



Overcoming the stigma of social housing

Summary Document

Based on research by Professor Anne Power and Dr Bert Provan
With thanks to those tenants involved in the Trafford Hall Think Tank



Housing and
Communities



Executive Summary



Background

This report was commissioned by the Benefit to Society campaign to explore the causes and impact of an increasing stigma around social housing.

It draws together findings from The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) research, using long-term government surveys and tenant thinktanks, together with new qualitative data from a tenant thinktank on the topic of stigma and social housing. This is underpinned by new findings from public polling and a survey of 450 tenants.

Findings

- Social housing is increasingly a residualised sector. A reduction in numbers of properties, together with changes in housing policy, have led to the sector housing more vulnerable households.¹
- Fewer people now have direct experience of social housing and increasingly it is seen as a tenure of last choice and as a safety net. The public over-estimate the number of people in social housing who are unemployed.²
- This view of social housing is reflected in pejorative media programming, recognised in 'poverty porn' and moralising broadcasting such as *Benefits Street* and *Council House Crackdown*, which specifically link tenure and benefits status together, also drawing links to perceptions of unacceptable behaviours.² 90% of tenants say the media portrays a stereotype of social housing tenants.⁴
- Social housing tenants have a very different perspective and their narrative shows the value of community in their local area and of their volunteering, caring and work roles.²
- This narrative is supported by the English Housing Survey which shows that 70% of social housing tenants are in work or retired, with just 7% unemployed. The remaining 22% are unable to work due to caring responsibilities or disability with 1% in full time education. Tenants recognise the contributions made to society by all these people.¹
- Social housing tenants view an increase in stigma as being one of the major challenges to the tenure and to their wellbeing.²

“ People look down on you and your communities if you are a social tenant, and I believe that this has a negative effect on children growing up, who come to believe that they are not worth as much as other people. ”

Social housing tenant

- Many tenants have negative experiences of policy changes under welfare reform and service cuts, and feel indignant about how they see vulnerable tenants being treated.²
- Tenants also cite as a major issue the lack of care and property maintenance invested in private rental properties in their local neighbourhoods. Often these are ex-social housing, sold on to private landlords through the Right to Buy scheme.²
- As the government has increasingly withdrawn grant funding from social landlords and cut benefits to tenants, so social landlords have been forced to become more ‘commercial’ and more private finance driven. This has reduced or diluted the ethical purpose of social landlords in the public eye, making it harder to win public support for their increasingly marginalised role.¹
- Social housing is of itself a huge asset, is valued by the 4 million households living in it, offers good rental services, and contributes significantly to the benefit of society.¹
- By recognising the role social housing plays in providing homes for lower income households across the country, and in turn the valuable contribution made to society by those households, it has the potential to contribute even more.¹

Recommendations

1

To create a fairer, more representative narrative around social housing, the Benefit to Society campaign needs to reach:

- People without direct experience of social housing to share the narrative from tenants; and
- Journalists and media workers to ask them to present a more balanced portrayal of those living in social housing.

2

See the increasing stigma in the context of policy changes and service cuts.

3

Learn the lessons of the past. Quality must be at the heart of the housing we provide and the management of housing must pay attention to the voices of the people living in it.

4

As well as working with media, politicians and others, those housing providers seeking to dispel stigma must take action in their own organisations to develop a narrative that is positive and respectful about the tenants they serve.

Social housing has moved from being a popular and well-regarded solution to poor housing conditions and a housing shortage, providing accommodation for a large section of the working class population, to becoming a residualised tenure, stigmatised as a safety net for more vulnerable households.

The main factors that caused this decline were:

- Poor quality design, construction, and management of the rapidly built, over-sized new council housing estates.
- Highly visible events like the collapse of Ronan Point and the Broadwater Farm riots which had a large public impact on how social housing was viewed.
- Change in the post war consensus about the role of government, leading to “rolling back” the state including withdrawal of support for council housing.
- The impact of Right to Buy in reducing the proportion of high quality homes available for rent.
- The impact of Homelessness legislation on the proportion of vulnerable households who became social housing tenants, in the context of reducing numbers of social housing.



Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher hands over the keys to the first Right to Buy household in Romford, Essex in 1980. (Photo source: The Telegraph)



