below:

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Figure 1: Sample framework

	Wave 1 (pre-wave) (n) unweighted	Wave 1 (pre-wave) (n) weighted	Wave 2 (post-wave) (n) unweighted	Wave 2 (post-wave) (n) weighted	Wave 3 (post-wave) (n) unweighted	Wave 3 (post-wave) (n) weighted	Net (n) unweighted	Net (n) weighted
Overall	749	749	750	750	751	751	2250	2250
Male	289	270	381	270	360	270	1030	810
Female	460	479	369	480	391	481	1220	1440
<35 years old	102	126	20	127	37	97	159	351
35-49 years old	250	271	128	270	153	276	531	816
50-59 years old	134	109	198	113	180	134	512	359
60-69 years old	116	108	310	105	252	161	678	371
70+ years old	147	136	94	135	129	83	370	353
North East	45	37	40	38	41	38	126	112
North West	91	97	70	98	84	98	245	292
Yorkshire and Humberside	59	67	71	68	65	68	195	202
East Midlands	53	45	48	45	52	45	153	135
West Midlands	72	67	56	68	51	68	179	202
East of England	71	60	78	60	68	60	217	180
London	94	127	73	128	69	128	236	382
South East	89	82	111	82	119	83	319	248
South West	58	52	78	52	80	53	216	158
Wales	37	37	42	38	41	38	120	112
Scotland	80	75	83	75	81	75	244	225

# Executive summary

- Overall awareness of the removal of the spare room subsidy (RSRS) amongst housing benefit recipients is at 87% in wave 3. Awareness is highest among older people and gradually gets lower across the age categories. The highest level of awareness is measured in the East Midlands (94%) while the lowest level can be found in Wales (81%).
- In wave 3, the three most mentioned sources of information which have contributed to RSRS awareness are friends and family (37%), communication from councils or benefit offices (30%) and social media (28%).
- When asked to indicate which sources of information would be used to find out more about the RSRS, in the post activity wave, 46% stated that they would use a council website, 45% said government website and 41% stated a letter from the council or housing benefit office. This block of three information sources are clearly ahead of the next group which includes housing association websites (29%), a letter or information from a housing association (28%) and news/media coverage (26%).
- The most common method people are aware of as a means to manage their money continues to be moving to smaller accommodation (57%) which increased by 3 percentage points since wave 1. This is followed by applying for a discretionary housing payment (42%) and swapping houses (41%), both of which also increased by wave 3.
- Among those whose housing benefit has been reduced due to the RSRS, application for discretionary housing payments is the most highly considered action (45% in wave 3) as a method to manage money. This is followed by 31% of people who said they haven't considered any of the listed actions to manage a shortfall; this is highest among older respondents.

# Awareness of the RSRS

The survey asked respondents whether they had heard of the removal of the spare room subsidy from housing benefit. The respondents were informed in the question text that the removal of this subsidy was sometimes known in the media as the 'bedroom tax' in an attempt to present the subject in language which would be as inclusive as possible.

Awareness of the removal of the spare room subsidy continues to be very high. In wave 3, 87% of people stated that they had heard of it, 9% said they had not heard of it with a further 5% saying there weren't sure.

In wave 3, awareness is significantly higher among the oldest age group (95%) and gradually declines to 83% among the youngest under 35 year old category.

In contrast to waves 1 and 2 where the highest level of awareness was recorded in London (86%), in wave 3, the highest level was measured in the East Midlands (94%). This is followed by those living in the Yorkshire and Humberside (90%) region and Scotland (89%). The lowest level of awareness was in the North West (82%) and Wales (81%).

The East of England continues to record relatively high numbers of people who are unsure whether they have heard of RSRS or not (11% in wave 3). However, it is in the South East where a noticeable rise can be seen with only 1% claiming to be unsure in wave 2 which increases to 10% in wave 3.

## Sources of awareness

When asked to name which sources have contributed to hearing or seeing about the RSRS, friends and family (37%) continues to be the most often mentioned. Second most frequently selected source is via a communication from the council or housing benefit office.

