



better homes and better  
services for better lives

# Great expectations

Exploring social housing customers'  
expectations of great service

July 2019



# Acknowledgments

This research was compiled on behalf of Acis by Simon Williams and Hollie Jones of Service Insights Ltd. With thanks to other participating organisations Gentoo, Midland Heart, Orbit Group, Regenda, Riverside, WDH, and Yorkshire Housing as well as their customers for taking part.



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# Executive summary

This research has been commissioned to help Acis and other social housing providers to better understand customer expectations of great service, and how we need to change as organisations and a sector to deliver to those expectations. It is an exploratory piece of work with the ultimate aim of helping providers with service improvement and customer satisfaction, particularly on the back of 2018's social housing green paper which explored potential new key performance indicators for social housing providers.

The research involved eight providers who expressed an interest in the research. As an indication of scale, this group of providers together manage almost 200,000 properties. Almost 6,000 social housing customers took part in this research, making it one of the largest studies of its kind in the UK.

This research doesn't look at the types of service delivered, but the way they are delivered. The customer experience. The way people are treated. The communication about service delivery. Essentially, how the service they receive makes people feel.

The results show that customers expect the same level of service they receive from other organisations – because they're paying for it. For many, the majority of their income will be spent on maintaining their home – through rent, service charges and day-to-day running. They want that money to be well spent, and with an organisation that is going to serve them well.

This is the second research report commissioned by Acis. The first, *More than bricks*, looked into which organisations are best placed to support customers in overcoming the barriers they face in everyday

life. We found that social housing providers were best placed and that a whole range of services were being delivered – going above and beyond normal responsibilities.

However, this report clearly shows that social housing customers aren't asking for more. In the first instance, they simply want to receive the core service they signed up to as part of their tenancy agreements with their provider.

They're also very clear they want to receive the same level of service from their providers as they receive from other companies. Interestingly, despite customers wanting the same service because they were paying for it, the subject of value for money was not borne out as a main theme in this report.

## Key findings:

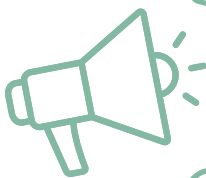


- More than four out of five social housing customers said they **expect the same level of service** from their social housing provider as they do from other companies.
- Customers said they want – and should expect – that level of service **because they're paying for it.**

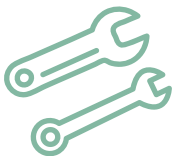


- Customers value **speed, ongoing updates, tracking** and **timeliness** when receiving a service from companies such as Royal Mail, Amazon or their bank. They also look fondly on good communication, friendliness and helpfulness.

- The majority of customers want the same from their social housing provider but would like it to be a two-way relationship, to be treated with **respect** and would like ongoing service delivery **communications** to be better.



- When customers consider great service, they often relate it to their home. Understandably, a **good, speedy repairs service** was seen as significant and the most important reason to class a service from a social housing provider as 'great'.



- The top ten qualities of a great service were: repairs, speed, maintenance, listening, communicating, problem solving, keeping promises, timeliness, customer service and being respectful.



- While there is some customer interaction with online services as standard, not all customers want to interact with social housing providers in this way. Many simply want face to face, human interaction. Great service should happen irrespective of the way it is delivered.

*For the purpose of this research paper, a 'customer' of a social housing provider is anyone who pays rent to the organisation managing their home. Customers may also see themselves as 'tenants' or 'residents'.*







# 1. Introduction

Social housing providers deliver far more than a home to live in. They offer services around maintenance and repairs to ensure the house continues to be a home and wider services to help customers live better lives. They interact with their customers day to day for many different reasons – far more than other sectors.

There is a perception that it was accepted in the past that people in social housing should accept the level of service they get because they get their accommodation paid for. They are sometimes seen by providers as just a social housing tenant – not that they interact with countless other organisations. This was further emphasised in the Green Paper published by government in 2018 where stigma of social housing tenants was cited as a fundamental issue for the sector to tackle.

Against a backdrop of decreased funding for services our customers engage with in other sectors, the introduction of Universal Credit and wider welfare reform changes, some of our customers' environment and way of living has changed. They are not just impacted by the services we as a sector offer or the way in which we deliver some of our services in isolation.

The shift for people to manage their own money, to pay for all their expenditure, and move into work and away from benefits altogether is a key driver of government policy and is a significant change in the landscape in which social housing providers operate in.



Alongside this, since the Grenfell disaster, customer input and the impact of the service we offer has been at the forefront of the government's housing agenda, giving us an opportunity to explore how we engage and respond to customers. Proposals in the Green Paper in 2018 suggest the government wants customers to hold the sector to account for the service they receive, and there is a suggestion they want to pitch providers against each other for their performance through things like leaderboards. While many social housing providers have strengthened the involvement of their customers, and continue to measure customer satisfaction of the service they get, for this to be done across the sector consistently we must first understand what our customers expect – and if this is different to what they would expect from other types of service - before they can start to look to how to measure our service performance across the sector and customers can hold us to account.

Customer relationships in social housing can be unlike other sectors. It's not like a relationship people have with their utilities suppliers or most consumer organisations. For example, providers may request rent while also taking action against the customer for tenancy breaches such as antisocial behaviour. They may also be receiving support from providers too – including support that goes above and beyond any typical landlord responsibility. As well as responsibilities resting on the shoulders of social housing providers, customers have their own roles and responsibilities they agree to when signing up to live in our homes. This sometimes can make for an unusual customer relationship. Nevertheless, the onus is always on the provider to deliver the best

possible service, irrespective of circumstance.

Customers do not just interact with social housing providers in isolation. They engage with other sectors and the commercial world daily, and they see the service we as a sector provide against the context of other services they interact with. Things have changed significantly around the way customers interact with companies, particularly in the last 20 years with technological advancements. The advancement of the internet and subsequent innovations has led to a change in expectation where customers expect queries to be answered in a timely fashion and expect a speedier response or service delivery updates so they feel informed. Therefore, it was questioned whether customers should expect the same level of service within housing to that of other sectors.

This is a significantly different operating space we are working in to that when the historic view of expectation was made. This research was commissioned to understand the contemporary expectation of service within the sector and help us drive changes if they are needed to increase the perception customers have of us, and the sector overall.

