



Ministry of Housing,  
Communities &  
Local Government

# English Housing Survey Methodology Paper

Findings from the 2017-18 incentives experiment



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# Introduction and main findings

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1. The English Housing Survey (EHS) is a national survey of people's housing circumstances and the condition and energy efficiency of housing in England. It is commissioned by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and run by a consortium of contractors led by NatCen Social Research. From time to time, MHCLG commission work to improve EHS data collection and methodology. This report gives the findings from one such piece of work: an incentives experiment carried out by NatCen on the 2017-18 EHS, to determine the optimum strategy for incentives to maximise the EHS response rate within the existing incentive budget.
2. Falling response rates are a concern for surveys, including major UK surveys and general household surveys in other countries. Incentives are often used as a way to maintain sample quality through improving response and reducing bias, and the strategic use of incentives is an important factor in survey design.
3. The aim of the EHS experiment described in this report was to test the effect of three incentive conditions on the response rate of the EHS:
  - **£10 conditional:** £10 gift card for each participating household at the end of the interview (the EHS incentive at the time of the experiment);
  - **£10 unconditional:** £10 Post Office voucher sent to each issued address with the advance letter; and
  - **£5 unconditional, plus discretionary incentive:** £5 Post Office voucher sent to each issued address with the advance letter. Interviewers were also given two £25 discretionary incentives (in the form of gift cards) for each assignment – around 1 per 20 addresses – to use at their discretion where they felt it would make a difference to response.
4. As well as looking at response, the effect of the three incentive types on the demographic and housing profiles of the achieved sample was examined. Interviewer feedback about their experience of using the incentives in the field was also collected.
5. The incentives were tested on almost 10,000 cases over a nine month period. All the cases were part of the 2017-18 EHS sample. Interviewer assignments were randomly allocated to one of the three conditions, with roughly equal numbers in the three groups. All the addresses within an interviewer assignment received the same incentive condition.

## Main findings

6. Response rates varied across the three incentive conditions, and the rates achieved using the two unconditional incentives were at least three percentage points higher than the rates obtained by the conditional incentive.
7. There was no difference in response for the two unconditional incentives, indicating that a smaller £5 unconditional incentive combined with one or two discretionary incentives could be as effective as a larger £10 unconditional incentive.
8. Using a lower initial unconditional incentive allows the EHS to offer all potential respondents a token of appreciation, and to use the remaining incentives 'budget' towards a larger conversion incentive for those who would not otherwise take part. The advantage here is that the conversion incentive may have the potential to reduce bias by encouraging those who would not otherwise take part to do so.
9. The profile of the achieved sample was broadly similar across the three incentive groups, except for the features below.
  - The predominant tenure within the postcodes containing the sample receiving the £5 unconditional incentive with two discretionary incentives tended to have a lower proportion of Local Authority tenants compared with the sample receiving the £10 conditional incentive.<sup>1</sup>
  - The £10 unconditional incentive condition was associated with a sample profile containing a higher proportion of respondents in paid work.
10. Interviewers had mixed views about discretionary incentives. Some believed that they were effective in converting responses while others were concerned about rewarding non-participation. Some of the issues the interviewers raised provided useful information for developing guidance for implementing the incentives, for example, strategies for using the incentives or approaches for introducing the incentives to respondents. At a practical level, interviewers were good at keeping track of the incentives used.

## Acknowledgements and further queries

11. Each year the English Housing Survey relies on the contributions of a large number of people and organisations. The Ministry of Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) would particularly like to thank the following people and organisations, without whom this report would not have been possible:

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis was carried out before the full EHS datasets were available. The analysis, therefore, could not use the validated tenure information available on the EHS and had to use the 'predicted tenure' of the sampled addresses derived from the predominant tenure within the postcode that contained the address. Predominant tenure was identified using Experian's Residata, a database containing information obtained from a number of sources including insurance companies, Census, etc.

all the households who gave up their time to take part in the survey, NatCen Social Research, the Building Research Establishment (BRE) and CADS Housing Surveys.

