Paula Palmer

Hello and welcome to this episode of Stonewater's On The Air podcast. Today, we're tackling a pervasive and often overlooked issue: stigma in social housing.

Stigma can take many forms, from the language we use to the way people living in social housing are portrayed in the media. In this episode, we'll be exploring how stigma is created, how it impacts people's lives, and what's being done across the sector to challenge it. We'll hear from researchers, practitioners, and those working in housing to understand how we can break down barriers and promote pride, equity, and inclusion in social housing.

I am delighted to introduce today's guests. We're joined by Joe Ross, Service Improvement Manager at Stonewater. We're also joined by Rick Liddiment, Head of External Affairs at Flagship Group and co-author of the Breaking Barriers Report, based on understanding and reducing social housing stigma. And authors of the Stigma and Social Housing in England report, Dr. Mercy Denedo from Durham University and Professor Amanze Ejiogu from Sheffield Hallam University.

Thank you all for joining us today. I'm really looking forward to hearing some insights from the research you've undertaken. So here we go. Let's start with something around the language we use.

We refer to homes, not voids or units or stock. But many organisations in the sector, including Stonewater, have adopted terms like customer, which comes with a bit less favour. Joe, why is that? And what might be lost by abandoning the word tenant?

Joe Ross

Yeah, sure. I think the word customer is one of those things we've come into in the 21st century a little bit more. We've got a part of that drive to treat customers with a bit more respect. I've just slipped into using the word customer when I didn't really want to, but here we go. And it reflects how we've aligned ourselves for more for-profit businesses. And I think you can see that using customer rather than tenant has actually had a positive impact.

Usually, you can see it as a bit of a signifier that the people, the colleagues who use the word customer often, do actually try and treat our customers with respect. And again, I've done it and I'm trying not to. But I think, I'm sure everyone on the call, has probably seen examples of stigma expressed, and it's often coupled with the word tenant and how tenant can be used in a pejorative way. So tenant has done X, the tenant won't let us in the house, that kind of thing.
It's often used in place of their name. And so I definitely think customer is, in some ways, is always trying to humanise people more. But I do feel like the word customer has a... Using it to connote respect highlights the undercurrent of, in British society, about the commodification of respect.

Why do we need to pretend that tenants are customers to treat them with respect? Why does there have to be a transactional element between us and someone that lives in one of our homes to treat them as if they are a person. It hides a power dynamic between us and them that we pretend we're a supermarket in some cases. But the people that live in our homes they can't shop elsewhere easily. You know as well as I do that anyone that ends up in one of our homes often doesn't have a choice.

It's found on a housing register. Sometimes, people can't turn it down because then they'll be intentionally homeless. There are all those reasons why We are not Tesco, and you can't just

go to Sainsbury's if you want to. It's really hard to move out if you're not receiving a good service, particularly if you can't afford to move to the private sector, you have to wait for months on a housing register waiting list or find mutual exchange which can fall through so easily. There's all those reasons why we're not really customers. They're not really customers in the way that the word, in my mind, particularly means.

I think it hides that they are legally our tenants and there is that power relationship between us. Perhaps it can also, in some ways, then by hiding that power relationship between us, there is a bit of a problem there that we believe there is more choice than there is. I think we need to tackle then why tenant is an issue - why that is automatically stigmatising for a lot of people.

Paula Palmer

Okay, thanks, Joe. Rick, can you tell us a bit more? From your research and experience within the housing sector, how does stigma sometimes play out within the sector itself? Perhaps more about the language we use or maybe organisational culture.

Rick Liddiment

For sure. Similar to what Joe was mentioning. But ultimately, sadly, stigma isn't just external. It can definitely show up internally, too. Sometimes it's in the language that people use, difficult tenants or assumptions about who deserves what, that type of thing. And these can really reflect that unconscious bias. So, us and them thinking can be where people unintentionally distance themselves from tenants. Those houses, those new homes, are lovely. Even I would live there, that example. It definitely creates that divide and undermines the trust. That's why, I guess, training is fairly crucial. But it can't really stop there. I think, from my perspective, leaders set the tone. If we're serious about tackling stigma, then it definitely needs to be modelled from the top in how we speak, behave, and, I guess, prioritise people.

Paula Palmer

Fantastic. I think it's really easy for us to blame stigma on external sources, media and social media and the news and stuff like that. But yeah, it's really important to start closer to home.

Mercy, in your research, as well as identifying stigma in relation to individuals in social housing, the stereotypical unemployed or antisocial neighbour, you also talk about in terms of perception of social housing estates and tenure for vulnerable households. That's a lot to unravel. Can you tell us some more about the research and how stigma is constructed and reinforced within the housing system?