## 2. Methodology

While Acis is a medium-sized social housing provider with access to thousands of its own customers, the organisation wanted to get a deeper – and wider – understanding of what great service meant to customers within the sector. This culminated in wider perceptions based on geography and services available.

Working collaboratively with social housing providers that had expressed an interest in participating in the research, four questions were formed:

1. Think about the last time you received great service, this could be from any organisation for example Amazon, Royal Mail, or your bank perhaps. What made this service great?
- 2a. Do you expect this same level of great service from your landlord?
- 2b. Why?
3. Can you describe what great service from your landlord would look like?

Data was collected from participating social housing providers during telephone and online interviews between December 2018 and April 2019, through their existing customer feedback structures. This helped to ensure that the data, as best possible, mirrored organisational customer profiles.

Overall, the customers participating in this research are predominantly those who fit in the ‘general needs’ and ‘housing for older persons’ categories, while a small proportion of shared ownership customers were included in the research.



A total of 5,817 tenants were asked the four questions comprising three open questions and one closed question. This produced a raw data set comprising of a total of 246,613 words. This was manually coded using thematic analysis, using first and second coding techniques to group codes into themes.



To complement the customer data gathering, a World Café consultation was undertaken in April 2019 to consult with 29 social housing research practitioners representing 25 social housing providers. This involved the groups writing down a summary of their thoughts and opinions, in keywords, bullet points or themes, in relation to the customer questions. This generated a total of 787 words. Whilst this was much shorter than the customer consultation, it nonetheless gained insight into people working in and around multiple social housing providers.





## Participating organisations



## A focus on Acis

While customers have always been at the forefront of our priorities, our new strategy launched this year redefines customers as number one, refocusing us on providing the best possible service to the people in our communities.

Like many other social housing providers, we embarked on a significant change programme in 2016 to improve the service for our customers, focusing on people, process and tools. We're over half way through this, and while this programme goes a long way to provide a consistent service to all our customers and gives us the tools to change the way we work, we now want to look to the future to determine where we go next, and what our focus should be on to deliver a great service to our customers. Our culture is rooted in ensuring our people feel empowered to do what's right and deliver a first-class service for our customers. This research will help us underpin the tangible actions we must focus on to ensure this is felt by our customers and they see significant positive change.

We wanted to look further than the sector and further than just our current customers so we build a model of delivery that will be fit for the future. We also believe a great service, co-created with customers, should be delivered across the sector to all social housing customers regardless of the provider they are with. That's why we made this research even bigger, so we can share an informed view of customers' perceptions within social housing, enabling all providers to learn from it and make changes to improve.

We want to learn from organisations with reputations for good customer service, like Amazon, John Lewis and Disney. With almost 6,000 customers views captured, and over 250,000 comments analysed, we believe this research will give us the insight we need to tangibly focus us, and hopefully the sector, to deliver the service in a way our customers want.



## 3. Findings – customer perspective

This section looks in detail at customer responses to each individual question, and how that fits with the perception of people working for and with social housing providers.

### Question 1: What makes a service great?

Firstly, This question was posed to gain an understanding of the base level of ‘great service’ expectations wider than solely those services delivered by social housing providers.

The majority of respondents were able to convey what good service looked like, but some reverted to what they perceived as their ideal service.

For services outside of social housing, **speed** and **timeliness** of service were cited most frequently by respondents. **Good communication** and staff qualities, such as **friendliness, helpfulness, politeness** and **respectfulness** also scored highly, as did the **quality** of service, **consistency** of service and organisations **carrying through on their commitments**.

It is interesting to see the human side of service come to the fore in the answers, ahead of any online or digital services. Pricing, too, wasn’t necessarily a factor in many people’s answers.

.....  
*“Having worked in retail before the one thing you walk away with is feeling satisfied when someone attends to your needs and when you speak in a manner that a customer can feel comfortable with.”*

In the main, customers did not believe great service is about exceeding expectations – rather that they wanted organisations to just deliver on their promises.

.....  
*“Great customer service is people listening and acting on queries and requests, not providing poor excuses and making no changes.”*  
 .....

But many did feel providers could take a leaf out of Amazon’s book – concentrating on flexibility and ease of their services. Amazon may be seen as an online service, yet it has a huge human element to it employs **650,000** people worldwide, including **27,000** in the UK. This includes delivery drivers, warehouse, logistics, packing, plus helping others to capacity build – all of which include human interaction and service delivery that is as easy to engage with and as friendly as their digital platform. In a social housing world, replicating this service when customers report repairs and maintenance requests could be crucial and is explored more later in this report.

*“Online service - excellent - items ordered, delivered within two-day window with morning or evening slot driver very helpful and pleasant products excellent condition.”*

*“The good thing about companies like Amazon is that you can pick a delivery day that's convenient for you, so you're not left waiting. Companies shouldn't expect their customers to just be stuck around waiting for two days for a parcel to come.”*

*“My last Amazon order - It gave a time and date for delivery when I placed the order and then I received a text message on the morning to confirm that it was still coming, and it turned up on time.”*

*“From a gift supplier, communication was faultless. They emailed me during every step of my order to ensure I was kept up to date with my order. With landlord, whenever I have logged an issue, no confirmation is received. Additionally, sometimes when I have called to check on the progress of the issue, several agents had told me that my issue had not been logged in originally which gives me little hope in the way problems are dealt with.”*

