

Somali Housing Experiences in England

**Ian Cole
David Robinson**



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Contents

Acknowledgements

List of Maps and Tables

Foreward

Executive Summary	i
Introduction	i
The Development of the Somali Community in England	i
The Needs of Somali Households: Some Initial Impressions	ii
Recognising and Responding to the Needs of Somali Households	iii
The Housing Experiences of Somali Households	iv
Housing Policy and Service Provision	v
Recommendations	v
Introduction	1
The Research Approach	1
Report Structure and Content	2
1. The Development of the Somali Community in England	5
1.1 Introduction	5
1.2 A Brief History of Somalia	5
1.3 Patterns of Somali Settlement in Britain	8
1.4 The Somali Community in England at the Local Level	11
1.5 Key Aspects of Local Somali Communities in England	17
2. The Needs of Somali Households: Some Initial Impressions	19
2.1 Introduction	19
2.2 The Situations, Experiences and Needs of Somali Households	19
2.3 Recognising and Responding to the Needs of Somali Households	30
2.4 Conclusion	39
3. The Housing Experiences of Somali Households	41
3.1 Introduction	41
3.2 Access and Security	41
3.3 Homelessness	44
3.4 Housing Conditions and Suitability	51

3.5 Housing Policy and Service Provision	56
3.6 Conclusion	62
4. Meeting the Housing Needs of Somali Households in England: Summary and Key Recommendations	63
4.1 Introduction	63
4.2 Understanding Somali Housing Needs	63
4.3 Implications for Development and Management	67
4.4 Cultural Sensitivity in Service Provision	70
4.5 Somali-led Services	72
4.6 Conclusion	74
Bibliography	77
Appendix: Official Statistics on the Somali Population in England	79

List of Maps and Tables

Map 1.1	Somalia and its Environs	6
Table 3.1	Factors Limiting the Applicability of Traditional Methods of Estimating Homelessness to the Somali Population	46
Table A1	Top Asylum Nationalities and Percentage Increase in Application (2000-2001)	80
Table A2	Somali Asylum Seeker Statistics	81

Foreword

Somali people have been living in Britain for well over 100 years, yet little is known about the size of the population, their problems or needs. The Somali population has remained largely invisible and their needs have been neglected by local and national policy-makers, largely because of the failure to recognise Somali as a distinct ethnic group. This report is an important step forward because it casts light on these hidden experiences and reveals some of the extreme problems and urgent needs of Somali people across England.

This research emerged from the realisation among Somali agencies, like Sahil Housing Association, that the only way they were ever going to get funding agencies to listen to their requests for assistance and secure a share of resources was if there was solid evidence of the problems faced by Somali people. This report provides this solid evidence and should be essential reading for local authorities and housing associations in towns and cities wherever Somali people are living.

It is important that this report represents the beginning, rather than the end, of a concerted effort to recognise and respond to the needs of the Somali population in Britain. Somali led agencies should use this report to raise awareness of Somali experiences and needs and to push for more detailed research to understand the range and incidence of Somali needs at the local level in towns and cities across Britain. Only then will the Somali population gain a fairer share of the resources and opportunities available.

Mohamed Abdullah

Co-ordinator, Sahil Housing Association

Executive Summary

Introduction

A key inadequacy in current awareness and understanding of the housing needs of black and minority ethnic groups is the failure to appreciate their unique circumstances and aspirations. The Somali population in Britain is one ethnic group whose needs seem to have been largely ignored. In response, this report sets out to cast light on the neglected experiences of Somali households, focusing in particular on their housing situations, aspirations and needs.

The research was undertaken in partnership with a London-based Somali-led housing association (Sahil Housing) and focused on the situations and experiences of Somali households in five key clusters of the population in England: Sheffield, Liverpool, Bristol, Ealing and Tower Hamlets. The research process involved the team in a trawl of key data sources, literature and research evidence, discussions with local authority officers in the five case study local authority districts about the local Somali population, group discussions with community group leaders and focus group sessions with sub-sections of the Somali population.

The Development of the Somali Community in England

A Brief History of Somalia

Somalia is a nation with a chequered history, involving various bids for colonisation and control from European countries, sporadic conflicts with neighbouring countries, persistent internal clan-based territorial divisions and a succession of fragile attempts to establish more unified forms of governance. A defining event in recent years has been the civil war, which started in May 1988. In the ensuing period, there was little clear central government authority and, in this fragmented system of governance, clan leaders and 'warlords' regained control over specific territories. By 1992, up to a third of all Somalis were facing starvation, as a combined result of the war and the drought, and one million Somalis (out of a total population of around 7 million) fled, mainly to Kenya, Ethiopia, Yemen and Djibouti in Africa and, for about 100,000 people, to Europe. The number of refugees peaked in 1992, remained high until 1995 and has since started to fall.

Patterns of Somali Settlement in Britain

Britain has long-standing links as a destination for Somali out-migrants, due to the recruitment of seamen in the early part of the century in ports such as Cardiff, Bristol, East London and Liverpool. Some Somalis moved on, to work in heavy industry in cities such as Birmingham, Sheffield and Derby. From 1960 onwards the largely male community was joined by the arrival of women and children. From the mid 1980s there was a renewed wave of out-migration from Somalia as a result of civil unrest and conflict. According to Refugee Council statistics, in 2001 there were 6,500 applications from people with Somalia as their country of origin. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that out-migrants from Somalia to other European countries, who may now be classified as EU nationals, are also moving to the UK, although precise figures about the scale of this in-migration are not possible to come by.

The Needs of Somali Households: Some Initial Impressions

In each of the five case study districts the Somali population was clustered in inner-city neighbourhoods characterised by deprivation, high levels of unemployment, crime problems, poor quality services and limited local amenities. Despite these problems, respondents typically expressed a commitment to their local neighbourhood, underpinned by the benefits associated with living alongside other Somali households. In particular, respondents referred to the sense of safety and security from living within a concentrated population of Somali households, as well as informal advice and support and local services provided by and for the Somali community.

Racial Harassment

Racial harassment was reported to be a frequent and widespread experience among the Somali population, especially in the current context of increasing mistrust and suspicion of asylum seekers. Local authorities, however, had limited evidence of racial harassment among Somali households. Reasons for this under-reporting of harassment included the language barrier, a lack of knowledge about available support and scepticism about the likely service response.

Unemployment

There are no readily available figures on employment or unemployment among the Somali population, but anecdotal evidence suggests very high levels (over 70%) of unemployment. Respondents pointed to both supply and demand side factors, including: the expectation and experience of discrimination; the language barrier; a lack of recognition for academic and professional qualifications gained in Somalia; and the decline of industries in which Somali people traditionally worked.

Education and Training

Difficulties were reported in accessing available education and training opportunities, largely because of the failure to accommodate the needs of people with limited English language skills. Respondents also noted problems with language teaching and bemoaned the limited relevance of available provision to the specific needs of Somali people, whether school children or older people.

Health and Well-Being

Respondents talked in general terms about the relatively high incidence of mental and physical health problems and disabilities among the Somali population, related to three factors: difficulties accessing health care, the impact of the refugee experience and inadequate or inappropriate accommodation.

Recognising and Responding to the Needs of Somali Households

Integral to the problems in education and training, employment and health were the difficulties engaging with service providers and accessing provision relevant and sensitive to the needs of the Somali community.

Experiences of White-led, Mainstream Services

Somali households were reported to experience various problems accessing and utilising services provided by mainstream, white-led agencies, which often failed to understand the requirements and aspirations of Somali households. Respondents also complained that Somali households rarely benefited from the various reforms introduced by mainstream providers to help minority ethnic clients utilise service provision.

Somali Experiences of BME-led Agencies and Service Providers

Respondents suggested that BME-led agencies were rarely aware or sensitive to Somali concerns and priorities. There was concern that the presence of an active network of BME-led agencies was assumed to guarantee that the specific needs of all minority ethnic communities were being represented and met.

Somali-led Service Provision

An array of Somali-led agencies was active in the case study districts. Few of these agencies, however, had successfully tapped into major funding streams. This outcome was linked to limited relevant expertise within the local population, divisions in the community and problems convincing funders about the extent of need among Somalis because of a lack of research evidence or demographic data.

The Housing Experiences of Somali Households

Access and Security

The vast majority of Somali households appear to be living in the social housing sector. This concentration is less the consequence of choice and more the result of a series of constraining forces. Three factors were key: the reliance of households granted leave to remain in the country on assistance from the local authority with their housing needs; affordability problems, restricting access to owner occupation; and social networks binding households to certain locations, limiting housing choice. However, access to social housing is not straightforward for all Somali households. Key constraints included: limited knowledge and awareness; difficulties approaching landlords and negotiating access to housing; and limited availability of accommodation in preferred locations or for different household types.

Homelessness

Homelessness is a common experience among the Somali population, although the incidence and extent of the problem is difficult to establish. Living with families and friends was reported to be the most common situation, although homeless refugee households granted leave to remain were more likely to be recognised as homeless and resident in temporary accommodation. Problems with living in temporary accommodation included isolation from other Somali households, its unsuitability to cultural and social norms and the dearth of appropriate move-on accommodation.

Housing Conditions and Suitability

Many Somali households were living in severely overcrowded circumstances which had a dramatic impact on their physical, mental and emotional well-being and future prospects. Young people, for example, complained about problems completing homework and studying for exams in overcrowded conditions. Overcrowding was common in the low demand housing markets of Liverpool and Sheffield, as well as in the high demand housing market of London, suggesting that it was influenced by constraints above and beyond the provision of bricks and mortar. Problems with housing conditions included damp and condensation, ineffective heating systems, poor quality repairs and maintenance and inadequate security measures. Many households were reliant on the assistance of family or friends in order to report the need for repairs and maintenance or to challenge the actions of their landlord.

Housing Policy and Service Provision

Understanding the Housing Aspirations and Requirements of Somali Households

Many social landlords showed a general lack of understanding about the experiences, requirements and preferences of Somali households. They tended to refer to minority ethnic households as a homogenous group. Monitoring of Somali experiences was relatively ad hoc and there was little evidence of any systematic attempt to collate and analyse data, in order to learn key lessons and to review or improve practice.

The Inadequacies of Mainstream Provision

It is hardly surprising, given the lack of understanding of Somali housing needs, that certain aspects of provision are not sensitive to their preferences. This results in a failure to provide new housing opportunities in preferred locations and include relevant design features, the failure to recognise and respond to Somali needs in the allocation process, the insensitive allocation of properties and the limited provision of culturally sensitive services. The key factor, however, was the language barrier between Somali households and their current or prospective landlord; and relevant translation and interpretation services either did not exist or were of limited use.

The Absence of Targeted or Specialist Provision

The experiences and observations of Somali households suggest that few of the benefits associated with the development of the BME housing movement have accrued to the Somali community. Indeed, some argued that BME-led agencies were failing to provide an accessible service for Somali households to a similar degree as mainstream, white-led landlords.

Recommendations

The report concludes with a series of action points and recommendations designed to:

- build a better understanding of Somali housing needs and preferences;
- capture the diversity of experiences of Somali households in different local housing markets;
- promote the development of culturally sensitive and appropriate forms of service provision;
- provide better support for Somali-led services and other community-led initiatives.

Introduction

A key inadequacy in current awareness and understanding of the housing needs of black and minority ethnic (BME) groups is the failure to appreciate the unique situations, wants and needs of specific minority ethnic groups. The tendency in BME housing needs surveys, for example, is to consider minority ethnic households as an homogenous group or else to focus on three or four ‘catch-all’ groupings (such as South Asian, African-Caribbean, Chinese and Other). This failing is significant because if a problem is not observed and measured it is unlikely to attract the attention of policy or be the target of resources (Robinson, 2002a).

At a time when the rise of ethnic differentiation has led to a renewed scramble among different ethnic groups for the category of ‘most disadvantaged’ in order to secure limited resources, services and provision (Alexander, 2002), research and analysis often therefore fails to highlight the needs of particular minority ethnic populations. It may thereby unwittingly excuse the neglect of their specific housing needs by policy and provision.

The Somali population is one ethnic group whose needs would seem to have been largely ignored, so that they are ‘losing out’ in the competition for resources and targeted service provision. Little is known about the Somali population in England, principally because of the inadequacies of the standard ethnic categorisation employed in the Census of Population, service provider ethnic monitoring and research and analysis (see Appendix). The history of Somali settlement in England, which spans over a hundred years, the more recent arrival of Somali households fleeing the civil war (see the Appendix for a summary of immigration statistics) and the apparent clustering of the Somali households suggest, however, that there are sizeable Somali populations in a number of towns and cities across England. This research exercise set out to cast some light on the neglected situations and experiences of these households. In particular, it was intended to provide some initial impressions regarding their housing situations, aspirations and needs, in response to mostly anecdotal evidence that many Somali households are living in overcrowded, poor quality and unsuitable living conditions.

The Research Approach

The research was undertaken in partnership with a London-based Somali-led housing association (Sahil Housing) and focused on the situations and experiences of Somali households in five key clusters of the population in England:

- Sheffield
- Liverpool
- Bristol
- Ealing
- Tower Hamlets

The key stages of the research process involved the team in the following tasks:

- a trawl of key data sources, literature and research evidence, which revealed the virtual absence of any information or research evidence about the housing needs or situations of the Somali population in England;
- discussions with local authority officers in five local authority districts (Sheffield, Liverpool, Bristol, Ealing and Tower Hamlets) regarding available evidence and other anecdotal insights into the Somali population within their district;
- group discussions with Somali community group leaders in each of the five case study districts, which were attended by research team members from Sahil Housing Association and CRESR. They attempted to explore the population profile, history and location within the district, the current housing situations of the local Somali population, targeted provision for the Somali population and the wider experiences of the Somali population (experience of racial harassment, employment, education, health, involvement in politics etc.). All sessions were tape recorded and a detailed record of the round-table event was subsequently written up;
- focus group sessions with sub-sections of the Somali population in the five case study districts (young people, older people, women, asylum seekers and refugees). These groups were conducted by members of the research team skilled in the Somali language and focused on their current accommodation position, other housing issues, and their wider experiences and attitudes to the local area.

Report Structure and Content

This report draws on these various data sources to provide a series of initial impressions regarding the housing aspirations and needs of the Somali population in England. The report is divided into four distinct parts:

- Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Somali population in England and includes an introduction to Somalia, a history of Somali settlement in Britain and a discussion of the Somali population in the five case study districts in England;
- Chapter 2 provides some initial impressions about the needs of the Somali population and discusses Somali experiences of racial harassment, unemployment, education and training, health and well-being. Chapter 2 also explores Somali

experiences of service provision and includes discussion of the recognition and response to Somali needs by mainstream, white-led agencies, BME-led agencies and Somali-led agencies;

- Chapter 3 focuses on the housing experiences of Somali households, exploring issues of access and security, homelessness, housing conditions and suitability and housing policy and service provision;
- Chapter 4 provides a summary of the key lessons to be drawn from the insights of preceding chapters, and is presented as a series of recommendations.

1. The Development of the Somali Community in England

1.1 Introduction

Little is known about the Somali population in England, despite a history of Somali settlement stretching back well over 100 years. This chapter attempts to counter this failing and to set the scene for the following discussion by providing a brief introduction to Somalia, the history of Somali settlement in Britain and the characteristics of Somali communities in each of the five case study districts.

1.2 A Brief History of Somalia

The development of Somalia as a nation needs to be pieced together from an extremely chequered history, involving various bids for colonisation and control from European countries, sporadic conflicts with neighbouring countries, persistent internal clan-based territorial divisions and a succession of fragile attempts to establish more unified forms of governance. This history requires some intricate unravelling, in order to provide even a quite cursory summary of changes over the past hundred years.

In the 1860s, France acquired a foothold on part of the Horn of Africa, and gained control over land later to be redesignated as the country of Djibouti. Britain proclaimed a protectorate over part of the northern and central area and called it British Somaliland in 1887, and secured an agreement with the French over the boundary between this country and what is now Djibouti. The British then withdrew to the coastal regions, following increasing challenges in the central area and Italy, which had built up its control by setting up a protectorate in central Somalia in 1908, extended its influence further in 1915 under the Treaty of London. This area was then combined with the Somali-speaking parts of what was then Abyssinia, following the Italian invasion in 1935. The Italians also occupied British Somaliland in 1940, only for the British to re-take control of the protectorate, and Italian Somaliland as well, the following year. This area was then established as United Nations trust territory under Italian control in 1950. Italian Somaliland was renamed Somalia and granted internal autonomy in 1956.

The United Republic of Somalia was formed in 1960 when the former British and Italian parts of the country were merged into a single nation. The first president, Aden Abdullah Osman Daar, was elected in 1960 and defeated in 1967 by the former premier Abdi Rashid Ali Shermarke. Shermarke was assassinated in 1969 as part of a military coup led by Major General Mohammed Siad Barre, who declared Somalia a socialist state in



Map 1.1 Somalia and its Environs

1970. The government embarked on an ambitious programme of nationalisation but economic difficulties were compounded by drought and crop failure in 1974 and 1975, resulting in widespread starvation.

A new constitution was adopted in 1979 with executive power vested in the president, as head of state and leader of the sole political party, the Revolutionary Socialist Party. The civil war started in May 1988, when the armed domestic opposition to Siad Barre by the Somali National Movement (which had strongholds in the north of the country) was put down. However, Barre was deposed in 1990 after increasing unrest and fled the country in January 1991. In the ensuing period, there was little clear central government authority: the declaration of Ali Mahdi as president of the Republic of Somalia, for example, was not recognised by other groups. The former British protectorate declared its unilateral independence in 1991 and, in this fragmented system of governance, clan leaders and 'warlords' regained control over specific territories. By 1992, up to a third of all Somalis were facing starvation, as a combined result of the war and the drought, and one million Somalis (out of a total population of around 7 million) fled, mainly to Kenya, Ethiopia, Yemen and Djibouti in Africa and, for about 100,000 people, to Europe. The number of refugees peaked in 1992, remained high until 1995 and has since started to fall.

