

# Rethinking Regulated Housing in England

Absalom, Hannah

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# Rethinking Regulated Housing in England: Home as an emotional place



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### About the author

Hannah Absalom, has over 18 years of practitioner experience in regulated housing. She is passionate about regulated housing being better for tenants and reconnecting the sector with a clear social purpose of providing safe and stable housing informed by emotional and psychological insights into the meaning of the home in our lives. She can be contacted at [RT.Homes@TrainandConsult.co.uk](mailto:RT.Homes@TrainandConsult.co.uk), and you can read more about her work at [www.trainandconsult.co.uk](http://www.trainandconsult.co.uk)

**Author: Hannah Absalom**

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# Rethinking regulated housing in England: Home as an emotional place

## Executive summary:

This research briefing draws attention to the barriers that inhibit an emotional understanding of the home from informing policy and practice in the regulated housing sector in England. A home is more than bricks and mortar; a home is an emotional place. By understanding and working with a dual understanding of the importance of a stable home in good condition and the emotional value of home and landlord services, a new perspective emerges to inform the current review of the English regulated housing sector.

Three processes inhibit the emergence of an emotional understanding of the home. These processes are stigmatisation; the separation of core business and social value work; and tenant participation. Drawing attention to these processes and making recommendations for change will assist the regulated housing sector in England in moving closer towards emotionally informed policies and practices.

## Key recommendations in this report include:

**Understanding and working with stigma as a wicked problem.** When access to regulated housing is restricted and home ownership a cultural norm, stigma will be present. It is recommended that working with stigma as a wicked problem can improve both the reputation and practices within the regulated sector. This is through a move to reflective practices and closer working between tenants, landlords and other stakeholders invested in improving regulated housing and reducing the harms caused by stigma.

**Recalibrating how social value is understood and measured.** This briefing understands social value to be produced by a stable home in good condition and an emotional understanding of the value of home and landlord services. Current social value frameworks are a poor fit in terms of accounting for stability and the psychological meaning of home in our lives. There is a need to account for the social value of core housing services, such as repairs and furnished tenancies. Furthermore, there is a need for a new approach to governance that understands what is socially and emotionally valuable for tenants in terms of their home and home-related services.

**Adopting a citizen social science lab model to replace current approaches to tenant participation.** It is time to rethink tenant participation in regulated housing. In other policy making areas, lab-based participation models have gained popularity. It is recommended that a lab-based model is adopted that is informed by the values of citizen social science. Such a model is flexible yet robust, with three different approaches outlined in the body of this document.

To conclude, an emotional understanding of the home and regulated landlord practices may be key to rethinking what is meant by a quality home and landlord services in the English regulated sector. Identifying the barriers to this emotional perspective and making recommendations for change helps to turn the sector towards providing homes and services that meet the home-based needs of tenants.

## About this research briefing:

Regulated housing in England is in crisis. The avoidable death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak from prolonged exposure to black mould showed that poor-quality homes can be lethal. The charter for social housing residents: *Social housing white paper*<sup>1</sup> revealed tenants' concerns about safety and quality, poor and slow complaints handling and a feeling that tenants were not listened to or treated with respect. This briefing seeks to contribute to the agenda of improving the quality of social homes and services by drawing out new understandings of key processes that have contributed to the crisis. Furthermore, the briefing outlines new approaches to tackle the problem of some regulated landlords' failure to listen to tenants and deliver quality homes and services that contribute to tenants' long-term health and wellbeing.

This research briefing focuses on the social rented sector. It is important to note that the problems of poor-quality homes and landlord services are also present in the private rented sector. In 2021, 23% of privately rented homes (around 1 million homes) did not meet the decent homes standard compared with 13% of owner-occupier homes and 10% of social homes<sup>2</sup>.

The private rented sector is subject to its own regulatory review as set out in the white paper *A fairer private rented sector*<sup>3</sup>. Regulated housing exists in its current form to house people experiencing various degrees of poor housing conditions, and health and hardship challenges. Providing poor-quality homes and services runs counter to the purpose of regulated sector which is to alleviate housing-related distress.

Recommendations are made for policymakers, social landlords, tenants and housing activists who want to find new ways to ensure the regulated housing sector works effectively to improve tenants' experiences of the home and of landlord services. The definition of 'home' here is informed by emotional insights into the value and meaning of home. This emotional perspective of the home underpins the findings and recommendations of this report.

## The definition of home:

*'Home' is understood first as a material environment that provides safety and stability, a cocoon that provides both physical protection and respite from the stresses and pressures of life. Second, the environment of the home is psychologically significant; we express our 'selves' through the home, and the home itself shapes our sense of who we are*<sup>4</sup>.

*From this perspective, the material condition of the home and individual emotional wellbeing are connected. Landlord services that are attuned to this interdependence will produce better homes and services for tenants.*

<sup>1</sup>Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government (2020). The Charter for Social Housing Residents Social Housing White Paper.

<sup>2</sup>Cromarty, H. and C. Barton (2022). Housing conditions in the private rented sector (England). <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7328/>. Retrieved 21 February 2023, House of Commons Library.

<sup>3</sup>Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (2022). A fairer private rented sector.

<sup>4</sup>Cooper Marcus, C. (1995). House as a Mirror of the Self. Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home. Berkley, California, Conari Press.

## Briefing section summaries:

**Section one** provides an overview of key trends and challenges facing the regulated housing sector in England today. It offers a brief review of relevant regulated housing studies.

**Section two** describes the empirical research that informs this report. This includes PhD research into behavioural insights in English regulated housing conducted from 2018 to 2022 at the University of Birmingham. The research results are provided in a PhD thesis that is available on request from the author. Ideas from this research were turned into a suite of training, workshops and experimental work which examined the value of psychological insights for rethinking the allocation of empty, unfurnished homes to new tenants.

**Section three** identifies three key processes that need to change if regulated housing practices are to meet the material and psychological housing needs of tenants. These processes are:

- the stigmatisation of the regulated housing tenure and tenants,
- the practice of separating the social purpose from the financial bottom line, and
- the reform of tenant participation.

**Section four** summarises the recommendations for changing these processes.

**Section five** outlines next steps for researching regulated housing from an emotional perspective.



## Section one:

# Trends and challenges facing the regulated housing sector in England

The regulated housing sector carries out a broad range of work, including building new affordable and social homes, managing current homes, and working with local authorities to discharge homelessness duties. In addition to this core housing-focused work, the sector undertakes a range of non-housing-related social value activities.

This includes initiatives concerning procurement, employment, health, digital skills and community development and neighbourhood-based work. The sector provides housing and socially valuable services to 4.4 million English households<sup>5</sup>.

