

How can the UK's social housing stigma be overturned?

Social housing plays an essential role in the UK's housing and social environment and yet there is an unwarranted stigma attached to it. This stigma greatly exacerbates the challenges many lower-income households in social housing face.

In researching my recent Masters dissertation, I was curious to investigate ways in which to address this stigma. My research blended a review of academic and professional publications with the results of interviews I conducted with participants active in the social housing sector. Here is what I uncovered.

The current stigma

Social housing provides a much-needed safety net in the form of long-term housing for many lower-income households and affordable housing for households unable to compete in the private market.

Stigma is a form of collective prejudice and discrimination. It reinforces social inequalities and results in the exclusion of people for no other reason than the perceptions of where they live.

Today we see that stigmatisation in views that social housing communities are crime-ridden areas dependent on the state, that they typify lawlessness, fraud, poor parenting, mental health problems and substance addiction. The reality is that this only represents a minority. The stigma associated with social housing, however, drives some lower-income households to favour the high costs of private rent. Many studies have found that social housing is often avoided and only used as the last resort housing option by those that need it most.

Why this is so different from 50 years ago

But this wasn't always the case. Up to the mid-twentieth century, social housing was essential and valued in the UK, providing housing for all sections of the community. It was acceptable to live in and each community comprised a mix of different ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds. A sense of community and value was clearly evident in much of the social housing sector.

This sense of pride sadly diminished over time as investment in social housing decreased. Successive governments sought to reduce the cost burden of social housing and introduced policies that encouraged home ownership.

Such policies ultimately created a perception that social housing was only suitable for the desperate and those who wanted to live off the state. This perception continues to be reinforced by the media in printed, broadcast and social media. We see this particularly in popular television dramas that depict those in social housing as criminals and workless.

Such a belief has been supported by the poor quality of some social housing stock, in which extremes of poverty can be found. This combination results in pockets of deprivation, where social exclusion occasionally overflows into social disruption. Such events are then seized on by the media and their followers to justify their negative perceptions of social housing. And these views are sometimes echoed within the social housing sector where residents refuse to move to a certain area because of its poor reputation.

With an increasing population and stagnant rates of income, a sizeable gulf has opened in between supply and demand for social housing. It exerts greater financial pressure on low-income households, increases overcrowding in existing properties, and adversely affects levels of homelessness.

How can this be overturned?

Social housing is not the only sector to be adversely affected by stigma; sectors such as mental health have also been stigmatised for centuries. Interestingly the media are finally addressing some of the stigma associated with mental health and this has created a widespread rejection of stigmatisation surrounding it.

The lesson for the social housing sector is to therefore educate the public and government about social housing, and to demonstrate the impacts such stigma can have on communities.

In doing so, the sector requires champions to raise its profile and to educate the masses as to social housing's importance and benefits. In our digital age this requires cooperation from all forms of media, including government, print, broadcast and social media.

This will also be helped by the regeneration and refurbishment of existing housing and the provision of new, good-quality properties in mixed tenure developments. But these measures need to be handled with care so they are not destructive to existing social housing communities and reinforce a belief that they need to change to fit in with social norms.

Changes to social housing need to go hand in hand with changing societal perception of social housing residents. The mind-set of society needs to be altered and this will come from more positive coverage of social housing communities and an open, honest discussion about the needs of lower-income households and the vulnerable in society. The government should take the lead, supported by the media changing its current reporting practices.

An impossible task you may think, but if the stigma around mental health has been successfully challenged in recent years, perhaps not?

End.

About the Author

Michael Guest is a highly experienced chartered housing professional with professional and academic expertise across the housing sector and beyond. He recently gained an MSc. in Housing Studies with distinction, the dissertation research focus being on stigma in social housing. The full dissertation is available at <https://www.michaelquest.co.uk/articles>