In 1992 the United Nations attempted to take direct control of the government, occupying the country with its military forces and attempting to disarm the native population. US Marines landed to safeguard relief supplies, and entered open conflict with the Somali resistance during 1993, before withdrawing in March 1994. By March 1995, the remaining African and Asian UN troops withdrew and the fighting subsided, only to flare up again at various intervals thereafter.

A period of disruption and division followed, with the eventual formation of an interim Transitional National Government in October 2000 under President Abdulkassim Salat Hassan. The government had a mandate to create a new constitution and hold elections within three years. However, it has struggled to reunite the country and controls only parts of the capital. In practice, other bodies continue to challenge for effective control of different regions of the country, such as the Puntland region in northern Somalia, and the pull of traditional clan divisions is as pervasive as ever. Various efforts have been made to broker peace and reconciliation between the contending parties, with a ceasefire signed by 21 different factions and another transitional regime set up in October 2002. The country remains in a state of considerable tension and confusion.

Instability is pronounced in the south of the country, especially around the Mogadishu area. The Somali Reconstruction and Restoration Council (SRRC) has been formed in opposition to the Transitional National Government. It is a loose coalition of opposition warlords from Southern Somalia. It feels that the TNG is not representative of Somali

society and wants the international community to intervene and set up a transitional government, as in Afghanistan.

Somalia comprises six major clan-families, and this lineage is pivotal to the social organisation of the country. Four of the families are predominantly nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists and represent approximately 70% of Somalia's population: Dir, Daarood, Isaaq and Hawiye. Two are primarily crop farmers and they represent approximately 20% of the population: Digil and Rahanwayn.

By the early 1990s a manufacturing sector started to develop under the modernising socialist regime, though many of these factories have since closed during the civil unrest. While the adult literacy rate increased from 5% in 1970 to 24% in 1990, it has now faltered as enrolment in the formal primary and secondary education system has declined. The health care system has also been placed under strain as a result of the civil war. In 2001 the average life expectancy in Somalia was 47 years and the infant mortality rate was 124 per 1000 live births. In 1996, Somalia was ranked 172nd out of 174 countries on the UN Development Programme's Human Development Index (HDI).

It is difficult to underestimate the impact of the civil unrest in Somalia on population migration world-wide. According to UN estimates, there are 350,000 Internally Displaced Persons and 451,600 international refugees, out of the population of just over seven million.

1.3 Patterns of Somali Settlement in Britain

Britain has had long-standing links as a destination for Somali out-migrants, due to the recruitment of seamen in the early part of the century in ports such as Cardiff, Bristol, East London and Liverpool. Recruited as a source of cheap labour they took on the low status and very demanding work of firing ships' boilers in the 'tramp steamer' trade - ships moving from port to port depending on the availability of cargo. Men from the British protectorate of Somaliland were engaged under special legislation that enabled these workers to be paid less than British nationals and face repatriation at the end of their contracts. This made them an attractive source of cheap labour in buoyant economic periods. Most of these Somalis who were working as seamen were reputed to be particularly independent, possibly reflecting their nomadic background, and to not readily develop affiliations with other migrant labour forces.

Some Somalis set up boarding houses to cater for these seamen when they were on 'shore leave', in part as a response to discrimination and the poor conditions offered by existing landlords in these ports (Collins, 1957). Others moved on, to work in heavy industry in cities such as Birmingham, Sheffield and Derby. Somalis were also recruited to the British armed forces in both the First and Second World Wars. These long-standing residents were joined by the influx of other young men who migrated to

England in the 1950s to seek work in the expanding post-war economy. From 1960 onwards the largely male community was joined by the arrival of women and children. Many of the out-migrant Somalis continued to move around European and North American countries, and some returned to the new republic in the late 1960s. From the mid-1980s onwards, however, there was a renewed wave of out-migration from Somalia, especially from supporters of the Somali National Movement, as a result of civil unrest and conflict.

The number of applications from Somalis seeking asylum in Britain since the early 1990s has fluctuated - partly due to the changing political situation in Somalia, partly due to the legislative regime on immigration, and partly as a result of the vagaries of the recording system. According to Refugee Council statistics, the number of applications from those with Somalia as their country of origin increased from 6,020 in 2000 to 6,500 in 2001 (see the Appendix).

In terms of Home Office figures, the number of Somali applicants *recognised as refugees and granted asylum* rose from 45 in 1993 to 2,330 in 1998 and to 5,310 in 2000 (though this increase partly reflected the clearance of the previous backlog). The number fell to 2,845 in 2001. The annual number of applicants *refused refugee status but given exceptional leave to remain* has varied from about 400 to 3,500 during this period, with 1,960 applicants classified in this category in 2001. 10% of all the applications classified in these two categories were from Somalia - the second largest group after those applicants from Afghanistan. The sharpest change has been in terms of the number of *applications refused*, partly due to legislative changes contained in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This rose from an average of about 200 a year in the late 1990s to 2,365 in 2000 and 3,495 in 2001.

An analysis of the principal applicants from Somalia in 2001 shows that there is roughly equal gender representation and they cover all age categories - including 196 unaccompanied children applying for asylum. It is not possible to discern from such figures the total scale of the Somali asylum seeker and refugee population for a variety of reasons, such as the lack of access to Immigration and Nationality Department data. As a detailed national survey published in 1999 noted:

'It is impossible to provide an accurate estimate of how many refugees and asylum seekers currently reside in the UK and how this impacts on housing demand.....The only obvious source of data tends to be rather sketchy, anecdotal knowledge of past practice, or partial surveys of particular groups of refugees and asylum seekers or particular location specific studies'

(Zetter and Pearl, 1999 pp2-3)

Of course, applications for asylum seeker status are only one source of in-migration to Britain. There are also original out-migrants from Somalia to other European countries,

who may now be classified as EU nationals when they move to Britain. Precise figures about the scale of this in-migration are also not possible to come by. One constant theme in this report is the difficulty of estimating the size and nature of the Somali population in Britain. This is not only because of the complex pattern of in-migration, but also due to the variable forms of self-classification used by members of the community when recording their nationality. The question of Somalis' self-identity is a far more fundamental issue than awkward categorisation - it reaches into the heart of religion, lifestyle and culture. As a recent report of the Somali community in Hackney has noted:

'Subsumed within the category 'Black African' Somalis do not share any culture, language, diet, dress and religious practices with their near neighbours. As Muslims Somalis worship at mosques along with co-religionists from Asian and Arab countries but they do not share other aspects of culture, language, diet or dress with these groups. The lack of sensitivity in monitoring categories has frequently resulted in the Somali community's - often desperate - needs being overlooked.'

(Holman and Holman, 2003 p6)

Daley's (1998) analysis, for example, illustrates this tendency, in that a detailed breakdown of the country of birth of the Black African population in Great Britain between 1971 and 1991 subsumes Somalis under 'other Africa'. The result is a population without a clear or consistent identity - either in terms of any bureaucratic classification or in terms of self-definition. The estimated population of the Somali community in Britain - about 95,000 - should therefore be taken as giving only a very broad brush indication of its actual size, and this figure is contested by many of those within the community itself.

New arrivals tend to join members of existing communities across Britain - a strategy that may have been reinforced since the compulsory dispersal system of asylum seekers was set up by the Home Office, working through the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). As this report testifies, the Somali population has faced multiple forms of disadvantage - reflected in poor housing conditions, high levels of unemployment and low educational attainment. There is increasing evidence of health problems, and a rise in mental illness and depression - illustrated in claims about high levels of drug misuse, dependency on alcohol or chewing *qat*, evidence of destructive behaviour and high rates of suicide. Young members of the Somali community are also held responsible for juvenile street crime which can give them a reputation of being unduly violent - a negative image which can easily translate into additional forms of discrimination.

These problems are then compounded by linguistic difficulties for many members of the Somali community, where few have access to any interpreting support. This provides a further obstacle to gaining employment or taking advantage of training opportunities. The Somali population has also developed relatively few formal structures and forms of

representation in order to argue their case for more recognition, resources and support from statutory agencies.

Overall, a most mercurial picture emerges - in terms of the underlying concept of Somalia as a 'nation', in terms of the pressures behind waves of out-migration from the country and patterns of settlement in Britain, in terms of how members of the Somali community are classified, and indeed classify themselves, and in terms of the strains that result from these processes - whereby multiple disadvantage is reinforced by discrimination and hostility. But much of this picture is derived from anecdote and perception, rather than substantive independent research. In the vacuum of authoritative national studies, one is forced to rely on small-scale local surveys and projects so that a more complete description can be given of this most distinctive, and yet concealed, community.

1.4 The Somali Community in England at the Local Level

In order to set context to the discussion of the perceptions and experiences of members of the Somali community, this section assesses the limited research evidence about Somalis in the five case study areas - Sheffield, Liverpool, Bristol, Ealing and Tower Hamlets. The areas were selected to give a regional spread, to cover both high demand and low demand local housing markets and to include long-standing and more recent areas of settlement.

1.4.1 Sheffield

Originally the Somali community in Sheffield was primarily based in city centre locations, but there are now several areas of settlement in the outer ring suburbs of Sheffield, largely in the local authority or housing association sectors. The original source of much employment for Somalis in the post-war period - the steel industry - collapsed in the early 1980s. As a result, it is claimed that many younger Somalis left the city to seek work elsewhere in Britain, so that the number of Somalis in the city fell to as low as 100, mainly elderly men and their families.

The Somali population has expanded sharply since this period. In the survey discussed below, the local Somali population was estimated to have increased in the early 1990s (from about 2,000 in 1992, to 3,500 - 4,000 by 1994). Although many of the more recent arrivals are reported to be skilled workers and professionals, a large proportion has been unable to secure any kind of work at all since their arrival. While the community is now considered to be well established in several localities, Somalis have still faced major problems with crime, poor housing and environmental conditions, in addition to significant barriers to training and employment.

In the course of this present research project, the current Somali population in Sheffield was estimated by members of the community as between 5-10,000. Sources in the local authority, however, have suggested that the current population was around 1,400. A study of black and minority ethnic housing needs in the city (Gidley et al, 1999) undertook a survey of 323 respondents, but only six of these were Somalis, preventing discrete analysis of the circumstances facing this group.

The most substantial research project on the Somali community in Sheffield was undertaken nearly ten years ago, and the situation will have changed considerably since then. The survey of 204 households (covering 793 people) examined a range of social needs. The survey population was relatively young, with 70% under 30 years old, and 16% between 16 and 20 years old. (90% of the sample had been in Sheffield for less than five years). The sample was drawn from the seven areas in Sheffield previously identified as the main settlements for the Somali community (Hillaac Housing Association, 1996).

In terms of housing needs, the research found a high level of overcrowding, multiple occupancy of homes, poor quality and inappropriate housing and homelessness. Over a third of households contained either more than one family unit or was providing accommodation for otherwise homeless people. Over half of the sample of Somali households lived in overcrowded conditions; the average family size was four but more than a quarter of dwellings had six or more people living in them. In-comers tended to rely on the advice of friends and family rather than that provided by an advice centre or the statutory authorities. Homeless Somalis in particular used such informal sources to find accommodation - many said they had been refused access from the local authority and could not afford to pay the deposits required by private landlords. (On a national level, Zetter and Pearl (1999 p18) also found that 48% of their sample of refugees and asylum seekers who were RSL tenants had found their accommodation through friends and relatives).

The homes occupied by households in the Sheffield sample had, on average, three rooms to live and sleep in. Many respondents felt that the housing was not designed to reflect the cultural, social and support networks within their community (such as elderly people living with other members of their family, or the provision of separate facilities for men and women).

Employment levels were very low (4% of those over 16, though a sizeable number were still in full-time education), with the vast majority of households dependent on benefits. Feelings of isolation were compounded by the low level of English literacy among half the sample population, and the effects of racial harassment and discrimination from landlords and employers. The barriers to finding out how 'the system works' was particularly serious for new arrivals in Sheffield and homeless people, and the absence of an established Somali welfare and community association exacerbated such problems.

The report called for a number of actions, anticipating some of the main themes in other research and the findings of this report:

- provision of appropriately designed housing - ideally, new build accommodation on large enough sites to allow a mix of dwelling types and sizes;
- the need for improved and accessible advice and translation facilities;
- a demand for courses in written and spoken English;
- positive action to improve employment opportunities.

1.4.2 Liverpool

The history of the Somali community in Liverpool, as in other case study areas, dates back to the last century and many of the seamen who arrived in the port settled in the then prosperous area of Granby Street in the Toxteth district, Liverpool 8. Businesses were established, restaurants and clubs sprung up, and the largely male community made increasing use of local banking and postal services, not least to support their families back in Somalia. It has been estimated that about 500 Somali seamen were living in Liverpool in the 1950s. The original community has since been joined, as elsewhere, by other family members and by refugees and asylum seekers, who then often move on to other communities, such as London, Sheffield, Manchester or Birmingham, once the outcome of their application is settled.

A study undertaken under the auspices of the Granby Toxteth Community Project in Liverpool in 1993 is of interest, as it probably represents the most extensive local research project up to that date. In the report, the Somali community in Liverpool during the 1980s was estimated as somewhere between two hundred to over a thousand, with the largest age group in the 45-64 range. The survey of 546 households (1,067 people) 'who considered themselves to be Somali' found an array of difficulties facing the community. 35% of households, for example, had at least one person with English language difficulties. 85% did not have any UK educational qualification and 96% lacked any vocational qualification. Unemployment was 73%, four times higher than for the city as whole, and seven times the then national average (Granby Toxteth Community Project.1993).

In terms of housing, 60% of the households in the survey said that they could not afford to heat their accommodation adequately. Many (36% of survey respondents) had family members who had also been displaced by the war in Somalia and were now living in refugee camps in Ethiopia, Kenya and Yemen, and were unable to come to the United Kingdom - partly for financial reasons, and partly because they feared they would be refused entry. Further problems were identified in terms of low take-up of welfare benefits and poor nursery provision, often compounded by a lack of information for Somalis about the range of provision that was accessible locally.

Nearly ten years on from this survey, estimates of the present size of the Somali population in the city range from 3,000 to 5,000. The Somali community is still based mainly within a one mile radius of Granby Street. It was suggested during this case study research that, while this offered a possible source of strength in bringing together an often disparate community, this potential had not been realised in practice because of deep-seated internal divisions. Most households live in council housing, with some also occupying very poor quality owner-occupied stock. The area is currently earmarked for regeneration, which is likely to involve stock reductions. It was claimed in the course of this research that the unemployment rate among Somalis was now about 70%, compared to 45% in Granby as a whole.

1.4.3 Bristol

As in Liverpool, the original Somali settlers in the city were seamen, with other young men arriving in the 1950s, followed by wives and families and, more recently, refugees and asylum seekers, who now make up the majority of the community. In the case study research, it was estimated that the Somali population was 'in the hundreds' twenty years ago, but is now around 7,000. Many of these recent arrivals are from highly educated, professional, skilled and relatively affluent backgrounds, though a large proportion of this group is now either unemployed or working in manual jobs. Most households are based in the local authority or housing association sector.

The Somali Educational and Cultural Community Association (SECCA, 1997)) undertook a review of the needs of the Bristol Somali community in 1997 and identified the following problems:

- unemployment estimated at over 90% of those available for work, with particularly deleterious effects on the social position and self-esteem of men;
- language difficulties, which were especially problematic when applying for social security benefits or seeking other forms of support - one local survey had also found that two-thirds of older Somali people (over 50 years) were illiterate in *any* language;
- long-term dependence on benefits;
- lack of sufficient nursery provision;
- cramped housing conditions, social isolation- especially among older members of the community - and lack of money for transport or leisure pursuits;
- mental and emotional health problems, as a result of feeling 'misplaced', and a range of physical conditions, often stemming from former work-related injuries;
- bereavement among those who have lost family members in the civil war, or have others in refugee camps elsewhere in Africa;
- anxiety and confusion for those hoping to be reunited with close relatives who are trying to move to Britain.

The Somali population in Bristol is mainly drawn from a single clan, and so does not suffer from the same degree of internal division that has characterised the community in Liverpool, for example. Somalis have settled in inner city locations in area such as Barton Hill (a New Deal for Communities area), Easton, Ashley and St. Paul's. There has been a marked increase in reported harassment cases in the past two or three years. In Barton Hill, a 'Support against Racist Incidents' project has been launched but severe problems remain. There are high reported levels of poverty and social exclusion, a lack of available and accessible advice and information, especially for recent arrivals, a high incidence of homelessness and low attainment by Somali children in primary and secondary schools.

1.4.4 Tower Hamlets

There is a more complete data base on the Somali community in Tower Hamlets than in any of the other case study areas, though much of the evidence about the current position still relies on estimates and anecdote. The origin and development of the long-standing local Somali community has followed a similar pattern to the communities in other case studies which are also ports (Bristol and Liverpool) and over thirty elderly Somali seamen are still involved in the Seamens' Mission in Canning Town. The '*Somali Community in Tower Hamlets*' report (CSC, 1998) suggested that there were 3,500 Somalis in 1981, rising to around 15,000 by 1991. Somalis are the largest refugee community, and are considered to be the second largest minority ethnic community, in the borough. Half or more of the community are under the age of 25 and one fifth of Somalis are lone parents - often as the result of deaths or detentions of men caused as a result of the civil war and disorder in Somalia (East London Somali Consortium, p3).

Tower Hamlets was the location for the formation of the first specific Somali housing association, Karin, in 1988 (Zetter and Pearl, 1999). This association has over the years responded to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers at different stages of the settlement process. Another association, East Thames Housing Trust, manages a sheltered housing scheme for Somali elders in the Isle of Dogs. The Trust also provides general housing and welfare advice and health referrals.

