Home Encounters – Understanding and Improving the Emotional Impact of Home Visits

"These are not assets, these are peoples' homes and people need to feel safe in their own homes… Homes need to be built with people in mind, they are places where people live and raise their families, they are not assets to sweat and make money."

Angela Rayner Deputy PM interviewed on Sky News about the Dagenham fire, 27 August 2024.

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Introduction

The *Home Encounters* report sheds light on the often-overlooked emotional dimensions of social housing, uncovering the complex dynamics between tenants, landlords, and the concept of home. This report is particularly relevant for policymakers, practitioners, and tenants who understand that the quality of tenant-landlord relationships is vital for satisfaction and success within the social housing sector.

In recent years, social housing has become increasingly market-driven, reducing tenants' experiences to mere metrics and treating properties as assets to be sweated rather than as homes where people can thrive. This approach oversimplifies complex issues, leading to technical solutions that fail to address the nuanced challenges faced by tenants and landlords. This report advocates for a reframing of our understanding of the home, calling for policies and practices that prioritise people and relationships over profit.

One of the most concerning findings of this study is the diverse range of experiences where tenants felt small and judged during home visits. Such encounters can deeply impact tenants' relationships with their homes, their sense of self, and their interactions with landlords. The report reveals the tensions that home visitors navigate and underscores the importance of relational skills, such as empathy and respect, in fostering positive interactions. These insights are particularly timely as the sector moves towards new accreditation and professional standards, and as regulations increasingly focus on complaints handling and performance benchmarking.

What makes this report especially compelling is its deep connection to tenants' experiences. Over two years, I collaborated with tenants through the Feeling-at-Home research project, where tenant-researchers played a central role in shaping the study, co-creating research questions, and developing interview schedules. The tenant-researchers reviewed the findings, highlighting those that resonated with their experiences and drawing out recommendations.

By examining the emotional interactions between tenants and landlord representatives, this report offers fresh insights to inform housing practice, policy, and regulation. Our goal is not merely to identify problems, but to work collectively towards a social housing sector that embodies empathy, respect, and professionalism—a sector in which all stakeholders can take pride.

Dr Hannah Absalom

Key Findings

The *Home Encounters* report underscores the profound emotional impact that home visits can have on tenants, revealing that many experience feelings of being small, judged, and belittled during these interactions. These emotional responses, often invisible to housing organisations and home visitors, can significantly affect tenants' relationships with their selves, homes and landlords. The report brings these subtle yet powerful effects to light, challenging the sector to acknowledge and address the emotional dimensions of home visits.

The report also explores the complex dynamics of help within tenant-landlord relationships. These dynamics are shaped by personal histories, societal expectations, and financial constraints, making them far from straightforward. The findings suggest that fostering positive relationships requires a shift towards empathy and judgment-free engagement from practitioners and investing in supportive neighbourhoods which allow informal relationships with neighbours to grow.

When tenants take the initiative to invest in home improvements without prior permission from their landlords, they often face punitive responses, even when their actions are motivated by a desire to create a safer and more nurturing home environment. This situation highlights a critical need for a more collaborative approach between tenants and landlords when it comes to home investment and rule enforcement. By working together, landlords and tenants can ensure that home improvements enhance rather than strain their relationship.

Historical experiences with landlords play a crucial role in shaping tenants' feelings about home visits, often leading to anxiety and mistrust. These past interactions deeply influence whether tenants feel comfortable allowing access to their homes. Trust emerges as a pivotal factor, not just in facilitating access but in determining the overall success of the tenant-landlord relationship.

The report further acknowledges the importance of the relational skills that home visitors bring to their work. Managing difficult conversations and balancing organisational expectations with the realities of tenants' lives require a level of emotional intelligence and empathy that is often undervalued. Yet, these skills are essential for fostering positive interactions and ensuring that home visits are supportive rather than adversarial.

However, the report also raises concerns about the impact of regulatory pressures on the tenant-landlord relationship. An overemphasis on policy compliance and performance benchmarking can overshadow the emotional aspects of home visits, leading to a disconnect between landlords and tenants. To bridge this gap, the report advocates for the incorporation

of emotionally informed training and practices within the sector, ensuring that the human side of housing is not lost amidst the drive for public accountability and compliance.

In addition, the report calls for greater involvement of tenants in decision-making processes, particularly regarding home improvements and the emerging Net Zero agenda. It argues that tenants should be involved from the planning stage, with careful consideration given to the ethical and legal implications of any new initiatives. This participatory approach would not only empower tenants but also lead to more effective and acceptable outcomes.

Finally, the report warns against the dangers of ‘mission creep’ in social housing services, where well-intended initiatives, such as mental health support, might inadvertently undermine tenants' right to the quiet enjoyment of their homes. The report suggests that a focus on domain-specific activities, where landlords and service providers stay within their areas of expertise, could prevent such unintended consequences and better serve tenants’ needs.

These key findings collectively highlight the need for a more empathetic, collaborative, and tenant-centred approach in the social housing sector, ensuring that homes are places of safety, dignity, and support.

Report Structure

This report is structured into four main sections, each designed to guide readers through the findings and their implications. The first section presents key recommendations that have emerged from the research. These are intended to spark discussions among regulators, tenants, and landlords, encouraging a collaborative approach to improving social housing.

The second section details the research that underpins the report. This research was co-designed with tenants and involved an observational case study conducted with a social landlord. We extend our thanks to this organisation for hosting the research visit and commend their courage in inviting external scrutiny to help them learn and grow.

The third section presents the findings, beginning with the emotional aspects of home visits, including the complex dynamics of help and the under-explored issue of tenant-led home improvements. The remaining findings are structured chronologically, following the journey before, during, and after the home visit.

In the fourth section, we propose new directions for research and regulation, aiming to inspire continued progress in the sector. Following a brief acknowledgments section, the report

concludes with an appendix that addresses four key legal questions tenants had regarding home visits.

