

The experience and impact of stigma of living in social housing

Views of tenants across England, 2019



www.seetheperson.org

What's the experience and impact of stigma around living in social housing?

20 September 2019

1. Introduction

Research carried out by the See the Person campaign has found that most people who live in social housing have direct experience of negative stereotypes and stigma and that this has an impact on their lives and the lives of neighbours, family and friends.

Between March and June 2019, 699 people who live in social housing took part in an online survey carried out by the See the Person campaign. Participants were from across the country and were self-selected, using a snowball methodology (where one survey respondent is asked to pass the survey onto other possible respondents). The survey was set up in response to a request from the MHCLG who wanted more data around the impact of negative stereotypes.

The results were discussed with respondents using online publication and comments. They were also discussed as part of a round table discussion with tenants, media professionals, politicians and others.

Survey results are discussed here in the context of the See the Person campaign, [its previous research and recommendations to government](#), [to the media](#), to local politicians and to social landlords.

2. Summary

Experience of stigma

Most respondents said they had experienced negative stereotypes about people living in social housing (74% said they had, a further 10% were not sure).

The main source of this stigma was very direct and local, with comments, assumptions and discriminatory attitudes experienced from neighbours, family, others in the community or institutions. At an extreme, this has led to bullying and anti-social behaviour towards tenants or those who have lived in social housing. See for example <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leicestershire-47088785>.

The media and politicians were also common sources of stigma, sometimes very specifically, but often as part of an all-pervasive attitude that many respondents experienced. This ties in with [earlier findings by the Benefit to Society campaign](#) that 9/10 tenants think the media portrays them negatively.

Social housing landlords were a source of stigma, both for their own tenants and, for a significant minority, for their staff who live in social housing with a different landlord.

Impact of stigma

For some people, there is no personal impact from the negative stereotypes they experience. However, for the majority of respondents, there is a very real impact. This aligns with previous research commissioned by the Benefit to Society campaign which found an impact on three levels:

- Personal
- Community
- Societal

Personal impact

The majority of people who have experienced negative stereotypes and stigma around living in social housing reported an impact on them personally. The survey sought to explore this initially.

The main personal results of this stigma are:

- Negative impact on mental health
- Negative impact on confidence or happiness
- A strong feeling of being looked down on and not being a full member of society
- A negative impact on communication and relationships. For some people this included an impact on how they interact with their landlord, for example, avoiding resident involvement opportunities.

A significant minority of people who have experienced negative stereotypes and stigma around social housing do not perceive a personal impact, or consciously seek to ignore it. Others recognise a personal impact, but say they counter this as best they can by seeking to 'prove' themselves and counter expectations.

Community impact

Some respondents talked about the wider implications of negative stereotyping and stigma around social housing. This linked to the impact on communications and relationships.

People referred to children being bullied or treated differently, being excluded from play with friends because of assumptions their families made about where they live.

They talked about limiting visitors to the area where they lived for fear of being identified with social housing.

The impact on goods and services was explored by some respondents, including high premiums for insurance and negative responses from service providers.

This fits with previous findings in research commissioned by the Benefit to Society campaign which found prevalent negative assumptions about areas with high numbers of social housing, but that the experiences of tenants were very different. The reality is that properties in poor condition are often those bought through RTB and ending up within the private rental sector.

During the course of this survey, the segregation of new developments to exclude children living in social housing from play areas, was reported and successfully challenged. Our research suggests that, while this segregation is unacceptable, it forms only a small part of the impact on communities.

Societal impact

The strong view from survey respondents that they do not feel an equal part of society is deeply concerning, particularly when seen in the context of lower levels of voting by people who live in social housing. The wider impact appears to be disenfranchisement.

A view also comes through the survey that there is an impact on funding and planning permission for new social rented housing. Evidence gathered through social media, showing the attitudes of some in the world of development and real estate, strengthens this view. These include the segregation of playing areas and information to a potential house buyer, allaying unexpressed fears about social housing being on the same development. This was a finding of the [2015 tenant Scrutiny Live review](#) of national housing policy – ‘the biggest barrier to new social housing are the lies and the hate’.

4. Recommendations

A. What we are asking the Government

1. We believe the Government should explore **discrimination on the grounds of socio-economic status**. This would help tackle segregation of new developments, postcode discrimination and help people to tackle the all-pervasive stigma that they perceive by stating clearly that it is not acceptable.
2. We want **the Government – and indeed all political parties - to take action when its own politicians use stereotyping** language about social housing and the people whose homes are social housing.
3. Whatever the ideological basis around home ownership, **please stop talking always about ownership as the ultimate goal**. We need government to **recognise the value and importance of good quality, truly affordable rented homes**.
4. We are asking Government **fund a national study to look at paid and voluntary work done by people living in social housing**. We believe that people who live in social housing contribute significantly and would like this quantified to end the unhelpful rhetoric around ‘subsidy’.
5. We would like the Government to re-introduce **a tenant empowerment fund** or similar to support national networking and skills.
6. We call on the Government to **invest in democracy**, to investigate why voting levels are lower for people who live in social housing than other tenures, and to set up a **youth advisory panel** to listen specifically to young people who live in social housing.