12. This report was produced by Melanie Doyle, Hollie Jones and Matt Jonas at NatCen Social Research.
13. If you have any queries about this report, would like any further information or have suggestions for analyses you would like to see included in future EHS reports, please contact [ehs@communities.gov.uk](mailto:ehs@communities.gov.uk).
14. The responsible analyst for this report is: Stephanie Freeth, Housing and Planning Analysis Division, MHCLG. Contact via [ehs@communities.gov.uk](mailto:ehs@communities.gov.uk)

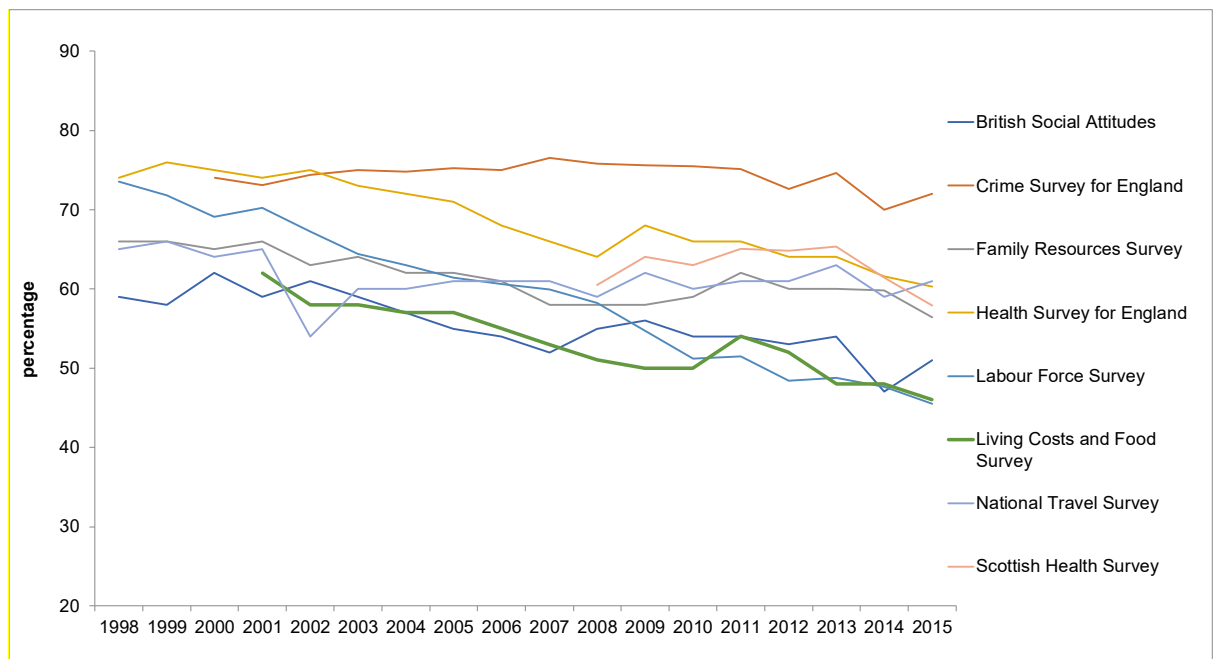
# Chapter 1

## Background

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1.1 For some time now, the major face-to-face random probability surveys in the UK have found it challenging to maintain the response rates to the level that they have traditionally achieved, Figures 1.1.<sup>2</sup> Response rates of the interview survey of the English Housing Survey (EHS) has also fallen, from 62% in 2011-12 to 50% in 2016-17.<sup>3,4</sup> Maximising response rate to the interview survey is important to the EHS. A surveyor carries out a physical survey of the dwelling of half the households responding to the EHS interview, a low response rate to the interview survey may mean that an insufficient number of dwellings would be available for the physical survey.

