



# NO VOICE LITTLE CHOICE

The Somali Housing Emergency  
in north and east London

## SUMMARY REPORT

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"I feel that we are ignored; we don't get genuine advice and help. They could start by stopping to ignore us." *quote from a Somali interviewee*

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# THE SOMALI HOUSING EMERGENCY IN NORTH AND EAST LONDON

Research commissioned by Karin Housing Association and carried out by research consultant Sue Lukes, Hannah Lewis and Mohamed Aden Hassan, has found evidence of housing deprivation among Somalis in north and east London so extreme as to be called an emergency.

158 people interviewed told researchers about the conditions in which they live, their efforts to improve them and their difficulties in accessing appropriate advice and advocacy. They talked about the effects on them and their community, especially the youth, and why they believed this had happened. The researchers also interviewed local council officers and discussed the issue with the Equalities and Human Rights Commission because many interviewees spoke of discrimination.

In these areas of significant housing need the comparison made with general conditions do show that levels of housing deprivation within Somali communities in these areas are extremely high and probably unparalleled by other communities. While 85% of Londoners find their current housing satisfactory, only 12% of those in our survey reported this to be so for them. The way in which this deprivation is combined with, and connected to, high levels of unemployment and long term illness and disability, results in the community feeling deprived and demoralised, under attack and sometimes helpless.

Less than a third of those interviewed had a home big enough for them and their family (compared, for example, with Tower Hamlets, the most overcrowded borough in England, reporting 13% of families as overcrowded). Many faced quite devastating levels of overcrowding, with six children in a two bedroom flat, nine people in three rooms, or seven people in one bedroom. One family of eight including a disabled woman share a two bedroom house, with five beds in one room.

## The overcrowding is caused by

- Larger families combined with a failure to recognise this as a need and provide for it in the relevant areas
- Difficulties faced by households (often headed by women, facing very high levels of illness or disability) in accessing advice and support that might get them the housing they need
- Families accommodating relatives or friends who have no housing access themselves because of low priority, rules on local connection or eligibility
- Family reunions, leading to people crowding into existing accommodation

45% of interviewees suffer from disrepair. Over a third said that major repairs were needed, and 38% reported damp. Some were without heating or hot water, urgent repairs are not being done, and some suffer significant ill health as a result. A third of interviewees had long term illnesses, and 16% were disabled. Many felt that stresses caused by poor housing conditions, repairs not being made, overcrowding, anxiety of waiting for a house, lack of choice, and uncertainty of temporary housing caused depression and damaged family relationships.

The poor housing is linked to other problems: only 17% of the group were in employment, with people identifying ill health, lack of skills/education and housing as barriers to work. The average personal weekly income was £130 a week. Housing deprivation is also affecting children's education and chances which combined with intergeneration problems, risk young people becoming alienated and involved in crime or anti-social behaviour.

The mix of extreme and unacknowledged housing needs with so many other very high levels of deprivation creates a "perfect storm" in which it is very difficult or impossible for individual households to break out of the cycles and change their dreadful situations: they are battling on too many fronts simply to survive, and do not have the resources to pursue complex applications or complaints.

Many Somalis believe that they face discrimination in housing allocation and in other crucial areas of life, and this report provides some evidence of discrimination in the housing field. Somalis also believe that they have not been able to make their housing applications properly because of lack of access to language, information, advice and advocacy. A majority of those who went to solicitors, for example, got their problems resolved, which might indicate that if they had access to appropriate services they could deal with some aspects of their needs.

Choice Based Lettings have created particular problems, because many Somali families find it difficult to ensure that they have been given the right priority and even if that is sorted out, to bid well, because of the language and other barriers to access. It is significant that very little appears to be being done to address this.

The mix of long term, seemingly intractable problems with no obvious solutions appearing or being proposed from either within the community or those responsible for community relations and housing poses a very serious challenge. The level at which these problems present, the depth of need involved, the seriousness of the possible long term consequences and the near total failure to recognise them lead us to characterise this as a housing emergency.

There is a sense throughout the area that Somalis are at the bottom of the housing heap which is borne out by this research. Somali presence is rarely registered on most monitoring systems used to identify discrimination.

There is also a global shortage of large size dwellings in the social rented sector, so it is likely that even the best support, advocacy and representation would eventually run up against a brick wall of a simple shortage of provision. This shortfall in provision can be remedied by lobbying and 'political' pressure on housing providers.

What becomes apparent from this work is that 'voice' and 'choice' are intimately linked. The lack of voice over many years has meant that the choices offered to many or most Somalis in housing need is essentially minimal. We found that Somalis are

- not **recognised** as a community or monitored as such
- not **heard** in consultations
- not **included** in decision making
- and so not **housed** adequately

## THE RESEARCH

158 people living in seven east and north London boroughs gave in depth interviews to a team of community researchers in 2008. The majority (70%) were women and between the ages of 26 and 45 (69%). Background information on housing need in London and the areas under review compares the experience of the interviewees to what is known about the housing crisis in London and the relevant boroughs. This points up the fact that, not only are Somalis much more likely to face extreme levels of housing deprivation but also that many of the measures underway to meet London's housing needs may not be of benefit to them because of the failure to provide appropriate access to services or the types of housing that they need.

### Profile of respondents

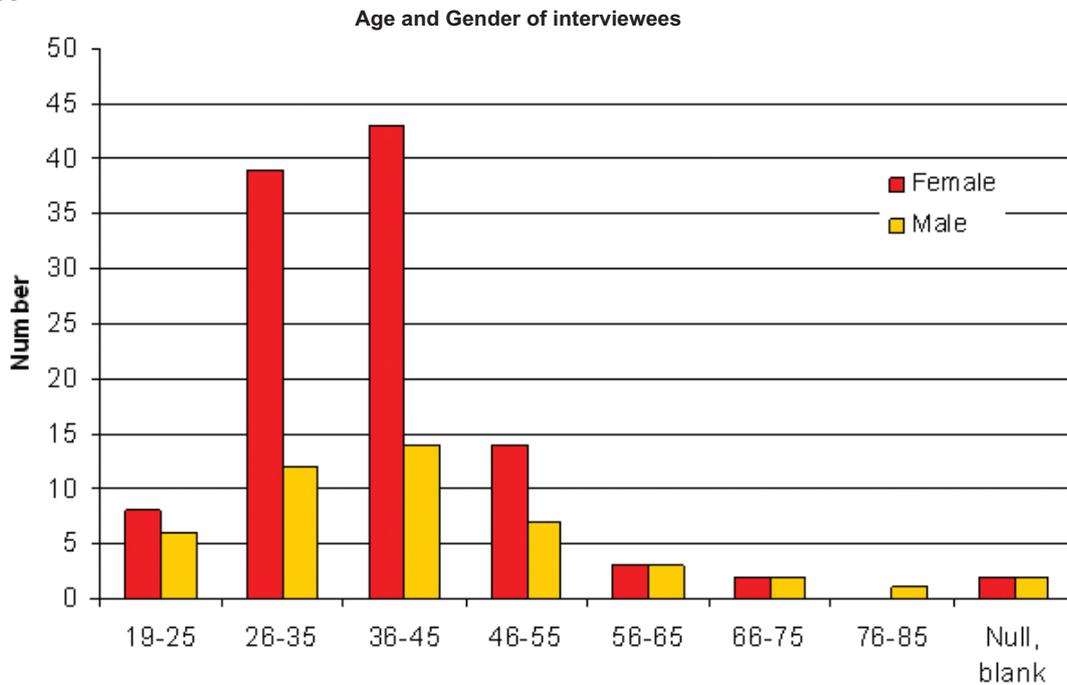
Table 1 Gender of interviewees

Gender	Number	Percentage
Female	111	70%
Male	47	30%
Total	158	100%

Table 2 Age of Interviewees

Age	Number	Percentage
19-25	14	9%
26-35	51	33%
36-45	57	36%
46-55	21	13%
56-65	6	4%
66-75	4	3%
76-85	1	1%
Null, Blank	4	3%
	158	100%