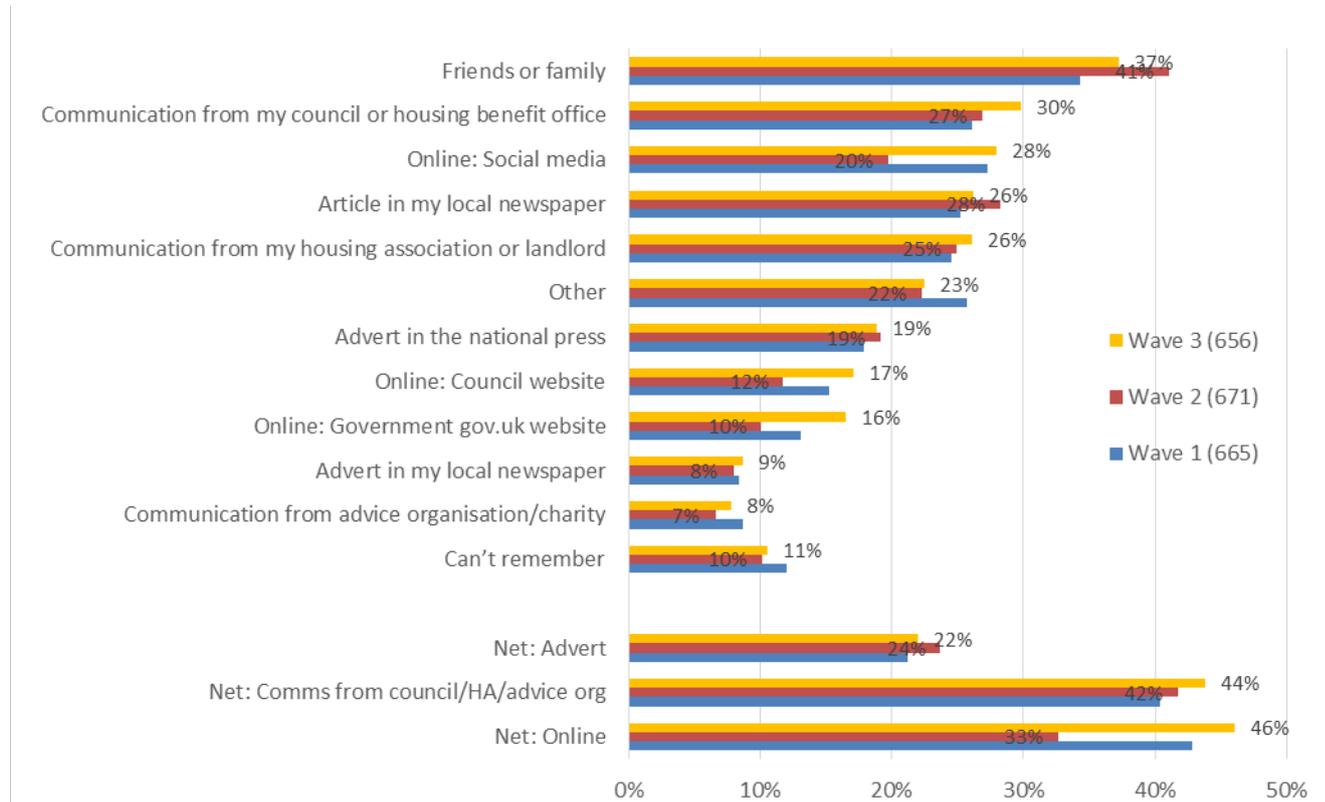
Online sources have increased since wave 1. The largest increase was housing association website with an increase of 4%. The combined result across all online sources increased from 43% at wave 1 to 46% at wave 3.

Letters or newsletters from a) councils/housing benefit offices and b) housing associations/landlords continue to be a relatively effective means of communicating the RSRS. Those who heard about RSRS from letters sent out by councils/housing benefit offices has grown steadily since wave 1 (26%) across wave 2 (27%) to 30% in wave 3. Similar communication coming from housing associations/landlords is also a relatively common method of dissemination (26% in wave 3).

Perceived effectiveness of adverts both in the national press (19%) and in local newspapers (8%) has remained fairly steady since wave 1.

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Figure 2: Q. Where have you seen or heard about the removal of the spare room subsidy from housing benefit?