**Figure 1.1: Trends in response rates on major UK surveys, 1998 to 2015**



Source: Bolling and Smith, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Bolling, K. and Smith, P. (2017) Declining Response Rates and their Impact. Presentation given at the SRA Summer Event “Where now for the random probability survey?”, London, 29 June 2017 (<http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/keith-bolling-and-patten-smith-declining-response-rates-and-their-impact.pdf>)

<sup>3</sup> English housing survey technical advice note: survey overview and methodology - 2011 to 2012 update ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/211301/Survey\\_Overview\\_and\\_Methodology.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/211301/Survey_Overview_and_Methodology.pdf))

<sup>4</sup> English Housing Survey 2016 to 2017: technical report (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-housing-survey-2016-to-2017-technical-report>)

- 1.2 Most large scale social surveys now use some type of financial incentive to encourage participation.<sup>5,6</sup> These usually come in two forms: ‘unconditional’ incentives – sent to all sample households in advance, or ‘conditional’ incentives – given only to those who participate.
- 1.3 While both these approaches have been shown to improve response rates<sup>7</sup>, they are not optimal financially. This is because incentives are given to respondents who would have participated in the survey without being offered an incentive or, in the case of unconditional incentives, people who did not take part at all.
- 1.4 From a broad approximation based on data from multiple face-to-face surveys and experiments, NatCen Social Research has estimated that, with current levels of incentives, between 10% and 20% of those who take part are persuaded to do so by the financial incentives offered.
- 1.5 In a climate where achieving response rates is becoming more difficult year-on-year, and survey budgets are under pressure, methodologists in NatCen Social Research and other organisations have been experimenting with possibilities for targeting incentives.<sup>8,9</sup>
- 1.6 This report describes a split sample experiment carried out for the 2017-18 EHS to test three different approaches to financial incentives: a £10 conditional incentive (the EHS incentive at the time of the experiment); a £10 unconditional incentive; and a £5 unconditional incentive combined with two discretionary incentives worth £25 each to be offered to up to two households.

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<sup>5</sup> Simmons, Eleanor, and Amanda Wilmot. "Incentive payments on social surveys: A literature review." *Social survey methodology bulletin* (2004): 1-11.

<sup>6</sup> Singer, E., & Ye, C. (2013). The use and effects of incentives in surveys. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 645(1), 112-141.

<sup>7</sup> Mercer, A., Caporaso, A., Cantor, D., & Townsend, R. (2015). How much gets you how much? Monetary incentives and response rates in household surveys. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, nfu059.

<sup>8</sup> Laurie, H., & Lynn, P. (2009). The use of respondent incentives on longitudinal surveys. *Methodology of longitudinal surveys*, 205-233.

<sup>9</sup> Colicchia, M. A., Czaplewski, M., & Jaszczak, A. (2012). Refusal conversion incentives and participation in a longitudinal study of older adults. *Survey Practice*, 5(3). Chicago

# Chapter 2

## Methodology

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### Sample

- 2.1 In 2017-18, a full split sample experiment was carried out on the English Housing Survey to test the effect of three incentive conditions on response rates. All interview assignments carried out between July 2017 and the end of March 2018 – around 680 in total – were included in the experiment.<sup>10</sup> Assignments were randomly allocated to one of the three incentives conditions so that each of the conditions had a roughly equal number of assignments. Each assignment had around 29 addresses and all the addresses within each assignment were allocated to the same condition and, therefore received the same type of incentive.
- 2.2 The experimental conditions were as follows:
1. **£10 conditional:** £10 gift card for each participating household at the end of the interview (the EHS incentive at the time of the experiment);
  2. **£10 unconditional:** £10 Post Office voucher sent to each issued address with the advance letter; and
  3. **£5 unconditional, plus discretionary incentive:** £5 Post Office voucher sent to each issued address with the advance letter. Interviewers were also given two £25 discretionary incentives (in the form of gift cards) for each assignment – around 1 per 20 addresses – to use at their discretion where they felt it would make a difference to response.

