

MEARS



Mears Your Voice Forum: Tackling Stigma

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Mr and Mrs Dobbie – Tenants

Helen Smith – Tenant

Maggie Duke – Tenant

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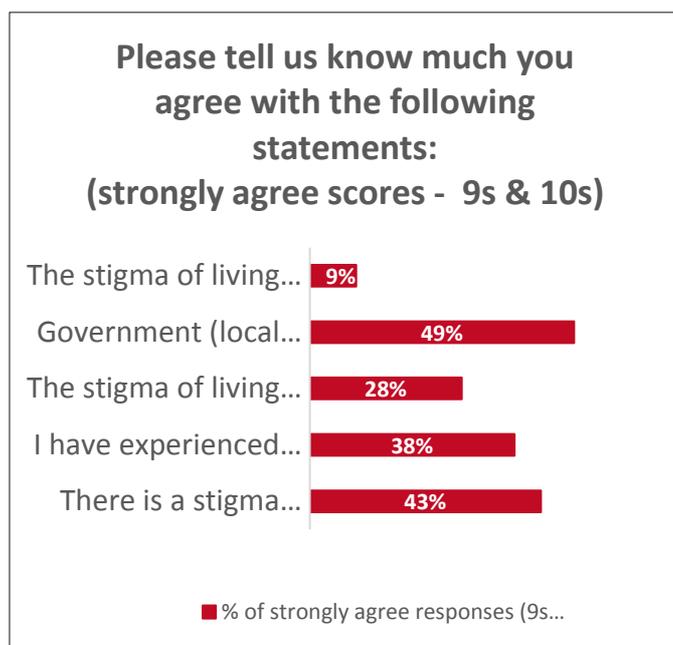
Tracey Lyth, Group Head of Customer Success, Mears Group

‘Stigma and disempowerment comes not only from the media and general public but disappointingly from landlords and housing professionals and others working in the field’ it’s important that Mears can be a part of finding solutions, and sharing good practice to work jointly with their customers to have a mutually respectful and fulfilling relationship’

As a leading contractor providing services to the housing sector, Mears understand the importance of engaging with tenants and tackling stigma.

As part of Mears’ Your Voice Online, we reach out to hundreds of tenants to gain feedback on various themes. The latest survey focused on stigma, and whether there is an issue in relation to social housing. The results indicated that there is an issue which requires address.

Summary Insight from the Your Voice Online Forum



What can contractors like Mears do to tackle stigma?

- Treat people with respect
- communicate
- Ensure fairness
- Train/ educate staff and operatives
- Treat people's homes/property the way you would if it was your own
- Do not make assumptions about social housing or people that live in it

What should be done nationally to tackle stigma?

- Improve appearance of council housing and council housing areas
- Education
- Media needs to change how they report
- Social housing residents must do their bit to change opinions

What behaviour or attitudes can we change to help tackle stigma both individually and organisational wide?

- Don't make assumption about people
- Treat people with respect and courtesy
- Improve maintenance of council housing properties
- Engage residents of council housing
- Change the wording used to describe someone who lives in council housing

See the Person Campaign

Chair of the See the Person, Martyn Lund, advised that the campaign is a tenant led committee, founded in 2017 and work with over 30 housing organisations. See the Person Campaign was launched in 2018 to the Houses of Parliament, over 200 attendees attended, and many MP's pledged their support to the campaign to stop the stigmatisation of social housing tenants.

A guide called 'Fair Press for Tenants' has been created by the committee to help journalists understand how to treat social housing tenants during interviews. Most recently, See the Person Campaign was mentioned in the Social Housing White Paper.

Members from the See the Person Campaign advised that television programmes such as 'Benefit Street' portray those living in social housing as 'scroungers' and have the perception that they live in the property rent free. Two years ago, there was an incident which saw a block of private housing tenants mixed with a block of social housing tenants. The developer created a playground but banned access to social housing tenants. As a result, there was a public outcry which highlighted that the developers had a negative attitude regarding the planning of mixed tenure development.

A toolkit called 'It's not okay' was created by See the Person Campaign in partnership with CIH. The toolkit advises how tenants wish to be treated. The guide can be used as a manual to show housing providers how to form relationships with their tenants and to train their employees on how to build mutual respect. Within the guide, there is the 'Mum test' for landlords, which is asking the question "would this be good enough for my mum?" if the answer is no, it shouldn't be good enough for anyone who rents their properties.

Sarah Davis – Senior Policy and Practice Officer, Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH)

There is concern regarding the stigma attached to social housing. See the Person campaign were established to challenge unfair stereotyping. In 2018, CIH produced a lot of work regarding rethinking social housing to highlight the value of social housing. The release of the Social Housing Green Paper had a chapter around stigma and more recently the Social Housing White Paper, which focused on strengthening tenants' voices.

What is Stigma?

Social Stigma: disapproval of our discrimination against a person based on perceivable social characteristics that serve to distinguish them from other members of a society. (Source: Wikipedia)

A mark of disgrace, associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person. (Source: Oxford English Dictionary).

What are the causes?

There is a housing shortage, access to housing and affordability for people to feel safe is a premium. Government policy has privileged home ownership and as a result, a lot of housing policies are focused on home ownerships. Social housing is viewed as a safety net.

The media is also a cause and cause a perception of social housing. With the use of social media, this perception is spread widely and quickly.

What about us?

I work in social housing (3 HA's, 15 years in total) the worst stereotyping has been from colleagues (Source: See the Person Report 2019)

There is the issue that landlords and housing professionals may contribute to stigma rather than tackling the issue.