Dr. Mercy Denedo

Thank you, Paula. I worked myself and Amanze in 2018. We set out to understand how stigma is constructed, how stigma is experienced by social housing tenants, and then how social housing stigma can be challenged. In 2018, we spoke to over 200 participants. We spoke to social housing tenants, particularly in England. We spoke to board members. We spoke to CEOs. We spoke to housing professionals. We spoke to politicians, councillors, and then. What we uncovered then was that when you're looking at stigma, you need to understand that there is the external element of stigma and there's also the internal element of stigma.

Both of them, they are quite interlinked in relation to government policies around homeownership. The conservative government then, their emphasis was around encouraging people to own their own home. In terms of championing homeownership policy, they tend to

use languages that are stigmatising to social housing tenants. Most times, they see, in order to encourage people to buy their own home, they use the term Right to Buy, to encourage social housing tenants to buy their own council housing without understanding that even when they are selling those houses to social housing tenants, they need to also invest in building more social housing to encourage those who would like to live in social housing, to live in social housing.

As a result of government policy, social housing became a residualised tenant, and it's residualised to the most vulnerable in society, the most helpless in society. The media then capitalise on those negatives to be projected by policymakers to justify their own ownership agenda. They capitalised on it. They use language such as sink estate to describe social housing estate.

We've heard so many stories from social housing I'm saying, When you look at the media narrative, they see them as lazy, uneducated people, unemployed people. They rely mostly on benefit. But the majority of those that we've been engaging with since 2018, even today, majority of them will tell you that they they work. It's just that their take-home pay is not sufficient enough to cover their market rent, so they have no option but to go into social housing. They work. Some of them, they will tell you they don't even have access to benefits because they work.

Also, when you look at the internal stigma, by internal stigma, I'm looking at the stigma within the housing association level. Majority said they feel social housing professionals or social housing providers, they see them as weak, as people that they need to take care of.

Because of that, their voices are not being heard. They don't have a voice in decision making. Tenants do not have a voice in decision making to shape their lived experiences. Majority of those social housing tenants, they feel as a result of this, multiple levels of stigma, external, internal, that makes them feel worthless and as if they are second-class citizens in society. When you talk about stigma, it affects their lived experience. It affects the way they entail themselves, they see themselves because they've internalised this stigma.

Paula Palmer

Thank you, Mercy. You were talking there about sink estates, those places that are typically characterised by high levels of poorer people, deprivation and crime. But social housing providers are now, and many developers, are trying to mix up tenures to try and prevent that segregation of renters and homeowners to prevent areas why that might be that need or vulnerability. Joe, would you tell us some more about that? From my experience here at Stonewater, we're providing mixed tenure estates. So, does it help with the stigma experienced by residents?

Joe Ross

I think certainly mixed tenures developments are often held up as a bit of a silver bullet, almost, for solving stigma, because like you say, it doesn't create that us versus them, that sink estate, that area where, I'm sure, again, we've all heard that - "that's an estate you don't want to go through". It certainly has helped with that and certainly how to break down that. Particularly in terms as well, places that local councils don't give as much investment into and all that stuff. It has really helped with that thing.

 I think, again, though, if it's not done properly, it can actually contribute to stigma. There is an inter-estate dynamic that can often be at play. So again, those homeowners that live alongside people who live in social housing can often be quite, for want of a better word, cruel, almost,

see themselves as they shouldn't have to live alongside someone who doesn't own their property. Why should I pay X amount of money to live here and someone gets to live here for cheap, that thing? I think you can see how in the terms of the design and the way that we hand these over, even by policy design, we still actually end up contributing to that.

Our Section 106 is handed over first. That often means that social housing tenants are moved into estates first when building is not done. It means they live on their own in a building site, which is definitely not pleasant. It means they're there before homeowners move in and it still creates that us versus them, those people who were here before, that thing, and who often live in houses that have been built for less money and are less well maintained because of the way that they've being built.

I think it's really important if we do do mixed tenure developments, which is definitely the right way to go, that community building is a really critical part of that. That's where places like Stonewater and any other housing association can help with that. We've got a tenure-blind approach. We treat our shared owners exactly the same as we treat social rent tenants, for example. We try and act as a community focal point. Our neighbourhood team, for example, they've done some really interesting work where they have skips provided not long after people move into the whole state, where both our tenants and people who don't live in one of our homes can come along and bring rubbish that they've got from moving in.