### Documents and procedures

- 2.3 Advance letters were sent to each issued address with information about the survey and the incentive for taking part: each address was given information about the conditional or unconditional incentive that applied to them.

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<sup>10</sup> EHS fieldwork is split into four quarters covered over the course of the fieldwork year, from April 2017 to March 2018: the incentives split sample experiment covered all addresses in quarters 2 to 4



- 2.4 The advance letter did not contain any information about the discretionary incentive; that was introduced by the interviewer at the point it was offered to the household.
- 2.5 Interviewers who had previously worked on the EHS received a written briefing on the experiment while interviewers who were new to the survey were briefed on the experiment in person as part of the face-to-face briefing for new interviewers. Some broad guidelines were given about when to deliver the discretionary incentives offered in Condition 3, but it was made clear that those were only guidelines. The guidelines included offering a discretionary incentive to those who would not have taken part otherwise and using them towards the end of the fieldwork period, as well as a suggested form of wording for introducing the discretionary incentive.
- 2.6 Field Performance Managers responsible for supporting and monitoring interviewers in the field were also briefed on the details of the experiment.

## Analysis

- 2.7 Response rates, sample characteristics and interviewer feedback were analysed to establish the optimum approach for incentives in future English Housing Surveys.
- 2.8 Survey response was compared between the three experimental groups.<sup>11</sup> The EHS consists of two components: an interview survey and, for a sample of respondents, a physical inspection of the dwelling they occupy. The analysis compared interview response rates and non-response across the three conditions, as well as rates of agreement to the physical survey. The outcomes for the physical survey itself were not compared.
- 2.9 Unweighted data were used to compare the demographic profile of the three incentive groups to determine whether and how the incentives changed the profile of the responding sample.
- 2.10 Interviewers' feedback on their experience and views of the incentives used was systematically collected and analysed qualitatively.

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<sup>11</sup> Outcome classes included: Refusal, Non-contact in field, Other non-contact, Other unproductive, Productive

# Chapter 3

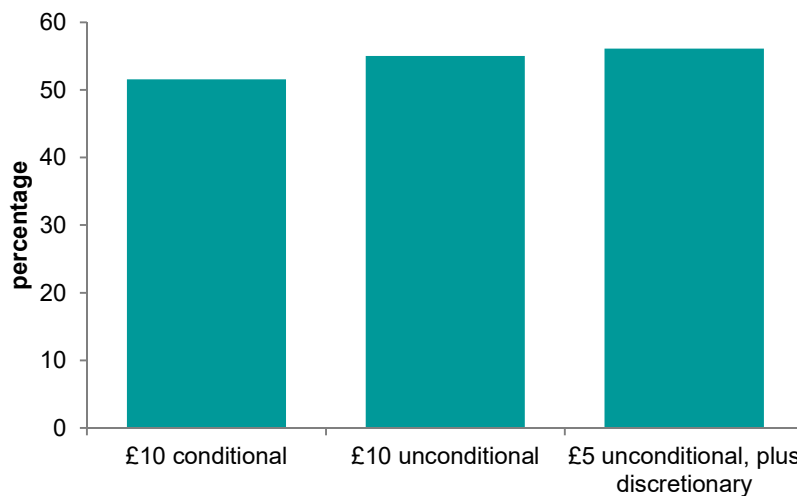
## Results

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### Response rates

- 3.1 Response rates were three to four percentage points higher when unconditional incentives were used, compared with the conditional £10 incentive used to date.
- 3.2 This increased response was evident even for the lower value unconditional incentive. The response rate was 55% among assignments offering a £10 unconditional incentive, 56% for assignments offering a £5 unconditional incentive, combined with a discretionary incentive and 52% for assignments offering a £10 conditional incentive. There was no difference in response rates between the two unconditional incentives, Annex Table 3.1 and Figure 3.1.