Base: Aware of the RSRS (wave 1 – 665, wave 2 – 671, wave 3 - 656)

Net advertising: Said advert in the local press or national press

Net communications from council/HA/advice organisation: Said communication from council or housing benefit office/ housing association or landlord/ advice organisation/charity

Net online: Said council website/housing association website/government gov.uk website/social media

## The effect of the RSRS on those who claim housing benefit

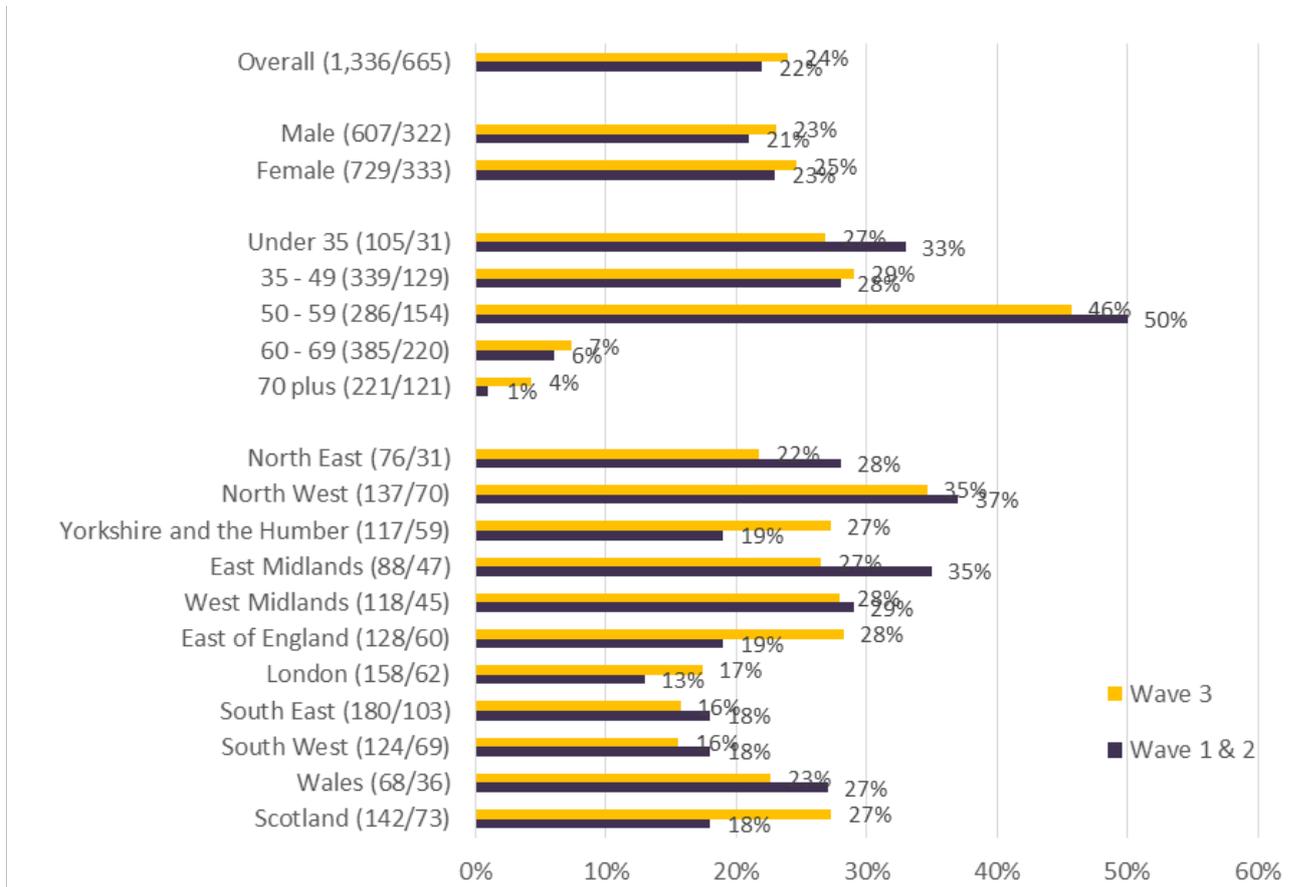
As all respondents in the survey could potentially be affected by the RSRS, a key objective of the research is to measure the impact of this action. When looking at results across all three waves, it can be seen that of those who were aware of the removal of the spare room subsidy (87%), 24% said their housing benefit had been reduced. Three quarters said that it had stayed the same and 2% claimed that they did not know.

