The Unexpected Community:
The Needs and Aspirations of
Birmingham’s Somali Community

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FOREWORD

This report makes an important contribution to exploring the characteristics, needs and aspirations of the Somali community in Birmingham. It enables us to move beyond surmise to assembling evidence of how may Somalis live in Birmingham. But more importantly, it points to how agencies like Trident and AMANA, in partnership with Birmingham City Council, other statutory and voluntary agencies, can best meet the needs of Somalis, enhance cohesion with other Birmingham communities, and help Somali families join a long line of arrivals from all over the world who have made Birmingham their home.

Trident and AMANA are committed to ensuring that Somali families can make telling and ongoing contributions to a truly international city like Birmingham, and at the same time fulfill their potential as active local citizens. We are both determined to ensure that the Somali community can take advantage of the facilities, opportunities and challenges of living in a major multi-cultural and multi-ethnic city.

The ‘Unexpected Community’ shows that there are many obstacles to overcome on this journey, but it equally demonstrates that partnerships like those formed by Trident and AMANA during 2007 are the way forward. We recommend this report as a means to start our journey on a firm footing. The rest is up to us.

John Morris, Chief Executive of Trident
& Hassan Dimbil, Chair of AMANA
About this Report

This report is the result of a partnership between Trident Housing Association and AMANA (a fledgling Somali-led housing association operating in Birmingham) identifying the need for research into the needs and aspirations of the Somali community in Birmingham, given the current lack of information with regard to that community. The key aims of this study were:

► to identify gaps in provision and areas where there is a need to improve substantially on existing provision;

► to provide evidence regarding life experience in Birmingham;

► to generate an enhanced understanding of the Somali community in general.

Funding limitations prevented the carrying out of a large-scale quantitative survey. The information detailed in this report therefore combines “secondary” quantitative data (e.g. data from the 2001 Census, studies carried out elsewhere in the UK and data from service providers) with more qualitative data, collected through interviews with community groups/individuals and key service providers.
SUMMARY

► Somalis in Birmingham represent a newly emergent community, which has grown dramatically in size over the past 5-6 years, with many members of the community not having come directly to Birmingham as refugees but via other European countries as European Union citizens. There is no accurate data regarding the size of the city’s Somali population, although community estimates indicate a population of some 40,000. This community is concentrated in the most deprived inner-city areas of Birmingham.

Housing - Key Issues

► Nationally there has been a clear tendency for local authorities to treat Black African households as a homogeneous group. Whilst Birmingham City Council now includes “Somalian” as an ethnic origin category on its Housing Application Form, when it comes to analyzing ethnic origin data the “Somalian” category is collapsed into a broader “Black” heading.

Household Type, Tenure & Social Status

► The size of Somali families can have a major impact on their ability to access appropriate accommodation. The average family size of those attending the focus group held as part of this research, for example, was 8 people. Given the limited range of housing options available this means that access to housing of a sufficient size is problematic.

► Somalis see themselves very much as occupying the lowest point of the immigrant hierarchy in terms of accessing appropriate accommodation. They feel that they are seen as competition by other minority groups.

► The situation in Birmingham would seem to be slightly different from that found elsewhere in the UK in that while many Somalis are living in local authority and housing association accommodation, a significant minority is reliant on the private rented sector. No Somali owner-occupiers were identified.
Private Rented Sector

► Somalis may have turned to the private rented sector due to:
  : Having left secure accommodation in other EU countries to move to Birmingham, and thus being found to be intentionally homeless
  : Having found local authority housing hard to access.
  : Having turned down an offer of accommodation
  : The opportunity of being located close to the Somali community.

► The private rented sector was viewed very negatively. The sector is seen as primarily marked by high rents and poor housing conditions. Many lettings were reportedly made without there being a tenancy agreement.

► Key problems identified were:
  : Housing Benefit payments not matching rent levels.
  : Landlords requiring deposits.
  : Landlords asking for “top-ups”
  : The rapid rise in house prices leading to landlords evicting tenants so that they can sell the property.

Social Rented Sector

► The impact of the language barrier and the lack of Somali staff in the Housing Department were identified as a key problem by our interviewees.

► Somalis generally prefer specific areas of the city, close to other Somalis and community facilities. There is a fear of isolation and harassment if they were to move to “non-traditional” areas. The amount (and availability) of suitable housing stock in preferred areas can, however, clearly have an impact on waiting times for housing.

► There appears to be quite a widespread perception that the Council are deliberately housing Somalis in “bad” areas. This must, however, be seen against the context of a decline in the size of the Council’s housing stock, individual choice and a slow-down in turnover of larger properties. There was recognition that the Council faced a hard task in trying to meet the Somali community’s housing needs.
One potential solution may be to allocate properties to Somali families in “Non-traditional” areas but to do so through clustered allocations, which would enable the families to support each other.

Homelessness

Homelessness is a major problem in Birmingham, which has about 20% of all of England’s homelessness applications. This clearly has significant implications for both for access to local authority housing and service delivery.

One key factor identified by the recent Judicial Review was an over-reliance on Home Options rather than combining this with legally set-out homelessness procedures.

The policy of keeping families already in accommodation in their current accommodation led to a number of Somali families occupying accommodation that was much too small for their needs.

In addition to the findings of the Judicial Review, a number of other key problems with regard to homelessness were identified by those interviewed:

i) it is hard to find temporary accommodation for large homeless households;

ii) households coming directly from EU countries may be found to be intentionally homeless and thus not eligible for housing by the local authority;

iii) whilst the local authority may house someone in adequate accommodation (in terms of size), this accommodation may then become inadequate if the person housed then brings the rest of his/her family over leading to the property becoming overcrowded;

iv) the policy of single offers to homeless households can be problematic if those offers are to “wrong” areas;
v) many Somalis don’t properly understand the homelessness system.

▶ The issues raised both by the Judicial Review and by this research are clearly issues that need to be addressed. Further, they are issues which, given the limited and decreasing size of the Council’s housing stock (and the conflicting pressures it is facing), would benefit from a multi-agency approach.

Housing Conditions and Suitability

▶ Many Somalis are living in extremely overcrowded circumstances. The issue of overcrowding needs to be set in the context of the type of housing available. In Birmingham, there is a clear problem regarding the availability of larger properties.

▶ Key private rented sector problems identified with regard to housing conditions were damp and condensation, poor quality repairs and a failure of the landlord to carry out repairs full stop. Private rented accommodation was seen as being “unfit housing”, which was not checked to ensure that it was fit for occupation.

▶ Key problems identified with regard to local authority housing were damp and condensation, poor heating and poor quality repairs and maintenance. Local authority accommodation allocated to Somalis was seen as being damp and sub-standard. A perceived lack of maintenance prior to allocation was also identified. Housing association properties, on the other hand, were seen as well-maintained and hence extremely desirable.

▶ Even though people might complain about the condition of local authority accommodation, private rented accommodation was seen as being worse.

Other Key Issues

▶ Deprivation in terms of access to and quality/location of housing does not exist in isolation. It is intrinsically related to other forms of deprivation and disadvantage.
Employment

► Whilst no hard data is available unemployment rates among Somalis are generally believed to be extremely high.

► As well as unemployment, under-employment is also an issue. Key factors identified as contributing to this un/under employment were:
  : Lack of recognition of Somali qualifications;
  : Language barriers;
  : Lack of knowledge of the system i.e. how to go about finding a job;
  : Lack of support with regard to finding a job;
  : Lack of Somalis working in Job Centres;
  : Lack of opportunities for training/re-training;
  : The insistence of employers that you don’t just have work; experience but that you have it in the UK.

► Possible actions to increase employment opportunities would include:
  : accredited Prior Learning programmes:
  : work based learning;
  : work experience;
  : specialist English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision;
  : creating jobs with housing providers for Somalis.

Education

► On average, the educational achievements of recently arrived Somali children, most of whom have English as a second language, are below that of other groups.

► A number of reasons were identified as contributing to under-performance in education. These included:
  : being placed in a class according to the pupil’s age, not their level of fluency in English;
  : children moving to the UK from other countries needing time to adapt to UK schooling;
  : lack of support and encouragement within schools;
  : Lack of support at home;
THE UNEXPECTED COMMUNITY

• lack of parental understanding of the UK educational system
• parents’ lack of English;
• overcrowded domestic conditions making it hard to study at home;
• living in deprived areas.

