

Understanding BME tenants

This report summarises the findings of two qualitative research projects that have been commissioned by the Housing Corporation to improve our understanding of BME tenants:

- ‘Drivers of satisfaction amongst black and minority ethnic (BME) tenants’ (undertaken by Ipsos MORI), exploring why satisfaction levels are lower amongst BME tenants.
- ‘Culturally sensitive service provision in social housing’ (undertaken by GFK Research), examining the level of importance placed by BME tenants on the provision of culturally sensitive services.

Reports from both projects are available from the HC website.

Drivers of satisfaction

Correlation analyses have demonstrated that there are many factors that affect tenant satisfaction, most notably the repairs & maintenance service, communication issues, and attitudes towards social housing as a tenure. The factors that are more important, or more common, amongst BME tenants are discussed below.

Repairs & maintenance is of universal concern, with issues raised around responsiveness, reliability and the quality of workmanship. However, Asian tenants indicate a greater willingness to take repairs into their own hands, a response symptomatic of a more general tendency for this group to disengage from their landlord. Black tenants, in contrast, demonstrate

higher expectations about their repairs services and are more likely to push their case to get what they feel they need.

Satisfaction tends to be lower amongst younger tenants across all groups. This and other research has indicated some possible causes: younger tenants may have greater aspirations to home ownership which leads to a dissatisfaction with social housing, they may have less experience of other tenures (and hence do not appreciate the benefits of social housing), or they may be less experienced with social housing and therefore experience some frustrations with the system. Whilst this lower satisfaction is observed across both BME and non BME tenants, the higher proportion of younger tenants amongst the BME groups does lead to lower overall satisfaction for BME tenants.

The housing needs of BME tenants are not always adequately met. They are more likely to require larger homes for large families, houses with sufficient space for men and women to be segregated, or adequately ventilated kitchens. BME tenants also place great importance on the local neighbourhood and community networks: the perceived dilution of communities for both groups is a much more important factor influencing levels of dissatisfaction than it is for white tenants.

The correlation analyses indicated that a dislike of social housing as a tenure is linked to lower satisfaction levels. Whilst the qualitative work was unable to enhance our understanding of this attitude, it did identify that strong aspirations for ownership and

a desire for more choice and mobility were both drivers of dissatisfaction that were more prevalent amongst BME tenants.

Communication issues have a major impact on overall satisfaction. Apart from the obvious issues around language, some BME tenants have a strong preference for face to face contact rather than telephone. They may also have a preference to deal with a 'senior' person. A perceived lack of these opportunities reflects negatively on views of communication and influence. Dedicated 'case-workers' are seen as the most effective solution to these poor communication structures. However, another option for landlords would be to build rapport and thus create trust, leading to greater willingness amongst tenants to engage with the landlord, and greater belief in the communication channels. Tenants report that such rapport can be built via community events and local consultations, which give the impression that the landlord is interested in its tenants and cares about them as individuals. Without rapport and trust the landlord can appear too distant and too disinterested, and this can cause a breakdown in communication that manifests itself in lower satisfaction levels.

Culturally sensitive service provision

In this research BME (and White British) tenants expressed the need of all tenants to receive good housing services, regardless of ethnicity. There was also some resistance to the concept that services should be specially developed for any particular group: instead there was a strong desire for equality for all.

However, BME tenants may have specific housing needs, for example, larger houses for larger families, separate kitchens and living rooms, proximity to shops selling particular range of groceries, separate rooms to allow men and women to segregate, and ventilation in kitchens. These are housing needs not cultural needs, even if their origins lie in the tenant's cultural background. As housing needs, they must be met.

Some housing associations reported that BME tenants may also experience a lack of understanding of their housing association, resulting in unrealistic expectations. This can cause tensions, and particularly if combined with poor rapport, may result in poorer communication and resultant frustration. While this is not an issue restricted to BME tenants, it appears to be more prevalent amongst these groups.

While demonstrating cultural sensitivity can help build rapport and improve communications, it is more critical to avoid being 'culturally insensitive'. Such insensitivities would include not removing shoes when entering the house (or not explaining why this cannot be done), or not recognising that some women cannot admit a male workman to the house unless her husband is present, which can cause difficulties if appointments are delayed or changed. This behaviour signifies that the landlord does not understand the tenant, and is not interested in the tenant. This in turn creates a rift between landlord and tenant which reduces communication, causes tension, and reduces satisfaction.

While culturally sensitive services are not deemed essential, they may nonetheless be appreciated. Examples of culturally sensitive services include language support and responding to tenants' preferences when allocating housing according to requests, especially for those experiencing racism or wanting to be close to family. Other examples include provision of BME community centres, meetings to discuss BME specific needs, and provision of multi-cultural events. It was not necessarily seen to be the duty of the housing association to provide these services, although doing so was appreciated. Provision of such services also has an important role to play in building the relationship between landlord and tenant: this creates the impression of a landlord who is interested and receptive, builds rapport, hence improving communication and tenant satisfaction.

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Once basic housing needs are met, culturally sensitive services can have a role to play in building the relationship between landlord and tenant.

Policy implications

Although the research centred around two separate topics the results show how closely the issues of culturally sensitive services and drivers of BME satisfaction relate to one another. For example, it is clear that the manner in which an association engages with BME communities has the potential to address culturally driven preferences, as well as improving tenants' perceptions of how effectively services are being delivered. In particular this overcomes a belief from some BME respondents that their landlord operates at arms length or is, in some instances, faceless.

Although we are seeing a reduction of traditional housing management structures and neighbourhood offices, the effectiveness of communication is critical to BME communities. Therefore the emphasis for associations is on ensuring that they get communication right first time which may involve developing effective customer information that relates to core housing functions such as repairs and maintenance, resident involvement and allocation. Nevertheless, a neighbourhood presence – through community events – does appear to be an effective vehicle for demonstrating commitment to people locally. What is clear is that the overwhelming majority of respondents to both research projects believe that the provision of added value services, such as those identified as culturally sensitive, are significantly less important than core housing functions.

The issue of larger homes for some BME respondents was of critical importance. However, it is arguable whether any response to this need is based on housing and not cultural grounds. In the event that larger housing is developed – with a particular community in mind – the allocation of that housing is unlikely to be based on any racial characteristic. To do so would be in breach of the provisions of the Race Relations Act and be deemed discriminatory. Importantly the research in general appears to challenge any perception that lower satisfaction is driven by racial or other discrimination.

The implications of this research do have direct applications for housing associations' policies, procedures and practices. They are to:

- develop effective profiles of residents – including service preferences (e.g. methods of communication, information about preferred visiting time, and other considerations);
- develop culturally driven services that are led by residents' need – not perceived need;
- ensure effective systems for data collection and communication are joined up to core management functions;
- conduct analysis of satisfaction drivers locally;
- identify issues that may be considered 'culturally insensitive' and ensure that where issues may arise residents are informed of why a service is provided in a particular way;
- recognise that BME satisfaction or appreciation of added value services will always be compromised if core housing functions are perceived to be poor.