

# Changing Perceptions

## Stigma and Social Housing in Ireland



### Executive Summary

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## Acknowledgements

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This project was overseen by a research board comprising: Simon Brooke, Head of Policy, Clúid Housing (Chair); Fiona Cormican, New Business Director, Clúid Housing; Kath Cottier, Director of Housing Services, Clúid Housing; Lucinda McNally, Communications Manager, Clúid Housing; and Mary Murphy, Senior Lecturer, Social Sciences Institute, NUI Maynooth.

Research board members provided much invaluable input into the design and execution of the research study.

We would particularly like to thank everyone who agreed to be interviewed for this study. Without their input, the research would not have been possible.

## Foreword

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This research is the fifth study funded by the Adrian Norridge Housing Research Bursary, established in honour of the founder of Clúid Housing. Clúid Housing is an independent not-for-profit charity that develops and provides high quality affordable housing for people who cannot afford to buy their own home or pay for private rented housing. Clúid currently (February 2017) owns or manages nearly 6,000 homes across the country.

The issue of stigma in social housing is one that Clúid tenants and staff encounter every day. It manifests itself in the expressed views of some people (although by no means all) when they hear about plans for social housing in their neighbourhood; and the views of some developers when they discuss the merits or demerits of Part V of the Planning and Development Acts (whereby a percentage of all new housing developments can be reserved for social housing). In addition the media

sometimes perpetuates negative stereotypes associated with social housing. Of course a further manifestation of stigma is tenants' own experiences, through their interaction with neighbours, work colleagues, and others. Stigma has been a feature of social housing for many years.

However it is very important to emphasise that the problem is far from being a universal phenomenon. Tenants in many social housing estates do not feel stigmatised as a consequence of living in social housing; they identify strongly with their neighbourhood and feel a strong sense of pride in their community.

That being said, it is clear that where people feel stigmatised through living in social housing, the effects of this stigmatisation can be acute and have a significant impact on their lives.

However, we hesitated before deciding to commission research on this topic. First, we knew that it would be a difficult topic to research. It is a sensitive area, and getting worthwhile interviews with stakeholders might not be easy. Second, we were concerned that by drawing attention to the existence of stigma in social housing, that we would end up reinforcing the very thing we were trying to challenge. However, we felt that the risks were worth taking, and we will develop a strategy for tackling stigma on foot of the research, which we hope will address the second issue.

In all of this we were greatly assisted by the quality of the research carried out, and we are extremely grateful to Michelle Norris, Michael Byrne and Anna Carnegie who tackled this difficult subject with determination, rigour and sensitivity. As well as being very illuminating, the research report provides an excellent platform on which to base a practical strategy for tackling stigma in social housing.

**Simon Brooke**  
Head of Policy  
Clúid Housing

## Introduction

A strong body of evidence suggests that stigma is a problem for some social housing neighbourhoods, both in Ireland and abroad. The media often portrays these neighbourhoods negatively and unfairly and there is evidence too that the growing residualisation of social housing characterised by a concentration of low income and disadvantaged households, has led to increased stigma.

Stigmatisation of social housing, however, is complex and many aspects remain poorly understood. The impact of stigma in the social housing sector has been the subject of only limited research, particularly in Ireland.

Social housing in Ireland is provided by local authorities (up to 70%); and housing associations (up to 30%). The latter are independent, not-for-profit charities that mainly provide social housing for people registered on local authority housing waiting lists, and are sometimes known as approved housing bodies or voluntary housing bodies.

This report aims to address these shortcomings in the evidence base for stigma and social housing.

## Research Methods

Research methods included reviews of the academic and policy literature; analysis of survey data from EU Survey of Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) on the socio-economic characteristics of social housing tenants in Ireland; case studies of measures used to combat stigma in three social housing estates in Dublin; and a cross-cutting analysis of issues raised in the literature review, survey data analysis and case study research.