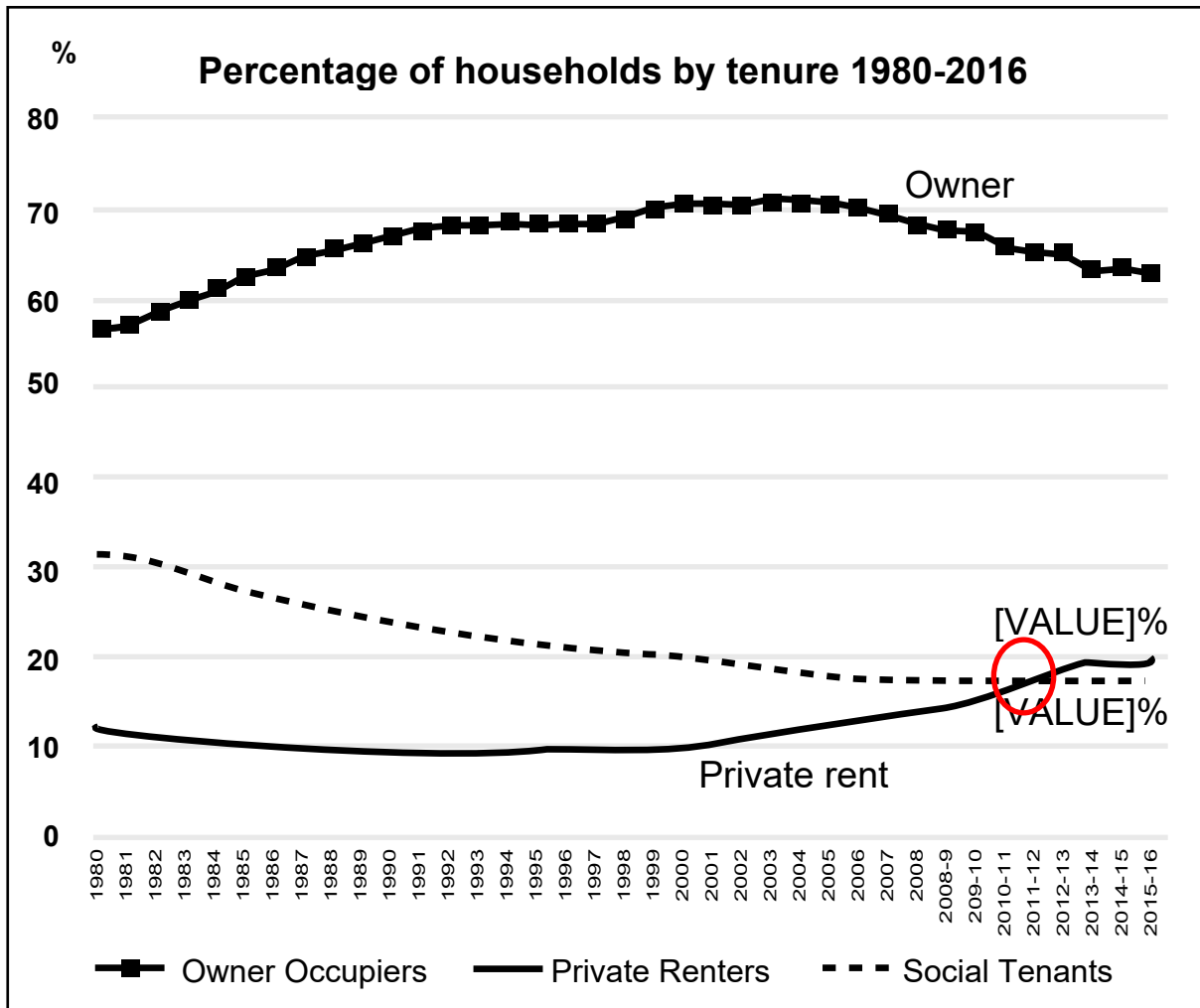
Large concrete panel buildings, a popular form of post-war construction, fell out of favour after the Ronan Point disaster in east London in 1968, when a gas explosion caused the panels to slip and collapse, killing four people. (Photo source: Wikipedia)

A shrinking tenure

Over the 20th century, tenure changed dramatically from private renting dominating, to owner occupation becoming the biggest tenure. Meanwhile, council housing grew throughout the century up to the 1980s and housing associations expanded rapidly from the 1980s, as council housing began its steep decline. Overall, social housing (council and housing association rented homes) lost ground to private renting, which re-expanded from the early 1990s. This leaves social housing as a shrinking tenure, overtaken by private landlords.



Fig 1
 Social renting peaked in 1981 at 32%. Private renting's market share revived from 1994 and overtook social renting in 2012.



The economic policies of the 1980s, with strong support for home ownership led to an even greater polarisation of social housing, driven by privatisation and a shift in subsidies in favour of owning.

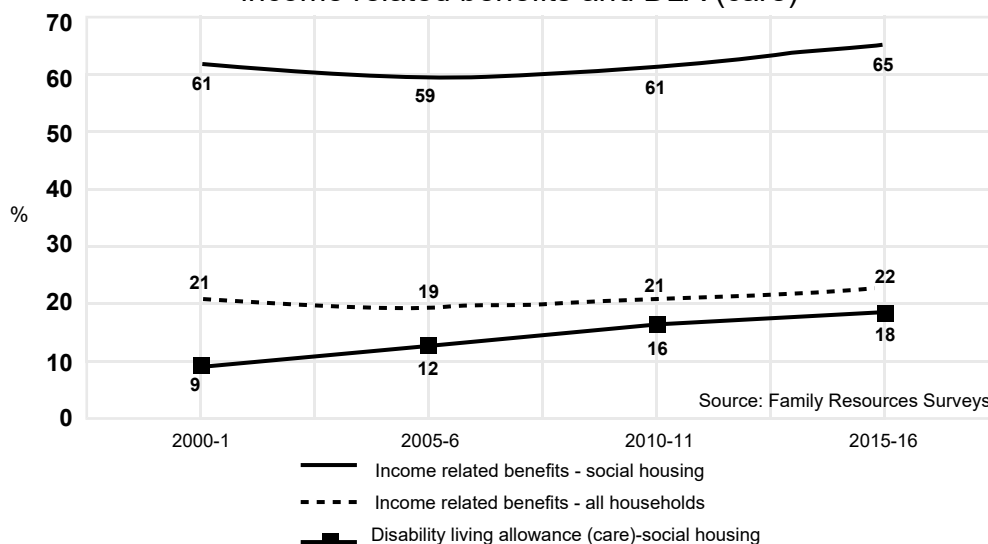
The schism between tenures and the decline of council housing intensified this polarisation. Overall the high level of sales of more popular houses in more popular areas through Right to Buy has greatly increased the residualisation of council built homes, whether owned now by councils or housing associations.