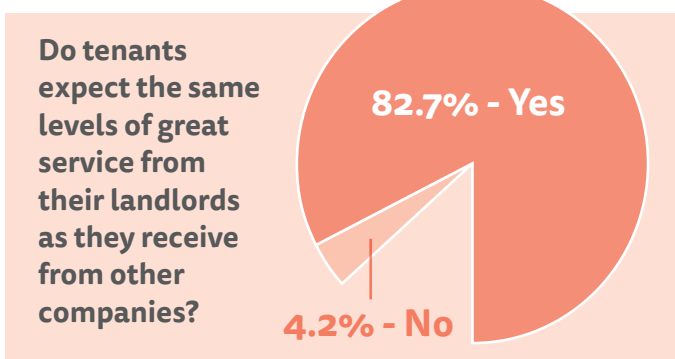


Question 1: Word cloud created from responses



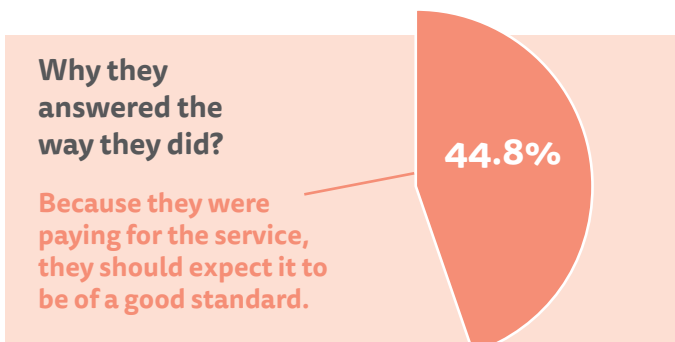
## Question 2: Do tenants expect the same levels of great service from their landlords as they receive from other companies?

This question was asked to help us understand whether people differentiated between services delivered by more well-known companies and those delivered by their social housing provider – especially as they probably pay more money regularly to the organisation managing their home. It was posed simply as a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ question.



An overwhelming majority of respondents, 82.7%, said ‘yes’ – they do expect the same level of service. Only 4.2% said they didn’t expect the same level of service. Social housing providers regularly report on customer satisfaction, but historically benchmark against others in the sector, rather than looking further than the sector at how other organisations perform.

When asked about why they answered the way they did, a high proportion (44.8%) of respondents said because they were paying for the service, they should expect it to be of a good standard.



*“They should be as good as everywhere else. When we pay, we should automatically get good service.”*

Looking deeper at how social housing providers could improve their service, respondents urged providers to be respectful in their actions. Communication was also born out as a main theme – namely providers communicating more frequently about their service delivery and those communications being more helpful.

*“I had a dodgy package delivered, and they were really swift in replacing it, with no charge. And, then [they] rang up, following, to confirm I'd got the order”.*

*“If I have an issue, I call them, they take action and if they can't do anything about it they contact us to let us know rather than not updating us.”*

*“Humanity. For example, if something is late then let you know. There are a lot of situations where people wait in all day for a service and no one turns up. Happens quite a lot here”.*

*“Well, it's just communication, isn't it? And, doing what they say - so following through.”*

*“Kept fully informed of what was happening. Pro-active communication.”*

*“The company made a note of my concern, gave me a time frame on when I could expect my complaint to be resolved. Called me the next day with an update.”*





### Question 3: Can you describe what great service from your landlord would look like?

This question was posed to enable social housing providers to look at our own services to better understand customer perceptions of a great service from a social housing perspective and, ultimately, assess whether enough was being done to create the right levels of service for people.

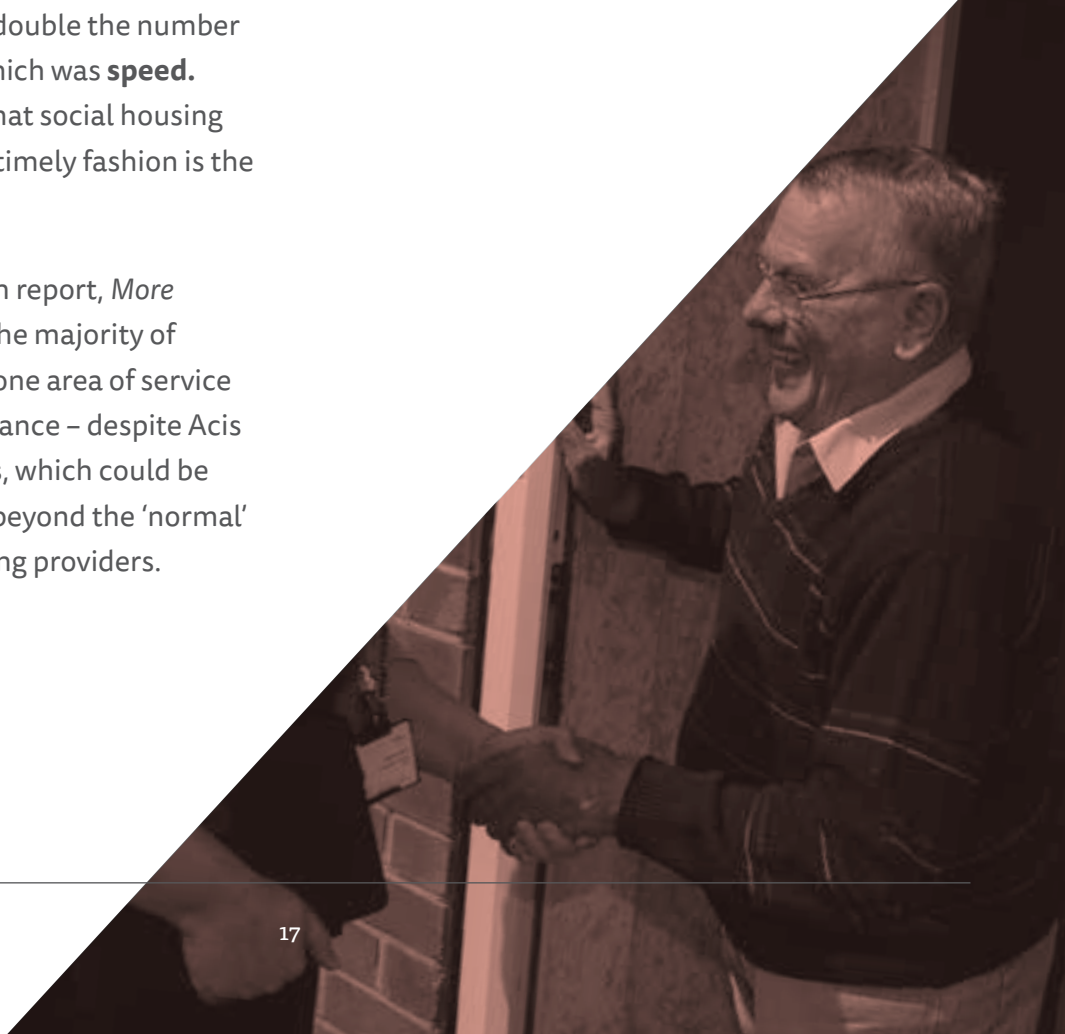
It is clear from the responses that customers have long memories of poor service. However, while not directly asked for, it was encouraging to see so many positive responses from all customer groups. Each participating organisation had at least a hundred different positive unprompted comments about the service they currently deliver.