The three case study estates – all in Dublin – were Fatima Mansions, Ballymun and Clarion Quay. These were selected because measures to combat stigma had been implemented in each, thus they provided an opportunity to assess their effectiveness. These measures

included social mixing; building environment solutions; and public image change strategies and media campaigns.

## Understanding Stigma and its Impact on Social Housing

### Theories of stigma

Erving Goffman's pioneering analysis in 1963 locates stigma within three spheres: bodily "abominations"; blemishes of moral character; and tribal forms of stigma related to ethnicity, nationality or religion. His work has been developed by numerous researchers, in particular with the addition of place-based stigma, which is separate from the three spheres and can interact with other dimensions of stigma such as socio-economic status and ethnicity.

### Social housing as a site of stigma

The view is widespread that growing residualisation of social housing in many European countries, combined with the normalisation of owner occupation, has contributed to a perception of social housing as a tenure of last resort, and therefore a prime target for stigmatisation. Discussion of causes of neighbourhood stigmatisation often focuses on portraying tenants as a 'moral underclass' which problematises this group and intensifies public stigma. Alternative perspectives link social housing stigma to wider social and economic structures, including government and public policy failure.

### Forms and causes of stigmatisation

In the research literature drivers of stigma which emanate from outside stigmatised neighbourhoods (external) are often distinguished from those which arise from within (internal). In addition, a myriad actors who influence stigma are identified. Media representations of a particular estate or housing tenure have been found to exercise considerable influence on public perception. They do this by successfully reinforcing stigmatising attitudes, thereby perpetuating well-worn stereotypes that

are defended on the basis that positive news stories rarely sell papers.

### Implications and responses

Researchers internationally have argued that stigma leads to people's perception of themselves (their actual identity) being more positive than their perception of how others see them (their virtual identity), and this is observable in the context of social housing. In response, stigmatised individuals have developed two broad categories of response: strategies of submission and strategies of resistance.

Submissive-type reactions are typified by internalising the negative perceptions or by projecting these perceptions onto others in the same community, and may inspire a retreat into the private or family sphere. People may engage in self-monitoring stigma minimising practices, for example by changing their accent.

Strategies of resistance involve individuals defending the neighbourhood's reputation perhaps by normalising problems or problematising the characteristics of neighbouring communities.

These contrasting reactions are not necessarily mutually exclusive and researchers have identified multiple responses from a single individual to their stigmatisation depending on the particular time and context.

## Stigma and Irish Social Housing

Social housing in Ireland is highly residualised and many researchers have suggested that this has exacerbated stigmatisation. This is supported by data from the 2009 and 2013 EU-SILC.

Strong evidence suggests, however, that due to the impact of social housing policy and other factors, the residualisation of the Irish social rented sector has operated in an uneven fashion and as a result some social rented neighbourhoods are more stigmatised than others. The longstanding policy of sales

of social housing to tenants is a key driver of this uneven pattern of residualisation because tenants tend to buy homes in higher demand neighbourhoods while lower demand neighbourhoods remain in the social rented sector and are likely to be more stigmatised.

There is significant evidence of local and national media playing a prominent role in perpetuating and intensifying stigmatisation of some social housing estates in Ireland, with some persistently depicted in a negative and stereotyped light. Research in Ireland has also found internal differentiation in large estates.

Studies have also found that a sense of community and neighbourhood pride is extremely strong in many Irish social housing estates. As a result, some have actively resisted their stigma through the use of public image change strategies designed to promote local identities and provide an alternative narrative to dominant media rhetoric.

## Combating Stigma in Social Housing

### Built environment solutions

Evidence shows that stigmatisation of social housing is exacerbated by design features that clearly distinguish between different tenures, for instance through owner-occupied, local authority or housing association properties having different appearances. Furthermore, researchers have argued that the physical isolation of estates from the wider urban fabric is a cause of stigmatisation and a barrier to reputational change because outsiders are simply unaware of the transformation happening within them.