We hope this report serves as an engaging and valuable resource in your efforts to make social housing a desirable and respected tenure—one that provides a crucial foundation for human flourishing.

Recommendations

Enhancing communication and transparency

1. Advance information sharing: Consider providing more information about the visiting staff and the purpose of the visit to tenants beforehand. This could be facilitated through online portals or other means for those without access to digital technology.

2. Clear and meaningful visits: Ensuring that the purpose of visits is clear and meaningful for both parties might help avoid home encounters that can feel like fault-finding exercises from the tenant's perspective.

3. Access and privacy considerations: Landlords might want to advise tenants in advance about which areas of their home will need to be accessed during a visit. Where possible, offering alternative arrangements for inspecting more private spaces, such as bedrooms, could be beneficial.

Training and professional development

4. Emotionally informed practices: It may be beneficial to include training on socially and emotionally informed practices in new sector accreditations and in professional development programmes.

Promoting empathy and respect in practice

5. Value-based approach: A value-based approach that emphasises empathy and respect could be more effective in social housing practice. Collaborative efforts with tenants to identify and address priority issues might be more fruitful than gathering extensive data that frames tenants as customers and/or vulnerable recipients of services.

6. Addressing tenant concerns: The findings of this study suggest that the experience of feeling small and judged during home visits is widespread among tenants. Further research

may be needed to understand the structural causes of these experiences and to identify actionable steps within landlords' control.

Involving tenants in decision-making

7. Tenant-led home improvements: An amnesty on tenant-led home improvements, along with guidance co-developed with tenants and regulatory bodies, could be explored as a way to support, not punish, tenants who make improvements to their homes.

8. Net Zero agenda: As the Net Zero agenda progresses, it might be valuable to ensure that tenants are actively involved in the planning and execution of related home improvements. Research in this area should involve tenants from the outset, with careful consideration given to the ethical and legal implications that new technologies may introduce.

Safeguarding tenant rights and wellbeing

9. Mindful of mission creep: Social landlords and sector regulators might want to remain mindful of 'mission creep,' where well-intended services, such as mental health support, could inadvertently undermine tenants' right to quiet enjoyment of their home. Focusing on housing domain-specific activities that add value may be more effective.

10. Regulatory pressures and emotional impact: It could be worthwhile for sector regulators and landlords to engage with tenants to discuss how the pressures of regulatory compliance in complaints management and benchmarking might obscure the emotional aspects of complaining and the relational dimensions of home visits.

Research Underpinning This Report

This report is the culmination of over two years of action research conducted in collaboration with tenants. The research project, named 'Feeling-at-Home,' centres on tenants' experiences of their homes and landlord services. During a workshop requested by the tenant-researchers, we explored together the factors that made them feel angry and fearful about their homes and the services they received (see the resource for co-creating domestic plans here and recommendations for the sector here) and 'Home Encounters'—interactions between tenants and landlord representatives during home visits.

The research is informed by the principles and practices of action research. This mode of researching seeks to advance co-produced knowledge that aims to bring about change and social justice. Participating tenants have been trained in a variety of research skills and are referred to as 'tenant-researchers' throughout this report. The tenant-researchers were

involved in determining the research questions and interview schedules. While case study data was collected independently by the report author, tenant-researchers contributed to interpreting the findings through two workshop sessions. This process helped to identify shared experiences from the case study that resonated with tenants, strengthening the interpretation and resulting recommendations. Together, we recommend that the report is used to trigger conversation and reflection and to inform future emotionally informed research into the home.

Most of the research underpinning this report is based on a case study with a regional social landlord and their approach to tenancy audit home visits. *The Better Social Housing Review* (2022) recommended property focused audits; however, the observed landlord interpreted this more broadly, conducting home audits that encompassed not just the property but also the tenancy, place, and people. The author spent a week with this landlord, observing two home visits, one attempted visit, and the behind-the-scenes administration. Three 'home visitors'—staff involved in general housing and tenancy administration—were interviewed, along with six tenants, two of whom were present during the observed visits. The interviewed tenants were recruited through the tenant participation programme, with three residing in +55 accommodation schemes, though not classified as 'supported' tenants. Interviewees' attitudes towards their landlord varied widely, ranging from satisfied to deeply unsatisfied, a range of attitudes also reflected in the tenant-researchers.

Researching Home Encounters engages with academic literature on relational dynamics, not only between people but also between human and non-human entities, such as the home. These dynamics are shaped by various processes operating at different scales and dimensions, including historical experiences, institutional practices like repairs and maintenance services, and broader cultural and socio-economic factors, such as the stigmatisation of non-home ownership tenures. By studying these small, interactive moments, this report brings to life the complex dynamics at play and helps identify opportunities for changes in social housing policy, practice, and our understanding of the purpose and value of a home.

In this report, 'home' is not understood as just a physical property, but as a relational entity, shaped by the interplay of material, human, temporal, and social factors. This relational understanding of home is widespread in geographical studies of the home, and this report seeks to bridge the gap between academic research and practice, by evidencing the utility of this perspective in rethinking social housing policy and practice. Home is experienced through the condition of the living space, financial resources, psychological wellbeing, relationships, past experiences, and cultural perceptions of tenure. These elements collectively influence

the diverse meanings and experiences of home. As this report focusses on the interactions of home visits, the material condition of the home is less present. Ramboll's Happy Home report focuses on this aspect – one that matters a great deal for people living with disabilities that can be alleviated through thoughtful home design.

This report focuses exclusively on tenants in English social housing, excluding those in fully supported accommodation, care homes, or the private rented sector due to different legislative contexts.

The Findings

This project is grounded in a relational understanding of the home, so the findings related to the emotional aspects of home encounters are summarised first, focusing on the dynamics of help and tenant-led improvements to the home. The remaining findings are presented chronologically, guiding the reader through the home visit process. Both perspectives—the tenant's and the home visitor's—are explored with particular attention to the emotional dimensions of these encounters. The report concludes with a summary of future directions for research and regulation and includes an appendix on rights and responsibilities regarding home access, as this was a key concern for both the interviewed tenants and the tenant-researchers.