A waiting list of over a million households<sup>6</sup> represents growing demand on the sector of individuals and families in housing-related distress.



## A focus on social value:

*‘Social value’ accounts for how different interventions increase wellbeing and quality of life<sup>7</sup>. Social landlords have a long history of undertaking socially valuable work through their connections with local authorities and the charitable roots of some housing associations.*

*Government funding has also driven the need to evidence the social value of landlord work. More recently, regulatory pressures for private organisations to account for their Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) activity and the regulated housing sectors increasing reliance on private funding sources for new build homes has renewed interest in the social value produced by social landlords.*

*Large social landlords with established social value programmes have an appeal as stable investment opportunities primed to exercise new ESG expectations in exchange for reduced-cost new-build housing loans<sup>8</sup>.*

<sup>5</sup> National Housing Federation (2019). Capital grant required to meet social housing need in England 2021 – 2031.

<sup>6</sup> Shelter (2022). “Social housing deficit.” Published at [https://england.shelter.org.uk/support\\_us/campaigns/social\\_housing\\_deficit#:~:text=More%20people%20than%20ever%20are,are%20waiting%20for%20social%20homes](https://england.shelter.org.uk/support_us/campaigns/social_housing_deficit#:~:text=More%20people%20than%20ever%20are,are%20waiting%20for%20social%20homes). Retrieved 17 March, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> HACT (2021). “Measure your social value.” <https://hact.org.uk/how-we-can-help/measure-your-social-value>. Retrieved 11 January, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Smyth, S., et al. (2020). “From gatekeepers to gateway constructors: Credit rating agencies and the financialisation of housing associations.” *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* **71**.



## Challenges faced by the sector:

The regulated housing sector in England is experiencing significant problems that are rippling out and impacting negatively on both tenants and on the reputation of regulated housing as a valuable public resource. The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH)<sup>9</sup> has summarised key risks to the sector that include:

- The impact of macroeconomic shocks from Brexit, covid-19 and Russia's invasion of the Ukraine as accentuating an already uncertain operating environment.
- High inflation, a tight labour market and supply chains and increased borrowing costs. A downturn in the housing market and the possibility of capping rent increases introduce the possibility of more financial shocks.
- Many providers are managing the dual pressure of making substantial investments in existing housing stock's quality, safety and de-carbonisation commitments and the need to invest in new housing supply. This tension in purpose is compounded by scrutiny from a wide range of stakeholders, including tenants, local communities, local and national government, lenders, contractors, and the media.
- In terms of service delivery and accountability, new, proactive consumer regulations emphasise the need to listen to tenants and for tenants to be able to hold their landlord to account. Underpinning this work requires robust data and systems to manage service delivery effectively. Cyber security is a growing threat to the sector and the resilience of systems and services to tenants.
- Reputation is a key challenge facing the sector. A series of high-profile problems with the quality of housing stock and services, poor engagement with tenants and an under appreciation of the problems tenants face in a growing cost-of-living crisis has harmed the sector's reputation.

In June 2022, the Better Social Housing Review (BSHR) was set up by the National Housing Federation and the Chartered Institute of Housing to independently examine ways to improve the quality of regulated housing in England<sup>10</sup>. Key recommendations of relevance to include:

- The sector needs to refocus on the core social purpose of providing 'decent, safe homes for those who can't afford the market'.
- Creating new maintenance and repair standards through collective work with tenants, contractors and frontline staff.
- A recognised programme of training and professional development for housing management roles.
- Increasing tenants' ability to influence landlord decision-making at every organisation level through a mix of paid and voluntary roles.
- A collective annual review by tenants and frontline staff on how the organisation is implementing the recommendations of the BSHR.

It is clear from the summary of risks facing the sector that boards face complex choices that need to be informed by evidence and with decisions made together with tenants and other stakeholders.

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<sup>9</sup> Regulator of Social Housing (2022). "Sector Risk Profile 2022." (Issue October 2022).

<sup>10</sup> National Housing Federation and Chartered Institute of Housing (2022). "The Better Social Housing Review. Executive Summary."

The BSHR recommendations for change broadly align with the thesis research underpinning this document, namely the need for a clearly articulated social purpose and a collective approach to decision-making. This research briefing complements BSHR recommendations by introducing an emotionally and psychologically informed perspective that reveals new insights into how tenants' experiences of the home and landlord services can be further improved.

## Reviewing the literature - regulated housing and emotional research:

The research agendas within regulated housing are cross-cutting and diverse, which reflects the complex ways housing contributes to our quality of life and wellbeing.

This includes:

- Health-related studies highlight that housing instability has an adverse impact on patient health<sup>11</sup>;
- Studies on housing transitions, such as from homeless-supported housing to affordable, general-needs homes, highlight a need to examine the long-term outcomes of these transitions<sup>12</sup>. Housing transitions research is also concerned with researching the different models and approaches in aiding successful transitions from supported to general needs housing<sup>13</sup>.
- International research concerning individual wellbeing and social outcomes from providing secure, stable and permanent housing to people trying to exit homelessness emphasises the role of support services and the value of a stable home<sup>14</sup>.

This literature evidences the health and wellbeing outcomes of providing stable homes and the value of evidenced transition support services for people trying to exit homelessness. What is missing is an evidence base concerning the role of regulated landlords in continuing the transitional work within general needs housing and services.

Furthermore, there is little research into the emotional meaning given to the home by regulated housing tenants<sup>15</sup> and how this perspective could contribute to better service design and health and wellbeing outcomes for the broader regulated tenant population.

This briefing contributes to furthering regulated housing studies by identifying key barriers to the adoption of emotionally attuned practices within the sector.

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<sup>11</sup> Chhabra, M., et al. (2019). "Screening for Housing Instability: Providers' Reflections on Addressing a Social Determinant of Health." *Journal of General Internal Medicine* **34**: 1213-1219.

<sup>12</sup> Tiderington, E., et al. (2022). "Leaving permanent supportive housing: a scoping review of Moving On Initiative participant outcomes." *Housing Studies*.

<sup>13</sup> Semborski, S., et al. (2021). "Housing interventions for emerging adults experiencing homelessness: A scoping review" *Children and Youth Services Review* **127**.

<sup>14</sup> Carnemolla, P. and V. Skinner (2021). "Outcomes Associated with Providing Secure, Stable, and Permanent Housing for People Who Have Been Homeless: An International Scoping Review." *Journal of Planning Literature* **36**(4): 508-525.

<sup>15</sup> Tester, G. and A. H. Wingfield (2013). "Moving Past Picket Fences: The Meaning of "Home" for Public Housing Residents." *Sociological Forum* **28**(March 2013).



