



Chartered  
Institute of  
Housing

SEE THE PERSON.  
NOT THE STEREOTYPES

# It's not okay

A guide to tackling stigma in social housing

August 2020



## Acknowledgements

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Our case study housing organisations

See the Person's sponsoring organisations

## Forewords

CIH, as the professional body for people working in housing, has an expectation that professionals will be aware of how their language and behaviour impacts on tenants and colleagues. So, it was quite shocking and upsetting to read some of the previous research with tenants by See the Person, which highlighted just how much housing organisations and staff contribute to the stigma that many tenants experience when we fail to live up to that expectation. Our own work for rethinking social housing had brought it to the surface as well, and it is something that we are determined to work to stop.

It has been a pleasure to work with See the Person to develop this guide. We hope that housing providers, their staff, contractors and other partners will take it on board as it is meant – as a genuine opportunity to stop and take stock, and reflect on what we are doing and what impact it has. Sometimes it can be hard to take the time to do that, but the comments from tenants graphically illustrate why we must. It also shows why listening to and working with tenants is the best way forward, because not only have respondents to our survey highlighted what the problem is but also how to put it right, and the case studies provide some great examples of where that is happening across the sector.

We should not and cannot be complacent, but we hope that this guide will give some food for thought and opportunities to do things differently.

**Gavin Smart**, chief executive, Chartered Institute of Housing



The [See the Person](#) campaign began in 2017. Initially called 'Smashing Silly Stereotypes' (2017), 'Benefit to Society' (2018) and then See the Person (in late 2018), it is led and organised by social housing tenants and staff working in partnership to combat the stigma associated with those who live in social housing.

We wanted to set the story straight and see a more balanced representation and understanding of social housing and the people who live in it. Social housing is not about subsidies - it's about people with somewhere decent to live having the time and resources to give back to society. We wanted to reflect the volunteering, work and community involvement we'd all experienced. We gained support from around 30 housing organisations, including housing associations, councils, arms length management organisations and trade bodies.

Our YouGov research found the general public thought all people living in social housing were unemployed and in receipt of benefits. Feedback from tenants themselves showed that 9/10 thought the media portrayed them unfairly. We commissioned research by the London School of Economics which showed the reality of social housing did not reflect the common view.

Recognising that so much stigma and prejudice is perpetuated by the media, we worked with the National Union of Journalists to produce a guide for journalists and media workers called [Fair Press for Tenants](#). A positive social media campaign with Facebook early in 2018 reached over 300,000 accounts.

Stigma is still at the forefront of our campaign. A recent online survey drew responses from almost 700 tenants and revealed that 74 per cent have experienced stigma. The main source was direct and local and directly impacted on the well-being of those affected. We realised that stigma and disempowerment came not only from the media and general public but, disappointingly from landlords and housing professionals.

That's why we've worked with CIH to develop this guide for landlords and housing professionals. It highlights the ways landlords can create and reinforce stigma, considers solutions and shares positive examples. We very much hope this guide will help landlords to work jointly with tenants to have a mutually respectful and fulfilling relationship.

## See the Person campaign



## Introduction

### What is stigma?

*"A mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person"*

Synonyms: shame, disgrace, dishonour

(Source: Oxford English Dictionary)

*"Social stigma - disapproval of or discrimination against a person based on perceivable social characteristics that serve to distinguish them from other members of a society"*

(Source: Wikipedia)

Many people living in social housing experience stigma because of where they live. This came through strongly in CIH's discussions with tenants and housing professionals for its [Rethinking social housing](#) project:

'there is a stigma attached to social housing as a 'product' and to the organisations providing it and the people living in it'.

The government acknowledged it in its green paper of 2018, [a new deal for social housing](#), recognising that stereotypes shaped by the negative language used by politicians and the media can be reinforced by the way social housing is managed and run. Conversations with tenants to inform the green paper emphasised the sense of 'institutional indifference' they can experience from landlords (p10).

The causes of stigma are many and varied. They include the way in which the media represents and reports on social housing and the people who live in it creating and reinforcing unfair stereotypes. Housing policy which promotes home ownership as superior to renting also plays a part.

However, we must also consider the role of social housing providers and the people who work for them in creating and reinforcing stigma which was highlighted by See the Person's extensive [research with tenants](#). It also revealed the negative experiences of people who work in social housing and live there too. It called for landlords to accept where this is the case, and to work with tenants to become part of the solution, tackling inappropriate language used about and views of tenants, and developing relationships of mutual respect.