Emotional Aspects of Home Encounters

Two themes emerged in both tenant and home visitor interviews that may explain difficulties in gaining access to a tenant's home for a home visit; namely the complexity of the help dynamic and having to account for, and possibly rip out, non-approved improvements to the home undertaken by the tenant, without the permission of the landlord.

Finding one: The complexity of help asks for co-creation and empathy

The dynamic between those offering help and those receiving it in social housing is complex and cannot be easily divided into simple categories. This relationship is influenced by personal histories, such as the death of intimate partners or pre-existing diagnoses of non-neurotypicality, as well as societal expectations, like gender roles. For example, in the interviews and observations, some men reported feeling inadequate if they cannot perform basic household repairs, while some women found it challenging to transition away from traditional caring roles towards more independent phases of their lives. Additionally, financial constraints often lead to a mindset of 'making do', further complicating the acceptance of help.

The interaction between tenants and different individuals also impacts this dynamic. In one instance, a tenant only acknowledged her need for help after a conversation with her neighbour, despite previously dismissing offers from a staff member whose role is to help:

> **TENANT TWO**: "My [landlord] said, 'You've nothing to worry about. If you've any problems, we're here to help you.' But, I'm one of these, I never asked anybody to help. I got on with it. It's something I've always done, all my life. But, they had that independent [Living Co-ordinator]… she always said to me, 'Tenant Two, I don't come and visit you, but if you need me, just ask.' You know what I mean? 'Don't sit there, worrying about anything. We can help.' And I went, 'No, you're all right.' But then, this last 12 months, I've been really poorly. I've lost a lot of weight, and [my neighbour], I don't know if you met her yesterday, was just coming out my flat, she comes down every day, to make sure I'm all right. And she said to me, '[Tenant Two], you need some help. You're struggling,' and I went, 'No, I'm not.' She said, 'Yes, you are.'"

This finding suggests that 'help' is an emotionally complex topic in social housing that requires further research. There is a need to explore what empathetic and judgment-free engagement might look like, and to consider the role of empathetic listening in co-creating positive helping services and environments with tenants. Help can sometimes feel like an attempt to control and exert power over tenants, so landlords must be mindful of this, especially when interventions are driven by task-oriented processes or social return on investment frameworks. Additionally, navigating increasingly complex help systems has become a source of stress and shame for tenants. It may be temping for social landlords to try to fill these gaps in services. However, caution is advised, as services such as probation, social work and mental health are specialist areas with a high degree of expertise (see the appendix for a tenant-researchers experience of a well-intentioned wellbeing service unintentionally causing distress and a possible breach of the right to quiet enjoyment of the home).

The housing sector's true value lies in collaborating with tenants to create homes and environments where they can flourish. The 'During the Visit' section of this report highlights excellent relational practices by home visitors, showcasing raw talent that could be further developed to inform accreditation and professional standards in the sector. However, addressing gaps in dysfunctional state services can distract from the primary focus on the home and the development of relational practices. Additionally, fostering neighbourliness and genuine care for each other's wellbeing is something we can all strive for, and landlords, in partnership with tenants, can make significant contributions in this area.

Tenant-researchers pointed out that viewing tenants as customers brings into the sector ideas and practices that are poorly suited, prioritising data collection and control over fostering authentic connections that allow help and support to naturally emerge. Additionally, the tendency to label tenants as 'vulnerable,' while well-intentioned, can hinder the development of helpful relationships and environments. Social housing serves an incredibly diverse population, and instead of fragmenting and trying to understand this diversity in isolation, a more effective approach might be to identify common experiences across different groups and develop better services based on this shared knowledge.

Tenant-researchers underlined the importance of fundamental values, such as empathy and respect, in preference to gathering data about tenants as customers, or tenants as vulnerable service recipients. Treating tenants as data points induced feelings of being experimental subjects, and introduced concerns about how sensitive data was handled 'in the back office' of the housing organisation. There is a preference for understanding problems that impact negatively on tenants' experiences of their homes and landlord services, and working co-productively to understand and then collaborate to produce homes and services that enable people to flourish.

Finding two: The complexity of home investment and property-based rule enforcement asks for a new relationship

Home visitor three recounted a visit where the tenant had significantly invested in improving the property. The tenant, who was caring for children who had experienced trauma, had made these investments as an expression of care with the intention of creating a safe and loving family home. However, as the extract below illustrates, the concept of safety held a different meaning for the landlord. The tenant's failure to seek permission for the improvements resulted in what appeared to be a punitive response from the landlord's repairs and maintenance team, contrasting sharply with the lack of attention given to a different tenant who, despite neglecting the property and hosting property damaging parties, faced no such scrutiny:

> **HOME VISITOR THREE:** "The week before, I did an audit, went in the house, I was like, oh my god, this is not one of our houses. It was absolutely amazing. She'd done all sorts to it. There was a conservatory, there was new heating, you name it, she had done it, it was beautiful. I was like, she has broken every rule that anybody could break, I'm like, … she's going to get in so much trouble for this because she did not get permission for anything. Now, when I went, she burst into tears as soon as I walked in. She said, 'I've been dreading this for years.' I said, 'Why?' She said, 'Because I

know how much trouble I'm going to get in for doing this.' I reassured her that she'd done a fabulous job on the property, but she had broken some rules… for obvious reasons, for health and safety etc. And I would have to take it back and report it, but not to worry because we would end up doing the right thing by her. But there may be some things that she had to change. I'd reported the issues that were there and a couple of people straight away, their backs got up about, well, what changes has she made? 'You're not allowed to do that, you're not allowed to do that,' and before I knew it, I think there was about 10 different people, managers involved in this, this. Whereas Tenant Y, who didn't give a shit about his property, nobody's involved."

