

## Challenging Stigma in Social Housing - The Tackling Stigma Journey Planner

Stigma has been a persistent concern raised by social housing tenants. Our previous research - **"Stigma and Social Housing in England"** and **"Stigma in Social Housing in England: Feedback on the Consultation Responses"** - identified stigma as a deeply rooted issue within the social housing sector and wider society and emphasised that it must not be overlooked. Both reports called for a collective, concerted effort from stakeholders - including government, politicians, media, housing providers, and tenants - to address stigma and drive the meaningful changes that tenants have long advocated for.

In 2023, we launched a project in partnership with the Stop Social Housing Stigma Campaign (SSHS), the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH), TPAS, and YD Consultants to provide a framework and resources to enable tenants and landlords to collaboratively work to tackle stigma. As part of this project, we launched three set of surveys in 2024 and gathered responses from 364 social housing tenants, 63 housing professionals, and 9 contractors. Respondents strongly opposed the development of another superficial "tick-box" toolkit and called for tools that would drive genuine cultural change in tenant engagement, experience, and accountability.

Drawing on the survey findings, we developed the initial version of the *Tackling Stigma Journey Planner*, which informed a series of 13 focus group consultations: eight (8) with tenants, four (4) with housing professionals, and one with contractors. Across the consultations, participants emphasised that addressing social housing stigma should be viewed as a journey, requiring a culture of trust and accountability at its core.

The feedback from the surveys and focus groups shaped a prototype *Tackling Stigma Journey Planner*, launched at the Housing Community Summit in September 2024. This framework was piloted with 11 Pioneer Traveller landlords - six local authorities (including one Arms-Length Management Organisation) and five housing associations. Lessons and case studies from the pilot are presented in a separate report titled **"Tackling Social Housing Stigma Journey Planner: Pioneer Travellers' Case Studies and Learning Points."**

Building on the pilot phase, survey responses, and consultation feedback, we developed a refined and more comprehensive framework. A summary is included in this report, while the full version is presented in a separate report titled **"The Tackling Stigma Journey Planner."**

Complementing this report, the *Pioneer Travellers' case studies and learning points*, and the *Journey Planner*, we produced fifteen short films featuring tenants, housing professionals, and academics speaking candidly about social housing stigma. These films provide personal insights into the construction and experience of stigma and offer practical recommendations for addressing it. They are available on the Durham University and SSHS websites.

We hope that these materials will serve as powerful advocacy tools. We encourage housing providers, trade and professional bodies - including the Chartered Institute of Housing and TPAS - to integrate them into staff training and recruitment programmes, helping to raise awareness, enhance organisational culture, and recruit compassionate, high-performing staff. We also encourage Board Members, Councillors, and senior staff to lead by example and undertake their own tackling stigma journey.

Furthermore, we hope that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Regulator of Social Housing, and the Housing Ombudsman will use these resources to influence standards and policies that promote greater accountability, transparency, respectful and inclusive tenant engagement, and the provision of decent, high-quality accommodation across the sector.

Ultimately, our ambition is to inform policymaking, shift media narratives, and challenge public perceptions of social housing estates and their residents.

## **Recommendations from this report**

This report examines the findings from the consultations (through survey and focus groups); and provided additional recommendations to support tenants, housing providers, policymakers and others in tackling stigma in social housing.

### **a) Recommendations from the survey and focus groups with contractors**

In responding to the survey and in the focus groups, contractors and other stakeholders made several suggestions on what they thought would be effective in challenging stigma. These are summarised below:

#### **i) Education and Awareness:**

- Training programs for staff on diversity, equity, and inclusion and unconscious bias can equip them to sensitively handle stigma-related issues.

**ii) Tenant Engagement:**

- Engaging tenants in decision-making processes and design on repairs to be completed and quality measures within the contract will ensure their voices are heard and valued, which can help combat feelings of stigma.