► Clearly Somali children are emerging from the educational system without the qualifications that would enable them to compete equally in the employment marketplace. Given their poor educational performance, this is an area where remedial action is vital if the cycle of deprivation is to be broken.

Young People

► The issue of cultural conflict/generation gap was identified as key issue. Somali young people were identified as being between two cultures and not full members of either.

► Somali young people tend to live in poor accommodation, in deprived areas, go to poor schools, lack support at home and, consequently, have low educational attainment (which in turn affects their employment options). Additionally there is perceived to be a lack of understanding of the criminal justice system. As a result of these factors they are felt to feature heavily in the “crime radar”.

Health and Well-Being

► Health issues identified included:
  • Asthma (due to damp housing) - this was seen as being very widespread;
  • allergies;
  • Bronchitis;
  • Diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure;
  • TB - seen as a “big issue”, but also as stigmatised and “shameful”
  • Khat use and use of other drugs by young people;
  • mental health problems.

► Khat users are seen as more vulnerable to mental health problems but as unlikely to access medical services until their mental health problems become critical.
► Other issues raised included:
  : conflict between traditional healing and understanding when one
    should access “mainstream” medical services;
  : the concentration of the Somali community in a limited number of
    areas leading to GPs in those areas being “flooded”;
  : the language barrier preventing people from receiving the level
    of service they need from GPs;
  : negative perceptions of GPs.
1. Birmingham’s Somali Community: Introductory Overview

Introduction

Somalis in Birmingham represent a newly emergent community, which has grown dramatically in size over the past 5-6 years. Whilst it is clear that a substantial number of Somalis have come to Birmingham as refugees (indeed over the period January 2006 to January 2007 alone, 156 of the 806 new registrations at the Wardlow Road Centre were from Somalia), many members of the community have not come directly to Birmingham as refugees but, rather, have come via other European countries (primarily Holland and the Scandinavian countries), where they obtained refugee status and citizenship i.e. they have come to Birmingham as European Union (EU) citizens - this has also been highlighted in Birmingham Somali Council’s Community Plan (Tyers & Mahamoud, 2007). As one Somali interviewed as part of our research noted, however:

“Is the Somali from Europe a refugee? On paper no, but they have a lot of common needs with refugees”.

This move from mainland Europe to Birmingham has been attributed to a number of factors:

- The lack of ethnic diversity in other EU countries;
- Dispersal policies in other EU Countries (with people being housed in isolation in small towns);
- Perceived greater ease in finding employment in the UK compared to other EU countries;
- Britain’s reputation as a tolerant and multicultural country;
- Britain’s colonial links with Somalia;
- Joining families and relatives already living in Birmingham.
One Somali interviewee (highlighting the UK’s reputation for “humanity” and tolerance) felt that:

“The British should be proud that they are the chosen country in Europe”

Other members of the community have moved to Birmingham from other UK cities. As with those who have moved to the city from EU countries they have been attracted by a number of factors including community facilities (e.g. mosques and shops), cost of living (lower than London), availability of accommodation, community/family links and the city’s multiracial/multicultural nature. Given the comparatively sudden growth in community size, Birmingham’s Somalis have been described as an “unexpected” community.

Demographic Characteristics

The 2001 Census identified 819 people in Birmingham Metropolitan District as having been born in Somalia, although estimates in 2002 (Dick, 2002) were of a community numbering 4,000 (n.b. Dick notes that “Birmingham is home to about 4,000 Somalis, providing Islamic support networks, alongside a reputation as a tolerant city”). The wards with the largest numbers of residents born in Somalia were:

Sparkbrook - 100
Lozells and East Handsworth - 89
Bordesley Green - 83
Soho - 64
Ladywood - 47
Aston - 46

Community estimates of the size of Birmingham’s Somali population now vary between 10,000 and 60,000, with most settling around the 40,000 mark. What is clear, however, is that there is no accurate data regarding the size of the Somali community.

The lack of accurate population data is not just a problem for Birmingham. One study (Harris, 2004) has noted, for example, that:

“Estimating the total number of Somalis in the UK is very difficult. There has been no national survey which could be used to produce an accurate figure”.

The Needs & Aspirations of Birmingham’s Somali Community
Research carried out nationally into “Somali Housing Experiences in England” by Sheffield Hallam University (Cole and Robinson, 2003) found that:

“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”.

In Birmingham’s case, while data from the 2001 Census with regard to the Somali population is out-of-date (predating most of the in-migration of Somalis to Birmingham), school roll data does indicate that the community is largely concentrated in the city’s most deprived areas.

Data regarding languages spoken for pupils aged 4-14 in 2005 identified 1,310 pupils as speaking Somali. The 2006 LEA ethnic breakdown of pupils aged 4-15 at the start of the academic year 2005-2006 identifies 3,257 as Somali (2% of the total school population). The top 6 wards in terms of the % of Black-Somali pupils in the ward are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nechells</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bordesley Green</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aston</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladywood</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washwood Heath</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparkbrook</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N.b. source for all of the above data: Birmingham City Council)

Birmingham City Council have estimated the percentage of the city’s population in each ward falling within the most and least deprived Super Output Areas (used to pinpoint smaller pockets of deprivation rather than merely looking at ward level) in England. Nine Birmingham wards were estimated to have at least 75% of their population falling within the 10% most deprived Super Output Areas in England. They were Washwood Heath (98.9%), Lozells & East Handsworth (97.2%), Sparkbrook (88.6%), Aston (88.2%), Kingstanding (84.6%), Nechells (84.5%), Soho
(81.3%), Bordesley Green (78.8%) and Ladywood (76.5%) [Source Birmingham City Council “2001 Census of Population: Key Findings”].

Clearly the top six wards in terms of the % of Black-Somali pupils are all included in the list of Birmingham’s most deprived wards. While we may lack accurate statistics on the community’s size we can, therefore, state with certainty that the community is concentrated in the most deprived inner-city areas of Birmingham.

Given that Birmingham’s Somali community is a comparatively new one it is, perhaps, not surprising that little (if any) research appears to have been carried out into the community’s housing needs and aspirations. Indeed, the Sheffield Hallam University research found that:

“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”.

Similarly research carried out for the London Borough of Camden (Khan and Jones, 2004) noted that:

“There appears to be little published research regarding Somalis in the United Kingdom in general”

From the limited amount of research that has been carried out in areas such as Bristol, Liverpool and Sheffield, and the London Boroughs of Camden, Ealing, Hackney and Tower Hamlets, a number of key findings regarding the housing situation of Somalis can be identified – these are detailed along with the findings from our research in Birmingham below.
2.

Housing: Key Issues

Overview

Whilst this study focuses primarily on housing, housing should not be looked at in isolation from other service issues. The key role played by housing (and its relationship to other key areas such as educational attainment and health) was, for example, emphasised by several of the service providers interviewed in the Camden study:

“Housing is the predominant issue….everything else is linked to that”

This was backed up by those we interviewed in Birmingham, where comments made included:

“Housing is the main issue”
“Everyone has a problem with housing”

Nationally there has been a clear tendency for local authorities to treat Black African households as a homogeneous group – indeed for ethnic monitoring purposes they are often collapsed into an all-encompassing “Black” category which also includes Black British and African Caribbeans. The Sheffield Hallam study, for example, found that:

“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”.

Some of those interviewed as part of our research also expressed the view that the local authority was not aware of what (in terms of housing) Somalis want. While it is commendable that the Council’s BME Housing Strategy states that:

“The BME population cannot be treated as homogeneous”.

and the Council now includes “Somalian” as an ethnic origin category (under Black or Black British) on its Housing Application Form, when it comes to analyzing ethnic origin data the “Somalian” category is collapsed into a broader “Black” heading. Further, the ethnic origin field is not mandatory thus staff may not be collecting or entering the data - this has been identified as a training need by the Housing Department.

Household Type, Tenure and Social Status

The size of Somali families can have a major impact on their ability to access appropriate accommodation. Somali households tend to be large. Khan and Jones’s research in Camden found that:

“The average household was perceived to be large, with four to six children”

The average family size of those attending the focus group we held as part of this research was 8 people. Given the limited range of housing options available this means that access to housing of a sufficient size is problematic (we return to this theme in more depth below). The primary effect of this is that many Somalis are living in severely overcrowded conditions.