Tenant four (see finding eight in the during the visit section) also described feeling belittled by a property inspector after spending money on home improvements. In both cases, the concept of safety is applied differently: tenants seeking to create a safe and loving home are seen as rule-breakers, while landlords leverage safety as a pretext for a controlling and possibly punitive intervention. This may reflect paternalistic tendencies within the social housing sector, where tenants are often viewed as passive, yet difficult, recipients of services. When tenants assert agency over their homes through material investments, it may be seen not just as breaking rules, but as challenging the traditional tenant/landlord relationship, where landlords hold sole authority over property maintenance.

Repairs are the leading issue in Housing Ombudsman cases (2022). Tenants often face the choice between navigating a rigid, rule-bound repairs system that frequently results in irrational and upsetting outcomes or taking matters into their own hands. Under these circumstances, it's understandable why tenants might choose to exert control over their home environments.

At the case study site, tenant four noted, "I think the worst thing I've ever been told is, 'it's not a replacement service, it's a repair service.'" This sentiment was echoed by home visitors and the majority of tenant-researchers, who described experiences of being told to make do with mismatched items and poor-quality repairs. There was a shared sense that landlords prioritised the cheapest, short-term solutions, even if these resulted in future costs and immediate distress for tenants, undermining their ability to take pride in their home. This may be due to a restrictive 'spreadsheet thinking' form of managerialism, focused on short-term savings over long-term investment in quality homes.

Before the Visit

The pre-visit phase revealed a complex landscape shaped by tenants' past experiences and the home visitors' administrative challenges. Historical interactions with landlords and related

services deeply influenced tenants' feelings about impending visits, creating a mix of trust, anxiety, and power dynamics. Responses to the visit varied, with some tenants welcoming it, while others felt apprehensive. From the home visitors' perspective, each visit required significant time and effort to plan.

Finding three: Historical experiences influence the home visit

Tenant one, who had a history of undiagnosed neurodiversity and negative experiences with previous social landlords, described a lingering incident that still affected his perception of housing authorities:

> **TENANT ONE:** “The bloke in the housing office, he was perfectly fine but another employee, “Mr [TENANT ONE], can I have a word, if this rent isn’t paid up within a few weeks we’ll send the big boys in with a warrant.”
>
> **INTERVIEWER:** “He was jabbing his finger at you?”
>
> **TENANT ONE:** Yes.”

For tenants facing ongoing financial hardship, negative interactions with authorities often leave a lasting emotional impact. When such histories intersect with vulnerabilities (in the broadest meaning of the term), the anticipation of a home visit can cause significant anxiety.

Finding four: The role of trust, anxiety and information in the home visit experience

Tenant one further illustrated the critical role of trust in deciding whether to allow access to his home. Trust can sometimes outweigh the importance of information about the visit's purpose. Across interviews, a lack of clarity about the visit’s purpose emerged, despite overall satisfaction with the contact mediums, such as phone calls, letters and text messages used to arrange the visit. Trust often determined access, even when the visit triggered anxiety:

> **TENANT ONE**: “If you just turned up and I did ignore you, I’d be really panicking there but because I had someone I both know and trust with [home visitor], she introduced you to my door and because I have [home visitor] there, that told me I could trust you as well… because I never read the email properly.”

This case highlights the importance of trust in managing the anxiety of home visits. Landlords should reflect on the roles of trust and anxiety in the home visit process and consider tenant preferences for both the medium of contact and the relationship with the staff member arranging the visit and attending the home.

The tenant-researchers emphasised the anxiety that can arise from not knowing who is visiting, highlighting the anxiety induced in a situation where it 'could be anybody coming in' to their home. Another issue identified was that visitors sometimes had incorrect information (repairs where highlighted as a key problem area for poor information), leading to wasted time for both the tenant and the visitor. A key recommendation is to explore ways to provide more information about the visiting staff and the details of the visit to the tenant prior to the visit. This information could be shared through online portals or other means for those without access to digital technology. Doing so may help increase trust, reduce anxiety, and decrease the number of failed visits.

Finding five: The visit can undermine the tenant's relationship with their home

Tenant five, who moved from the private rented sector after personal life changes, expressed a tension between accepting the visit and feeling that it undermined her sense of home:

> **TENANT FIVE:** "I just feel like it's not my home and I have to let someone in. And I don't like that, because I'm very independent… and I think some of the other people, like my neighbour who I talk to a lot, she enjoys them coming. She likes to be involved and I don't. I just like to close my door and be private."

This insight is crucial for landlords to consider, as home visits can potentially disrupt tenants' relationship with their home. A disrupted relationship with the home may have a negative impact on the relationships with tenants and landlords, and also for the tenants relationship with themselves. The risk of a disrupted relationship is a key reason to ensure home visits have a clear purpose and do not feel like an imposition that is difficult to refuse.

Tenant-researchers reflected on how years of housing insecurity may be producing a generational difference in tenants' relationships with their home. They noted that younger generations might be less invested in developing a secure attachment to their homes, and reflected on if this might contribute to future housing management challenges, such as increased turn over and less emotional and material investment in home-making.

Finding six: Arranging visits is time-consuming, and the purpose too broad

For home visitors, planning visits was an extensive administrative task, often involving multiple contacts across various mediums, with tenants often agreeing to the visit, only not to be home when called upon (as witnessed in observation three). The visits lacked a clear focus and while initially intended to address property, grew to include tenure, place and people. In this case, the home visitor softened the landlord-determined priorities by framing the visit as a relational, 'getting to know you' encounter:

> **HOME VISITOR TWO:** “I’m still quite new within [case study landlord] and a lot of it for me is trying to introduce myself to customers when I’m out there. So, I like to make it quite informal, and I tend to, when I ring them and book them in, I tend to explain that, that we’ve not met and so it’s just a first opportunity. But also, looking at the property condition, the make-up of the family, do they still fit that housing criteria? Do I need to look at transfers? And then it’s just an informal chat then about the neighbourhood. Are they still happy there?”