This guide aims to support that ambition, by providing the opportunity and support for landlords and housing professionals to reflect on their practices, both organisational and personal, to identify where these contribute to tenants' experiences of stigma, and to consider how to change this, working in partnership with tenants. It will consider some of the work already taking place in the sector, illustrating what is possible by looking at how some organisations are currently re/shaping organisational culture and developing services with their tenants, building on their experience and strengths. Together with the previous research by See the Person, it will also help to inform CIH's further development of the professional framework for its members.

## What we did

A survey was developed with open questions seeking to understand what practices contributed to stigma and how these could be changed. It asked what needed to be stopped by landlords and professionals and what needed to be adopted instead, including what language needed to change.

The survey was promoted by See the Person and CIH, through organisations and social media. Whilst aimed primarily at tenants it was also open to professionals and people working with the sector. The survey was extended when the period of lockdown meant additional face to face meetings could not be rolled out and about 250 completed it.

The survey aimed to draw out qualitative responses from tenants, and these provided some clear common problems, and directions about what matters most to tackle tenants' experiences of stigma. These relate both to the culture of organisations and the systems they operate, and to the behaviour, attitudes and language used by housing staff and contractors.

## What matters?

Firstly, the challenge:

*'Colleagues feel they know more about living in social housing than customers'*

This section may be difficult to read, but it is important to listen to what tenants have to say about their experience with landlords and staff, and to understand how that contributes to their experience of stigma. Here, we pick up from the survey responses the most commonly reported areas that tenants wanted organisations and staff to recognise and tackle.

- **Making assumptions about tenants**

Such as that tenants are unemployed, on benefits, always at home.

*'When signing up for the tenancy, it was assumed I was on benefits'*

*'Assuming single parents don't work and only claim benefits'*

*'The assumption that all tenants are scroungers'*

The most common practical example given was the lack of appointments, or very broad timescales given for repairs and other visits. Respondents felt very strongly that this illustrates clearly that landlords expect tenants to be at home rather than working/ volunteering and so on and gives the impression that the landlord's or contractor's time is more valuable than the tenant's.

*'Realise we don't all just sit at home 24/7. We have lives'*

*'Contractors turn up without appointment presuming we don't work'*

*'They assume that we are home all day so give 8am-6pm appointments'*

*'Not offering weekend/ out of hours repairs to people who work'*

### Quick facts:

- 3.9 million households live in social housing, that is 17 per cent of the population
- 43 per cent are working households
- 28 per cent are retired
- 8 per cent are unemployed
- 17 per cent are disabled

- **Poor/ discriminatory treatment of tenants, and the ways they are spoken to**

The negative assumptions made about tenants are reflected in and shape the way that tenants are treated and spoken to; at worst, that conveys contempt, an 'us and them' attitude, with tenants being seen as second class, both by staff at all levels and contractors. Negative treatment also reflects a failure to understand and appreciate diversity amongst tenants and respect for different cultural expectations.

*'Staff talk to you as if you are stupid'*

*'Treating tenants in a condescending, patronising manner'*

*'Lack of respect for the person - see only the tenure, not the person'*

*'A culture of superiority by local authority cabinets'*

*'Bullying behaviour'*

*'The perception that people who need affordable housing are somehow 'other''*

*'That you don't deserve the property because you're a single parent or black or unemployed'*

*'Guilty until proved innocent for some things - presumption of fraud when succession, getting a lodger, or asking anything unusual'*

- **Not listening to or acting on tenants' concerns**

From issues in the home, to concerns about their neighbourhoods and communities, where landlords and their staff are distant from or fail to listen to tenants, this can lead to a failure to respond promptly and appropriately, and shows a lack of appreciation about how that in turn impacts on tenants and communities. Consequences can range from tenant dissatisfaction to more serious safety issues.

*'Culture of "institutional deafness"'*

*'Toxic culture of judgemental behaviour and dismissiveness'*

*'Remember when tenants contact you, it is not just to pass the time of day, they are concerned'*

*'Listen to tenants and explain decisions, rather than fob us off'*

- **Standards - the quality of homes, neighbourhoods, and ongoing repairs and maintenance**

A strong theme emerged about the quality of homes, maintenance, and repairs, where tenants felt that the standard of work fell short of what would be accepted by housing professionals in their own homes. Although recognising constraints in budgets, many felt this was a further demonstration of a lack of respect, that they were not deserving of higher standards or good quality work, at least by contractors, if not also by landlords and their staff.

*'Poor quality work done by contractors. They see it as the tenant is not paying for it, that will do'*

*'Letting houses get into a state of disrepair'*

*'Poor quality design and build quality of community and homes'*

- **Real tenant involvement**

The concern here was that tenant involvement and consultation had reduced or become tokenistic, without real influence, but also that not enough was done to make sure the wide range of tenant voices was heard.