Many Somali households are headed by lone mothers, indeed one study in the London Borough of Hackney (Holman, C. and Holman, N., April 2003) found that over 50% of householders described themselves as single parents. A further study (Bloch and Affield, 2002) found that nearly a third of Somali women were single parents. One estimate in Birmingham was that some 30-40% of Somali households are female-headed.

Our research in Birmingham revealed Somalis as seeing themselves very much as occupying the lowest point of the immigrant hierarchy in terms of accessing appropriate accommodation:

“We don’t get a proper house”

Indeed, they see themselves as losing out across the board:

“We’re completely excluded from everything”
“Some [ethnic groups] are more equal than others”

This may partly be a result of the clan divisions in the Somali community resulting in the community being unable to speak with a strong and unified voice:

“This weakens us…There is no one voice”

It was very much felt by the Somalis we interviewed that they are seen as competition by other minority groups (who are more likely to have positions of comparative power and more likely to have some form of political voice). As one interviewee noted:

“They see that we are taking a share of what they had”

Research carried out elsewhere in the UK has identified Somalis as overwhelmingly tending to live in the social housing sector. Rather than being due to choice this may be attributed to three factors:

► the reliance of households granted leave to remain in the country on assistance from the local authority with their housing needs;

► social networks and need for easy access to cultural facilities - binding households to certain locations and thereby limiting housing choice;

 ► affordability problems - restricting access to owner occupation.

With regard to the later the West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy notes that:

“Lack of economic capital restricts housing reach”

As the Sheffield Hallam research has shown, however, access to social housing is not straightforward for all Somali households. Key constraints they identified included:

► limited knowledge and awareness;

► difficulties approaching landlords and negotiating access to housing;
► limited availability of accommodation in preferred locations or for different household types.

Comments recorded during our research in Birmingham included:

“[Somalis] don’t know where to go or who to speak to"
“[Somalis] don’t know the law”

As with the Sheffield Hallam study, Khan and Jones’s research in Camden also highlighted the concentration of Somalis in local authority and housing association stock (with a smaller number of households being housed in the private rented sector). Indeed, 92% of respondents stated that they were renting their accommodation from Camden Council. There was virtually no home ownership.

We were unable to identify any owner-occupation amongst the post-2001 Somali population in Birmingham. If one examines the wards in which the Somali community is perceived to be most heavily concentrated, this finding comes as no surprise. Roughly one in five (20.6%) of Birmingham City Council’s 68,201 properties are located in the six wards in which the Somali community is most highly concentrated (using the % of Black-Somali pupils as an indicator). These wards (with the exception of Ladywood (which has seen the lowest % change in average property sales price of any of Birmingham’s 40 wards over the period 2001-2005) have also seen some of the largest changes in average property sales prices in Birmingham:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>% change in average Property sales price – 2001-2005</th>
<th>Ward position in terms of % change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nechells</td>
<td>156.4%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aston</td>
<td>132.6%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washwood Heath</td>
<td>130.4%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bordesley Green</td>
<td>128.9%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparkbrook</td>
<td>116.1%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladywood</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Birmingham City Council: Birmingham Housing - Facts and Figures, January 2007)
Even though these wards tend (with the exception of Ladywood) to be at the lower end of Birmingham’s average property sale price “league table”, the prices charged will still be out of reach of the vast majority of Somalis. This is particularly the case when one remembers that:

- Somali families tend to be large and will thus require larger properties
- Somalis are largely to be unemployed or in lower paid employment
- Average property sale prices have risen since 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>Average property sale price 2005</th>
<th>Ward position in terms of sale price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ladywood</td>
<td>£159,302</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nechells</td>
<td>£124,226</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparkbrook</td>
<td>£121,445</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bordesley Green</td>
<td>£118,057</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washwood Heath</td>
<td>£112,075</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aston</td>
<td>£110,006</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Birmingham City Council: Birmingham Housing - Facts and Figures, January 2007)

Thus the wards in which Somalis are likely to live are marked by a high concentration of local authority properties alongside property price increases (in most of these wards) of a level which make home ownership a non-starter.

Some differences in terms of tenure type between Birmingham’s Somali community and Somali communities elsewhere in the UK can be identified. As detailed above, the model of Somali tenure in other parts of the UK is one of heavy concentration in the social rented sector. Given that a significant percentage of Birmingham’s Somali population have not come to the city directly from Somalia as asylum-seekers (i.e. they have not had to seek leave to remain in the UK, but have, rather, come here as citizens of EU countries as detailed above) the situation in Birmingham would seem to be slightly different in that while many Somalis are living in local authority and housing association accommodation, a significant minority are reliant on the private rented sector.
Private Rented Sector

As many of Birmingham’s Somalis may have left secure accommodation in other EU countries to move to Birmingham, they may be found to be intentionally homeless and would thus not be eligible for priority housing under the homelessness legislation. In the case of Somalis coming from the EU (rather than as refugees directly from Somalis) local authority housing may be seen as hard to access. Given this, some will either move in with relatives on a temporary basis or turn to the private rented sector in order to meet their accommodation needs.

Even those found to be non-intentionally homeless and in priority need may turn to the private sector if they have turned down an offer of accommodation and consequently found themselves going to the back of the queue for social housing. The private rented sector may have an additional attraction when it offers the opportunity of being located close to the Somali community.

Despite the above, the private rented sector was viewed very negatively by those interviewed for this research. As one Somali interviewee noted:

“Landlords are one of the main issues… Landlords are creating hell for Somalis”

The sector is seen as primarily marked by high rents and poor housing conditions (see also under “Housing Conditions and Suitability” below). Landlords letting to the Somali community were identified as being small landlords, making direct lettings without a letting agent as an intermediary. Consequently many lettings were reportedly made without there being a tenancy agreement.

One key problem identified by many of those we interviewed was that of Housing Benefit payments not matching rent levels. This was seen:

i) as a barrier to accessing housing; and

ii) as a potential cause of evictions for non-payment of rent, when Somalis can no longer afford to self-fund the top-up necessary (in turn leading to people presenting themselves as homeless).
The need for a review of housing benefit “cut-off” levels was thus identified by several of those we interviewed.

Additional problems identified were:

- Landlords requiring deposits. Deposit guarantee schemes and deposit loan schemes can relieve this problem but the problem of the rent/housing benefit mismatch will still remain.
- Landlords asking for “top-ups” – sometimes this would be appear to be related to complaints to the local authority leading to the landlord being forced to carry out repairs, but on other occasions it would be appear to be an almost arbitrary demand to “pay up or get out”. This was felt to extremely commonplace by those attending the focus group we held – half of those attending had personal experience of it.
- The rapid rise in house prices (as shown above) leading to landlords evicting tenants so that they can sell the property.

It is clear from the above that there is an urgent need for action to be taken by the City Council with regard to private landlords.

Social Rented Sector

Research nationally has noted a lack of understanding of Somali housing needs, which results in existing provision not being sensitive to their preferences. The Sheffield Hallam study notes that:

“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 impact of the language barrier and the widespread lack of translation and interpretation services are of great importance. With regard to the former the Camden research drew attention to the limited fluency in spoken English across the Somali community in that Borough and highlighted the fact that:
“The language barrier is seen as leading to a poor housing service for Somalis, who usually need interpreters”

Birmingham City Council’s website states under “Support for Minority Ethnic Communities” that:

“Birmingham City Council Housing Department can provide information about our services, or arrange for an interpreter, in these community languages”

Somali is not, however, one of the languages listed. Indeed, the lack of Somali staff in the Housing Department (and the need for sign-posting with regard to housing problems) was identified as a key problem by our interviewees.

The Somalis we interviewed identified some difficulties in accessing local authority and housing association accommodation. It was clear from our interviews that Somalis generally prefer specific areas of the city. Indeed, the need for community support and access to community facilities (shops, mosques etc) was raised by several interviewees:

“We would like to move where the Somali community live as we can help each other...We feel safe”

Consequently high-rise flats in areas away from the bulk of the community were not seen as an attractive option. The amount (and availability) of suitable housing stock in preferred areas can, however, clearly have an impact on waiting times for housing.