When looking at the change in housing benefit status by age group, numbers claiming a reduction have increased among 35-49, 60-69 and 70+ age brackets. The highest rate of reported impact was for those aged between 50-59 years old reported they are affected (46%).

Regional comparison shows that the North West returns the highest numbers of people reporting that their housing benefit has been reduced as a result of the (-2% to 35%). Behind the North West, a cluster of regions return similar levels in wave 3; Yorkshire and the Humber (27%), East of Midlands (27%), West Midland (28%), East of England (28%) and Scotland (27%), London (17%), the South East (16%) and the South West (16%) can be grouped as the least affected regions.

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Figure 3: Q. Have you been personally affected by the removal of the spare room subsidy from your housing benefit? Yes, my housing benefit has been reduced (wave 1 and 2 vs. wave 3)



Base: As indicated (wave 1 & 2 the initial figure)

## Potential sources of further information

As opposed to actual sources of information used to hear about the removal of the spare room subsidy, the survey also asked respondents to identify where they would look to find out more information about the RSRS.

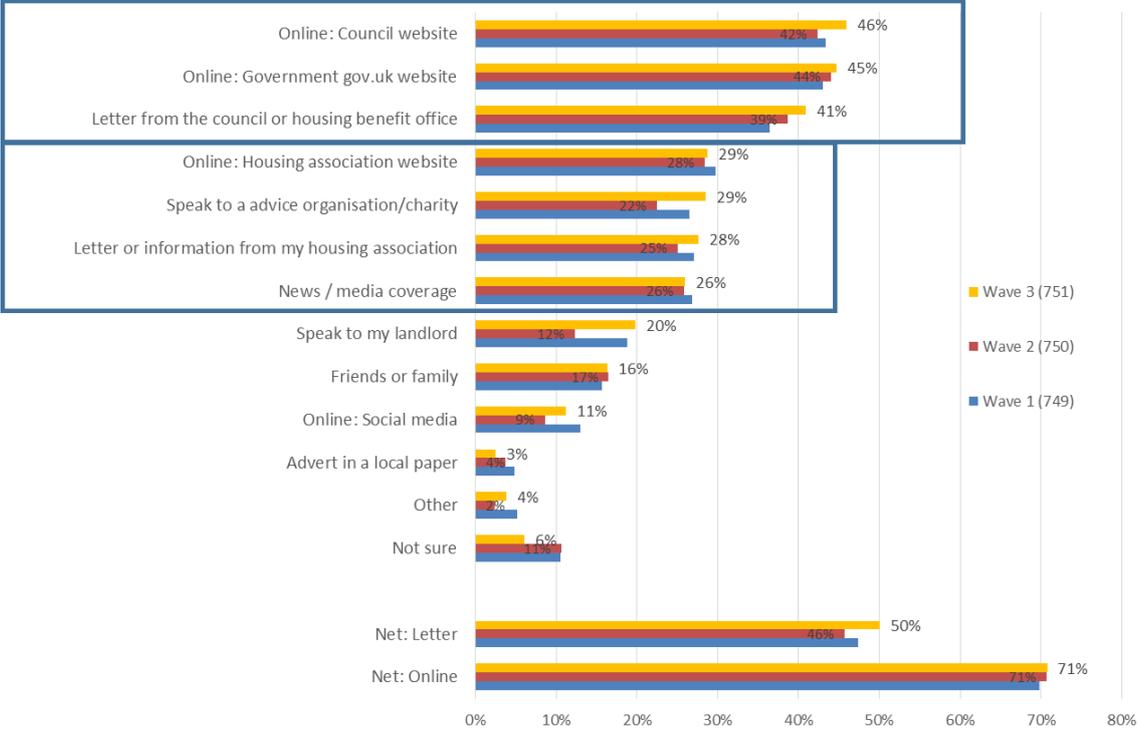
Council and government websites as well as letters from the council or housing benefit office are the most popular sources of information people would use.

In line with wave 3 increases in actual use, the main online sources also show modest but noticeable increases as a potential source of information.