*'Curtailing resident involvement'*

*'Not including us in decisions about our estate'*

*'Promoting a tiny percentage of tenants as speaking for us all'*

- **Business not community**

Landlords often refer to having a 'business head and a social heart'. However, comments in the survey raised concern that landlords were increasingly focused on business, development and different tenures, losing their connection with and service to tenants. They also felt that landlords were not always fair, open and consistent in how they applied policies.

*'Business to them, disregarding they are people's homes'*

*'Seeing properties as assets, not homes'*

*'By prioritising profit and disregarding community benefit sends a message that residents are second class citizens'*

*'Senior managers not following policies is totally disempowering'*

*'Some dictatorship. Being council tenants we are refused certain things on policy not in merit. This would not be the case for private residents'*

## Stop

- Talking down to tenants
- Making assumptions about tenants
- Being disrespectful of tenants, of their homes, of their communities
- Tick box tenant involvement/ consultation
- Being uncaring, inconsistent, failing to follow through, ducking difficult issues

## Start

- Treat as you want to be treated, with respect
- Listen to, appreciate and act on tenants' concerns
- Keep people informed, use a range of ways to communicate
- Improve the quality of homes and estates
- Have skilled, professional, empathetic and well-trained staff

## Getting it right

### Tenant/ Customer/ Resident?

It clearly mattered to respondents what term was used to describe their relationship with landlords, but was evenly split between tenant and customer, with resident being a close third.

For some, the word tenant matters because of the legal position of their contact with landlords, the rights and responsibilities they and the landlord have.

For others customer was important because of the expectations for a customer centred and responsive service that landlords should aim to deliver

The case studies below reflect a range of terms used by landlords themselves; often the word customer is used to account for the range of relationships they have with people who live in their homes of all tenures and/ or receive other services from them.

Here we would suggest that what matters most is not the term used but how the decision to use it is made, by executives alone or with tenants.

Tenants are clear on what contributes to the stigma they experience and on what landlords and staff can do to tackle it, internally and externally. This section picks up those areas most frequently highlighted in the survey responses alongside examples of what some social landlords are doing about it and how, together with their tenants, they are working to change services, attitudes, and culture.

- **Organisational culture**

The culture and values of an organisation, led by board and senior executives and embedded at every level throughout its staff, will set the parameters for real tenant influence, and address the imbalance of power and control that makes many tenants feel disempowered and devalued. A customer service ethos and person-centred approaches were seen as key to responding positively and appropriately to tenants, and challenging negative views.

*‘Ensure that boards are more reflective’*

*‘Senior staff that “place the customer at the heart”’*

*‘Do things with, rather than for/ to residents’*

*‘Put the person at the centre of decision making, this is applicable to staff throughout the organisation, not just the frontline service providers’*

*‘More challenge to attitudes and behaviours’*

*‘Culture change and more diversity and tenant employees’*

*‘Zero tolerance to stereotyping with a clear complaints process. Many organisations claim they have this but often a tick box exercise’*





## Phoenix Community Housing

Phoenix Community Housing is a resident-led organisation. Tenants and leaseholders can become shareholding members and are able to take a central part in the organisation's decision making. Residents form the largest group on the management board and are elected to their position by other shareholding residents. Both the chair and deputy chair of the board are residents.

The association also ensures that residents are involved in groups that shape all aspects of the organisation's operations, including:

- Policy working group - where all policies are reviewed and agreed before going to board for adoption
- Scrutiny panel - which scrutinises the activities and services of the organisation and presents its findings directly to the board
- Phoenix Gateway committee - which acts as a sounding board to the main board, led by residents with a few members of staff, providing a joint 'critical friend's' voice
- Resident Communications group - which reads and oversees all correspondence, so that the language used is free from jargon, accessible and in keeping with the values of the organisation.

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## South Yorkshire Housing Association (SYHA)

SYHA has made a shift to a strength-based approach within its services, focused on what abilities, strengths and experiences customers have.

This was piloted first in a new service contract to provide employment support. When applying for jobs, the focus is usually on what experience people have and their strengths/ abilities, and this shifts the conversation and makes it a positive one. Applying this approach to this service seemed natural and showed it worked; changing the way people were perceived. It led to more positive and hopeful conversations, which had a positive impact for the individual and people working with them. And it provided motivation and strength to tackle issues and hit goals.

