

Barriers in accessing homeless provision and service needs of Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in London

RACE ON THE AGENDA

Summary of Findings, May 2007



Focus group discussions with homeless individuals



Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Who we are	4
Methodology	4
Focus Groups	5
Cause of Homelessness	6
Use of BAME Organisations	7
Access to and Use of Mainstream Services	8
Worklessness	9
Client Participation	10
Appendix- Table of respondents' demographics	12



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Introduction

This Summary of Findings details the experiences of sixteen homeless individuals from BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) backgrounds. ROTA is carrying out fieldwork with these clients in order to gain evidence on barriers to accessing services and service needs of homeless people from BAME groups. The fieldwork is carried out for ROTA's Equal funded project "Linking services for BAME homeless individuals". This project is part of the 'Tackling Multiple Disadvantage in London by Improving Employability' (TMD) programme, which is run through a cross-sector partnership led by the charity Off the Streets and Into Work (OSW). The core partners include Cardboard Citizens, Connection at St Martin's, Depaul Trust, Greater London Authority, Groundswell UK, Prospect Us, Race on the Agenda, St Mungo's and Thames Reach Bondway.

The TMD programme targets individuals facing multiple disadvantages in the labour market who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, in temporary accommodation, or have been recently resettled. Running until the end of 2007, it intends to test routes out of inactivity and worklessness. It will provide innovative and individual options, in a city with current and projected skills shortages, but where there is less incentive for those on benefits to work than anywhere else in the country, and where mainstream measures have had the least impact.

The overall aim of ROTA's project is to enhance access to appropriate training and employment services for homeless individuals from BAME groups. In order for this to be achieved BAME individuals need to be able to access support that best meets their needs and empowers them to enter or return to the labour market. There may be barriers to BAME people in using some generic homeless provision; there may also be a lack of knowledge within some BAME services of the support available within the homeless sector.

As there is limited information available on the specific service needs of BAME homeless people, and insufficient knowledge/links between the BAME and homelessness sectors, it is essential to carry out research on these issues and to build new links and referral routes across services. This would ensure that support and services tailored to people's needs are available and would lead to improved levels of employment for BAME homeless individuals.

Linking Services for BAME Homeless Individuals will result in mapping of BAME training provision; individuals receiving support in testing out the links between BAME and homelessness provision over a period of a year; greater awareness of the needs of BAME homeless individuals within the homelessness and BAME voluntary sectors, and between these sectors themselves.

Who we are

Race on the Agenda (ROTA) is a social policy think tank that has been active since 1986. We work with London's Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities towards achieving social justice by the elimination of discrimination and promotion of human rights, diversity and equality of opportunity. We achieve these aims by informing London's strategic decision-makers about the issues affecting the BAME voluntary and community sector (VCS) and the communities it serves and by making government policy more accessible to London's BAME organisations. **MiNet**, the regional BAME network joined ROTA in 2002. Its focus is on strengthening the voice for London's BAME VCS in the development of regional policy

Methodology

ROTA's project is split into three phases:

Phase 1: Desk research

A paper introducing the policy and legislative context of the project, by addressing all the latest and historical policy and statutory changes around homelessness at three levels: European, UK and London. In particular,

- EU level: most significant/ relevant European policies, primary and secondary (directives, regulations etc) legislation relating to homelessness and BAME groups including employment, equal opportunities, housing, social inclusion and community cohesion. The Equal principles and objectives will also need to be reviewed.
- UK level: most significant/ relevant UK policies and primary legislation relating to homelessness and BAME groups including employment, equal opportunities, housing, social inclusion and community cohesion.
- London level: most significant/ relevant policies/ statutes relating to homelessness and BAME groups in London (e.g. Government Office for London, the Greater London Authority, London Boroughs, Central Government particularly the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Home Office).

A literature review paper covering the major theoretical arguments around homelessness & BAME groups especially in relation to London. In particular:

- Barriers and any other issues faced by BAME groups trying to access homeless provision;
- General issues faced by BAME homeless individuals especially in relation to London;
- Any available information on the relationship between mainstream homeless organisations and BAME organisations;

- Any available information on the service needs of BAME homeless individuals;
- Any available information on awareness raising initiatives around the needs of BAME homeless individuals.