Figure 1



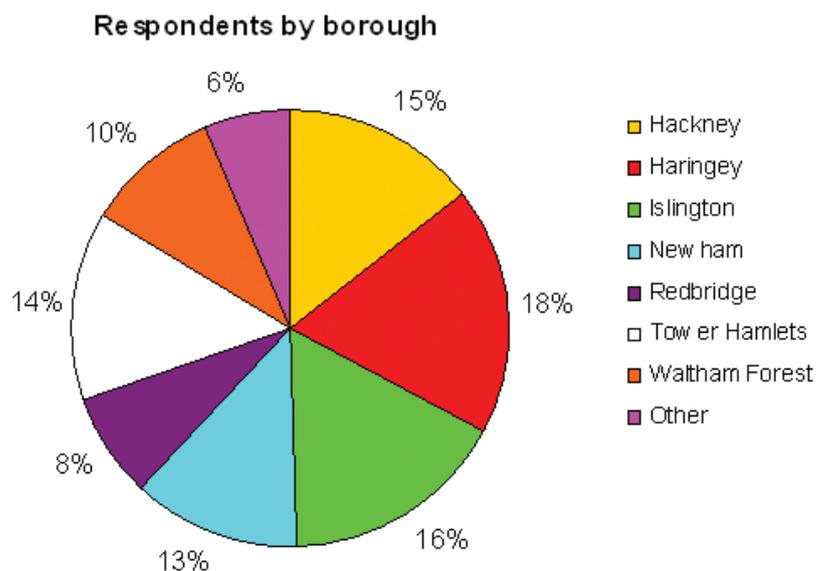
Borough of origin of interviewees

Table 3 Boroughs of residence

Borough	Number
Hackney	23
Haringey	29
Islington	26
Newham	20
Redbridge	12
Tower Hamlets	22
Waltham Forest	16
Other	10
	158

Age range of interviewees

Figure 2



## SOMALIS IN THE UK

Prior to the First World War, many Somalis came to the UK to work as seamen and settled in places such as Cardiff, Liverpool and docks of East London. They sent money home to their families in the former British Somaliland.

With the onset of the civil war in Somalia, migration patterns were altered. Somali men and women of all ages and status became the new generation of Somali Diasporas.

The size of the Somali community in the UK has been estimated at around 180,000. This, however, does not include those who have migrated from other parts of Europe. Since 1998 around 22,000, Dutch Somalis have

migrated from the Netherlands to the UK. A similar trend is observable from other parts of Western Europe. Figures on the Somali-born population in the UK from the census and the Annual Population Survey also provide some indication of the population. In 2001, the census counted 37,999 Somali born Muslims in England. The 2006 Annual Population Survey estimated the Somali born population at 82,300. However, these figures are likely to be significantly lower than the actual Somali population in the UK as they do not include children born in the UK or other parts of Europe. The Somali community is still growing through new births, secondary migration from mainland Europe and family reunions. This growth is hard to quantify. Estimates of the size of the whole community that could be described as Somalis in the UK vary from 200,000 to 500,000.

Estimates of the Somali population in London vary from 70,000 to 110,000, including 10-15,000 in Ealing and Tower Hamlets, the two local authority areas generally agreed to have the largest populations (although the numbers may be larger). Newham, Camden, Ealing and Greenwich are other London local authority areas that have a large number of Somalis.

The challenges to Somalis being recognised as a significant minority group in the UK have led to some Somalis referring to themselves as the 'invisible community.' However, Somalis have been long established in the UK and can be seen as a sizeable and significant minority ethnic group in the UK. There is, in other words, no cogent reason for them to be "invisible" to those making decisions or providing services in north and east London.

## Somalis and housing in the UK

Within recent migrants, Somalis show a very distinct pattern that is unique, with a negligible proportion owning or buying and almost all renting. Somalis in the UK have mostly been housed by local authorities, or by housing associations. Very few buy their homes, and a much lower proportion of them rent privately than any other nationality.

There is an ethnic monitoring problem in that Somalis are grouped in the categories 'Black African' and possibly in those identified as 'Black British' or 'Black Other'. There are no disaggregated figures available so the average includes all Black/Black British-African groups, and we have no way of identifying the percentages of Somali families involved. The other overcrowded communities (identified in most monitoring as Asian/Asian British-Pakistani or Bangladeshi) are separately identified: all are five times more likely to live in overcrowded households than white British households.

## Choice based lettings

Anyone placed on to a housing waiting list or register or accepted as homeless is then waiting for an allocation of housing from the local authority or a referral to a housing association. Councils must give priority in allocations to people housed in overcrowded or insanitary conditions and to the homeless. Under the older systems, this priority was expressed in points, and allocation was done simply by offering available homes to the households with the highest points. The government is now committed, however, to ensuring that by 2010 all councils use, instead, a system of 'choice based lettings' to allocate housing.

Choice based lettings (CBL) aims to 'put customers at the heart of the allocations process' The system includes all those on the waiting list, existing tenants wanting transfers and the homeless. Applications are given points and, in some systems, are then allocated to 'bands' reflecting their priority. In practice, because of housing

demand in London, only the 'top' bands will be able to get housed, and some systems do not allow people in lower bands to bid. Applicants are then expected to check weekly lists of available properties in local papers, council offices, and on the internet, and 'bid' for any they want within a short period. Theoretically, the bidder with the highest priority then gets the property. In fact, sometimes properties are allocated outside the system (to vulnerable people or to existing tenants the council wants to move urgently) and sometimes the top bidder is rejected by the landlord and the property goes to someone with lower priority. The system is lauded for its transparency but there are concerns that it is not as open as it should be. Much depends on the correct initial calculation of points and there are certainly instances of this failing to assess need properly. Some banding systems have failed to take multiple needs into account. But probably the most significant area of concern has been that the system is difficult to operate or even understand for many users. Local authorities are encouraged to make sure there are support systems in place but many groups complain that the communities they represent find the system difficult or impossible to understand or use.

Even those with priority have to wait, and some boroughs (those who use the East London Lettings Company to run their CBL systems) publish how long, on average, the time is for different types of property.

The waiting times for larger accommodation are very long indeed in all three Inner London boroughs, ranging from four years (for "urgent cases" in Hackney who would normally have extremely high levels of medical or social needs) to 14 years in Newham. Those with no priority in Hackney would simply never be allocated a home, however long they waited. So families needing large accommodation find it very hard to get, which would almost certainly contribute to overcrowding.

## Housing and discrimination

Discrimination in housing provision on the grounds of race is unlawful in the UK, and the definition of race includes ethnicity and nationality.