We all know that moving in generates an enormous amount of rubbish. We can act as that community focal point, which is really important to try and make sure that the Housing Association is not seen as someone who just moves in people who homeowners consider lesser than them, for example. I think that's really important that, again, we remain vigilant as housing associations as well. We call out snobbery when we see it. It's important for us to defend our tenants in that regard as well and not just play into that stigma and apologise for it, if you see what I mean. I think they're very important, but we can't just assume that on their own, they are the be-all and end-all of it.

Paula Palmer

Okay, That's a good answer, and it shows the level of the task at hand to break down the stigma, isn't it?

Amanze, the report talks about stigma existing at both societal and institutional levels. How do these two layers interact?

Professor Amanze Ejiogu

Thanks, Paula. I think Mercy started to touch on this earlier. In our first report on stigma and social housing in England, we saw stigma at a societal level. This is when you go into the society broadly and you see that negative perception of social housing. So you see people think about social housing as zones of criminality, full of druggies, people who live there are lazy, don't work, benefit cheats. So you have that negative perception. A lot of it driven by the media, a lot of it driven by political narratives. And so you have that in society.

But you have the landlords who exist in that society. So all their staff are part of that larger society, and then they bring those attitudes into the organisation. But the landlord is now directly interfacing with the tenant. And so you have that level of stigma within the organisation. And what it then does within the organisation is to create all sorts of disrespect, negative attitudes towards the tenant. A lot of what we've seen is paternalistic attitudes towards tenants. So we look at the tenant as being incapable or unable to do things for themselves.

We need to do things for the tenant. And so the tenant is there to be controlled. Things are done through the tenant rather than with the tenant.

Paula Palmer

Thanks, Amanze. In Housing we often talk about home being pivotal for social mobility, but as we can see, this obviously depends on the home. We hear about postcode lotteries, but this is altogether different, and job opportunities, and how people are perceived just by the place they live. And one common bit of stigmatisation is the belief that a social housing home is a lesser standard or run down. So, Rick, can you tell us some more about the link between repairs and maintenance and demonstrating how tenants feel respected.

Rick Liddiment

Yeah, for sure. I guess repairs are often seen as the front line of how tenants judge our respect for them. So when service is poor or dismissive, It can definitely feel like their homes, and I guess by extension, their well-being, particularly tenants, doesn't matter. For some, living with those unresolved issues, consistently sitting around it can definitely impact mental health, especially when it feels like no one is listening, particularly your landlord. I guess it's short and simple in some ways. On the flip side, timely, quality repairs do more than fix a problem. They really restore trust, and they show tenants that we care, that we're reliable, and we're on their side.

Paula Palmer

Yeah. Thanks, Rick. Mercy, whilst we're talking about repairs, could you tell us some more about the Tackling Stigma Journey Planner that was produced with the Stop Social Housing Stigma Tenant Led Campaign Group? I was interested to read the repairs and contractor flyer, the one that says, treat me with respect, and I will have the same level of service. I'm not lazy. I do work. I would like an appointment to suit my working hours. Then there's the bit where you've broken it down into tickets, and one of those also refers to repairs. Tell us some more.

Dr. Mercy Denedo

Yeah, thank you. I think when we started this project, myself and Amanze in 2018, we read so many stories from tenants because after the initial report in 2021, we had a consultation with social housing tenants, policymakers, and Housing Foundations, to understand what we can do collectively to address stigma in social housing. And in 2022, we published a report on the consultation responses.

But following that report, we felt there is a need for us to do more, to work with housing providers to understand how issues around this repair affect tenants' wellbeing, affect their self-esteem.

So, since 2023, we've been working with Stop Social Housing Stigma campaign. The Chartered Institute of Housing, T-PAS, YD Consultants, to develop what we now call the Stigma Journey Planner. When we started in 2023, the initial plan was to develop a pledge, and a toolkit. If we have to develop a toolkit to address stigma. A majority of the feedback we got from the survey responses were like, No, we don't want another set of toolkits because we already have quite a lot of that across the sector, and we can't really see the impact of that on our lived experiences.

We want something that housing professionals and providers can develop collectively with their tenants to tackle stigma. Following that survey responses, we developed an initial draught

of the Stigma Journey Planner, and then we had a series of focus group conversations with tenants. I think we had eight focus group conversations with tenants, not just one tenant. In the focus group, we had up to 10, 8 tenants attending the focus group conversation because of how important the issues around stigma is to them.

We had a focus group conversation with housing providers, and then we had one with contractors. From the focus group conversations, we then went back to revise what we now have as a Stigma Journey Planner. Since last year, we've piloted the Stigma Journey Planner with 10 housing providers, I think five councils, and then six housing associations.

