



Working with the new Government to tackle social housing stigma

Stop Social Housing Stigma (SSHS) is an organisation led by a committee of social housing tenants. It has a growing membership consisting of social housing tenants, supporter members, and corporate organisations including growing numbers of landlords.

SSHS was formed following the Grenfell fire tragedy and the subsequent Ministerial roadshows, where tenants identified that tackling social housing stigma was their most important priority, higher even than getting a good quality and safe repairs service.

This paper makes a set of recommendations (summarised in Appendix One) that form an initial blueprint for how Government can tackle social housing stigma, working in partnership with SSHS.

The importance of tackling social housing stigma

Social housing stigma should not have existed back in 2017 when the Grenfell fire took place, but it did. Lessons should have been learnt since then, but social housing stigma continues unabated. Government had a responsibility to tackle it back then, but even more so, it has a responsibility to tackle it now.

Social housing stigma is **not** an “add on” minor problem where tackling it would be just a nice thing to do whilst other things are more important. Social housing stigma is deep rooted in the social housing sector. It is a root cause of failure in the other areas that might be considered more important. It is fundamental to the lives of social housing tenants.

A small selection of the many issues that were raised by tenants in our consultations relating to our “Journey Planner” programme (referred to later in this paper) are shown in the table below.

- *They're only tenants... what do they want to know that for?*
- *We know what's best for you*
- *It's a culture of disrespect and distrust*
- *You're getting free repairs – what are you complaining about?*
- *That'll do – they're only tenants*
- *What does it matter if we're late for a repairs appointment? They're just tenants – they haven't got anything better to do*

- *You should be grateful that you have a social housing home*
- *They think we're thick, stupid and lazy*
- *We put loads of work into designing and building properties – then the tenants move in and trash them*
- *Tenants are all on benefits and cannot support themselves*

These, and many other similar or worse, concepts are what social housing tenants have to deal with on a daily basis. Tenants just tend to accept such things as part of life, but academic conceptualisations of stigma point towards a harsh and challenging reality for those stigmatised and harsh and challenging motivations amongst stigmatisers:

- Stigma is defined as a deeply discrediting attribute which reduces the bearer in our minds from a whole person to a tainted and discounted one (*Goffman 1963*)
- Stigma ... is a resource drawn on by the stigmatisers to exploit and dominate (keep people down), manage and enforces regulations (keep people in), control or exclude others (keep people away) (*Link and Phelan 2014; Phelan et al 2008; Tyler 2020*)
- Stigma is a machine of governance used to legitimise the reproduction and entrenchment of inequalities and injustices on people and places (*Loyd and Bonds 2018; Tyler 2013; Slater 2016; Sisson 2021; Watt 2020; Wacquant 2008*)

The Grenfell report highlights swathes of issues. Social housing stigma is the unifying factor behind them:

- inaction, thoughtlessness, carelessness, officialdom, unresponsiveness, delays as a result of requiring another report from different consultants in the hope they would suggest something different
- no consultation with residents about new cladding, defensiveness, hostility, personal antagonism, cost cutting and anger towards tenants and their representatives
- warning signs of distrust and dissatisfaction not being addressed by the landlord and TMO – from tenants, who were not listened to, and requests that were not actioned

There is a danger that individual issues could be dressed up and compartmentalised as poor landlord communications; landlords not addressing the needs of vulnerable people; landlords not taking responsibility; or as something else. All of these are of course important issues in themselves, but Government, society, landlords and others need to tackle the root cause – social housing stigma – the idea that it is OK to treat social housing tenants as second-class citizens; to not involve them in decisions about their homes; to consciously or unconsciously discriminate against them.

To get the fundamental culture change that the Prime Minister has recognised as being necessary, social housing stigma needs clear recognition by Government, regulatory bodies, landlords and others in the sector.

The current UK Government has clearly recognised social housing stigma. In the debate following the release of the Grenfell report, the Prime Minister stated in the house that regulations alone are not sufficient to tackle social housing stigma but that there is a need for a significant cultural change in the social housing sector. The Prime Minister was responding to Florence Eshalomi MP (now the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee) who raised the issue of social housing stigma, possibly for the first time in a debate in the house. The Deputy Prime Minister went on to stress the importance of social housing stigma in interviews the day after the debate.

Civil servants in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government now need to follow the lead set by the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, recognise the importance of tackling social housing stigma, and work with SSHS to develop strategies to tackle the problem.

The post Grenfell promises

Promises were made to tackle social housing stigma in the Government's post Grenfell White Paper. SSHS's former name (See the Person) was referred to in the White Paper and the subsequent Green Paper.