**iii) Advocacy and Partnerships:**

- Collaborating with local organisations, councils, and advocacy groups can amplify efforts to challenge stigma. This includes advocating for policies that promote dignity and reduce discrimination against social housing residents.
- Developing partnerships with organisations focused on social equity can provide additional resources and support for stigma reduction initiatives.

**iv) Feedback and Continuous Improvement:**

- Establishing mechanisms for collecting feedback from tenants about their experiences can guide ongoing efforts to address stigma. This feedback is crucial for refining strategies and ensuring they are effective.
- Facilitating effective communication between contractors and tenants prior to contractors arriving onsite can help manage expectations and reduce the likelihood of tenants feeling that their needs are unmet.
- Regular collaboration between the landlord, staff and tenants can review progress and success and can help to reignite the importance of tackling stigma.

**v) Self-Assessment Tools:**

- Developing tools for housing providers that include checklists, case studies, and training resources can empower organisations to assess and improve their practices related to stigma.

**b) Recommendations from the survey and focus groups with housing professionals**

Through the survey and focus groups, housing professionals made a number of suggestions in terms of what they think has been effective and what needs to be done to challenge stigma. These include:

## 1. Awareness and Education:

- **Training for Staff:** Implement training programmes that focus on understanding stigma, unconscious bias, and respectful communication. This helps staff recognise their own biases and promotes a culture of respect towards tenants.
- **Community Workshops:** Organise workshops that bring together residents and housing professionals to discuss stigma and its impacts. This approach can help foster a fundamental culture rooted in trust, empathy, accountability and transparency, understanding, and effective communication. It encourages active listening and open dialogue with tenants, which are essential in breaking down the barriers often created by stigma.

## 2. Positive Communication:

- **Use of Language:** Shift the language used in communications to avoid terms that carry stigma. For example, referring to individuals as “tenants” or “residents” rather than “customers” can help change perceptions and foster a culture of fairness, respectful and inclusive engagement.
- **Promoting Positive Stories:** Actively share success stories and positive experiences of residents living in social housing. This can counteract negative media portrayals and highlight the diversity and contributions of residents.

## 3. Engagement and Empowerment:

- **Tenant Involvement:** Encourage tenants to take active roles in the co-production, co-design and decision-making processes within housing organisations. This can empower them and give them a voice in shaping policies that affect their lives.
- **Support Tenant Movements:** Housing providers should support tenant-led initiatives like the Stop Social Housing Stigma Campaign, which encourages tenants to advocate for themselves and challenge negative stereotypes.

## 4. Collaboration with Media:

- **Media Engagement:** Work with local media to promote fair and balanced reporting on social housing issues. This includes providing

guidelines on how to report on social housing and its residents positively.

## **5. Feedback Mechanisms:**

- **Anonymous Feedback:** Implement anonymous feedback systems where tenants can share their experiences and perceptions regarding stigma. This can help organisations identify areas for improvement.

## **6. Community Building:**

- **Mixed Tenure Developments:** Promote high standard mixed tenure housing developments that integrate social housing with private housing. Promoting a high standard within mixed-tenure estates also plays a role in addressing stigma. Ensuring that the quality of housing for social renters is consistent with that of private homeowners - through design, build quality, and maintenance - can foster community cohesion. It prevents social renters from being visibly distinguished by details such as their door colours and quality, construction (i.e. exterior and interior) standards, or segregating hedges. Investing in a high standard mixed tenure estates can contribute to building a more integrated and equitable living environment.

## **c) Recommendations from the survey and focus groups with tenants**

Suggestions for what could be done to challenge stigma were made through the survey and focus groups and are summarised below:

### **1. Education and Awareness:**

- a) **Training for Staff:** Housing providers should implement training programmes for their staff to raise awareness about stigma and unconscious bias and its impacts. This includes educating them on how to treat tenants with respect, fairness and dignity, and understanding the biases that may exist within their own attitudes.
- b) **Community Education:** Initiatives that educate the broader community about the realities of social housing can help dispel myths and stereotypes. This could involve campaigns that highlight the positive contributions of social housing tenants to their communities.