Phase 2: Fieldwork with BAME homeless individuals (interviews, focus groups, questionnaires) and with BAME and mainstream homeless organisations

For the fieldwork with BAME homeless individuals we are employing three data collection instruments. The findings in this document originate from data collected through focus group discussions (23 individuals). The themes and questions for these discussions were informed by a questionnaire survey of 16 clients. Finally, a six month longitudinal study (2006- 2007), involving monthly follow-up phone interviews with clients, will map their experience of using homeless services to provide routes into education, training or employment.

For the fieldwork with BAME and mainstream homeless organisations (200-300) we shall employ the qualitative methodologies of interviews and questionnaires.

This paper is one of the three interim reports produced during the second phase of the project. The first one reported on the interviews with individuals. The final interim report will report on the findings from the fieldwork with organisations.

Phase 3: Report, toolkit, film, dissemination and policy influencing

The final report will combine the desk research papers (policy & literature review), the two interim reports (interviews & focus groups) on the research with BAME homeless individuals and the interim report on the research with organisations to posit policy, research and intellectual recommendations on how to address the issues covered by the Project. A short film will provide a summary of the interviews and focus group discussions of Phase 2 with direct quotes from the sample. A toolkit will also be produced providing examples of best practice.

FOCUS GROUPS: Second interim report – Phase 2

This report summarises the main findings of three focus group sessions with clients, held as part of ROTA's fieldwork to gather evidence on barriers to accessing services and needs of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) homeless individuals. Of the 23 that were invited, a total of six women and ten men from a range of ethnic backgrounds participated on the day. Five of the seven who did not attend the sessions are street homeless without any direct means of contact such as a mobile phone. Consequently it was difficult for the project to confirm their attendance near to the dates of the group sessions, although initially they agreed to participate.

A questionnaire survey which collected data on BAME homeless individuals' experiences and use of services was conducted prior to the focus groups and provided the themes for the discussions. A separate interim report has been prepared copies of which can be obtained by contacting Eshe Petinaud - Allen, Eshe@rota.org.uk 020 7729 1310.

The primary objective of the focus group discussions was to determine the nature of the use of services by our clients with regards to their homelessness and worklessness. Data gathered in this part of the field work would suggest that the services of BAME organisations are not sought, or are not known to the majority of BAME homeless individuals. None the less, the majority of those surveyed feel that services provided by BAME organisations for BAME clients would make a difference to their homeless situation. Although responses varied; the majority of participants felt that their status as a member of a minority ethnic group impacted on their experience as a homeless person.

Cause of Homelessness

The Crisis report on homeless women (2006) reported that:

Homelessness is rarely the consequence of a single event, action or issue but is the culmination of a complex range of experiences and events which together bring women to the point of losing their accommodation. The immediate 'triggers' of homelessness mask a host of underlying issues, experiences and processes, all of which influence the likelihood of a homeless outcome.

Evaluation of the data from the ROTA focus groups would suggest that this also describes the experience of BAME homeless individuals. Respondents' explanations under this theme suggests that the causes identified have not by themselves determined their homelessness but perhaps underpin what in fact has been a series of events and issues.

For example, three of our teenage female clients had to eventually leave home and were consequently homeless, due to deteriorating relationships with their

parents: for one, this was due to her parents' wish for the family to relocate back to the Philippines, and later on, their response to her unplanned pregnancy at age 16. One respondent (male, age 34) became homeless following the death of his father and his unsuccessful bid to come to terms with his father's death and eventual inability to sustain the tenancy for the accommodation he shared with him. Another male respondent age 39, explained that he lost his flat after his 14 year old daughter went back to living with her mother following 13 years of him being a single-parent to her. This loss and shift in identity impacted on him emotionally and led to his mismanagement of his priorities, which in turn lost him his accommodation.

Although none of the respondents felt that their ethnicity contributed to them becoming homeless, or indeed, the likelihood of them becoming homeless; most felt that their ethnicity did play a negative role in their experience of homelessness. For example lack of targeted information that might help BAME homeless individuals, lack of language support for those whose first language was not English; and many perceived that they were treated in a biased fashion by those in a position to deliver a service due to their non-White status.

