

Somali father Hassan Dimbil and his family in their Birmingham Council home



The Somali community is the worst off of all the UK's minority groups – and one of the least understood. But new research gives a crucial insight into Somalis' needs, as **John Morris** explains

Even with the recent fumbled general election call, immigration is unlikely to recede as a hot issue between now and polling day proper.

This was pointed out by the makers of a recent Channel 4 programme, aired in the wake of police demands for extra resources to cope with an influx of migrant workers and asylum seekers (*Inside Housing*, 5 October). Based on a study by the Institute for Public Policy Research, the Dispatches programme was particularly disquieting: it sought to calculate a balance sheet detailing which migrant groups are in 'debit', and which were in 'credit' within the UK economy.

Using this accounting method, Somalis emerged as the community most in hock: 71 per cent were economically inactive and just 19 per cent had jobs, ranking Somalis bottom of 26 identifiable communities consisting of more than 60,000 people.

What the programme failed to mention is how the predominance of asylum seekers within the UK Somali community creates significant barriers to finding work; or that being one of the most recent, large groups to arrive in the UK – almost three-quarters have settled here since 1996 – has given people little time to make a meaningful economic impact.

Trident Housing Association and its research partner, the Human City Institute, argue that this type of analysis can be badly misinterpreted and set hares running before the needs of vulnerable communities such as the Somalis can be explored properly.

Earlier this year, midlands-based Trident commissioned HCI to provide evidence of Somalis' experience of Birmingham, where

the association manages 2,000 homes. The landlord wanted to develop a better understanding of the Somali community, its needs and gaps in current provision. And it wanted to understand the future which Somalis envisage for themselves in the UK's second city. The result was a report by Adrian Jones, *The Unexpected Community: the needs and aspirations of Birmingham's Somali community*.

Somalis in Birmingham represent a newly emergent community which has grown dramatically during the last five years. Many community members have come to the city indirectly, refugees whose journeys have taken them via other European countries. Government figures indicate that there are more than 82,000 Somalis in the UK – 0.14 per cent of the total population. There is no accurate data regarding the size of Birmingham's Somali population, although community estimates indicate a possible population of 40,000.

The low level of Somalis' economic activity revealed by the IPPR report can also be attributed to the community's demographics; almost two-thirds are women, one of the largest proportions of any UK ethnic group, and most have considerable child care responsibilities. Somalis are also one of the youngest ethnic groups within the UK. One-fifth are under 16, and the average age is 31, compared with the national average of 39.

Birmingham's Somali community is concentrated in the city's most deprived inner neighbourhoods, which are already congested reception areas for other migrant groups. These areas are characterised by persistent levels of multiple disadvantage, including high-density, poor and old housing. Some Somalis have settled in Birmingham neighbourhoods which officially fall within the most deprived 1 per cent of 33,000 wards in England.

Tenure of last resort

Nationally, 80 per cent of Somalis live in social housing – the largest proportion of any ethnic group, although there has been a tendency for social landlords to treat black African households as a homogeneous group. In Birmingham the council now includes Somali as an ethnic category for its local housing register, a welcome development.

As a result of this we know that a minority, close to a third of Birmingham's Somali population, rely on private rented accommodation, a significantly larger proportion compared with both other ethnic groups and Somalis living elsewhere. HCI researchers couldn't find a single Somali owner-occupier in the city.

Many of those who have ended up renting privately see this as a tenure of last resort because they don't qualify for social housing for various reasons. Some are categorised as intentionally homeless having left secure housing in other European Union countries to move to Birmingham, while others have turned down previous housing offers.

The prevailing view of the private rented sector within Birmingham's Somali community is not positive. Many see high rents for relatively poor conditions. Often housing benefit doesn't match these rents and some landlords demand top-ups from income benefits or low wages, causing considerable distress. Deposits are generally required, and many lettings are reportedly made without tenancy agreements.

Researchers saw for themselves that damp and condensation, poor-quality repairs or landlords' failure to carry out repairs are key problems in the sector. Somalis generally view private renting as 'bad housing', which has not been checked for occupational fitness. As one interviewee said: 'Private landlords are the main issue... they are creating hell for Somalis'.

Now there is a new concern: rapid house price rises in some of Birmingham's core areas are prompting some private landlords to evict Somali tenants so that they can sell the properties for fat profits. This puts further pressure on the social

housing stock.

But those seeking alternative accommodation in the social sector can face different problems. The impact of the language barrier and the lack of Somali staff in the council's housing department and local housing associations are key housing service concerns for many in the community.

But more fundamental is the location, size and type of social housing on offer. Somalis generally prefer specific areas of the city, close to other Somalis and desired facilities. There is equally a fear of isolation and harassment in 'non-Somali' areas. And the average size of Somali households – which is 3.8 nationally, but 8 for those taking part in the Birmingham research – tends to put the brakes on speedy social housing offers. These factors have a major bearing on Somalis' ability to access appropriate housing.

All this leaves Somalis thinking of themselves as at the bottom of the immigrant hierarchy when it comes to accessing accommodation. They believe that they are perceived as competitors for scarce housing resources by other disadvantaged minority ethnic groups.

The perception among Somalis themselves is that social landlords deliberately accommodate them in the 'worst' areas. This must, however, be seen within the context of a decline in Birmingham's social housing stock over the last two decades through right to buy and the effect of under-provision of larger properties, which has a disproportionate effect on the larger households in minority ethnic communities. Local social landlords recognise that meeting the needs of the Somali community is difficult within current stock constraints.

There are many obstacles for Somalis to overcome outside of the housing arena, including those related to employment, education, health and well-being. Yet equally it demonstrates that Somalis wish to become more independent and aspire to make a greater economic contribution and improve the quality of their community life. ● **John Morris is chief executive of Trident and vice-chair of the Human City Institute**

● *The Unexpected Community: the needs and aspirations of Birmingham's Somali community*, by Adrian Jones, www.humancity.org.uk

Better prospects

The research behind *The Unexpected Community* grew out of a partnership between Trident Housing Association and a fledgling Somali-led housing association called Amana. Researchers interviewed around 80 people, split into five focus groups.

The two organisations are trying to offer Birmingham's Somali community better prospects. Currently Trident is looking at transferring 50 of its mainstream properties to Amana, and is mentoring the fledgling landlord through the Housing Corporation registration process.

This latest study forms part of Trident's 'no community left behind' strategy, which builds on a history of housing and supporting the midlands' most vulnerable minority ethnic communities, helping their members meet their aspirations. Sometimes these are new arrivals, like the Somalis. At other times they are groups of longer standing, such as the Bangladeshi, Chinese and Vietnamese communities, which may need support to improve their housing situation and overall quality of life. Somalis are perhaps the most disadvantaged Birmingham community that Trident is supporting.

Tales of the unexpected