The public perception of social housing tenants is that they are unemployed and in receipt of benefits. 72% of the public over-estimate the number of people in social housing who are unemployed.²

Yet the English Housing Survey shows that around 70% of social housing tenants are in work or retired, with only 7% of tenants unemployed. 30% of social housing tenants in receipt of housing benefits are also in work. The remaining 23% are unable to work due to caring responsibilities or disability. The Disability Living Allowance has risen from 9% in 2001 to 18% in 2018. This reflects both the much higher level of disability in social housing and the wider impact of ageing. (See Fig 2 next page)

Fig 2

Increasing proportions of social housing tenants on income related benefits and DLA (care)



However, long before the decline in social housing numbers, stigma had started to develop around social housing in the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s, due to a growing perception that council estates were often badly constructed and managed, and was increasingly used to house low income households from slum clearance areas.

The reality is that major improvements have been made to the management, state of repair, thermal efficiency and levels of tenant involvement in social housing since the 1980s.

A Think Tank to gather tenants' views of social housing in October 2017 found an overwhelmingly strong message that tenants like living in social housing, they value their landlord and their local community. This does not mean that they live trouble-free lives. But it does mean that their experience of where and how they live and who they are does not match the negative images and stereotypes seen in newspapers or television programmes. Nor do they recognise as valid the pejorative phrases used by politicians such

as 'sink estate'.

When asked what they value about social housing, most tenants said they value security of tenure, closely followed by their repairs service and sense of community. They expressed pride in their local area, particularly around community spirit and neighbourliness.

By far the worst feature of social housing is what other people think of tenants, giving them a negative image of themselves. A survey of 450 tenants showed that 9 in 10 feel the media portrays a stereotype of tenants, that they are unemployed, in receipt of benefits, are younger and have children. Whilst not individually pejorative, this view is exploited by 'poverty porn' programming which links social housing and receipt of benefits to difficult lifestyles and behaviours.

Poor housing management is also an issue for some tenants. In thinking about what made them feel bad about their lives, the most significant answers were around neglect of their local area, particularly through private landlords (ex-RTB) not keeping their properties in good conditions.

It was notable that, as well as seeing the media as a main source of negative stereotypes about social housing, a significant number of tenants said they had been made to feel uncomfortable about their tenure by someone in an 'official' position, including statutory and housing association staff.

These responses fit with headline findings from Housing Plus Academy Think Tanks held by the LSE over five years. The evidence shows clearly that people living in social housing value their local communities and are particularly positive when they are involved directly in community action and generate their own activities to improve things locally. It also reveals the negative experiences of social housing tenants, especially under the impact of welfare reform and service cuts. Many feel alienated and denigrated by the harsh system that now seems to be in place. They are indignant about how they see vulnerable tenants being treated.



Conclusions

The Benefit to Society campaign aims to change the way people living in social housing are portrayed and thought about. It is clear that this aim strikes a chord with many tenants across the country.

This research will help us to reach those without direct experience of social housing, but who have an awareness of the negative media representations.

Our research demonstrates that negative media portrayals of social housing tenants are far more common than any positive coverage. There is an ongoing negative impact from this on individuals and communities.

However, it also shows the need to view the increasing stigma in the context of policy changes and service cuts. There is work to be done by social landlords with staff, as well as partners, to recognise the huge value added by those living in social housing. As with other tenures, a whole section of society should not be judged by the perceived actions of a small minority. The benefits of social housing and its tenants to neighbourhoods, and society as a whole, are immeasurable.

There are also lessons to be learned about the way housing is developed and managed. Quality must be at the heart of the housing we provide and the management of housing must respond to the voices of the people living in it.

As well as working with media, politicians and the public, housing providers must listen, and respond to, the tenants they house and ultimately depend upon.

References

- 1 *Overcoming the Stigma of Social Housing. Can social housing rebuild its reputation?* February 2018, Professor Anne Power and Dr Bert Provan – available on www.benefitstosociety.co.uk
- 2 *Overcoming the Stigma of Social Housing: Findings from Tenant Think Tanks* February 2018, Professor Anne Power – available on www.benefitstosociety.co.uk
- 3 YouGov online survey of 2,075 adults carried out on behalf of Soha Housing. Fieldwork was undertaken between 16-19 February 2018. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).
- 4 Online survey of 450 social housing tenants, carried out by the Benefit to Society campaign, June 2017.



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