But there has been no Governmental activity to tackle social housing stigma. The promises made have not been delivered on.

SSHS welcomes the new suite of Consumer Regulations which came into force in 2024. If landlords comply with them, they will improve the quality of service that tenants receive. But, despite stigma being of fundamental importance to tenants, Governmental and regulatory activity to tackle social housing stigma remains a blank sheet of paper.

The closest that the regulations come to tackling stigma is that the first Required Outcome in the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard is that Registered Providers must treat tenants and prospective tenants with fairness and respect. But this is the only Required Outcome in the Regulatory Standards that includes no Specific Expectations – another blank sheet of paper. And the Regulator's accompanying Code of Practice (CoP) does not mention stigma and does not signal any examples or best practice on tackling stigma.

That little has been done by Government or the Regulator to tackle social housing stigma to date is perhaps not surprising. It is so deep rooted in the culture of UK social housing and indeed across society that tackling it is considered so difficult (with some landlords still intransigent towards even considering the issue) that it has been parked whilst progress is made in other areas. Social housing stigma is complex and intangible. It means different things to different tenants. It manifests itself in many different ways making it difficult to regulate or measure. It is perhaps difficult to know even where to start.

But nonetheless, social housing stigma goes to the heart of the anger and hurt that so many social housing tenants feel in the wake of the Grenfell tragedy and which has been reawakened with the publication of the Grenfell report. The previous Government **did** have a duty to address social housing stigma (but didn't), and the new Government inherits that responsibility.

In this paper, Stop Social Housing Stigma is offering to work in partnership with Government and others to tackle social housing stigma so that the Government's responsibilities can be met. We make detailed and specific recommendations below.

SSHS and the Tackling Stigma Journey Planner

SSHS has started to develop strategies to tackle social housing stigma. Our two current primary activities are set out below. We would like to do much more, (and the tenants involved have already devoted many days of voluntary action to build the organisation) but we are limited by the resources available:

- a) **uniting the social housing sector and society to tackle social housing stigma** - developing as a membership organisation (membership is free and requires no specific commitment), where full membership is open to tenants, but supporter membership is open to anyone else, and where organisations, including Registered Provider landlords, can join as corporate members. Our aim is nothing less than to develop a membership that is united in its commitment to tackle social housing stigma together as a sector.
- b) **developing a framework for tenants and landlords to work together to tackle social housing stigma** - SSHS has worked with the University of Durham, Sheffield Hallam University (the leading academics working on social housing stigma), the Chartered Institute of Housing, TPAS and YD Associates to produce a Tackling Stigma Journey Planner – aimed at helping tenants and landlords work together to address the problem. The Journey Planner is available [here](#). It is a flexible framework that recognises that there could be many ways to tackle stigma, and we welcome any ways that tenants and landlords choose to use. But to our knowledge, our Journey Planner is the first time that anyone has attempted to develop a comprehensive framework to identify and tackle stigma.

Recommendation one – the Government should make a commitment to working in partnership with SSHS as the only national body (and one that is tenant-led) that is actively seeking to address social housing stigma; which is working with the leading academics in the field and with a growing number of tenants, supporters and Registered Provider landlords; and which has developed (and will continue to develop) a comprehensive framework for tackling social housing stigma. That commitment should include regular meetings with senior Ministers to discuss progress of strategies and ongoing meetings with civil servants.

Recommendation two – following the publication of the Grenfell Report, the Government should commit to publishing a paper, and widely promoting it both in and out of the social housing sector, regarding its views and intentions regarding social housing stigma. In order to demonstrate to Registered Providers the importance of working with tenants, the Government should send a clear signal that it wishes to work with tenants to tackle social

housing stigma by publicly stating its commitment to working with SSHS and other tenants.

Recommendation three – the Government should endorse and commit to working with SSHS to support the development of the Journey Planner as the only existing comprehensive framework to enable tenants and landlords to work with each other to tackle stigma. If the Government does not consider it appropriate to support the Journey Planner, the Government should commit to working closely in partnership with SSHS to develop its own comprehensive strategy and framework to enable tenants and landlords to work together to tackle stigma.

Recommendation four – whatever strategies the Government supports to tackle social housing stigma, it should commit to reviewing its tackling stigma strategies on an annual basis, again working with SSHS, and extensively gathering tenant views (from a range of diverse groups) on progress regarding tackling stigma through a number of different methods.