The majority of our respondents reported that they fell into the category of 'hidden homeless' on first becoming homeless, and was careful to keep their predicament from family in particular, and friends. The respondents of African descent were particularly clear about their need at the time to keep their homeless situation hidden from their families. One respondent (male, 39) compared the shame associated with telling his parents he was homeless to 'the time the police came to the house looking for me'. In short, those who were articulate on this issue mirrored published research which suggests that cultural perception of homelessness and the individual's level of ambition, and notions of shame is primary in the BAME homeless person's decision to keep her/his homelessness hidden.

Use of BAME Organisations

The respondents were unclear if the intervention by an organisation at the time of the onset of their homelessness, or when they were at risk of becoming homeless, would have helped their situation as the vast majority of them were not aware of the relevant organisations, BAME or otherwise, and possible service provision at the time.

Importantly, the majority of the respondents reported that they had no knowledge of any BAME organisations and no respondent could identify any specific BAME organisation, except one respondent who said he was familiar with the African/Caribbean housing organisation, Ujima. Only one respondent had used a BAME specialist organisation within the housing organisation in which they were based. Many of the respondents attributed their lack of knowledge of BAME

organisations to their perception that BAME organisations were not as well publicised and funded as mainstream organisations.

I don't understand why they are not advertising BAME services, I've heard of nothing. (Male age 19)

There aren't many BAME services out there, at least I've never heard of them. They're not promoted (Male age 37).

In hostels there are no flyers or information on BAME organisation services. (Male age 40)

The majority felt that the existence of specialist BAME service provision is important, primarily because BAME organisations are in a better position to understand the needs and experiences of BAME individuals and therefore able offer a more sympathetic and effective service.

An organisation aimed at ethnic minorities will make you feel more comfortable. If you deal with your own race, you can relate to them more. (Female aged 18)

Staff and key workers do not take your cultural background into consideration. Homeless organisations use a white mould in a black situation. (Male age 39)

A black person could express himself better to someone from the same group and they will know where you are coming from (Male age 34).

Access to and Use of Mainstream Services

In general, respondents across the three discussion groups reported that they were satisfied with the services of mainstream homeless organisation they had used. A sizeable number however, felt that they were treated in a biased way due to their ethnicity; and the Black male respondents in particular, complained of differential treatment based on gender specific, racial stereotyping from staff. For example, they were viewed as 'natural trouble makers' and 'aggressive' (also see previous ROTA interim report on interviews with homeless BAME individuals).

A reoccurring theme, articulated by Black male respondents, was the perception that staff would treat their ability to be clear and articulate, and in particular the ability to question or seek clarification on policy, as deviant.

When you express yourself intelligently, the staff see you as a threat and just give you a blank look. (Male age 40)

We put ourselves across differently to archetypal homeless people due to where we come from. The staff put you into stereotypes, as a Black person, of people

who do not want to engage. They think of us as aggressive so an impasse begins and it becomes 'us and them' so you then disengage more. You need people from your background who know where you are coming from. Perhaps if they came from the same area or have had the same lifestyle as me they can empathize. The problem is not just with White staff but people from different backgrounds, when you get an impasse they retreat to their fixed opinions and stereotypes of you. (Male age 37)

Agencies do not discriminate but they have biases. They lack understanding of where we are coming from. (Male age 39)

The majority of respondents felt that services to them would be improved if the mainstream homeless organisations were to put a greater emphasis on BAME issues. There was a general feeling that this might help to raise the level of understanding of cultural issues and go some way to making mainstream staff more cognisant of the needs and experience of BAME homeless clients. Many of the Black respondents felt this may also help to lessen stereotyped ideas of them.

At my hostel they see that I'm from probation so assume that I'm from prison, they see my friends with baseball caps on and assume that I'm carrying a gun. When you confront them about it, they wind you up. The staff go on like they're better than you, they make you feel like nothing. They put you in a category; if you are black they think you are a mugger. (Male age 19)

They should treat us as individuals not as coming from a particular ethnic group- take what I say as valid for me. I feel they have already painted a picture of us from day 1 in the hostel as aggressive, not wanting to engage, lazy, been on drugs and in prison. (Male age 40)

When asked if they felt BAME homeless people have different service needs than non-BAME individuals, respondents had no particular views on this but articulated their perceptions that a greater understanding of what it means to be homeless for BAME people was necessary.