**Figure 3.1: Interview survey response, by incentive condition, 2017-18**



**Base: issued cases, eligible for survey (£10 conditional: 6,077; £10 unconditional: 6,027; £5 unconditional plus discretionary: 6,028)**

**Notes:**

1) underlying data are presented in Annex Table 3.1

2) Base excludes deadwood and office refusals. Corresponding response rates with office refusals included are: 50% for £10 conditional, 53% for £10 unconditional and 54% for £5 unconditional plus discretionary.

**Source: English Housing Survey 2017-18, fieldwork quarters 2 to 4**

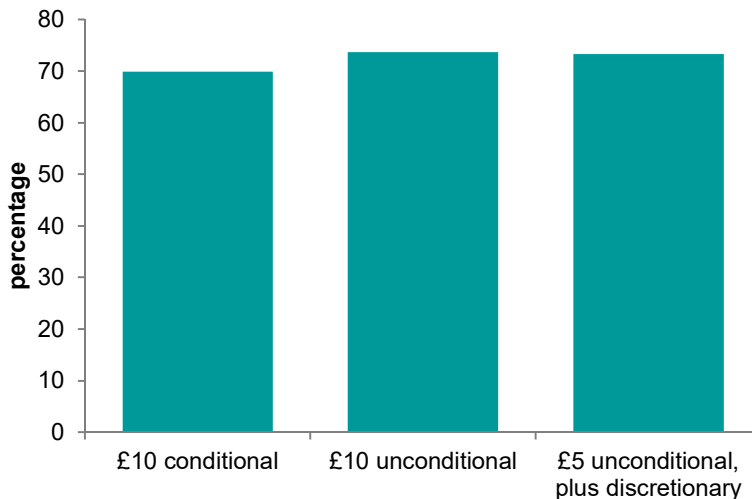
- 3.3 Refusal rates were lower for assignments where unconditional incentives were used (both 30%) compared with assignments where a £10 conditional incentive was offered (34%).

- 3.4 There were no significant differences in non-contact rates between the three incentive conditions.
- 3.5 There was a significant difference for ‘other unproductives’ – cases where the respondent was unable to take part due to illness, being in hospital or away for the entire fieldwork period. Rates of other unproductive responses were lower with the £5 unconditional incentive than with the £10 unconditional incentive.

### Agreement to the physical survey

- 3.6 Around half of interviewed respondents are invited to take part in the second stage of the EHS, involving a physical survey of the dwelling. Interviewers seek permission to make an appointment for that follow up visit at the end of the interview.
- 3.7 Higher agreement rates were achieved with the unconditional, than with the conditional incentives. The agreement rate was 70% among assignments offering a £10 conditional incentive compared with, 73% for assignments offering a £5 unconditional incentive, combined with a discretionary incentive and 74% for assignments offering a £10 unconditional incentive, Annex Table 3.1 and Figure 3.2.

**Figure 3.2: Agreement to physical survey at interview, by incentive condition**



**Base: all respondents invited to take part in the physical survey (£10 conditional: 2,462; £10 unconditional: 2,615; £5 unconditional plus discretionary: 2,619)**  
**Note: underlying data are presented in Annex Table 3.1**  
**Source: English Housing Survey 2017-18, fieldwork quarters 2 to 4**

## Differences in achieved sample profiles between the experimental conditions

3.8 The profile of the samples achieved under the three incentive conditions were compared. The profiles assessed included: age and sex of the household reference person (HRP),<sup>12</sup> tenure, dwelling type, household composition and employment status of the respondent. Except for two of the aspects, the profiles of the achieved sample was broadly similar across the three incentive groups, Table 3.1