The 1998 survey found that up to half of the Somalis in Tower Hamlets were unable to communicate well in English and most had very low levels of skills or qualifications relevant to the UK labour market. The study argued for a more pro-active literacy programme and supported vocational training, the provision of a dedicated community centre, the appointment of Somali support workers in the education and health sectors and an induction programme to help new and recent immigrants understand the way public services operate. Overall, the study noted '*the extent of the marginalisation of the Somali community in the Borough is a major finding...*' (p4)

A more recent report on employment and training in the borough has advocated that pro-active local authority support is given to enable Somali refugees to become active

participants in the development of council services rather than passive recipients (Ismail, 2002). It also calls for local voluntary service providers to review the impact of their services on the community and for leading members of the Somali community to unite and establish a single front to advocate for the needs of the community.

The Somali community in Tower Hamlets is mainly located in the west of the borough (E1 and E2, Bethnal Green and Whitechapel). The high level of concealed households in the borough and the intense demand for larger properties places severe constraints on the housing choices for Somalis, and the community is therefore more dispersed than in the other case study locations. However, it is possible for the members of the community to maintain contact due to the compact nature of the area and the relatively good transport links. Most Somalis rent from the local authority - a sector that has shrunk considerably in the past fifteen years in Tower Hamlets.

Although the council does not record the ethnic background of its tenants, it monitors waiting list applicants - and the number of Somali households on the waiting list has grown in recent years to 252. In 1997 there were 27 Somali homeless applicants, rising to 64 in 2000. 4% of the 6028 people accepted as priority need homeless cases in the borough between 1996 and 2001 were Somali. In partnership with voluntary and community groups, the local authority has produced an ambitious and comprehensive Action Plan for the Somali community, covering a wide range of service areas.

1.4.5 Ealing

The development of the Somali community in Ealing is distinct, compared to the other case studies, the population being derived entirely from the arrival of refugees from 1990 onwards. The proximity of the borough to Heathrow airport is relevant here - and this also provides one of the few major sources of employment for members of the Somali community. It was claimed that many Somalis had also moved in from the more settled communities in East London, due to the belief that there were better opportunities for jobs and housing. Somali households are mainly based in the Southall and Acton areas, mainly in the local authority sector - often living in the estates with lowest housing demand which are now due for programmes of regeneration.

There is little firm evidence on the characteristics of the Somali population in Ealing, though estimates from the local authority suggest a population of between 11,000 and 15,000. There are attributed problems of overcrowding due to larger size of Somali families (typically between five and eight members), and also many have friends staying with them. There are alleged problems of an emerging drug culture among younger people, incidences of bullying, harassment and tension with other communities, and no Somali community organisations to provide informal support where formal networks are considered non-existent, inaccessible or simply unhelpful or obstructive. Other than a Somali officer in the local authority working with refugees, there is little in the way of

either an overarching strategy or more specific forms of support to deal with the needs of this community.

1.5 Key Aspects of Local Somali Communities in England

A fairly consistent picture emerges from the five diverse locations covered in this report. The extent of social and economic disadvantage in the community is starkly evident, underpinned by language difficulties, lack of access to advice and support from statutory and voluntary agencies and reinforced by discrimination and hostility. It is likely that this picture is repeated in other Somali communities, a fact confirmed by the findings of a recent report regarding the Somali population in Hackney, East London (Holman and Holman, 2003) and wider studies, such as the report on Muslim youth in Hackney, in which 10% of the sample were Somalis (Al-Azami et al, 2001).

While the history of the communities differs from one locality to the next, in every case the population has increased sharply in the past fifteen years, as a result of the influx of refugees and asylum seekers. Much of the limited research that is available is therefore out-of-date. The recent arrivals face their own problems of settling in to a new country, often after their own traumatic experiences in Somalia and with friends and family still at risk in the midst of civil unrest. There are inevitably extensive hidden social and economic needs in the community which are not adequately recorded: because of the recency of population growth, the diverse categorisations used for, and by, Somalis, and the often informal nature of support provided through housing and financial help.

Furthermore, it is often misleading to refer to a single community in any of these localities. There are differences according to clan group, between the elders and the younger households who have arrived more recently, between the single parent families and the larger extended families, between those struggling to gain a foothold on the labour market and those who feel totally marginalised and excluded. In order to do justice to some of these nuances *within* the communities, as well as some of the common barriers and problems that confront *all* Somalis, primary research evidence is at a premium, and the following two chapters aim to shed some light on the scale of the challenges to be faced.

2. The Needs of Somali Households: Some Initial Impressions

2.1 Introduction

As described in Chapter 1, the history of Somali settlement in England stretches back well over a hundred years. Throughout this history, the nature and extent of Somali experiences and needs have remained relatively invisible. ‘Somali’ is rarely recognised as a distinct ethnic category in research and analysis, limiting understanding of the location, nature and extent of social, economic and material needs within the Somali population and how these compare and contrast with other minority ethnic groups and the White-British population. This chapter attempts to reveal these hidden situations and experiences and to expose the limits of current provision in meeting the specific needs of the Somali population.

The chapter is divided into two key sections, which explore:

- the hidden situations and needs of Somali households, including the experience of racial harassment, unemployment and education and training;
- the recognition and response to Somali needs by mainstream, white-led agencies, by BME-led organisations and by Somali-led groups.

It is important that this chapter is not regarded as a comprehensive review of the situations and experiences of Somali households. Such a task was well beyond the scale and remit of this study. Rather, the intention is to provide some initial impressions of the hidden circumstances and experiences of Somali households in England in order to provide a context for the analysis of Somali housing experiences detailed in Chapter 3.

2.2 The Situations, Experiences and Needs of Somali Households

In each of the five case study districts the Somali population was found to be clustered in certain inner-city neighbourhoods. All of these neighbourhoods were reported to be characterised by deprivation, high levels of unemployment, crime problems, poor quality services and limited local amenities, such as recreational and leisure facilities. Despite these problems, respondents typically expressed a commitment to their local neighbourhood, a point well illustrated by the comments of a number of older respondents in Liverpool:

'We like the area, it's our home and the place we have been since we came into this country, but we are very much concerned about the increasing crime, drugs and the racial harassment facing our wives, children and grandchildren.'

Older Somali Respondent, Liverpool

'My Family live in Great Britain in five generations. My father used to live in Liverpool and died here. Liverpool 8 is the address of the Somali people in this country and we are not going anywhere else.'

Older Somali Respondent, Liverpool

Similar sentiments were also expressed by younger respondents, who were committed to the Liverpool 8 area:

"We are very proud of this area and would like to stay in it. We feel Liverpool 8 is the home of the Somali community in Greater Britain, but we are very much concerned how the authorities are keeping the area and its Somali community in deprivation."

Young Somali Respondent, Liverpool

"I grew up in Granby Street, Liverpool 8 and now my brothers are all here. We are not going anywhere else, despite the discrimination, racial harassment and the unemployment that we are now suffering."

Young Somali Respondent, Liverpool

Respondents reported that their commitment to the local area was underpinned by the benefits associated with living alongside other Somali households. In particular Somali respondents - young and old, men and women, recent refugees and people born and raised in the area - all referred to the sense of safety and security provided by living within a concentrated population of Somali households. Other benefits were reported to include the informal advice and support available from friends and relatives and the local services provided by and for the Somali community, including shops, restaurants and religious facilities. In contrast, respondents living outside traditional Somali population clusters, in particular refugees and asylum seekers who had often been located in accommodation well away from other Somali households, were less committed to their local area:

"The areas Somali refugees and asylum seekers are usually resettled is far away from the area where the older Somali community live and they always receive racial harassment."

Somali Respondent, Bristol

“We do not like the area because we do not receive any help at all and we always receive racial harassment from black and other communities in areas we live.”

Somali Refugee, Liverpool

However, all respondents, regardless of where they were living, reported major problems and difficulties affecting their well-being and quality of life. Key themes to emerge from the focus group discussions were racial harassment, unemployment, problems associated with education and training and health status.

2.2.1 Racial Harassment

Racial harassment was reported to be a frequent and widespread experience among the Somali population in each of the five case study districts. This experience, however, was rarely reflected in official monitoring figures. In Sheffield, for example, respondents said that physical and verbal harassment was a commonplace, everyday experience. The local authority Tenancy Enforcement Team, however, could only recollect one incident in which Somali tenants were the victims of harassment. In this case it was reported that five families were the target of ongoing harassment and physical abuse by a gang of youths, involving bricks being thrown at their properties, verbal abuse and children being threatened and bullied.

In some districts it was suggested that awareness of the incidence and experience of harassment among Somali households is limited by the failure of local authorities to recognise Somali as a distinct category in their monitoring procedures. In Sheffield, however, the monitoring process collects information about the ethnicity of harassment victims and contains a Somali category. The limited evidence of racial harassment among Somali households in Sheffield appears to reflect the reluctance or inability of Somali households to report incidents of harassment. Four key reasons were given by respondents to explain under-reporting of harassment by Somali households:

- **the language barrier** - some people have problems reporting harassment to the local authority and the police because of the inadequate provision of translation and interpretation services and the consequent language barrier between themselves and service providers;
- **harassment as an everyday experience** - some respondents reported that racism and harassment were so commonplace as to be accepted as an inevitable part of life:

“The difficulties facing Somali women in Ealing now are the language barrier and the increasing discrimination, racism in services delivery and racial harassment and verbal abuse in front of the school gates, bus stop or inside the buses.”

Somali Woman, Ealing.

As one respondent pointed out, if every incidence of racial harassment were reported, it would involve daily contact with the police or the local authority. It therefore appears likely that harassment is only being reported in instances where it is systematic and ongoing or where violence is involved;

- **lack of knowledge regarding available support and assistance** - some respondents were uncertain how, where or even why to report harassment; they were unaware, for example, that social landlords have a statutory obligation to work to prevent and address the problem as and when it occurs;
- **scepticism about the service response** - some respondents questioned the commitment and resources available to landlords to respond to evidence of racial harassment and pointed to the futility of reporting incidents of harassment to the police from unidentified individuals on the street, at a bus stop or on public transport:

"We, the young people of the Somali community, have lot of discriminations in the services delivery and physical and abusive racial harassment, which the local authority is quite well aware of and has not yet addressed."

Young Somali Respondent, Liverpool

A discussion group of Somali respondents in Tower Hamlets suggested that fewer than one in ten incidents of racial harassment experienced by Somali households is reported to a landlord or the police as a consequence of these factors.

Racial harassment can have a corrosive effect on the lives of minority ethnic households, impacting on attitudes and behaviour and restricting opportunities, particularly if individuals or communities are left to manage the problem themselves:

"We are always confronted with racial harassment from both the black and white communities in the areas, therefore we feel unsafe when we are in the bus stops or on the street."

Elderly Somali Respondent, Bristol

This is particularly true at a time when the racial harassment and abuse experienced by Somali households is on the rise. Respondents suggested that, in the context of increasing mistrust and suspicion of asylum seekers, ill-founded assumptions that all Somali households are asylum seekers or refugees recently arrived in the UK were laying the Somali population open to abuse and persecution by other minority ethnic groups, as well as the majority ethnic population:

“My father came here in this country as a British national and I am still a British citizen, but most of the black and white community in our area see us as refugees and asylum seekers who have no rights in this country.”

Young Somali Respondent, Liverpool

Individual respondents recounted incidents in which they were verbally abused with comments such as ‘why did you come here’...‘go home stupid African’ and were branded ‘scroungers’ and blamed for taking jobs away from local people, even though they have been living in England for many years or all their life. It was also suggested that harassment had become more widespread since the events of 11 September 2001:

“The Somali women with hijabs (veil) always suffer with racial harassment and increased dramatically after eleventh of September 2001.”

Somali Woman, Sheffield

Some respondents raised an additional concern, related to the misconception that Somali households are asylum seekers or have recently settled in the country. They felt that poverty and deprivation within the Somali population could be excused as typical of the experiences of a new immigrant population adjusting to life in a new country, when, in fact, many Somali households have been resident in the UK for generations:

“The history of Somali people in England has been neglected. Some people have five generations who lived in England, but are still viewed as refugees. Thinking about the Somali population as recent population allows their problems to be excused as those of refugees, who will always face difficulties adapting to life in a new country. There is a need to educate the white population about the history of the Somali population in England and the fact that Somali people have been living in England for hundreds of years.”

Somali Respondent, Bristol

2.2.2 Unemployment

There are no readily available figures regarding economic activity, employment in full or part-time work or unemployment among the Somali population. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, very high levels of unemployment and economic inactivity:

- focus group participants in Tower Hamlets suggested that the unemployment rate among Somali men was at least 33 per cent, an estimate supported by evidence from the 1988 survey of Somali residents of Tower Hamlets, in which only 8.5 per cent were in paid employment and 31.4 per cent declared that they were unemployed and looking for work (East London Somali Consortium, 1998);

- respondents in Sheffield suggested that 90 per cent of Somali people in the city were unemployed. Indeed, the group struggled to point to any friends or associates in paid employment, other than a small number of people engaged in community group activities. This perception was supported by the 1996 survey of Somali households, which found only four per cent of people aged over 16 years of age to be in paid employment (Hillaac, 1996);
- in Liverpool, the report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Somali community, chaired by the Bishop of Liverpool, estimated that the unemployment rate in the Somali population during the 1990s was over 70 per cent and concluded that *“everyone agrees that unemployment levels are astronomical”* (Jones, 2000, para 16.1).

Asked to explain the incidence of unemployment among the local Somali population, respondents pointed to both supply and demand side factors.

(i) Supply Side

Respondents recognised that language was a major obstacle to employment opportunities for many Somali people, although it was pointed out that the unemployment rate among young Somali people born, raised and educated in the UK is also extremely high. There was also anger that academic and vocational qualifications gained outside the country were not recognised by employers and that training and education opportunities were not readily available to allow people to convert existing expertise, experience and training into qualifications recognised in the UK context. As a result, a population - many of whom were in high status professional and managerial positions, such as teaching, accounting and law, before fleeing Somalia - has been systematically deskilled and deprofessionalised:

“There are a lot of professional workers within the community who over the last four or five years have struggled to find work.”

Somali Respondent, Tower Hamlets

A further barrier to employment was the expectation that discrimination would bar entry to employment. It was suggested that such attitudes were reinforced by the absence of Somali staff in key services, including the local authority housing department, housing associations, advice centres, social services, job centres and such like:

“The young people like to see role models; the young people who left the schools before them working in the benefit offices, housing offices, education department or in higher education.”

Young Somali Respondent, Sheffield

“There is a large scale of unemployment among the Somali young people caused by lack of proper training suitable to their needs, role models and under-achievement in the schools.”

Somali Respondent, Ealing

Respondents also reported little familiarity with job application procedures, or knowing where vacancies are advertised. Similar conclusions emerged from the 1991 study of employment and training issues with a cross-section of the Somali population. Key barriers to employment included lack of familiarity with application systems and procedures, difficulty finding English language training, limited availability of suitable courses to facilitate professional qualification, lack of affordable childcare and lack of understanding of the culture of work in the UK (Ismail, 2002).

(ii) Demand Side

Respondents in Sheffield referred to the collapse of opportunities within the traditional industrial base, which had drawn early Somali residents to the city. They recounted how Somali residents had traditionally been employed in manual work, which required little or no English language skills, demanded no qualifications and needed limited training. Respondents in other locations made similar comments, but tended to be more concerned with the perceived unwillingness of employers in all sectors to recruit applicants from the Somali community. Particular anger was directed at key agencies that Somali households are in regular contact with, such as social landlords. It was suggested that the staff base of these agencies should reflect more accurately their client base and that the service would be improved through the recruitment of staff sensitive to the situations and needs of Somali households and skilled in the community language. Implicit in these discussions was the issue of discrimination and racialised inequalities in access to job opportunities within the public sector, although respondents did not articulate clear views about the policies or processes to blame for the virtual exclusion of Somali staff from key agencies.

2.2.3 Education and Training

Two core concerns about education and training ran through the majority of comments and observations made by respondents. First, they reported difficulties accessing and making the most of available education and training opportunities because of the failure of provision to accommodate the needs of people with limited English language skills. Respondents also noted related problems with available English language teaching:

“I have not got the opportunity to get to go to school in Somalia and I am having difficulty to study the ESOL in the college because the courses are more advanced than my level.”

Somali Respondent, Liverpool

Second, respondents bemoaned the lack of relevance of available provision to the specific needs of Somali people, be they school children or older people requiring seeking retraining or reskilling.

It was suggested that various problems were limiting the achievements and attainment of Somali school children at all stages of the education system, resulting in less success in Key Stage tests and GCSE examinations. Some respondents claimed that local education authorities were fully aware of under-achievement among Somali school children but had failed to address the problem effectively, providing inadequate support and assistance, including language training:

“There is no Somali teachers or support teacher in the colleges or in the training places that can explain and give more support to those who do have difficulties in English.”

Somali Respondent, Liverpool

“The young people and the children in the schools or colleges do not have enough support teachers in their schools or colleges to help them.”

Young Somali Respondent, Sheffield

Somali school children who have moved to the UK from another EU states and are not, therefore, engaged with formal services for refugee households were reported to have particular problems:

“The young people from the Somali community who came from other European countries do not get much support. They need better assessment in the schools or the training providers and do not give the support and advice they need.”

Young Somali Respondent, Sheffield

Young people themselves often pointed to the situations and conditions in which many school children live when explaining the difficulties facing them. They voiced particular concern about the impact of overcrowding on the ability of students to study, do homework and complete assignments:

“When you are living in overcrowding accommodation and you do not have space to read quietly or relax, it is hard to get better grades in the school.”

Somali Young Respondent, Sheffield

“The young people in the hostel or temporary accommodation become isolated, less achieving in the schools and rarely go into training or jobs.”

Young Somali Respondent, Sheffield

“It is very difficult to study at home when you live in over-crowded accommodation with your older father and younger brothers and sisters.”