29% of London's population is identified as from 'BME' (black and minority ethnic) groups (excluding all white groups) but 59% of homelessness acceptances are from these groups: in other words, they are much more likely to become homeless. This figure is particularly startling because many migrants are excluded from homelessness services altogether. The main indicator for homelessness is, of course, poverty, but the availability of suitable advice and support (especially to enable early interventions) and simple discrimination are also significant factors.

Somalis, however, face a problem in that they are a community for which little monitoring data is available. They tend to be subsumed into ethnic monitoring categories that may include other African communities who are settled, prosperous and well housed. As a result, they simply do not get assessed in equality impact assessments. In areas where there are significant numbers of Somalis, this almost certainly represents a failure by the local authority to carry out their statutory duties.

## HOUSING: THE RESEARCH RESULTS

No-one in the survey owned their own home, but only 45% were in social housing (or possibly slightly more than this since 5 of those in 'other' may be in social housing). 20% were in some arrangement defined as temporary (temporary accommodation provided by the council, a hostel or 'sofa surfing') and a further 4% staying with friends or family.

Table 4 Tenure

What is your current housing tenure?	No.	%
Buying	0	0%
Renting from council	50	31%
Renting from housing association	23	14%
Renting from private landlord	19	12%
Temporary accommodation provided by council	26	16%
Hostel	4	3%
Temporary accommodation provided by Home Office	0	0%
Staying with friends	2	1%
Staying with family	4	3%
Sofa surfing	2	1%
Actually homeless	0	0%
Other	10	6%
Null	18	
Total	158	

### Temporary accommodation and homelessness

Some people were effectively homeless although they had a roof over their head. In response to questions about the current home, for example, people gave answers such as "in the hostel we share the living room and the kitchen".

Some in temporary arrangements recorded few other housing problems:

*'Apart from the uncertainty of living at another person's house as a favour the house is not in any disrepair'*

*'We are fine except the house is a temporary accommodation'*.

But even those who had adequate temporary accommodation found the insecurity difficult to deal with, especially if they believed they had a longer wait to come:

*'I have been moving from one local authority to another over the four years, so I do not know where I belong to'*

And for some, temporary accommodation was clearly unacceptable.

### Mobility

The high rate of homelessness and temporary arrangements are also reflected in the number of moves people had made in the UK.

Table 5 Mobility

Number of moves in the UK	No.	%
1	47	30%
2	25	16%
3	30	19%
4	12	8%
5	6	4%
6	1	1%
7	1	1%
8	1	1%
10	2	1%
Null, Blank	33	21%
Total	158	100%

16% had moved four to 10 times and over a third had moved three or more times. Two people had moved 10 times. In some cases, the move represented an improvement in housing circumstances: 57 had made their last move to go to bigger or better accommodation and 28 had made the previous move to go to bigger or better accommodation. Securing permanent accommodation was also an important driver: 21 made their last move to get permanent accommodation.

Table 6 Drivers in mobility

What prompted the last move?	
Response	Number
Eviction	12
Moved to a better place	26
Moved to a bigger place	31
End of lease	2
Got permanent accommodation	21
Moved to UK	4
Moved for family reasons	10
Moved for work reasons	1
Moved because unsafe where lived before	8
Other	35
Total	150

What prompted the move before that?	
Response	Number
Eviction	10
Moved to a better place	10
Moved to a bigger place	18
End of lease	6
Got permanent accommodation	3
Moved to UK	17
Moved for family reasons	2
Moved for work reasons	1
Moved because unsafe where lived before	16
Other	26
Total	109

While some moves were simply because of changes of circumstances, such as the owner moving, redevelopment or family breakdown, some reflect considerable housing stress in the history of those interviewed. Overcrowding, some of it extreme, and sharing with other families figure heavily.

Disrepair had forced a move in a surprising number of cases, and this was usually of a high level: faulty roof, flooding, fire damage. Safety in the area was also an issue.

Some moves were the consequence of seeking refuge (being a refugee or civil war cited as the reason for a move), or, more often, of government policy in housing asylum applicants. Two had moved back to London having been dispersed to Sheffield and Birmingham, although this latter was a council enforced move.

## Overcrowding

Overcrowding is often identified as a major problem within the Somali community. The survey did not use any legal definitions of overcrowding but simply asked whether the accommodation was big enough and how many more rooms were needed.

Table 7 Overcrowding

Is your current accommodation big enough for your family?		
Response	No.	%
Yes	45	28%
No I need one more room	60	38%
No I need two more rooms	34	21%
No I need three or more extra rooms	5	3%
No I need to stop sharing with other people	2	1%
Other	7	4%
Null	5	4%
Total	158	

Only 28% said their accommodation is big enough: 69% said their current accommodation is not big enough for their family because they need one, two or three more rooms. What is also very striking is that the overcrowding is at very high levels. These are not generally families complaining that two children have to share a bedroom, but households living in extraordinarily difficult situations. It should be noted that the definition of 'overcrowding' used in housing statistics generally is 'more than one person per room'. The interviewees expressed a great deal of dissatisfaction with the levels of overcrowding experienced and the problems caused.

## Other housing problems

Almost half of the respondents identified disrepair as a problem. Damp was identified as the main disrepair problem by 38%, followed by the need for major repairs experienced by 36%. Only 37 respondents, 23%, said their home was in good repair. 45 did not report any need for repairs or other problems. 114 (72%) did report damp or the need for minor or major repairs.

Table 8 State of repair

Is your current home in good repair?		
Response	No.	%
Yes	37	23%
No it is damp	60	38%
No minor repairs need to be done	32	20%
No major repairs need to be done	58	36%
Other	8	5%

## Inappropriate housing

Many respondents told us that their housing simply did not meet their basic needs, especially if these were compounded by disability or other problems. The prevalence of long term illness and disability in the community combined with poor housing causes particular problems.

## Safety and housing

Some housing is directly identified as unsafe or posing significant risks to health.

## Cost

For some (essentially those in the private rented sector and renting temporary accommodation while waiting to be rehoused as homeless) cost has caused further problems. The cost is also related to the poor value for money represented by the private sector, paid for from the public purse via benefits.

## Locality

Some problems are linked directly to the area in which the interviewee lives, principally those relating to personal safety, crime and isolation.

## Positive Experience

Some had positive comments to make about their housing, although these were often mixed:

*'Overcrowding is the only problem. We get on well with the neighbours and have not had any other problems with the house. Maybe a ground floor accommodation would be more suitable but we don't have any other complaints.'*

*'There no other major complaints, I would keep this accommodation if it had 2 more rooms.'*

*'The house is in very good condition, and although there is a bit of antisocial behaviour in the area, the accommodation is generally OK.'*

*'Other than overcrowded we don't have any problems.' 'Compared to our old house, the one we are living in is very good.'*

## Housing problems for young people

The lack of options for young people also contributes to overcrowding, because they cannot find any other place to live, and so stay on in the parental home. This leads to further pressures within families as generational clashes cause problems. In Islington, for example four of the respondents had young people in their homes sharing a room with one or two other people.

Poor housing has a particular effect on young people's education and so will go on to contribute to later unemployment or low paid work, which can also be the result of homelessness.

Some pointed out that one effect of overcrowding is to put young people in harm's way, i.e. 'on the streets' where there are no adults to look after them.

