

Reducing social housing stigma in England: recommendations for the housing sector

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This briefing note highlights a number of concerns related to stigma in social housing and recommends a range of policy interventions that respond to these.

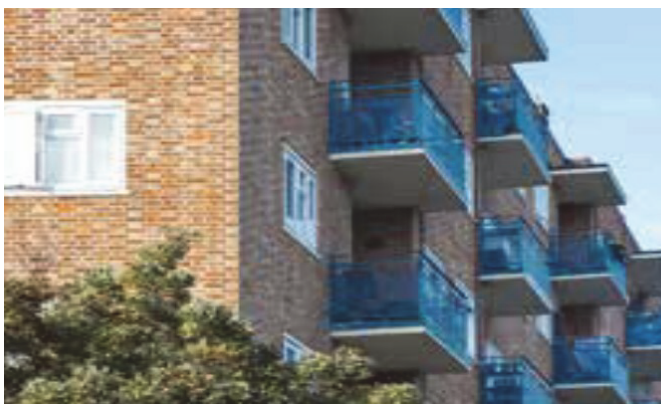
A recent report published by Dr Mercy Denedo from Durham University Business School and Dr Amanze Ejiogu, Newcastle University Business School (formerly at Leicester University) titled "Stigma and Social Housing in England"[1] revealed evidence of stigmatization of social housing, an issue that, until now, was little understood. It explored how stigma is constructed, experienced and challenged and found that stigma took different forms and was evident at different levels.

The UK government acknowledged that stigma was the most consistent theme raised by residents in its social housing green paper and this was also raised in the recent Select Committee for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' report "The Regulation of Social Housing".

Following the publication of the report, a consultation was undertaken with different stakeholders across England, to deepen our understanding of the issues around stigma in social housing. This resulted in the production of a report, Stigma and Social Housing: Feedback on the consultation responses. [2]

[1] Ejiogu A. and Denedo M. (2021). Stigma and Social Housing in England. Durham: Durham University.

[2] Denedo, M. and Ejiogu, A. (2022). Stigma and Social Housing in England: Feedback on the consultation responses. Durham University/Newcastle University.



Key Findings

- Key findings from the consultation report were that affordable social housing should be regarded as a fundamental right, i.e. that homes of a decent standard should be available to all households who chose to live in social housing.
- Residualization and shortage of social housing are key drivers of stigma. This is worsened by the governments housing policy emphasis on increasing home ownership.
- Politicians use stigmatizing language in relation to social housing to justify their housing and welfare policies. This stigmatizing narrative from politicians and policy makers is a key driver of the negative media narrative on social housing.
- The spread and intensity of stigma in social housing was linked to the absence of a strong tenant voice, which implies that political and media narratives were left unchallenged. There is therefore a need for a strong tenants' voice at national, regional and local levels to challenge political and media narratives.
- Embedding tenants' voices would be beneficial for housing providers in understanding the lived experience of their tenants, in challenging the stigma experienced by tenants and in promoting a co-designed culture for service deliveries.
- The regulatory system needs to be redesigned to put tenants, and the interests of tenants at the heart of regulation.

Recommendations

The key findings of this consultation report have led to a number of recommendations that should be considered by, policy makers, housing associations, housing regulators and professional bodies, advocacy groups, tenants and representative bodies.

1. Current housing and welfare policy directions of the residualization and depletion of social housing stock needs to be reversed. This will facilitate the creation of a social housing system with sufficient stock to meet the needs of a diverse population.
2. Recognize affordable housing as a fundamental human right and focus policy on its provision. Affordability of housing should be at the core of government housing policies to ensure the provision of social homes that meet the needs of a diverse set of people.
3. Policymakers and those in position of power are encouraged to raise awareness of stigma in social housing by setting the right tone to influence policies and the media stigmatizing narratives.
4. The media is encouraged to break the stigma by reporting factual, credible and balanced stories, and not be sensational when reporting on social housing and its residents. Media narrative can be improved by the adoption of guidelines such as the Fair press for tenants' guide produced by the Stop Social Housing Stigma campaign.
5. Government should support the establishment of a stronger national tenants' voice to give tenants an independent platform to effectively engage at the national, regional and local levels acknowledging them as experts and co-regulators of the sector.
6. The government should consider the introduction of a regulatory metric where housing providers' performance and compensation are tied to service delivery. The Regulator of Social Housing and the Housing Ombudsman should be empowered to proactively enforce consumer and service-related standards.
7. The housing sector needs to lobby for increased and sustained funding to build high-quality, energy-efficient social housing so that it can be available and affordable to everyone, and not residualized to those in precarious circumstances.
8. The acute shortage of social housing should also be addressed through the withdrawal of Right to Buy.

"Tenants need to be acknowledged as experts in their experience and listened to! Properly."



"Part of the stigma arises from the language attached to home ownership. [...] It is unacceptable to stigmatize a third of the population! [...] People must be told that there are other ways to succeed in life other than to own a home. This is not to hide the unfair benefits of home ownership. In fact, "levelling up" is far more important in the housing sectors than in the geographical differences within the UK."



"The trouble is the narrative that comes from the higher echelons of society travels down to the way contractors speak to tenants. I'm always made to feel like a second-class citizen... They need to understand what their storytelling is doing. If they could empathise more."