The option of speaking to an advice organisation or charity (29%) has been included in a group of information sources clustered behind the main three (see figure 5). Other sources of information within this group include housing association websites (29%), letters from a housing association (28%) and news/media coverage (26%).

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Figure 4: Q. Where would you look for more information about the removal of the spare room subsidy?



Base: As indicated

When looking at combined data across all three waves of interviewing, online from the council (44%) and the government (44%) emerge as the top two sources which people would use to find out more information regarding the RSRS. The wave on wave rise observed in letters from the council/housing association means that when combined across all three waves, this source comes out slightly behind the main two at 39%. Online popularity remains fairly constant across all age groups other than the 70+ category where it falls away noticeably.

# Awareness and consideration of methods for managing money

The final two questions in the survey looked at some methods available as means of managing money given the RSRS, and asked respondents to state which they were aware of and which they had actually considered<sup>1</sup>.

In wave 3, the most common method people were aware of as a means to manage their money continued to be moving to a smaller accommodation. This is bolstered by a 3 point increase from wave 1 resulting in the highest figure for this action across all three waves of interviewing.

Increases in awareness were also recorded in applying for Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) and swapping houses. Similarly to the high point reached in wave 3 for moving to a smaller house, as well as asking other adults who live in the household to pay rent and increasing hours of work.

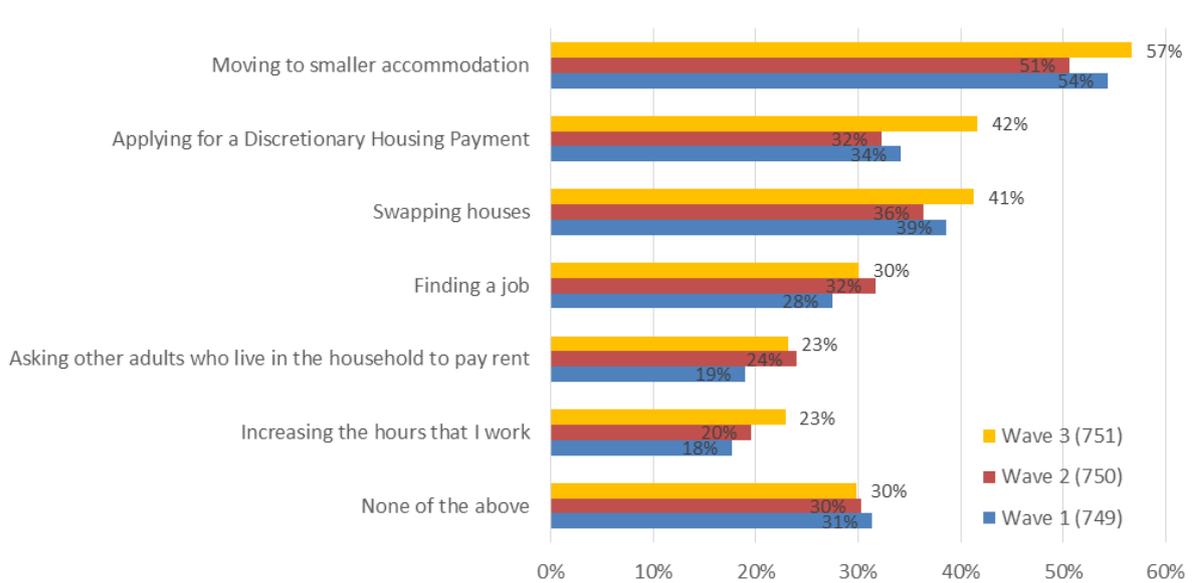
The increases observed in DHP applications and increasing working hours also represent the highest awareness increases across all waves for these particular options (8% and 5% respectively).

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<sup>1</sup> Awareness was asked to all and consideration was only asked to those who have had their housing benefits reduced as a result of the RSRS

## Housing costs for tenants in social housing: awareness and consideration of options

Figure 5: Q. This question is thinking about how you manage your money, given the removal of the spare room subsidy. Which of the following options are you aware of, to help you manage your money? Please choose all that apply.



Base: As indicated

Awareness of applying for a DHP falls away noticeably among the 60-69 year old age bracket while increasing working hours is more an option for younger people.

