



Headlines from Community Think Tank *Overcoming Stigma in Social Housing*

Held at Trafford Hall on 4th-5th October 2017

A. The challenges facing social housing and social housing tenants

1. Social housing **is an invaluable asset**, providing low cost rented housing that is secure and decent quality to people on low incomes. Social housing overwhelmingly helps people in need of a home who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. It also provides housing for people who are vulnerable, have experienced homelessness or need supported housing due to disabilities, ill health, and mental illness.
2. Social housing tenants are **proud** of:
 - a. their homes, which are secure, affordable and in decent condition;
 - b. their communities. Most social housing estates develop close-knit communities offering informal support and community initiatives;
 - c. the support of their landlord – social housing is much more than just “bricks and mortar”. The majority of landlords go the extra mile to provide help, support and advice to their tenants, e.g. tenancy sustainability services, benefit advice, and support for community-led projects.
3. **Many social housing tenants spend time volunteering** to help local groups and activities. Their unpaid volunteering contributions amount to millions of pounds every year in real inputs and outcomes. They save social landlords money by acting as advisers, guardians and watchdogs. This helps staff and raises performance standards.
4. Residents contribute to the common good by **caring for people in their community**, both formally and informally. This includes looking after elderly people, looking after children, helping neighbours out, and providing support to residents who need it.
5. Social housing was part of a vision of a fairer society, was seen a basic human right. However, social housing estates, especially high-rise estates quickly, built up a negative image and many became ‘difficult to let’. This resulted from **neglect of the stock, poor management** and maintenance, and concentrating hard to house families in the most unpopular estates where problems became concentrated.
6. **The press portrays social housing in a very skewed and prejudiced** way which contributes to the negative image of social housing. The media headlines portray extreme events which can powerfully influence the public opinion. Men aged 25-40 who read the Daily Mail and own their own home are apparently the most prejudiced against housing tenants.
7. **Ignorance** as well as bad press drives prejudice against social housing tenants. It is wrong to assume that social housing tenants are ‘out of work’ and ‘on benefits’. 22% of people living in social housing are ‘economically inactive’ because they are either in education or training, unable to work due to disability or illness, or caring full-time for young children or family members who are incapacitated. Actually, **43% of social housing tenants** are in full-time or part-time work. A report published in 2016 shows that 1 in 3 police officers, ambulance drivers, carers, nurses, teaching assistants, cleaners and security staff in London live in social housing. The report estimates that social housing tenants in London contributed £15 billion to the city’s economy in 2015.

8. **Austerity** has hit social housing tenants hard, with some punitive measures in the welfare system. People have lost their sense of entitlement and are often treated as ‘scroungers’. The re-assessment of people receiving disability benefits carried out by private companies has led to many people with disabilities seeing their benefits reduced.
9. The roll out of Universal Credit is pushing people into debt because of its built-in delays. Face-to-face benefit advice is limited and people struggle with the bureaucracies. The Universal Credit phone line, where the caller pays a fee, now suspended by Theresa May, is an example of the barriers people face.
10. Tenants recognise that social landlords are also hard hit by austerity and they understand the need to cut costs, pay rent on time and help where they can – generally they say they want to.

B. What can be done to address stigma

There is a lot social housing tenants can do to overcome the stigma attached to social housing:

1. **Support the Benefit to Society campaign and sign the online petition** - a group of landlords and tenant organisations have launched the Benefit to Society campaign, which aims to reverse the stigma social housing carries by highlighting positive, success stories of tenants living in social housing. The organisers have worked with the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) to put together a guide for journalists reporting on social housing matters.
2. **Build capacity within the local community** to empower people to voice their concerns.
3. **Continue to help local communities** and tackle neighbourhood conditions.
4. **Building positive working relationships with landlords** as they share a common interest in making social housing work.
5. **Document evidence of positive impact from local effort**, both human stories and measureable outcomes whenever possible.
6. **Inform local MPs and local councillors** about their contribution they make to society.

C. Changing the storyline

1. **The government has started a listening exercise** in the wake of the Grenfell Tower disaster of social housing tenants. This is a good time to make tenants’ voices heard and raise the profile of social housing.
2. **More social landlords can join the Benefit to Society campaign**; they can encourage and support tenants to play a more proactive role in governance and decision-making; they can develop apprenticeships and job opportunities to their tenants; they can promote the work they do in communities, and support tenant-initiated projects.
3. **Efficient, consistent on-site management of estates is crucial** if social housing estates are to work well and estate conditions to be maintained. The ‘broken windows’ theory which suggest that small problems like litter, unkempt communal spaces and graffiti can quickly escalate into much bigger problems of anti-social behaviour, vandalism and crime, requires immediate action on small problems and landlords need to be close to the ground, making sure the estate is clean and family-friendly and so reduce wider costs. Intensive support to vulnerable tenants and households with serious difficulties, which are a minority, is important in making sure conditions do not spiral out of control and create ugly news stories, as has happened too often.
4. Researchers can also play a role in improving the reputation of social housing by **providing evidence of the positive impact of tenant volunteering** and the hard evidence of who is living in social housing and what they contribute.

5. The progressive shrinkage of the country's social housing stock has turned social housing from a tenure of choice to a tenure of last resort. Protecting the social housing we have and **building more social housing** is key to changing the image of social housing.
6. Tenants not only express deep loyalty to social housing and gratitude to their landlord; they organise activities in their community; look out for their neighbours; take part in community events. We can defend the record of social housing and **explain clearly its enormous social value for low income households**.