At the point when SYHA was refreshing and redeveloping its strategic plans, it led to the organisation adopting the approach for its other LiveWell (care and support) services, enabling positive conversations, and developing strong working relationships. Staff have been trained in the approach and it has also been incorporated into the IT system used to manage customer relationships (using different questions and prompts in a way that helps to embed and systematise it).

SYHA aims to put the customer voice at the heart of what it does, and has a strategic theme focused on developing the relationship with customers - working to increase co-creation of governance and scrutiny, in ways that go beyond having customers on the board, ensuring that they are fully part of the decision making processes in the organisation. Whilst this has started with care and support services, the aim is to embed it throughout the organisation. Having different discussions with customers from the strength-based approach is helping to challenge practices to achieve that.

The journey of co-production is still new and spreading through the organisation; the next stage is to embed it within core housing management activities. Already customers are more involved at an earlier stage around the design of systems, such as the customer portal which enables tenants to access their rent accounts, report repairs and so on, but also to the design of homes and estates.

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## Soha

Soha is known for having a strong culture of co-regulation with residents, which it has ‘hard-wired’ through becoming a mutual community housing association. This means that most tenants, shared owners and leaseholders can become shareholding members and have a say in any major decisions and changes made by the organisation. The association’s rules set out how residents will be part of the governance structure, including through residents sitting on the board, and through the Members Forum (previously tenants forum) which influences all decisions relating to tenant-facing strategies and policies, major budget setting and other strategic level issues. Staff are also able to become shareholding members, although limited to ensure that residents remain the largest group.

Community engagement is fundamental to Soha’s values, and members are required to vote on the Community Strategy which shapes its vision for the organisation working with its communities. It aims to contribute to shaping a sustainable future for local communities, by working with residents to identify local priorities, build capacity to address issues, and together to develop connected, engaged communities that are able to bring about positive changes in their local area.

As well as supporting local residents to make decisions and take action, Soha is also committed to devolving resources to achieve this, including doubling its funding for community engagement (from £50,000 to £100,000 in 2020/21) with Soha members deciding how that is to be invested. It has developed a three-stage process for that: identifying the communities to work with; supporting Soha members to consult with the wider community and agree priorities for action; delivering (or working with other partners to deliver) events to co-design solutions, which it will then fund or match fund to put into action.

An early pilot identified issues of loneliness and isolation in one generally affluent local area, in particular with challenges for young people and young families because of a lack of community space and opportunities to develop positive relationships. The next stage is to work with these groups to understand how they want to be supported to become connected and involved in their local community.

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- **Being accessible and accountable to tenants**

Responses highlighted the impact for tenants where organisations and their staff were physically distant, or difficult to contact easily. That included messages being taken but rarely responded to. Expanding the methods for accessing the organisation, including longer contact hours at call centres improves access, but physical presence, including local offices and staff on estates with good local knowledge is an important element of developing better relationships, alongside being open and transparent about policies, and why decisions have been made, to increase accountability.

*‘Management should live in social housing, or actually go and spend time in the communities. Some are so far detached from tenants and communities, it’s unreal’*

*‘Having a local office that we can access at any time’*

*‘Being open and honest and not raising expectations without follow up’*

Many housing organisations are developing new forms of neighbourhood/housing officer roles with smaller patches to enable staff to get to know local tenants better and also understand the local area and what services and facilities are available. This enables them to provide housing management services and to support tenants to connect with any opportunities or support they might want.

## Bromford

Bromford's neighbourhood coaching model has been embedded throughout the organisation since its introduction in 2016. Neighbourhood coaches work across small patches of up to 200 homes across all tenures in Bromford's homes, to enable them to get to know both the customers and the local area well. They are responsible for core housing management functions but also work with customers to identify their interests, ambitions, and challenges. Their knowledge of the local area and its community resources and assets enables the neighbourhood coaches to offer appropriate support or signpost and connect customers to local community resources as appropriate, to support their wellbeing.

(See more in CIH's [new approaches to housing management](#)).

## Phoenix Community Housing

Phoenix Community Housing's head office, The Green Man, also operates as a community space and resource. It has been designed to ensure that staff and residents are very visible to each other. Even staff in 'back office' roles are aware of and visible to residents, so there is no 'hiding', and everyone recognises the business is about people, their homes and community.

- **Staff - recruitment and training**

The pivotal role of housing professionals across an organisation, and their impact on tenants' experiences of stigma, was clear from the survey responses, both positive and negative. Improving the skills, attitudes, and behaviours of staff at all levels, from recruitment to training and support, was a priority for respondents. Clear routes to raise complaints/concerns, and consequences from poor behaviour were also important.