Importantly, a **good repairs service** came out as the main theme among our respondents. More than a thousand comments were made about the importance of it being their home – and repairs being key to that – more than double the number of the next common theme which was **speed**. Put together, it is easy to see that social housing providers tackling repairs in a timely fashion is the top of a customer's wish list.

This fits with our 2018 research report, *More than bricks*, which found that the majority of customers were aware of just one area of service delivery – repairs and maintenance – despite Acis offering more focused services, which could be described as going above and beyond the 'normal' responsibilities of social housing providers.

#### Top ten qualities of a great service in social housing

- 1) Repairs
- 2) Speed
- 3) Maintenance
- 4) Listening
- 5) Communicating
- 6) Problem solving
- 7) Keeping promises
- 8) Timeliness
- 9) Customer service
- 10) Respectfulness



## Repairs

The issue of repairs was clearly at the top of customers' thoughts throughout this research. It's very apparent most social housing customers simply want issues fixed if they go wrong – and as soon as possible.

.....  
*"I've got a big hole in my hallway ceiling that's been there for two and a half years. If they got that completed that might make me say something nice about them."*  
.....

Flexibility is also key, with appointments needing to be convenient to both providers and customers.

.....  
*"Being able to book an appointment that is convenient to yourself as well as the workmen and turning up in the time scale given and completing the job ASAP with less mess."*  
.....

But it should be noted that some customers are already receiving a great and expected service – perhaps even going beyond expectations.

.....  
*"I actually received great service today, my boiler went, and they first said they couldn't get anyone out until Monday, but they managed to get someone out today."*  
.....

## Speed

Social housing customers are clear that they want things sorting as quickly as possible, particularly in emergency situations.

.....  
*"Most of the time if something is broken it prevents a normal life. If something doesn't work, you want it fixed."*  
.....

.....  
*"The man who fixed my kitchen light said that once he saw how much of an emergency things were for me he came and fixed it as fast as he could. They sort things very fast, usually within a day of contacting them."*  
.....

Throughout the responses given, the general perception was that the speed of service was highly valued by customers.

.....  
*"[Provider] come out as soon as you call to deal with your problems. People are always out to fix our problems within an hour or two."*  
.....

.....  
*"When I have needed [Provider] they have always been there and dealt with any issues straight away, or no longer than a couple of days."*  
.....

.....  
*"My front door wouldn't open, and they sent someone who had it fixed in ten minutes."*  
.....

However, the consistency of service could seemingly be improved.

.....  
*"Phoned up and done that day, that's proper service. When I've had an emergency, they sent someone out that day but when my boiler went down, I had to wait so many days. They came the same day for a light in the space of an hour. Last year during that really cold winter my pipes froze, and they couldn't come out for three or four days, so I managed to do it myself."*  
.....

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## Maintenance

While customers are obviously keen to get repairs fixed when things go wrong, some consideration may also be needed for those issues which may not fit into a normal repair category. It is apparent that this is a vital service to ensure a fundamental basic need continue to be met, and we continue to deliver on that promise. And that some everyday home maintenance issues which would normally fall into the customers' responsibility might not be able to be carried out by the customer.

Our *More than bricks* research in 2018 identified that providers should explore the wider services we should offer to complement our core landlord services. Changes to core services over time should be reviewed continuously in line with whether customers are able to deliver on their responsibilities, whether they need support to do it, and that we continue to deliver on our sector ethos of meeting the basic need around safe and secure homes.

.....  
*"They've just decided they won't change lightbulbs so if I get a bulb blown I've got to change it myself but I'm disabled and I suffer dementia and reading problems and the kitchen light won't work and I rang them up and they refused to do it."*  
.....

*"I haven't got a man in the house, at all. Little things that go wrong, we have to do it ourselves. I've had a dripping tap for weeks. I live by myself. I'm 88, and I don't know what to do about it."*  
.....

*"It's a two-way street. I look after the house and expect the same back."*  
.....

*'You've got a roof over your head, what more do you want?'*  
.....

*"A fair deal on both sides."*





## Listening

The theme of providers listening to the customer came up throughout, with respondents suggesting that more could be done to co-create services and to treat people with more understanding.

.....  
*“For them to work with tenants on what they need doing and then getting it done fairly quickly.”*  
.....

*“Treated with respect and treated as an individual.”*  
.....

*“If there's a job to be done, or something needs doing; that they're there. That they listen, and they help me.”*  
.....

*“What I would expect is when I contact them whether that be by internet or the phone and they listen to what you're saying. They act appropriately with what you're telling them, and their actions are appropriate for your needs whether it is urgent or non-urgent.”*  
.....

## Communicating

When the issue of communication was brought up, the importance of human contact in service delivery was clear. The value of face-to-face contact cannot be underestimated.

.....  
*“The most important thing is with an issue; good communication and I would like more easy access to human contact rather than being pushed to use the internet.”*  
.....

*“The actual lady who is the housing officer is very understanding. They realise not everyone is internet savvy and connected, so can't do everything online. Need to make sure they always have lines of communication available for those that aren't.”*  
.....

*“I think to get perfection, [Provider] need to get out a bit more from their offices - 'get on the ground'. Because, when it did happen, things happened.”*  
.....

*“I don't want contact via Twitter or an app! [Provider] are increasingly inward looking forgetting they are a provider.”*  
.....

While not many people mentioned digital communications, some were in

favour of them – linking it to services seen regularly elsewhere in the commercial world such as Amazon and Ebay, and potentially using new technologies like vehicle tracking to enhance service delivery.

.....  
*“Updates throughout process, contactable via email and live chat service, named contact, personalised service.”*  
.....