## How could new research evidence shape regulated housing policy?

There are important opportunities to incorporate new, emotionally attuned and psychologically informed practices into regulated housing.

- New research evidence could shape the current staff **training and qualifications review**<sup>16</sup>.
- There is scope to contribute emotional and psychological perspectives to catalyse the **support and training for tenants** in knowing their housing rights and making complaints<sup>17</sup>. An emotionally informed perspective highlights the need for activity with landlords to improve their listening skills and how they work with tenant feedback to enact change.
- The Housing Ombudsman has established a National Resident Panel<sup>18</sup> and the Department for Levelling up Housing and Communities (DLuHC), a national Social Housing Quality Resident Panel<sup>19</sup>. Research with tenants about their emotional experiences of home and landlord services may **strengthen the voice of tenants sitting on the panels**.
- The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) is taking steps to prepare for a new consumer regulation regime and is undertaking a pilot inspection regime with seven registered social landlords. This will inform the launch of an anticipated new regime from April 2024 with a renewed focus on the value of safe and good quality homes<sup>20</sup>. **There is a role for new research to inform the safety and quality standards** and aid the transition of social landlords towards more emotionally attuned services and practices.

In essence the broad programme of reforms that are planned for regulated housing stand to benefit from incorporating emotional insights into the home and landlord services. There is scope to incorporate findings from established domains, such as the homeless transition research described above. Furthermore, there are opportunities to undertake new research with general needs tenants to inform this change agenda.

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<sup>16</sup> Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (2022a). “Government to drive up standards in social housing.” <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-drive-up-standards-in-social-housing>. Retrieved 5 July 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (2022b). “Social housing tenants to receive training and support to make their voices heard.” <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-drive-up-standards-in-social-housing>. Retrieved 17 January, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Housing Ombudsman Service (2023). “Resident Panel.” <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/residents/resident-panel>. Retrieved 8 February, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (2022c). “Social Housing Quality Resident Panel. Find out more about government’s new Social Housing Quality Resident Panel.” <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/social-housing-quality-resident-panel>. Retrieved 10 January, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Regulator of Social Housing (2023). Reshaping consumer regulation. Our implementation plan. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1128222/20231010\\_CR\\_implementation\\_plan.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1128222/20231010_CR_implementation_plan.pdf). Retrieved 10 January 2023.

## Section two:

# Research methods

The research underpinning this briefing is based on an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded PhD thesis examining the use of behavioural insights in English regulated housing.

The research involved 42 interviews with regulated housing practitioners, sector specialists and tenants, complemented by ethnographic work observing behavioural projects in regulated housing practice and undertaking consultancy work exploring the value of psychological and emotional insights for practice and policy.

A seminar was delivered to the DLUHC to engage with policymakers on the core ideas explored in the thesis. To engage with housing professionals on the topic of poverty and regulated housing, I chaired the 'Hard Times' Housing Quality Network conference in 2021. I presented my early findings at the Housing Studies Association Conference in 2022<sup>21</sup>. Positive feedback from these engagements and the consultancy work resulted in a winning application to the William Sutton Homes for All prize in 2022<sup>22</sup>.

Further work was undertaken through funding from the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account at the University of Birmingham in partnership with organisations deeply embedded within the regulated housing sector. The ESRC funding was applied to explore the value of psychological insights to rethink empty homes and allocation processes in regulated housing.

Activity during this phase included:

- Bringing together stakeholders invested in reforming the practice of allocating empty homes to tenants at a **participatory workshop** hosted on 21 September 2022. This was attended by 14 people representing tenants, housing change activists, regulated landlords and academics;
- Piloting a **trauma-informed approach to day-to-day housing work** with a team of eight housing officers;
- Undertaking desktop research exploring the opportunities and barriers identified in this phase of research;
- Developing a **suite of training** delivered to 95 people from a cross-section of housing associations, local authorities and tenants on key topics such as stigma, citizen science and innovation, and emotional insights into the home.

More information about the training can be found at [trainandconsult.co.uk/the-think-differently-training-suite](https://trainandconsult.co.uk/the-think-differently-training-suite).

Focussing on the allocation of empty homes in regulated housing was the means to identify the broader processes described in this research that inhibit the adoption of emotionally informed understandings of the home.



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<sup>21</sup> Housing Studies Association (2022). "Event Schedule." <https://www.housing-studies-association.org/pages/our-conference-programme>. Retrieved 7 March, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> University of Birmingham (2022). "Recognition for University of Birmingham PhD student." <https://www.housing-studies-association.org/pages/our-conference-programme>. Retrieved 10 March, 2022.

## Section three:

# How could this research inform regulated housing practice?

This section describes, through reference to academic and grey literature, the three processes of stigma, the division of the social purpose and the bottom line and tenant participation and summarises how this briefing ‘thinks differently’ about each topic.

## Process one - stigma and regulated housing:

Stigma, broadly defined as a set of negative beliefs that a society or group have about something, has garnered much attention in sociological research. Pathological explanations that locate stigma as a product of a moral defect of the individual<sup>23</sup> have been rightly criticised.

The political utility of stigmatising regulated housing tenants and places has been highlighted<sup>24</sup>. A report concerning *Stigma in Social Housing in England*<sup>25</sup> makes recommendations to reduce stigma by expanding access to truly affordable housing and stopping the use of stigmatising language by policymakers. This calls on the media to undertake more balanced reporting, for a strengthened tenants’ voice nationally and locally and processes to improve housing providers’ accountability.

A review of international regulated housing and stigma research suggests that even where regulated housing has traditionally been unstigmatised, in cities such as Amsterdam and Vienna, stigmatisation is on the rise<sup>26</sup>. This is partly due to the shift away from a mixed housing policy of private home ownership and universally accessible state-subsidised housing. Internationally the sector – as in England - is increasingly seen as the means to home the socially and economically vulnerable, with home ownership framed as the tenure of first choice.

In addition to the turn away from a mixed housing policy, rising income inequality, rising property prices, demographic changes and immigration have also led to increased stigmatisation<sup>27</sup>. These general trends suggest that stigma and regulated housing has become a complex or wicked problem resistant to simple intervention<sup>28</sup>.



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<sup>23</sup> Hastings, A. (2004). “Stigma and social housing estates: Beyond pathological explanations.” *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* **19**: 233-254.

<sup>24</sup> Shildrick, T. (2018). “Lessons from Grenfell: Poverty propaganda, stigma and class power.” *The Sociological Review Monographs* **66**(4): 783-798.