Having said the above, it must be emphasised, however, that a key factor must be individual choice, it should not be assumed that just because someone is Somali they will automatically want to live in an area where there are a lot of other Somalis. It is up to the individual. As an interviewee noted:

“We need to avoid creating ghettos”

When housing is allocated concerns are sometimes raised regarding the suitability of the allocation. Indeed there appears to be quite a
widespread perception that the Council are deliberately housing Somalis in “bad” areas:

“Deliberate policy of providing [Somalis with] housing that is not suitable” (with reference to size and location). Another view was that the allocations section:

“Do what they like”

The use of a priority banding system for allocations was another contentious issue with the view being expressed that once you have been assigned to a particular band it is difficult to move out of it.

It should, however, be emphasised that these are the views expressed by some of those interviewed and are not necessarily hard fact.

Any discussion of the allocation of properties needs to be rooted in property availability (type, size and location). Birmingham City Council’s Housing Strategy for 2005 states that:

“There is a mismatch between the existing supply of affordable housing and the location of demand”

Expanding on this, the West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy states:

“The main problem in terms of refugees’ aspirations is that they are seeking council housing in areas that do not have a surplus of social housing and they do not have a fall back plan to rely on when they are not offered the social housing they want. They do not have knowledge about areas where they may be able to locate housing more quickly and are worried about moving outside known areas because of the fear of racial harassment”.

The Council’s BME Housing Strategy in turn recognises that:

“One of the largest challenges facing Birmingham is the mismatch between provision and need in inner city areas, combined with the restricted access to outer city areas”

A 2006 City Council report from Overview and Scrutiny on homelessness additionally notes that:
“The supply of suitable affordable properties across all tenures is outstripped by demand. The housing market has changed considerably over recent years and has been heavily influenced by changes in demographics, the make up of households, and the significant impact in price influencing affordability.”

Similarly, the Housing Department’s 2005/06 Lettings Analysis states that:

“It is apparently obvious that the number of properties let by the Housing Department is declining, with 2003/04 seeing the sharpest decline in lettings. A closer inspection of the information shows that the actual number of lettings is declining faster than the percentage of lettings as a proportion of stock. In essence what this means is that even though the department’s stock is declining, the number of properties available or becoming available for letting is declining faster.”

The table below, from the 2005/06 Lettings Analysis shows by property size the number of properties that were let by the department in the last two years for which data is available and the percentage decline in lettings by property size.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing Department Lettings by Bed Size</th>
<th>2004/05</th>
<th>2005/06</th>
<th>% decline in lettings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bedsit &amp; 1 Bed</td>
<td>2577</td>
<td>2569</td>
<td>-0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Bed</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1703</td>
<td>-15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Bed</td>
<td>1401</td>
<td>1179</td>
<td>-15.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Bed plus</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>-34.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total lettings</strong></td>
<td><strong>6050</strong></td>
<td><strong>5496</strong></td>
<td><strong>-9.2%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The percentage of properties that were let in the year by property size clearly declined as the property size increased. With the number of 4 bed plus properties (45) that were let in the year declining by 34.8%.

Birmingham City Council’s “Birmingham Housing - Facts and Figures” (January 2007) details stock type by ward. Numbers of properties for wards perceived to have the highest concentration of Somalis (Nechells,
Bordesley Green, Aston, Ladywood, Washwood Heath and Sparkbrook) are detailed below.

The stock type/size tables show that 38.8% (26,431) of the City Council’s properties have 3 or more bedrooms. Of these, 81.5% (21,534 properties) are houses. Only 2.3% (1,571 properties) have 4 or more bedrooms.

14,079 properties (20.6% of the total housing stock) are located in the six areas perceived to have the highest concentrations of Somalis, with 4,264 of these (30.1% of the total stock for these areas i.e. less than the city wide percentage) being houses.

Unfortunately a breakdown of type and size by area was not available at the time of writing this report. When taken with the data from the 2005/06 Lettings Analysis, however, the disparity between the accommodation (and location) that the Somali community wants and what is actually available is evident.

One common complaint we heard from the Somalis interviewed was that the Council has a lot of accommodation lying empty:

“Thousands and thousands of houses that are empty”

Details of empty properties by ward for 2006 (from “Birmingham Housing - Facts and Figures” Information) are shown below. Ladywood had both the largest number of empty properties of any ward in Birmingham and the largest number of properties empty for more than 6 months in 2006.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Flats</th>
<th>Houses</th>
<th>Maisonettes</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nechells</td>
<td>3125</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>4433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bordesley Green</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>953</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aston</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1059</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladywood</td>
<td>1410</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>2225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washwood Heath</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparkbrook</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>617</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1303</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n.b. “Other” includes bungalows and prefabs
Of the 10,308 empty properties in 2006, 2,425 (23.5%) were in the 6 wards perceived to have the highest concentration of Somalis. Of the 8,672 properties empty for more than 6 months, 1,992 (23.0%) were in these wards.

Data for the whole city shows the number of bedrooms by property type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bedrooms</th>
<th>Flat</th>
<th>House</th>
<th>Maisonette</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bedsit</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 bedroom</td>
<td>1597</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3522</td>
<td>19535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 bedrooms</td>
<td>1116</td>
<td>8830</td>
<td>1019</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>21303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 bedrooms</td>
<td>2737</td>
<td>20026</td>
<td>2065</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 bedrooms</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1432</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 bedrooms</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 bedrooms</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 bedrooms</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3057</td>
<td>30385</td>
<td>3116</td>
<td>4125</td>
<td>68201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figures given above and below show the distribution size and availability of local authority stock alone (similar details for housing association stock were not available). These figures should be considered in light of the typical size of Somali families (6 to 8 people), which demonstrate a clear need for larger accommodation. Lack of such accommodation has led to severe overcrowding. Not only, however, is there limited (and declining) availability of such accommodation, but housing associations are tending to build only smaller houses, which don’t meet Somali needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>All empty properties - 2006</th>
<th>Properties empty for more than 6 months - 2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nechells</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bordesley Green</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aston</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladywood</td>
<td>799</td>
<td>578</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washwood Heath</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparkbrook</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2425</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What then can be done to address the problem of limited availability of accommodation in “preferred” areas? Moving away from such areas is one obvious solution. The West Midlands Housing Strategy states that:

“BME households who choose to move well beyond the traditional areas of settlement, whether from inner city to outer suburbs or rural areas and shire towns should be able to do so without encountering discrimination”

There is, however, a clear (and rational) fear of isolation and harassment. One potential solution may be to allocate properties to Somali families in “non-traditional” areas but to do so through clustered allocations (for example allocations being made in a given area to 10 or so Somali families, creating a self-supporting micro community) – families are unlikely to accept an offer that would see them being housed in isolation from other Somalis:

“You cannot isolate people and expect them to live happily there”

Clustered allocations of a small number of properties (with appropriate support) would enable the families to support each other.

In general, however, it should be pointed out that whilst there was criticism of Birmingham City Council in terms of time spent on the housing waiting list, condition of properties, areas offered and overcrowding, there was also recognition that the Council faced a hard task in trying to meet the Somali community’s housing needs. As one Somali interviewee noted:

“Birmingham City Council did their best but the need was beyond their capacity”

Homelessness

Whilst problems in accessing social rented housing were identified by our interviewees, it would appear that the issue with regard to local authority housing is not just one of access, it also one of what is allocated (and where). In other words it is not just homelessness in the form of a lack of access to housing but a lack of allocation to appropriate accommodation. As one interviewee working in the housing field noted:
“The offers are coming, but is it fit for purpose, is it the right offer?”

Studies elsewhere in the UK have examined the issue of homelessness amongst Somali communities. The Sheffield Hallam research, for example, notes that:

“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”.

The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAAR) have also noted (Harris, 2004) that:

“New arrivals often have difficulty finding somewhere to live, and take advantage of norms of family or clan obligation to move in with relatives.”

In Birmingham homelessness is a major problem. The Council’s Housing Strategy for 2005 notes that:

“Homelessness is a particular problem in Birmingham with the rate of presentations being twice the national average. During 2004/5, 4,663 homeless households were assessed as being in priority need”.