*“Maybe you should send a text message. You know, like dentist or doctors do, everyone has a phone nowadays so why waste a letter.”*  
.....

*“I'm disabled and have trouble holding the phone for a long period, and stuff like that. I sometimes find it takes ages to get through to the telephone service. So, it would be 'great service' if I could press a button and get them to call me back.”*  
.....

*“Having good, open communication and letting people know exactly what is happening. Being able to track the progress of your repairs.”*  
.....

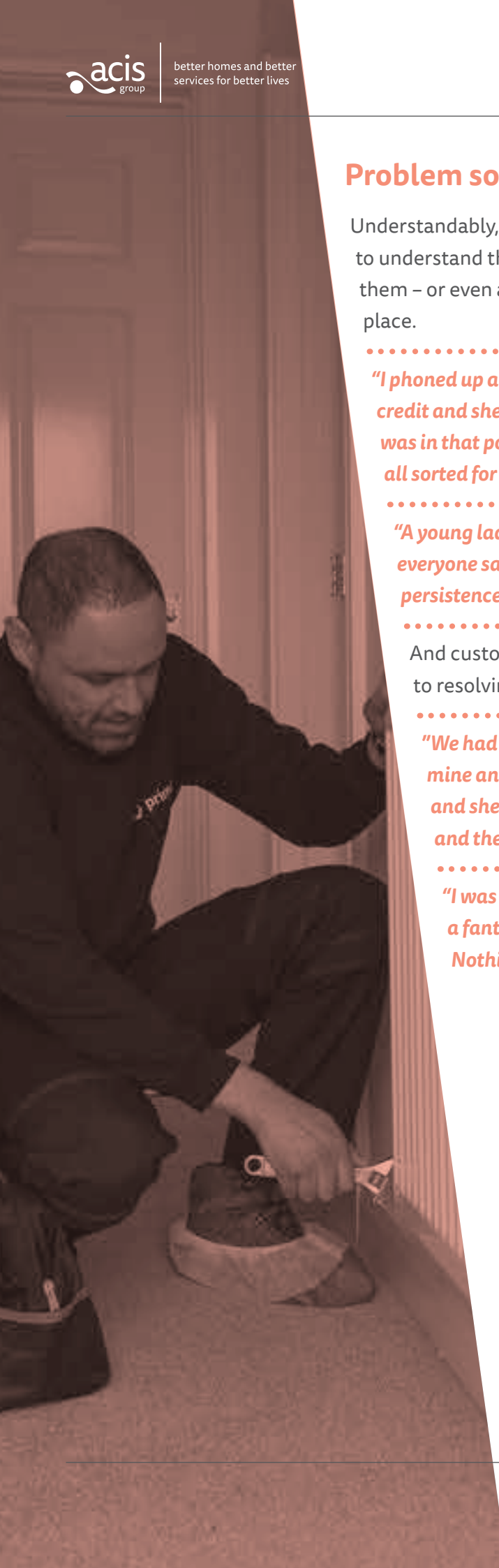
And linking to the main issue of the way we deliver repairs, many customers would like to see more communication around appointment times.

.....  
*“If repairs are going to be done it'd be good if they kept in touch so you'd know when it'd done, where it'd be done, how it'd be done, and when it'd be convenient because if you're not in they just seem to turn up.”*  
.....

*“If you report any repairs the operatives from [Provider] always call and tell you what time they will be coming. I am not left waiting for a long time.”*  
.....

*“Make sure that the workmen are given the right information. They turn up to people's houses and the people are not in as they were told a different time. It's frustrating for the tenants and the workmen.”*





## Problem solving

Understandably, customers want their social housing providers to be able to understand their issues and come up with solutions to help resolve them – or even act proactively to prevent issues from arising in the first place.

.....  
*“I phoned up about a debt that I owed, and I didn't have enough phone credit and she phoned me back and got it sorted. She said if anytime I was in that position again, they'd ring me back straight away and get it all sorted for me again.”*  
.....

*“A young lady made a great deal of effort to resolve something that everyone said was impossible. She saved me stress and money by her persistence to resolve the problem.”*  
.....

And customers would like to see more of a collaborative approach to resolving issues, rather than an 'us and them' scenario.

.....  
*“We had a complaint a while ago about a tree in the vicinity of mine and my neighbour's garden and I spoke to a lady at [Provider] and she said that 'we can get it out of the way as soon as possible' and they did, we was very happy with that.”*  
.....

*“I was housed within six weeks of being made homeless, I had a fantastic [support staff] who supported me and helped me. Nothing was ever a problem.”*



## Keeping promises

Customers have long memories of small details. They want dependability and for providers to keep to their word. If providers don't do as they say they will, this obviously has a knock-on effect, potentially wider than the customer directly affected. It affects the whole brand.

.....

*"I asked for the central heating switch to be moved downstairs for easy access, the gas inspection fitter said he would recommend this, but two years later still not been moved. I have bad knee making stairs hard work."*

.....

*"About five, six or eight years [ago] I had someone come around and inspect bathroom which they did, and nothing happened."*

.....

*"Just to keep their promises. When I ring up with a repair, for them to give me a date - and they consequently do not turn up. And, having to take days off work, and they don't turn up."*

.....

*"There's so many times recently the landlords broken their own rules, they've allowed people to have dogs and things that haven't been cared for and when the housing company asks someone to do something the housing officer should check they've followed through."*

.....

But it's clear that when providers keep to their word, it has a big impact on the way they are seen in local communities.

.....

*"They are always there. As soon as I ring up, they are always there. I don't know how to explain it..."*

.....

*"It doesn't matter what it is they're there for you. For advice or anything."*

## Timeliness

While customers desire services to be speedy, they would also like them to be delivered at convenient times. This will build trust and help manage expectations on both sides. Often, our respondents said they wouldn't mind if the outcome took longer than expected, just as long as they were being communicated with.

.....

*"Being able to book an appointment that is convenient to yourself as well as the workmen and turning up in the time scale given and completing the job ASAP with less mess."*

.....

*"When you report a problem, [Provider] do not say that someone will be there at a certain time if it is not true. They give you a date and if there are any problems then they will contact you to let you know that someone can't make it, it is a good service. If someone is off sick or ill then they will ring you to let you know and say sorry, which is great."*

.....

