

CIH policy briefing: Addressing stigma, resident voice and institutional learning

About this briefing

This briefing is produced by the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) as part of its policy and practice work on stigma, culture, and resident voice. It draws on the CIH policy paper *Measuring What Matters: Tackling Structural Stigma in Social Housing* (2025). It also draws on Housing Ombudsman spotlight reports, resident-led research, and academic work on epistemic injustice and territorial stigma. It is intended to support policymakers, practitioners, and parliamentarians working on housing governance, culture, and resident voice.

Background

Around four million households in England live in social housing, yet many residents continue to face stigma, feel unheard, or experience services that do not consistently learn from past failings.

Recent years have reinforced a clear lesson: improving outcomes in social housing is not just about investment or regulation—it is about culture, accountability, and how organisations listen and respond to residents.

Key Messages

- The Grenfell Tower tragedy exposed not only regulatory failures but deeper cultural problems within housing systems, including how resident concerns were interpreted and acted upon.¹
- Research suggests social housing residents can experience structural stigma, affecting whose knowledge is considered credible within decision-making processes.²

- Existing regulatory reforms have strengthened safety and accountability, but primarily measure **service performance rather than institutional culture**.
- Improving safety, trust and governance requires stronger mechanisms for recognising **resident knowledge and lived experience**.^{3 4}
- Parliament has a role to play in strengthening housing governance by ensuring regulatory frameworks consider **voice, learning and culture alongside technical compliance**.

Context: Trust and accountability after Grenfell

The Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 exposed profound failures in building safety, regulation and governance. It also highlighted deeper cultural issues within housing organisations and public institutions.¹

Residents had repeatedly raised concerns about fire safety and building conditions. These warnings were documented, but they were not sufficiently recognised or acted upon.

Evidence presented to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry demonstrated how organisational culture, communication failures and institutional decision-making contributed to these outcomes.⁵

1. How do housing systems recognise and respond to resident knowledge?

Addressing this question is central to rebuilding trust between residents, landlords and the state.

Recent reforms have introduced important changes, including stronger consumer regulation, new professional standards and expanded regulatory oversight.

However, the cultural and relational dimensions of housing governance remain less visible within policy frameworks.

2. The role of stigma in housing governance

A growing body of research highlights the role that stigma can play in shaping perceptions of social housing and its residents.^{6 7 8}

Narratives about “sink estates” or “problem tenants” have long appeared in media and political discourse.² These narratives can influence how institutions interpret residents' experiences and concerns.

Within housing systems, this can lead to **credibility gaps**, where certain forms of knowledge are less likely to be recognised as legitimate.⁹

In practice, this may occur when:

- Resident complaints are interpreted as isolated issues rather than early warning signs
- Lived experience is considered less reliable than technical or managerial knowledge
- Organisational priorities override local insight from communities.

These dynamics rarely result from individual prejudice alone. Instead, they can become embedded in institutional systems and procedures.¹⁰

When this occurs, organisations may unintentionally reproduce patterns where resident voice is marginalised.

3. Institutional lock-ins and housing decision-making

Research into governance and policy systems highlights how institutions can become “locked in” to particular ways of interpreting problems.¹⁰

Within housing systems, this can occur through:

- Organisational routines and reporting structures
- Professional hierarchies and expertise
- Performance frameworks focused primarily on measurable outputs.

These structures can make it difficult for organisations to recognise alternative perspectives or emerging risks. Where resident concerns challenge established assumptions or operational priorities, they may struggle to influence decision-making. The result can be delayed responses to problems that residents experience firsthand.^{3 4}

4. Lessons from housing practice

These dynamics can be seen across several housing issues;

Damp and mould

In recent years, housing providers and regulators have recognised that damp and mould complaints were sometimes treated as lifestyle issues rather than structural problems.¹¹ The introduction of Awaab's Law reflects the need to ensure such concerns are taken seriously and addressed quickly.¹²

Building safety

Grenfell demonstrated how repeated resident warnings about fire risks were not fully recognised within institutional systems.^{1 5}

Repairs and maintenance

Research on repairs services has found that residents often report needing to raise issues multiple times before action is taken, particularly where concerns fall between organisational responsibilities.⁴

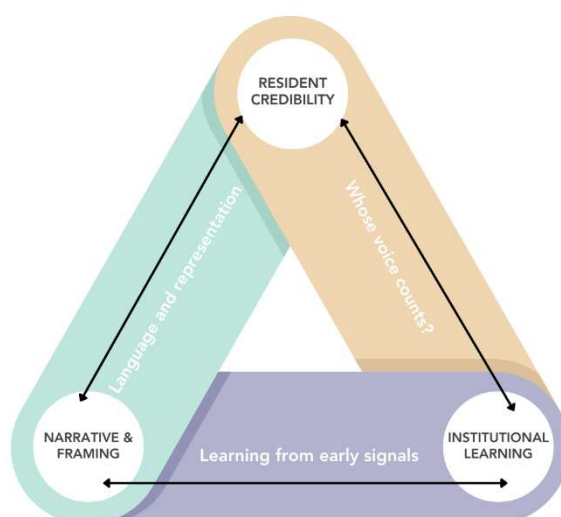
Across the practice-based evidence, residents possessed valuable knowledge about emerging problems. Recognising this knowledge earlier could improve outcomes for both residents and housing organisations.¹³

5. Measuring what matters: a framework for learning systems

Safe and accountable housing systems depend on three interacting factors: resident knowledge being recognised as credible, organisations capable of learning from early signals, and policy narratives that avoid stigmatising communities.¹⁴ Weakness in any of these areas can prevent institutions from responding effectively to emerging risk.