While a multi-purpose ‘check box’ approach to a home visit is understandable from an administrative perspective, it dilutes the visit's purpose. Landlords might consider offering tenants different types of visits or clearly defining the visit’s purpose, such as focusing solely on property audits or gathering specific information for planned works and related knowledge and information management. Furthermore, consulting with tenants on home visits may help to develop processes that reduce anxiety and ensure that tenants’ relationship with their home is understood and respected.

The tenant-researchers stressed the need for emotionally informed training in order to develop the skills to work with an understanding of home as a relational entity. Tenant-researchers drew particular attention to the role of empathy, which is both as a natural trait and a teachable skill. The broader field of social and emotional learning is a likely good source to inform the development of professional standards and accreditation in housing practice. Tenant-researchers emphasised that this type of learning needs to cut across organisational levels, as this may foster the emergence of respectful and empathetic cultures that understand the emotional significance of the home to tenants, and the value in working collaboratively on creating both the home and landlord services.

In the case study, home visits often reflected landlord interests in property condition, rent collection, and behaviour. The purpose of visits should be clear and meaningful for both parties, avoiding overly broad objectives that can feel like a fault-finding mission. One tenant-researcher recounted a home visit that resulted in unwanted photographs being taken of his property under a misguided attempt to intervene in what the visitor judged to be hoarding, which for the tenant, was a personal and emotionally laden gradual adaptation to a much smaller home. This triggered a migraine post the visit, and resistance to allowing access for future visits.

In addition, tenant-researchers suggested making information about tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities and what to expect during home visits easily accessible in multiple formats. This could help visits feel less intrusive and foster more of a collaborative approach.

Tenant-researchers also recommended providing information about available services that could benefit tenants, such as the hassle-free provision of white goods. Making tenants aware of such services, and of landlord/tenant rights and responsibilities could make the visit a more positive experience.

During the Visit

The home visit experience was complex for both tenants and home visitors. Emotional 'hot spots' within the home, such as bedrooms, were challenging spaces, with living rooms generally perceived as neutral. Tenants expressed concerns about feeling judged, which, when combined with ongoing frustrations with landlords, could negatively impact their psychological wellbeing. Home visitors were aware of the delicate balance between building trust and managing difficult conversations, employing various soft skills to navigate these situations.

Finding seven: Emotional hot spots in the home can generate mutual discomfort

Tenant one described discomfort with having female home visitors in his bedroom, despite having a good relationship with them:

> **TENANT ONE:** "I've always had that thing, about having ladies in my bedroom, when you looked at my bedroom… I just felt a tiny touch uncomfortable even though I knew [home visitor] well enough, it was just the thought of having a lady in my bedroom… I know you and you've come up to my flat to do an audit yesterday and you said to me, '[TENANT ONE], can I look around your flat?' I'll say, 'Yeah, go ahead,' but with the bedroom thing, it's another one of those things… Very fortunately enough, I seem to get on better with ladies than blokes."

Similarly, home visitors expressed discomfort, particularly in situations like entering a bedroom where a tenant was sleeping due to night shifts. The analysis suggests that consent for a home visit is often ambiguous, with living rooms causing little tension but private spaces like bedrooms being points of awkwardness. For tenants with a strong sense of privacy, the entire visit might feel as invasive as a bedroom inspection, potentially undermining their sense of ownership over their home. Landlords may want to consider advising tenants of where access is needed and ensuring alternative arrangements for inspecting home hotspots are in place wherever possible.

The tenant-researchers highlighted several incidents where repair operatives were 'treating the home like a workplace.' Examples included entering private rooms and using tenants' items without permission, sometimes causing damage. While the case study research did not

specifically focus on repair operatives, the prevalence of these issues among tenant-researchers, combined with the poor attitudes discussed in Finding Eight and the fact that repairs are the most common source of complaints to the Housing Ombudsman, suggests that these experiences may be more widespread and warrant further investigation

Finding eight: Tenants feel small and judged

Tenant four, who had spent considerable money on home improvements despite ongoing issues with damp, highlighted feelings of being judged by inspectors:

> **TENANT FOUR:** "Because you're in a [case study landlord] house and [they think] they're better than you and you're expecting too much. It does feel like that, especially with the inspectors and stuff. I do feel like I'm smaller than them… it's quite intimidating when you're trying to explain how you feel about something. And they just go, 'No, no, no.' It does feel like they're crawling under your skin because you know it's someone higher up. You just think, 'Oh god, he's going to say 'no' anyway. I should appreciate that I've got this house,' because, you know, we are quite lucky to get these houses and I do appreciate that, but it is also stressful when you're trying to explain to someone how uncomfortable it makes you feel with a house being in a shit state."

This experience highlights the tension between the landlord's focus on cost-effective repairs and the tenant's need for a comfortable home. Tenants often feel small and judged during these interactions, particularly when their concerns are dismissed or inadequately addressed. Failure to resolve root issues like damp causes significant emotional distress and undermines the landlord's social purpose of providing safe, decent housing. It may also push the cost of home-making onto tenants, leading to risks like debt and non-payment of rent, and damaging their relationship with their home and with their selves.

Feeling belittled emerged as a significant issue, with tenant-researchers recounting various poor experiences across service areas. Reports from workshops revealed instances of sex-based discrimination, with women experiencing gendered interactions, such as dismissive remarks or expectations of providing refreshments—expectations not placed on male tenant-researchers. One tenant-researcher shared a disturbing experience where a repair operative offered to exchange sexual favours for additional work, leaving her feeling violated in her own home.

The tenant-researchers also noted that the skills shortage in trades and related industries limits landlords' hiring options and may contribute to conditions that result in the stigmatisation of social housing tenants. One male tenant-researcher described an interaction where a repair

operative assumed he was unemployed, prompting him to produce pay slips to prove otherwise. These attitudes are difficult to address amid the ongoing housing crisis, and in addition to tackling the skills shortage, tenant-researchers support calls for more universal provision of below-market, social rent homes to combat the problem of tenure envy and belittling interactions.