We are in support of the **Shelter commission** call for more social housing.

We are in support of the **Voice for Tenants** call for a national independently funded tenant organisation to feed into policy and regulation.

B. What we are asking all politicians

1. We are asking MPs to **establish an All Party Parliamentary Group or similar forum** to tackle the issues specific to stigma around social housing and the impact it has. We believe such a group could prevent the issue being seen as party political and would want the group to take advice directly from tenants.

C. What we are asking those who work in the media

1. Please **read our guidelines [Fair Press for Tenants](#)** and consider the tone and factual basis of what you are writing.
2. We would like the **IPSO code** to reflect the guidelines within Fair Press. There is substantial evidence to show that there negative coverage and representation in parts of the media of people
3. Please **consider the images** as well as the editorial content of media pieces about social housing.
4. We would love your help us to get out the reality of social housing – the importance of having a safe, secure home. **Help us to get a TV programme commissioned** – not about people who've succeeded and left social housing – about those of us who love our homes and communities and are here now!

D. What we are asking social landlords

1. Accept that you are sometimes part of the problem and become part of the solution. Please stop using language about 'turning lives around' and statistics that perpetuate stereotypes.
2. Work with your staff to develop a relationship of mutual respect with tenants and challenge where there is inappropriate language or views about tenants.
3. We are developing a toolkit to help achieve the points above and would welcome your involvement in this. Please email seethepersoncampaign@gmail.com subject line Landlord Toolkit

5. Survey results

A. Survey Results Part 1 – experience of negative stereotypes and stigma

73.6% of respondents said they had experienced negative stereotypes about people living in social housing. (456 people). A further 10% said they were not sure.

For many people this has been experienced as an all-pervasive stigma directed against tenants and directly felt many times.

“It is still a misheld believe that people in social housing are somehow less intelligent and therefore less able to make informed decisions about all sorts of issues from politics to their own housing needs. Social Housing tenants often feel they are of no worth as no one seems to listen or take seriously their opinions. There is still the idea that they should be grateful for their home and they should shut up and put up with it.”

A number of more specific themes also emerged.

The most common experience of stigma is direct and local. 38% of those who have experienced stigma gave accounts of very local examples. This often involves people having a negative view of a neighbourhood.

“That slight hesitation when you tell local people where you live. Also, people talk about not wanting social housing build near them “don’t want people like that” knowing full well where I live. “Not you of course” as if I am a different species

“When explaining to someone where I live, they were surprised and asked when I purchased my home, which confused me. When I clarified it was rented, they responded “you don’t seem the type”

“On many occasions when walking my dog up the local woods, several people have made derogatory comments about the estate, where I live in social housing, implying the people on the estate are basically benefit scroungers, single mothers and untrustworthy and uncivilised people.”

“..a new housing development next to me wants to fence of and gate the park.”

“Towards myself, a house opposite felt like she had to make her opinion on myself known, which were: that I don’t work, had a baby young (20) and because of that I was scum. She actually didn’t know that I was on maternity leave when we moved in, so she had never seen me in my community caring uniform.”

“A neighbour who had bought their house started moaning from the day I moved in about me being a single mum, (I was separated after my husband walked out on me and my children after 20 yrs). I was heartbroken at

having to move and start all over again. I was working and supporting my children but that was not good enough for my neighbour, he never had a good word to say about me or my children and it got me down."

"People chat happily to me on the bus or in the village until I mention where I live which is a street of council houses. They immediately stop the conversation and move away or go to a different seat etc."

"People assume you are in Benefits, even relatives. Contractors seem to think that they don't have to take you into account or do a good job as you're only the tenant. My brother offered me a job cleaning his office and said would pay cash so it won't affect your benefits, we've never had benefits, just income too low to afford to buy."

17% of those who'd experienced negative stereotypes said the media was the main source. Media representations were also mentioned by many of those seeing stigma as an all-pervasive societal issue. This builds on previous research by the See the Person campaign, finding that 9/10 people living in social housing feel the media portrays them negatively.

Comments ranged from particular 'poverty porn' programmes to the general use of images and phrases in the media.

"News [on] channel 4, every paper every 'cutting edge' drama"

"[The media]...took photographs of the less than pleasing parts of the estate and painted that as the picture. Labelled us as scroungers and the benefits capital of England. As the ex chair of ... Tenants & Residents, I put much work into dispelling the harm the likes of right-wing media have caused us."