The initial draught of the journey planner was designed to enable housing providers to work with their tenants to understand how issues that affect stigma can be resolved collectively and to give tenants a platform to actually engage with their housing providers to get their voices heard around issues around service delivery repair. Because the majority of the issues that when you look at the internal stigma, the majority of the issues around the internal Stigma have to do with issues around service delivery and repairs.

In the pilot phase, we ran a series of workshops with the pilot organisation to develop this Stigma Journey Planner to understand what needs to go into the Stigma Journey Planner to understand how effective the Stigma Journey Planner will be to them. When we did the pilot, we had 12 tickets. One was around tenants leading change, one was around issues around trust because most tenants, they do not trust the housing providers. One was around staff culture, and one was around organisational governance, and how stigma can be embedded in organisational culture.

From the piloting, the majority felt the tickets were quite too long and too cumbersome for housing providers to work with. So what we've now done is to streamline the tickets into six. We will be launching this journey planner next month. But the emphasis is to provide a platform for housing providers to collaborate with their tenants to address issues around stigma, to give tenants a platform to get their voices heard internally, and to influence decision-making at the board level, at the operational level, and to get people to understand that tenants should be seen as a valuable resource in decision making.

You can't make a decision without consulting tenants, so they have to be at the forefront of decision-making. That's the core purpose of the Stigma Journey Planner. From the pilot phase, we've seen positive responses from the partners, we call them Partner Travellers, the piloting organisation. We call them the Partner Travellers.

We've seen positive feedback from them because they've been able to bring both contractors, tenants, and housing professionals into the room to understand how issues around culture can be addressed, how issues around service delivery can be improved, and how issues around the place can be addressed.

Paula Palmer

Fantastic. I'm looking forward to seeing the new journey player and lots of people taking it up. On the topic of results, Joe, could you share us an example of how Stonewater Support Services have helped someone overcome the barriers linked to stigma?

Joe Ross

Yeah. We've got a number of services that just wouldn't be available in the private sector. One of the ones we've got, we've got an employment specialist, so someone that helps provide advice and apply for grants and the sort of thing that helps people get over the barriers that

are there to finding stable employment and often also not necessarily finding stable employment, but also moving on up ladders and into jobs that are perhaps more desirable.

For example, we've provided in the past a grant to get someone a Class I HGV licence. That's a really good skilled job that is a massive barrier to get into because you need to pay up to £5,000 to do the learning in the first place.

So we also helped a customer named Brian, for example, who was provided our grant through our Longleigh Foundation, which is our partner, to get forklift refresher training and then also pay for travel expenses and workplace-appropriate clothing and all that stuff. Things that if you're more privileged, you don't think of as a barrier to getting into work, just the capital costs that are there in the first place.

While I'm inherently aware that what we're doing here is helping people to get into stable employment, we're still not necessarily tackling that stigma against unemployed people.

What we are trying to do is at least try and make it clear that the barriers that are preventing people from getting into stable employment are often not our tenant's fault. It's things that are just simply structural in stopping people from getting in place. I think what we've tried to do with these services is try and break down those things that are stopping people, that are stigmatising people, that someone like Brian, who might have been feeling stigmatised and had poor mental health because of it, we know now that his mental health has improved. He's now into stable work. There are some really important things that help him feel better about himself and hopefully, therefore, and that's the most important thing, but also, hopefully, therefore make some of those ideas around employment break down the stigma.

Paula Palmer

Lovely, thanks, Joe. It's a good example that a social housing home is a good place to be in once you can strip away the negativity surrounding it. Amanze, in your work, what organisational behaviours did you uncover that unintentionally perpetuate stigma?

Professor Amanze Ejiogu

I think with organisations, one of the things which we've seen is that stigma is an issue of culture. And so there's this ingrained culture which is disrespectful to the tenant, which views the tenant as incapable. And if we think about the Ombudsman's report on Rochdale Borough Housing, the two-year-old who died there, Awab Ishaq. One of the things which the report talks about is this culture of disrespect, and not just in Rochdale, but talking about it being endemic across the sector. And so this drives all sorts of behaviours within the organisation. You see tenants talking about, especially with regards to repairs, they phone in to report a repair, and they are passed from pillar to post. When a repair is booked, they are not consulted as to the time, it's just booked, and the assumption is the tenant is at home because the tenant doesn't work. And then you see contractors turn up without notice. They do a shoddy job. There's no explanation to the tenant what's going on. They leave the job halfway, and they walk away without any explanation. We talk about changes within the organisation or changes broadly around the living environment which impact on tenants.

