

The advice gap

A study of barriers to housing advice for black and minority ethnic communities

Shelter commissioned this study to understand better how people from BME communities access housing advice and the barriers they face in doing so.

Key findings

- People from BME communities access advice from informal and formal sources.¹ Often people seek help from both, approaching family and friends first and then seeking further advice from a housing provider, community organisation or advice agency.
- Use of independent advice services is very limited among most BME communities. Most people from these communities are unaware that such services exist or how they can help.
- Where formal advice is sought by people from BME communities, it is usually from non-independent sources such as local authorities, or non-expert (but independent) sources such as community organisations.
- Many people from BME communities prefer to access advice through a local, community-specific service such as a community organisation.
- Young people's awareness and use of advice services is low. Young people feel existing services do not understand or respect their needs.
- There is a lack of understanding about how the social housing system works across all BME communities.
- For people without good English skills, the availability of advice in appropriate languages is seen as very important, but current provision is inadequate.
- Face-to-face advice is the preferred method of advice provision, but there are problems with the way this is currently provided, particularly in relation to the opening hours of services. Some people would like to be able to access support by telephone or via the Internet.
- Older people and those with restricted mobility, ill health or caring responsibilities found themselves excluded by current methods of service delivery – that is, both the location of services and their opening hours.
- Housing providers and community organisations have limited understanding of the role of independent advice and what it can achieve.
- The volume of independent housing advice does not meet current demand, meaning that many who need advice and assistance cannot access them.
- Because of the high demand for advice services, there is inadequate targeting of resources by advice providers. This means that some harder-to-reach groups such as BME communities are not accessing services.
- Many housing advice providers feel disconnected from the BME communities that they are supposed to be serving.

This summary has been produced by Shelter and is based on the full-length report. This is available from Shelter's online bookshop at www.shelter.org.uk/bookshop or by calling 0844 515 2036. Shelter's bookshop also offers a wide range of other materials. For copies of the questionnaires used in the study, call Shelter's Supporter Helpdesk on 0845 458 4590.

The study drew on the views and experiences both of users of advice services and advice service providers. There was a focus on young people to fit with Shelter's programme of work for young people. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with individuals from different BME communities across England. Organisations working with these communities, including housing providers, community organisations, and housing advice providers, were consulted through telephone interviews.² The study also incorporates the findings of previous research.

Use of advice services

The findings of this study confirm that people from BME communities face a high volume of serious housing problems including overcrowding, disrepair, homelessness and exploitation by private sector landlords. Although most people seek some form of advice about their housing problems, they rarely approach independent housing advice services (such as Shelter or Citizens Advice). This means that the advice they receive tends to be neither independent nor expert. People from BME communities tend to approach their housing provider or local community organisation for advice, or an informal source of advice such as friends or family. Most people seek advice from a combination of the two, often approaching a formal source of advice such as their local authority after discussing the problem with family or friends.

The study found that there is very little awareness of independent housing advice services among most BME communities. Many people were unaware that they have legal rights in relation to their housing problems or that there are organisations that can provide free advice to help them enforce these rights.

Among the participants in the study:

- more than half (56 per cent) of those who had sought advice had done so from both informal and formal sources – this includes more than half of respondents from each community under study, except European Union (EU) Accession State nationals and asylum seekers and refugees
- more than a quarter (29 per cent) of those who had sought advice had approached formal sources directly without seeking any assistance from family or friends

- most who had accessed formal advice reported doing so from non-independent or non-expert sources such as their local authority or a community organisation
- very few interviewees had accessed, or were aware of, independent housing advice services
- nine per cent of respondents had not sought advice from any source about their housing problems (12 out of 15 of these respondents were EU Accession State nationals – this group had by far the highest proportion of people not seeking any advice, despite experiencing similar housing problems to other communities)
- the majority of those who had not sought any advice reported that their housing situation had not changed; none reported that the situation had deteriorated.

Young people reported limited success in accessing advice and showed very little awareness of independent housing advice services. The majority of young homeless people participating in the survey sought advice from friends, local housing associations, or the housing or homelessness department of their local authority.

Barriers to advice

Overall, the main reasons for people from BME communities failing to access independent housing advice highlighted by the study were a lack of knowledge about their rights and entitlements to housing, and about how advice services could help them secure these rights. There are, however, multiple barriers to advice confronting BME communities, as summarised below.