The Judicial Review of the Council’s homelessness policy reported in January 2007 states that:

“The defendant [the City Council] is the largest local authority in the country and at any one time has some 19,000 people waiting for housing and a further 17,000 awaiting transfer. In the year ending 31 March 2006, there were 9,576 homelessness applications, which is apparently about 20% of all applications made in England. There is a limited stock and inner city clearance programmes coupled with the exercise of rights to by reduce what is available”
This clearly has significant implications for access to local authority housing. It also has implications for service delivery, particularly given that the Housing Strategy identifies reducing the level of statutory homeless as a key action under its “Priority theme 2: Safety net and support services”. As result the City Council can be perceived to be steering people towards the private rented sector (and the affordability issues that raises, as detailed above) in order to keep homelessness figures down. The Judicial Review additionally notes that the Council:

“Tries to keep persons living in their own properties so that they do not have to apply for accommodation as homeless. This has been extended so that, even though the defendant [i.e. the Council] may accept that because, for example, of chronic over-crowding, it is not reasonable to expect a family to continue to live in accommodation so that they must be regarded as homeless, they are required to remain in that situation waiting for suitable accommodation to become available.”

Our research in Birmingham coincided with the publication of the Judicial Review. This put the whole issue of Somalis and homelessness procedures very much in the public eye (as the claimants were Somalis). One key factor identified by the Review was an over-reliance on Home Options (the Council’s strategy to help prevent homelessness and provide other housing options through providing housing advice and working in partnership with other agencies) rather than combining this with legally set-out homelessness procedures. Those presenting as homeless were, instead, dealt with under Home Options and no formal homeless application was taken i.e. they were not recorded as presenting as homeless – this fails to comply with Section 184 of Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002). As the Review notes, Home Options:

“Cannot lawfully be use to defer consideration of a homeless application”

Clearly, the policy of keeping families already in accommodation in their current accommodation led to a number of Somali families occupying accommodation that was much too small for their needs. N.b. under such conditions households can be defined as occupying accommodation that it “would not be reasonable for him [them] to
occupy” under Section 175 (3) of Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002).

In brief, the Judicial Review found that the Council had failed to deal with the claimants in accordance with the provisions of Part VII of the 1996 Act and that:

“There have been consistent accounts of failures by the defendant [the City Council] to deal with applications in accordance with the law”

In addition to the findings of the Judicial Review, a number of other key problems with regard to homelessness were identified by those interviewed:

► it is hard to find temporary accommodation for large homeless households;

► households coming directly from EU countries may be found to be intentionally homeless and thus not eligible for housing by the local authority;

► whilst the local authority may house someone in adequate accommodation (in terms of size), this accommodation may then become inadequate if the person housed then brings the rest of his/her family over leading to the property becoming overcrowded;

► the policy of single offers to homeless households can be problematic if those offers are to “wrong” areas – people are reluctant to accept offers to areas in which they feel they will be unsafe and isolated. Safety and community contacts are seen as key issues;

► many Somalis don’t properly understand the homelessness system - they are not aware that there is little choice with regard to offers made homelessness channels and think that it is ok to refuse an offer.

There are no simple solutions to these problems, which must all be set against the statement in the Judicial Review that:
“Each claimant has a large family and so requires accommodation which has more than three bedrooms. Such accommodation is not readily available in Birmingham”

Indeed, the cabinet member for housing at the City Council, was quoted in “Inside Housing” (Hilditch, 2007) as saying:

“I would be interested in the judge’s view on how local authorities should meet the enormous demand for affordable housing with a diminishing property base”

The issues raised both by the Judicial Review and by our interviewees are clearly issues that need to be addressed. Further, they are issues which, given the limited and decreasing size of the Council’s housing stock (and the conflicting pressures it is facing), would benefit from a multi-agency approach.

Housing Conditions and Suitability

Two of the main problems identified by our interviewees in Birmingham were overcrowding and poor housing conditions. Research carried out in other English cities has noted that many Somalis are living in extremely overcrowded circumstances. This can have a number of impacts including:

- physical, mental and emotional well-being
- future prospects e.g. young people can find it a problem to complete homework and study for exams in overcrowded conditions.

The Camden research noted that:

“Overcrowding can be the result of an allocation initially being made to a small family (e.g. a woman and two children), but then the extended family arrives”

This was clearly also the case in Birmingham. (see, for example, Case Studies 3, 4, and 5 below).

The Camden research also noted that:
“Overcrowding impacts on educational achievement as with five or six children in a two-bedroom property, it is hard to do homework due to the noise. Overcrowding and repairs are crucial issues”

The issue of overcrowding does, however, need to be set in the context of the type of housing available. In Camden, for example, the researchers found that the structure of the social housing stock meant that there were too many bedsits and one-bedroom flats and not enough larger properties. Again in Birmingham there is clear problem (detailed above) regarding the size of properties available.

Problems with Somali housing conditions identified by research carried out in the UK to date include:

- damp and condensation,
- ineffective heating systems,
- poor quality repairs and maintenance
- inadequate security measures.

When presented with an extensive list of housing related problems, around half of the respondents in the Camden research stated their biggest housing problem was related to repairs. Findings from our research in Birmingham indicate that this is an issue both in the local authority and private rented housing sectors.

Key private rented sector problems identified by those interviewed in Birmingham were damp and condensation, poor quality repairs and a failure of the landlord to carry out repairs full stop. Private rented accommodation was seen as being “unfit housing”, which was not checked to ensure that it was fit for occupation. Birmingham Somali Council’s Community Plan (Tyers & Mahamoud, 2007) reflects these findings stating that their focus group was:

“Particularly scathing of the private landlord sector believing that they were abusing at risk and vulnerable Birmingham Somalis by overcharging, offering poor facilities and providing low quality services”
## Case Study 1 - Private Rented

5 people (a single mother her three children and one granddaughter) living in a 2 bedroom house. The living room ceiling has collapsed and the shower leaks down into the living room. Whenever the washing machine is used it floods the yard (due to a blocked up drain). The landlord has been told about the needs for repairs and maintenance several times but has taken no action:

> “He says “Yes Darling, I will send someone tomorrow but nothing happens”

> “Sweet words but no action”

On key problem is the difficulty in making a complaint to the Council when there is a lack of Somali-speaking staff:

> “We can’t report what’s happening to us in English!”

The rent for the property (which the tenant found independently i.e. not through the local authority) is £450 per month but this is not fully covered by housing benefits (of which she is reportedly paid £360 per month). The tenant has to make up the shortfall from her £57 per week Job Seeker’s Allowance.

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## Case Study 2 - Private Rented

7 people (a single mother and her 6 school-age children – 3 girls and 3 boys) living in a 3 bedroom house. One bedroom is not used as it is unsafe, due to leaks from the adjacent bathroom.

The property suffers from bad damp and water pours through the kitchen ceiling from the bathroom overhead. As a result the children have to visit a neighbour in order to have a bath. The problems have been reported to the landlord, but to no effect.

The rent for the property (which the tenant found independently i.e. not through the local authority) is £450 per month, with housing benefits covering £370 per month. The tenant has to fund the difference from her Job Seeker’s Allowance. The tenant also had to pay the landlord £1,500 in advance (2 months rent in advance + a £600 deposit) before the family could move in.
Key problems identified with regard to local authority housing were damp and condensation, poor heating and poor quality repairs and maintenance. Local authority accommodation allocated to Somalis was seen as being damp and sub-standard. A perceived lack of maintenance prior to allocation was also identified. Housing association properties, on the other hand, were seen as well-maintained and hence extremely desirable.

**Case Study 3 - Local Authority**

6 people living in a one bed flat, with the living room being used as an additional bedroom. The flat has bad damp and the 4 children all have asthma. When the Council was told about the damp they reportedly painted it over.

The husband was by himself when he moved into the property – his family arrived a year later from Denmark. Thus whilst the property is now overcrowded it wasn’t at the time it was allocated. The family is on the waiting list for a transfer.

**Case Study 4 - Local Authority**

4 people living in a one bedroom flat, with heating through wall vents and bad damp. The damp is so bad that the husband stated that he had:

"A four year old daughter living under the water"

The damp has resulted in sofas and beds having to be replaced due to mildew. The Council were told about the damp problem but reportedly painted over it, rather than dealing with the cause.

