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It is a great honour to be asked to deliver the Sarah Webb Memorial lecture this evening.

Why are social housing tenants stigmatised?

Introduction

I want to take as my subject tonight the demonisation of social tenants, best summed up by programmes like “Benefits Street” and “How to get a Council House”. Of course these programmes are mainly commissioned and edited for entertainment value. The “real” people become caricatures. But many of us who work in housing have reacted with anger to some of the negative portrayals. When our customers are marginalised and misrepresented we feel it too. And underlying this concern is the fact that “public opinion” appears to support cuts in benefits, sanctions on the poor and disabled, and a negative attitude to black people and immigrants.

‘By the margin of 2.5 to 1, the British public said that the benefits system is too generous ... 85% of the British public believed that there are groups of people who claim benefits who should have their benefits cut’. (1)

In response there has been a well orchestrated “We love Council Housing” campaign, and I salute tonight’s Chair Michelle Reid for her sterling efforts. While I count myself a supporter I want to offer something of a critique.

Most efforts to date have consisted of mature, well paid housing professionals announcing that they were born and brought up in Council housing. There have been touching black and white photos of tidy front lawns, smiling babies in Silver Cross prams, and ladies in crisp cotton skirts; a Golden Age when we all played out in the sunshine and enjoyed chatting to our neighbours.

The problem, as I see it (and I have to declare an interest – I was *not* born in Council housing), is threefold.

- Most of these advocates did not remain in Council housing

- Council housing is very different today, compared to the Council housing of the 50s and 60s
- It is an approach which glosses over some of the very real the problems we have in managing social housing today.

Let me deal with each of these three points.

Firstly take my husband's family. He was born in Council housing in East London, was moved to a pretty semi- in Harlow New Town, with a garden, new schools, fresh air and friends. But as soon as they could his family bought a modest home in Croydon and stayed there until they died. They perceived the move to owner-occupation as offering more choice, and saw a mortgage as a better investment than rent.

Secondly Council housing has changed, especially in terms of the people we house. John Hills report(2) showed definitively that since the 1970s there has been a steady decline in the proportion of better off people living in social housing. The richest third of the population had almost completely deserted social housing by 2004. A report by the Smith Institute in 2008 found:

“Social housing was until the mid 1960s the tenure of choice for the many. The depressing conclusion is that social housing has become an indicator of risk for adult life chances, above and beyond what might be expected. As well as poorer households being increasingly concentrated in social housing, social housing has become more concentrated in deprived areas.” (3)

There was a time when only the upper echelons of the working class got Council housing and the poorest rented rooms from private landlords. When I was the Director of Housing in Brighton & Hove, half our executive team had come from Council housing. But we recognised that, like the locally-sourced football team, this was going out of fashion. We knew we were housing needier and needier people, with hardly a skilled working class family in sight. Last year there were almost 1.7 million names on local authority housing registers in the UK, compared with 212,000 lets in the year. This means only 12% of registered housing need was met.

Thirdly I suppose my main beef is that you can't deal with the crude TV propaganda with equally blunt instruments.

(sings)

You say “it’s disreputable”. We say “it’s delectable!”.
You say “it’s Dirty” – we say “it’s Pretty!”
“Nicey!”/”Nasty!”. “Hate it!”/”Love it!” ...
Let’s call the whole thing off....

What I am arguing for is a more nuanced conversation with the public about social housing (and I include housing association housing, although I think “I have a housing association flat” is not a negative statement). These crude dichotomies don’t help anyone.

The new realities

I am sure everyone in the CIH would wish to bust the myths. We are all offended by the mythical social tenant – a beer drinking man, with tattoos and a vest; a smoking, swearing woman with lots of children; unemployed, ignorant people, parodied by Harry Enfield’s *Wayne and Waynette*, and by Little Britain’s *Vicky Pollard*. These TV themes are backed up by the populist press, and often supported passively by the general public.

