Housing in Practice

Tackling stigma by listening to tenants

In the latest in our Housing in Practice series, we explore how two local authorities working in partnership have found ways to reduce the stigma experienced by many tenants. *Neil Merrick* reports.



Tenant board members, staff and councillors come together for a tackling stigma workshop with the Stop Social Housing Stigma campaign group

The tenant's story

Just over a year ago, Paula Warren noticed a change of tone in an email that she received from her social landlord. Instead of addressing her in a patronising way, the council seemed genuinely concerned about any problems she faced and informed her how she could make a complaint.

Warren has been a council tenant in Mid Suffolk for more than 20 years. For the past 14 years, housing in the area has been run as a shared service by Babergh and Mid Suffolk councils, which between them have about 7,000 tenants.

Previously, says Warren, tenants were often made to feel like second-class citizens. "If you spoke to anyone at the council they used terms like stock or property rather than talking about your home," she recalls.

By last September, Warren had accepted an invitation to join the tenant board, which advises councillors on operational matters. For the past three years, she has also worked in the councils' customer services team, meaning she hears first hand from residents who are dissatisfied with local authority services.

In terms of housing, she says, tenants are feeling less stigmatised while at the same time contributing to discussions and decisions. "There has been a reset and things feel completely different," she adds.

What's driving change?

Stigma has existed among tenants for years, coming to the fore most noticeably following the tragedy at Grenfell in 2017.

Subsequently, the government pledged to give tenants more say over how services are delivered by councils and housing associations, with a new system of tenant satisfaction measures and consumer inspections created under the Social Housing Regulation Act

In Babergh and Mid Suffolk, stigma partly stemmed from poor-quality service. In late 2022, the councils referred themselves to the Regulator of Social Housing for failing to meet the home standard (since superseded by the safety and quality standard).

"We were in a dire situation with our repairs service," says David White, who joined in 2022 as head of housing, transformation and regulation.

According to White, the way repairs were dealt with epitomised wider problems in the relationship between the councils and tenants, which led to many tenants feeling not just frustrated, but stigmatised.

White recalls once hearing a council officer referring to some new flats as being "too good for our tenants". As a former council tenant himself, he didn't hide his feelings when they spoke in private afterwards. "We needed to not just tackle issues around repairs but the culture of the organisation," says White.

How was the stigma most obvious to tenants?

Tenants used to feel stigma most when repairs were carried out. Instead of giving them an allotted time, contractors would simply turn up, and expect someone to be at home.

Worse, says Paula Warren, contractors tended not to show residents any respect. "They'd come in and leave the door open, regardless of whether it was cold or you had children inside," she adds.

This approach was a symptom of wider issues and needed to change, agrees David White. "We were just going out and knocking on doors," he says. "Tenants felt we didn't respect them and that we didn't believe they were worthy of quality service."

What changes have been made?

For the past three years, Babergh and Mid Suffolk has run a tenant board, giving tenants the opportunity to discuss issues with councillors and officers, and influence decisions.

There are currently six members of the board, which meets once per month and is in effect a scrutiny panel for the two local authorities. The cabinet members for housing from each council attend all meetings and discover how tenants feel about services and proposed changes in policy.

The board suggests three scrutiny projects per year, while a complaints task force, including tenant board

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> **David White, head of housing transformation and regulation, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils**



The tackling stigma workshop gets underway

members, meets quarterly to monitor complaints data. In addition, tenant sounding boards are used on an ad-hoc basis while 'neighbourhood experts' flag up issues in their communities.

A tackling stigma action plan was drawn up towards the end of last year and is being used to review how day-to-day services are delivered.

Richard Winch, Mid Suffolk's cabinet member for housing and property, says he and his Babergh counterpart adopt "listening mode" when they attend meetings of the tenant board.

During the past year, planned increases in service charges were scaled back after board members objected. "The general feeling was that we were trying to move too fast," says Cllr Winch, who is also deputy leader of Mid Suffolk.

Together, councillors and tenants feel part of the same team with the similar long-term ambitions. "Sometimes we hear things that maybe we're uncomfortable with, but it's better to know about things sooner, rather than wait until something goes really wrong," says Cllr Winch.

Contractors are also vetted to ensure they treat tenants with respect when they carry out work. "There's been a massive shift in the attitude of contractors," says Ruth Hendry, cabinet member for housing in Babergh. "They've had it drummed into them that they must be respectful if they want council business."

For too long, says Cllr Hendry, a housing association tenant, decisions were made by landlords on behalf of people living in social housing. "They concentrated on the wrong things. Listening to tenants makes a real difference," she adds.

Have Babergh and Mid Suffolk got closer to tackling stigma?

David White grew up in council house with his parents and, having left home and been homeless for a short period, was allocated a council flat in Essex. "It was quite unusual, but I thought it was the best thing in the world," he says.

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>
> **Ruth Hendry, cabinet member for housing and chair, Babergh District Council**

Years later, he believes the stigma that surrounds much of the sector stems from the shortage of homes for social rent. This means they tend to be allocated to people in desperate need, and are therefore associated with vulnerability or disadvantage.

"If there was plenty of social housing to go around, more people would be able to access it and it wouldn't be seen as something for vulnerable people, which leads to stigma," he says.

While Babergh and Mid Suffolk cannot hope to solve the housing crisis overnight, their new approach appears to be delivering results, with tenant satisfaction scores looking up.

Last year, 74% of tenants said their landlord treats them fairly and with respect, up from 69% the previous year. Not that any landlord should expect things to change overnight, "It takes a good 18 months for satisfaction to improve," says White.

White and other officers would like to see more tenants join the tenant board, and a system of rewards or incentives may be introduced to recognise the work and time involved.

Paula Warren, meanwhile, says it's as if a "big button has been pressed", with the tenant board enjoying real influence over housing policy. "I feel there's been a redistribution of power between the councils and tenants," she says.



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