The wife has medical problems whilst the school-age daughter misses school regularly due to her asthma.

The husband sleeps in the living room. The wife and one daughter share a bed while the other daughter sleeps in the same room. As with Case Study 3, when the property was allocated the husband was by himself – his wife and children came over later. The family is currently on the waiting list for a transfer.
Case Study 5 - Local Authority

8 people (a married couple, their 5 children and a Grandmother) living in a 2 bed flat – the Grandmother shares a room with 3 of the children, while the other 2 share with their parents. When the property was first allocated it was just for the wife and one child.

They are on the waiting list for a transfer but feel that the Council’s approach is one of:

"""We will give you another house”, but it’s only words…nothing is coming out of it"

"It’s not the problem of anybody, it’s just the problem of the family”

The damp and cramped accommodation is impacting on the children’s education:

“Do you think these children can learn something”

It was evident, however, that even though people might complain about the condition of local authority accommodation, there was still a feeling of gratitude that they at least had somewhere to live, coupled with a feeling that things could be worse:

“When Council houses are like this, what about private [rented] houses?”
3. Other Key Issues

Introduction

Deprivation in terms of access to and quality/location of housing does not exist in isolation. It is intrinsically related to other forms of deprivation and disadvantage. Studies carried out in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, for example, have highlighted that Somalis are probably the most disadvantaged minority ethnic group in that Borough, noting that despite being among the earliest black settlers in this country, the profile of the community remains very low, and its access to power and the political decision-making process is limited. One such report (Shire, 1999) has stated with specific reference to Tower Hamlets:

“It [the Somali community] . . . consists of predominantly young people. The latest survey of Tower Hamlets shows that up to 54% are under 25-years-old, more than 90% are unemployed and about 41% have no qualifications. 25% of the men and 75% of the women do not speak English. Somali children have the lowest reading performance in schools and one of the highest rates of truancy and exclusion. Access to health services is another major problem due to language and cultural barriers”.

Key non housing-specific issues covered by our research are identified below.

Employment

In terms of employment, Khan and Jones’s research in Camden found that the Somali-born community could broadly be divided into three groups:

► those who were professionals in Somalia, and who are doing badly in the UK due to their “I used to be somebody” mindset – they are not willing to learn new skills and start chewing Khat;
those who were unskilled in Somalia who are doing well in the UK and working their way up;

women, who are not doing well because men lost their traditional role, so women took the sole responsibility for raising children rather than looking out for themselves.

Youths growing up in the UK can also be divided into two groups:

those born in the UK or entering the UK at a very young age who are doing well;

those entering the UK aged 10 or older, who are underachieving.

Whilst no hard data is available (due to the widespread lack of a separate “Somali” category for monitoring purposes) research carried out in other English cities (e.g. Khan and Jones and Sheffield Hallam) has noted that unemployment rates are generally believed to be extremely high.

The Camden research notes that Somalis in employment are often seen as “the telephone people” (due to the telecom and internet access businesses), although most of those starting such businesses have not come directly from Somalia but rather are Somalis from mainland Europe. n.b. comparisons may be made here with growth in such businesses on the Stratford Road.

As well as unemployment, under-employment is also an issue as Somali qualifications are frequently not recognised in the UK – some Somalis may not have been able to practice their skills for the last 10 or more years and as a result they find it still harder to get jobs.

A study carried out in Tower Hamlets (Abdilla, 2001) found that:

“A major concern is unemployment amongst educated young Somali jobless despite [them] holding diplomas, degrees and even Masters qualifications. These young people have fallen through the net and are not able to access jobs in the city or the community”
This also reflects the findings of a study on the professional capacity of Somalis in the UK (Bloch and Atfield, 2002):

“The research has shown a high level of skills, qualifications and employment experience”

High unemployment is, in turn, reflected in a reliance on benefits – the Camden research, for example, found 71% of Somalis to be claiming state benefits.

For those attending/finishing school in the UK access to employment has been identified as problematic due to a number of reasons:

- perceptions of racism on the part of potential employers;
- language barrier;
- poor health/disability;
- lack of role models;
- an general impression that Somalis are excluded from mainstream employment;
- cultural and gender expectations.

Somali respondents across the focus groups held during the research in Camden presented a picture of a ‘vicious cycle’ in which Somalis would leave education as failures and end up in dead-end jobs.

Our research in Birmingham once again found evidence of disproportionately high unemployment and under-employment among Somalis, although the development of businesses along the Stratford and Coventry Roads is evidence of a strong entrepreneurial spirit (which, in turn, may lead to jealousy on the part of other minorities and thus lead to inter-community tensions).

None of the 15 people attending our focus group, for example, were in full-time employment. These findings are matched by those detailed in Birmingham Somali Council’s Community Plan (David & Mahamoud, 2007).

Key factors identified as contributing to this un/under employment were:
Lack of recognition of Somali qualifications - one interviewee (living in very poor housing) stated that he had been a Civil Servant in Somali and had an MBA:

“But it doesn’t work here”

One of those attending our focus group had been an Economist and Bank Director in Somalia but was:

“Oh not so successful here”

- Language barriers;
- Lack of knowledge of the system i.e. how to go about finding a job;
- Lack of support with regard to finding a job;
- Lack of Somalis working in Job Centres -

“We need to have some employees in the office who can communicate with Somalis”

- Lack of opportunities for training/re-training;
- The insistence of employers that you don’t just have work experience but that you have it in the UK.

Research findings, both national and Birmingham-specific, mirror the experiences cited in “Celebrating sanctuary: Birmingham and the refugee experience 1750-2002 “(Dick, 2002):

“For qualified people like Saeed Hassan and Abdi Y Farah, obtaining professional employment is virtually impossible. Saeed, a former maths teacher, has been able to establish a video and photography business to support himself and his family. Abdi was educated at university in the USA and Canada and has produced a detailed report into the needs of the local community. Both are active in developing support networks for Somali people and are trying to improve English language and IT provision for adults and children. The waste of talent in the community concerns them when so many Somalis could be playing a larger role in society”.
Possible actions to increase employment opportunities identified in the West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy to increase employment opportunities for refugees generally (of relevance not only to those coming to the UK directly from Somalia but also to the “refugees at one remove” coming from other EU countries) would include:

“Accredited Prior Learning programmes, work based learning, work experience and specialist English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision”

Given the language barriers identified earlier in this report with regard to accessing services, one possible solution might be look at the possibility of creating jobs with housing providers for Somalis. This would both increase employment opportunities and enable services to be provided to Somalis by people who share their language and culture.

Amana Housing Association is endeavouring to place Somalis within Trident Housing Association’s care and support services. To date 8 successful placements have been made, with more in the pipeline. Additionally Amana has formed a relationship with Archway Academy to promote “Entry to Employment” training among Somalis.

Education

Studies elsewhere have drawn attention to issues of access and performance with regard to education. The Sheffield Hallam study records that:

“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”.

Research on education in Camden (Ali and Jones, 2000) highlighted that:

“Larger societal factors that can hinder achievement included: racism, poverty, high mobility rates due to housing policies, health [including
drug-related] problems, translation issues and difficulties in relation to immigration status. There is also the issue of hostility towards asylum seekers and, ultimately, refugees”.

The research carried out in Camden by Khan and Jones found that there was a widespread perception among the community groups interviewed of high rates of underachievement, school exclusion and withdrawal from education within the community. This was seen as attributable to:

- children having no prior experience of school due to the collapse of the education system in Somalia;
- children being placed in streams according to their age rather than their previous level of attainment (given that they may lack both experience and English language skills: “they are like deaf people sitting among speaking people”) - as recent arrivals they have no time to “catch up”;
- lack of parental support;
- lack of parental, or more specifically mother's, literacy in English;
- lack of a safe, secure and settled environment;
- poor and overcrowded housing conditions;
- their experiences of violence in Somalia - trauma;
- their history as a refugee, possibly in multiple countries - unsettled life;
- families not knowing how to cope with life in the UK;
- bullying and racism;
- stigmatisation by schools as “troublemakers”.

Due to these often inter-related problems, there was perceived to be inequality of access to education alongside a very high school drop-out and exclusion rate. Somalis were seen to be underachieving and leaving school without any qualifications or skills.

