

Practitioner article

Providing housing and homelessness services to BME communities

Written by **Catriona Paton**, Homelessness Strategy Coordinator at East Renfrewshire Council, and **Naheed Asghar**, BME Housing Advice Coordinator at Arklet Housing Association

December 2006

www.shelter.org.uk

© 2006 Shelter. All rights reserved. This document is only for your personal, non-commercial use. You may not copy, reproduce, republish, post, distribute, transmit or modify it in any way.

This document contains information and policies that were correct at the time of publication.

Shelter

Providing housing and homelessness services to BME communities

Catriona Paton and Naheed Asghar discuss the work of East Renfrewshire's BME Outreach Project, which was launched in 2004 to address the housing needs and concerns of the area's growing BME community.

Introduction: BME communities in East Renfrewshire

In 2002, East Renfrewshire Council and Communities Scotland commissioned consultancy company ODS Ltd to carry out a study into the housing needs of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) community.

The 2001 Census identified that the 'visible' BME population had increased since the 1991 Census from 2.2 per cent of the population to 4.09 per cent. The ethnic origin of the majority of the BME population is Pakistani and Indian, with the majority living in the owner occupied sector, which is generally regarded as the natural tenure.

In 2001 there were only 17 BME households residing within social rented housing, and the study identified that this situation had arisen as a result of the lack of culturally sensitive housing information and advice services, coupled with a perception that social renting results in a lack of choice in terms of house size and location. Access to public sector housing was also seen as overly bureaucratic, and the success rate in obtaining suitable accommodation low.

The BME Outreach Project

The study recognised a need to work more closely with the BME community, to identify needs for housing information and advice and to raise awareness within the community of the range of services available. To assist the council and other agencies to gain a better understanding of the needs of the BME community, an Outreach Project was developed, with the appointment of Naheed Asghar, BME Housing Advice Coordinator, in November 2004. The Project is funded jointly by East Renfrewshire Council and Communities Scotland.

The key service areas provided by the BME Outreach Project are:

- outreach work to engage with local communities to identify housing needs and raise awareness of social rented housing options
- to minimise the perceived bureaucracy of applying to social landlords by supporting individuals through the application process
- to help BME tenants in sustaining their tenancies

- to prevent homelessness through the provision of a culturally sensitive housing information and advice service
- to work with other agencies to raise awareness of the needs of the BME community.

Preventing homelessness in the BME community

Homeless presentations from the BME community are generally low and account for just three to four per cent of the total number of presentations.

The main reasons for homelessness within the community from 2003 – 2006 are:

- parents/relatives/friends cannot accommodate (44 per cent)
- family disputes or spouse violent/abusive (22 per cent)
- loss of private sector tenancy (15 per cent).

Part of the remit of the BME Outreach Project is to work with individuals and the community as a whole to prevent homelessness through the provision of good quality information and advice about the range of services available to assist them. As well as signposting people to appropriate or specialist services, the Coordinator supports individuals and organisations while they're sorting out their housing problems.

Partnership working

In addition to working directly with the community, the BME Project Coordinator also works in partnership with a wide range of statutory and voluntary organisations to assist in the development of strategies and services, and to ensure that they recognise and incorporate the needs of the BME community.

Help and advice for the BME community

Since the Project's inception in November 2004, 173 people have been assisted with housing information and advice, as well as general information and advice.

The main reasons for re-housing cited by clients were:

- domestic abuse (from partner and/or extended family)
- living in poor private rented stock
- formation of new family unit
- divorce/separation
- moving to be closer to good schools
- overcrowding.

Seventy per cent of the female referrals to the Project are or were in a violent relationship. The abuse suffered ranged from physical to financial, and the abuser was often not the partner but the mother- or sister-in-law.

Issues and concerns

The main issues or concerns raised by clients assisted by the Project were:

- lack of appropriate housing in desired areas
- lack of knowledge of the range of housing options available
- opting for private rented accommodation to prevent homelessness
- huge, off putting waiting lists
- problems understanding the points system
- difficulties completing forms
- preferences for dealing with bilingual workers so clients don't have to explain themselves
- concerns that services tend not to be religiously or culturally sensitive.

The majority of clients who were fluent in English were happier dealing with a bilingual worker, as they felt they could talk about their personal situation and not have to give a cultural and religious background before they could be understood.

Having assistance to fill in housing applications to several providers was seen as a plus, as often even requesting a housing form was a stumbling block.

Access to the private rented sector was often seen as easier than access to social housing, and tended to be through word of mouth. However, 90 per cent of the clients in the private rented sector were staying in housing which required major repairs, ranging from no hot water to dry rot. Many clients were worried that they could be made homeless at any time and were not aware of their rights.

Accessing groups within the BME community

The BME Outreach Project has also given the council and other organisations the opportunity to access groups within the BME community which were previously difficult to engage with, and has allowed the community to gain an understanding of the range of agencies and services within the area. This has been achieved through the organisation of women's events and information days for older BME people.

This communication ensures that the actual needs as opposed to perceived needs of the community are recognised and addressed through partnership working with a wide range of statutory and voluntary agencies operating within the area.

Conclusion

So far, the BME Outreach Project has been successful in raising awareness of housing advice and information services available, and in engaging with the BME community to address specific concerns, including the prevention of homelessness.

Further information

If you would like any further information, or an update at any time in the future about how this approach is progressing, please send an email to [**practicescotland@shelter.org.uk**](mailto:practicescotland@shelter.org.uk) in the first instance.

The views expressed in the article are those of the author and not necessarily those of Shelter.