Young Somali Respondent, Liverpool

“I live with my family, we are overcrowded, I am always unorganised and do not do my homework on time and it is hard to revise and concentrate what I have done at the school.”

Young Somali Respondent, Tower Hamlets

It was also suggested that limited ambitions undermine interest and commitment at school:

“Lots of Somali young people in the schools are demoralised and have no ambitions because they do not see good role models from their older brothers and sisters.”

Somali Respondent, Liverpool

Respondents also referred to the demands placed on some children which restrict attendance at school, and the difficulties some parents experience discussing the welfare and progress of their children with teachers:

“I always stop my daughter from the school when I am not well or when my little son has got an appointment with his GP or in the hospital.”

Somali Woman, Bristol

“You cannot go to the parents’ evening of your children, when you do not speak English or have someone to interpret for you.”

Somali Woman, Bristol

Problems with post-16 education and training centred on the accessibility and suitability of available provision.

“The training and the education courses are not consulted with the Somali Community organisations and they are not suitable to the needs of Somali youth.”

Somali Respondent, Liverpool

There was a particular need among older people for training opportunities to allow people to convert experience and expertise into relevant UK qualifications or to be retrained in skills relevant to the local job market.

Respondents criticised the support from central government to assist local authorities in providing schemes designed to assist and enable Somali people to fulfil their potential in pre- and post-16 education and training. In particular, one respondent argued that grant

support from the Home Office had been cut, under Section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966 (amended by the Local Government (Amendment) Act 1993). (Under this provision, the Secretary of State may pay grants to local authorities required to make special provision as a consequence of the presence of persons belonging to minority ethnic group whose language or customs differ from those of the rest of the community). This reduction was reported to have had major on-the-ground consequences for Somali people.

2.2.4 Health and Well-Being

Respondents indicated that many Somali households suffered from a range of health problems and that this affected their housing needs and requirements. It was not appropriate to use focus group discussions to collect detailed case history information from respondents about the incidence of physical and mental health problems and their impact on functional and social well-being. Respondents did talk in general terms, however, about the relatively high incidence of mental and physical health problems and disabilities among the Somali population, which they related to three factors:

- **difficulties accessing health care** - these difficulties were commonly reported to be linked to limited understanding and awareness of points of contact and access to health care services, as well as language difficulties. They were compounded by inadequate interpretation and translation services and the virtual absence of Somali workers in the health care professions. There were examples in the five case study districts of initiatives designed to improve access to health care for Somali people and to attend to their specific needs - for example, through the employment of Somali health link workers - but they tended to be small-scale and piecemeal;
- **the impact of the refugee experience on mental and physical health** - the Somali refugee experience has typically involved people fleeing the bloody civil war in Somalia, in which they have often lost family members and friends, negotiating access to and securing the right to remain in the UK and getting to grips with life in a new country. The group discussions in Sheffield vividly revealed the hardships encountered by refugees and, in particular, women and young people, which are likely to impact in various ways on their mental and physical well-being (see box opposite);
- **inadequate or inappropriate accommodation** - many Somali households appear to be living in unsuitable and inadequate conditions, and focus group respondents often referred to the problems of overcrowding. The causal links between housing, homelessness and the incidence and severity of health problems are widely acknowledged and it seems plausible to suggest, as respondents frequently did, that the physical conditions in which many Somali households are living (explored in Chapter 3) are having a major impact on their mental and physical well-being.

The Refugee Experience - Evidence From Focus Group Discussions

The Somali women and their children are the group most affected by the bloody civil war in Somalia. In Somalia, they saw their husbands and sons killed; their homes or villages were burnt down or destroyed. On their way to Britain, they went through difficult situations and endured appalling conditions of poor sanitations, intense heat, overcrowding, disease and shortage of clear water and food inside the refugee camps of Ethiopia and Kenya. In Britain, they arrived traumatised, penniless, with only few personal possessions. They have not been given the practical support, proper counselling, and guidance and resettlement advice and programmes suitable to their social and cultural needs. As a result of this, they are directly faced with all sorts of problems such as homelessness, overcrowding, poor housing and multiple occupation, language barriers and lack of understanding of how the system works, high level of unemployment and high level of poverty and culture shock. In Sheffield, they found themselves in an alien environment with enormous cultural and social problems. They are not happy about the deprivation, the poor environment and the current conditions of the neighbourhoods where they live.

Group Discussion Summary, Sheffield

The majority of the young people of the Somali community in Sheffield are mostly the sons and daughters of the Somali refugees who arrived and settled in Sheffield for the past 15 years. Like their parents, the children and the young people of the refugees went through many difficulties and were subjected to many atrocities. They saw their fathers or their brothers killed in front of them. Their villages were bombed. When the Somali refugees crossed the borders of the neighbouring countries, mainly Ethiopia and Kenya, the children and the young people were affected by the poor sanitations, the shortages of food and water inside the refugees camps, the loss of friends and playmates from their neighbourhoods in the civil war, the lack of schooling and playing areas and freedom of movement inside the camps. In Britain, they arrived with clear scenes of the war effects. They were traumatised, physically weak and psychologically disturbed. They have not been offered the appropriate help and necessary support, the practical advice and guidance they need, and never had designed for them a suitable resettlement programme appropriate to their needs. They were only left and dumped at the mercy of the Sheffield City Council.

Group Discussion Summary, Sheffield

2.3 Recognising and Responding to the Needs of Somali Households

Integral to the problems in education and training, employment and health were the difficulties engaging with service providers and accessing provision that was relevant and sensitive to the needs of the Somali community. This section explores these issues of access and engagement in more detail, focusing on experiences in relation to services provided by:

- mainstream, white-led agencies, including local authorities;
- BME-led agencies;
- Somali-led organisations and groups.

2.3.1 Experiences of Mainstream, White-led Agencies

Focus group discussions regularly mentioned the problems encountered by Somali households in accessing and utilising services provided by mainstream, white-led agencies, such as:

- the failure of service providers to appreciate the situations and experiences of Somali households;
- the difficulties encountered by Somali households with limited language skills in accessing service provision;
- the failure of service providers to understand the requirements and aspirations of Somali households and the consequent insensitivity or irrelevance of service provision to Somali wants and needs.

In general terms, mainstream service providers have introduced various reforms in response to the difficulties encountered by minority ethnic clients in accessing and utilising service provision, and the associated inequalities in housing, health, education and employment outcomes. These have tended to focus upon:

- targeted interventions in response to particular problems, such as language issues;
- institutional reforms in response to evidence of racialised inequalities in service access and client outcomes.

Targeted initiatives or interventions tend to be implemented on a piecemeal basis at the local level by agencies working in relative isolation. Examples might include the recruitment of community link workers, the provision of translation and interpretation services, community liaison events and the development of relations between mainstream providers and community groups to inform and sensitise provision. There was some evidence in the case study districts of these kinds of initiatives targeted at the needs of Somali households. These often centred on the recruitment of Somali case workers, as in:

- the employment of a development worker for the Somali community in Liverpool City Council's Community Development Team;
- the employment of a Somali health link worker by the Primary Care Trust in Liverpool;
- Somali housing surgeries with a Somali speaking officer run by the London Borough of Ealing;
- Somali support workers working in schools in the London Borough of Ealing;
- a 'link officer' system, with a named officer in the local authority's Housing Aid Centre acting as a key point of contact for Somali agencies, who can be phoned for advice and assistance.

Although largely welcomed by respondents, the recruitment of Somali staff into a community link role was not seen as an adequate solution to the relative under-representation of Somalis in the wider staff base of statutory agencies. Respondents in one case study district drew attention to the perceived tokenism of some community link posts, making reference to the recruitment by the local authority of a Somali link officer from the Pakistani community, who did not speak the language and was reported not even to know where Somalia was. This particular example raises an important point which will be returned to later - the common assumption that the minority ethnic population is an homogenous group with shared problems, concerns, needs and aspirations.

Another targeted initiative in the five case study districts was the provision of interpretation and translation services. It was suggested that local authorities were relying on these services to overcome the language barrier between agency staff and Somali clients. However, both Somali respondents and local authority officers across the case study districts reported problems with the operation of translation and interpretation services:

- in one district, the local authority translation and interpretation service did not cater for the Somali population;
- officers in another area reported that translation and interpretation services were only available on prior request. It was not clear how Somali clients were expected to know and be able to make a prior request for interpretation services to be made available;
- there were also problems even where interpretation services were readily available and accessible. It is increasingly common, for example, for contact with key services to be made by telephone. Respondents questioned how translation and interpretation could usefully assist clients with limited English on how to engage with customer telephone services.

Discussions with local authority officers, Somali community group leaders and individual respondents suggested that it is rare for more substantial institutional reforms - such as improvements in record-keeping and ethnic monitoring, staff training and the culturally

sensitive proofing and consequent reform of agency practices - to be introduced in response to the problems and needs of Somali households. This finding should not come as any great surprise. The impetus for reform of institutional policy and practice usually comes from evidence about the difficulties encountered by a particular group or section of society. Although there was some evidence that ethnic monitoring recognised ‘Somali’ as a distinct ethnic group, practice tended to be *ad hoc* and piecemeal, and varied between organisations and even between departments in the same agency. There was also little evidence of any systematic attempt to analyse monitoring data in order to piece together a fuller understanding of the experiences and outcomes for Somali clients.

Without accurate and comprehensive monitoring information sensitive to Somali clients, and given the limited evidence base on the needs of the Somali population, there is little reason why statutory agencies should be aware of the need to review the relevance and sensitivity of institutional practices to the situations of Somali households. There are also other inter-connected reasons to explain why the reform of mainstream provision to meet the needs of Somali households has been limited.

(i) Crude Conceptualisations of Ethnicity and Minority Ethnic Need

Respondents complained about the crude categorisation of minority ethnic populations into the catch-all grouping ‘BME’. Service providers were criticised for assuming that minority ethnic communities share common experiences, aspirations and needs and are therefore equally well served by blanket policies and generic provision targeted at ‘BME’ needs. As respondents in Bristol pointed out, many of the same barriers (social, cultural and religious) can exist for Somali people when approaching a service supposedly targeted at the ‘BME’ population, as for a mainstream service:

“Somali community has not received much support from the local authority or government. The assumption is that Somalis will be served by BME services, but our language and culture makes us distinct.”

Somali Respondent, Bristol

A further consequence of the tendency for policy to draw minority ethnic populations together into the generic grouping of ‘BME’ was reported to be competition between groups for a share of the limited resources targeted at ‘BME issues’ - a competition in which the Somali populations often lost out.

(ii) Somali Political Power and Influence

In each of the case study districts, the Somali community was considered to wield little political power or influence to effect any change in the policy or practice of mainstream service providers. Respondents in Tower Hamlets gave various reasons to explain the limited influence of the Somali population in local politics. Many Somalis were thought to be disengaged from formal politics, whether as activists, candidates or merely as voters. The Somali population was therefore “*a hidden society*”, even though the size of

the population in certain wards provided the opportunity to influence, if not determine, the outcome of local elections. It was also suggested that the Somali population in Tower Hamlets was not as geographically concentrated as some other minority ethnic groups, such as the Bengali population, limiting their chances to secure political representation. Respondents in Tower Hamlets concluded that greater political representation would not be secured until the generation of Somalis who have grown up in the UK are able to secure positions of influence and represent the community more vocally.

The limits of Somali power and influence were also apparent in the politics of resource allocation and agenda setting within BME networks. Across the case study districts respondents felt that other minority ethnic groups are better organised than the Somali population and better able to articulate their needs, influence policy and secure access to resources. The Somali population therefore struggled to influence and inform policy toward minority ethnic groups and to secure a fair share of resources directed toward minority ethnic populations and the neighbourhoods where they lived.

In Liverpool, for example, respondents argued that the needs of the Somali community have traditionally remained hidden because other minority ethnic groups have successfully focused initiatives and resources targeted at minority ethnic needs on their own requirements. In particular, it was suggested that the Indian and Caribbean communities in Liverpool have, through their organised and active representatives, successfully concentrated targeted interventions and resource allocation on the needs of their own communities, whilst less organised groups, such as Somalis, have tended to be excluded from such provision.

(iii) The Characterisation of Somali Households as Asylum Seekers

Respondents suggested that the tendency for people to categorise Somali people as refugees and asylum seekers allows policy to presume that their needs are being catered for by services targeted at households recently arrived in the UK. If one ignores, for a moment, the recognised limits and inadequacies of local and national service provision and support for refugees and asylum seekers, and even if *all* Somali households were recent refugees, they would still require support and access to services above and beyond the specialist provision available to people processing asylum applications or recently granted leave to remain in the UK, as a respondent in Bristol pointed out:

“But what about once they get refugee status and get a local authority tenancy? What services and support are available then, other than the informal support of friends and relatives?”

Somali Respondent, Bristol

There was evidence that some of the limitations on how mainstream, white-led service providers respond to the specific needs of Somali households were being countered successfully. In Liverpool, for example, the local authority was reported to have been

more responsive to the needs of the Somali community since the publication of the inquiry *“The Somali Community in Liverpool”* chaired by the Bishop of Liverpool in January 2000. This report included specific recommendations which Somali groups believe have been successful in putting the local authority on the spot about its efforts to meet the community’s needs. Following publication of the report, a Somali Action Plan has been agreed by the local authority. As respondents in Liverpool observed, however, the process of reviewing and reforming institutional practices in light of the experiences of the Somali population has only begun because of the impetus of the report. What or who might provide such an impetus in the other case study districts is not clear. In the past, other minority ethnic populations have benefited from the active lobbying of statutory agencies and service providers by BME-led agencies. The Somali population does not appear to be well served, however, by the established network of BME-led agencies.

2.3.2 Somali Experiences of BME-Led Agencies and Service Providers

A common sentiment among respondents was that the Somali population has very specific and unique needs and requirements:

“We want to be treated the same as other communities... distinctly, because of our language ... our culture, customs, even though we share the Muslim religion we still congregate as a community ... we wish to have our community maintained.”

Somali Respondent, Tower Hamlets

As well as highlighting the deficiencies of mainstream, white-led provision, respondents suggested that BME-led agencies were also rarely aware or sensitive to Somali concerns and priorities. Respondents asked why a BME-led agency run by and employing Pakistani, Chinese or African-Caribbean staff, for example, should automatically be more aware or sensitive than white-led organisations to the special requirements of Somali households - circumstances that are rooted in the population’s unique mix of cultural practices, social structures and norms, religious beliefs and shared experiences, centred on the civil war and life since arriving in the UK. It was therefore not surprising that many of the same barriers that were reported to restrict access to and limit use of services provided by mainstream, white-led agencies were also relevant to services provided by BME-led agencies. In particular, respondents referred to language difficulties, which could sometimes be more problematic in dealings with voluntary sector agencies because of the absence of interpretation and translation services.

Respondents were not as critical of the practices of BME-led agencies as of the underlying assumptions behind their role. It was acknowledged that many were originally established in response to the difficulties encountered by a particular group or community and have a stated mission to serve the needs of that community. Respondents

were therefore more concerned that statutory agencies might believe that the presence of an active network of BME-led agencies was a guarantee that the specific needs of all minority ethnic communities were being met. Concern was also voiced about the tendency for local partnerships (such as Single Regeneration Budget partnerships, Local Strategic Partnerships or New Deal for Communities Boards) to recruit ‘BME’ representatives without sufficient regard to the communities that individual representatives came from. This point was illustrated in one case study district with reference to the presence on the NDC partnership of two ‘BME’ members, neither of whom were Somali, who it had been assumed were capable of representing the diverse minority ethnic population within the area. Respondents were also concerned about the relative dearth of Somali organisations with the capacity and resources to represent and respond to the needs of the local Somali population.

2.3.3 Somali-Led Service Provision

A traditional response of minority ethnic communities to the inadequacies or insensitivities of white-led, mainstream service provision has been to develop alternative services through community-led groups and voluntary sector agencies. A prime example of this process has been the growth of the BME housing movement. Respondents identified an array of Somali-led agencies that were active in the case study districts, although the nature and extent of this sector varied. At one end of the spectrum was Bristol, where it was reported that only one Somali-led organisation, a women’s group, was receiving local authority funding. Other groups were active in the city and providing vital support and assistance to local people, but the extent and nature of their activities was limited by resource constraints, as one local authority officer observed:

“voluntary groups within the (Somali) community come and go according to the availability of funding.”

Local Authority Officer, Bristol

Respondents in Bristol suggested the relative dearth of Somali-led agencies within the city was a reflection of the relatively small size of the population in the city until recent years, which did not demand or have the capacity and resources to support a diverse range of community-led services. Whereas the Somali communities in Sheffield and London are well established and have had years to nurture community-led services, it was suggested that the Somali population in Bristol has grown rapidly during the last ten years and is taking time to develop and secure funding for community-led services.

In Sheffield, in contrast, there were reported to be over fifty Somali-led groups and organisations. Few of these, however, were reported to have successfully tapped into major funding streams. This was a recurrent theme across the case study districts. Despite a diverse range of Somali-led agencies working in various areas (housing, health

and social care, as well as providing advice and translation and interpretation services), few were reported to be receiving support through formal funding streams. Respondents in Sheffield blamed this failing on the lack of capacity within the local Somali community, suggesting that it lacked leadership from people who understood “the system” and arguing that other minority communities could more readily call on community members with professional expertise (such as solicitors, doctors, councillors or MPs) to secure a share of available resources. A further explanation was that divisions within the Somali community were undermining the potential capacity of the population to organise the provision of community-led services, with one respondent commenting: *“we are re-enacting the Civil War here”*.

Similar points were made by respondents in Liverpool, who pointed out that the majority of Somalis live within a one mile radius of Granby Street in Liverpool 8 - a concentration that should provide the community with the potential to influence local political representation and gain from area based initiatives in the district. However, it was suggested that this potential had not been realised because of deep-seated divisions within the community, and that the four main Somali organisations within the city receive funding of less than £50,000 annually from the local authority. Consequently, services provided by and for the community are often housed in unsuitable accommodation and are dependent upon the goodwill and commitment of volunteers:

“The so-called Somali Community centres in the area are Victorian houses with small rooms, overcrowded and there are no facilities for the elderly.”