<sup>25</sup> Denedo, M. and A. Ejiogu (2022). Stigma and Social Housing in England: Feedback on the consultation responses. [https://www.durham.ac.uk/business/media/durham-university-business-school/research-centres/centre-for-organisations-and-society/Stigma-and-Social-Housing-in-England---consultation-report-\(final-version\)-24082022-3.32-MB.pdf](https://www.durham.ac.uk/business/media/durham-university-business-school/research-centres/centre-for-organisations-and-society/Stigma-and-Social-Housing-in-England---consultation-report-(final-version)-24082022-3.32-MB.pdf), Durham University Business School.

<sup>26</sup> Esslezlichler, J. and J. Forcher (2021). ““Red Vienna” and the rise of the populist right.” *European Urban and Regional Studies* **29**(1).

<sup>27</sup> Litschauer, K. and M. Friesenecker (2021). *Affordable Housing for all? Challenging the legacy of Red Vienna. Vienna, Still a Just City?* Y. Kazepov and R. Verwiebe. London and New York, Routledge.

<sup>28</sup> Skaburskis, A. (2008). “The Origin of “Wicked Problems”.” *Planning Theory & Practice* **9**(2).

## Tackling stigma in regulated housing practice:

Within the regulated housing sector, tenants actively campaign against stigma. The ‘See the Person’ campaign highlighted the personal experiences of tenants and stigmas neighbourhood effects<sup>29</sup>, producing a tool kit for regulated housing organisations and professionals<sup>30</sup>.

A new tenant-led campaign, ‘Stop Social Housing Stigma’, continues to campaign on the topic. The group highlight the pressing need to improve quality and professional standards in regulated housing. In 2020 a Social Housing Project Group consisting of housing associations, local authorities, tertiary organisations and academics dedicated to understanding regulated housing stigma and its effects was established and meets regularly to share research and best practice on this topic.

## Understanding stigma as a wicked problem:

This research approaches stigma as a wicked problem. A training module using the wicked problems framework to understand stigma from a behavioural perspective was created. This reveals the influence of **moral behaviourist ideas**<sup>31</sup> and stigmatising **assumptions about place**. These ideas continue to influence government policy,<sup>32</sup> regulated housing practices and individuals’ perceptions of themselves and others.

Framing stigma as a wicked problem and using a behavioural lens to approach the topic reveals a collection of actionable insights at the level of individual and organisation behaviours. The insights allow stigma’s influence to be openly discussed and consciously worked on through collective and reflective practices. This is a new approach to working with stigma in regulated housing and feedback has been positive.

The training module *stigma as a wicked problem* was delivered to 66 participants, representing tenants, social landlords and campaigners for social change.



<sup>29</sup> See the Person (2019). The experience and impact of stigma of living in social housing. [https://seetheperson.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Survey-findings-2019-final-report\\_.pdf](https://seetheperson.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Survey-findings-2019-final-report_.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Davis, S., et al. (2020). It’s not okay. A guide to tackling stigma in social housing, Chartered Institute of Housing.

<sup>31</sup> Murray, C. (1990). “The British Underclass.” *The Public Interest*(Spring): 4-28.

<sup>32</sup> Slater, T. (2018). “The invention of the ‘sink estate’: Consequential categorisation and the UK housing crisis.” *The Sociological Review* **66**(4): 877-897.

## What is a wicked problem?

*'Wicked problems' was developed in the 1970s<sup>33</sup> to explain the difference between 'simple' technical and 'complex' social problems.*

*The wicked problem framework rejects rationalistic approaches, acknowledges the role of the subjectivities of everyone involved in the problem and calls for participatory approaches that work with disagreement<sup>34</sup>.*

*Approaching stigma as a wicked problem acknowledges its complexity while allowing for the identification of actions by individuals and organisations.*



<sup>33</sup> Skaburskis, A. (2008). "The Origin of "Wicked Problems"." *Planning Theory & Practice* 9(2).

<sup>34</sup> Crowley, K. and B. W. Head (2017). "The enduring challenge of 'wicked problems': revisiting Rittel and Webber." *Policy Sciences* 50: 539-547.

## Process two – the problem of separating core business and social value work

Regulated housing work tends to be managed and accounted for in two ways.

- The first approach concerns core business services, such as property maintenance, repairs and allocations and is focused on time and cost efficiencies.
- The second approach concerns housing organisations' social purpose activity, including additional to core housing functions such as community development, digital skills, volunteer programmes and helping tenants to find work.

This split has produced different approaches to management and accounting that have caused landlords to lose sight of the social and emotional value of the core housing work of the regulated sector<sup>35</sup>.

A key problem produced by this split is that it contributes to miscommunication between tenants and landlords about what is valuable in regulated housing work. Tenant concerns tend to focus on the material condition of the home and neighbourhood<sup>36</sup> and, more recently, cultural challenges such as the stigmatisation of regulated housing and the ripple out of this into poor services and complaints handling<sup>37</sup>.

Landlords, in part driven by a need to ensure their financial viability, the turn to private funding sources for new build homes<sup>38</sup>, and for reactive services to support tenants in coping with welfare reforms<sup>39</sup> have adopted increasingly managerialist practices that centre cost-efficiency. Landlords are effectively being pulled in too many directions and this distracts them from directing resources to meet the home-based needs of tenants.

A second problem is the split between core business and social purpose activity means core housing work such as repairs, maintenance and allocations are not being accounted for in social value assessment frameworks. This is most sharply seen in the allocation of unfurnished and undecorated homes to new tenants trying to exit insecure housing and homelessness<sup>40</sup>.

Effectively, the current approach of seeing social value as lying outside of core business activity is inhibiting the reform of core regulated housing practices so that they can better meet tenants' home-based material and emotional needs.



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<sup>35</sup> Absalom, H. (2023). An Investigation of Behavioural Public Policy in Social Housing in England. Unpublished, University of Birmingham.

<sup>36</sup> McKee, K. (2011). "Sceptical, Disorderly and Paradoxical Subjects: Problematizing the "Will to Empower" in Social Housing Governance." *Housing, Theory and Society* **28**(1): 1-18.

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government (2020). The Charter for Social Housing Residents Social Housing White Paper.

<sup>38</sup> National Housing Federation (2019). Capital grant required to meet social housing need in England 2021 – 2031.

<sup>39</sup> Martin, A. (2020). No Time to Wait. Claimant experience of Universal Credit and how to improve it. <https://www.housing.org.uk/globalassets/files/resource-files/no-time-to-wait.pdf>, National Housing Federation,.

<sup>40</sup> End Furniture Poverty (2021). "Social Return on Investment of Essential Furniture Provision." Retrieved 1 September, 2022.

## The case for a different approach to social value:

The core purpose of a home is to **provide stability**. A home is a place of safety and security, a refuge from the outside world<sup>41</sup>. Stability can render the significance of home in our lives invisible and hard to measure, with its value only made visible when threatened or removed.