### Tenure mixing solutions

Policies aiming to achieve social mixing emerged in the 1980s as a response to concerns about poor neighbourhoods, and they are now common across Western Europe and the United States. These policies have primarily focused on mixing home owners and private renters (who tend to have higher incomes) with social renters. Proponents of social mixing highlight positive impacts.

Most research on use of tenure mixing to combat stigma in social housing concludes that increasing tenure mix has had some success in reducing external stigma. Tenure mixing seems to be much more effective in combating stigmatisation of social housing when applied to new developments.

Research on community opposition to affordable housing indicates that initial resistance by home owners, particularly those with higher incomes, largely dissipated once the new development was completed and occupied.

### Image change solutions

Most research on the role of image change and communications strategies in combating stigma examines regeneration projects. Consequently it is not always possible to distinguish between the impact of the image change and communications strategies and the impact of other regeneration elements. A dominant research finding is that stigmatising reputations are stubborn and resistant to change despite substantial physical and social restructuring. Researchers argue that one fundamental difficulty in altering public perceptions of social rented estates is the widespread ignorance among the wider population of changes within them.

### Community and grassroots responses

It is important to acknowledge that social housing residents often act to reduce stigmatisation. Their activities, which can be described as grassroots or everyday interventions, include any action taken independently of relevant authorities or responsible agencies to challenge or ameliorate stigmatisation.



## Stigma and Social Housing in Three Case Study Neighbourhoods

### Perceptions and experiences of stigmatisation in the case study neighbourhoods

Research on the case study estates revealed that many social housing residents and managers interviewed agreed that the tenure is stigmatised in Ireland; but this viewpoint's prevalence varied significantly across the three estates.

#### External Stigmatisation

Consensus was strong across residents of the three estates that stigmatisation of social housing tenure was linked to its residualisation. Both residents and housing managers interviewed identified the media as a significant contributor to the perpetuation of these negative stereotypes. The effects of external or address-based stigmatisation on the social residents who experienced it were significant.

#### Internal Stigmatisation

The case studies identified internal stigmatisation within the neighbourhoods examined but its operation was very complex and varied significantly across the three. The issue of different cultures of different tenure groups was evident in all three estates.

#### Intersecting forms of stigmatisation

While the majority of interviewees spoke about their experiences of stigmatisation predominantly in relation to tenure type and socio-economic status, instances of intersecting forms of stigma emerged. For example, children were a controversial subject and, at times, a frustration with them was linked to negative attitudes towards lone parents, specifically lone mothers. Issues of immigration and ethnicity operated in a slightly different manner and migrants were often conflated positively with a move to greater tenure diversity because they had higher aspirations for their families than previous tenants.

### Residents' responses to stigmatisation

In the three case study estates, interviewees adopted a range of responses – submissive and resistant – to stigmatisation. These ranged from practices of self-monitoring, such as falsifying one's address and failing to disclose one's tenure, to the normalising and distancing behaviour identified in international research on the topic.

### Combating stigma in the case study neighbourhoods

#### Built environment solutions

Residents of Ballymun and Fatima Mansions reported that new design of their neighbourhoods had helped to reduce external stigma.

#### Tenure mixing solutions

The case study neighbourhoods experienced different levels of success in achieving tenure mixing in practice and so this strategy's effectiveness in combating external stigma varied. In addition, in some neighbourhoods tenure mixing amplified internal stigmatisation, but most interviewees agreed that the policy's shortcomings were outweighed by its benefits in this regard.

#### Image change solutions

In Ballymun and Fatima Mansions additional interventions aimed to change their image.

These involved:

- > Provision of arts and recreational infrastructure;
- > Large-scale public events;
- > Media campaigns;
- > Changing the name of a section of Fatima Mansions to Herberton.

The impact of these image change strategies is difficult to disaggregate from the impact of the built environment refurbishment and tenure mixing strategies concurrently applied to these neighbourhoods. Furthermore, interviewees expressed differing views on the achievements of image change strategies.