Older Somali Respondent, Liverpool

“We share Somali Community centres with the young and children of the community who do not have other places to go to. Therefore the places are always overcrowded and there is too much noise and lots of smoking.”

Older Somali Respondent, Liverpool

“There is no advice or information centre for the Somali youth and no one from the Somali Community is employed to address our needs.”

Younger Somali Respondent, Liverpool

Respondents in Liverpool, however, were optimistic about the recent formation of the Somali Umbrella Group, to provide a single voice for the community and point of contact and liaison for the local authority. This offered the opportunity for Somali interests to work for the benefit of all Somali groups and community members and to illustrate need and secure funding more effectively.

Respondents in Tower Hamlets offered other explanations for the difficulties facing voluntary sector agencies in accessing resources. In particular, it was suggested that

groups had faced problems in convincing funders about the extent of need in the Somali community because of a lack of research evidence or demographic data:

“The nature of the process and the nature of the needs of the system are such that an officer ... to give approval for a scheme ... can not sign something unless it has been properly researched... has to be accountable for public money.”

Somali Respondent, Tower Hamlets

Respondents in Tower Hamlets therefore argued that the Somali community must gain access to the various forums where decisions were being taken about resource allocation:

“We need to play at a high level ... where decision making is....shout louder to get a share of the available resources.”

Somali Respondent, Tower Hamlets

The failure of groups to organise and manage their affairs in a manner likely to satisfy the protocols and practices of funding agencies also undermined the efforts of Somali organisations to tap into available funding streams, according to Somali respondents and local authority officers. Access to resources was often restricted even where there was a willingness to support the activities of a Somali organisation.

Across the case study districts and throughout discussions with various sub-sections of the Somali population (young and old, men and women, recent arrivals and people born and raised in the UK), respondents were clear that community-led organisations had an important role to play in countering the inadequacies of mainstream, white-led service provision in meeting the particular requirements of the Somali population. Although respondents in each of the case study districts were able to point to a small number of Somali-led projects and initiatives that had apparently made a big difference to the lives of local people, discussion also generated a list of unrecognised and unmet needs requiring the urgent attention of specialist Somali-led agencies.

Respondents' Priorities for Somali-Led Services

- language training and education for Somali women to narrow the gap between the children (who speak English and more actively engaged with other cultures and ways of life) and their mothers, who often have no English language skills and limited understanding of service provision, activities and interests that their children are gaining.

“We must get language classes that are designed for Somali people. There are language courses in the colleges but they are not tailored to Somali people. They

need starter courses. This will help us to get access to shopping, to talk to the housing offices, to go to the GP, all these things."

Somali Respondent, Bristol

- advice and advocacy services, able to assist and represent Somali households in dealings with service providers and able to provide interpretation and translation services.
- education, training and employment opportunities for and run by Somali people. Somali people often find it difficult to tap into mainstream opportunities because of their isolation and exclusion as a result of their limited English language skills and unfamiliarity with opportunities.
- pre-school provision for Somali children, including toddler groups and childcare, enabling Somali women to take up training opportunities, such as language classes.

"The Somali Community in Ealing do not have any centre or a mosque, there is not a place for the women and children come together and enjoy their day."

Somali Women, Ealing

- social centres and events for older people and for women.

"There is not a place such a day care centre, or Somali community centre they go to socialise and meet with their friends or the older people know before."

Older Somali Respondent, Ealing

"The elderly people of the Somali community need to have developed day care centre, shelter and supported housing and a community centre where they socialise and meet with their friends."

Older Somali Respondent, Ealing

- youth clubs, recreational facilities, advice and support facilities for younger people.

"There are no youth centres or youth clubs for the Somali youth in the borough. Therefore, there is not a place for their own to socialise or meet with their friends in their spare time."

Younger Somali Respondent, Tower Hamlets

2.4 Conclusion

The impression gained from focus group discussions with different sub-sections of the Somali population in five case study districts across England is that extreme levels of deprivation and disadvantage are commonplace. These experiences appear to be informed and reinforced by the difficulties facing Somali households in accessing both mainstream, white-led and BME-led service provision. Somali-led service provision, meanwhile, appears to be under-resourced, limited in scale and nature and unable to provide sufficient support to Somali households, either in accessing and utilising mainstream provision or in providing an alternative to mainstream provision. These key themes are revisited and reinforced in the detailed analysis of the housing situations, experiences and needs of Somali households presented in the following chapter.

3. The Housing Experiences of Somali Households

3.1 Introduction

As shown in Chapter 1, the early pattern of settlement of the Somali population in England produced a distinctive geography, with small population clusters in port areas, such as London, Liverpool and Cardiff, and in particular industrial centres, such as Sheffield. This pattern of settlement has been reinforced by the subsequent migration of dependents and, more recently, by the arrival of refugees fleeing the civil war, with existing populations serving as a magnet for new arrivals. Discussions with Somali residents in the five case study districts suggested that there is also a distinctive pattern of settlement at the local level, characterised by clustering in deprived inner-city locations, with households living in overcrowded accommodation which is often in poor physical condition. The aim of this chapter is to shed light on these housing situations, through analysis of the experiences of Somali households, the preferences and aspirations of different segments of the population and the overall relevance and adequacy of housing policy and provision.

The chapter is divided into four sections, exploring particular dimensions of the housing experiences of Somali households:

- access and security;
- homelessness;
- housing conditions and suitability;
- housing services, policy and provision.

Throughout, attention is paid to the specific and unique experiences, aspirations and needs of different sections of the Somali population.

3.2 Access and Security

Evidence from both Somali residents participating in focus group discussions and local authority officers suggested that the vast majority of Somali households were living in local authority and housing association accommodation. Households recently arrived in the country were reported to be often living in hostel accommodation provided by private landlords, under arrangement with NASS and, once granted leave to remain in the country, in local authority temporary accommodation for homeless people.

During these discussions, it became clear that the concentration of Somali households in the social rented sector was less the consequence of choice and more the result of a series of constraining forces. In particular, three factors, commonly called on to explain the particular housing situations of minority ethnic groups, were significant in explaining the concentration of Somali households in the social rented sector:

- the resettlement process for households recently arrived in the country and granted leave to remain often requires them to rely on assistance from the local authority with their housing needs, unless they are able to call on the informal support of family or friends or have the financial means to secure alternative accommodation. Once granted leave to remain, refugee households are no longer entitled to reside in NASS sponsored accommodation and have to leave within 28 days. Effectively homeless, many refugee households are recognised as such under the homelessness legislation. The local authority, once recognising a household as homeless, has a statutory obligation to assist in meeting their housing need. For applicants recognised as being in priority need this means an offer of permanent accommodation. Applicants not deemed to be in priority need, typically single people, can be offered temporary shelter, for example, in hostel accommodation. There is therefore a tendency for those Somali households arriving in the country who are reliant on formal service provision to be funnelled into local authority accommodation.
- limited material resources and related affordability problems can obviously restrict choice and, in particular, prevent access to owner-occupation. Although some Somali households are resident in the low cost owner occupied sector, high levels of unemployment and income poverty were reported to limit access to home ownership and even private renting, as Housing Benefit often failed to cover the full cost of rents. It was also suggested that access to private renting was limited by the virtual absence of Somali landlords within the sector, who might literally be more accommodating.
- social networks and the reliance on family and friends for advice and assistance were reported to bind households to particular locations, thereby limiting housing choice and reinforcing historical settlement patterns in particular towns and cities. Residents in several case study districts made the point that Somali people in some instances have increased their housing opportunities by moving outside traditional population clusters. The majority of Somali households, however, were reported to be involved in a trade-off, in which the informal advice, assistance, social support and cultural facilities available in traditional clusters were determined to be more important than the opportunity to gain access to higher quality accommodation elsewhere. Respondents also pointed to the impact of the experience and/or expectation of harassment as a constraint on the willingness to move into new neighbourhoods. As a result, there was limited mobility among Somali households across tenures and between neighbourhoods.

Although these various factors appear to funnel Somali households into local authority and housing association accommodation, it would be wrong to assume that this means that access to social housing is straightforward. Key constraints on access to the sector included:

- **the knowledge and awareness of available provision and access routes into social housing** - respondents suggested that Somali households often had limited cognitive resources (education, skills and knowledge of the housing market and the social welfare system), which can be critical in negotiating access to their desired housing situation.
- **difficulties approaching landlords and negotiating access to housing** - problems were reported in dealings with social landlords, compounded by the severe lack of either front-line or senior Somali officers in local authority housing departments and housing associations and the inadequate provision of interpretation and language services. Social networks within the Somali population rarely included persons or extended into groups with significant power to assist or advise Somali households about access to social housing or to inform and sensitise the policies and practices of landlords to their situations and needs.
- **availability of accommodation** - problems in gaining access to social rented housing were reported to be particularly acute in London, where the logic of rationing access to local authority and housing association property through various entry criteria and a strict interpretation of statutory obligations still prevails in the context of high demand. It was reported that, as a consequence, certain household types were more likely to be living in other sectors of the housing market. In particular, although the vast majority of Somali households in each of the case study districts were thought to be living in the social rented sector, it was suggested that younger people and single person households were more likely to rent in the private sector because of problems accessing social housing.
- **availability of accommodation in preferred locations** - respondents in the low demand housing markets of Liverpool and Sheffield reported that access to social housing was nevertheless restricted by the limited availability of accommodation in desired locations. In Liverpool, for example, the local authority and housing associations were reported to be unable to meet demand among applicants to live within the established Somali community in the Granby area. Consequently, non-priority applicants (traditionally single people) were having to either accept an offer of accommodation in an alternative area or look outside the social rented sector in order to secure accommodation in the Granby area. It was also suggested that the difficulties encountered by Somali households in the Granby area had been exacerbated by the actions of landlords. For example, it was reported that one housing association had converted large properties well suited to the needs of large

families into flat accommodation. The local authority was also criticised for suspending its policy of undertaking conversions to create larger family homes more suited to Somalis.

- **availability of suitable accommodation for different households types (size, design and facilities)** - it was argued that the limited awareness of the specific needs of particular sections of the Somali population among social landlords and the failure of the Somali community to assert these needs to service providers resulted in the limited provision of specialised accommodation. In particular, there was limited provision of support and care (including adaptations to accommodation) and sheltered accommodation relevant to the particular needs of older Somali people. The dearth of specialist provision was reported to force older people to rely on family and friends, often by living in unsuitable social and physical conditions:

“Some of the Somali older people share houses with young people who make a lot of nuisance to them.”

Somali Respondent, Bristol

Despite the multitude of factors apparently limiting the housing choices of members of the Somali community, tenure was mentioned less as an issue than concerns about homelessness and housing conditions.

3.3 Homelessness

The group discussions showed that homelessness was a common experience and major problem among the Somali population in all five case study locations. The incidence and extent of homelessness among the Somali population is difficult to establish, however, because the experience of homelessness was reported to take many forms and to affect different sections of the population in different ways.

3.3.1 The Incidence of Homelessness

It is difficult to piece together a picture of homelessness among Somali households and compare the incidence of homelessness with that experienced by other ethnic groups. Official figures submitted to the ODPM by local authorities detailing the number of households presenting as homeless reveal that minority ethnic groups are over-represented among households recognised as homeless under the legislation. Between July and September 2002, for example, over 8,080 of the 33,640 households accepted as homeless (24%) were recorded as being from a black or minority ethnic background (ODPM, 2002a). In Ealing over three-quarters of all homeless applicants (78%) were recorded as belonging to a minority ethnic group in the third quarter of 2002; in Sheffield the equivalent figure was 38%, in Tower Hamlets 72%, in Bristol 52% and in

Liverpool 44%. These figures, however, do not allow analysis of homeless applications from members of specific minority ethnic groups. The ethnic categorisation distinguishes only between White applicants, African Caribbean applicants, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi applicants and applicants of Other Ethnic Origin. Nor is it possible to isolate information about homeless refugees and asylum seekers granted leave to remain and therefore qualifying for assistance under the homelessness legislation.

At the local level, some of the case study authorities were found to recognise Somali as a distinct category in their ethnic monitoring of homelessness presentations, but it remains difficult to interpret this information without knowing the overall size of the local Somali population. In Liverpool, for example, 19 Somali households containing 104 people were recorded as presenting as homeless between 1997/98 and 2001/02, but it is not possible to compare the incidence of homelessness with that experienced by other communities. Any useful interpretation of official figures also demands some understanding of the propensity of homeless Somali households to approach the local authority for help. The limited evidence available suggests that these households are often reticent about approaching statutory services for assistance, relying instead on the support and assistance of family and friends. A study of the Somali community in Sheffield, for example, found living with family or friends to be the most common form of accommodation among people self-defined as homeless. It reported that many homeless people had not approached the local authority for assistance, as they were unaware or unsure about how or why they might do so (Hillaac, 1996).

The reliance on family and friends for accommodation and support when homeless also limits the insights provided by alternative methods of estimating homelessness, including temporary accommodation surveys and analysis of service user records of homeless agencies (see Table 3.1). Neither is anything known about the incidence of rough sleeping among the Somali population, given that the officially sanctioned method of counting rough sleeping, which involves a team of enumerators visiting known haunts of rough sleepers on a particular night and counting the number of people bedded down and sleeping rough, does not permit ethnic monitoring. Enumerators are required to observe and count rough sleepers rather than talk to and question them.

Table 3.1 Factors Limiting the Applicability of Traditional Methods of Estimating Homelessness to the Somali Population

Data Sources	Factors Limiting Applicability to the Somali Population
<p>Statutory Statistics <i>(households dealt with under the homelessness provisions of the 1985 and 1996 Housing Acts and the Homelessness Act 2002)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the categorisation of ethnicity in figures published by the ODPM does not allow Somali or other specific ethnic groups to be identified some local authorities do collect more specific information about the ethnicity of homeless applicants, including Somali applicants, but without understanding the size of the local Somali population it is difficult to put these figures in context the figures only count people who express a 'felt need' and present as homeless to the local authority perhaps unaware or uncertain of the assistance available or because of low expectations about the service they will receive, Somali homeless households appear to only rarely approach their local authority for help the statistics refer to households not individuals. The extent of homelessness among the Somali population is therefore likely to be underestimated, given the relatively large size of many Somali households (the Somali households applying as homeless in Liverpool between 1997/98 and 2001/02 contained an average of 5.5 people) it was suggested in group discussions that some Somali people do not recognise themselves as homeless, even though they are living in situations that might reasonably be defined as such
<p>Accommodation Surveys <i>(local estimates of people using temporary accommodation to generate a proxy measure of single homelessness)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> evidence of the failure of Somali households to engage with formal service provision, for various reasons, suggests that Somali people will often be unlikely or unwilling to use generic temporary accommodation the limited provision of specialist services forces reliance on informal support networks and varied accommodation situations, in particular, staying with family and friends
<p>Rough Sleeper Counts <i>(head count of people sleeping rough on a particular night(s) in known haunts)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> do not permit ethnic monitoring, as the method does not involve engaging with and questioning rough sleepers, merely noting their presence research evidence suggests that minority ethnic people often engage in tactics of invisibility and keep out of the public eye when sleeping rough
<p>Analysis of Service User Records <i>(information collected by service providers about the housing and homeless situations of clients)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> homeless Somali households are likely to be under-represented in service user data, because of their limited engagement with formal service provision information collected and collated by Somali-led agencies could provide some insights, but there is a relative dearth of Somali-led service providers
<p>Housing Needs Surveys <i>(local authority led surveys providing an assessment of shortfalls from pre-determined standards)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the tendency to focus on mainstream (White-British) assumptions about wants and needs can neglect the unique needs of minority groups, such as the Somali population methodological failings have often resulted in housing needs surveys struggling to access and assess the needs of minority ethnic households. In addition the common categorisations of ethnicity used in housing needs surveys often fail to identify Somali as a distinct group

3.3.2 The Situations and Experiences of Homelessness

Somali households were reported to be living in many of the situations commonly associated with homelessness (sleeping rough, resident in hostels and bed and breakfast hotels, staying as temporary guests, living in overcrowded or sub-standard accommodation and in situations where their personal safety or well-being is at risk). It was suggested, however, that three homeless situations were particularly common among homeless Somali households and shaped their experience:

(i) Statutory Homelessness

Group discussions suggested that few Somali households were recognised as homeless under the legislation, principally because relatively few had approached the local authority for help or assistance. Reference was made to the limited understanding and knowledge among many Somali households about the rights of homeless people or the statutory obligations of local authorities. It was therefore suggested that the majority of Somali households recognised as homeless and assisted under the legislation were refugee households living in NASS sponsored accommodation. These households were engaged with formal services and commonly encounter homelessness upon being granted leave to remain in the country while having no other accommodation they could be reasonably be expected to occupy.

The Somali refugees and asylum seekers granted leave to remain who had experienced homelessness included single people, large multi-generational families and single parent families, typically headed by women. When asked about their experiences, these respondents referred to the inadequacies and unsuitability of temporary accommodation provided by the local authority while their application was processed and during their wait for an offer of permanent housing. These problems centred on the physical condition and location of temporary accommodation, the availability of support and advice services and the time spent waiting for an offer of permanent accommodation.

Refugee households granted leave to remain and recognised as homeless by a local authority were reported to be staying in various types of temporary accommodation, including bed and breakfast hotels, hostels and local authority properties provided on a temporary basis. Familiar problems with bed and breakfast hotel and hostel accommodation included:

- **overcrowding**, with examples of whole families being accommodated in a single room and experiencing problems such as the lack of privacy;
- **inappropriate mixing of ages and household types**, with evidence of single people and families with young children being placed in the same accommodation. Problems were also reported to be encountered by single men, when forced to share with families with children;

- **limited understanding or appreciation of the situations and experiences or cultural requirements of Somali people**, compounded by the absence of Somali hostel staff;
- **poor physical conditions**, inadequate heating, limited cooking and cleaning facilities and limited play areas for children and recreational opportunities for adults;
- **isolation**, either as a result of placement in temporary accommodation with few Somali residents or in locations away from major concentrations of the Somali population, limiting the opportunities for support, social contact and advice, as well as assistance in liaising with the local authority.

