Understanding BME tenants

Higher levels of dissatisfaction among black and minority ethnic (BME) tenants was brought to the fore in the recent Hills report\(^1\). To address this issue the Housing Corporation commissioned two pieces of research:

- Drivers of satisfaction – correlation analysis from our 2004 Existing Tenants Survey, followed by a programme of focus groups undertaken by Ipsos MORI.
- Culturally sensitive service provision in social housing – focus groups and individual interviews undertaken by GFK Research, examining the level of importance placed by BME tenants on the provision of these services.

\(^1\) J. Hills (2007) *Ends and means: the future roles of social housing in England*
Drivers of satisfaction for BME residents

Satisfaction levels are generally lower among BME tenants. Although many factors were found to affect satisfaction, three emerged in particular. They are:

- the repairs and maintenance service;
- communication issues; and
- attitudes to being a social housing tenant.

The quality of the repairs & maintenance service is of concern to all tenants, 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 not to make demands on their landlord. African and Caribbean 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.

Communication issues have a major impact on overall satisfaction. Language barriers were reported, but also some BME tenants have a strong preference for face to face contact rather than telephone. Some BME tenants have a preference to deal with a ‘senior’ person, and a perceived lack of these opportunities reflects negatively on tenants’ views of communication and influence. Dedicated ‘case-workers’ are seen as the most effective solution to these poor communication structures.

However, community events and local consultations can also help create rapport and give the impression that the landlord is interested in its tenants and cares about them as individuals. Breakdowns in communications can occur when the landlord appears too distant and too disinterested, which manifests itself in lower satisfaction levels.

The correlation analysis shows that tenants who have lower satisfaction levels are also more likely to disagree that social housing is a good tenure. 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 among BME tenants.

The higher proportion of younger tenants among BME groups could be another explanation for the lower satisfaction levels. Satisfaction in general tends to be lower among younger tenants – across all ethnic groups. This and other research has indicated some possible causes: younger tenants may have greater aspirations to home ownership, 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 hence experience some frustrations with the system.

Culturally sensitive services (CSS) represented within Maslow’s hierarchy of needs

Culturally sensitive services

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.
Gold practice in building cohesive communities

For a practical view on providing cohesive services, check out these examples of best practice from our 2008 Gold Award for Excellence winners.

Building cohesive communities

Ashram “Hits all the right buttons to reach hard to reach groups” was the judges’ verdict on Ashram's work to promote community cohesion in Birmingham that has seen the association change from a specialist provider for BME communities to a mainstream organisation working with a diverse cross-section of communities.

Old Ford HA “An extremely impressive example of an association working with residents from different ethnic groups, age groups and backgrounds, and actively promoting community cohesion and integration.” That is the judges’ verdict on Old Ford HA's project: Creating the conditions for a cohesive community.

The Papworth Trust's Foundations for living project is “an inspiring example of a scheme which enables disabled people to live independently in an inclusive mixed tenure development”.

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If you, or a colleague, would like to attend please contact: gold@housingcorp.gsx.gov.uk

For more information on all the 2008 Gold Winners, visit: http://gold.housingcorp.gov.uk

Some housing associations reported that BME tenants may also experience a lack of understanding of their housing association, resulting in unrealistic expectations, for example relating to where they should be on the housing waiting lists and the services they receive (e.g. a repair and maintenance service that responds very quickly to their demand). A low level of understanding can lead to unrealistic expectations and can cause tensions, particularly if combined with poor communications and rapport generally.

Whilst 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 otherwise 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 have to be delayed or changed. Insensitive behaviour implies that the landlord does not understand the tenant, and can also lead to the view that the landlord is not interested in the tenant. This in turn can create a rift between landlord and tenant which undermines communication, causes tension, and reduces satisfaction.

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 culturally sensitive services creates the impression of a landlord who is interested and receptive, builds rapport, improves communication and ultimately promotes tenant satisfaction. Once basic housing needs are met, culturally sensitive services can have an important role to play in building the relationship between landlord and tenant.

For an expanded summary of these projects' findings see: www.housingcorp.gov.uk/CRMI/InBrief

‘Drivers of satisfaction among black and minority ethnic (BME) tenants’ was completed by Ipsos MORI. ‘Culturally sensitive service provision in social housing’ was undertaken by GFK Research. Both research projects were commissioned by the Housing Corporation’s Centre for Research and Market Intelligence (CRMI), and the full reports are available from: www.housingcorp.gov.uk/CRMI/Insights
A view from residents...

- Most tenants feel it is important that their landlord considers tenants' views in decision making.
- Around two thirds of tenants think their landlord does take their views into account.
- However, even where it may be happening, the vast majority of tenants are unaware of efforts being made to encourage the participation of tenants under 21 years of age.

Excerpts taken from the sixth residents panel: [www.housingcorp.gov.uk/CRMI/residentspanel](http://www.housingcorp.gov.uk/CRMI/residentspanel)

**Existing Tenants Survey 2008**

Since 1996, the Housing Corporation has conducted the Existing Tenants Survey (ETS) approximately every four years to collect feedback from tenants. The survey covers a broad range of topics, including: satisfaction with landlord and neighbourhood, complaints, tenant involvement, overcrowding and housing aspirations. The 2008 ETS has been commissioned and, for the first time, will also include Local Authority and ALMO tenants. A total of 20,000 tenants will be interviewed providing our largest and most comprehensive survey of the sector ever.

The past few months have been spent perfecting the questionnaire and pulling together the sample. A high level of co-operation from housing organisations in supplying information has been greatly appreciated and we are pleased to announce that interviewing began in August.

A series of reports on the findings are scheduled to be published by March 2009.

**NROSH regional seminars - September/October 2008**

The 2008 National Register of Social Housing (NROSH) seminars are designed to give housing associations and local authorities all the information and advice needed to get started with NROSH, and to meet the targets for data submission. Themes include:

- the benefits of NROSH
- how NROSH data can be used
- steps to successful data submission
- using NROSH-Online
- troubleshooting and an opportunity to ask questions

Visit [www.housingcorp.gov.uk/NROSH](http://www.housingcorp.gov.uk/NROSH) to book now and secure your place.

**Contact us**

If you would like to make any comments or suggestions on this bulletin, add someone onto or take yourself off the distribution list, or sign-up to receive CRMI Insights electronically, then please contact us.

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**About CRMI**

The Housing Corporation's Centre for Research and Market Intelligence (CRMI) was created in 2006 to deliver the Corporation's vision to be an acknowledged centre of expertise for housing knowledge and information. Further details can be found on our website: [www.housingcorp.gov.uk/CRMI](http://www.housingcorp.gov.uk/CRMI)