The Competence and Conduct Standard

The direction on the Competence and Conduct Standard was consulted on before the election and the Government’s intentions regarding the Standard are awaited. The consultation indicated that a stated intention of the Standard is to “achieve significant culture change to tackle social housing stigma”. SSHS and others have questioned how such an intention will be achieved simply through requiring qualifications. Our recommendations are about ensuring that the Government can achieve the stated intention.

Recommendation five - ensure that the direction to the RSH on the forthcoming Competence and Conduct Standard and the standard itself specifically requires Registered Providers to develop strategies with their tenants to tackle social housing stigma.

Recommendation six - request that the RSH works closely with SSHS to develop the Competence and Conduct Standard to ensure that it successfully contributes to its stated intention of tackling social housing stigma

Recommendation seven - require that qualifications anticipated in the Competence and Conduct Standard will include comprehensive training in respect of tackling social housing stigma and that those providing qualifications engage directly with SSHS to ensure effective training in relation to tackling social housing stigma (including reference to SSHS’s Tackling Stigma Journey Planner). If the Government considers that this is not appropriate, it should explain in detail how the proposed qualifications will contribute to tackling social housing stigma and how the Government will review that this is the case.

Recommendation eight - require that qualifications anticipated in the Competence and Conduct Standard also include training on how to cascade training on social housing stigma to all staff and contractors and include a requirement that training is provided internally in all Registered Providers on social housing stigma.

Recommendation nine – require that Registered Providers have human resources systems that appropriately address tackling social housing stigma

Recommendation ten - require that those with existing qualifications in respect of the Competence and Conduct Standard are expected to complete a training module relating to social housing stigma including reference to SSHS’s Tackling Stigma Journey Planner to maintain their qualifications.

The RSH’s Codes of Practice provide guidance and support to Registered Providers to comply successfully with the regulatory standards. Given that social housing stigma is not currently referred to in respect of the Required Outcome relating to Fairness and Respect, we make the following recommendation:

Recommendation eleven - request that the Regulator of Social Housing reference SSHS’s free Tackling Stigma Journey Planner in the Regulator of Social Housing’s Code of Practice relating to the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard.

Reviewing the success of regulatory and other changes

Our recent consultations have shown considerable ongoing anger and frustration at the pace of change in the social housing sector amongst some tenants. Many tenants are pleased about the new standards but are sceptical about whether Registered Providers will deliver, whether they will treat the Consumer Standards as a tick box exercise and whether the RSH will be in a position to properly assess tenant viewpoints in respect of Registered Provider performance. In most landlords, tenants are still not considered to be a partner in the delivery or shaping of services by landlords. There is good practice, but there are significant areas that remain unaddressed, even in landlords who have been given a C1 rating.

It is right and proper to give the new Regulatory Framework an opportunity to deliver cultural change that will reduce social housing stigma, but there need to be methods to assess progress that tenants trust.

Recommendation twelve - enable a “one year on” tenant-led review with tenants of their views of the success of the Consumer Standards (introduced in April 2024) and of the Housing Ombudsman’s Relationship of Equals recommendations (introduced in January 2024). Ensure that the tenant-led SSHS are particularly involved in reviewing aspects of the review that relate to social housing stigma.

Recommendation thirteen – develop a co-regulation expectation where tenants, drawn from a cross section of the community, are enabled to participate in their Registered Provider landlord’s assessment of compliance with Regulatory Standards

Recommendation fourteen – explore how RSH Inspectors can be influenced by dissatisfied tenants pre-inspection and how they can meet with diverse tenants including those not involved with the Registered Provider and not just those selected by landlords

Tackling discrimination

Social housing stigma is discrimination. SSHS has defined tenants' experience of social housing stigma as follows:

Social housing stigma is about:

- a) drawing conclusions about someone because they live in social housing
- b) conscious or unconscious negative, generalised and unfounded assumptions about the circumstances, behaviours and abilities of social housing tenants
- c) considering social housing tenants to lack the capacity to input into decisions that affect them
- d) treating where social housing tenants live to be inferior neighbourhoods
- e) housing staff, contractors, the media and others treating tenants without respect and empathy or in ways that demonstrate a lack of trust
- f) negative consequences for the lives of social housing tenants affecting their quality of life and life chances.

No one should have to face discrimination just because of the type of home they live in.

Recommendation fifteen - consider whether and how social housing stigma and discrimination against social housing tenants could be made unlawful and included in Equality Act provisions.

Promotion and publicity

There is an ongoing need for Government to work with SSHS and others to consider how to continually promote positive stories about social housing; to promote best practice in tackling social housing stigma; and to send signals both to the social housing sector and more widely that social housing and its tenants are valuable and an integral part of society.

