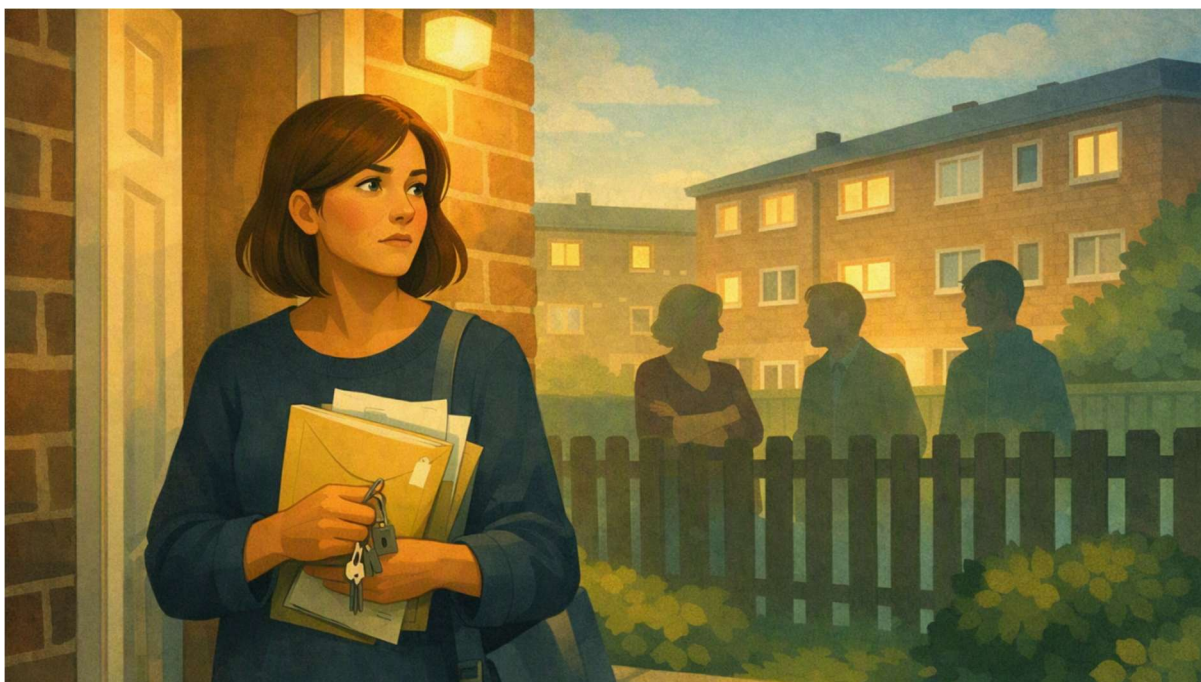




Notice the Surprise: how social housing stigma works, and what would help



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At the Housing Community Summit in Liverpool, I was asked the same question again and again: how exactly does stigma show up?

I'd have liked to answer it properly in the room, but my own differences and needs made that hard. So this is my answer, written down.

I'm writing as a social housing tenant, and as someone who works across the sector on tenant voice and stigma. Each place I sit shows me a different side of the same problem. These views are my own, not those of any organisation I'm part of.

The small moments

Stigma rarely arrives as one big incident. It shows up in the small moments.

The surprised look when a tenant understands the regulations, or can set out their rights. Nobody says anything. They don't have to.

That is why "how exactly are you stigmatised?" is so hard to answer on the spot. You're being asked to point at one thing, when what you're living with is the build-up of hundreds.

It isn't rare. In Stop Social Housing Stigma's national survey of 1,643 tenants, 70% said they feel stigmatised, and 54% linked that to something their landlord had done.

Prejudice and stigma are not the same thing

The words get used as if they mean the same. They don't, and the difference matters.

Prejudice is what is done to you. Stigma is what you are left carrying.

The first happens in the room. The second comes home with you. They need different fixes, and most of what the sector measures today only sees the first.

How prejudice builds: five stages

Othering. Drawing a line between "us" and "them", so that people in social housing become a different kind of person. You hear it in "those estates" and "people like that". It lives in headlines and on TV long before it reaches any policy.

Stereotyping. Filling "them" in with a fixed picture: not working, not coping, not capable, not financially secure, not a responsible parent. One story, stretched over millions of people.

Prejudice. A judgement made in advance, before anyone has met you or heard what you have to say. The surprised look is prejudice.

Bias. When that judgement gets built into how things are done: policies, standards, processes, forms. Bias doesn't need anyone to mean it. It runs on its own.

Discrimination. When bias changes what actually happens to you. The repair that waits. The complaint that isn't believed. The support you only get once you've been labelled.

There is a gap in the law here. In the UK, home ownership is treated as the default, and every other tenure is ranked somewhere beneath it in an unofficial hierarchy. Yet housing tenure is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, and the socio-economic duty in section 1 is still not in force in England. So when this happens to tenants, the law doesn't even call it discrimination.

Where you can see it

Bias is in policies that describe tenants as people things are done to, never people who act. Housing has a whole vocabulary for what tenants need, and almost none for what we bring.