Even where there is no direct causal link, there are concerns that young people may be made more vulnerable to crime and gangs because of their families' housing problems and the lack of options for them.

# HEALTH

Table 9 Good and poor health

	No.	%
Currently in good health	107	67%
Not in good health	48	30%
Null	3	3%
	158	100%

Table 10 Long term illness

	No.	%
Long-term illness	52	33%
No	97	61%
Null	9	6%
	158	100%

Of these 52 individuals, the following health problems were cited most frequently:

Table 11 Type of long term illness

	No.	%
Back pain/problem	13	8%
High blood pressure	13	8%
Joint/leg/knee problems	12	8%
Depression	9	6%
Diabetes	9	6%
Arthritis	7	4%
Asthma/respiratory problems	7	4%
Heart problems	5	3%
Rheumatism	3	2%
High cholesterol	2	1%
Null	78	50%
	158	100%

Other problems mentioned (once) included: kidney operation, caesarean complications, stomach ulcers, head injury, chronic chest infections, insomnia, polio, and headaches. Several people experienced multiple health problems.

## Disability

Of the respondents surveyed, 16 were registered disabled and 9 others were disabled but not registered.

Two others said they cared for a disabled mother or children, and two respondents received incapacity benefit (but were not disabled). 1% stated they received Incapacity Benefit. One respondent described their experience of appealing a refusal of disability living allowance.

## Health and housing

To capture the diverse impacts of poor housing, the research included questions on the effects of housing environment on health. It is widely understood that the major determinants of health and well-being are underpinned by social and economic factors rather than medical interventions. Hence, understanding wider factors such as housing are critical to understanding health concerns.

## Trauma and overcrowding

Two people who said they had long term health issues attributed them to previous trauma.

The pressures of caring for a disabled family member or newborn baby are compounded in conditions of lack of space and shared facilities.

Some parents were concerned that overcrowding negatively affects their children's development by limiting space for play.

## Poor housing conditions, damp, disrepair

Problems of overcrowding with poor housing conditions have consequences for physical and mental health.

16 respondents felt that poor conditions including damp, draughts, coldness, poor heating or lack of ventilation had caused or worsened asthma and allergies suffered by their children. Poor housing also exacerbates poverty.

## Unsuitable housing and health

Seven respondents were living where stairs inside or for access to the property caused problems because of poor mobility, back pain, disability, or having to climb the stairs with a pushchair, creating risk of injury. Those with mobility problems living in properties accessed by stairs indicated that this led to social isolation.

## Mental health, trauma and inappropriate housing

Many people felt that stresses caused by poor housing conditions, repairs not being made, overcrowding, anxiety of waiting for a house, lack of choice, and uncertainty of temporary housing caused depression and damaged family relationships.

## Locality

Environmental conditions relating to housing and location contributed to stress and ill health for some respondents.

The support of family members was also seen as important, but separation from family who could help relieve caring responsibilities at times of ill health was a concern.

## FAMILY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Living group/family group

Most respondents were parents: 40% were single parents, 32% were part of a couple with children; 18% were single. Three respondents lived with their parents, two respondents were single parents and cared for their disabled mother. Two others lived in wider family groups: 'with auntie and her husband and four girls'; 'with four kids and two sisters'. The survey included two homeless people.

Figure 3

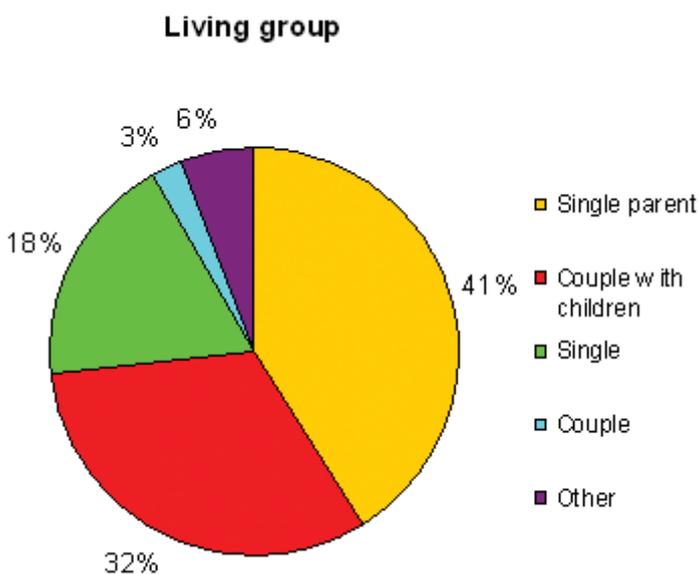


Table 12 Marital status

Marital status	No.	%
Married	62	39%
Single	39	25%
Separated	32	20%
Divorced	17	11%
Widowed	7	4%
Null	1	1%
	158	100%

24% of respondents were single, the rest were married (38%) or were separated (20%), divorced (10%) or widowed (4%).

Table 13 Children

Children	Respondents	%
0	32	20%
1	17	11%
2	25	9%
3	22	14%
4	22	14%
5	17	11%
6	9	6%
7	9	6%
8	1	1%
9	3	2%
13	1	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100%</b>

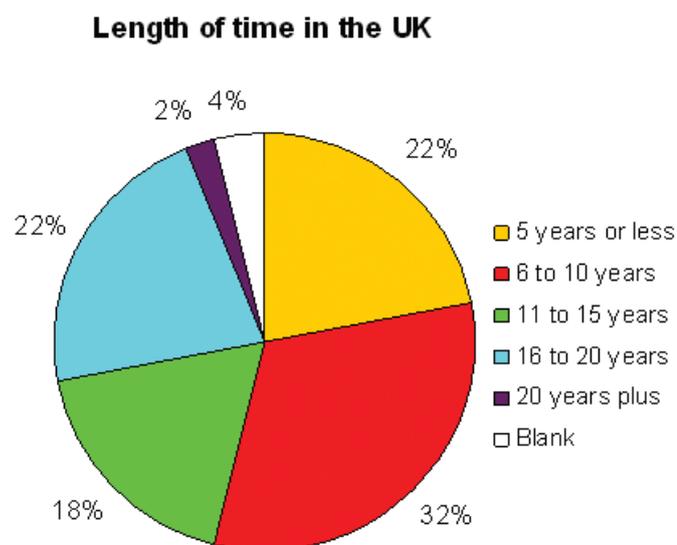
Highlighting the prevalence of large families, 27% of respondents had five or more children including one respondent who had thirteen children. It was not always clear from the survey results whether or not children were living with the principal respondent, so some of responses could include children living elsewhere. In three cases all children were over the age of 18.

Large families were seen as a barrier to getting appropriate housing, and were considered by some to be a factor in discrimination against Somalis.



## Migration and immigration status

Figure 4



Over half of respondents had been in the UK for less than 10 years. Although some boroughs included in the survey have a long history of Somali migration, only one respondent had been in the UK for more than 20 years. It is therefore likely that the majority of respondents left Somalia during ongoing waves of conflict in the last two decades.

Table 14 Status in the UK

	No.	%
UK citizen	93	58%
Indefinite leave	37	23%
EEA national with right to reside	14	8%
Refugee status indefinite leave	10	6%
Rejected asylum seeker	1	1%
EEA national with no right to reside	1	1%
Null, Blank	2	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100%</b>

All of those who were UK citizens arrived before 2002, reflecting the minimum five year legal residency that is required to apply for citizenship. Only three UK citizens had been born in the UK. It is important to note that only two respondents were thus ineligible for local council housing provision.