**Table 3.1: The impact of the incentive condition on sample profiles**

age of HRP	no significant difference across incentive conditions
sex of HRP	no significant difference across incentive conditions
predominant tenure within postcode of the sampled address	£5 unconditional plus discretionary incentive group were less likely to be Local Authority tenants than the £10 conditional incentive group
dwelling type	no significant difference across incentive conditions
household composition	no significant difference across incentive conditions
employment status of the main respondent	£10 unconditional incentive group more likely to be in paid employment than the £10 conditional incentive group

**Notes:**

1) underlying data are presented in Annex Tables 3.2 and 3.3

2) The only tenure information available when the analysis was carried out was the 'predicted tenure' of the sampled addresses derived from the predominant tenure within the postcode that contained that address. Predominant tenure was identified using Experian's Residata, a database containing information obtained from a number of sources including insurance companies, Census, etc.

Source: English Housing Survey, fieldwork quarters 2 to 4, unweighted response data

### Age of HRP

3.9 The mean age of the HRP in all the three groups was 53 years. The proportion in the different age groups did not vary significantly across incentive conditions, Annex Table 3.2.

### Sex of HRP

3.10 There were also no significant differences in the sex of HRP across the three incentive conditions. Respondents were more likely to be women (56%) than men (44%).

### Tenure

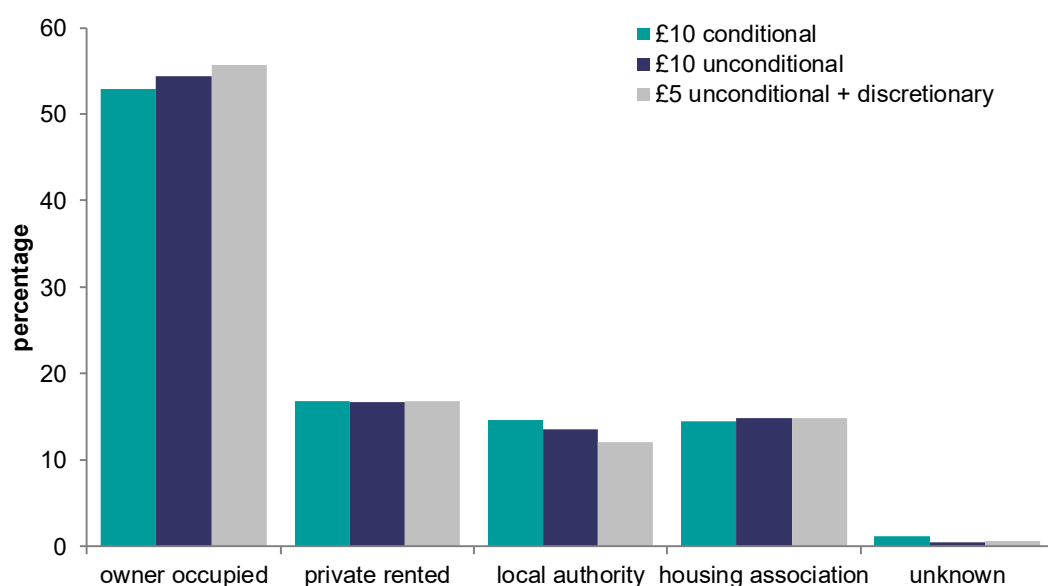
3.11 The predominant tenure within the postcodes containing the sample receiving the £5 unconditional plus discretionary incentive tended to have a lower proportion of Local Authority tenants (12%) when compared with the conditional

<sup>12</sup> The household reference person (HRP) is the person in whose name the accommodation is owned or rented.

incentive (15%). The other types of tenure did not vary across incentive conditions, Annex Table 3.3 and Figure 3.3.