9% of respondents (64 people) had specific experience of stigma from their landlord – the housing association or council. Some respondents felt that offering daytime only appointments, made the assumption that they would not be working. Others had experience of negative behaviours from staff – for a minority of respondents who also worked for a social landlord, they experienced this from their colleagues.

"I work in social housing (three HAs, 15 years in total). The worst negative stereotyping has been from colleagues... I heard one colleague say: "You can tell who's in social housing, their curtains are filthy." At the same HA, I told another colleague that I had bumped into one of our tenants in town who I knew from our Tenants' Panel - this tenant had given me a hug. My colleague said: "You let a tenant hug you? Ew, gross!" I reminded both colleagues that I was also a tenant - cue apologies from them."

"When I entered a Sheltered Housing Scheme my age was used as if I was incapable of thinking and the staff dismissed any thoughts you had."

"Repairs contractor praising me for a tidy home like I need his validation, repair contractor making a comment about how his taxes pay for my repairs when I've paid my own rent for the whole of my life and the reality was my rent was paying his wages."

"Refusal to answer questions - the "take what you are given & be grateful" culture - where directors /cllrs are concerned."

"However nice you try and keep your flat, as they just see it as council housing, so you often get a rushed and very substandard job/repair that they would never do in their own homes!"

Colleagues at work generally (in any sector) were another source of stigma,

"Worked in voluntary sector for thirty + years many times would be told social housing tenants feckless/ workshy/ignorant/ dirty/benefit encounters etc"

Politicians or the policy landscape were noted by some respondents as directly reinforcing negative stereotypes and stigma. This builds on previous research commissioned by the See the Person campaign which found stigma as situated inextricably within the context of policies around benefits, provision of social housing and home ownership.

"Local councillor objecting to social housing being built next to a school, claimed paedophiles would be living there."

"The list goes on but I think the government is to blame for peddling lies and negative perception of any one living in social housing or on a low income."

A significant minority of people said this had an impact on their children, "...when I ask ..for her friends to come over, they will not send their kids to council flats."

The impact of these negative perceptions on planning was also an issue raised *"I have heard people talking of objecting to planning applications to build social housing because they believe it will affect their house value."*

Other sources of stigma noted were:

- Response from the police
- A postcode premium for insurance and services for people living in areas with predominantly social housing
- Social media

A minority of people raised specific concerns that negative stereotyping was also tied into pejorative views based on race, ethnicity or disability. Sometimes the source of stigma was from other tenants, specifically around access to housing in a particular locality.

B. Survey Results Part 2 - the impact of stigma around social housing

Research carried out by the See the Person campaign has found that most people who live in social housing have direct experience of negative stereotypes and stigma and that this has an impact on their lives and the lives of neighbours, family and friends.

This paper discusses the impact of stigma only. Survey respondents also gave evidence about the impact, but this was discussed in a separate paper.

In March and April 2019, 670 people who live in social housing took part in an online survey carried out by the See the Person campaign. Participants were from across the country and were self-selected, using a snowball methodology (where one survey respondent is asked to pass the survey onto other possible respondents). The survey was set up in response to a request from the MHCLG who wanted more data around the impact of negative stereotypes.

The most common impact described was the **limiting of communication**. Many of these comments linked to people feeling they could not communicate openly with friends about where they live.

It can be socially isolating, I don't like people knowing I live in social housing as I have witnessed regard for me and others changed when people know...

Avoid inviting friends over/ saying where I live.

Stereotyping tares all social housing tenants with the same brush. The impact is huge. You find yourself not wanting to say where you live as you know you will be frowned up on. The media and government think we all don't work and scrounge from the government. This is not the case.

Others commented about the negative impact on the local community and infrastructure improvements.

Local home owners sold property and moved away, objections to planning application.

Extreme difficulty in getting problems with the infrastructure and management of the estate sorted out. Constantly hearing negative statements about our estate...

Some people noted that they were reluctant to engage with their landlord (council or housing association) because of how they are made to feel.

it makes me feel like avoiding any contact with the Council when it comes to repairs etc. I simply do not get them reported, because I am fed up with the treatment. I am an educated and articulate person.

I do not tell anyone other than those closest that our home is social rented, most will assume it is private rented, as many of these properties are having been sold off. I feel I have to keep it a secret to avoid stigma. I believe that the road has a stigma attached as a 'poorer road' despite being mixed tenure and a peaceful, well kept, low crime area. I dread contractors coming in to do work...as they often show little respect and express stereotypes about who or how they expect you to live. I feel as if I need to prove myself, and it is ridiculous, I shouldn't.

I'm careful who I tell that I'm a social housing tenant as I know some people may judge me. I don't feel any loyalty to my housing provider or that the relationship is a particularly good one. In the past I've been involved in events 'showcasing' social tenants & have been invited to tenant forums, but these days I don't get involved as I don't really feel engaged or valued particularly.