Reasons given for poor achievement included:

- The collapse of education in Somalia - some children do not know how to handle a pen – it is hard to work when you cannot write and this fuels frustration. It is difficult for teachers to cope when they have a class full of other children too.
The high proportion of single female-headed households, with little spoken English. As a result Somali children were felt to be more unruly and to exhibit bad behaviour.

In addition to the above there is a problem of school absenteeism, sometimes due to parents taking their children to meetings to act as interpreters.

Issues identified by service providers in Camden as being of key importance with regard to education included:

► Dramatic underachievement by boys due to lack of self-esteem (they are refugees and often come from poor families);

► Lack of out-of-school provision for children;

► A generational divide and culture clashes - “Anglicisation” of kids leads to family stress as it clashes with family values. Teenagers are torn between two cultures. Some are trying to get away from the Somali element by focusing on what’s modern and English. As a result some run away from home.

In Birmingham, a report on “Examination and Assessment Results 2006” to the Education and Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee/Cabinet in December 2006 notes that:

“On average, the educational achievements of recently arrived Somali children, most of whom have English as a second language, are below that of other groups”

As the report states:

“Children at risk of underachieving are not evenly distributed across the City and some wards have a significantly higher proportion of children at risk than others”.

For Foundation Stage Assessments the percentage of children achieving the majority of the early learning goals ranges from less than 30% in Soho, Washwood Heath, Sparkbrook and Ladywood wards, to
over 60% in Sutton New Hall and Sutton Four Oaks wards. The report notes that:

“These differences are associated with differences in levels of deprivation and in the proportion of pupils with English as an additional language”.

In Birmingham Somalis are, as noted earlier, located primarily in the most deprived wards. Clearly three of the four wards with the lowest percentages of children achieving the majority of the early learning goals are among the six wards with highest percentages of Somali pupils (see under “Birmingham’s Somali Community – an introduction” above).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Learning – Foundation Stage</th>
<th>% of pupils achieving the majority of the early learning goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somali Boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal, Social &amp; Emotional Development</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication, Language &amp; Literacy</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematical Development</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge &amp; Understanding of the world</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Development</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Development</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* equal lowest with Bangladeshi
Somali children were least likely to achieve the majority of the early learning goals for each area of learning (although girls are clearly out-performing boys).

For Key Stage 2 English the proportion of pupils achieving Level 4 and above ranges from between 60-65% in Sparkbrook, Nechells and Bordesley Green wards to over 85% in the Sutton, Perry Barr, Hall Green and Bournville wards. The report again notes that these differences are associated with differences in levels of deprivation and in the proportion of pupils with English as an additional language. All three of the wards with the lowest levels of achievement are among the six wards with the highest percentages of Somali pupils.

As the table below shows, across all wards Somali children were least likely of all groups to have achieved Level 4 and above at Key Stage 2 or Level 5 and above at Key Stage 3 (although, interestingly, boys were performing better than girls at Maths at both Stages).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Learning – Key Stage 2</th>
<th>% of pupils achieving Level 4 or above</th>
<th>Somali Boys</th>
<th>Somali Girls</th>
<th>All Somalis</th>
<th>All Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td></td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Learning – Key Stage 3</th>
<th>% of pupils achieving Level 5 or above</th>
<th>Somali Boys</th>
<th>Somali Girls</th>
<th>All Somalis</th>
<th>All Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td></td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results for GCSE and equivalent for 2006 again show Somali children generally performing less well than those in other groups, although Somali girls once again out-perform Somali boys, with a better than overall average percentage for Functional English and Maths at Level 1 and “Achieving one or more qualifications” (where Somali boys also score higher than the average for all groups).

The percentage of Somali girls achieving 5 or more A*-G grades is also higher than that for all groups (boys and girls) and only slightly lower (90% compared to 93%) than that for girls across all groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GCSE or Equivalent</th>
<th>Somali Boys</th>
<th>Somali Girls</th>
<th>All Somalis</th>
<th>All Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achieving 5 or more A*-C grades</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieving 5 or more A*-C grades (inc. Eng. &amp; Maths)</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieving 5 or more A*-G grades</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieving 5 or more A*-G grades (inc. Eng. &amp; Maths)</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieving Functional English and Maths at Level 1</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieving one or more qualifications</td>
<td>98.2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>97.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.b. the small number of Somalis sitting A levels or equivalents makes comparison with other groups meaningless.

As with research carried out elsewhere in the UK a number of common reasons were identified by those interviewed during our research as contributing to under-performance in education. These included:
Being placed in a class according to the pupil’s age, not their level of fluency in English
Children moving to the UK from other countries needing time to adapt to UK schooling
Lack of support and encouragement within schools
Lack of support at home:

“The problem is the families, they don’t want to monitor the children”

- Lack of parental understanding of the UK educational system
- Parents’ lack of English
- Overcrowded domestic conditions making it hard to study at home:

“Children need space to learn. When there’s five in one room they can’t learn much”

As a result of the above:

“Children are being left behind in the education timetable”

While the City Council reportedly have a Black Awareness programme in schools this was felt to lack Somali involvement (with the problem being, as identified earlier in this report, that disparate groups tend to be lumped together under a “Black” umbrella). At the most basic level, one of our Somali interviewees stated that:

“We need Somali support teachers”

Clearly Somali children are emerging from the educational system without the qualifications that would enable them to compete equally in the employment marketplace. Given their poor educational performance, this is an area where remedial action is vital if the cycle of deprivation is to be broken.

Young People

Research carried out elsewhere in the UK (e.g. Khan and Jones’s work in Camden) has highlighted the difficulties faced by Somali young people, who may find themselves falling between two stalls: they find themselves neither Somali nor British and are thus unsure of their actual identity. This
lack of a positive identity is felt in some cases to have lead to a drift into gang culture as at least gang membership offers an identity. The Camden research identified family break-up as linked to young people turning to drugs and crime. Camden’s Somali community was worried that Somali youth were edging towards crime, with the potential future threat of gang-related problems. Younger Somalis were seen as proportionately more likely than others to commit offences, with the lack of facilities for younger people seen as contributing to possible future juvenile delinquency.

In Birmingham, the issue of cultural conflict/generation gap (the culture at home versus the culture outside of the home) was also identified as key issue. As one (non-Somali) interviewee noted:

“The system and the culture are in conflict”

Again, as with the findings of the Camden study, Somali interviewees in Birmingham highlighted the situation of Somali young people as being between two cultures and not full members of either. As one interviewee aid:

“They don’t fit”

Somali young people tend to live in poor accommodation, in deprived areas, go to poor schools, lack support at home and, consequently, have low educational attainment (which in turn affects their employment options). Additionally there is perceived to be a lack of understanding of the criminal justice system. As a result of these factors they are felt to feature heavily in the “crime radar” (although, given the lack of a “Somali” category in Police statistics, no hard data exists to support this).

This has already been identified as an issue of concern by the Police who are trying to build links with Somali young people and to employ Police and Street Wardens from the Somali community.

One of Amana Housing Association’s long-term aims is to look for solutions to the issues facing Somali young people, through training and education, employment, accommodation and partnership work with other provider organisations.
Health and Well-Being

The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK report “The Somali community in the UK: What we know and how we know it” (Harris, 2004) notes (whilst also drawing attention to the lack of research studies focusing on health in the Somali community) that:

“The contributing causes of ill health are well-rehearsed. Poor housing is one. Local authorities have an obligation to house those with refugee status and leave to remain, but the social housing stock is dwindling, and refugees often find themselves in the oldest accommodation, plagued by damp and vermin…. [Additionally] …British housing is not designed for large households and the health of members inevitably suffers”

Birmingham City Council’s BME Housing Strategy also notes that:

“The link between health and housing is well known; for BME groups, who are disproportionately concentrated in poorer conditions with overcrowding, illness can be exacerbated”

The Camden research (Khan and Jones, 2003) identified a number of key issues with regard to health:

► Health problems may be housing-related e.g. problems associated with damp and inadequate heating;

► Liver disease is a particular problem (Hepatitis linked to water quality in Somalia – Hepatitis A, B and potentially C were identified as problems), along with TB, diabetes, strokes, traumatic stress (due to civil war experiences) and respiratory problems (e.g. asthma). The latter has a clear link to housing conditions;

► Health services can be difficult to access e.g. there are very few (if any) Somalis working in hospitals or as GPs; there is a lack of interpreters and Somalis do not know how the system works. In short, communication was identified as a key problem;

► Some aspects of the health service (e.g. preventative measures) are seen as alien to Somali culture;
Depression and mental health problems (especially amongst older and younger Somalis). These may be due to poverty, poor housing, trauma or lack of advice/guidance;

The problems of heading the household and coping with children, alongside language problems were seen as leading to stress for women;

Older people suffer from stress due to isolation and inability to understand written communication;

The community is dependent on the NHS as it can’t afford to access private care;

The long-term effects of Khat chewing are under-researched but it can apparently contribute to:
- Psychological problems e.g. depression
- Throat, mouth and stomach cancers
- Insomnia and associated paranoia
- Dementia
- Loss of libido
- Malnourishment
- Suicidal tendencies
- Hypertension and strokes.