### **2. Tenant Empowerment and Accountability:**

- a) **Involvement in Decision-Making:** Encouraging tenants to participate in decision-making processes can empower them and help challenge the stigma. This includes involving them in discussions about policies that affect their living conditions and community.
- b) **Support for Tenant Movements:** Housing providers should join and support tenant-led initiatives. One of such initiatives is the "Stop Social Housing Stigma" Campaign (SSHS), which aims to raise awareness and advocate for better treatment of social housing tenants. SSHS has collaboratively published a *Tackling Stigma Journey Planner* to support housing providers and their tenants in working together to address issues that affect them.

### 3. Policy and Structural Changes:

- a) **Accountability and Transparency to improve tenant engagement and culture:** Housing providers were encouraged to demonstrate greater accountability and transparency in both their decision-making processes and service delivery. Participants in the focus group discussions emphasised that meaningful engagement with tenants can only be achieved when housing providers go beyond basic regulatory compliance and actively build relationships rooted in trust and mutual accountability. Many believed that this approach would lead to tangible improvements in the quality of services, delivered by both housing providers and their contractors and will help tackle stigma associated with their providers, improve fairness and respect and overall, improve the culture within their organisation.
- b) **Improving Housing Conditions:** Ensuring that social housing is well-maintained and visually appealing can help change perceptions. When properties are kept in good repair, inside and outside, it can enhance the overall image of social housing.
- c) **Addressing Anti-Social Behaviour:** Proactively managing anti-social behaviour within communities can help create a more positive environment, which in turn can reduce stigma associated with living in social housing.

### 4. Positive Representation:

- a) **Showcasing Success Stories:** Highlighting success stories of tenants who have improved their lives through social housing can counter

negative narratives. This can be done through media campaigns, community events, and social media.

- b) **Promoting Community Engagement:** Organising community events that bring together tenants and the wider community can foster understanding and reduce stigma. This includes activities that encourage interaction and collaboration among residents.

## 5. **Engagement with Local Authorities, Central Government, Regulators and Watchdogs:**

- a) **Advocacy for Policy Changes:** Engaging with local government and policymakers to advocate for fair treatment and resources for social housing to help address systemic issues that contribute to stigma.

- b) **Recommendation for Government**

In issuing the direction on Competence and Conduct to the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH), ensure:

- The professionalism of social housing customer facing staff is not the only focus
- The spirit and the words of the Directive to RSH, is explicit to address social housing stigma through identification and collaboration between landlords and tenants, locally/
- Education programmes and qualifications address expectations that training for staff will include unconscious bias of stigma, organisational culture, and behaviours of staff

- c) **Recommendation for Regulator of Social Housing (RSH)**

- i) **Regulatory Standards**

In your review of the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Regulatory Standard, or a result of any new Competence and Conduct Standard directive from Government:

- Be explicit about the need for landlords to demonstrate they have considered localised stigma with tenants and have a plan to address this issue.

- Ensure educational qualifications and staff training includes the building of an understanding of the impact of landlord work which can exacerbate stigma and the need to collaborate with tenants in defining and addressing landlord culture and behaviours of staff.
- Ensure assurance on “diversity” includes inequalities and discrimination to address social housing stigma.

**ii) Code of Practice, which accompanies the Consumer Standards:**

- Expand the “fairness and respect” guidance to include examples and ideas from the Journey Planner and other reports of stigma to work with tenants to define and address stigma.
- Expand the “Local Cooperation” include ideas from the Journey Planner and Case Studies on stigma to showcase collaboration between landlords and tenants through co-design and coproduction.

**d) Recommendation to the Housing Ombudsman Service**

- Expand your recent work on “4 tests of good communication” in complaints to review good practice, work with academics and the Social Housing Stigma Campaign to deliver an Insight Report and recommendation to landlords on reviewing landlord culture and behaviours which can lead to complaints and concerns from tenants.