*'Better people in the company with people and social skills'*

*'Honest self-reflection and more customer focused staff from the commercial sector'*

*'Employ staff who live in social housing'*

*'Have people that look like me working there and get managers out to see tenants'*

*'Be kind'*

To establish an organisational culture of respect for and value of tenants, many organisations are looking at how to involve tenants in staff recruitment, both in interviews and in setting the specifications and descriptions of different functions.

## Phoenix Community Housing

Prospective employees of Phoenix Community Housing are interviewed by a panel that always includes a resident. A group of residents are trained alongside staff, in how to conduct strength-based interviews; often a lot of the interaction in the interview will be with the resident on the panel. The approach makes it clear from the outset that the organisation's culture is resident-led and that residents are at the heart of its values and purpose.

New starters are then invited to lunch with the chief executive, the chair and the deputy chair of the board - both residents. They will be asked to spend about five minutes talking about their life journey so far, which provides the opportunity for developing mutual understanding with the organisation's leaders.

## South Yorkshire Housing Association

South Yorkshire Housing Association has a customer panel helping to interview staff, which has influenced the appointments made, but now the association is working on how to embed customers' views of what is important and required in different roles from the start. The need to review a dated job description for a recent appointment of a tenant involvement officer provided the opportunity to develop the job description and specification with customers, as well as having a tenant on the interview panel. Challenges from doing this involved not only looking at what the priorities and therefore skills were for this role, but also how that was described. The ambition is to use this approach going forward initially focused on customer facing roles.

## Home Group

Home Group involves customers in writing job adverts, shortlisting and on recruitment panels, with their scores being weighted equal to staff. It is seen as one of the best ways to get rid of the myth of customers as 'other'. It required some significant work internally to get acceptance and changes to processes to address concerns about protecting data, confidentiality and safeguarding personal details, such as email addresses (both of applicants and involved customers).

- **The importance of training and development**

Training and development should include challenging inappropriate views and unprofessional conduct.

*'Better training in customer interaction for staff, with emphasis on empathy and cultural awareness'*

*'Include social housing stigma in diversity training along with race gender etc.'*

*'Quality, consistent training and support for staff'*

*'Ask questions...Listen to learn (train them to do this, don't assume every housing worker can). Ask them to reflect regularly on why they're working for a housing organisation?'*

*'Tenants part of annual appraisal of all staff'*

**Home Group's** customers are involved in training for staff. The Engagement team always co-train with customers and its 'Involvement Works' training, delivered in a day and tailored where appropriate to the teams being trained, helps to embed the culture of listening to and involving customers across all teams.

The organisation draws on the diversity of their customers to take a robust approach to equality and diversity. Its 'Life Swap' group includes customers and staff who are supported to tell their stories and experiences in a safe way, which helps staff to understand the impact of how they engage with others, and what happens when services are delivered and developed in a way that does not take account of the customer. The Life Swap model has been very powerful in challenging the perceptions of housing staff, as they realise what skills and experiences that customers have. The stories of customers' experiences, and the resilience and courage shown in telling their stories (customers with learning disabilities who have experienced abuse, people who have survived domestic abuse, for example) has further broken down barriers seeing customers as 'other'. Their stories are what has changed hearts and minds.

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## The Phoenix Academy

The Phoenix Academy runs housing qualifications accredited by CIH, which are available for staff and residents. The courses are very interactive, looking at the big questions around social housing, its purpose and role in communities and so on. Learning together creates shared understanding and provides a shared culture and consensus on the purpose of the organisation.

Learning together, staff and residents, happens at every opportunity, such as the lunch and learn sessions on a range of issues/ subjects, for example, on hoarding.



CIH, as the professional body for people who work in the housing sector, has a code of ethics to which members should adhere. It expects professionals to make a difference, including challenging negative stereotypes, and to show respect for others, demonstrating a commitment to equality and diversity and treating people fairly.

CIH is also developing a professional standards framework that will set out the values and characteristics to enable housing professionals to build and maintain trust and credibility, which employers can use as benchmark to support recruitment and development of staff. The vision set out for the profession includes:

- Professionals to have the expected standards of knowledge, skills, and behaviour to deliver the best service for their customers
- To understand the impact of their language, behaviour, and conduct
- To be committed to be a force for change across the sector

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• **Tenant involvement**

The government’s rent reduction policy imposed on social landlords over four years between 2016-20 led to many organisations looking at what costs could be rationalised and reduced. Anecdotally, tenant involvement was an area that faced significant cuts in number of organisations, in spite of previous evidence about the value for money, efficiencies and saving it could deliver.