Figures from June 2022 show that 94,870 households lived in temporary accommodation<sup>42</sup>. Being able to account for the social and emotional value of housing stability and the safety and security this provides may draw attention to the value of significantly reducing this number.

The meaning we give to a home is deeply personal. What is homely for one person will feel like a prison for another<sup>43</sup>. The meanings of home can be variable and contradictory<sup>44</sup>. Many of us experienced this ambiguity during covid when home became a place of confinement and of safety. We have a personal relationship with home and the value of our relationship with home is seen in our self-expression and our personalisation of the home space<sup>45</sup>.

In essence, the social value of the regulated sectors work is produced through the stability and psychological security of a home. Approaches to understanding and making visible the hidden value of regulated housing are in radical need of reform.



<sup>41</sup> Owen, C. and J. Crane (2022). "Trauma-Informed Design of Supported Housing: A Scoping Review through the Lens of Neuroscience." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* **19**.

<sup>42</sup> Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (2022). Statutory Homelessness April to June(Q2) 2022: England. Official Statistics Release. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1119847/Statutory\\_Homelessness\\_Stats\\_Release\\_Apr-Jun\\_2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1119847/Statutory_Homelessness_Stats_Release_Apr-Jun_2022.pdf).

<sup>43</sup> Cooper Marcus, C. (1995). *House as a Mirror of the Self. Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*. Berkley, California, Conari Press.

<sup>44</sup> Lowe, J. and G. DeVerteull (2020). "The role of the 'ambiguous home' in service users' management of their mental health." *Social & Cultural Geography*.

<sup>45</sup> Cooper Marcus, C. (1995). *House as a Mirror of the Self. Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*. Berkley, California, Conari Press.

## Reforming how social value is measured – positive practice, the social value of a furnished tenancy

There is excellent work that accounts for the social value of core business processes. The End Furniture Poverty<sup>46</sup> campaign has produced measures that account for the social value of furnishing a home and a blueprint for achieving this<sup>47</sup>.

*Research by End Furniture Poverty and social value experts 'morethanoutputs' assessed that providing essential furniture to someone who needs it creates £6472 in social value<sup>48</sup>.*

*Respondents who benefited from the furniture reported broader wellbeing benefits such as increased independence and reduced financial worry.*

There are opportunities for change through new behavioural insights that seek to build interventions and policies based on how humans actually think and behave<sup>49</sup>. While much of the focus of policy making in this area is still concerned with changing individual behaviours, there is evidence of a policy interest in **understanding emotions and relationships**<sup>50</sup>.

These may provide a means to guide the application of and accounting for more emotionally informed policies and practices in regulated housing work.

There is a renewed interest among social landlords and private investors in measuring social value through the introduction of ESG frameworks. The regulated housing sector needs to take control of the ESG narrative, and there are early signs of an appetite for this<sup>51</sup>. There is scope for further reform, and the recommendations on page 24 outline these.

To summarise, there are new opportunities to rethink how regulated housing work is accounted for and how the sector produces social value, and this is a key process for reform.

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<sup>46</sup> See [www.endfurniturepoverty.org](http://www.endfurniturepoverty.org).

<sup>47</sup> Donovan, C. Hardman, B (2022). 'A blueprint for Furniture Provision in Social housing'. End Furniture Poverty and Fusion 21

<sup>48</sup> End Furniture Poverty (2021). "Social Return on Investment of Essential Furniture Provision." <https://endfurniturepoverty.org/research/social-return-on-investment-of-furniture-provision>. Retrieved 1 September, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Whitehead, M., et al. (2019). "Neoliberalism: Cognition, context, and the geographical bounding of rationality." *Progress in Human Geography* **43**: 632-649.

<sup>50</sup> Unwin, J. (2018). Kindness, emotions and human relationships: The blind spot in public policy. *Changing Minds Changing Lives*. London, Carnegie Trust UK.

<sup>51</sup>The Good Economy (2020). UK Social Housing Building a Sector Standard Approach for ESG Reporting. Bath.



## Process three - reforming tenant participation:

Tenant participation happens within regulated landlords and at a national policy scale. Within social landlords, tenants influence and make decisions about services to varying degrees. The quality of this in-house tenant participation varies considerably, with a recent government white paper highlighting the significant failures of some landlords in listening to tenants and acting upon their concerns<sup>52</sup>.

Tenant participation at a national policy level has a rocky history. The short-lived National Tenant Voice, which was to ensure regulated housing tenants had a say in shaping national housing policy, was set up and disbanded in 2010<sup>53</sup>.

On 29 March 2022, the government announced the launch of a Social Housing Quality Resident Panel<sup>54</sup>. The panel, consisting of 250 residents across England, is time-limited, with DLUHC only committed to six meetings over two years, focusing specifically on the DLUHC Social Housing Quality Agenda<sup>55</sup>. The focus of discussions following consultation are; standards, repairs and maintenance, the transparency and accountability of landlords, how landlords and the Housing Ombudsman handle complaints, and the experience of residents with disabilities and complex needs.

The Housing Ombudsman has its own Resident Panel, which will meet twice a year to feed into the development of the Ombudsman's annual business plan and three-year corporate plan<sup>56</sup>. The creation of these panels is a positive means of empowering the tenants' national voice, and there are opportunities to build upon this activity.

What is clear is that there is a renewed interest in tenant participation within organisations and at national levels of policy. There is potential to contribute to these positive developments in tenant participation by outlining the value of a policy lab model informed by the values of citizen social science. It is noted that there remains a need for independent tenant activism at a national and local level.

Tenants, landlords and sometimes policymakers could work together more effectively, and further research on successful models of organising empowering forms of tenant participation is needed.