It was claimed that these problems, which are common among people living in bed and breakfast accommodation, were compounded by the extra time that Somali households were forced to reside in temporary accommodation, as a result of delays in being rehoused due to difficulties identifying suitable accommodation (size, location and design). Lengthy delays in accommodating homeless Somali households resident in temporary accommodation were confirmed by local authority officers in one case study district, who reported that various strategies had been introduced in an attempt to solve the problem, including placing homeless Somali families in private rented accommodation and breaking up large families and accommodating them in adjacent properties.

(ii) Homeless and Living with Family and Friends

The reliance of Somali households on the informal support and assistance of family and friends was reported to extend to the provision of temporary accommodation for homeless individuals and families. This situation was distinct from family members wanting and choosing to live together in multi-generational households and was described as a situation borne out of necessity rather than choice.

Living with family and friends was reported to be the most common situation for homeless Somali households. There is no way of independently verifying this assertion, but, as already noted, a study of the Somali community in Sheffield confirmed this among people self-defined as homeless (Hillaac, 1996). For some Somali households who did not approach NASS for help or assistance with their accommodation needs, living with family and friends represented a long-term housing solution and the only situation they had known since arrival in the country. For other households, living with family and friends was the preferred option. Reasons for the reliance of so many homeless Somali households on family and friends for accommodation, however, commonly centred on the problems associated with other options, rather than the positive benefits of using informal networks.

The reluctance of Somali households to approach the local authority for advice and assistance was explained by reference to the limited understanding of services or statutory obligations, as well as language difficulties. The poor quality of much temporary accommodation (bed and breakfast hotels and hostels) and its limited availability in existing concentrations of Somali households were also considered to have an impact.

Even where homeless households had approached the local authority, the reliance on family and friends for accommodation was common. Young single people and childless couples, for example, were reported to face particular difficulties because they were not recognised as being in priority need under the homeless legislation and due to their low priority on the waiting list. They were often forced to rely on family and friends at a time when they were wanting to strike out on their own. Even those homeless Somali households who had approached the local authority and had been recognised as homeless and in priority need were reported to also end up living with family and friends, following difficulties with temporary accommodation or the failure to secure permanent accommodation. In one case study district it was suggested that families were commonly discharged from hostel accommodation following their refusal to accept their first tenancy offer, which they deemed unsuitable, either because of its location in relation to other members of the Somali community or its unsuitability given the size and structure of their household. There were also reports of family units being offered split site accommodation, because of a lack of adequately sized units.

(iii) Homeless at Home

An objective assessment of the physical and social situations and conditions facing some Somali households would be likely to conclude that they are lacking the physical and emotional determinants of 'home'. They could therefore reasonably be considered to be homeless, although not necessarily defining themselves in this way. Overcrowding was reported to be a key problem, with the accommodation of large, sometimes multi-generational, households in property designed for the needs of a nuclear family. These problems were compounded by the poor physical condition of accommodation, the incompatibility of property design with social norms and ways of living common among Somali households and inadequate or inappropriate facilities - for example, relating to food preparation and cooking. Respondents also mentioned problems over safety and security and the experience of crime and harassment in and around the home.

3.3.3 Homeless Lifestyles

The experiences of homeless Somali households varied in nature and severity, depending upon their accommodation position, the degree of engagement with, and reliance on, statutory and voluntary sector agencies, the presence of friends or relatives and links into social networks of Somali people able to assist, and the awareness of available housing and support opportunities and routes out of homelessness. The vast majority of homeless Somali households, however, reported that they lived in environments that in some way

restricted their freedom, lacked privacy, and were insecure and sometimes unsafe. They mentioned various difficulties, commonly documented in other studies of the wider homeless population, such as inadequate or hazardous living environments, where space is cramped or overcrowded, and the limited provision of basic services, including cooking and washing facilities. Other difficulties were more specific to Somali households and have not been recognised by accommodation providers. A common complaint was the isolation of being the only Somali household in a hotel or hostel, particularly if the household has limited English language skills:

"I am homeless and live in hotel with my little girl daughter. Sharing the bathrooms, the toilets, the kitchen and the communal facilities with men and women whom you can not speak to puts you in a great pressure and makes you feel insecure."

Homeless Somali Woman, Tower Hamlets

The incompatibility of life in hostel accommodation with the cultural norms and expectations of Somali society was also pointed out:

" I have three children two girls at the age of 13, 10, and a boy of 15 years old. We live in a large one room a bed and breakfast hotel. It is un-Islamic and culturally taboo for a boy of this age to live with us in the same room."

Homeless Somali Woman, Tower Hamlets

The consequences of a long stay in temporary accommodation were regarded as having a disproportionate impact on young people, undermining their educational attainment and limiting opportunities to access training and employment. Some of these problems were regarded as inevitable when living in temporary accommodation:

"The young people in the hostel or temporary accommodation become isolated, less achieving in the schools and rarely go into training or jobs."

Somali Young Person, Liverpool

"The biggest problem facing the Somali young people is homelessness. If you are homeless you cannot get better education or find work or better health."

Somali Young Person, Sheffield

It was suggested, however, that the relatively long time spent in temporary accommodation and the constant movement between different hostels and hotels was often undermining whatever informal network of support that households were able to establish:

“The homeless families get longer to stay in temporary accommodation and move from one area to another. So the children’s education is disrupted or they lose playmates and religious and cultural ties.”

Somali Respondent, Sheffield

“Keeping a long period for the Somali homelessness families and their children in bed and breakfasts hotels or the temporary accommodation and moving them from one place to other are seriously affecting both the education and the health of the parents and the children.”

Somali Respondent, Tower Hamlets

The difficulties facing homeless Somali households were reported to be affected further, in some instances, by their placement in temporary accommodation well away from clusters of the Somali population - especially in London, where homeless households are often accommodated outside the borough.

3.4 Housing Conditions and Suitability

“Housing and the poor housing condition are the main problem faced by Somali people. The conditions, the homelessness.”

Somali Respondent, Bristol

The suitability and condition of available and accessible accommodation was the housing issue that raised most concern across all sections of the Somali population in this study. The two biggest problems were overcrowding and poor physical conditions.

3.4.1 Overcrowding

The apparent prevalence of overcrowding among the Somali population should not come as a surprise. Overcrowding is often associated with households with large number of children, which describes a common household type among the Somali population, and is more widespread among households living in rented accommodation (ODPM, 2002b), where the vast majority of Somali households reside. Discussions with respondents did not involve the collection of information about household composition and size and details of current accommodation. It is not, therefore, possible to comment on occupation densities among respondents or to apply the official ‘bedroom standard’ measure of overcrowding. Respondents made it clear, however, that many Somali households were living in severely overcrowded circumstances which were having a dramatic impact on their physical, mental and emotional well-being and future prospects.

It is well known that overcrowding affects the physical and mental health of household members - for example, through the increased incidence of accidents in the home or the

mental stress associated with a lack of personal space and privacy. The problems identified by respondents also reveal the impact of overcrowding on everyday, taken-for-granted activities, such as watching television and sitting quietly and relaxing:

"The difficulties that my family and I are facing is overcrowding. My children do not have place where to sit to read and do their homework or watch their TV programmes when their father, who is an elderly man, is staying at the living room."

Somali Woman, Tower Hamlets

"I have seven children at the age between four to 21 and live in four bedroom house. There is always an argument or quarrels between the young and the older ones."

Somali Women, Sheffield

" My two grown up boys are living with me and my three younger children in the flat. There is no space to study or to rest for the children."

Somali Woman, Ealing

A lack of peace and quiet and privacy was also reported to be a major problem for some older Somali people:

"The elderly people who live with their families do not have enough space to relax or sitting quietly due to the overcrowding."

Older Somali Respondent, Sheffield

"My elder mother lives with us, and we are overcrowded. She feels that she does not have any privacy and needs a ground floor flat which is near to us."

Somali Respondent, Bristol

For young people, similar problems were reported to be affecting their ability to study and do their homework:

"When you are living in overcrowding accommodation and you do not have a space to read quietly or relax, it is hard to get better grade in the school."

Young Somali Respondent, Sheffield

"it is very difficult to study at home when you live in overcrowded accommodation with your father and younger brothers and sisters."

Young Somali Respondent, Liverpool

Overcrowding had a marked impact on Somali women, as they were likely to spend more time in and around the home. It was also suggested that the home was the domain in

which Somali women could often define and assert their role within the household. Overcrowded conditions would have a negative impact on this role.

“The women’s role in the home gives her a space for developing her own sense of autonomy, which is largely achieved through her relations with other women.”

Somali Woman, Sheffield

Overcrowding partly reflects the limited availability of housing opportunities. However, it was a common experience in the low demand housing markets of Liverpool and Sheffield, as well as in the high demand housing market of London. This suggests that the limited availability of housing opportunities reflects a series of constraints other than the provision of bricks and mortar. Increasing the availability of suitable accommodation in desired locations through refurbishment and new build is a necessary long-term response to the problems of overcrowding, but it would not be enough on its own. It needs to be complemented by efforts to tackle factors such as the limited knowledge and awareness of access routes into available provision among Somali households and the inadequacies of landlords’ policies and practices. Together, such measures could have a significant impact on reducing levels of overcrowding.

3.4.2 Housing Conditions

The government has set a target designed to ensure that all social rented housing is of a ‘decent’ standard by 2010. For the purposes of measuring progress, a decent home will have to meet the current statutory minimum standard for housing, be in a reasonable state of repair, have reasonably modern facilities and services and provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort. It is likely that many of the problems reported by Somali households with the condition of their accommodation will be addressed if this target is met, given that the majority are resident in the social rented sector. At present, problems were commonly reported to include damp and condensation, ineffective heating systems, poor quality repairs and maintenance and inadequate security measures. Due to language difficulties, many people said that they were reliant on the assistance of family or friends in order to report the need for repairs and maintenance or to challenge the actions of their landlord:

“It takes four or five days to report a leaking sink or other disrepairs to the housing office due to lack of speaking English.”

Somali Respondent, Tower Hamlets

“The majority of the Somali women do not speak the English language, they rely on their children as interpreters for them in the housing offices.”

Somali Woman, Sheffield

" I always phone my cousin who now lives in Brent Council and ask him to report my blocked toilet other broken things on my behalf."

Somali Women, Ealing

It was pointed out that, as a result of difficulties and delays in reporting the need for repairs and maintenance, minor problems sometimes developed into more major concerns. Such problems would be less likely if more immediate lines of communication were opened between landlords and their Somali tenants - for example, through the employment of Somali staff in core housing management or community liaison positions.

In addition to problems with the physical condition of their property, respondents also voiced concerns about the suitability of their current accommodation. They identified various considerations rarely included in housing design which are important requirements for Somali households, given household structures, social norms, cultural practices and religious requirements. These included the provision of large kitchens with good ventilation, at least two living rooms and shower facilities instead of baths. In addition, it was pointed out that many older people are living with family and friends, often out of necessity because of the limited provision of specialist provision for Somali elders. Many Somali households therefore reported the need for property adaptations to allow older household members to be less dependent and more mobile around the property:

"I have mother who is 75 years of age. She lives with me on the 14th floor. When the lift breaks down, it is very hard for her to get down and went for her appointment with GP or go out to breath the fresh air and take a walk."

Somali Woman, Tower Hamlets

"The houses and flats lived in by most of the elderly people are not adapted to the standard of the elderly accommodations such as adapted showers and bathrooms, and the area has no gardens or parks."

Older Somali Respondent, Sheffield

"My mother, who is 74 years old, is living with me; she has difficulties to go up or down the stairs when she needs to go to the toilet."

Somali Woman, Bristol

This need is often compounded by the fact that older Somali people tend not to be in contact with, or receive assistance from, formal support and care services, because of limited knowledge, concerns about the sensitivity of the services and language barriers. Instead, older Somali people often rely on family and friends, putting pressure on family members, as well as limiting the lives of older people:

“The elderly disabled people have no support and they are always bound in to their homes or flat in 24 hrs.”

Older Somali Respondent, Sheffield

“There is no downstairs toilet in the house, the stairs, the toilet and the bathroom in the upstairs are not adapted for an elderly person, so we are having to carry her when my mother needs the toilet or the bathroom.”

Somali Woman, Bristol

However, not all older Somali people are able to call on family support; many are former seamen with few family contacts in the UK or single people who lost their spouse in the civil war and subsequently fled Somalia. There is therefore also a need for accommodation and support packages for those who are unable to call upon the assistance of family and friends.

Respondents suggested that Somali households are more likely to live in poor housing than other social housing tenants, for at least three reasons.

1. Many Somali households are entering the social rented sector under the provisions of the homelessness legislation, contained in the Housing Act 1996 and reasserted in the Homelessness Act 2002. Research has indicated that homeless households typically receive a limited number of tenancy offers and can be directed toward less popular housing by local authority allocation officers (Robinson, 1998). It was not, therefore, surprising to hear refugees and asylum seekers granted leave to remain in the country recount how they have been housed in the most unpopular housing and worst conditions:

“We, the refugees and asylum seekers, live in poor houses, which are always at high rises or top floors in hostels without lifts.”

Somali Refugee, Liverpool

2. The apparent benefits associated with residing within a settled Somali population are leading Somali households to cluster in particular neighbourhoods, resulting in overcrowding and poor housing conditions. As already discussed, the benefits associated with living within a wider Somali population appear often to outweigh concerns about housing choice and quality. This can result in localised pockets of high demand and housing scarcity, overcrowding, poor housing conditions and homelessness. There is a clear need for housing providers to work with the Somali community to increase supply within popular neighbourhoods and to tackle those problems, such as the fear of harassment, that limit the willingness of Somali households to consider living in adjacent neighbourhoods where housing might be more readily available.

3. As a consequence of historical settlement patterns, Somali populations tend to be clustered in the most physically deprived neighbourhoods, characterised by an ageing housing stock in an increasing state of disrepair. The Somali population in each of the five case study local authorities was clustered in poorer neighbourhoods characterised by post-war low and high rise local authority developments or pre-war stock refurbished by a housing association or local authority and pepper-potted across the neighbourhood.

3.5 Housing Policy and Service Provision

The housing experiences and difficulties encountered by Somali respondents can be distilled into three broad categories:

- the ignorance and misunderstanding of Somali housing situations, requirements and preferences;
- the difficulties in accessing, and the inadequacies of, mainstream provision;
- the absence of specialist Somali provision.

3.5.1 Understanding the Housing Aspirations and Requirements of Somali Households

Underpinning the various problems experienced by respondents with the services from local authorities and housing associations (such as lack of accessibility, relevance and sensitivity of provision, and safety and security in and around the home), social landlords displayed, in general, little appreciation of the particular experiences and preferences of Somali households.

Local authority housing departments have a statutory responsibility to analyse and map provision and needs within their area. Traditional housing needs surveys are a tool commonly used to assist authorities in fulfilling this obligation. General housing needs surveys, however, have proved relatively ineffective in providing an insight into the *specific* situations and experiences of minority ethnic populations (Gidley et al., 2002). In some case study authorities, this failure had been recognised and a commitment had been given by the local authority to secure a more accurate understanding of the needs of minority ethnic populations. In Bristol, for example, the Race Equality in Housing Strategy (2000-2004) aimed to “*establish a measurable framework of need and action to meet the needs of Black people in Bristol*”.

However, the overall tendency was to focus on the generic needs of minority ethnic households as a homogenous group or, as with the analysis of minority ethnic needs in Sheffield, to focus on broad ethnic categorisations (South Asian, African Caribbean and Chinese), and therefore to provide few, if any, useful insights into the situations of Somali households *per se*. The Action Plan to emerge from the report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Somali community in Liverpool, chaired by the Bishop of Liverpool,

recognised these failings and recommended research to assess the specific housing needs of Somali households and the experiences of and issues raised by Somali local authority and housing association tenants.

As well as assessing needs, monitoring and analysis of experiences and outcomes of service use is necessary to review progress on equal opportunity commitments, to identify failings in policy and practice and to direct reform (Robinson, et al., 2002). Analysis of information collated by the case study local authorities, however, revealed that data collection was often *ad hoc*. While some housing departments were engaged in ethnic monitoring of service users which involved data collection about the experiences of Somali tenants, this only applied to some sections or teams, such as homelessness services. There was also little evidence of any systematic attempt to collate and analyse whatever data were being collected, in order to learn key lessons and to review and improve practice.

Given the failure of local authorities and housing associations to analyse systematically the housing requirements of Somali households or to review patterns of engagement with landlord services by Somali tenants and applicants, it is hardly surprising that certain aspects of provision were reportedly insensitive to their preferences. These inadequacies included:

- **the provision of new housing opportunities in preferred locations and involving relevant design features** - without understanding the level and nature of need within the Somali population it is difficult to see how new developments could be targeted toward meeting the specific needs of Somali households. The danger is that new developments will therefore replicate the size, structure or design problems that Somali households encounter with current provision.
- **the measurement and assessment of need involved in the allocation process** - traditional methods of determining need and assigning priority can be insensitive to the distinct housing needs of specific groups. Assessing the deficit or shortfall in material circumstances from a pre-defined standard or norm, needs assessments can deny or underestimate the level and severity of need among specific populations, such as the Somali community.
- **the sensitive and relevant allocation of properties** - ignorance or uninformed assumptions about the locational preferences of Somali households (to live in recognised clusters or to move into new areas, for example) can result in inappropriate or unsatisfactory allocations and undermine the likelihood of a successful long-term housing outcome.
- **the provision of culturally sensitive services** - if they are unaware of the unique requirements of Somali tenants, landlords will find it difficult to develop services and

implement initiatives to counter these difficulties and challenge the negative experiences that discourage Somali households from approaching a social landlord for advice and assistance.

