

## Headlines for Housing Plus Academy Workshop

### Race Matters: How social landlords can create more racial equity

Friday 13<sup>th</sup> November 2020

The workshop attracted 40 participants, with just under half of participants identifying as from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds. The chair, Alicia Francis, has many years' experience in this area, and the chair and presenters all bought live examples of their own journey in social housing, facing significant barriers and in some cases receiving valuable support to gain equality. There was a strong consensus that social landlords must make an explicit and open commitment to overcome racism in all its forms.

#### **1. Structural and systemic racism**

Racism permeates every section of society including education, housing, health, and criminal justice. It has become so ingrained that often we no longer notice it. People from BAME<sup>1</sup> backgrounds experiences disadvantages in ways that impact many aspects of their lives. In response to the Black Lives Matter movement, people have been trying to understand the underlying reasons behind these inequalities. This effort will help us move forward if it is followed up with more concrete action to create a more equal society where people are not undervalued because of the colour of their skin, their ethnic, religious, or cultural background.

#### **2. BAME communities and housing**

BAME households are less likely to be owner-occupiers and more likely to live in social and private rented housing. 25% of all BAME households and 44% of Black African households live in social housing, compared to 16% of White British households<sup>2</sup>. This makes the role of social landlords in helping to tackle racial inequalities absolutely crucial. One explanation offered for the high concentration of BAME households in social housing is that BAME households are less likely to have access to the generational wealth which can help people get on the housing ladder.

BAME households are more likely to live-in poor-quality housing with serious problems of disrepair and less fuel efficient, and are more likely to live in deprived neighbourhoods with lower air quality and worse road safety:

- Asian households are most likely to live in the 10% of most deprived neighbourhoods (16%), followed by Black people (15%), compared to 9% of White people<sup>3</sup>.
- BAME residents are more likely to live in neighbourhoods with limited access to green spaces and shops selling affordable fresh food.

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<sup>1</sup> BAME stands for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and is used in this report to refer to people from ethnic minority backgrounds. We acknowledge this is an umbrella term that does not fully convey the experiences of diverse groups living in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> MHCLG (2020) Renting social housing: Available at: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/housing/social-housing/renting-from-a-local-authority-or-housing-association-social-housing/latest>

<sup>3</sup> ONS (2020) People living in deprived neighbourhoods. Available at: [ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk](https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk)

- BAME households in the UK are twice as likely to live in poverty as white households<sup>4</sup>

All of these factors impact the life chances of the people living under these conditions. Landlords need to take into account all stages of the housing cycle to meet the needs of BAME groups, looking at development; allocations including type and quality of housing on offer; service provision; governance; and resident engagement.

### **3. Concentrations of ethnic minorities in particular areas**

There tends to be high concentrations of minority ethnic populations in particular areas; it is important that social landlords explore their lettings data and understand the reasons behind the growth in minority ethnic concentrations. In part, it could be explained by people wanting to live near people they feel are like them and have access to community support such as places of worship. One landlord explained that BAME tenants often turned down rural properties in almost exclusively White areas as they did not want to feel like the “odd ones out”. However, this does not explain the high concentrations of minorities in specific areas of major urban areas such as Bradford, Leicester, Birmingham and elsewhere. Historically, employment shortages in the post-war era were resolved by encouraging immigration from Commonwealth countries to areas such as Bradford, Leicester, Birmingham, East London and elsewhere. These communities often settled in particular areas of a city and can, in part, explain the high concentration of ethnic minorities in urban areas today.

Today, the concentration of ethnic minorities may be partially explained by where property is available. Local allocations policy can intensify this problem. Deprived areas tend to have a higher turnover of properties, with people moving out to more “desirable” areas where they feel they will have more opportunity, leaving empty homes available in more deprived areas for people who are more desperate for accommodation. This leads to high concentrations of vulnerable households including asylum seekers, formerly homeless households and overcrowded families in these properties alongside BAME households who face many disadvantages in the letting system.

Harrow Council is in the process of reviewing their allocations scheme, looking at who ends up on the housing register, and the ethnic profile of people living in different housing tenures and areas. It is hoped this will achieve fairer outcomes in allocations for BAME applicants.

### **4. Supporting all communities**

Landlords need to provide support to all communities to help them thrive. As third sector organisation funding has been cut, there is less support in areas of high concentrations of BAME households. Landlords need to step in to support tenants with financial problems, providing benefit advice access to training etc. Landlords need to work alongside other organisations such as the NHS, Local Authorities, and the police to strengthen support for more vulnerable communities. Landlords also need to assess access to wider infrastructure such as green space, shops, and other local amenities, to ensure that low-income estates do not lose out.

It is a mistake for landlords to treat ethnic minority groups as a homogeneous entity. There are significant disparities in wealth, health, and income between BAME communities. It is important to understand the different backgrounds of BAME groups and to design services around different

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick Butler (2020) Nearly half of BAME UK households are living in poverty. The Guardian. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jul/01/nearly-half-of-bame-uk-households-are-living-in-poverty>

needs. When considering tenant feedback, it is important to disaggregate which groups are saying what, and to identify which groups are not putting their opinions forward.

Landlords cannot assume they understand the different needs of different ethnic groups. They should encourage residents to share with landlords how landlords can support them. Landlords need to make clear to tenants that feedback is being taken on board; they need to show what action is taken. If action is not being followed through, they need to explain why. Sometimes, landlords may not know what the solution to a problem is, but by talking to BAME tenants and staff they can develop new solutions together. Landlords need to create bold social experiments that integrate communities and support BAME households.