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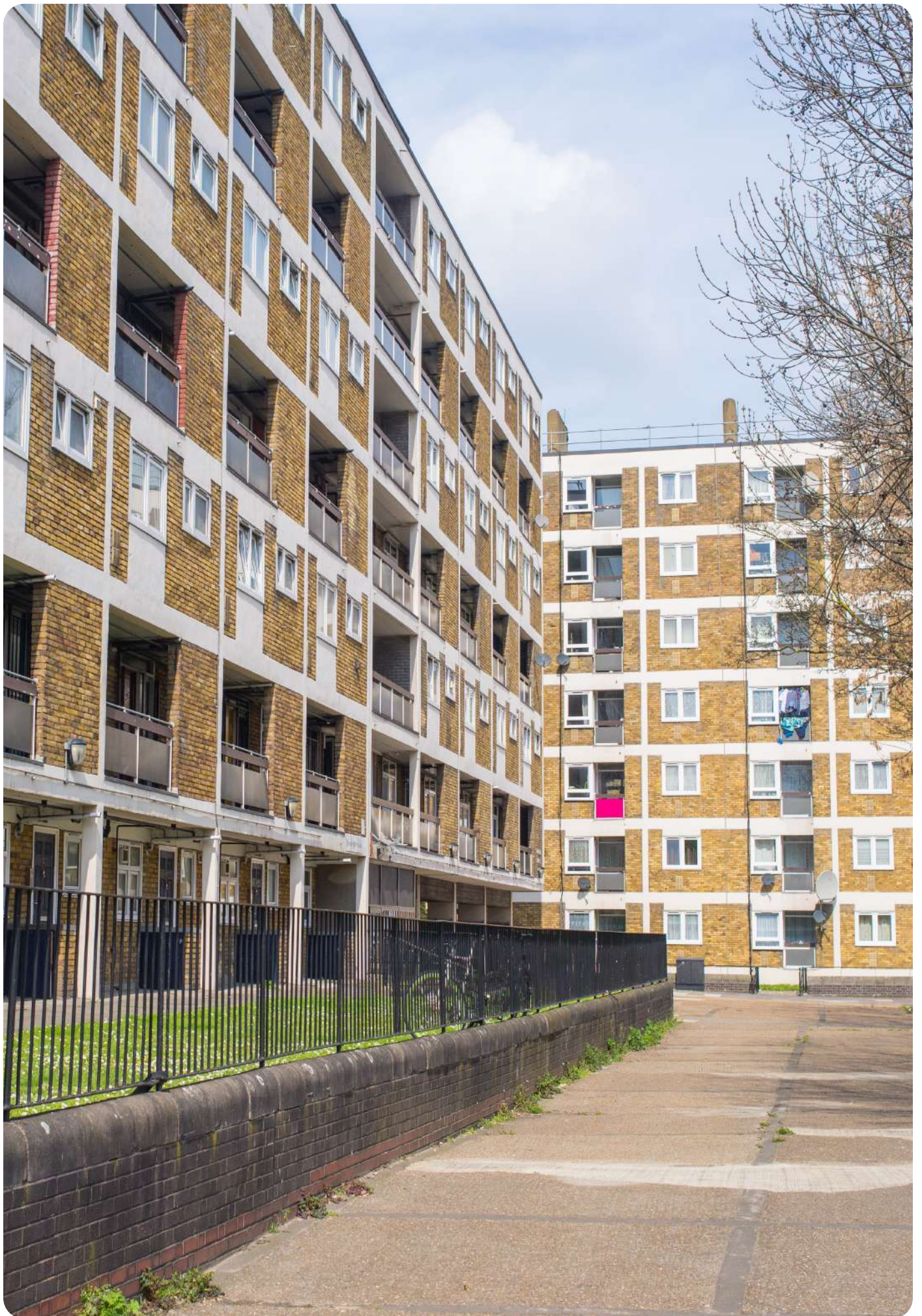
<sup>52</sup> Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government (2020). The Charter for Social Housing Residents Social Housing White Paper.

<sup>53</sup> Communities and Local Government (2010). "National Tenant Voice." Retrieved 26 January 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Cromarty, H. (2022). Social housing reform in England: What next? Research Briefing. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9227/CBP-9227.pdf>. Retrieved 8 February 2023 House of Commons Library.

<sup>55</sup> Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (2022c). "Social Housing Quality Resident Panel. Find out more about government's new Social Housing Quality Resident Panel" <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/social-housing-quality-resident-panel>. Retrieved 10 January, 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Housing Ombudsman Service (2023). "Resident Panel." <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/residents/resident-panel>. Retrieved 8 February, 2023.



## Policy labs and citizen social science. Reinigorating tenant participation

Policy labs emerged in the UK policy landscape in 2014 as part of the Civil Service Reform plan to make policy-making more open and transparent<sup>57</sup>. Policy labs are a policy-making model that applies innovative participation methods and emphasises experimentation and finding solutions<sup>58</sup>.

There are different types of lab, with the UK government preferring the model that promotes the use of digital and design thinking in policy making<sup>59</sup>. There is also a tendency to prefer scientific means of evaluating whether a solution is effective or not, with the Randomised Control Trial (RCT) framed as the gold standard in evaluation methods<sup>60</sup>.

RCTs work by allocating a treatment or intervention randomly across a population. For example, to find out if furnishing a tenancy makes a difference to the length of a tenancy, some new tenants will be given a furniture package and others, in what is called a 'control group' will not receive a furniture package. The difference in the tenancy lengths will be measured to determine if the intervention is effective.

### Pros and cons of Randomised Controlled Trials

- *RCTs are celebrated for identifying the causes of intervention effects, testing the effect of new and existing interventions and variations, learning what is and is not working, and incrementally improving policies through iterative changes*<sup>61</sup>.
- *They are criticised for an inability to look at the whole picture, an over focus on what works over understanding why a policy works<sup>62</sup> and ignoring local variation that may reduce effectiveness<sup>63</sup>.*
- *Celebrating RCTs as 'the gold standard' may produce a feedback loop that reinforces the use of 'scientific methods' and reduces the use of less scientific participatory approaches that may be more valuable in finding why a policy works and who it is most effective for<sup>64</sup>.*

<sup>57</sup> Policy Lab UK (2023). "About Policy Lab." <https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/>. Retrieved 26 January, 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Asenbaum, H. and F. Hanusch (2021). "(De)futureing democracy: Labs, playgrounds, and ateliers as democratic innovations." *Futures* **134**(102836).

<sup>59</sup> Einfield, C. and E. Blomkamp (2021). "Nudge and co-design: complementary or contradictory approaches to policy innovation?" *Policy Studies* **43**(5): 901-919.

<sup>60</sup> What Works Network (2014). *What Works? Evidence for decision makers*. Cabinet Office. London.

<sup>61</sup> Haynes, L., et al. (2012). "Test, Learn, Adapt: Developing Public Policy with Randomised Controlled Trials." *Cabinet Office - Behavioural Insights Team*.

<sup>62</sup> Deaton, A. and N. Cartwright (2018). "Understanding and misunderstanding randomised controlled trials." *Social Science and Medicine* **210**(August 2018): 2-21.

<sup>63</sup> Jones, R. and M. Whitehead (2018). "'Politics done like science': Critical perspectives on psychological governance and the experimental state." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **36**: 313-330.