They are not consulted. And when they are consulted, it's a tick-box thing. It says we should consult you, so we've spoken to you, but we really don't take your views into account. And so you have an organisation which does not feel that it's accountable to tenants or it should be accountable to tenants, an organisation that feels that the tenant voice is not important. And that's where stigma leads. And we see that across a range of organisations. While organisations are different places and some are better than others. Generally, there's that

underlying culture which does not view the tenant as one who deserves the respect and dignity which you would give to, say a homeowner.

Paula Palmer

Yeah. It's a shame that level of respect just isn't granted, isn't it? It just should be a given for whoever you are and whoever you're dealing with. We're all people. Rick, I know that you've also worked with the Social Housing Stigma Group, and You've spoken about how campaigns can unintentionally reinforce stigma. So, what does a more empowering approach look like?

Rick Liddiment

Too often we see stories and campaigns framed around successes, meaning someone has escaped from social housing. But that reinforces the idea that social housing is something to rise above, and we really need to shift that. I think campaigns should definitely highlight the thriving that goes on within social housing, not just despite it. That means telling stories of strength, pride, and real community. These real voices genuinely matter. We really need to make space for tenants to lead that narrative and let authenticity cut through the stereotypes. I think they've been created by a minority, and it's time to cut through that and highlight social housing for what it really is. It's a foundation to thrive, really.

Paula Palmer

Yeah. I think these celebrity campaigns, I think they're trying to do a good thing. But actually, yeah, from those, I always get that escape narrative. I came from there, but now I'm doing It's better. Whereas, like you said, we need more storytelling of how people are in it and enjoying it and thriving. That's great.

Fantastic. Mercy, so what were some of the most striking impacts of stigma has on tenants based on the interviews and focus groups you've held?

Dr. Mercy Denedo

Recently, I had a chat with someone who said there was a contractor who came to fix a problem in a house. When the contractor walked in, the first thing the contractor said was, Oh, your house is clean and nice. How long have you been living in this house?

When she told me, I was like, Are you actually sure? So that person said, Yeah, that was what he said, The house is clean and nice. How long have you been living in this house? So it's that perception that those who live in social housing are dirty. They are not. They live in rough areas.

So it just creates this sense of self-worthlessness that they're just second-class citizens. The majority of them, some of those I've spoken to said, oftentimes they've internalised this stigma because when they go for a job application, for instance, they get interviewed. We've heard stories from tenants who said they knew they did well, but when they came back with their feedback, they were not offered the job. They went back to the interview and said, Okay, we've done this interview with you, Can you provide more feedback? The feedback they got was, If you want a job, you need to change your postcode.

If you don't change your postcode, we can't offer you this job because your postcode is linked to crime.

The same thing with insurance, with access to applying for insurance or opening up a bank account. The moment they can link their postcode to a social housing estate, automatically, the insurance premium goes up because they feel they live in a crime zone, so which will affect the services the insurance company can provide.

Also at work, we've heard stories of social housing tenants saying they can't go to work and tell their colleagues where they live because the moment they mention that they live in a social housing or social housing, they look down on them instantly and that make them feel as if they're a second-class citizen.

We've heard stories of Postcode stigma, particularly in London, where in a built estate, particularly in an Irish tower, where there are separate entrances for those who have bought their homes and those who are on social rent. Those have owned their own home. They have this luxury entrance. We can see everything's shiny. But for social housing, then you have just a tiny pathway to their home.

That creates a sense of segregation. Majority of those who live or have lived in such housing, they feel as if they are second-class citizens because there's no way they can get things changed. Even within the housing providers level, they feel they don't really have a voice to influence decision-making. The housing providers only come to them when decisions have already been made about issues that will It affects them, so they don't have a voice.

So that creates a sense of disrespect because majority of those that were spoken to feel as if nobody actually respect them. The housing providers do not respect them. The policymakers do not respect them. The media do not respect them, and they don't have any means of engaging or changing their narrative.

So majority have been crying for the creation of a national tenant voice, at least to enable them to challenge the societal stigma, to enable them to engage with policy makers and the media. And majority also argued for Social Housing Tenants to be on the board of housing providers in order to share policies, in order to influence decisions around housing, service delivery, repairs, and things like Wow, it's shocking, isn't it?

Paula Palmer

Just all those levels of stigma and disrespect. I'm surprised at some of those that we heard there. Amanze, can you tell us some more? I think Mercy started touching on customer voice and stuff there. What is missing from current tenant involvement structures and how can we do better to start tackling this?