*‘Listen to tenants and take them seriously, take on their advice and don’t be dismissive’*

*‘More and closer tenant involvement in running their homes’*

*‘Tenants on the board’*

*‘Ensure there are different platforms for engagement to encourage people who work or have young families can give their views, tell us what they need and possible provide some positive feedback, to make frontline working a less thankless task as it sometimes feels’*

*‘[Stop] box ticking around tenant engagement. It doesn’t work when you ask tenants views and always do what you want to do anyway’*

Active and meaningful involvement of residents requires the commitment of time and resources by staff as well as tenants but can deliver significant benefits in tenant satisfaction with the landlord, improved services, and efficiencies and savings. It is important to be honest and clear about the extent of influence that tenants can expect to have; as the above quotation shows, tenants are not fooled or impressed by tokenistic engagement.

**Sovereign Housing Association**

Sovereign’s triangle of involvement includes formal ways to include tenants in the governance structure, such as the [Resident and Board Partnership](#) and the [Scrutiny Coordination Group](#). 'At the local level, Sovereign's Communities Team supports residents to self-organise, creating space and opportunities for community members to come together to identify shared priorities and discover the assets held within their community (and within partner networks) to co-create solutions.

[POPCAN](#) - the Penleigh and Oldfield Park Community Action Network in Westbury, Wiltshire -is a community group in an area with a significant level of social housing, including a high proportion of



Sovereign homes. Residents initially came together to carry out local litter-picks, which soon evolved into a regular walkabout, involving Sovereign's staff, police and council representatives. Sovereign later supported POPCAN to become constituted and a local charity offered a banking facility to enable POPCAN to fundraise and deliver its own projects. It developed an annual POP-Up fun day, where members ran a listening exercise asking people 'What is it like to live here?' Local children from the nearby primary school were supported to join forces with POPCAN to deliver the event. This activity revealed several shared priorities that became POPCAN's 'manifesto' for action, which was shared with local households with information about how to stay involved.

The [solutions](#) developed drew on the resources and skills of all partners, and this collaborative way of working is helping to resolve a number of long-standing local issues, including work begun on the local recreation park, where young people, local councils and businesses together have improved the skate park.

Coinciding with the 100 years of council housing celebrations, the group produced a [video](#), celebrating the unusual history of social housing in the area with stories from local residents who benefited from the new social housing and filmed by a town councillor. It created a lot of interest, capturing local history and highlighting the important role social housing has played within the town, and the contributions made by its residents.

These events have helped to develop collaboration and mutual respect between the community and partners, laying foundations that enable greater co-creation across a range of shared priorities. It has helped the residents of this combined estate to recognise the vast range of skills and knowledge they have to offer, but also (perhaps more importantly), it's demonstrated the vast amount of human capacity that is available for the whole town to draw upon when relationships are forged on an equal footing.

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## Thirteen Group

Encourages customers to get involved in

- Scrutinising the organisation's services and performance
- Ensuring that they are meeting regulatory standards
- Providing comment on its strategy and policies.

Thirteen has an engagement framework that enables customers to be flexible about how to be involved, supported by a structure that plans out what areas of the business it will be covering over the course of 12-18 months in a series of work streams. A customer will take on the stream lead role, keeping the project on track. Where the project is large or involved there would also be a project lead. The streams include:

- Policy consultations: all policies are developed in consultation with customers before being signed off by the board
- Consumer standard assurance: reviewing the requirements of the standards and the organisation's compliance
- Performance monitoring and complaints - meetings for these streams alternate and apply a traffic light risk analysis to direct which areas of the business to monitor. A task and finish rapid response team can also be set up to undertake reviews
- Strategic and service reviews: getting involved in the development and shaping of services. The customer engagement team are clear that all projects that impact customers must involve them from the outset, and further engagement is identified at milestones throughout a project
- Community fund: decisions on funding to support local initiatives and groups to add value to local areas.

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- **Standards of homes, neighbourhoods, repairs and maintenance**

A very strong theme emerged in responses to the survey about how the standard of repairs in homes, and maintenance in neighbourhoods, made respondents feel devalued and second rate - with it not being what they felt housing professionals, executives or councillors would accept in their own homes. More careful monitoring of contractors and ensuring higher quality of work was called for.

*'Better/increased caretaker services - improve the environment'*

*'Shorter time slots for appointment for services'*

*'Do any maintenance work as if you're doing it to your own property, so it's your best possible work'*

*'Spend money on upgrades and quality repairs before things are falling apart. Be proactive not reactive'*

*'Spot check on work done by contractors'*

## Homes in Sedgemoor

Has a customer first ethos and is concerned to ensure that customers and their homes are central to the work that they do, and all are treated with respect.