At the time of writing, the Housing Ombudsman is consulting on Repairs and Maintenance services. This consultation is welcomed, and a detailed response can be found here in a blog piece published on the University of Birmingham website.

Finding nine: Relational practices help navigate tricky conversations

Home visitors described the challenge of balancing personal standards with tenant realities, often suspending judgment while noting potential signs of declining housekeeping as indicators of broader issues:

> **HOME VISITOR ONE:** "When you go round the windows and they're quite dusty or there's an odd cobweb. I'm dying to go, 'Oh gosh, if only I could just... But I look at the rest of it, you know if it's just a small thing then I do, overlook it and maybe make a mental note for next time that it's not got worse when I go back."

In another observed interaction, a home visitor used relational skills during conversation to ease a difficult conversation about a repair to a shower seat, blending genuine concern with subtle references to the cleanliness standards of faceless others:

> **TENANT ONE:** First time I've noticed it is broken! I have been here for four years!
>
> **OBSERVED HOME VISITOR:** They will come to fix it, but you have to know some of our workmen are a bit funny, so you might have to have a bit of a clean.
>
> **TENANT ONE:** I do my best, few minutes here and there.
>
> **OBSERVED HOME VISITOR:** You need to be safe, that is the whole idea of the seat, so you can have a proper shower.

These interactions reveal the relational techniques home visitors use to navigate the complexities of their visits, balancing personal judgment, organisational expectations, role demands, and genuine concern for tenant wellbeing. This work, often invisible to organisational systems, reflects a level of professional judgment and human warmth that is difficult to incorporate into formal processes but is crucial to the tenant-home visitor relationship. Those involved in developing professional qualifications for home visitors might

consider studying these informal techniques further to include social and emotional learning in accredited courses.

Additionally, providing tenants with information on preparatory work for different types of repairs could be helpful. If this information is standardised, it might make discussions about tidying up less awkward, as this labour becomes an expected norm for every tenant. However, it's important to note that tenants with mental health complexities or physical disabilities may not be able to perform this preparatory work, and reasonable adjustments should be discussed with the landlord.

After the Visit

This section explores the experiences of both tenants and home visitors after home visits, revealing the emotional and administrative challenges faced by each group. Tenants often employ coping mechanisms to manage the stress of these visits, with some reporting intense emotional responses. Meanwhile, case study home visitors navigate a complex landscape of administrative tasks and tenant advocacy, often encountering tensions between organisational policies and the realities of tenants' needs. The following findings illustrate the nuanced dynamics at play during these post-visit interactions.

Finding ten: Tenants have to cope with emotional fallout from the visit

In this interview extract the respondent describes a coping technique to self-manage the stress of the visit. In this case, the respondent is neurodivergent; however, both intense stress responses like migraines, crying, and feeling belittled, as well as positive responses like relief when the visit was over, were reported by case study participants and tenant-researchers:

> **TENANT ONE:** "Another thing I just thought of, have you heard of Abbott & Costello, have you ever head of the routine "who's on first"? It's a mish-mash of the English language where you take turns, I tell you, I reply who is on first, what's on second. That type of thing, I had that running through my head to make me feel I had a familiar routine run through my head."
>
> **INTERVIEWER:** "Say you had a stressful visit at home, would that be a thing you do after the person is gone?"
>
> **TENANT ONE:** "Yes and close my eyes for a bit, go through my who's on first..."

A key point is that tenants are unlikely to report the emotional impact of home visits, making the subtle effects of these interactions largely invisible to housing organisations and home visitors—until this research brought them to light.

Tenant-researchers identified several factors that may contribute to the intensity of these hidden emotional experiences. First, they suggested that because negative emotional experiences occur in the privacy and 'sanctuary' of the home, they are often concealed but potentially more harmful, undermining feelings of security and belonging. This underscores the importance of adopting a relational understanding of the home, which acknowledges its emotional significance for many tenants and highlights the value of the relational work being done by home visitors in the case study, often out of sight of the organisational gaze.

Second, tenant-researchers suggested that in response to regulatory pressures, landlords may place an overemphasis on policy compliance in complaints management, which can shift focus away from the emotional aspects of home visits. Research also indicates that tenants may struggle to lodge complaints, a struggle with hidden emotional dimensions (Absalom, 2023) that landlords and sector regulators may benefit from understanding. Third, they expressed concern that benchmarking, with its focus on performance metrics and competitive comparison with other landlords, may detract from understanding the tenant experience of home visits and the value of relational practices that stem from a relational understanding of the home.

It is recommended that sector regulators and landlords engage with involved tenants to discuss these tensions, supported by training on the emotional aspects of complaining and the relational conceptualisation of home that underpins this report.

Finding eleven: Home visitors have to engage in tenant advocacy and navigate organisational tensions

For the home visitor, each visit produced varying degrees of administration. Due to problems with internet connectivity, the home visit forms were paper based. Upon returning to the office, data were inputted on an excel spreadsheet – which allowed for monitoring by management of the number of home visits per staff member and issues raised, as described in the 'Before the Visit' section. Notes about the visit were also added to the Housing Management System and task such as reporting outstanding repairs undertaken.

A key point of tension for the home visitor was advocating for the tenant to obtain repairs as this extract from post visit observation notes describes:

> ‘First email is to contact the centre, who are booking the repairs to the toilet seat. [observed home visitor] knows this will normally get knocked back, as it is the customer's responsibility; [observed home visitor] purposefully leverages health and safety, as [observed tenant] is a fall risk and may also struggle to know where to buy a toilet seat and install it themselves’.