So, while we must accept that allocation policies have increased the number of socially disadvantaged tenants, and that the inhuman design and poor maintenance of many big estates has added to the problem, we as the housing profession have a most important role.

Firstly the facts

Everyone here will know that social housing tenants are diverse and varied. The only thing which unites them is that someone in authority deemed them to be in need of social housing.

It is my experience (especially in London) that the majority of new lettings go to more disadvantaged house holds, although our longer standing tenants may be better off. And of course over time many tenants experience improved circumstances. But the fact remains that 70% of tenants nationally moving into social housing were not in work, either due to being unemployed (23%), long-term sick or disabled (13%) or retired (19%) or for other reasons (15%). (4)

But whatever the exact proportions of tenants in your area (and I am very aware that where overall need is lower social housing is more available to better off households) I would divide Notting Hill's customer group crudely into three main segments.

1. Successful working families who are more or less self sufficient, requiring financial support through tax credits and housing benefit merely because the gap between housing and wages is especially high in some areas. This group includes long-standing tenants who may now be retired. Most of this group are poor, but don't need additional help. We would say that seven out of ten households are in this category.
2. Vulnerable people who are housed in social housing because they need support. Their support may come from social services, health, the voluntary sector and from us - the landlord. A significant number of those we evict each year for ASB, or huge arrears, are from this group. We often have to end our relationship precisely because they are too needy. At NNHT the remaining three out of ten households are in this group. Unfortunately the number of court actions is steadily increasing as more homes go to vulnerable people. We currently evict 80 households a year (less than half a per cent), 70 of them for rent arrears, and less than 10 due to ASB, and always after we have tried everything we can to prevent them becoming homeless.
3. And some of those we evict are actual criminals who are knowingly dishonest. An example would be people who sublet their homes, who defraud housing benefit, or who pretend to be disabled when they are not.

In popular consciousness the second and third groups get mixed up, while the aspirant and well organised tenants are ignored. It's the same as the recent coverage of food banks. It's obvious to us, who work with poor people every day, that many are experiencing real hardship. Gifts of food and money can really help them. But of course there are always a few people who abuse any system.

Perceptions

Let's go back to the ghastly TV programmes which I admit I haven't watched; (I like to do nice stuff in my free time). I think it is worth briefly exploring how stereotypes work. If there was a programme made about hunting, for example, the cameras would inevitably focus on the poshest, dimmest rider. They would edit out any sensible remarks he made and home in on the sensational. That is

the nature of the media, and these programmes are designed to entertain rather than inform. And I guess that's why our reaction matters. There is a desire by Michelle, Michaela and Murtha to prove that they (like all their customers) are nice, successful people – of course they are – unlike the boorish folk on these programmes.

But I don't think the media alone are responsible for people's prejudices. These are real people, not actors. Bad tenants exist, and some of the people we house really do have a stack of problems. And while there are some completely beautiful, desirable estates, we must accept that some of our stock is run down, unattractive, dirty and unloved. Many of those who live in Council housing today experience neglect, poor quality design and repairs, litter, vandalism and graffiti, in addition to ASB from time to time.

Is something deeper happening here? Many of us survive by projecting their fears onto those seen as a threat, or those we believe may be doing us out of something. How else can we understand racism, xenophobia, sexism, anti-Semitism and homophobia?

It is my contention that these attitudes arise from fear of difference; stereotypes block our ability to think about individuals. The label "Council tenant" becomes a boundary that allows us to define ourselves as not like them and to project our own frustrations onto the other. It is obviously folly to claim that all Council Tenants, or Somalis, or menopausal women are the same. But scapegoating is when we also apply negative attributes to each group eg. Scrounger, Violent, Dotty.

In the case of social housing it's even worse because much of it was built on big estates – it therefore concentrates a specific group into a geographical area that is often out of sight and out of mind. I have friends who have never been to a Council estate, and would probably be afraid to.

Of course the only thing that really undermines stereotypes is in fact meeting people as individuals, and having a relationship with them. Then you realise that no-one is perfect, nor irredeemably bad.