The majority view among Fatima Mansions interviewees, however, was that image change strategies had very positively contributed to improving the neighbourhood's external

image. In Ballymun, by contrast, interviewees overwhelmingly believed that the very positive and innovative programme of arts and cultural events was inadequate in improving their neighbourhood's image without effective tenure mixing and completion of the programme of built environment rebuilding and redesign.

The use of name change to combat stigma evoked strong and conflicting responses from interviewees.

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

### Conclusions

International research reviewed in this study and evidence garnered from research on three case study estates in Dublin indicate that social housing tenure is stigmatised in Ireland. Most social housing residents and landlords interviewed for this study thought it was associated in the public mind with high levels of welfare dependency and low levels of labour market participation. In their view the stigmatisation of the sector has increased is often reinforced by negative media reporting.

Not all social rented neighbourhoods in Ireland are stigmatised, however. Research indicates that the vast majority of social rented neighbourhoods are successful, settled communities in high demand among housing applicants.

Built environment solutions, tenure mixing and image change solutions have all been shown to be effective to a greater or lesser extent in combating stigma. It was observed, however, that once a neighbourhood gained a negative external reputation, it was likely to prove very challenging to shift.

### Policy Implications

This research on scale and impact of stigma and Irish social housing and possible responses has implications for social housing policy. Key here is stigma's negative impact on the life chances of residents of social housing neighbourhoods.

This research indicates that the following design and management strategies would help prevent micro-spatial segregation within mixed tenure communities:

- > Most interviewees believed that dispersal of social housing units across a development, rather than its concentration in one area, would lead to better outcomes.
- > Mixed tenure developments should be designed to produce a sense of equality for residents. For example, social housing should not be in the least desirable part of a development nor should private residents have access to amenities, such as car parking spaces, that are unavailable to their social renting neighbours. From the point of view of stigma, inequality at design level embeds the dynamics associated with stigmatisation into the built environment at neighbourhood level – with lasting impacts.
- > Acoustics and the quality of apartment sound proofing were a concern in the Clarion Quay estate. Of course this problem is not confined to mixed tenure development, but it is likely to create additional problems in these areas which could house a more diverse population than mono-tenure estates.
- > Provision and design of common and play areas are important considerations in mixed tenure developments.
- > Community centres which have traditionally been provided in mono-tenure social housing estates may not facilitate the interaction of households living in private and social rented dwellings in mixed tenure estates as they can be perceived as solely the preserve of social housing residents. Community buildings with a wider range of services such as crèches and gym as well as space for community events are likely to be more successful in encouraging the integration of mixed tenure communities.
- > Community-based facilities, such as gyms and retail facilities, are important outlets in which young people can work and socialise and they can contribute to breaking patterns of anti-social behaviour.



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## **The Adrian Norridge Housing Research Bursary**

This research was funded by the Adrian Norridge Housing Research Bursary which was established by Clúid Housing in 2011 in honour of its founder. The bursary, which is awarded annually, supports applied research on housing issues that are relevant to the social housing sector in Ireland.

To date, the bursary has funded the following research studies, all of which are available for download at [www.cluid.ie](http://www.cluid.ie):

*Financing the Irish Social Rented Housing Sector: Lessons from England and Canada* by Conor Farrell, 2012

*Starting Afresh: Housing Associations, Stock Transfer and Regeneration*, by Declan Redmond and Rory Hearne, 2013

*A Warm Welcome: An evidence-based strategy for tackling fuel poverty among Clúid Housing Association tenants* by Christine Liddell, Chris Morris and Harriet Thomson, 2014

*A Home for Life: The housing and support needs of Clúid's older tenants* by Siobhán Fox and Lorna Kenny, 2015

*Changing Perceptions: Stigma and social housing in Ireland*, by Anna Carnegie, Michael Byrne and Michelle Norris, 2017

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