Table 15 Nationality

	No.	%
UK only	75	47%
Somali only	55	35%
UK and Somali	11	7%
Dutch	11	7%
Danish	1	1%
German	1	1%
Belgian	1	1%
Finnish	1	1%
Blank, null	2	1%
	<b>158</b>	<b>100%</b>

As discussed earlier, secondary migration from other European countries has brought some Somalis to the UK. 15 respondents identified their nationality as from another European country, including 11 from Holland. 20 respondents who identified themselves as UK citizens also said they had Somali nationality. This discrepancy highlights the importance of mixed and dual identities among Somali migrants.

### Family migration

In this survey 23 (14%) respondents had a different immigration status from their family. For some, this was because their children were born in the UK after arrival. Families may be separated in the process of migration or couples with different immigration statuses may meet in the UK.

Table 16 Did all family members arrive together?

	No.	%
Yes	52	33%
No some arrived through family reunion	42	26%
Other	26	16%
No, the family was formed after arrival in the UK	26	16%
Null, Blank	12	8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100%</b>

Only one third of respondents had arrived together with their family. Others were in the UK alone, the rest of their family still in Somalia. Some had arrived with some family members, others joining through family reunion. Some had joined their spouse or family member already in the UK.

Family separation and migration through different routes over time, or family formation once in the UK can result in a complicated mix of different immigration statuses within one family. This can affect entitlement to housing and welfare resulting in the dependence of spouses or family members on their relative if they are not eligible to claim in their own right. The arrival of family members may also have been a factor in overcrowding.

## Housing problems causing strain in family relations

Problems with housing were seen as a cause of strain in family relations, leading to arguments, tension and stress in the home. Exposure of children to arguments and poor housing conditions was a source of anxiety for parents.

A number of respondents felt that arguments and stress from housing problems had created misunderstandings and caused family breakdown or separation.

For a few people housing problems had serious, lasting negative effects. Two people said their marriage had ended due to housing problems, four others said relationships with their partners had become 'on and off' and had suffered under the strain.

## Overcrowding and family relations

Overcrowding was seen as causing problems in family relations by creating stress from lack of privacy, lack of space to play or 'relax' and lack of safety. Sharing rooms was seen as a cause of stress. Lack of space for play forces children out of the house.

Lack of housing options can trap people in situations sharing with family members in overcrowded situations: *'As I explained for a long time I wanted to move out of my Auntie's family home, as the house is really only meant for them.'*

## Poor housing inhibiting socialising and fostering social isolation

Lack of ability to socialise was a key concern. Overcrowded and poor housing conditions not only affects relations within the family, but also affects the ability for people to maintain friendships, offer hospitality, have visitors or children's friends to visit or stay. As one person describes, this also creates feelings of shame.

For those in temporary accommodation these problems may be acute, especially for those living under the restrictions of hostel accommodation.

Some people felt separated from other Somalis and found their housing situation caused loneliness and depression.

## Family and friends as a source of help

Being near family for support was seen as desirable and a positive aspect of housing. One person identified this as a sign of satisfaction with housing. For others, lack of available housing meant families were forced to live apart. Family and friends can be an important source of help for those who are homeless.

Obligations to provide support for family members can be a particular burden for children who are relied on for help if adults struggle to understand housing systems, or do not speak English.

## Effect of housing problems on wider social relations

The strains of overcrowding, lack of available appropriate housing, housing insecurity and poor housing conditions were considered to have an impact on social relations, creating challenges for the wider population of Somalis in London.

## Social cohesion

Many people saw housing issues as a key problem for Somalis, having negative effects on social cohesion.

## Housing as a cause of unemployment and health problems

Housing was linked to other problems including unemployment and health problems and seen as contributing to widespread social problems. Housing was considered a cause of poor health among Somalis. Mental health problems were a major concern: 29 respondents identified depression or stress as a symptom of housing problems.

Poor housing conditions and threat of homelessness were seen as causing stress and frustration, leading to a sense of hopelessness and a sense of being forgotten by society.

Stress and the frustrations of poor housing were also linked to lack of confidence, underachievement, and instability. The effects on children were a particular concern, with fears about the impact of housing problems on their health, education and behaviour due to family frictions.



# INCOME, EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS

## Income and poverty

Table 17 Source of income

	Number	Percentage
Benefits	117	74%
Employment	25	16%
Other	3	2%
Self-employment or business	2	1%
No income	3	2%
Asylum support	1	1%
Null, Blank	7	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100%</b>

Most respondents were benefit recipients. 22 (14%) respondents earned their income from employment. This included 5 people who mentioned benefits: working tax credit (3), 'part time work and child benefit', 'top up benefits'. Anxiety about the high cost of housing causing a benefit trap, and even pushing people out of work and onto benefits were mentioned in the survey.

The high number of respondents receiving benefits reflects other research that indicates very high unemployment among refugees and a high rate of recipients of Income Support among Somalis in Britain. In 2005/6, 39% of people born in Somalia were claiming Income Support, compared to 4% of the UK born population.

Table 18 Average personal weekly income

Average personal weekly income (134 respondents)	£130.12
Average of personal weekly income under £250 (113 respondents)	£90.46

The average personal weekly income of respondents was very low. From a total of 158, 134 respondents provided information on their personal weekly income, and only 21 of these had a personal weekly income above £250. When they were removed from the calculation, the average of the remaining 113 respondents dropped considerably to £90.46. This demonstrates the prevalence of poverty among the survey respondents, which emerged as a key theme in the analysis.

Low income and poverty was identified as a barrier to getting or improving housing as a result of perceived discrimination against poor people, the high cost of housing and consequent feeling that lack of money created a barrier to being able to improve poor housing situations.

# EMPLOYMENT

## Barriers to employment

Respondents mentioned seven barriers to employment that they felt hindered their prospects for future work.

- Caring responsibilities
- Poor health
- Disability
- Housing insecurity
- Lack of education
- Cost of housing and the benefit trap
- Language

## Desire to work

Despite these barriers to employment, many of those not employed had hope and expectation that their situation would improve.

Some already had skills or qualifications they wanted to put to use; others hoped that education or volunteering could help them gain employment.

Just as lack of English was seen as a barrier, improving language was central to employment aspirations, but could be hampered by lack of availability of classes.

## The effect of housing problems on employment

Housing problems were seen as negatively affecting employment or chances to get a job in several ways. Overcrowding interferes with the chance to rest away from work, affecting stress levels at work. Having no fixed abode or insecure accommodation makes it difficult or impossible to stay in work, or to find a new job. Five people said they lost their job or could not find new work due to having no fixed abode.

There was concern about how insecure housing and unemployment can lead to a negative downward spiral, creating more problems.

The risk that lack of housing options could lead to unemployment was seen as a particular risk for young people suffering housing problems.

The task of attempting to resolve housing problems could be so time-consuming that it took the place of work, or going to work left little time to seek help and support.

Moving for work did not emerge as a significant reason for mobility in housing, perhaps because of the high number of benefit recipients. One person was happy with the locality of their house for work reasons.