“It’s not okay”

As CIH wanted to champion housing professionals and champion tenants and were keen to work with See the Person. The “it’s not okay” guide is aimed at contractors, housing providers and housing workers to encourage reflection on language, behaviour, and service design/delivery. There is the presumption that those who live in social housing do not work, and therefore do not need an appointment system. This was reflected within the guide.

The big issues

CIH conducted a survey which addressed stigma. There were reoccurring themes, the big issues highlighted were –

- Are we making assumptions?
- Poor or discriminatory treatment
- Not listening to or acting on tenants’ concerns
- Standards
- Ticking the ‘Involvement’ box
- Business not community.

What are the solutions?

CIH asked for solutions as part of the survey. These solutions included –

- The right culture: own it!
- Accessible and accountable
- Clear, positive communications
- Meaningful tenant and resident involvement that has an impact
- Good standard of homes, neighbourhoods, repairs, and maintenance.
- Staff: recruitment, training and development
- New homes that don’t “stick out”

Professionalism

CIH are committed take on board the findings from the See the Person Campaign. Where housing professionals, they should –

- Use their skills, knowledge, and expertise to add value
- Are committed to be a force for change across the sector
- Understand the impact of their language, behaviour and conduct and unconscious bias
- **Challenge stigma and negative stereotyping**
- React positively to a constantly changing environment
- Stand up for what is right and do the right thing
- Are recognised and valued for their knowledge, skills and behaviours
- Are seen to have equal credibility and status to other professional partners.

CIH Professional Characteristics.

Later this month, CIH are releasing their professional standards framework. The seven hooks include:

Integrity

Inclusive

Ethical

Knowledgeable

Skilled

Advocate

Leadership.

Ideas/Discussion – Performance Measures

Helen Smith, Tenant: I used to privately rent, but I am now surrounded by social housing. When tenants move into these properties, they're all friends. Consequently, this makes me feel isolated. Therefore, this stigma can be created by the tenants.

Lynn Brosnan, See the Person Campaign: Helen, in my area, we are lucky that we have a community centre and we make sure that we invite everyone. Regarding new tenants, we have an introduction pack which provides information regarding volunteering and how you can get involved which is shared across the Borough.

Martyn Lund, See the Person Campaign: We need to make sure that social housing is tenant blind and these properties do not stand out.

Mary Jacques, Tenant: Rotherham council work hard with tenants, I have lived in a council house for 15 years and have never experienced stigma. It can work both ways, some tenants in council houses can stigmatise themselves.

Mr and Mrs Dobbie, Tenants: We are based in North Lanarkshire, the council have started a project whereby any private firm which want to build have to allow the council to have X number of houses for social housing. The spec for a social house compared to a private house is exactly same, there is no way of distinguishing between them. The council have tried their hardest to integrate people.

Patriota Ramoo, Tenant: I live in social housing and have a five-year-old child. With the housing association, we have limited space inside our home for movement. We have a patio, sometimes – I have health issues and I have been asking my housing association whether they will work with me. However, there are frequent barriers. I would be willing to invest and contribute some money to have more space outside, but the answer is no. It would be great if housing associations could work with tenants and not dismiss suggestions.

Patriota Ramoo, Tenant: There is a lot of support for young people in social housing i.e. educational programmes, however, some are not taking advantage of this due to the stigma. This is an issue for young people.

Pam Hankinson, See the Person Campaign: I live in Doncaster and have never experienced stigma. I am part of See the Person Campaign and want everyone to be respected regardless of tenure.

Martyn Lund, See the Person Campaign: The main word is ‘communication’, to tackle stigma comes from communication and the communication between staff and tenants on contracts. Mears conducted a survey, this is great – it is important to find out tenants’ views. Also, important to understand the language of stigma, some people may not realise that they are being stigmatised.

Claire Smyth, Tenant: Martyn, how do I encourage my council to get involved? I spoke to East Kent Housing about the cleanliness of our communal areas, and I was told that my standards were too high.

Mr & Mrs Dobbie, Tenants: Does the See the Campaign operate also in Scotland?

Martyn Lund, See the person Campaign: Currently only in England, however – we would love to spread our work to Scotland. Please get in touch with us and we can advise how we can help you to get involved.

Gillian McLaren – National Consultancy Manager, Tpas: Tpas is an organisation membership and work with landlords, tenants and communities. This year, Tpas have launched National Engagement Standards. At the centre of the standards is ‘Culture’. The reason for this is that the behaviours and attitudes of staff form the foundation of an organisations approach in delivering excellence.

Please can this group all think of one practical thing that we can all do to tackle stigma and enter this into the chat function:

- Communication and the language/ tone of communications
- Some organisations are using the stigma guide to self-assess the areas of their business and areas for focus to change/address
- Having appointments with contractors, not vague times. Operatives arriving when they say they will. Letting tenants know if an appointment has been cancelled
- A practice way to tackle stigma is to have one on one communication to ensure suitability and agreement between contractors and tenants.
- Listen
- Challenge behaviours that stigmatise
- Link this all into training for staff
- Do the “Mum Test”
- Respect one another and treat others how you want to be treated.
- Challenge anyone who makes disparaging comments about people who live in social housing

Recommendations

1. Review MAPD training material for unconscious bias and tools to support operatives with positive behaviours in considering stigma
 2. Create task groups with Your Voice tenants to review and enhance all customer communication materials and resources, in consideration of stigma, with content and tone
 3. Mears to consider being a supporter or involved more with 'See the person campaign' as I don't think there are any other contractors that are part of this, and we would be leading the way.
 4. Tackling stigma to be a task group for the Your Voice Board, as primary focus theme, with defined objectives and outcomes to be confirmed.
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