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Figure 6: Q. This question is thinking about how you manage your money, given the removal of the spare room subsidy. Which of the following options are you aware of, to help you manage your money? Please choose all that apply. [wave 3 only]

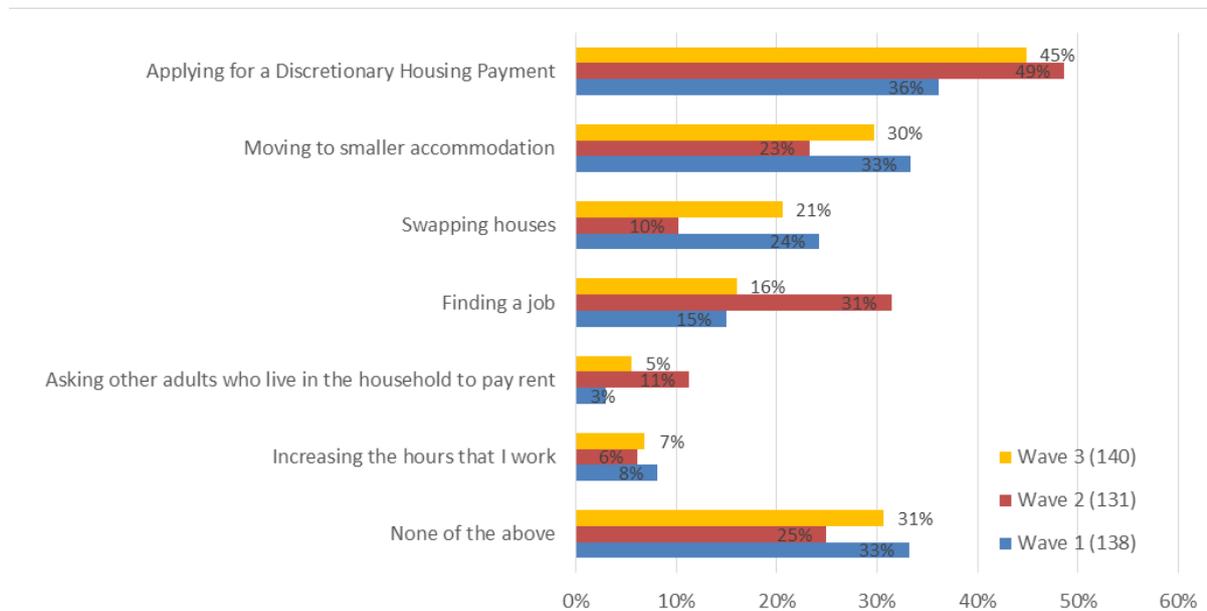
	Under 35 (37)	35-49 years old (153)	50-59 years old (180)	60-69 years old (252)
#[Moving to smaller accommodation	52%	62%	64%	56%
Applying for a Discretionary Housing Payment	49%	49%	54%	26%
Swapping houses	35%	47%	48%	39%
Finding a job	46%	38%	28%	20%
Asking other adults who live in the household to pay rent	25%	28%	20%	22%
Increasing the hours that I work	31%	33%	16%	13%
None of the above	23%	24%	22%	36%

Base: As indicated

Among those whose housing benefit has actually been reduced as a result of the RSRS, the leading method which has been *considered* to date is the application for a DHP (45% in wave 3) This action is still clearly ahead of moving to smaller accommodation (30%) and swapping houses (21%), both of which showed increases in the current wave.

## Housing costs for tenants in social housing: awareness and consideration of options

Figure 7: Q. And which of the following options have you considered to help you manage your money? Please choose all that apply.



Base: All who have had their housing benefit reduced (as indicated)

If we look across all three waves, applying for a DHP is clearly the leading action (44%). This is followed by 29% of people who said that they haven't considered any of the actions presented (although it must be noted that this is inflated by people within the older age categories).

The highest differentials between awareness and consideration at wave 3 were for moving to smaller accommodation (-27%) and swapping houses (-20%). The smallest differential was for DHP application at only 3% - illustrating awareness and consideration are roughly comparable here.

The Department has used the findings from this research, along with additional insights to agree further no/low cost communications activity. The focus of this activity is on the options that are available to those affected and the actions to take.