The Camden Central Health Needs Assessment (Keenan, 2002) identified the following key themes with regard specifically to the Somali community:

The attitude of GPs and other healthcare professionals towards asylum seekers;

The prevalence of diseases specific to the community, and the lack of cultural and religious sensitivity in the NHS;

Lack of employment opportunities especially for young and adult males, and for those with medical qualifications;
Mental health and domestic violence

Public prejudice and the media attacks on refugees and asylum seekers nationally affected their health.

Respondents in the Sheffield Hallam study 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
- inadequate or inappropriate accommodation.

Health issues identified by those interviewed as part of our research in Birmingham included:

- Asthma (due to damp housing) – this was seen as being very widespread
- Allergies
- Bronchitis
- TB – seen as a “big issue”, but also as stigmatised and “shameful”
- Khat use and use of other drugs by young people

Khat users are seen as more vulnerable to mental health problems but as unlikely to access medical services until their mental health problems become critical (as traditionally Khat use has not been seen as leading to mental health problems). Pressures of life in the UK and lack of community control are seen as leading to excessive Khat use. This in turn can lead to divorce and family violence and children turning to the streets.

Other issues raised by interviewees in Birmingham included:

- Conflict between traditional healing and understanding when one should access “mainstream” medical services
- The concentration of the Somali community in a limited number of areas leading to GPs in those areas being “flooded”
The language barrier preventing people from receiving the level of service they need from GPs. N.B. Birmingham Somali Council’s Community Plan (David & Mahamoud, 2007) also notes that interpreter services were a key issue.

The attitude of GPs towards them:

“Every time I go to him he jumps to conclusions before I tell him my situation”

“People have GPs but they don’t help”

Focus groups of Somali men and women held by Heart of Birmingham Teaching Primary Care Trust in November 2006 revealed:

- Negative perceptions of GPs and of health care generally
  “I don’t feel any confidence”
  “My opinion is the UK is very low on health care”

- Some incidence of mental health problems, depression and stress-related problems.

“What I have heard is that there are an awful lot of Somalis who are suffering from mental health problems and left to deal with it. Mainly because the main source of the cause they create the problems themselves. They eat Khat which provokes the problems...Those who don’t eat Khat don’t suffer not as much”

“Those who don’t use the Khat it doesn’t cause the person stress. The normal people who don’t use Khat it is very rare that they will get mental stress”

“I have heard a number of young people who suffering from depression because people... Somali people especially, don’t know what depression is. They don’t see that it exists and are not taken care of. I, myself, have come across quite a number of youngsters who are depressed...You look at their face and you can see. Because it doesn’t exist in our way of life and it’s not in our dictionary then nobody would recognise it.”
Diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure

The impact of the language barrier and lack of knowledge of the UK medical system:

“I think especially when they [hospital staff] see people like Somalis who they think cannot speak the language properly and they think they don’t know the system and usually force them to do things that they wouldn’t ask them to do”

“They think he doesn’t know the system, they think just send him away and don’t waste any time”

Whilst, then, there may be little research on health in the Somali community, what little there is (often in non-health specific studies) is clearly remarkably consistent in its findings.
4. Conclusions & Recommendations for Change

The people interviewed (both Somali and non-Somali) during the course of our research made a number of recommendations for improving the housing situation of Somalis in Birmingham. These included:

1. There should be greater monitoring and evaluation of private sector landlords, perhaps with the introduction of an accredited landlord scheme.

2. Housing benefits should be set at levels that reflect actual rent levels.

3. There is a need for greater employment of Somalis by the City Council and other providers of social housing. The creation of a Somali Link Worker post within the Housing Department would be a good start (n.b. we understand that such a post is planned).

4. Local authority allocations and nominations should take into account the area of choice of housing applicants being housed through homelessness channels.

5. The City Council should monitor the impact of the current piloting of choice based lettings (Urban Choice in Handsworth) with regard to allocations to Somalis.

6. The City Council should look at the possibility of making “clustered” allocations in “non-traditional” areas to Somalis.

7. There is a need for more 4 bed+ houses to be built. Failing that, the possibility of expanding property size by “knocking through” adjacent properties should be investigated.
More widely, recommendations were also made regarding:

1. The need for an active and effective community organisation to give the Somali community a voice.

2. The need for better community relations and recognition that many problems are cross-cutting rather than group specific.

3. More resources should be sought from Central Government and the European Union in order to meet the needs of this large, non-refugee and “unexpected” community.

The central role played by housing and its interrelationship with other service needs and key issues has been highlighted throughout this report. A study carried out in Tower Hamlets in 2001 (Abilla, 2001) concludes that:

“Housing remains the biggest challenge facing the community in Tower Hamlets, and in most other Boroughs, and requires the joint effort of all relevant agencies in the field. It is not possible to empower people and involve them when they are threatened with homelessness or live in poor conditions”.

That statement is of relevance not just to Tower Hamlets in 2001 but to all Somali communities in the UK today.

A report produced by Birmingham City Council in 2006 (“Homelessness - A report from Overview & Scrutiny”) further notes that:

“There will never be sufficient public sector housing to fulfill the needs of local people and indeed the stock has been reducing over many years mainly as a result of right to buy and demolition of unsustainable dwellings. The lack of affordable housing in the city cannot be solved by the Council working in isolation and we need to continue to work creatively with all partners to increase affordable stock and the housing options available to people in the city”.

This is where the establishment of a specialist housing association dedicated to meeting the housing and housing-related needs of
Birmingham’s Somali community may play a useful role, working with the City Council and other potential partners. Such an association would be a benefit to the Somali community as:

► It would not need to use interpreters – thus making it easier for Somalis to access its services without having to pre-book an interpreter;

► Somalis would recognize that there were people from their community able to speak out for them with regard to housing issues;

► Somalis would see the service as their own.

The Council’s BME Strategy states that:

“BME housing associations, as predominantly community based or focused agencies, are seen to offer tailored services to meet needs and aspirations and have a clear lead role in taking forward strategy”.

Nationally, with a few exceptions (such as Sahil Housing Association in London and some developments by Liverpool Housing Trust) very little housing provision targeted specifically at the Somali community has been identified. The establishment of a Somali housing association in Birmingham, offers an opportunity to help address the housing and housing-related needs of the Somali community in an empowering and inclusive manner.
Appendix 1 -

Methodology

The research, which began in January 2007, consisted of several distinct but over-lapping stages:

► **Literature Review:** A review of existing literature on Somalis in the UK (with particular reference to housing needs) was carried out.

► **Collection and Review of Information from Birmingham City Council:** Data regarding housing allocations and educational performance, alongside relevant policy documents and website data, were collected and reviewed.

► **Somali Organisation Interviews:** In tandem with the literature review representatives from five Somali community organisations were interviewed in order to identify key issues and concerns.

► **Service Provider Interviews:** In order to give as broad a range of views as possible, 10 service providers (both Somali and non-Somali) were interviewed regarding their perceptions/experiences of the needs of the Somali community.

► **Housing Visits/Depth Interviews:** 6 Somali households were visited in their homes and depth interviews carried out.

► **Focus Group:** A mixed gender focus group was held. This was attended by 15 Somalis, covering a range of ages and housing tenures.
The Needs & Aspirations of Birmingham’s Somali Community