# EDUCATION

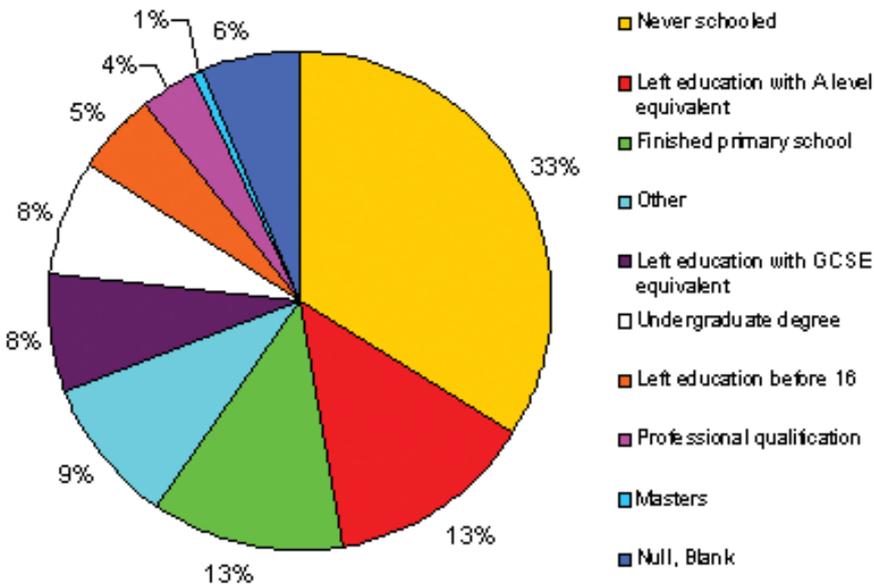
## Educational attainment

Of the survey respondents:

- 34% were never schooled;
- 18% had finished primary school or left school before 16;
- 21% had left school with GCSE or A level equivalent;
- 14% had an undergraduate degree, masters or professional qualification.

Therefore, a total of 35% respondents had a school or higher education qualification or equivalent. The labour Force Survey in 2006 found 57.5% of the Somali born population in the UK to be educated to this level, as opposed to 86.5% of those born in the UK.

Figure 5 Highest educational attainment

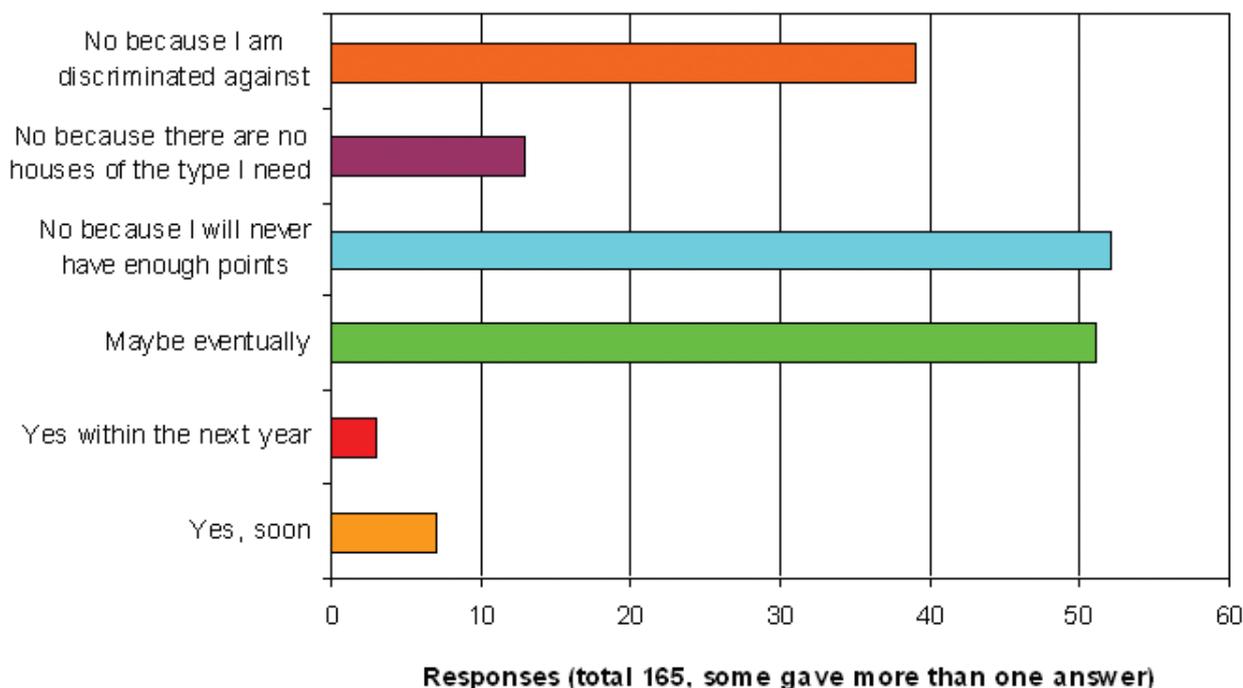


## Education and income source

Of the 53 respondents never schooled, 49 were receiving benefits. However, most respondents receiving benefits had been educated, so there was no clear link between education and whether or not respondents were employed. None of the six people with professional qualifications were employed. Two were pregnant, one of whom expected to get work as a nursery nurse in the future; one was not allowed to work as an asylum seeker; two hoped to get work; one said their qualifications gained in Somalia were not recognised.

Figure 6 Bid system(Choice Based Lettings)

### Do you think you will get somewhere from the waiting list?



## HOUSING SYSTEM AND HELP

As the responses show, a minority of the respondents were hopeful of getting a positive result. A few had been successful in finding accommodation they were happy with.

However, the majority of respondents did not feel that they would get anywhere from being on the waiting list, citing the lack of points and discrimination as the two top reasons. The key issues were lack of understanding of the system, eligibility and priority, availability and waiting times, and discrimination.

Some respondents indicated that they had little understanding of the bid system or how many points they had. Several respondents indicated that lack of understanding was due to the language barrier. Being new to the UK and new to the housing system meant some people had limited understanding of the system.

Many respondents said that they thought they were not eligible, or had characteristics or problems that they felt reduced their priority or created barriers to getting housing.

### Points and using the bid system

#### Not having enough points

A good level of awareness of the system was shown by some respondents who nevertheless felt that they could not get enough points to be successful in getting appropriate housing.

### Using the bid system

A few people seemed unclear about how to bid and found the internet-based system difficult. Another said they asked a friend to bid as they were not able to. One respondent said their bidding number was not working and they had not managed to resolve the problem despite making complaints. Overcrowding emerged as a key problem again: one person said they were low priority due to being in permanent housing was overcrowded but not recognised as such; another had been told they could start bidding.

### Waiting times

The length of waiting times was the most commonly identified barrier to the hope of getting housed. Some people said they had been on the waiting list between two to five years, but two said they had been on the waiting list for 10 years, three for 11 years and one for 17 years. This person had been on the list for 18 years.

Several respondents had simply been told that the wait would be very long. Long waiting times meant that respondents were exposed for extended periods to sometimes very poor housing conditions, including:

- Structural damage and disrepair
- causing risk of injury
- Stress and depression of long waits and unsuccessful bidding
- Enduring overcrowding for long periods

## Discrimination

A sense of discrimination came out clearly in the survey questions about using the bid system and being on the waiting list. For some this was a general sense of discrimination, others felt they were discriminated against due to being Somali, not speaking English or because of immigration status. Some people believed that the system is not fair or that other groups were being favoured.