This evidences the ambiguity and complexity for home visitors in navigating ‘rational’ organisation bureaucracy, and the emotional and ethical elements of direct interactions within a highly diverse population of tenants. Tensions were identified for home visitors with the realities of life and home as experienced by tenants, and rigid policies and attitudes within the organisation, as this interview extract demonstrated:

> **HOME VISITOR TWO:** “We do tell customers to ring repairs themselves. I’ll do it sometimes at the property with the customer… I think the call centre are short staffed, so I’ve tried to ring up and I’ve been on hold for 20 minutes… I do email the call centre a lot of times, even though it’s customer’s responsibility... So, it’s like by the time the customer has rung up, reported it, and I’ve sent the photo through I think I might as well just report it.”

Both tenants and home visitors highlighted challenges with the repair reporting process. Home visitors often found themselves caught between the expectation that tenants report repairs and the practical difficulties tenants face, including belittling interactions with repair staff. Some home visitors also mentioned that advocating for tenants, such as bypassing standard procedures by emailing the call centre directly, created workplace tensions.

Tenant-researchers suggested that adopting values-based recruitment in social housing could help create a culture more understanding of tenants and supportive of staff challenges. This approach could also foster pride in delivering high-quality repairs, contributing to tenants, feeling at home. However, this recommendation comes with the caveat that the national skills shortage may hinder value-based recruitment and the ability to deliver high-quality repairs at this time.

Further Research

This study’s focus on a single, in-depth case of Home Encounters between tenants and landlords highlights the need for further research across multiple sites. It is recommended that a multi-site case study be conducted using similar methods, with follow-up visits to the various locations. This would provide a broader understanding of tenant-landlord interactions and the

dynamics of giving and receiving help, thereby informing the development of new professional standards and accreditation—key elements in the ongoing regulatory reform of the sector.

To fully uncover the emotional aftermath of home visits and other tenant-landlord interactions, additional research is essential. Such work should also examine the role of social and emotional learning in improving these relationships. A specific area requiring attention is tenant-led home improvements and the recommended amnesty on unauthorised modifications. A consultation involving both tenants and landlords should be conducted to review and refine this approach and policy and practice going forward. This recommendation potentially aligns with the ongoing Housing Ombudsman consultation on repairs and maintenance services offered by social landlords.

Given the significant reports of tenants feeling belittled in their homes and the growing concern that they are being treated as experimental subjects, further research is strongly recommended in the expanding area of home retrofits to meet Net Zero commitments. Since technology in this field is often experimental, there is a risk of damaging future trust if this is not transparently acknowledged. This agenda should actively involve tenants in the planning and execution of net-zero retrofit improvements to their homes.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that organisations are puzzled by tenants' refusal to grant access, their failure to experience the promised benefits of new technologies, and their lack of full awareness about what has been installed in their homes. Additionally, record-keeping by landlords regarding retrofits and longitudinal evaluations has been weak. The installation of environmental sensor technologies, which collect data on variables such as humidity, CO2 levels, and temperature without tenants' full knowledge, further underscores the need for this research.

New technologies that monitor the home environment and generate vast amounts of data for landlords may have yet-to-be-understood implications for tenants' right to privacy and peaceful enjoyment of their homes. This complex area of ethics and legislation must be carefully navigated, as the unreflective adoption of such technologies, under the guise of a better future, risks undermining the trust between tenants, landlords, and public service providers in the present.

The tenant-researchers also highlighted concerns about tenants who restrict access to their homes. To address this, we have co-designed interview questions and developed a peer-to-peer interview method, enabling tenants to interview fellow tenants and explore how best to navigate this challenging situation.

Further research is needed on how accountancy frameworks and repairs and maintenance financial management are shaping the delivery of repairs and maintenance in the social housing sector. There is a need to orientate to a long-term approach to investing in the material condition of the home.

Finally, while the tenant-researchers welcomed the increased regulation of the sector and the Housing Ombudsman's focus on repairs and the experience of home, they expressed concerns that these efforts might inadvertently lead to more homes being condemned and demolished. The unanticipated ripple effects of renewed regulatory interest and the resulting reforms will also benefit from further research.

Conclusion

This report has explored the emotional and relational dimensions of home encounters within social housing, emphasising the value of seeing the home not merely as a physical asset but as a complex relational entity. By focusing on the often-overlooked emotional impacts of landlord-tenant interactions, we underscore the need for practices that prioritise empathy, respect, and collaboration. This relational approach to conceptualising the home allows for a more nuanced understanding of the tenant-landlord dynamic, where tenants' lived experiences and emotional wellbeing take precedence over bureaucratic or financial concerns.

Additionally, this report advocates for an action-research mode of participation, where tenants are not passive subjects but active contributors to shaping research and housing practices. Through collaborative initiatives such as co-created research and tenant-led recommendations, we highlight the power of involving tenants in meaningful discussions about their homes and the services they receive.

Our findings make it clear that fostering trusting and respectful relationships between landlords and tenants is essential for building a housing system where tenants feel at home—physically, emotionally, and socially. As we look to the future, it is vital that landlords and regulators embrace practices that are emotionally informed and grounded in tenant participation that is informed by the principles of action-research.

Call to Action

We urge landlords, housing providers, and regulators to use this report as a catalyst for change. Open a dialogue with tenants about their experiences, concerns, and ideas. By involving tenants in the discussion of these findings, you will be taking a critical step towards

reshaping the social housing sector to be more compassionate, relational, and responsive to the needs of those it serves.

We encourage all stakeholders to come together and explore how the emotional aspects of home visits, tenant-led home improvements, and the broader conceptualisation of home can inform new standards and regulations that truly support tenant well-being.

Acknowledgements

This report was funded through an ESRC Fellowship. The report owes much to the ongoing involvement and enthusiasm of the Feeling-at-Home tenant-researchers. Collaborating with tenants to research what matters to them and voicing their concerns to influence policy, practice, and advocacy is both a pleasure and a privilege.