Recommendation sixteen – work with SSHS to develop a Government social housing stigma communications strategy. Part of this strategy needs to be about ensuring that the Deputy Prime Minister, the Housing Minister and the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee are regularly briefing regarding social housing stigma. Part of this strategy needs to be about ensuring that properly supported tenants become high profile ambassadors for social housing in the media so that the public regularly get to “see the person” rather than the media image and rather than the people who are paid to deliver the service or to work in their trade bodies.

It may be that the term “social housing” itself is now broken beyond repair. Tenants generally do not like the term although that might just be because of the stigma attached to it. Simply replacing the name with something else may just invite social housing stigma onto that new name.

However, how much is there a need for Government and others to publicly refer to “social housing”. Clearly there could be complications with not doing so, but could the

Government simply refer to homes provided by Registered Provider landlords in statistical and other Government publications and then refer to housing as a whole publicly?

Recommendation seventeen – consider whether Government could cease referring publicly to the term “social housing” in order to signal that it wishes to stop social housing stigma and to encourage the concept that all housing is of equal merit.

Most housing associations are charitable organisations so that they can do not have to use their surpluses to pay Corporation Tax. This means that they can only house people “in necessitous circumstances”. This terminology potentially brings with it further stigmatisation, but further to that, it is questionable whether charities behaving in such a way as to attach stigma to their beneficiaries is in the interests of those beneficiaries.

Recommendation eighteen – enable discussion with the Charity Commission and SSHS regarding how the Commission can ensure that the charities it regulates are actively seeking to tackle the stigma that their beneficiaries are subject to.

Those tenants who attended the post-Grenfell Ministerial Roadshows thought that they would be the start of an ongoing dialogue with tenants that would enable them to input into national policies and strategies that affected them. Unfortunately, Government engagement with tenants since then has been largely limited to sounding boards where decisions have largely already been taken.

Recommendation nineteen – develop a programme with SSHS and others to enable ongoing direct dialogue between Government and tenants in a range of different ways. Those ways could include further Ministerial Roadshows, some form of National Tenant Voice, inclusion of tenants on the Boards of Government bodies involved with social housing, digital communications, sounding boards, targeted dialogue with particular demographics of tenants, and other methods.

Government needs to send clear messages to the social housing sector that it is serious about landlords having genuine dialogue with tenants by demonstrating that it is having genuine dialogue with tenants itself.

Recommendation twenty – the Deputy Prime Minister, the Housing Minister and the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee need to be seen to be engaging regularly in dialogue directly with social housing tenants. This could be through SSHS, through some form of National Tenant Voice, through Ministerial Roadshows and through other methods.

Ongoing examples of best practice in social housing stigma need to be continually shared across the social housing sector so that the sector is encouraged and supported to drive itself up. SSHS’s vision is that its growing tenant, supporter, landlord and other membership will develop a united approach to tackling social housing stigma, but we would welcome other input into that approach. RSH is now not permitted to share best practice, but the Housing Ombudsman may and does.

Recommendation twenty-one – enable discussions between SSHS and various bodies to consider how best to ensure widespread dissemination of best practice in tackling social housing stigma.

Resourcing Stop Social Housing Stigma

SSHS currently operates solely through ad hoc donations from landlords and others to ensure we can deliver free services and support within our mission. In respect of the various proposals listed above and potentially other activities, there is the scope for SSHS to carry out projects to deliver specific outcomes related to tackling social housing stigma that could be funded by the Ministry that could potentially pump prime SSHS to develop and grow. That there is a clear need for an independent national body to lead on tackling social housing stigma and to unite the social housing sector in its mission is evidenced by the Prime Minister's, the Deputy Prime Minister's and the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee's recent statements.

SSHS is not seeking "core funding". It is seeking opportunities to deliver projects that will lead to outcomes in relation to social housing stigma as set out in this paper, and therefore funding to deliver those projects. SSHS anticipates that any funding provided by Government could be at least part matched by other funding, and that once pump primed, SSHS will be able to develop in future with less reliance on public funding.

Recommendation twenty-two - the Ministry should discuss with SSHS the potential for project funding to enable SSHS to continue to build and develop as an organisation bringing the social housing sector together to tackle social housing stigma whilst at the same delivering outcomes in respect of specific projects.

For further information about these recommendations, please contact:
Nic Bliss, Campaign Director, Stop Social Housing Stigma –
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Appendix One – summary of recommendations

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