Some comments suggested that the negative stereotypes prompted people to give up on their local area.

Makes you not want to admit where you live, or help to keep the area nice

Others reported a strong sense of community, contradictory to the negative assumptions they hear elsewhere.

the government assume that those living in social housing have no ambition and are worthless to society. The communities where we live know better.

Feeling **angry** or feeling the **need to challenge** unfair and unhelpful stereotypes was a common impact.

Makes me defensive and sometimes angry

it makes me very annoyed as I am in social housing because my income as a teacher was insufficient to finance a mortgage but I am passionate about where I live.

Time consuming. in making me work harder at trying to change views. This is a uphill struggle especially with the lack of tenant involvement though outsourcing services

For some people, this has resulted in a need to 'prove' themselves or demonstrate that they do not fulfil the prevailing stereotype.

I feel I need to prove my worth

Sucks the life outta ya then u turn and think no I will show them

A serious **impact on mental health** was described by a high number of people. This included depression, stress and anxiety.

Serious anxiety in a place that you should feel most comfortable.

It made me feel down, after going through a difficult divorce i was already feeling down and not good enough. It was a really tough time.

It impacts on my mental health and deepens stress within my everyday life

For some people, this feeling is explicitly linked to their relationship with their landlord.

I become angry or depressed. I'm unable to contribute as an expert equal to making things better, which creates a vicious circle.

A prevailing sense of **feeling judged or looked down** on came through in the responses.

It doesn't tell a true story of who people are, you are lumped into THAT bunch. People pre judge you before they know who or what you can do.

That people judge my circumstance without knowing me, they automatically assume they "know" what I'm like. I have been accused of manipulating my condition to obtain income (due to where I live). People assume vices and are surprised that I don't drink, smoke, take drugs, etc.

I feel some people look down on me for not owning or wanting to own my own home!

For some people, this extended to feeling **degraded or ashamed**. These strong terms featured time and again in open ended responses about the impact of stigma.

I feel ashamed to say that I live in social housing

Ashamed of living in Local Authority Social Housing and Depressed

Feel ashamed to admit I live in social housing and unworthy to be a parent etc

I feel ashamed and embarrassed to speak about my housing situation

*Feels embarrassing and shameful to tell people that my home is HA.
Like I have failed somewhere even though I have worked full time all
my life.*

For others still, this had the impact of **feeling they are not an equal part of society.**

*It makes me feel that I am a lesser person. No-one is supposed to judge
you on your gender, race, religion or any disability etc, but you get
judged because you live in social housing!*

*Makes me feel as though because I am a social tenant that I am not an
equal member of society*

*It's painful to be looked down on and to know that to some you're a
second class person.*

The stigma experienced by so many people who live in social housing also has an impact on some people's confidence.

They affect my confidence, make me frustrated and question myself

Negative stereotypes make me feel uneasy and lower my self-esteem.

degrades confidence in oneself

A significant number of people said the stigma had no impact on them personally, although most recognised an impact on others. A further group of people said they tried to ignore stigma when they experienced it.

None - I ignore them. I do think they are ignorant though.

I can shrug it off but some people can't

*I'm a strong minded person so no impact other than I can see how
degrading it is for others*

*I'm a strong person so can brush it if but others feel they are not good
enough to attend such places*

*It doesn't have any impact on me. Why should I suffer for other
people's ignorance.*

*Very little - I've lived in social housing for the last 30 years by choice
(including having been members, treasurer, secretary chair of a
Tenants & Residents committee) & when I see negative stereotyping I
try to explain my reasoning - and if they choose not to understand or
abuse, I block them*

A number of people described an **impact on their family** and children in particular.

When my eldest son was at primary school he played with triplets who we had met at mother and baby group and he had been through preschool with. They came to play at the house after school and when they were being collected the parents commented on how nice our house was and what a lovely size garden we had. I told them all the council houses in the village have large gardens they looked shocked that we were in social housing. The next day my son came home from school upset because the triplets had been told they weren't to play with him any more (he was 8 or 9 at this point).

I pretty much keep myself to myself but, my children have been looked down on for living in a council estate and have been teased in school over it.

*Children get embarrassed of what others think
Children made to feel worthless*

Others described the **upset** caused by negative stereotyping.

It's quite hurtful, but I know it's not true.

6. Conclusions

Sadly, the *See the Person* campaign is needed now as much as when it launched in 2017. The survey findings included in this report set out some of the deep impact of negative stereotypes and stigma around living in social housing.

We continue to work at a grassroots level, seeking to influence locally as well as nationally.

We welcome support and involvement – please see www.seetheperson.org or contact us at seethepersoncampaign@gmail.com to find out how you can get involved.