Staff have been taught with a book and since we are outside the book they don't know how to deal with us. They should treat us as individuals not as coming from a particular ethnic group- take what I say as valid for me. (Male age 39)

Worklessness

All respondents reported that they have not received any support from BAME organisations, which is in keeping with earlier reports from respondents that they have had little or no knowledge or contact with these specialist organisations. Respondents did however report that they had received a range of support from mainstream homeless agencies, including skills support and training which would

help with their employment prospects. Respondents were critical however, of the length of time it took for them to access these support services.

With regards to perceptions of discrimination by employers or prospective employers, approximately half of the respondents claimed to have experienced discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity. Both direct and hearsay evidence was collected to support these claims.

Respondents were also split into two when asked to cite their main priority currently between securing permanent accommodation and employment. The Project noted that the group of respondents that cited securing a job as their top priority was made up of those individuals who were already in some form of temporary accommodation. Many of the respondents who identified securing accommodation as their top priority (and employment as their second highest priority) however, were rough sleepers.

Volunteering was something that all the respondents had considered. Almost all of them had either volunteered at homeless agencies in the past or were currently a volunteer. Those respondents who had not volunteered before, expressed an interest in doing so, citing that they considered volunteering to be a good way of 'giving back' and helping others who are in a similar situation to them, or to what they had been in. Information on how to go about volunteering was given to them on the day.

Client Participation

The majority of the respondents reported that they would value an opportunity to contribute to shaping policy and expressed a keenness to be involved, particularly in hostels. The project notes that the respondents may be more willing in this area than other homeless individuals who have chosen not to become involved in our research project.

Focus groups and discussion groups were identified by respondents as good ways of them participating and influencing policy. Respondents said they had enjoyed the experience of taking part in the focus group discussions and would like to do it again.

Respondents reported that some of them had participated in client participation opportunities with service providers, with some feeling that their involvement was more successful than others. For example, some of the Black respondents raised concerns around Black history month in hostels. After clients made their concerns about the lack of acknowledgment of Black History Month by the service, activities were arranged. However, the respondents felt that this was done in a 'tick box', non-genuine context, and viewed action by the service with cynicism.

When the respondents that have participated were asked if they felt they made a difference, some say they had, just by getting people to think more about particular issues. Importantly, the respondents who felt they had not made a difference, said that the lack of understanding and sometimes, disregard and disrespect for their culture and ethnic difference was more of an issue for them, than policy.

Due to the 'them and us' attitude, when it comes to them wanting us to engage in services we think 'forget about it!'. It makes you suspicious to opening yourself up. They should treat you as a blank canvas, as individuals, not as coming from a particular ethnic group. When they dismiss what you say, it shows they don't respect me as an individual. It is about seeing people as individuals, not as a homogeneous group. (Male age 38)

For more information and to express an interest in the project contact:

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Clients' Profiles

Name	Sex	Ethnic Group	Age	Special Needs	Currently living
Client 1	Male	Black British	36-45	Drug use	Hostel
Client 2	Male	Black British	36-45	Ex-offender	Hostel
Client 3	Male	Black British	36-45		Supported housing
Client 4	Male	Black British	36-45	Drug use	Hostel
Client 5	Male	Black British	34	Mental health	Supported housing
Client 6	Female	Black British	18-25		Supported housing
Client 7	Female	Portuguese/African	28		Hostel
Client 8	Male	Eritrean	24		Hostel
Client 9	Female	Burundi	19		Hostel
Client 10	Male	Somalian	45		Hostel
Client 11	Male	Jamaican	42	Drug Use Alcohol Use	Sleeping rough
Client 12	Female	Lithuanian	40		Sleeping rough
Client 13	Male	Caribbean	46	Mental Health	Sleeping rough
Client 14	Male	Mixed: Caribbean/White	19	Ex-offender	Hostel
Client 15	Female	Asian	19		Hostel
Client 16	Female	Filipino	18		Hostel