3.12 The analysis was carried out before the full EHS datasets were available. It, therefore, could not use the validated tenure information available on the EHS and had to use the ‘predicted tenure’ of the sampled addresses derived from the predominant tenure within the postcode that contained the address.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 3.3: Predominant tenure in respondent’s postcode (‘predicted tenure’) by incentive condition**



**Base: all interviewed respondents**  
 (£10 conditional n=3129, £10 unconditional n=3312, £5 unconditional plus discretionary n=3386)

**Notes:**

- 1) underlying data are presented in Annex Table 3.3
- 2) The only tenure information available when the analysis was carried out was the ‘predicted tenure’ of the sampled addresses derived from the predominant tenure within the postcode that contained that address. Predominant tenure was identified using Experian’s Residata, a database containing information obtained from a number of sources including insurance companies, Census, etc.

**Source: English Housing Survey 2017-18, fieldwork quarters 2 to 4**

3.13 The number of interviews each of the conditions had achieved was assessed to gauge whether they would be able to yield sufficient number of interviews among private and social renters to support analysis.

3.14 The overall number of respondents was higher when unconditional incentives were used than with the original conditional incentive: 3,129 interviews were achieved with the £10 conditional incentive, compared with 3,312 when a £10

<sup>13</sup> Predominant tenure was identified using Experian’s Residata, a database containing information obtained from a number of sources including insurance companies, Census, etc.

unconditional incentive was used and 3,386 with a £5 unconditional combined with discretionary incentives, Annex Table 3.2.

3.15 The number of interviews from respondents whose postcode predominantly contained local authority renters ranged from 409 when the £5 unconditional plus discretionary incentive was used, to 458 when a conditional £10 incentive was used, Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2: Number of interviews achieved, by tenure and incentive condition**

*all interviewed in quarters 2 to 4*

	2017-18		
	£10 conditional	£10 unconditional	£5 unconditional plus discretionary
			<i>number of respondents</i>
Owner occupied	1,656	1,802	1,883
Private rented	524	554	570
Local Authority	458	448	409
Housing association	454	490	504
Unknown	37	18	20
<b>all tenures</b>	<b>3,129</b>	<b>3,312</b>	<b>3,386</b>

Base: all interviewed respondents

Notes:

- 1) underlying data are presented in Annex Table 3.3
- 2) The only tenure information available when the analysis was carried out was the 'predicted tenure' of the sampled addresses derived from the predominant tenure within the postcode that contained that address. Predominant tenure was identified using Experian's Residata, a database containing information obtained from a number of sources including insurance companies, Census, etc.

Source: English Housing Survey, fieldwork quarters 2 to 4, unweighted response data

### Dwelling type

3.16 There were no significant differences in the type of dwelling occupied by respondents in the three incentive groups. Overall, 79% of respondents lived in a house or bungalow, 21% in a flat, Annex Table 3.3.

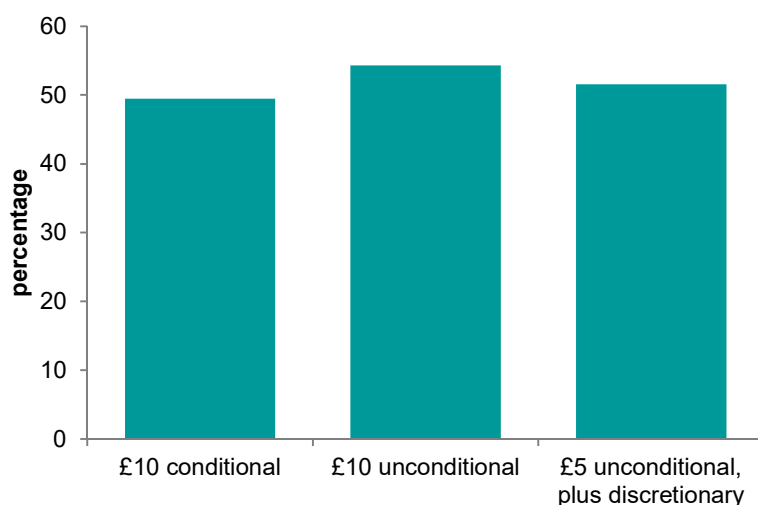
### Household composition

3.17 There were no significant differences in household composition between the three groups. In the sample as a whole, 29% were single person households, 27% couples, 41% families, and 3% other types of household, Annex Table 3.2.