## Experiences of seeking help and advice

- Most (115) respondents said they were not receiving any help with housing problems. Some had simply received no help, as one man explained: 'I struggle by myself housing problem'. Other respondents demonstrated various problems with accessing help, using it or with the language barrier.
- Lack of sources of help. One respondent said they were not aware of any Somali community organisation offering help, another said they had been helped by Karin but did not know of any other sources of help.
- Feeling exasperated or unable to get help.
- Work or childcare making access to help difficult

## Sources of help and advice

Some respondents had experience of trying to resolve their housing problems, though many of these had not achieved the desired results.

12 respondents said they had received help from a solicitor. Some were awaiting an outcome but seven respondents had been successful in improving their housing situation.

12 respondents said they had received help from a Somali group. Somali community organisations had provided the following types of help.

- making phone calls and advocating to resolve problems
- providing advice
- filling in forms
- language and translation
- understanding private rented sector options
- finding housing
- lacking experience in housing issues

Six respondents said they had approached their MP but that this had not resolved anything. A few respondents seeking more suitable housing on the basis of health concerns had tried to get help from their GP.

Some had relied on friends or relatives to help with interpreting or advocacy.

A few respondents said they had resolved their housing problems themselves for example, by learning English and improving knowledge of the system, flat sharing with friends, finding housing through an agency.

## The need for advocacy

Many respondents did not know where to turn for help and felt they needed support to resolve their housing problems for the following reasons.

- help with reading and writing in English
- getting more secure or permanent housing
- dealing with change of circumstances, for example, pregnancy and new children
- not understanding entitlements
- not understanding how to register for housing and use the bid system
- getting repairs done

Several people said they felt powerless to resolve their problems, or that Somali community organisations did not have sufficient power to effect change.

Changes to financial or family situation can alter a persons' level of need, requiring more support.

## Barriers to getting help

The following issues were identified by the respondents as barriers to getting help with housing problems:

- lack of information or knowledge of the system
- language barrier
- lack of time
- lack of money, poverty
- lack of education
- short term or one off assistance not providing help for longer term issues
- high mobility: moving many times
- lack of resolution to housing problems despite repeated complaints

Several respondents conveyed their sense of desperation that their efforts to seek advice or make complaints had not been successful.

## What help is needed

Respondents offered ideas about what help they needed which centred on improving understanding of rights and systems, and the need for help resolving specific problems. Advocacy and good advice was the most commonly identified help needed. Respondents wanted help with the following types of problems:

- advocacy, speaking to the council, understanding rights and systems
- overcrowding
- getting more appropriate housing for disabled relatives
- getting repairs done and improvements made
- transferring to another borough
- tackling perceived discrimination
- form filling
- letter writing
- translation, interpreting and help with understanding letters and the bid system
- deciding whether to enter the private rented sector
- additional help for those with health problems and pregnant mothers
- cultural understanding and sensitivity to Somali housing problems
- following up complaints and problems with bidding
- liaising in situations where people fear being
- forced into areas/ housing they do not want
- legal advice

## Changes needed

While 85% of Londoners find their current housing satisfactory, only 12% of those in our survey reported this, which is quite a startling difference, even when we take into account the likelihood that the call for interviewees was more likely to attract those who have housing problems.

Table 19 Is your current housing satisfactory?

Response	Number	Percentage
No	131	82%
Yes	19	12%
Other	3	2%
Null, Blank	5	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100%</b>

Most respondents felt their housing was not satisfactory. The following changes needed were identified most often:

- better accommodation
- more suitable accommodation (e.g. for children, wheelchair access, no stairs for those with mobility problems)
- permanent accommodation
- be housed/ get a house

## Other improvements desired were:

- a house in a better area with parks and play areas for children
- safe housing
- moving out of the private sector due to landlord problems
- a better, fairer allocation system
- more space
- less crime and anti social behaviour
- a location closer to relatives and/or services
- get repairs done

Overall, several respondents wanted to resolve their housing problems which they felt were stopping them from getting on with their lives.

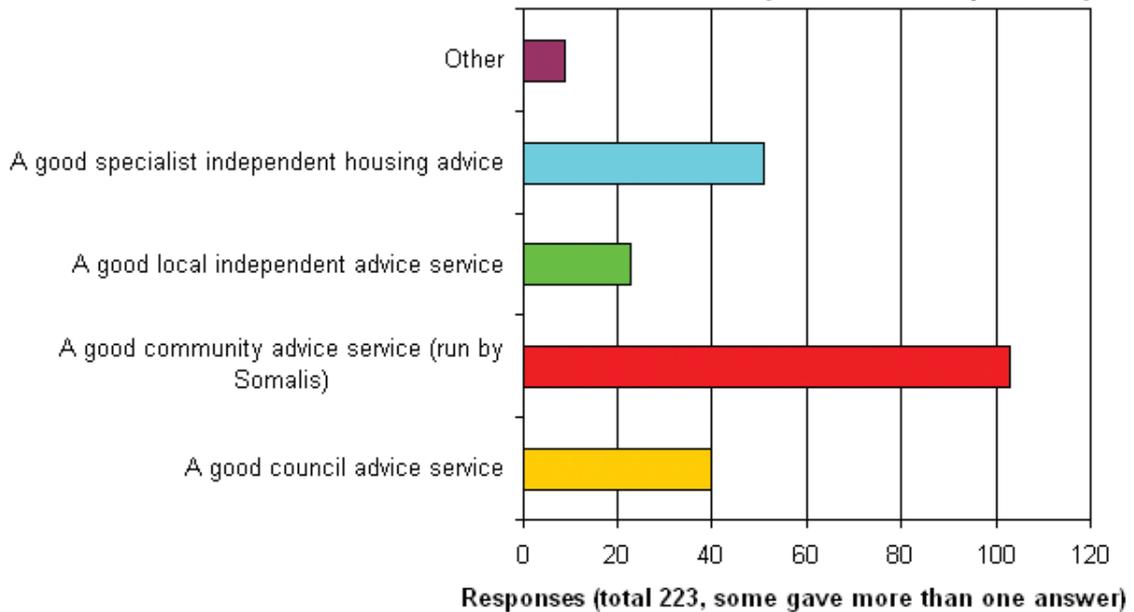
## Young peoples' housing need

Some respondents felt that young people had specific housing needs, and that young people were likely to not be receiving any help. A few had sought help from a council advice service or solicitor, but without results.

# IMPROVING ADVICE AND HOUSING

## If you could choose what help you could get to improve your housing situation what would you choose?

Figure 7 Preferences for help with housing



Although a Somali-run service was the most common response, 44 of 103 responses were in combination with choices for other types of advice service. This indicates that many of the respondents would welcome a good Somali community advice service alongside other types of good advice services.

Language was the most common reason people wanted a Somali service. Other reasons included cultural understanding and mobilising a common Somali voice. Desire for a Somali service was also tempered with concerns about limited power of community organisations and the need for accountability and professionalism. Some responses reflected a view that balancing Somali support with better specialist and general advice provision was the best approach.