*"The company made a note of my concerns, gave me a time frame on when I could expect my complaint to be resolved. Called me the next day with an update."*

.....

*"Quick response time even if it's just telling you it won't be a certain time. As long it's happening."*

.....

*"Flexibility in appointments and to work in unison with us, they will plan the appointments around their gaps but it's not convenient for us."*

## Customer service

Most respondents linked customer service to personalisation, wanting their social housing providers to understand their needs as a person rather than focusing on the commodity – the bricks and mortar of their home.

.....  
"I can't explain off hand. It is one of them things that you just know when you are getting a good service."  
.....

.....  
"A consistent point of contact, not an anonymous call centre, and a reliable service provider who treats tenants as people to liaise with and keep informed."  
.....

.....  
"Being treated as a person and not an account or transaction."  
.....

.....  
"For your message to be treated or answered ASAP. It might not seem important to them but could be very important to you. A response would at least let you know that someone is at least taking your concerns seriously."  
.....

.....  
"Great service would be understanding the particular needs of tenants and of the houses they live in."  
.....

As well as being treated well, customers want to deal with the people that can answer a problem or fix an issue, rather than going around the houses speaking to multiple people or waiting for an answer.

*"[Provider] would be providing us with personal contact rather than a 24-hour phone line. [Provider] have a hub in the town centre where you can walk in if you need anything, however I do not find the staff there very helpful. We still aren't speaking to people in authority, it is very difficult to get through to the people in charge, you have to speak to people lower down the hierarchy first. I want to get through to the people who can make a difference for me."*  
.....

.....  
*"It should be more cooperative. It's when you ring up and you go through. If you want any repairs doing, you need to go through to the repairs department and not go to the office. You can't do that at the rent office. When you go down to the office they tell you "Sorry, you have to ring the repairs up!""*  
.....

And it's apparent the previous delivery of service can have an impact on customers' feelings towards raising an issue going forwards, potentially exacerbating and prolonging issues.

.....  
*"If there's any problems they should be dealt with and also to just proactively keep a check and contact people periodically to check everything is okay because people may not want to approach them if they have any problems."*  
.....

.....  
*"Well, I think the main thing is when there is an issue, getting it fixed quickly. So, I'll give you an example: Last year, I had an issue of noise coming from some taps - with getting the Engineers out, with the right equipment and the right taps. I ended up losing three days' holiday, because it wasn't done correctly until the third visit."*

## Respectfulness

The concept of great services doesn't have to be complicated. Customers want to be treated with respect, fairness and understanding, as human beings, and would like providers to appreciate good customers more.

.....

*"A letter to show your looking after your garden or house saying it looks nice. Well done and appreciate it."*

.....

*"Avoidance of master-servant relationship."*

.....

*"The same level of service as I got when he came to fix my taps, as he was brilliant with me and my grandson, was courteous and respectful, and did a perfect repair."*

.....

*"Mutual respect, really. We are good tenants, if we get respected back it makes a hell of a difference."*

.....

*"The majority of tenants are genuine when they complain. We all feel like we should be treated with more respect."*

.....

Expectations are changing and shouldn't be below that of the private sector, or any previous iteration of social housing.

.....

*"Treating everyone with respect carrying out repairs because at the end of the day you are paying staff to do their job. You are paying a joiner to go into a house to do a proper job they should be doing the same quality of work even if it is social housing. The standards shouldn't drop just because its housing association."*

.....

*"A better all-round attitude to residents, there is still an attitude which is a throwback to 'Council Tenant' times some staff still believe they are doing residents a favour!"*

## Getting it right already

While it's clear many customers believe their social housing provider can improve, it's also only fair to highlight the thoughts of those customers who already believe their provider is meeting, and maybe surpassing, their expectations.

.....

*"Landlord provided me with great service as they had got me something, I wanted which was a food parcel and they helped me out with DSS to get a new wash machine."*

.....

*"[Provider] are prompt most of the time with repairs or enquiries. I put in a request for the repairs on my fireplace and the toilet one morning and they were both repaired the next day."*

.....

*"I think they've got it just about right."*

.....

*"I already have great service; I really don't think any improvement can be made. Staff are friendly and helpful as well as prompt when I need a repair etc."*

.....

*"I am already getting good service and feel there is nothing they can improve on."*

.....

*"The current level of service is a good illustration of what great service looks like."*





## Getting the basics right first

And while the questions posed prompted specific responses linked to customers' experiences of services, many respondents were simply glad to be in social housing – perhaps a world apart from where they had expected to be. With the exception of a very small number of comments, expectations of great service could be considered reasonable and measured.

*"It's very simple there's no need for glitz and glamour"*

*"I don't expect a 'great' service, just a service when one is 'needed' Don't think that's too much to ask!"*

*"I'm alright, you've got a roof over your head, what more do you want?"*

*"Gives me a roof over my head."*

*"Safe home to live in."*



Question 3: Word cloud created from responses

## 4. Findings – practitioner perspective

This section looks at the responses gained from the World Café activity undertaken in April 2019, held in association with the Research Users in Social Housing (RUSH) group.

Some 29 experts – people working in research at and alongside 25 social housing providers – attended the event, giving their thoughts on the questions posed to customers. They were not aware of the results or any of the answers given by customers.

Interestingly, many of the responses married up to what customers say however there was a fair amount of contradiction. It's obviously imperative that these perspectives align going forward.

Answering question one, the themes of **timeliness, respectfulness, helpfulness, friendliness** and **communication** were all born out – just like when customers were asked. However, this group also believed in the importance of modern techniques, customer rewards and transparency – themes not overly brought up by customers.

They also overwhelmingly agreed that customers should expect the same level of great service from their social housing provider as they do with private companies. However, they commented that past experiences may mean they do not feel as though they will expect it.

The long-term relationship between providers and customers may make transactions complicated as the balance of power shifts regularly towards providers. That, coupled with the fact that many customers do not have a choice in which organisation provides their home, means customers may feel – rightly or wrongly – they experience a lower level of service.