Gratitude is also extended to the case study landlord, who must remain anonymous. The issues highlighted in this report are not unique to them. Their bravery and willingness to allow an independent researcher to access and observe their daily operations is commendable. Furthermore, their appreciation of the value of collaborating with tenants in research projects, so change is developed through an evidence informed partnership. I hope this encourages other social landlords to participate in action orientated research with tenants and expert researchers.

The social housing sector is significantly underinformed by research into the day-to-day work of practitioners and tenant experiences of home and landlord services. Compared to fields like social services and education, the sector has been 'winging it' for too long. With sector professionalisation now a government priority, this is the time for social landlords to engage with, fund, and collaborate in independent research to ensure that policy and practice recommendations are grounded in the realities of day-to-day housing work and tenants' experiences. Ultimately, this research is not just about improving practice; it's about ensuring that social housing fulfils its potential as a cornerstone of social equity and community well-being, shaping a future where every tenant's home is a place of safety, dignity, and a foundation to live a flourishing life.

The tenant-researchers involved in this project are:

John Townend - is 80 years of age, and 53 years a tenant of my local council, with 21 years of involvement with my landlord and its managing agent, Berneslai Homes. This early findings report is timely after the publication of the Grenfell Inquiry report, it points out the home is a

protected environment and all visitors must respect that. Stigmatisation is an issue for those in social housing, let's all remember empathy and respect for each other will bring added results in our daily lives.

Judith Wren – is an involved Housing Association resident over many years. She is involved with charities working on equality and diversity, wellbeing, trained in advocacy and studying safeguarding.

Paul Symon - After being medically retired from the drinks industry at the age of 45 I turned my attention to social housing. With the help of my landlord I joined their tenants association. I began to apply the skills I gained in my career to my tenant involvement work. Through my this work, I have advocated for tenants rights and have had the privilege of learning from tenants, housing providers, regulatory bodies, government ministers and everything and one in between. All of this has proved very useful in being part of the Feeling-at-Home research for this very important report and other works by Dr Absalom.

Phil Coldicott – Is an engaged tenant and sits on the social housing government panel, he is a mental health champion and was Runner up in the West Midlands Mental Health Star Awards 2022. He is also active in the Stratford-Upon-Avon Men's Support Group. He is passionate about social housing and the importance of it and the desperate need for more below market rental homes.

Ted White - I got involved because knowledge is power. As a tenant I wanted to have my say and be heard and if possible, help to change awful situations, not just for myself but others. We need change and sitting quiet won't do it, so I became active and now I won't be swept under the carpet. I will have my say based on the knowledge I have acquired through the Feeling-at-Home research project.

Plus three tenant-researchers who wished to remain anonymous.

Appendix – Legal aspects of home visits

Tenants interviewed as part of the case study, and tenant-researchers sought clarification on what their rights were regarding landlord access to their home. Although the focus of the case study interviews was on recent tenancy audits, the majority of tenants were unable to distinguish this visit from a range of others to their home. They also expressed a lack of clarity as to the roles of visiting staff members and purpose of landlord-initiated visits.

It needs to be noted that landlord visits may be conducted with good intentions. One tenant-researcher reported signing up for a mental health support service run by their landlord. This triggered an unannounced visit by a wellbeing officer. Which caused unintentional distress as the tenant did not have time to tidy their home. The visit induced a sense of being spied on, an outcome which is counterproductive to the point of the programme. Landlords and regulators need to consider and clarify what the social purpose of the sector is and be cautious of 'mission creep' into areas that are outside of the sectors expertise. Well intended programmes that express a genuine desire to care need not to undermine the tenants right to quiet enjoyment of their home or produce counter-productive outcomes due to a lack of expertise.

Broadly tenants had four questions about landlord access to their home. Thanks to Julie Twist of Diversify Law for providing answers to these questions.

1. **What are my legal rights regarding the quiet enjoyment of my home?**

A landlord must give you 24 hours written notice of their intention to visit, then the tenant must allow access. However, if there is a good reason for the tenant to not be available, for example, prearranged appointments, collecting children from school, then the landlord must accommodate this.

'Quiet enjoyment' broadly means that tenants are to be left alone to get on with their lives. However, when safety checks such as gas and electric checks need to be conducted, it is important for the tenant to allow access, for their own safety and the safety of their neighbours.

2. **When can I refuse my social landlord access to my home and what might the consequences be?**

The tenant should allow access unless there is a reasonable excuse, and the Housing Ombudsman is clear that landlords should not make appointments that the tenant cannot keep. If there is a persistent refusal of access, the landlord can apply to court for a mandatory injunction to allow access. The court will examine closely the conduct of the landlord to ensure that reasonable attempts to gain access have been undertaken. If the court grants an injunction, the landlord is entitled to their legal costs, and these can be added to the rent. If legal costs are added to the tenant's rental liability, the landlord may ultimately be able to seek possession on the grounds of the tenants breach of covenant (promise) to allow access.

3. **Does a social landlord need to first give prior notice to gain access to my property?**

Yes, the rule is 24 hours written notice. In practice, this is often not the case, and both case study tenants and tenant-researchers reported visits without notice. If this notice has not been given, and it is not a serious emergency (for example, there are serious concerns for the tenant, or another household members welfare), then access can be refused.

4. **Can I refuse improvement works to the interior of my home?**

In short, no. The tenant has no rights to refuse improvements being made as they have no legal interest in the property. However, the report author is aware of high rates of tenants not allowing access for Net Zero related improvement works to their homes. If refusal reaches a critical point, it may not be financially viable to seek injunctions for access.

Tenants concerned about landlord access are encouraged to seek advice from Shelter, and if they believe their legal rights have not been respected, to complain to their landlord. Landlords are encouraged to engage with tenants about access to their homes, reduce the frequency of non-tenant initiated visits and explore less intrusive ways of gaining access to the home when needed – for example, using digital technologies to enable tenants to do their own property audits, conducting welfare checks by video call, and making it a priority to get repairs right the first time and carried out with respect to the home and tenant.