Professor Amanze Ejiogu

I think if we look at current structures, again, we need to look at them at the organisational level and at the societal level. At the organisational level, what you have is things like tenants on boards and scrutiny groups. But we've seen these as problematic also. So, with tenants on boards, we have tenants who are on boards who tell us that when they go on the board, they are still sidelined. They are still told, When you go on that board, you need to remove the tenant hat, and don't think of yourself as a tenant on the board.

We've seen cases where scrutiny groups have taken a section of operation to scrutinise. They've come up with a report which is critical of the organisation in those areas with learning points, and instead of taking that on board, the organisation dissolves their scrutiny group and buries the report.

So we've seen those as... While they might make some movement towards tenant involvement, there needs to be some genuine commitment to making sure that these work. Underlying all of this is really a power imbalance. So the tenants have lost their power in the sector. When we started talking about a co-regulatory approach to regulation of the sector, the idea was to have tenants, landlords, and the regulator together as co-regulators.

The tenants have been sidelined from that arrangement, so now it's really the landlord and regulators. What needs to happen is to put the tenants back in that equation so that you have a proper co-regulatory approach. And at the national level, again, you see it with the landlords, you have the National Housing Federation speaking on their behalf when we're thinking about policy-making. Nobody speaks on the tenant's behalf. Their voice is not heard at that policy level. And so we need to think about how we have a national tenant voice or a voice which speaks for tenants at that national level when we are talking about policymaking. So it needs to be approached both at the organisational level and at the more societal policy-making level.

Paula Palmer

There's some terrible cases of just playing lip service to customer involvement, isn't there? Jo, can you tell us about how Stonewater are ensuring 10 inclusion doesn't become tokenistic?

Joe Ross

Yeah, that's what I meant to say. It's really important to make sure that scrutiny panels, they don't just ignore what's been given to them, that we don't just ask for that information and then just ignore it.

Paula Palmer

It's such a waste of time, isn't it?

Joe Ross

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I mean, so obviously, we've got our customer inclusion panel, which is a scrutiny panel. In that, we've now got it in place. It's reasonably new. I mean, for the past two, three years or so, it's been increasing. What we're trying to do is make that more and more - More and more influential, more and more making sure that that is taking into account every single thing that we do, every single change that we make.

The inclusion panel reviews it; feedback is given, and the keyword that it is implemented as well. Making sure we're not just asking for it - we've already decided what we want to do, and if we don't like what we hear, then we're just going to ignore it. That's making sure very much that we're not doing that. I think we've still had some issues in terms of making sure that panel is truly representative.

We've tried very hard to get young people involved, and there's been a struggle there in terms of just getting that involvement. So we've tried with somewhere our young people's voice, for example, we've tried making sure that they're offered the chance to be involved and the interest is just not necessarily there.

We do tend to get that young people's voices, for example, from surveys, but obviously, surveys are very, very passive. We get not the same level engagement that you do from a scrutiny panel, for example. So that has been a challenge.

But I think where we can say we've been really inclusive of disabled people, for example. So a high proportion of our scrutiny panel are people with a disability. And that's really important. We've mentioned quite a few times on this podcast about the amount of times that people just assume that social housing tenants are available at any time of the day. Particularly for people with disabilities, there is that assumption that access is easy and should be given at all times. And I don't think it necessarily takes that into account. So it's something that we've done as an organisation. We have tried to make sure that we are taking on board everything that's given to us.

Of course, we certainly can do better. And I think as we continue to implement this process and get it more and more organizationally just part of the furniture, I think it will become more and more effective. The work that our customer engagement team led by Jade, does is really, really good. I think it's something we're acutely aware of. It shouldn't be tokenistic, and we're trying our best to make sure it isn't as well.

Paula Palmer

I think it's interesting the range of ways that people can become involved, isn't it? And trying to encourage that level of diversity, like you say, about encouraging different age groups because we don't all think the same, do we? Okay, so here's the dream reality, Rick. How can housing associations become brands that people admire?

Rick Liddiment

Well, yeah. I guess, yeah, it's a tough question, but branding shapes perception. So in housing, I think that's a huge opportunity. So when we're consistent in how we show up, speak, and listen, we definitely earn trust.

if we look at brands outside the sector, the ones that stand out for me are clear on their values. They lead with purpose. They're people-focused. Let's take, I don't know, Greggs, for example. They're a brand that knows its audience. It leads with authenticity. It's accessible and unpretentious, and it's definitely built that strong emotional connection with people across the UK. But it definitely shows that I guess, it's proud of being for everyone, and that's super powerful, I think.