This led to a new approach to responsive repairs, aiming to respond on the same or next day, which was introduced as a result of customers' dissatisfaction with the service, particularly with the number of repeat calls that customers often had to make before the repair was completed.

The previous system meant that, although the repair was agreed, the lack of clarity over timing for the work meant many calls were missed, which the system logged as a completed call, requiring the customer to call and report again. At the same time in many commercial services, same or next day service was becoming more frequent, leading customers to expect a better and faster response from their landlord as well.

Initially the service was re-shaped so that, if a repairs call came into the customer service team between 9 and 4, they would do the repair the same day. Where further work was required, this would be agreed and set in progress on that first visit, so that customers knew when it would be done.

Following more customer feedback and a scrutiny group report on the service, Homes in Sedgemoor are now introducing greater flexibility for customers to agree appointments, where same day services are not convenient for them. The contractor is co-located with the customer service team to enable this; they also have to go through the same Customer-First training as the landlord's own staff so they have shared understanding of how customers and their homes are to be treated. Homes in Sedgemoor undertake weekly customer feedback checks which now include questions on whether the contractor and staff are wearing correct personal protective equipment, and following the guidance on social distancing. There will also be a further review by the scrutiny group on how the repairs service is operating in the future.

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## Hull City Council

One-fifth of Hull City Council's residents live in flats, some in high rise, and many in low rise, and all the blocks have communal spaces. The Multi Storey Living (MSL) group developed out of a conversation between residents at a tenants meeting in 2009, where they realised that they were receiving different services and standards. This revelation led to the formation of a group to inspect the flats' common spaces to ensure a consistent standard.

From the pilot, the group has continued to meet and increased the frequency and scope of its involvement in how the blocks were managed. Volunteers are trained so that they take the same approach to inspections and how/what to report. The group now has a schedule of inspections and monthly meetings which staff across all services (fire safety, building cleaning services, tenancy management, housing facilities) attend and report to regularly. The city councillor with the housing portfolio also regularly attends.

Residents are clear that they want staff to be open and transparent, including providing information as to why and where some action cannot be taken. This has often led to productive conversations where residents have provided solutions. A strong working relationship and mutual respect has developed between officers and residents as a result. The MSL group and staff have together designed a fire safety booklet for residents, which will be reviewed annually, and they hold an annual fire safety meeting (which will be virtual this year).

During the pandemic leaflets setting out guidelines for using communal areas such as lifts was also developed by residents and staff and they also together delivered 3,200 leaflets to all multi storey homes.

Moving on from services and facilities, MSL is working with other tenant group representatives and the council to develop a communications charter. Initially, this will be an agreement between tenants and housing staff.

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### • Design that stops social housing from "sticking out"

The quality of new build homes was also raised, both in terms of poor standard in comparison with other homes nearby (where estates were mixed tenure) and all homes having the same, standard fittings (such as front doors) where there were significant numbers of social rented homes.

Organisations that have the capacity to build their own homes and estates, rather than purchase homes built by private developers may have more scope to tackle this problem and build more creatively in terms of safe neighbourhoods, address the range of housing needs and design to the same standard across different tenures.

## Thirteen Group

Thirteen Group develops new homes across a range of tenures. It has recently begun work in partnership with a local university, exploring what tenants think about their new homes and what is important, and being able to feel pride in the home and estate is high on the list of what matters to them, as well as safety.



## Broadland Housing

Broadland Housing's new mixed-tenure schemes in North Norfolk have addressed people's concerns and are challenging the unfair stigma that sometimes sits around social housing. The association is building beautiful affordable homes that complement the traditional Norfolk landscape, in schemes designed to grow thriving rural communities.

Broadland has developed a range of standard house types (from bungalows to 4-bedroom houses) which are then customised to the individual location. The association selects local building materials, architectural features and traditional styles to match the village's distinctive, authentic character.

The affordable rented, shared ownership and open market sale homes share identical designs, so there is no distinction between tenures. Tenants and homeowners live side by side. This design approach is helping to break down prejudice against social housing tenants. The quality of the interiors matches the aspirations of the open market.

Scheme designs also encourage neighbourly interactions, with communal spaces and open greens where children from the whole village can come to meet and play.

With the new homebuilding model, there is less opposition at the consultation stage of new rural schemes. Communities are pleasantly surprised to see the quality of the house designs and are significantly more amenable to affordable developments in their village.

It's an example of how good design shapes our perceptions, the way we live and the communities we live in.