Delving deeper at what customers should expect a great service from a social housing provider to look like, the experts agreed that **speed and delivering to agreed timescales** was important. However, despite the customers not seemingly wanting services that go 'over and above', experts wanted to see more managing of customer expectations.

**One of the key differences was that experts didn't see repairs as being a driver of great service.**



# 5. Conclusions and recommendations

Social housing customers have sent a very strong message to the organisations that own and manage their homes – they expect the same level of service that they get from other organisations and services outside of the social housing sector, such as private companies and public sector organisations.

They expect the same because they're paying for it, and understandably so. They spend their money on a home, and they expect to see some return from that. The stigmatised perceptions of people getting a home for 'nothing' should be a thing of the past.

The same level doesn't necessarily mean going above and beyond, though. Just what customers sign up to and a service most providers proclaim to be delivering, and to a standard customers expect.

The level of service doesn't seem exceptional, hard to achieve, or complicated. The majority simply want a safe, secure home that is well maintained and a provider there if needs be. If something goes wrong, they expect it to be fixed quickly and at a mutually suitable time. They wanted to be treated with respect, understanding and they want to be able to be more informed throughout.

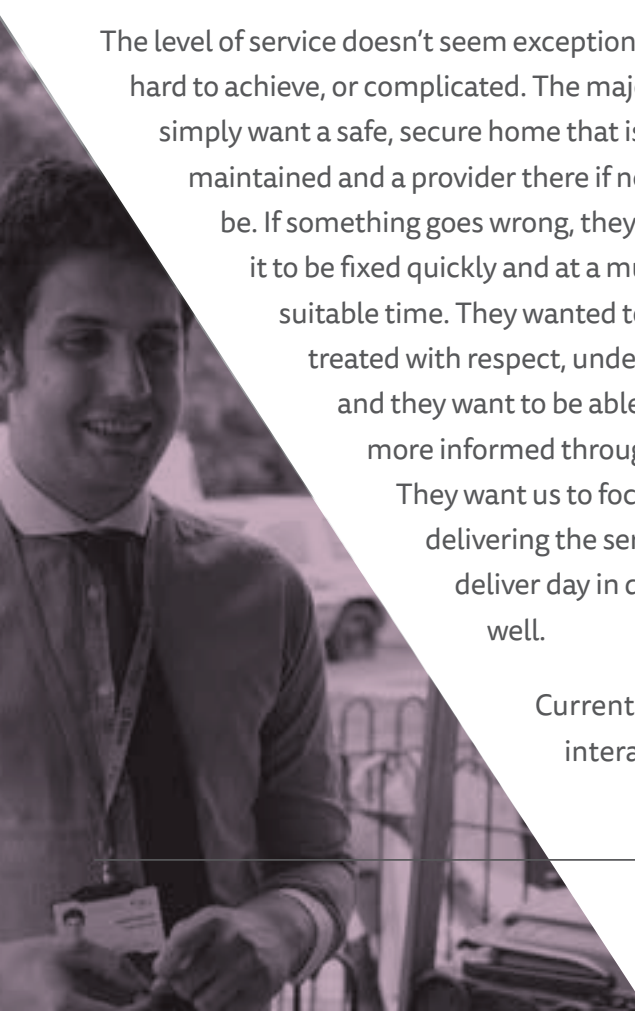
They want us to focus on us delivering the service we deliver day in day out, well.

Currently, most interactions

with customers are around negative situations like repairs and maintenance issues. The balance could, and perhaps should, swing the other way to involve customers in more everyday communications about their home, their local area and praising them for good upkeep of their home. It's very clear that while the push is for providers to be offer more digital-first channels to help customers communicate, many customers still recognise the value of and still want an option for human orientated service delivery. They want simple, face to face communication and for things to be sorted quickly.

People working on the front line in social housing need to feel empowered to make decisions and show our customers that they are the people who can help, who can decide on their tenancy matters and are the people who can help them, not higher management.

Social housing providers need to recognise that they do not operate in a bubble, and a social-housing-only world. They need to remember that from their customers' perspective they are just one of hundreds of organisations their customers come into contact with on a daily basis. In terms of providing a great service, this is what customers





formulate their expectations upon and the reality of the service context in which social housing providers deliver their service. While many great aspects of service are being delivered, this research suggests we are not fully aligned to customer perspectives but offers ways in which we can do better. It also suggests that as a sector we want to manage the expectations of customers rather than meeting them, which although could be the same thing, could have a huge impact if we don't set the expected standard right in the first place.

It is worth noting too that expectations will continue to change. Changing expectations increases the likelihood of complaints and the need for resources to deal with complaints. This is not a barrier to meeting expectations, but something for providers to continue to strive to meet.

Most providers are working within strict budgetary controls and would argue they are doing the best they can already. Money could be spent on delivering a better service, one that meets changing expectations, or spent on dealing with dissatisfied customers.

Going further, is it in social housing providers' framework to offer an enhanced service to customers willing to pay more? Could a tiered approach to service work? This would inevitably provoke anger from customers on the lowest tier, simply not getting a service that perhaps their neighbour gets because they can't afford it.

One area this research didn't pick up was the issue of outsourcing. With many providers delivering services through contractors, how far do they go in attempting to ensure they act in the same way the customers would like them to. Or they could already be delivering to a better service than the providers, perhaps.

## Recommendations

While this report was intended to generate recommendations for Acis to move forward in their ambitions to deliver the best service possible to their customers, all findings within this report are applicable to every provider across the sector.