This is the key point of my talk tonight.

Who meets social tenants as individuals, and builds a long term relationship with them?

Why, it's us! We know the truth – that social tenants are just normal people, just like everyone else, and not essentially different from people who live in other tenures. A large proportion have reasons for qualifying for social housing, which can be as simple as poverty and can be as complex as having multiple needs eg single parent, mentally ill, learning disabled, obese, experience of domestic violence and homelessness, and addicted to Valium. This person could become a figure of hatred, but for most of us she is just another tenant we do our very best to help.

And I think this is what makes our profession so damn impressive. We are not judgemental; we treat everyone as an individual. If the tenant is an eccentric old transvestite with cancer; or a Bengali family with a violent, excluded teenage, we actually embrace them and their problems and we try to help them. We do really care about our tenants, and we don't label them, or disrespect or condemn them. They are just people like you and me. And despite the advent of call centres and internet based services housing is not a transactional business. Our tenants are usually with us for life, and it pays us to get to know each other. Blaming people for their difficulties doesn't do anything to help.

I am not romanticising people who damage others. I know serious ASB can ruin communities. We have to deal with this, illegal behaviour, rudeness, dishonesty and aggression. Where we can we try to help people be better parents and neighbours; to be more reliable and more productive. Our ability to do this, day in and day out, helping people who have a fairly difficult time, is what makes the job rewarding.

I had lunch yesterday with a young woman who started out as a Notting Hill apprentice four years ago, in our finance team. She is a 26 year old, mixed race single mum and she has just completed the first of her accountancy exams. I didn't know that she was one of our tenants, but I was extra happy that we had helped her – by first providing her with a safe, affordable home, and then a work opportunity and training, so that she can progress into a professional carer. We should celebrate these achievements and always support aspiration amongst our tenants.

But, by the same token, we must also accept that many of our tenants are so damaged by their upbringing, their experiences, their breakdowns, their poverty, their experience of war or discrimination or their addictions, that they cannot just be “pushed” into work and self sufficiency. Some will get there, but many will not. **This is the real value of social housing. That it provides a safe haven for vulnerable people that means they will be OK.** Our caring role will

mean that they have somewhere safe to live, and a landlord who will never turn a blind eye, or blame them for the misfortunes they have experienced.

Other than doing our jobs professionally what can we do?

Using the media better

I know that Michelle and others are pulling together positive Council house stories, and we need those redemption tales. Nostalgia, and gratitude, has a place – have a look at Notting Hill's 50th anniversary website. But keeping fragile people safe is also a great story and we need to feature these stories too. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could get every social landlord to honestly explain their work – using their website, local articles and social media?

Real London Lives

This is a campaign, instigated by g15, to produce video evidence of what our tenants are like. This will help us, and potentially the public, understand who we are housing, what their lives are like, what their advantages and challenges are. With a view to busting some myths, by showing that we do house vulnerable, needy people as well as the aspirant poor.

Stop talking to ourselves

I hate to say it but our sector absolutely excels at this. Can we think of ways to get our message out more broadly? I was asked to do a pub talk last year to a local society, none of whom had any experience of social housing. I answered questions that might make you blush. But I believe I changed minds, which is what we need to do.

Let our profession speak!

No one knows better than we, CIH members and housing professionals. We need to announce the case for social housing, in many ways, in many fora, using real examples from our contemporary practice. John Popham has made a start, and I would like to go further. Shall we organise a competition where our front line workers find new ways to express their impact, their pleasure in their work, letting their tenants speak, using short films and other media to turn the tide?

And here I agree with Michelle, and of course with Sarah herself – let's change the story!

- (1) Ipsos-Mori research
- (2) John Hills, Ends and Means: the future roles of social housing in England, CASE, February 2007
- (3) Smith Institute, The public value of social housing: a longitudinal analysis of the relationship between housing and life chances, 2008
- (4) CORE lettings data (DCLG) 2012-13