Many tenants usually only contact their landlord if they have a problem that is affecting them or their neighbourhood. Landlords need to find ways to secure the views of all their tenants and to create trusted ways for tenants to share their honest opinions to help shape the housing service. A range of engagement methods, from quick surveys and feedback to more traditional engagement such as Scrutiny Panels, board representatives, tenants' forums, help tenants feel valued. Providing training to build confidence and know-how helps residents engage effectively.

## **5. The impact of COVID-19**

There is compelling evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected BAME communities, with people both more likely to catch the virus and more likely to suffer worse outcomes if they are from a BAME background<sup>5</sup>. Explanations for this disproportionate impact have included existing inequalities such as higher levels of overcrowding, poorer quality housing and worse general health among BAME people, increasing vulnerability to the virus. Research by the Runnymede Trust suggests BAME communities may lack adequate access to health services, green spaces, and healthy food all of which can have a negative impact on health outcomes<sup>5</sup>.

## **6. Race is difficult to talk about openly**

Staff and tenants from BAME backgrounds experience slights and insults on a regular basis which impacts their day to day lives. These micro-aggressions are small, but over time they can have an accumulative impact on people's wellbeing, adding a significant burden to the lives of BAME people. All staff at housing association Home Group have to go through unconscious bias training to help them address these issues. We need to recognise people's direct experiences and recognise that they carry racial overtones. When we do, then things will improve.

To tackle racial inequality, social landlords have to talk about race. Landlords need to create safe spaces where people can have honest, and sometimes difficult, conversations about personal experiences of racial injustices and racial prejudice. These conversations are not always easy, but they are key to developing a true understanding of the experiences of BAME communities and how things can be changed. People need to be able to share how they feel, for example pointing out when someone has said something that has undermined them, and challenging offending behaviour. People need to see positive outcomes rather than problems being swept under the carpet. Participants need to feel free of fear of using the "wrong words", since honest discussions about race are part of a crucial learning experience. These conversations need to be normalised. Putting

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<sup>5</sup> Zubaida Haque, Laia Becares and Nick Treloar (2020) Over-Exposed and Under-Protected The Devastating Impact of COVID-19 on Black and Minority Ethnic Communities in Great Britain. Runnymede Trust  
<https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/Runnymede%20Covid19%20Survey%20report%20v3.pdf>

these ideas into practice, L&Q has hosted a series of workshops called “*We need to talk about race*” to ensure that staff can familiarise themselves with the issues.

For Black History Month this year, the leadership team at Catalyst Housing listened to the concerns of Black colleagues and asked them ideas about what they thought was needed rather than just what would “look good on the internet”. All of the leadership team engaged in the sessions and actively listened and took on board what people were saying.

## **7. BAME Representation on boards and in leadership roles**

Leadership teams and boards must truly reflect the diversity in the make-up of their residents and communities to tackle racial issues. Clear leadership and full representation of different groups will help ensure decisions made will meet the needs of all tenants.

Landlords need to review their policies and procedures to ensure they are fully inclusive. Blind recruitment methods can help improve diversity. So, can targeted recruitment. Some organisations follow the “Rooney Rule” (originally used by sporting authorities), which states you must interview at least one BAME candidate for all senior positions.

Schemes that are specifically directed at widening participation can help encourage people to apply for roles that they may not otherwise have considered. For example:

- The G15 Accelerate programme is a 12-month training programme for BAME managers who want to accelerate their careers into more senior roles.
- Home Group has a leadership programme specifically for BAME staff members.
- The National Housing Federation’s revised Code of Good Governance includes the need for boards and leadership teams to be diverse and responsive to the needs of all residents.

## **8. Tackling racial inequality is central to how landlords work**

Tackling racial inequality needs to be at the heart of what social landlords do. It cannot be a one-off activity. Tenants and staff need clear leadership at the top of the organisation, endorsing, supporting, and acting upon the values of racial and all forms of equality and fairness. Impact Equality Assessments (IEAs) are a way to ensure that an organisation’s policies and practices do not disadvantage anyone affected by them and, wherever possible, improve equality, diversity, and inclusion. IEAs provide awareness of how decisions impact BAME tenants. An IEA that is robust and considers the needs of all residents should be undertaken before any organisational major decisions.

Efforts to improve racial equality need to have clear objectives and transparent time scales, leading to concrete action. Terms such as “zero tolerance of racism” need to have real meaning and carry consequences. To back this up, a clear complaints process that is trusted by BAME staff and residents is an absolute must.

## **9. Working with other organisations and sharing ideas**

Social landlords need to work together to tackle racial inequality across the whole housing sector. Landlords need to share ideas and experiences of what is being done within their own organisation. “UNIFY” is a network of 14 housing associations working to improve inclusion opportunities at all levels<sup>6</sup>. BAME networks, of which there are several in the housing world, can provide concrete

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<sup>6</sup>UNIFY BAME (2020) UNIFY’s History. Available at: <https://unifybame.org/our-history/>

evidence of BAME employees' and residents' experience. Social landlords should engage with these vital information conduits within their own organisation and on a cross-sector basis.

## **10. Concluding thoughts**

Racial inequalities can impact all aspects of a person's life. Social landlords have a critical role to play both in improving the life chances of tenants from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and in improving representation within staff and leadership teams. Many social landlords are already working to improve racial equality within their own organisation. Open and honest conversations must continue and produce results. These conversations must turn into concrete action which underpins the commitment that no one should be disadvantaged because of their skin.

## **11. Some ideas for action**

- Supporting BAME Networks
- Carrying out Impact Equality Assessments
- Targeted diversity schemes for recruitment
- Organizing set aside time for honest exchanges about race with staff and tenants
- Organising events that celebrate diversity such as Black History Month
- Training for staff in detecting their own biases
- Recruiting diverse members to the board and to leadership positions