Also, IKEA - they've democratised good design. They show that good design, quality, and comfort aren't just for the wealthy. Their messaging offers and focuses on home, belonging, and sustainability, all of the things that suit best with, I guess, social housing and what we should represent. They do it in a way that's, I think, fairly global but definitely personal. For us, and I guess for the sector, it means sharing powerful human stories, creating that strong visual identity, and showing that social housing is something to be proud of.

It's not hidden, it's not apologised for, and it's certainly not a last resort.

Paula Palmer

Yeah, fantastic. That's great. I like that last bit you said there about it not being a last resort. Mercy, some housing providers are worried that tackling stigma might require resources they don't have. How would you respond to their concerns and what small practical steps can organisations start with?

Dr. Mercy Denedo

I would probably say it won't cost them anything to challenge stigma and to work with their tenant to address issues around stigma. From piloting the Stigma Journey Planner, we've realised that it won't cost anything to bring the tenant into the room to understand how service delivery affects them, how it affects their lived experience, and how it impacts on their well-being.

It's also important for housing providers to know that they need to address issues around stigma because one, it will affect how they implement or comply with regulatory standards. But clearly, when you look at the consumer regulations around treating tenants with fairness and respect,

To address these issues, housing providers need to understand that there's a need for tenants to have a voice in decision-making and for those voices to be heard, not just inviting them to attend meetings just to tick a box. No, you have to understand that when you invite them into the room, you need to understand you need to get their voices heard. You need to have a platform where you can feed back to them on how their voices have been incorporated into decision-making and into operational policies as well.

Because the majority of those social housing tenants that we've spoken to felt, even when they are members of a board, members of scrutiny panels, they don't get to hear anything from the housing providers on what they've said, how they've said it has been used to influence policies.

So there's this communication breakdown between the housing providers and them, even when they try to engage, and they can't really see the impact of such engagement.

So, there's a need for tenants to have a voice, and those voices have to be meaningful if we are to challenge stigma. And also, housing providers need to be accountable to their tenants, not just being accountable to the regulators, but they need to be accountable to their tenant, and that will enable them to improve on their tenant satisfaction.

I don't think it will cause them anything to invite tenants to the room to have a one-to-one conversation on, Okay, these issues that is affecting you, what can we do to make things different? What can we do to address this issue? Tenants are willing to engage. Majority of those that we've been engaging with since 2018, and even recently, they are willing to engage.

All they are waiting for is they're waiting for our housing providers to create that platform where they can easily engage with them.

Paula Palmer

Yeah Okay. Fantastic. Yeah, that's more about that inclusivity and chatting and talking on an equal level, isn't it?

I was interested to read about the paternalistic nature of social housing and how it's having effect. That's one thing I'm going to take back to my day job about how we talk about our services and our role to our customers or tenants or however, we're referring to them.

Jo, I would like you to add a little bit there. What steps do you think we could take to bring back the positive role of social housing and supporting social mobility?

Joe Ross

I think really a wider one is simply just to build some more and make sure that government house building targets are met. It's been touched on by, I think, pretty much by everyone, Rick and Mercy, particularly. I think, where we've talked about how Social Housing is now seen as a last resort. Whereas if you look back at the 1940s through to the early 1970s, mid-1970s, for example, I know social housing was a big part of proportion of our housing stock, and it's got smaller and smaller, and I don't think it's particularly surprising to see that as it's got smaller, the stigma has got bigger.

I think you can see the introduction of the Right to Buy and particularly Margaret Thatcher's belief and the Government at the time's belief that a homeowning democracy is what Britain should be because they believed that to have a stake in society, you needed to own property has been really damaging. I think to try and push back against that and, again, bring back the fact that social housing can be a positive role for social mobility, we need to try and start thinking about limiting the Right to Buy, for example.

We need to be looking at making sure that all the proceeds from any right to buy are actually reinvested back in Social Housing and making sure that we are building more and not just losing that housing stock and having a net negative loss in certain places. I think that's really important.
I think, ultimately, that until we start making sure that we are building and expanding It's not going to be seen as anything other than a last resort for people who are on and below the poverty line.

My dad was born in social housing in 1953, and it was completely and utterly normal for just a normal working person to be in social housing. I think we've got to the point now where it's seen that it would be now seen as not normal per se or not something that the majority of working-class people should be aiming for. They should be aiming to be in a private rent until they can afford to buy. That, I think, is something we need to challenge.

Paula Palmer

Great. Thanks, Jo. It's interesting how the perception of social housing has changed over time, isn't it? I'm going to give a little plug to our history of social housing on our website. You can find the timeline, if you're interested, at socialhousinghistory.Stonewater.Org. I think it's also frustrating that housing providers now who offer so much more than a home that they're often thought of so poorly, and in some way that adds to the stigma, doesn't it?