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Examples of new Broadland Housing homes

- **Communication - internal and external**

Respondents wanted communications with and from their landlord to be open, fair and honest. It was also important that what was stated, particularly in external facing material, was backed up by the reality of their experience.

Working together with tenants to challenge the poor media presentation of social housing and tenants, and demonstrating the importance of what tenants do - for example for and in their communities - was also important to respondents.

*'Celebrate jointly with tenants positive outcomes'*

*'Show that tenants do work or give back to the community in another way.'*

*[Stop] publishing glossy magazines patting themselves on the back'*

*'Allowing the press to film on estates without asking residents - this always results in a negative portrayal of the estate'*

*'Newsletter articles about problems'*

*'Totally unacceptable written communications from council contractors'*

A recent social media posting by the Inside Housing journalist and shared owner, Pete Apps, included a communication from his landlord that whilst addressing serious issues, took an extremely aggressive tone for what, as he pointed out, was related to a service for which he paid. It is important to be kind or at least, polite!

## Town and Country Housing

Town and Country Housing is strengthening its resident focused approach in all teams throughout the organisation, not only those with regular and direct contact with residents.

Before the recent pandemic, TCH had started to make 'resident voice' a standing item on every team meeting agenda, encouraging regular reflection and conversations about how the activities of the team affected residents, and how it could improve. The aim is to review regular resident satisfaction surveys and comments and feedback collected from frontline staff, collate these for analysis by a supporting working group, and incorporate discussion about key themes into the team meetings. Identifying some of the questions frequently asked by residents along with their comments on services provides a starting point for this to happen.

A focus of this is to ensure that staff become more aware of the impact they and the services they deliver have on residents. This also involves an ongoing review of communications with residents, to ensure the 'human and kind' approach also practiced by TCH's parent organisation, Peabody. This is about using clear, jargon free plain English, so communication is understandable, and non-judgemental, to develop trust and encourage residents to approach their landlord with any issues.

During the pandemic, TCH has continued to produce its regular e-newsletter. This again has looked at the most frequent questions asked by residents, and so allowed staff to provide more details about and explanation of those matters.

Welfare calls to residents during the period of lockdown have involved many staff who don't usually have regular, direct contact with residents, providing an opportunity for both residents and staff to connect and talk in ways that would not otherwise have arisen. This will be something that can also help shape the internal discussions about how staff and residents interact and work together in the long term.

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## Language matters

'Language is the instrument of culture. It shapes domination and liberation.' (Angela Carter)

### Stop using

- Words that put people off or pass responsibility, negative
- Labels that categorise - e.g. 'our tenants'. As one respondent put it; 'the property belongs to you, not the people in it'
- Language that makes people 'other' e.g. 'vulnerable' - or even worse, language that depersonalises and dehumanises - 'you lot' 'council trash'
- Jargon or 'corporate bingo' words - 'void', 'anchor institution', 'empower'

### Start using

- Positive, problem solving words
- Apologies, when needed
- Words that are inclusive and person-centred (and mean it) 'how can we help you' 'your opinion matters'
- Positive statements about social housing and tenants  
Not categorising
- Plain English - 'house', 'home'

## What about the term 'vulnerable'?

This is an increasingly tricky term. Survey respondents did not necessarily raise this as an issue; many clearly felt that the different support that some tenants had should be reflected and responded to by landlords. But there was a thread of responses that highlighted a problem with the idea that social housing providers and their staff in some way rescue tenants and promotes this approach in their communications including using terms like 'turning people's lives around'.

There are a number of useful articles from both the housing and social care sectors that will help organisations and professionals to reflect on and change their language and approaches such as:

- Paul Taylor, [The regressive power of labelling people as vulnerable](#)
- Helen Phoenix, [Switching to a strengths-based approach](#)
- Bryony Shannon, [The virus and 'the vulnerable': have labels cost lives?](#)

## Conclusion

This guide aims to help housing professionals, providers and contractors stop and think, not only about what they are doing but how, and for whom, for what reason. It poses the challenge raised by one of the respondents to the survey: '...to reflect regularly on why they're working for a housing organisation.' It is a call to action - to be part of the solution, not part of the problem of the stigma that tenants in social housing face.

It includes a lot of examples of housing providers that are trying to do that, and gives ideas of how to start, of what is possible. These are not, however, organisations that are likely to claim they have arrived, but they are making progress, and making it together with the people who live in the homes they own and manage. However difficult some parts of the guide are to read, we hope that it will be seen as a positive step; See the Person and CIH have embarked on this because we believe that tackling stigma is possible, and that all in the housing sector can and must play a part in achieving that goal.





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