It's in rules that say we can't paint our own front doors.

It's in empty homes brought up to a "lettable standard": the cheapest white fittings, and no say for the person who will live there.

It's in repairs that take months or years, done to a standard you wouldn't accept in your own home. It's in all-day appointment slots that assume a tenant's time is worth nothing, because they either don't work or can rearrange their lives around the visit.

It's in the language. A "void" describes a home by the absence of a person. A "decant" borrows a word for pouring wine. Neither word has a family in it.

None of this is dramatic on its own. It's the build-up.

Why stigma lands differently: intersectionality

A fellow tenant told me he had never experienced stigma linked to his tenure. I believe him.

Stigma doesn't land evenly, because tenure is never the only thing being read. You are also read by your class, your accent, your gender, your ethnicity, whether you're disabled, neurodivergent, a single parent, on benefits. The legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw gave this a name: intersectionality.

Intersectionality isn't a list of labels you add up. It's the way they combine, and the combination changes the reading. The same behaviour can be read as "engaged" in one room and "difficult" in another, depending on who is doing it. Knowing your rights reads as confident in some people and as trouble in others.

That's why stigma doesn't stay in housing. It follows you to the school gate and the GP's surgery, where you can be read as irresponsible, unstable, unreliable, before you've said a word. If it isn't tenure, what is it? Usually, several things at once.

The gap between who you are and how you're read is where stigma lives. The wider that gap, the heavier the load.

What sits underneath: deservingness

Underneath all of it is one idea: that a safe, decent home is something tenants have to earn.

It's there even when people defend us. Answer "tenants don't work" with how many do, and you've accepted the premise that a home must be earned through work. You've also

quietly left behind the carers, the disabled, the unwell, and everyone else the statistic doesn't cover.

It's there when help depends on disclosing something about yourself, or being categorised as "vulnerable". The label becomes the price of being taken seriously.

It's there in what you're told to be grateful for. When our homes were demolished, we were told we were lucky, and that the compensation was enough to warrant the upheaval of entire lives. Compensation and support packages are rarely substantial enough to cover what tenants have actually put into their homes: good flooring, quality fixtures and fittings, proper decorating. They're set as if every tenant's home is basic. Basic is treated as enough.

And it's there when tenants turn on each other. "It's the state of other people's houses." "It's the new people." That's stigma looking for somewhere else to land. If someone else is undeserving, maybe it isn't you.

What stigma leaves behind: four stages

Expecting it. You anticipate judgement before it happens. You brace before every phone call, every appointment, every form.

Hiding it. You manage what other people know. You stop giving your address, stop inviting friends round, stop mentioning where you live at work.

Believing it. The judgement from outside becomes a voice inside. Maybe basic is all you should expect.

Giving up. You stop reporting, stop complaining, stop asking.

That last stage is the most dangerous, because from the outside it looks like success. Complaints fall. Satisfaction holds. But silence is not satisfaction. A falling complaint rate can be a warning sign, not an achievement.

Being believed

At the summit there was a lot of talk about tenant engagement and empowerment. That matters. But every tenant should be listened to and believed, however they engage with their landlord, and whether or not they ever join a panel.

Engagement alone can't fix a power imbalance where tenants are done to, while also being treated as a commodity with no real choice. The Better Social Housing Review reached the same conclusion: the imbalance between residents and landlords, built on unfounded assumptions, keeps stigma going.

When tenants aren't believed, stigma stops being hurtful and becomes dangerous. Awaab Ishak's family were told the mould in their home was down to their lifestyle. His death is why Awaab's Law exists.

From 1 October, the Regulator's Competence and Conduct Standard joins Awaab's Law in setting out what landlords and their staff must do. Rules like these are vital. But they can only tell us what landlords did. They can't tell us what tenants are carrying. That's the half I've been working on how to measure. It's early, draft work.

What would help

1. **Never make assumptions.** One standard of dignity for every tenant, rather than a new rule bolted on for each group.
2. **Believe first.** Treat every report as credible, however it arrives and whoever makes it.
3. **Change the language.** Retire words that describe homes and households as empty spaces or contents. Describe tenants as people who act, not people things are done to.
4. **Make choice the standard.** In fixtures, fittings and finishes, and in appointment times that respect people's time.
5. **Stop making support the price of a label.** Offer help without demanding disclosure, and let tenants see how they have been categorised and why.
6. **Measure what tenants carry, not just what landlords do.** Read falling complaints alongside what tenants say about their own experience, and never mistake silence for satisfaction.
7. **Defend tenants without deservingness.** A safe, decent home is a foundation, not a reward.
8. **Close the legal gap.** Bring the socio-economic duty into force in England, so that disadvantage has to be considered when decisions are made.

Stigma is not inevitable

The same survey found that a quarter of tenants feel respected, listened to and proud of their homes. What they describe isn't complicated: good communication, respectful staff, well-kept homes.

So it can be done. It starts smaller than any strategy.

Next time you're surprised that a tenant knows the rules, notice the surprise. That's where it starts. And that's where it can stop.