### Employment status

3.18 When examining the employment status of the main respondent (the HRP or his/her partner), respondents in the £10 unconditional incentive group were more likely to be in paid employment (54%) than those in the £10 conditional incentive group (49%), Figure 4.2 and Annex Table 3.2.

**Figure 3.4: Proportion of respondents in paid work, by incentive condition**



**Base:** all interviewed respondents with valid response to employment status

(£10 conditional n=3125, £10 unconditional n=3302, £5 unconditional plus discretionary n=3384)

**Note:** underlying data are presented in Annex Table 3.2

**Source:** English Housing Survey 2017-18, fieldwork quarters 2 to 4

## Feedback from interviewers

3.19 Interviewers were asked to provide feedback about the different approaches and on how they had used the discretionary incentives.

3.20 Twenty-one interviewers provided feedback. Interviewers on the EHS typically work on more than one EHS assignment in a survey year. All interviewers who provided feedback had used the £10 conditional incentive, 16 had tested the £10 unconditional incentive and 13 the £5 unconditional plus discretionary incentive.

3.21 Some interviewers had expressed a preference for one of the three incentive types while others did not have a preference. The conditional incentive was preferred by some interviewers as a way to counter reluctance because interviewers preferred giving the voucher at the end of the interview.

3.22 Interviewers offered some comments about the £10 incentive, for example, '£10 is not enough' or the '£10 incentive has lost its value and needs to be more eye-catching'.

### Attitudes to the £25 discretionary incentive

3.23 Around one quarter of respondents offered a discretionary incentive went on to take part in the interview survey. The interviewers generally said that they offered the discretionary incentive after a refusal, on a separate visit. Some pre-

empted a refusal by offering the discretionary incentive when they felt the respondent was about to refuse.

- 3.24 On average, each of the interviewers who had the option of offering discretionary incentives could offer them to two households per assignment. Interviewers did not use *all* the discretionary incentives available to them. That may be due to respondents refusing the incentive offered rather than to the interviewers not offering them to respondents. Several interviewers mentioned they would like more discretionary incentives made available to them.
- 3.25 Interviewers were divided about whether they felt comfortable offering the discretionary incentives. Some agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable offering them while others were neutral or did not feel comfortable. Some interviewers agreed that the discretionary vouchers made them more confident while others disagreed.
- 3.26 There were mixed views on how effective the discretionary incentives were at converting refusals, with some interviewers expressing no view, some agreeing, and others disagreeing. An interviewer said that the discretionary incentive would not make a difference to refusals; having made a valid point for refusal to take part, respondents would not change their mind when offered more money. In contrast, another interviewer found the discretionary incentive to be a useful tool and a further interviewer noted that the effectiveness of the discretionary incentive was dependent on the area.
- 3.27 Some interviewers had misgivings about the discretionary incentives: one or two saw the discretionary incentive as a bribe or felt that it 'excessively rewards uncooperative interviewees'. Those interviewers may have felt reluctant to or less confident introducing the discretionary voucher

### **Other operational issues raised**

- 3.28 The interviewers reported very few operational issues. On the whole, interviewers found it easy to keep track of the discretionary incentives that they had offered. Some interviewers reported that respondents occasionally did not receive the introductory letter containing the unconditional incentive. The design of the experiment had anticipated that this would happen and had provision for replacement vouchers to be issued in those situations.
- 3.29 The feedback also contained many useful suggestions for developing material for addressing the concerns interviewers had with administering the discretionary incentive. Examples include highlighting the impact of the unconditional incentives on interview survey response and physical survey conversion rates, and compiling briefing material or a training exercise on introducing discretionary incentive.



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