3.5.2 The Inadequacies of Mainstream Provision

The majority of Somali respondents identified language barriers with their current or prospective landlord as the key factor determining their access to and experiences of housing association and local authority provision. Although many Somali households have been resident in the UK for several generations, it was reported that certain sections of the population, in particular older people and women, often possessed limited English language skills. In addition, as indicated in Chapter 1, thousands of Somali households have fled the civil war and settled in the UK during recent years. Many of these households have struggled to acquire adequate English language training.

Local authorities were reported to be relying on interpretation and translation services to overcome the language barrier between Somali tenants or applicants and housing officers. Somali respondents and local authority officers across the case study districts reported problems, however, with the operation of these services. In one district, the local authority service did not cater for the Somali population. Officers in another local authority reported that such services were only available on prior request. How Somali tenants or applicants were expected to know and be able to make a prior request for interpretation services was not clear.

Even where interpretation services are readily available and accessible, they can still be of limited use. It is increasingly common practice, for example, for local authority repairs service to run a telephone reporting system, posing problems for tenants with limited English language skills. In one district it was reported that, rather than phoning in problems with repairs, Somali tenants had been calling into the local housing office, but staff there had been refusing to pass on requests to the maintenance department. A community development officer had started to phone in problems on behalf of Somali households, even though it was not part of her job.

It is often productive for white-led agencies to develop working relations with BME-led agencies in order to tackle inadequacies in provision. It was reported, however, that the gaps in mainstream provision of interpretation and translation services for Somali tenants were rarely being plugged by voluntary sector provision. There were few Somali-led agencies with the resources and capacity to provide a readily accessible and available interpretation service, either independent of or in co-operation with the local authority. Somali tenants and applicants with limited English language skills were therefore forced to rely on friends and family for assistance in communicating with the local authority, with inevitable consequences:

“Language problems cause a lot of women to miss their appointments when they do not have someone to interpret for them.”

Somali Woman, Bristol

“It took me three days waiting for someone, either a friend or a relative, to report a leaking sink.”

Somali Woman, Bristol

Recognising the language barrier that often stands between current and prospective Somali tenants and social landlords, respondents argued for improvements in English language training and the recruitment of Somali staff members.

There were hardly any Somali officers in the case study local authority housing departments, although there were examples of Somali community development officers being employed. It was considered that there were many benefits, for landlords and tenants alike, in employing Somali staff in front-line and management positions in housing associations and local authority housing departments, including:

- an increasingly positive image and reputation for landlords within the Somali population, which could be vital for attracting applications;
- increased understanding of the specific requirements and preferences of Somali tenants, which could result in more sensitive provision (in areas such as allocations, lettings, tenancy support, and the repairs and maintenance service);
- greater awareness and understanding of the difficulties encountered by Somali tenants, such as harassment, which might be masked by inadequate monitoring procedures and needs assessments;
- increased sensitivity to cultural considerations relevant to service provision;
- enhanced capacity in community language skills;
- positive role models for young Somali people.

The language barrier was the principal, but not the only, problem identified by respondents. They were also concerned about the design and suitability of available accommodation in terms of issues such as:

- **number of bedrooms** - Somali households are relatively large, as a result of various social and cultural factors, including the tendency for children to stay in the family home longer than is the norm in White British households, the reliance of people with housing and support needs on their family for support and shelter and the relatively large number of children in some families. Accommodation designed around the needs of the White-British nuclear family rarely provides adequate space or the required number of bedrooms needed to accommodate Somali households within accepted tolerable standards. As a result they may spend lengthy periods on the housing register waiting for a suitable property to become available, live in

overcrowded and poor housing conditions, accept unsuitable or inadequate accommodation when it is offered, or break up the family unit in order to be housed;

- **living space** - Somali households were reported to prefer the living space within their home to be divided into two living rooms, thereby allowing men and women and old and young separate spaces in which to interact and relax;
- **kitchen design and cooking facilities** - various difficulties were identified with the design and size of kitchens. The traditional social function of the kitchen as the hub of the household and cooking traditions were incompatible with small kitchens with limited storage space. Inadequate ventilation was also apparently a common problem;
- **washing facilities** - respondents reported a cultural preference for shower facilities, rather than a bath.

A third concern was the lack of accommodation relevant to Somali elders and people with support needs. Respondents in all five case studies bemoaned the absence of sheltered and supported accommodation for older people provided by agencies and delivered by staff aware and sensitive to their needs. Due to the dearth of specialist accommodation, many Somali older people were either living in unsuitable accommodation, such as seamen's missions, or sharing with friends and family in overcrowded conditions, which can lead to disagreements and friction.

3.5.3 The Absence of Targeted or Specialist Provision

The last twenty or so years have witnessed a dramatic growth in the BME housing movement. Supported by government initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s, the number of registered BME-led housing associations, for example, increased from 18 in 1986 to 63 in 1999 (Robinson, 2002b). This growth can be viewed in part as a response to the failures of mainstream, white-led social landlords to understand and respond to the housing needs of minority ethnic communities. The potential benefits associated with the growth of the BME housing movement include: the provision of a culturally competent housing service, which may reduce negative perceptions of the social rented sector among ethnic communities; the provision of effective channels for the local participation of minority ethnic groups; the creation of opportunities for training and employment; and improving cultural sensitivity and competence across the sector, through partnership working with white-led landlords (Harrison, 1991; Harrison, 1992; Bowes et al., 1998; Robinson, 2002b).

The experiences and observations of respondents in the five case study districts, however, suggest that few of these benefits have accrued to the Somali community. Indeed, some respondents argued that BME-led agencies were failing to provide an alternative service for Somali households to that offered by mainstream, white-led

landlords. Somali households had limited awareness about how to access BME-led provision, the impact of the language barrier may be as marked as ever, and the type and adequacy of accommodation and associated services provided by BME landlords could be inappropriate.

Generally, BME-led agencies strive to or are only capable of meeting the needs of particular minority ethnic populations. Many registered BME-led housing associations have a constitutional commitment to recognise and respond to the needs of a particular ethnic group or groups. For example, there are registered housing associations targeting South Asian households (either as a collective group or focusing on the separate needs of Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi households) and African Caribbean households (either as a collective group or focusing on specific populations). There are, however, currently no registered Somali housing associations in England and the few Somali-led housing organisations that are in existence (such as Hillaac Housing Association in Sheffield and Sahil Housing Association in London) have limited resources, no stock base and little, if any, management responsibility. The reported experiences of Somali households in the case study districts also challenge the stated commitment of many registered BME-led housing associations and non-registered housing agencies to recognise and respond to the needs of all minority ethnic groups. Without the representation of the Somali population on their governing body or among their staff base, BME-led agencies were reported to often be little better than white-led mainstream providers in understanding and responding to the requirements of Somali households:

“The Somali community has not received much support from the local authority or government. The assumption is that Somalis will be served by BME services, but our language and culture makes us distinct.”

Somali Respondent, Bristol

Respondents levelled similar criticisms against generic refugee and asylum seeker provision.

The experiences of Somali respondents across the five case study districts suggest that many of the potential benefits associated with the growth of the BME housing movement have failed to trickle down to Somali tenants. There are few agencies actively targeting and providing a service sensitised to the needs of Somali households. The improvements to mainstream provision through the involvement of BME agencies in service delivery (such as interpretation services, interviewing and advice) or shorter term arrangements (such as training events for staff to improve cultural sensitivity and competence) therefore appear to have largely passed the Somali population by.

3.6 Conclusion

Little is known about the housing situations and needs of the Somali population, partly as a result of the inadequacies of traditional methods of understanding and estimating housing needs. The insights provided by focus group discussions with sections of the Somali population and analysis of the little information available at the local level in five case study districts suggest that Somali households are clustered in some of the most deprived and run-down inner city neighbourhoods. Overcrowding is commonplace, physical conditions are often poor and available accommodation is typically unsuited to social and cultural needs. Homelessness is a major problem, although this is often not apparent in official statistics or to service providers, because of a reliance of homeless Somali households on the assistance of family and friends. The language barrier serves to bar many Somali households from access to key services (statutory and voluntary) and compounds many of the challenges that they face in securing and maintaining adequate housing. Somali-led service provision, meanwhile, is virtually non-existent and BME-led services often seem to fail to engage with and respond to the needs of Somali households.

Chapter 4 attempts to suggest how policy and provision might be developed to respond more effectively to these situations and experiences. Particular attention is paid to the opportunities for intervention arising from the fact that the vast majority of Somali households are living in local authority and housing association accommodation.

4. Meeting the Housing Needs of Somali Households in England: Summary and Key Recommendations

4.1 Introduction

This report has provided a series of initial impressions regarding the situations and experiences of Somali households in England, which until now have remained largely hidden from the view of policy-makers and service providers. This chapter draws on these impressions to provide a number of key conclusions about the general housing experiences of Somali households and to offer a series of recommendations about how policy and provision might better understand and respond to their housing needs. This chapter is far from constituting an exhaustive body of evidence on the housing situations of Somali households or a comprehensive sourcebook of advice on effectively meeting their needs. It represents a summary of key lessons that can be drawn from the findings detailed in the preceding chapters. Further detailed analysis would be required to uncover the full extent and true nature of Somali housing aspirations and needs in England.

Discussion is divided into four sections, each summarising the various impressions gained through the research. It outlines how the various agencies and interests involved in, and responsible for, understanding and responding to Somali housing aspirations and needs might react to this new evidence base.

4.2 Understanding Somali Housing Needs

Summary

Under the amended Race Relations Act (2000) it is unlawful for a local authority to discriminate on racial grounds - directly or indirectly or by victimisation - in carrying out any of its functions and all authorities have a duty to prove that they are fulfilling this responsibility. Local authorities and housing associations also have a general duty to promote equality of opportunity and good race relations in carrying out their functions. Monitoring is accepted as essential in order to review progress on these responsibilities, allowing failings in policy and practice to be identified and building a clearer picture of the need for reform and revision. More specifically, monitoring has also been promoted as an essential component of local authority efforts to piece together an understanding of local minority ethnic housing experiences, aspirations and needs (Robinson, et al., 2002). Local authorities also have a duty to provide detailed information about the housing experiences and needs of minority ethnic groups.

The nature and extent of Somali housing aspirations and needs, however, remain hidden, largely as a result of the inadequacies of ethnic monitoring procedures and the limits of traditional approaches to determining and profiling need. It is therefore difficult to see how the provision of new housing opportunities can cater for the particular needs of Somali households (in areas such as location or design), how sensitive and relevant housing allocations can be made to Somali applicants and how services can be provided in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner.

Recommendation: Ethnic categories employed by local authorities and housing associations should be appropriate and sensitive to the specifics of the local population.

Analysis of the collective experiences of minority ethnic households is always important, not least because such households are likely to have a shared experience of racism, which will inform and influence their situations and experiences. However, it is critical that monitoring also attends to the particular experiences of sub-sections of the minority ethnic population, whose unique, and possibly extreme, experiences tend to be lost within the generic categorisations currently employed. To this end, the research and monitoring process should employ an ethnic categorisation sensitive and relevant to the local population, which in the five case study districts and a number of other towns and cities across England would include a Somali category. Ideally, this categorisation should be designed to allow data to be re-aggregated back up to the more general categories employed in the Census and the Housing Corporation's CORE data base.

Recommendation: Analysis of minority ethnic housing needs by local authorities should acknowledge and explore the particular requirements of distinct minority ethnic populations.

In recent years there have been gradual improvements in the provision of detailed information about minority ethnic housing experiences, aspirations and needs, with increasing awareness of the failings of traditional housing needs survey techniques, which do not usually appreciate the particular needs of minority ethnic households. There has been a gradual move away from a focus on shortfalls, or deficits from professional defined standards, and towards greater cultural awareness. However, awareness and understanding of the housing experiences and needs of *specific* minority ethnic groups remains inadequate. The tendency in BME housing needs surveys is to consider minority ethnic households as an homogenous group, or to focus on three or four 'catch-all' groupings (South Asian, African-Caribbean, Chinese and Other). The result is that the

particular experiences and needs of smaller groups, such as the Somali population, are often ignored.

A useful starting point to remedy these deficiencies would be the 2001 Census, commissioned tables being available from the Office of National Statistics at the district and the neighbourhood level for sub-sections of the minority ethnic population, including Somalis. However, concerns remain about the ethnic categorisation employed and the likelihood that Somali respondents will be scattered across various categories, so that not all households can be identified as Somali, as distinct from the more general group of Black African (see Appendix).

Recommendation: Analysis of the distinct housing needs of different minority ethnic populations must attend to household diversity, including the unmet needs of individuals with mental and physical health problems and disabilities.

Available evidence suggests that many Somali households contain members suffering mental and physical health problems that impact on their functional and social well-being. These experiences were reported to raise a significant and largely unmet need for in-house adaptations, support and care. Developing a response to this apparent reservoir of unmet need will demand that the health and disability related wants and needs of Somali households are revealed and understood more fully.

Recommendation: Housing associations must assist with efforts to provide a better understanding of the housing pathways and outcomes of different minority ethnic groups.

A stated objective of the Housing Corporation's BME Housing Policy is that investment should reflect local need. Conforming to the Regulatory Code and Guidance also demands that housing associations actively review performance and ensure that strategies and policies are responsive to the social environment. Delivering on this objective requires an understanding of the specifics of local need, including the needs of distinct sub-sections of the local population, such as Somali households. Housing associations therefore have a vested interest in assisting local authorities to piece together a comprehensive understanding of the housing needs and experiences of different minority ethnic populations within and outside their tenant base.

Where necessary, housing associations should actively lobby local authorities to ensure that rigorous and detailed data about local minority ethnic housing needs are available, accessible and up to date. Local authorities, meanwhile, should promote a more rigorous collection and analysis of ethnic monitoring data about the rehousing process across the social rented sector, given that the quality and detail of monitoring by housing associations is often driven by local authority expectations and requirements (Robinson et al., 2002).

Recommendation: The Housing Corporation should encourage the employment of ethnic categorisations that go beyond the standard Census categories and allow disaggregation at the local level that is sensitive to the profile of the local minority ethnic population.

The Race Relations Act imposes a duty on the Housing Corporation to make appropriate arrangements with a view to securing that their various functions are carried out with due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups. Fulfilling this duty involves the Corporation promoting a culture of service monitoring and performance review and revision across the housing association sector. It is vital that in performing this role the Housing Corporation imposes on the sector, through the CORE system, an ethnic classification that allows disaggregation of distinct ethnic categories, beyond 'African Caribbean' or 'South Asian', and thereby facilitates analysis of the situations of specific populations, such as Somali households. Whether or not the ethnic classification currently employed by the Corporation serves this purpose should be an issue for immediate review.

Recommendation: The distribution of capital investment funds by the Housing Corporation through the Annual Development Fund should be informed by, and consistent with, the specifics of the needs of those smaller minority ethnic groups that are not currently recognised separately.

In fulfilling its obligations under the Race Relations Act and delivering on its stated objective of ensuring that investment in new housing opportunities reflects local needs, the Housing Corporation strives to ensure that the approval process requires housing associations to illustrate the relevance and appropriateness of new developments to the particulars of local need. This review process should venture beyond the standard ethnic classification and demand evidence that the needs of hidden and neglected sub-sections of the minority ethnic populations, such as Somali households, are being recognised and accommodated.

Recommendation: The Housing Corporation should maintain its commitment to a strong and vibrant BME housing movement in England, able to inform and educate white-led, mainstream agencies about the particular needs of different minority ethnic populations.

The Housing Corporation should continue to promote a vibrant BME housing sector (both through support for independent BME-led associations and for agencies working under the umbrella of white-led associations) that has the capacity to exchange knowledge about the situations of *different* minority ethnic groups and can develop relevant practice in design, allocation and service provision. This could involve an audit of those communities, in different locations, that are currently beyond the reach of the BME housing movement. This may then encourage the development of approaches to counter such deficiencies, including direct support for agencies working with neglected groups, such as the Somali population.

4.3 Implications for Development and Management

Summary

The housing choices of Somali households are severely restricted by various factors. Households were reported to limit their options to specific neighbourhoods already containing a resident Somali community, due to the importance of informal support networks and the availability of culturally specific facilities. There were also anticipated difficulties in living outside clusters of the Somali population. Demand in these locations therefore often far outstrips supply, restricting housing opportunities. Housing choices might be further restricted by problems of affordability, with income poverty limiting access to owner occupation. There was limited knowledge and awareness about access to social rented housing, and often a dearth of suitable accommodation in desired locations. Groups with low priority on waiting lists, such as young people and single people, faced particular difficulties.

One of the consequences of these constrained housing choices is homelessness, which was reported to be a common experience. Many homeless Somali households were reported to end up living with family and friends, suggesting that this situation does not necessarily reflect any assumed cultural preference for large multi-generational families to live together under the same roof. Indeed, many of the Somali households in the local studies reported that inter-generational families were living together, often in overcrowded conditions, out of necessity rather than choice, having either failed to gain access to permanent accommodation or found available temporary accommodation unsuitable, for a variety of reasons. Overcrowding was reported as a problem among Somali populations in both high and low demand housing markets. It was suggested that

many Somali households were also living in poor physical conditions, with problems often compounded by difficulties in reporting the need for repairs and maintenance.

Recommendation: Housing associations have a major role to play in the provision of relevant and appropriate new housing developments, located in areas that are sensitive to the specific aspirations of minority ethnic populations.