## Policy labs: not social enough for regulated housing?

There are good and bad applications of lab models. In my PhD research I found that labs focussing on digital solutions tended to be used as a marketing tool to promote the adoption of digital technologies sold by private companies to regulated landlords. Furthermore, the use of RCTs in lab-based approaches tended to be problematic. This was sometimes due to technical reasons such as the variation in the type of housing owned by landlords. In terms of the involvement of tenants, there was a tendency to ‘front load’ tenants at the design stage of the RCT and exclude their involvement later in the process. Tenants were often suspicious of the method, feeling that RCTs put them ‘under the microscope’ and excluded an examination of landlord behaviours.

Where a lab model worked well, the process was a collaboration between a think-tank, the landlord and the tenants most impacted by the problem requiring intervention. The evaluation was through mixed methods, with quantitative data meeting the landlord’s and lab funder’s reporting needs. Qualitative methods ensured that tenants’ experiences and thoughts about the intervention were visible in the evaluation report.

These findings suggest that a lab model underpinned by the values of collaborative social research are a likely good fit for regulated housing<sup>65</sup>. Citizen social science allows for a staggered approach to working with tenants captured in three categories ‘by the people, for the people and with the people’<sup>65</sup>

It is an approach that recognises some topics are better done ‘for the people’ as they require technical knowledge and advanced skills, for example crafting new guidance on building safety. There is still scope to involve tenants but the responsibility is weighted more with the experts.



<sup>64</sup> Straßheim, H. (2020a). “The Rise and Spread of Behavioural Public Policy: An Opportunity for Critical Research and Self-Reflection.” *International Review of Public Policy* 2: 115-128.

<sup>65</sup> King, A., W. SJ, J. Sheats, et al (2016). “Leveraging citizen science and information technology for population physical activity promotion.” *Translational Journal of the American college of sports medicine* 1: 30-44.

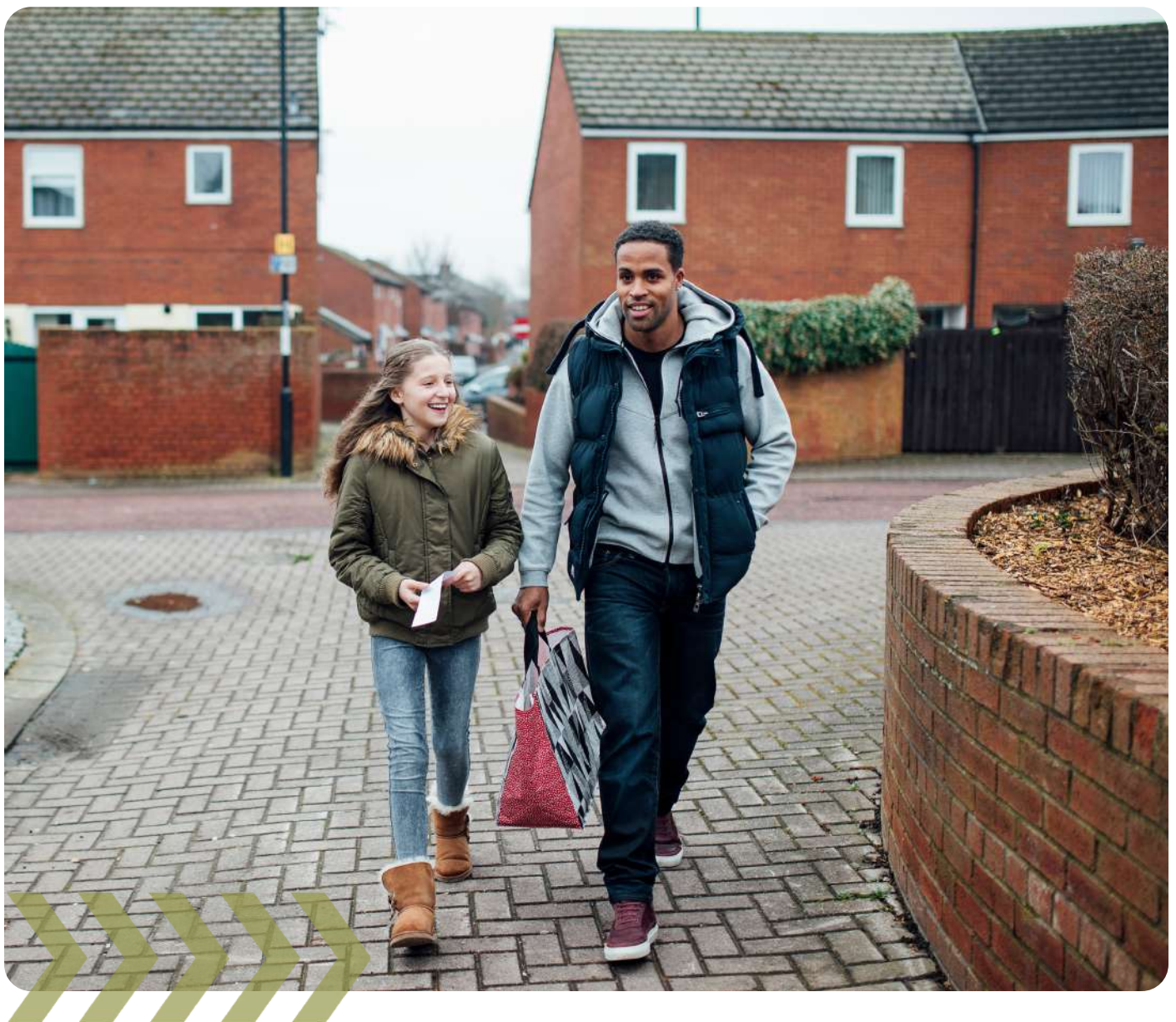
<sup>66</sup> Albert, A. (2021). “Citizen social science in practice: the case of the Empty Houses Project.” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8.

Citizen science ‘with the people’ shades into more collaboration involving mixed groups of experts, practitioners, tenants, and other invested stakeholders. Reviewing a repairs policy would suit this mode of enquiry due to the importance of this topic for tenants and landlords.

Finally, citizen science ‘by the people’ is the most open and participatory of categories. In this mode, tenants help to frame the problem, the collection and interpretation of data and the presentation of findings. Experts can contribute by guiding the research and contributing new ideas to produce new understandings of entrenched problems. This mode is suitable for wicked problems such as stigma and interventions that seek to alleviate the harms of contexts of poverty.

In addition to providing a staggered approach to collective working on social housing problems and clarifying the roles of experts, practitioners, tenants and other stakeholders, citizen social science is an ethical and transparent approach. The ethics of social research underpin the different modes of inquiry, and the decisions as to whether the activity is ‘by the people, for the people or with the people’ are rational and transparent.

Citizen science-informed labs, then, involve a flexible and robust process that has the potential to reinvigorate tenant participation in social housing.