## WHAT THE SOMALI COMMUNITY, COUNCIL AND GOVERNMENT CAN DO TO IMPROVE HOUSING

### What can the Somali community do?

When asked what role the 'Somali community' could have in improving the housing situation, many of the same issues discussed above about preferences for a Somali advice service emerged. Most respondents interpreted 'the Somali community' as referring to formal Somali community organisations. A few others placed responsibility on all Somalis to integrate to help resolve housing problems.

#### Lobbying strength, unity and voice

- Unite for a common voice: 'to unite their voices and speak as one'
- Gain strength by pulling together to share problems (e.g. with regular meetings)
- Increase impact by coming together to form a strong lobbying voice
- Promote representatives to speak on behalf of Somalis
- Work with other Somali organisations, rather than competing for funding

#### Improving advice, advocacy and training for staff

- Improve the quality and accuracy of advice and build advocacy skills to ensure change can be effected
- Operate referral to other sources of trusted advice when necessary and provide a list of contacts or information about resolving housing problems (such as repairs).
- Provide specialist training on housing for staff
- allocate support according to need and audit or evaluate this process
- accountability and transparency

#### Taking a more active approach

- Actively offer support and advice to all Somalis rather than just those who already know about the organisation
- Take more active role in lobbying local and national bodies for change
- Ensure clients' problems are followed and keep clients informed

## Powerlessness and limitations of 'the community'

- improving housing is the responsibility of councils/ the government, not the 'Somali community'

## Integration

- improving housing problems can be helped by all Somalis integrating, learning about UK systems and trying to adapt: 'integration is the best solution'

## What can the Council do?

### Improving existing systems

- bid system: ensuring that priority is based on need, but also that everyone has access to housing
- ensure reception staff do not discriminate and are sensitive to cultural difference
- improve quality of advice and clients' understanding of rights and entitlements
- offer help with filling in forms
- fix repairs

### Monitoring

- research into Somali housing problems
- enforcement of housing regulations/ laws and poor housing standards

### Availability of housing

- build more houses
- provide more houses for particular needs: young people, large families; and appropriate housing for disabled people.
- ensure Somalis are fairly allocated housing

## Engaging with Somalis:

### 'Listen to us and respect our needs'

- consultation-improve understanding of the issues through dialogue with Somali groups or leaders
- listen to (and do not ignore) housing problems faced by Somalis
- demonstrate awareness of the wider problems that can be caused by housing problems (e.g. crime)
- acknowledge that Somalis are a significant minority with housing need
- support the role of community organisations as intermediaries
- recruit Somali staff
- work with Somali intermediaries

## Equality and discrimination

- Ensure equality-that Somalis are treated the same as other people/ communities
- Do not discriminate against Somalis
- Allow equality of access by offering translation and interpretation, including telephone interpreting for those with mobility problems
- Ensure equality extends to all groups and that people are not discriminated on the basis of gender (including single men), immigration status (including European immigrants) size of family or disability
- develop specific policies and strategies to deal with the Somali housing problem





## What can the Government do?

### Listening

- Either by engaging with Somali organisations (like Karin) or by 'sending experts' to examine the Somali housing situation.
- This needs to be a two-way process between the government and organisations lobbying for Somalis:

### Monitoring and enforcement

- Monitor actions of landlords of poorly maintained houses
- Put pressure on councils to address Somali housing problems
- Ensure councils and landlords are meeting housing regulations, doing repairs, and address problems of poor quality housing
- Enforce equality and anti-discrimination

### Policy change and law

- Improve support for Somali organisations/ leaders to act as intermediaries
- Improve provision of independent advice services
- Extend the amount of housing/ number of landlords who accept people in receipt of benefits
- Increase funding for councils to build more houses





## RECOMMENDATIONS

The report's recommendations seek to address the need for joint and concerted action on housing to break the cycles of deprivation that generate so many of the communities' other problems, such as worklessness, family breakdown, poverty and terrifying levels of ill health and disability. A failure to work together will undermine any attempts to deal with problems piecemeal.

The authors call on

### The Equalities and Human Rights Commission to

- Conduct a formal investigation into Somali housing conditions, to discover the extent to which the levels of need have been caused by discrimination and take appropriate action
- Instruct boroughs with high Somali populations to monitor separately for Somalis, and to publish and consider such monitoring results
- Consider funding a service to tackle high levels of discrimination against Somalis in housing

### Local authorities to

- Start monitoring Somalis' access to services and outcomes and take appropriate action
- Conduct urgent negotiations with housing providers to increase the number of larger homes available
- Develop relationships with Somali housing providers
- Review the involvement of Somali organisations in developing local strategies and take steps to ensure their effective engagement
- Set up mechanisms to ensure that Somalis and their community organisations are involved in consultation and dialogue to ensure their housing and advice needs are taken into the account in planning, assessment and allocation of resources.
- Use the monitoring information collected about Somalis to review the effectiveness of choice based allocation systems and take steps to address any bias or deficiencies so identified.
- Review the actual accessibility of services to Somalis in their areas, and address the language and other needs identified appropriately, for example, by developing service relationships with community groups or employing bilingual support staff

## Housing associations, the Tenant Services Authority and the Homes and Communities Agency to

- Ensure that all registered social landlords have mechanisms that enable them to monitor Somali use of services and to take appropriate action to tackle discrimination or low take up
- Make a priority within their development programmes for creating larger homes.
- Develop and improve policies and processes that encourage the active participation of Somali community organisations as partners in the planning and provision of new homes and support services



## Karin Housing Association to

- Develop a new service in partnership with other agencies that will begin to tackle Somali housing needs by combining
- Linguistic and cultural competence
- Be trusted by Somalis from all areas
- Have the capacity to deal with large numbers of people, preferably by offering group based advice and information as well as individual services

- Essential support in making good social housing applications with access to expert advice and help
- Expert advice and advocacy to deal with overcrowding, disrepair and discrimination, with a good knowledge of the interrelationship of housing and immigration law
- Representation at courts and tribunals and the capacity to take judicial reviews
- Community development work including development of social enterprise, community finance and sources of employment
- Development of contacts with housing providers, mainly associations and hostels  
Advanced lobbying and campaigning skills

## Research Report – No Voice, Little Choice - Postscript

It gives me no real pleasure to add this postscript to the research report. The thorough and painstaking efforts of Sue Lukes and her team have documented what we in the community have known for a very time – the dire situation particularly in housing, facing the Somali community in East London and probably in other parts of the UK.

There is a myth prevailing among certain sections of the population that immigrants, refugees and migrants are taking away social housing from the indigenous community and they are given priority in allocations. Nothing could be further from the truth. The vast majority, at least in the Somali community, live in very cramped, overcrowded conditions or in temporary housing with severe consequences for community cohesion, children's growth and education and health of the young and the old. This research has demonstrated the extent of the "emergency" facing the Somali community. It cries out for action.

If we want to create a fair and just society and avoid creating second class citizens we have to act now. Some of the actions recommended in the report are incredibly simple, like keeping records identifying Somalis as a separate category in all ethnic record keeping. We can also harness the energy, drive and vitality of Somali community organisations to provide real and effective solutions.

I must thank Sue Lukes and her team for this quality research report and I trust the authorities will read not just this summary but also the full report that can be downloaded from our website ([www.karin-ha.org](http://www.karin-ha.org))

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*Chair*  
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