

Learning - Fighting Stigma: How we talk about homes matters

Introduction



Natalie Tate, Project Lead for Talking about Housing,
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Nic Bliss, Campaign Director for the
Stop Social Housing Stigma campaign



Natalie Tate, Project Lead for Talking about Housing, [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) and Nic Bliss, Campaign Director for the [Stock Social Housing Stigma campaign](#) spoke about how we talk about homes matters. This covered communications about the importance of social homes, particularly with those setting housing policy, deciding strategic direction or driving narrative change. With lots of challenges facing the sector, how we communicate is key to keeping social housing high up the agenda, getting the right people with the right skills into the sector and securing funding. A summary of the talks and the discussion session is set out below.

Natalie Tate, Project Lead for Talking about Housing

The [Talking about Housing Project](#) started 5 years ago and has been funded by JRF and The Nationwide Foundation. Within the UK, the context is that people do not understand how social housing matters and people fall back into the pre-occupations and pre-conceptions of the housing market which primarily relate to individuals buying their own homes. The aims of the project are to change the narrative necessary for a wider systemic change by:

1. understanding how people think about housing
2. identifying how best to shift people's thinking about housing

Particular associated research for this project has been undertaken by Frameworks UK.

What is framing?

Framing relates to the choices we make when talking about subjects and how we share our views. The key to framing is that it is not attempting to shift what people think but how they think. Previous powerful examples of this relate to the equal marriage campaign where the change to framing made was no longer to talk about equal rights for people but to talk about love and family. Another example is the smoking ban where the debate was shifted from talking about the dangers of smoking towards providing health and smoke free working environments for those who work in bars and restaurants.

The research identified the following obstacles to how people think about housing:-

Obstacle 1 – People mainly think of housing through a consumerist lens

The public thinks:

- home ownership is part of our culture

- everyone aspires to home ownership, despite recognising that its out of reach for some people
- housing is a commodity and an investment
- climbing the property ladder is important
- renting is temporary

An associated problem with this is that it allows people to believe that government accommodation can be very very basic because renting is only a temporary solution.

Obstacle 2 -There is inequality under housing

The public thinks:

- housing inequality is the natural order of matters
- the housing system is shaped by forces outside people's control
- housing inequality is inevitable

This can lead to feelings of powerlessness and fatalistic thinking.

People can then think the strengths and qualities of individuals determines how their lives turn out and this leads to a mindset of individualism. This leads to a thinking that people could (or should) work harder to resolve their housing issues as opposed to truly understanding the wider sector issues that stop people from being able to do this.

Obstacle 3 - While people recognise poor quality housing is harmful for health, they don't see how quality, affordable homes can be accessible for all

The public thinks:

- poor quality housing has a negative effect on health but they don't think better quality homes positively affects health
- housing that is both affordable and decent quality simply doesn't exist

This can lead to feelings of powerlessness and fatalistic thinking.

People can then think the strengths and qualities of individuals determines how their lives turn out and this leads to a mindset of individualism. This leads to a thinking that people could (or should) work harder to resolve their housing issues as opposed to truly understanding the wider sector issues that stop people from being able to do this.

To address the above obstacles, the toolkits being developed by the project include (1) how to talk about homes (2) how to grow support for building social homes and (3) how to talk about private renting.

Key themes

1. It is important for people to use the word “homes” and to avoid commercial language like properties, housing or units. This reminds people why homes are truly important because it involves relationships and people having a roof over their heads rather than something that is a commodity that can be traded.
2. It’s about health and not wealth. We should be talking about homes as a source of health and wellbeing to build an understanding of why access to decent and affordable homes matters.
3. We should talk about foundations to show decent and affordable homes should be an essential priority.
4. Invoke people’s sense of moral responsibility to build a case for making decent and affordable housing available to everyone.
5. Explain how we got here: focus on specific parts of an issue and say how it has come about and then also set out who is responsible for this. For example: “many people are being forced to pay a massive proportion of their income on rent, because the government has failed to protect them from runaway housing costs.”
6. To talk about solutions explicitly - about the fact we can change this, giving people concrete solutions and mention them often and early, rather than leaving people in the with a sense of crisis.

We should talk about what can be done right now and what needs to be put in place for the long term.

All the above is very important when we consider that most people will think about housing as a societal issue a couple of times a month whilst many housing professionals will spend several hours of each working day focussed on the sector. We therefore need to make sure we are clear about the messages we are sharing with wider stakeholders and society.

Nic Bliss – Campaign Director for the Stock Social Housing Stigma campaign

Nic's background is living in co-operative housing in Birmingham for many years. The [Stop Social Housing Stigma campaign](#) is properly tenant led and borne out of the Grenfell tragedy where it's about the impact on people's daily lives. It is to address the stigma that appears every day, such as examples that there is an assumption that people living in social housing have no jobs. Part of the challenge with this is that the stigma is intangible and therefore difficult to address.

Nic outlined two aspects of the Stop Social Housing Stigma campaign:

1. It is a membership organisation where they have members, supporters and corporate members.
Nic appealed to people to join the campaign as members and it is open to all and is free of charge
2. The campaign is developing a tackling stigma journey planner which shows the different stages as well as questions and themes for addressing the stigma. The journey planner is currently out to consultation with a variety of different focus groups where this will be finalised over the coming months and then launched. Nic highlighted how people can have an impact across the following three areas:
 - i) as a sector, engaging with other sectors nationally on how we address social housing
 - ii) in multi-agency arrangements to change the views of other agencies about social housing
 - iii) where there is developing new homes and addressing any form of nimby-ism for social housing

Discussion

There was a further discussion about helpful messaging where explaining what the issues were over the housing situation is helpful. Therefore, using the word “because” is helpful to explain what the situation is. In addition, too often housing associations use the word “our” when describing homes or tenants when this can come across as too possessive. Finally, there is a habit when discussing social housing to talk about people “living on an estate” rather than “living in an estate” which is a helpful change.

There was a helpful conclusion that, to change language, there is a requirement for commitments to be made by individuals, boards, organisations and the sector. There is a requirement for people to challenge the language others use if we are really going to deliver a change in perception for social homes.

It was acknowledged that, whilst we can change the language used for social homes, it is also important that the experience of living in social homes also needs to change, bearing in mind recent, high profile cases of poor quality social homes. This is not only about changes to language but changes to practice.



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What sessions would you like to see next?

We're taking our usual break for the summer and we'll be back in September, but of course, we'll be planning ahead.

Let us know if there are any topics that you would like the Network to cover

[Suggest a topic](#)

A special thanks to our partners:



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