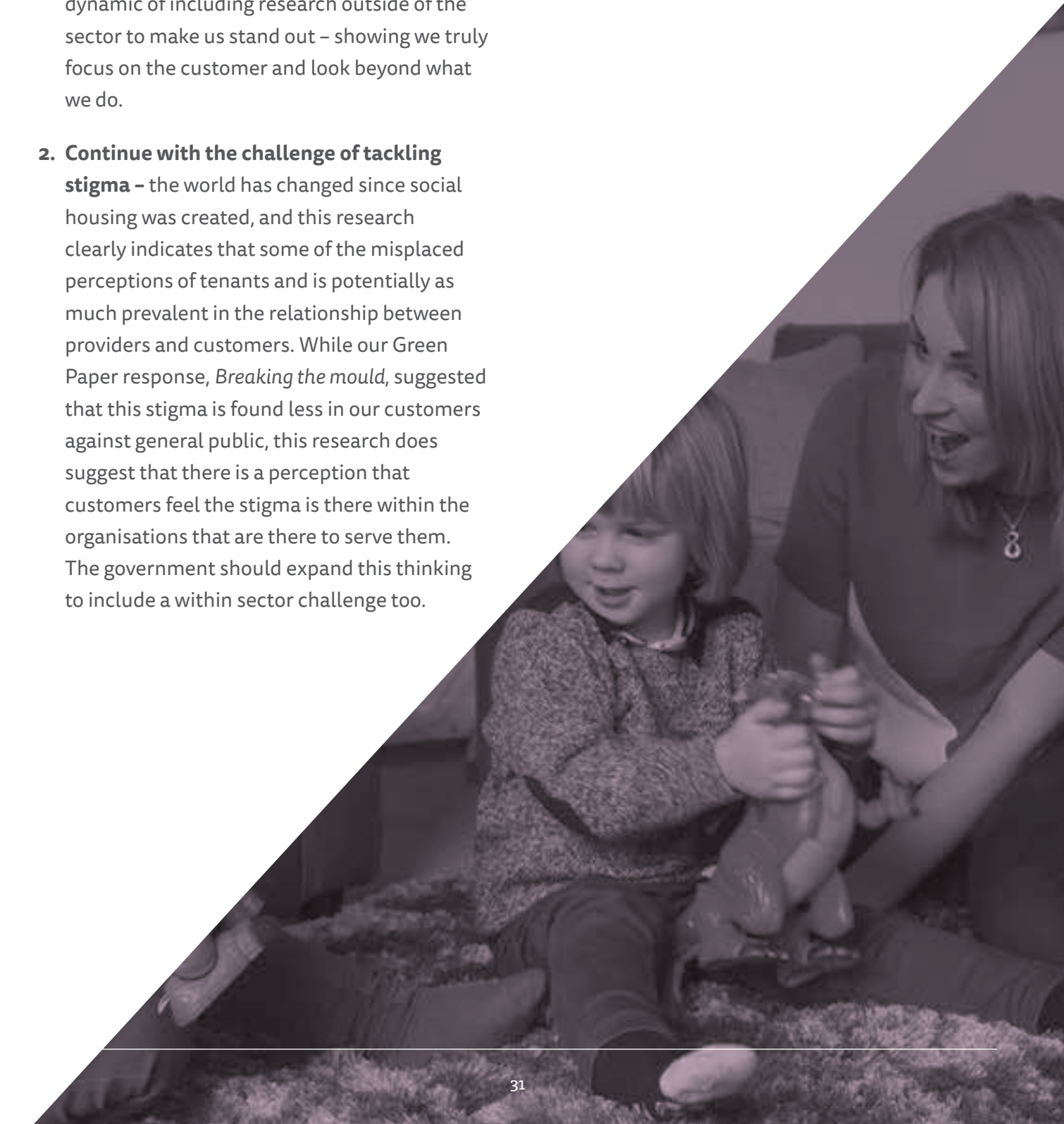
**Acis, and other providers across the sector, particularly those who participated in this research, should:**

- 1. Challenge the stigma surrounding social housing internally** – through promoting the two-way relationship we should develop with our customers, we will breakdown some traditional perceptions of expectations and standards, leading to a better service being delivered and improved satisfaction overall.
- 2. Promote examples of good service practice** – wherever possible to help others learn and for the sector to grow together. We are a sector which works together, and this topic is one which we can all learn from each other and improve because of it.

3. **Learn from outside the sector** – particularly in relation to service style and use of technology. While the sector still has a drive for improving service through digital means and creating consistency and efficiency through it, this should not be at the expense of the human interaction. This is what makes us the sector we are, and we can learn from other organisations who manage this balance well. By looking at solutions in other sectors, such as Uber and DPD for ongoing updates and reassurance messages, we should develop technological solutions to fit this, not just what would make our lives easier.
4. **Ensure all our people are equipped to deliver this great service experience** – it’s essential that all people working in social housing understand the importance of the experience our customers have with us, the part they have to play and the integrity and respect this needs to show. We need to ensure skills are developed and expertise introduced to focus on this like they would within the corporate world to deliver what customers need in the way they want it delivered. We should expand this to include organisations that customers may perceive as us as they are delivering on our behalf, for example grounds maintenance contractors.
5. **Focus on the way in which we communicate whilst delivering services and increase the frequency** - ongoing communication about customer queries (including repairs) will deliver a more informed and inclusive experience, showing that we listen and keep promises. Instead of focusing on just delivering the service to the customer, we should focus more on how this is delivered to the customer and how we ensure customers are kept informed all the way through.
6. **Co-create services with customers** – continue to increase the level of involvement customers have with organisations, including a focus on getting their views on designing and improving processes. We should ensure this is embedded across the organisation and is a mandatory part of all new or changed processes that deliver something to our customers.
7. **Review the approach to benchmarking** – while the current Housemark approach to satisfaction gives us a sound view of our service performance against the sector, if not already done, providers should explore whether this is fit for purpose and looks through the right lens for the customer. Looking outside of the sector will offer a different dynamic and insight. We should look at increasing the indicators we use to include more person-centred customer perspectives around how they felt interacting

## We recommend that the government should consider:

- 1. Increasing the importance of co-creation and customer involvement in service design and improvement** – while this should not be prescribed, it should be something that is reported on regularly across the sector to bring us in line with other sectors, and add the dynamic of including research outside of the sector to make us stand out – showing we truly focus on the customer and look beyond what we do.
- 2. Continue with the challenge of tackling stigma** – the world has changed since social housing was created, and this research clearly indicates that some of the misplaced perceptions of tenants and is potentially as much prevalent in the relationship between providers and customers. While our Green Paper response, *Breaking the mould*, suggested that this stigma is found less in our customers against general public, this research does suggest that there is a perception that customers feel the stigma is there within the organisations that are there to serve them. The government should expand this thinking to include a within sector challenge too.







**For more information, or to discuss how  
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