## Section four:

# Recommendations

## 1. Effectively tackle stigma in regulated housing

Recommendations in terms of national policy and culture have been adequately made elsewhere<sup>67</sup>. This set of recommendations focuses on training and professional standards and so contributes to ongoing government-led reviews about the quality of regulated housing practices.

### Provide training on stigma as a wicked problem

It is recommended that the training module on ‘stigma as a wicked problem’ is delivered to tenants involved in landlord participation and regulated housing practitioners and decision-makers.

By forefronting conversations about stigma and its effects, landlords and tenants are aided in working together to deliver services and support that account for the effects of stigma and reduce the harms it causes.

The training can be evaluated by sharing best practices that are developed by landlords who have undertaken the training and applied the insights and wicked problems approach.

### Incorporate ‘wicked problems’ training in professional standards and training for practitioners

As social problems grow increasingly complex, there is a need to develop skills to work with the challenging nature of social problems. There is a tendency for organisations tasked with reducing social problems to unintentionally contribute to them<sup>68</sup>.

A stark example is the failure of some regulated housing providers to tackle damp and mould in housing stock<sup>69</sup>. Another is the continued resistance to furnishing homes for applicants exiting homelessness or without the resources to make a property a liveable home.

The wicked problems framework could help regulated housing professionals to think differently and challenge institutional norms and practices that contribute to the problem of stigma and poor services in the sector.



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<sup>67</sup> Denedo, M. and A. Ejiogu (2022). Stigma and Social Housing in England: Feedback on the consultation responses. [https://www.durham.ac.uk/business/media/durham-university-business-school/research-centres/centre-for-organisations-and-society/Stigma-and-Social-Housing-in-England---consultation-report-\(final-version\)-24082022-3.32-MB.pdf](https://www.durham.ac.uk/business/media/durham-university-business-school/research-centres/centre-for-organisations-and-society/Stigma-and-Social-Housing-in-England---consultation-report-(final-version)-24082022-3.32-MB.pdf), Durham University Business School.

<sup>68</sup> Banerjee, A. V. and E. Duflo (2012). *Poor Economics. A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*. New York, Public Affairs.

<sup>69</sup> Cromarty, H. and C. Barton (2022). Housing conditions in the private rented sector (England). <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7328/>. House of Commons Library.

## 2. Reform how social value is understood and accounted for

Social accounting principles currently dominate the sector's approach to social value<sup>70</sup>. These frameworks rely on proxy measures of the social value of an intervention. For example, an estimate of the annual cost in 2012 of one homeless person ranges from £24,000 - £30,000<sup>71</sup>.

Social accounting uses such proxies to estimate the £-value of socially valuable activity. Such frameworks both evaluate the financial worth of social activity and set the agenda of such activity. The approach has come to signal both good governance and the financial viability of social landlords, yet it is a poor fit for the complex and wicked problems experienced by tenants and landlords.

A global shift to broader ESG reporting requirements provides an opportunity to rethink how regulated landlords understand and measure social value.

### Clarifying the social purpose of social housing

A key recommendation of the *Better Social Housing Review*<sup>72</sup> is that 'the sector as a whole, should focus on their core purpose and deliver against it'. The review describes this purpose as the provision of 'decent, safe homes for those who can't afford the market'.

In order to fully implement this recommendation, the sector needs to understand and work with the emotional value of the home and landlord services to tenants. Essentially, the material condition of the home and emotional wellbeing are interconnected, and this entanglement is productive of the social value of the regulated sector.

Further research is needed to understand the psychological and emotional importance of home and landlord services from the perspective of tenants.

### A turn to accountability processes over accounting frameworks

It is recommended that social value activity within the regulated sector needs to be accountable to those most impacted by it, namely tenants. This turns attention to governance accountability mechanisms over proxy £-values reporting. One example of achieving this is through a shift to wider tenant shareholding at housing associations. This would see tenants sign-off on annual ESG reports.

A turn to a process orientation over an outcome orientation requires further research as to how social value can be grounded in what is important to tenants regarding their homes and landlord services.

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<sup>70</sup> This approach to accounting for social value grew from the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2013. This act focused on obtaining value for money from procurement activity and reducing state expenditure. See Cabinet Office (2021). "Social Value Act: information and resources." Retrieved 10 March 2023.

<sup>71</sup> National Housing Federation and Chartered Institute of Housing (2022). "The Better Social Housing Review. Executive Summary."

<sup>72</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government (2012). Evidence review of the costs of homelessness. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/7596/2200485.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/7596/2200485.pdf).



## Reforming tenant participation:

In February 2023, the government opened a consultation regarding mutual exchange and tenant involvement<sup>72</sup>. The consultation document outlined welcome non-legislative measures such as a Resident Opportunities and Empowerment Grant to strengthen the capacity of social housing residents to engage with their landlords.

The consultation also proposes the removal of prescriptive performance information requirements. The intention of this to reduce the potential of providers taking a 'tick-box' approach to tenant participation is welcomed. What is of concern is an expectation of tenant scrutiny that lacks both detail and engagement with developments in lab-based models of participation, as described in **on page 20**.

## Trial a policy lab model informed by the values and ethics of citizen social science

It is recommended that social landlords are supported to trial the citizen social science lab model described on **pages 21 and 22**. This model will likely increase flexibility, rigour and accountability for tenant participation in regulated housing.

To encourage experimentation with this model government could provide funding to train tenants and landlords on the principles of the approach. Furthermore, learning by regulated landlords and tenants could be shared on a dedicated website. The aim of this training and sharing is to ensure rigour of process and accountability for the results of the model.

If the trial is successful, the approach could inform a review of the new professional standards and training for regulated housing managers and other practitioners.

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<sup>72</sup> Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (2023). "Implementing the new consumer regulatory regime: directions to the Social Housing Regulator on mutual exchange and tenant involvement."

## Section five: Next Steps

This report has identified, described, and made recommendations for change aimed at three key processes in regulated housing that inhibit the adoption of more emotionally attuned practices.

The next research stage includes working with involved tenants to explore the utility of emotional insights.

The project in partnership with TAROE Trust is called 'Feeling at Home' and engages a group of tenants currently involved in landlord services.

Co-produced research methods saw tenants trained in a collection of emotional and psychological based perspectives from different research disciplines. A series of workshops then explored the hidden emotions of home and landlord services from the tenants' perspective.

The report from this research will highlight the 'emotional hotspots' for tenants, an understanding of which can inform landlord practice.

If you want to find out more about the Feeling at Home project or get involved, you can contact Hannah at [RT.Homes@TrainandConsult.co.uk](mailto:RT.Homes@TrainandConsult.co.uk) or Darren, CEO of TAROE Trust, at [Darren@taroetrust.org.uk](mailto:Darren@taroetrust.org.uk).



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