So, Rick, can you tell us what role social media can play in amplifying positive narratives about tenants and social housing?

Rick Liddiment

Yeah, no problem. Social media is a funny one. It's like a double-edged sword, I guess. It can definitely spread those harmful stereotypes super quickly that we spoke about earlier, especially in that short form content where the nuance is lost. There's not a huge amount of context, particularly in the short, snappy videos.

But I think it's also a chance to really tell our story in our own words. So, the key for me is being proactive. So, we need campaigns that are controlled, thoughtful, and genuinely reflect tenant experiences. So, when done well, I think that social media can really challenge those misconceptions. It can definitely support and build pride and ultimately reach new audiences, particularly those that might never have heard these stories otherwise. There are a lot of people out there who just hear things from other people, and they don't actually see it at

source. I think it's a tool to be able to share those real stories about social housing if done correctly.

I think when we see or when we hear about campaigns or posts that aren't necessarily the truth, I think individually as people, we should be able to call that out amongst friends and colleagues as well.

Paula Palmer

Yeah, fantastic. I'm going to be watching our content to make sure we're not unintentionally reinforcing stigma. It's made me really aware of the language we use, to be fair, talking to you all today. We have uncovered a lot today, from the root causes of stigma to the efforts underway to challenge it across the housing sector.

Before we wrap up, I've got one final question that I'm going to pose to each of you. Looking ahead, what's the one thing you think housing providers should focus on to challenge stigma and promote pride in social housing? I'm going to start with Amanze.

Professor Amanze Ejiogu

I think with social housing and stigma, one of the things which the organisation needs to do is to look at root causes. In a lot of organisations, we have organisations doing things to retrain staff or looking at service delivery, but they are treating symptoms.

What they need to do is to address the root cause, and that has to do with organisational culture. They need to start there and address culture. As they address culture, the other things will start to change.

And so, for me, this focus will be on culture, on their values, because what we are again seeing with a lot of organisations is a shift away from their social values to become more business-like. Again, that feeds into some of the stigma. So that's refocus on values and culture, and then build out from there.

Paula Palmer

Lovely. Thank you. Mercy?

Dr. Mercy Denedo

What Amanze said. Also, I think to address stigma, looking at the organisational level, then there's a need for housing providers to engage more with their tenants To ensure that their tenants, they have a voice, and their voices are being heard - on service delivery, on repairs issue, on any issues that affect them, on how decisions are being made, on how finances are being utilised.

They need to have a voice in shaping decisions around such. Also, housing providers, they need to understand that even though they're accountable to the regulators, they're also accountable to tenants, and they should be accountable to tenants. So they need to create an effective accountability system where they can give accounts of their operations to tenants, and tenants can also feedback on their performance on how they can improve services.

Lastly, we've developed the Stigma Journey Planner, and we hope that more housing providers will be able to look at the tickets in the Stigma Journey Planner and self-assess

themselves against those tickets and see how they can work together to tackle stigma in social housing.

I hope that housing providers can pick up a copy of the Stigma Journey Planner and look at how it can help them to shape policies around stigma, around service deliveries.

Paula Palmer

Joe?

Joe Ross

I mean, it's difficult to find anything that hasn't been said now, but I think just to echo, particularly what Mercy said as well about inclusion, I think it would be really important just to remember, we can't, even if we're trying to be well-meaning, we often assume rather than ask first. I think in removing that assumption, it would be really important just to try to make sure that we don't come across as paternalistic and try to think we're doing the best for people without asking for them. I think I'd go very much on that.

Paula Palmer

Lovely. Thank you. And last but not least, Rick.

Rick Liddiment

No worries. I'll stay in my lane on this one. I think read what you've written before you publish. Think about how the tone comes across if there is, and you're accidentally creating them and us. But secondly, share those powerful stories, get them out there, the positive stories of social housing. As I mentioned earlier, create that strong visual identity. Showcase social housing for what it is. I'll say it again, obviously, because you liked it, but make sure that it's something you can be proud of, not hidden or apologised for, and certainly not a last resort.

So a true foundation for people to thrive is what I think. So just take that step back and read what you've got.

Paula Palmer

Fantastic. Definitely something I'm going to be taken away for my day job.

So, I want to thank you all for joining me on On the Air and for sharing your thoughts and research with us. Tackling stigma isn't going to happen overnight, but by listening, acting, and working together, we can start to shift perceptions and hopefully create a more inclusive, respectful housing system.

That's it for today's episode of On the Air. Thank you to our guests and listeners for joining us. We'll be back soon with more conversations on the future of social housing.