Appropriate housing will include supported and sheltered accommodation for older people and people with health problems and opportunities for single people and young couples, as well as properties for larger families. The location of new developments should be sensitive to needs in traditional population clusters, which can currently be identified mainly on the basis of anecdotal evidence. There is also a need for new housing opportunities to respond to emerging aspirations, particularly among younger households, to live outside traditional clusters. In many areas, there is a need to counter the dearth of accommodation for larger families. There is also evidence that many older Somali people are in dire need of appropriate sheltered or supported accommodation. Problems such as poor living conditions and overcrowding will only begin to be resolved if a diverse range of accommodation options is provided.

Recommendation: The development process must attend to culturally specific design considerations if new developments are to provide new housing opportunities for particular minority ethnic populations.

Culturally sensitive design features are likely to increase take-up of properties from a target population and increase the likelihood of a long-term positive housing outcome. The NHF's *Accommodating Diversity* will provide a useful starting point for associations developing housing designed to meet the cultural requirements of the Somali population. Somali households interviewed in this research articulated a series of specific design features necessitated by cultural practices and religious protocols (organisation of living space, kitchen and bathroom arrangements). Developers need to be aware which requirements are essential and which are preferred. It is also useful to identify common needs among different ethnic groups, so that the future utility of accommodation for other population groups can be considered during the design process.

Recommendation: The Housing Corporation approval process for new housing association developments should demand evidence that specific local needs are being met, as well as evidence that subsequent service provision will be sensitised to these needs.

The Housing Corporation approval process for new housing association developments demands that funding bids give evidence that the proposed development is responding to the specifics of local need. This regime should require evidence that consideration has been given to design and locational issues and to the ability of the managing association to provide culturally relevant service provision to the target tenant group, in order to maximise the likelihood that long-term positive housing outcomes will emerge.

Recommendation: Local authorities and housing associations should review the quality of permanent accommodation, the provision of temporary accommodation and the appropriateness of available options for homeless applicants from different minority ethnic populations.

Many Somali households are entering the social rented sector under the provisions of the homelessness legislation and research has revealed that homeless applicants are typically directed toward the most unpopular stock in worst condition. Somali homeless people were also often reluctant to stay in temporary accommodation, because it was highly inappropriate to their needs. Research evidence suggests that these concerns about the suitability of available temporary accommodation are shared by other minority ethnic households. There is therefore an opportunity to develop local provision relevant to the Somali population that can also cater for other homeless minority ethnic households. Local authorities and housing associations should also review and, where necessary, revise their allocation and lettings procedures to ensure the best possible match between applicants' aspirations and needs and property design and location, thereby increasing the likelihood of long-term positive housing outcomes. The provision of comprehensible and accessible information and advice for the Somali population is also critical here.

Recommendation: Local authorities and housing associations should develop pro-active strategies to remove the barriers that may limit the willingness of some Somali households to take up housing opportunities outside traditional population clusters.

Under the auspices of community cohesion action plans, local authorities and housing associations need to develop initiatives designed to counter the perceptions and experiences that constrain Somali households from living outside traditional clusters. Increasing the housing opportunities available to Somali households will serve to limit or reduce overcrowding and associated poor living conditions and assist efforts to reduce homelessness. It will necessitate the provision of support for those households moving into 'new' areas, wider community development work and a strong commitment and effective procedures for identifying and responding to racial harassment, abuse and violence.

Recommendation: Local authorities should work together with housing associations, health authorities and Primary Care Trusts to respond to the apparent high incidence of health problems and the related need for adaptations and supported and sheltered accommodation among the Somali population.

Many Somali households were reported to have immediate and significant needs for in-house adaptations, support and care that were not being met. Problems were also raised about the provision of appropriate supported and sheltered accommodation. In the short-term, interventions should involve efforts to increase the take-up of grants available for in-house adaptations and active liaison with health care and social service providers over support and care needs. In the longer-term, housing associations and local authorities will need to work to remove the barriers that appear to be restricting access for Somali elders and people with support needs to relevant accommodation.

4.4 Cultural Sensitivity in Service Provision

Summary

It is often widely assumed that the needs of Somali households are being met by services provided by white-led mainstream agencies targeted at asylum seekers and the minority ethnic population more generally, or by those provided by BME-led agencies. However, many Somali people are not, and have never been, asylum seekers. Targeted services, meanwhile, often tend to treat the minority ethnic population as an homogenous group and to assume that all groups will be equally well served by blanket policies. BME-led agencies tend to respond to the needs of specific minority ethnic populations and can often be no better placed than white-led agencies to understand and respond to the needs of other minority ethnic groups, such as the Somali population. The experiences of Somali households in this study suggest that there is an urgent need for providers to respond more effectively to the culturally and socially specific requirements of service users from different minority ethnic populations.

Recommendation: Local authorities should not assume that the mere existence of a race equality strategy, with discrete policies targeted at the BME population, will adequately attend to the particular needs of *all* minority ethnic groups. Constant review of changing opportunities and experiences of specific groups is required, prompting policy adjustments and follow-up action.

Situations, preferences and needs vary between minority ethnic groups. It is therefore vital that the particulars of the local minority ethnic population and variations in the requirements of different groups are appreciated and responded to in race equality and BME housing strategy development. This can only be achieved through the involvement of groups and interests from across the spectrum of minority ethnic populations within the district. The Somali population in each of the case study districts reported problems in gaining a voice in local housing and regeneration partnerships. This shows that it can not be automatically assumed that certain key representatives or agencies, such as BME-led housing associations, are able and willing to speak on behalf of a diverse minority ethnic population. Neither should it be presumed that the presence and involvement of an active BME-led sector in the provision of housing and related services ensures that the needs of *all* minority ethnic populations are being adequately dealt with. Local authorities and housing associations therefore need to be sensitive to the focus and representativeness of different BME-led groups and agencies, and seek to broaden the basis of representation in ethnically diverse areas.

This approach demands appreciating variable experiences, preferences and requirements within and between minority ethnic groups. All five local authorities surveyed, for example, had translation and interpretation services, but the experience of Somali households in a number of districts revealed that these services were often inappropriate or ignored the specific needs of the Somali population.

Recommendation: Local authorities and housing associations should improve cultural sensitivity and competence through the recruitment of minority ethnic staff and the development of working relations with a range of BME-led agencies.

The ability of service providers to understand and respond effectively to the aspirations and requirements of Somali households is limited by the virtual absence of Somali officers from the staff base of local service providers. Promoting opportunities for staff from all minority ethnic groups within the local population and tackling the factors that

serve to limit their subsequent career development is one obvious approach to improving cultural sensitivity. Local authorities and housing associations also need to improve their services to minority ethnic households through the development of working relations with BME-led agencies.

A particular priority for Somalis is the provision of adequate interpretation services. The presence of staff from the Somali population will clearly help to overcome the inadequacies of current provision, while Somali-led agencies might be able to advise or provide services in a more appropriate way. Somali-led agencies could also offer training events for staff and tenants to aid an appreciation of their circumstances and preferences and tackle any misconceptions about the Somali population.

Recommendation: Local authorities and housing associations should support capacity building within the BME housing movement and among key local minority ethnic organisations in order to inform and improve mainstream provision and fill gaps in local service provision to particular groups.

Local authorities and housing associations have a key role to play in developing the viability of smaller BME-led housing organisations working with particular groups and communities. This process should be mutually beneficial, with community-led agencies able to offer advice about the provision of services in a culturally relevant manner. It may also be important to involve non-housing community organisations in strategic planning and management, especially where smaller minority ethnic groups, such as the Somali population, are not represented by housing agencies.

4.5 Somali-led Services

Summary

Somali-led voluntary and community groups are, typically, poorly resourced small-scale operations that appear unable to provide sufficient support to Somali households to access the assistance they require from mainstream providers. Their resource base is also too fragile to respond to the failings of mainstream providers by providing alternative services. This syndrome partly reflects the lack of political power and influence among the Somali population, whether in the formal political context, in local community politics or within BME networks and policy agendas. The Somali population is therefore reported to have had little success informing and influencing policy and resource allocation toward minority ethnic groups.

Recommendation: Local authorities should promote capacity building within the Somali community to provide a reservoir of expertise and experience that can be utilised by local authorities, housing associations and others to support the provision of culturally sensitive services.

Somali-led agencies are needed to assist mainstream providers with the provision of culturally sensitive services, including translation and interpretation services, support and advice to the victims of harassment and advice regarding culturally sensitive design considerations. Somali-led groups are also needed to represent Somali views, requirements and priorities on various local forums and working groups that are increasingly playing a key role in the development and implementation of local housing and regeneration strategies.

Recommendation: The Housing Corporation should encourage housing associations to explore possibilities for supporting the increased involvement of Somali-led housing organisations in strategy development, stock management and service delivery.

There are currently no registered Somali housing associations in England and the limited evidence available suggests that few of the benefits commonly associated with the rise of the BME housing movement have accrued to the Somali population. The Housing Corporation, white-led and BME-led housing associations therefore have a key role to play in supporting the development of Somali-led housing organisations. They should also examine how to help meet the needs of Somali households in innovative and culturally sensitive ways. The form such developments might take will vary locally. One approach would be for registered housing associations to develop active partnerships with those Somali-led associations which are present in towns and cities with a significant Somali population, but which tend to be poorly resourced and under-developed.

Recommendation: Somali groups and agencies should combine their strengths to create local networks and organisations able to speak with authority about the priorities of the local Somali population. They would provide an obvious point of contact for mainstream agencies seeking advice and support about meeting the needs of Somali service users. They could also bridge some of the gaps that exist in mainstream provision through the delivery of targeted services for Somali households.

Somali-led agencies have potentially a key role to play in countering the failings of mainstream agencies to address the needs of Somali households more adequately, as well as working with mainstream providers to tailor service provision more closely to the needs of Somali households. Although there is currently a diverse range of Somali-led agencies working in various fields (housing, health and social care, as well as providing advice and translation and interpretation services), the vast majority are relatively small operations running on a shoestring budget and often accommodated in unsuitable or dilapidated premises. Groups have encountered difficulties organising and managing their affairs in a manner that could satisfy the protocols and practices of funding agencies. In some cases, divisions within the Somali community are undermining the potential capacity of the population to organise the provision of community-led services, with some groups competing with each other for local pre-eminence. Mainstream providers therefore face difficulties identifying informed and representative groups to actively liaise with and involve in strategy development and service provision.

Recent developments in Liverpool offer a positive example of how to resolve such tensions. The deliberations of a Commission of Enquiry into the Somali community, chaired by the Bishop of Liverpool and drawing contributions from across the Somali community, the local authority and various public services, provided the impetus that set in train a process for all the key Somali-led groups and organisations in the city to form a Somali Umbrella Group. The Group has worked to provide a single voice for the community and point of contact and liaison for the local authority. The logic behind the Umbrella Group was to maximise the potential of Somali groups and interests to work for the benefit of all Somali community members by more effectively highlighting Somali situations and needs, representing Somali concerns and interests on various fora and competing for scarce resources. This kind of approach would be worth attempting in other communities across the country.

4.6 Conclusion

In recent years, housing policy and provision has begun to acknowledge the importance of understanding and responding to cultural difference and diversity. Against the backdrop of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, the amendment of the Race Relations Act, the various reports and guidance notes produced in response to the disturbances in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001 and the Race and Housing Inquiry, guidance from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Housing Corporation has increasingly emphasised the importance of cultural sensitivity. This principle needs to shape the process of defining need and understanding and responding to the barriers limiting housing choices and restricting access to service provision among minority ethnic households. The evidence presented in this report, however, suggests that the rhetoric of cultural diversity has not yet been translated into practice - certainly for the Somali community.

Racism informs and influences the situations and experiences of all minority ethnic groups. Beyond this shared experience, however, different minority ethnic groups can experience unique situations and present distinct needs. The evidence from the five case study districts examined in this report suggests that housing needs surveys, strategy development and the targeted provision of accommodation and related services have still largely failed to grasp this fact. Rather than being sensitive to ethnic differentiation and cultural distinctiveness, the emphasis appears to be on understanding 'BME' as either an homogenous group with shared experiences that differ from the majority ethnic (white) experience or as a collection of very broad groupings, such as African Caribbean and South Asian, within which households have shared aspirations and requirements.

The consequences of this failure are significant:

- race equality and housing strategy development may often ignore the needs of (smaller) groups, such as the Somali population, whose situations remain hidden, largely because of the inadequacies of standard ethnic classifications;
- general needs and targeted provision focused on minority ethnic housing needs is often insensitive to the preferences and requirements of these hidden groups;
- resource allocation is largely by-passing groups and organisations working with these hidden populations, because they are unable to establish the urgency and comparative level of need;
- boundaries are being constructed between minority ethnic communities, as groups feel they are losing out in the scramble for recognition and resources, resulting in mutual competition and antagonism.

This report has responded to these findings by providing recommendations designed to foster increasing appreciation and responsiveness to the cultural distinctiveness and specific housing needs of the Somali population. All these suggestions, however, will have direct relevance to the many other minority ethnic populations in England whose needs are also currently being denied and neglected. The principle of cultural diversity has a long way to go before it is translated effectively into policy and practice.

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Appendix: Official Statistics on the Somali Population in England

The Somali population in England has remained hidden from the view of the official statistics, research and analysis, largely because of 'Somali' is rarely recognised as a distinct ethnic category. The only official data sources with the potential to cast any light on the size and distribution of the Somali population are the Census and Control of Immigration Statistics.

The Census

The Census has the potential to provide insightful information about the size and distribution of the Somali population as a consequence of questions asked of respondents regarding their ethnic origin and country of birth. Problems with the categorisations employed and the processing of data limit the insights to be gained, however.

A question exploring ethnic origin was first included in the 1991 Census of Population and was subsequently used in 2001 Census. The ethnic origin question, however, has failed to shed any significant light on size and situations of the Somali population because of the inadequacies of the ethnic categorisation employed. In summary, a Somali respondent completing the Census form is presented with three separate opportunities to define their ethnicity - Black African, Black Other and 'any other ethnic group'. A respondent indicating that their ethnic origin is either Black Other or 'any other ethnic group' has the opportunity to complete a box and indicate Somali as their ethnic origin. Commissioned tables at the national, district and neighbourhood level (assuming certain thresholds are met) will be available from National Statistics late in 2003 for respondents who defined their 'other' status as 'Somali'. There is no way, however, of disaggregating the Black African category and including Somali respondents from this category in commissioned tables. A further problem hampering comparative analysis across time is that commissioned tables regarding ethnic origin detailing Somali respondents are not available from the 1991 Census.

A further source of potential information from the Census regarding the Somali population in England is provided by a question about country of birth. Unfortunately, as with the ethnic origin question, commissioned tables regarding country of birth and detailing Somali respondents are not available from the 1991 Census. They will be available, however, from the Census 2001 at some point in 2003, by contacting National Statistics.

Control of Immigration Statistics

The 'Control of Immigration' statistics provide a detailed breakdown by nationality of applications for asylum in the UK and the number of people granted settlement. As such they provide a year-on-year proxy of the number of Somali people arriving in the UK, although there remain some recently arrived Somali households about which little is known, including those who have entered and been granted citizenship in other EU states and have subsequently moved to the UK.

Table A2, over the page, provides a breakdown of applications received and total acceptances for settlement from Somali asylum seekers (1985 through to 2001). Although it is difficult to piece together a precise picture of the number of Somali people granted settlement or awaiting a decision on an application and resident in the UK at any particular point in time, what the figures do reveal is that between 1985 and 2001 34,150 Somali people were granted settlement in the UK and many thousands were resident in the UK awaiting a decision for asylum that was ultimately unsuccessful (compare columns F - applications - and column A - total acceptances).

Comparison of the figures presented in Table A2 with applications received and total acceptance from other nationalities reveals that Somali remains one of the top asylum nationalities (see Table A1).

Table A1 Top Asylum Nationalities and Percentage Increase in Application (2000-2001)

	2000	2001	Percentage Increase 2000-01
1. Afghanistan	5,555	9,190	65
2. Iraq	7,475	6,805	-9
3. Somalia	5,020	6,500	29
4. Sri Lanka	6,395	5,545	-13
5. Turkey	3,990	3,740	-6
6. Iran	5,610	3,450	-38
7. FR Yugoslavia	6,070	3,190	-47
8. Pakistan	3,165	2,810	-11
9. China	4,000	2,415	-40
10. Zimbabwe	1,010	2,085	106

Table A2 Somali Asylum Seeker Statistics

Year	A		B		C		D		E		F	
	Total acceptances for settlement from Somali asylum seekers*	Total acceptances for settlement from All Nationalities	Total acceptances for settlement from Somali asylum seekers as a % of the total from All Nationalities	Total acceptances for settlement from Africa	Total acceptances for settlement from Somali asylum seekers as a % of the total from Africa	Applications received for asylum in the UK from Somalia						
2001	8,2900	106,8200	7.76	31,430	29.42	6,465						
2000	12,290	125,090	9.82	44,460	27.64	5,020						
1999	3,180	97,120	3.27	27,020	11.77	7,495						
1998	2,950	69,790	4.23	16,090	18.33	4,685						
1997	990	58,720	1.69	13,200	7.50	2,730						
1996	680	61,730	1.10	12,970	5.24	1,780						
1995	760	55,480	1.37	12,000	6.33	3,465						
1994	1,410	55,110	2.56	11,920	11.83	1,840						
1993	1,530	55,640	2.75	10,790	14.18	1,465						
1992	690	52,570	1.31	8,980	7.68	1,575						
1991	510	53,900	0.95	9,580	5.32	1,995						
1990	490	52,400	0.96	8,250	5.94	2,250						
1989	160	49,060	0.37	6,390	2.50	1,850						
1988	60	49,280	0.12	5,840	1.08	305						
1987	70	45,980	0.15	5,130	1.36	202						
1986	70	46,820	0.15	4,000	1.75	152						
1985	20	55,360	0.04	4,710	0.42	192						
TOTAL	34,150	1,090,870		232,760		43,466						

(SOURCE: Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom 1985 annually through to 2001; Home Office)

* figures in Column A for the year 2000 will be affected by changes introduced by 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, which resulted in an reduction in the time taken to process applications

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