Figure 1: A Responsive Housing Governance System

Responsive housing governance
Three interconnected conditions for a responsive housing system



This framework, Credibility, Knowledge and Framing, has been developed in full in the accompanying policy paper¹⁴. Improving housing governance requires tools that help organisations understand not only service performance but also **how knowledge flows through institutions**.

The Framework:

1. Resident credibility

- Understanding whether residents' knowledge and lived experience influence organisational decision-making.
- This includes examining how complaints, feedback and scrutiny processes shape policy and operational responses.

2. Institutional learning

- Assessing whether organisations are able to recognise early warning signals and respond before issues escalate.³
- Effective learning systems require transparent feedback loops and clear accountability structures.¹⁵

3. Framing

- Recognising how wider narratives about social housing influence expectations, policy priorities and organisational behaviour.¹⁶
- Addressing stigma can help ensure residents are recognised as partners in governance rather than passive recipients of services.¹³
- Together, these three elements form a simple framework for assessing whether housing systems are responsive, reflective and capable of learning.

6. Policy implications

Strengthening these areas could support more resilient housing governance.

Possible approaches include:

Embedding resident voice within regulation

Ensuring resident experience informs inspections, regulatory assessments and governance structures.

Expanding how housing performance is measured

Complementing service metrics with indicators that assess organisational culture, learning and engagement.

Supporting professional culture change

Strengthening reflective practice, community engagement and ethical leadership within housing professional standards.

Recognising lived experience as expertise

Ensuring residents' knowledge is treated as a legitimate form of expertise within policy development and organisational decision-making.

7. Opportunities for Parliament

Parliament has a critical role in shaping housing governance and ensuring regulatory reforms tackle the underlying drivers of failure - not just the symptoms.

Key areas for parliamentary focus include:

- Scrutinising how regulatory frameworks assess organisational culture, leadership and learning, not just compliance with technical standards ^{10,Error!}
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- Examining the role of stigma in shaping housing policy, public discourse and service delivery, and its impact on resident outcomes ^{2,6,14}
- Strengthening mechanisms to ensure resident voice meaningfully informs policy, regulation and oversight, including how feedback leads to demonstrable change ^{13,Error!} **Bookmark not defined.**

Stronger collaboration between policymakers, practitioners and researchers is essential to ensure reforms deliver not only safer homes and stronger communities, but more accountable organisations and better resident experience.

For further information: <https://www.cih.org/>

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¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2025). Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 2 report: Government response. [View online](#)

² Slater, T. (2018). The invention of the 'sink estate': Consequential categorisation and the UK housing crisis. *The Sociological Review*, 66(4), 877-897.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118777451>

³ Housing Ombudsman Service (2024). Spotlight on attitudes, respect and rights. [View online](#)

⁴ Housing Ombudsman Service (2025). Repairing trust: Spotlight report on repairs and maintenance. [View online](#)

⁵ Grenfell Tower Inquiry (2024). Phase 2 report. [View online](#)

⁶ Denedo, M., & Ejiogu, A. (2021). *Stigma and Social Housing in England*. Durham University / University of Leicester. <https://durham-repository.worktribe.com/output/1680888>

⁷ Stop Social Housing Stigma (2026). *Social housing stigma: widespread, structural and deeply felt*. [View online](#).

⁸ Liddiment, R. & Doolan, P. (2025). *Breaking Barriers: Understanding and reducing social housing stigma*. Flagship Group. [View online.](#)

⁹ Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198237907.001.0001>

¹⁰ Breukers, S. et al. (2017). Institutional 'lock-out' towards local self-governance? *Energy Research & Social Science*, 23, 148–158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2016.10.007>

¹¹ Housing Ombudsman (2021). Spotlight report on damp and mould – it's not a lifestyle. [View Online](#)

¹² Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2025). *Awaab's Law: Guidance for social landlords*. [View online](#)

¹³ Jackson, K. (2025). Is there a seat at the table? Ethnic minority voices in tenant engagement. CACHE/TPAS. [View online](#)

¹⁴ Blezard, E. (2025). *Measuring what matters: Tackling structural stigma in social housing*. Thinkhouse Early Career Researcher's Prize paper.

¹⁵ Housing Ombudsman (2023) Spotlight report on knowledge and information management. [View Online.](#)

¹⁶ Blezard, E. (2022). *Change, loss and community: Resident narratives of life on a social housing estate*. Doctoral thesis, University of Salford. [View online.](#)