Knowledge about housing rights

- A lack of knowledge of rights and entitlements to housing

Awareness of advice services

- A lack of awareness of advice services and how they can help secure people's rights

Practical issues

- The need for an interpreter where English is not a first language
- The limited or inflexible opening hours of advice services for those in employment or those with children or caring responsibilities

- Physical and mental ill health or old age making it difficult for people to travel any distance to advice centres
- The cost implications of seeking advice as a deterrent because of a lack of awareness, particularly among EU migrants, that many services are provided free

Immigration status

- Failed asylum seekers and others with uncertain immigration status deterred from seeking advice by a lack of understanding of their rights and the fear of being reported to the immigration authorities

Cultural barriers

- Public attitudes to refugees and asylum seekers reflected in the way public services are provided, for example the assumption that the needs of all refugees and asylum seekers are the same
- A reluctance to seek advice among older people because of a desire for independence and, particularly among older Asian people, a feeling that problems should be resolved within the family
- A reluctance to seek advice among young people because of a feeling that they should be able to cope alone or that services did not meet the needs of young people
- A perception, particularly in the Somali community, that cultural needs in respect of housing will be misunderstood or disrespected, leading to a preference for seeking assistance from within their own community.

Many of the barriers above are not confined to BME communities and are likely to be universal problems that any potential advice seeker would face. Although this study focused on the views of people from BME communities, many of the findings will have a wider relevance.

Improving access to advice services

The aim of the study was not simply to identify problems, but also to find solutions. Advice seekers and advice providers³ made suggestions for how to improve access to advice services for BME communities. Their suggestions closely reflected the barriers

identified above and fed into the development of detailed recommendations on how the needs of these communities can be better met.

Recommendations

There is a lot of work to be done to ensure that BME communities have easy access to appropriate and effective advice and assistance to address their housing problems. Through a better understanding of the current provision of housing advice to BME communities and the barriers that they face in accessing advice, the findings of this study should inform the development of policy and practice in housing advice to meet the pressing advice needs of these communities.

The recommendations below identify the steps that need to be taken to achieve this. (For the full list of recommendations, refer to the main report.)

Raising awareness

- Local authorities, community organisations and social housing providers should clearly signpost individuals to independent housing advice services, making clear the limitations of their own advice, the right to challenge decisions and the free assistance that independent advice services can provide in enforcing rights.
- Community legal education about rights and services must involve a diverse range of formal and informal organisations to ensure that all sections of society are aware of their rights and of the free assistance available to help enforce them.
- There is a need to develop methods to raise awareness among young people of their rights and the legal advice services that they can access to help them exercise those rights.
- As a matter of priority, social housing providers should develop and promote customer-friendly materials, in all the necessary languages, that clearly explain their policies in relation to housing allocations, repairs and homelessness.
- Induction materials in appropriate languages for migrants from EU Accession States should be made available at points of entry into the UK, covering their legal rights in relation to housing and other areas and the sources of support and advice available.

- Refugee integration services and mainstream providers of housing advice should work together more closely to raise awareness of housing rights and the advice services available to support refugees.

Planning and development

- Substantial work needs to be undertaken to increase the volume of housing advice available. Shelter should work with local, regional and central Government to promote the role of independent advice services and to ensure future strategies for the delivery and planning of social welfare law do not reduce the level and diversity of current suppliers.
- Advice providers need to be more proactive in targeting services to those most in need of housing advice in their areas. To achieve better targeting, agencies at a local level will need to map need by different communities, monitor service use, and redesign services to ensure they are accessible to the new target communities.
- Housing providers need to engage in regular consultation and dialogue with BME communities to ensure their housing and advice needs are taken into account in planning and the allocation of resources.
- Access to specialist advice for young people should be developed, including features such as confidentiality, and non-judgemental and holistic approaches.

Providing advice

- Existing specialist housing advice providers and local community organisations need to work together more closely to build the capacity of community organisations to provide early advice and support to the local communities they serve, recognise the limits of their competence in relation to housing law, and have arrangements in place for referring clients on to other specialist agencies as required.
- As part of the development of referral networks and capacity building, community organisations should work with specialist advice providers on service redesign to ensure that the services of these providers meet the needs of their community.
- In developing plans to provide services to specific communities, translation and interpretation budgets must be adequate to meet communities' needs.
- Services should improve their capacity to meet the needs of older people and others whose needs may exclude them from high-street services by implementing outreach surgeries and/or home visiting, or by providing free transport to advice centres. Telephone and Internet services should also play a role.
- Specialist housing advice agencies need to examine the ways in which they can work with youth services so that they can provide the specialist support required by young people in settings that are accessible to them.

- 1 'Informal advice' refers to advice from family, friends, and neighbours. 'Formal advice' refers to housing information and advice services provided by Shelter, independent housing advice agencies, Law Centres, Citizens Advice bureaux, local authorities and community support organisations.
- 2 The study undertook interviews in four study areas: the City of Bristol, Oldham, the London Borough of Hackney, and Dover and the south east of England. The communities represented in the study were: African-Caribbean, Black African, Somali, Turkish and Kurdish, Asian, asylum seekers and refugees, and European Union (EU) Accession State nationals. All 172 interviewees had experienced a housing problem within the previous two years and were therefore potential advice seekers.
- 3 'Advice seekers' and 'advice providers' are generic terms used to refer to all participants in the two groups of interviewees.

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