

Better  
Housing  
Briefing

**15**

**Linking black and  
minority ethnic  
organisations  
with mainstream  
homeless service  
providers**

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## Key messages

- 1 Homelessness service provision to black and minority ethnic communities needs to be informed by in-depth knowledge and understanding of the causes, manifestations and perceptions of homelessness within these communities
- 2 Black and minority ethnic and mainstream homelessness organisations should address the significant barriers faced by black and minority ethnic communities in accessing homelessness services
- 3 Significant differences exist in the nature of services offered by black and minority ethnic and mainstream organisations
- 4 The provision of homelessness services to black and minority ethnic homeless individuals can be improved by forging stronger links between black and minority ethnic and mainstream homelessness organisations
- 5 Partnership working between black and minority ethnic and mainstream organisations can seek to increase awareness of homelessness services among these communities, widen access to early intervention, maintain ongoing support to vulnerable individuals and inform policy development.

## Introduction

Homelessness statistics indicate that, when compared to their white counterparts, individuals from black and minority ethnic communities are more likely to become homeless, although the degree of over-representation varies substantially between individual ethnic groups ([Netto \*et al.\*, 2004](#); [CLG, 2009](#)). Additionally, hidden homelessness on an appreciable scale is suggested by evidence of overcrowding and over-representation in poor quality housing ([Netto, 2006](#)); again, however, there are substantial differences among ethnic groups. For example, [Dale \*et al.\* \(1996\)](#) found that Bangladeshi people were most disadvantaged in relation to housing amenity in England and Wales, while in Scotland [Netto \*et al.\* \(2001\)](#) found that Pakistanis had the highest levels of housing deprivation.

It is worth noting that although the legal definition of homelessness ring-fences those who are prioritised in the allocation of housing, the concept of homelessness is contested, ranging from a basic lack of shelter or rooflessness to living in accommodation deemed unfit for human habitation ([Webb \*et al.\*, 1995](#)). However, there is consensus that homelessness is due

largely to a complex series of factors associated with material and physical deprivation, including low income and levels of employment or employment in low-skilled jobs (Harrison and Phillips, 2003; ODPM, 2005; Netto, 2006). Other risk factors include minority status and marginalisation from mainstream services, racism and cultural factors that impact on housing circumstances. A prime example of marginalisation or exclusion is the treatment of Gypsies and Travellers. One in four Gypsies and Travellers do not have a legal place to park the caravans in which they live and therefore, by law, are homeless. Yet in a study published in 2003, over 70 per cent of local authorities did not include Gypsies and Travellers in their Homelessness Strategies (Avebury, 2003; see also Greenfields, 2009). Migration status and the lack of recourse to public funds for some groups is yet another significant risk factor, and the destitution experienced by failed asylum seekers may be viewed as a manifestation of extreme vulnerability to homelessness.

Understandings of what it means to be homeless are likely to differ across and within communities. For example, the travelling culture of Gypsies and Travellers might be seen by some to be a manifestation of homelessness, but among some Gypsies and Travellers, living in housing due to difficulties in travelling might be akin to being homeless (Netto *et al.*, 2004). Within the same ethnic community, recent arrivals to the country may have different understandings of what it means to be homeless, compared to UK-born individuals who may be more informed about the housing system and their rights to services. Such differences in the causes, manifestations and understandings of homelessness across and within communities need to be taken into account in the design and delivery of homelessness services. Further, services need to be sensitive to structural inequalities, such as power differentials among different groups. Disadvantages that are related to age, gender, disability and sexual orientation might also interact with racial disadvantage.

This paper argues that the forging of partnerships and joint working between black and minority ethnic and mainstream homelessness organisations is key to increasing the accessibility and appropriateness of services for black and minority ethnic individuals who are either homeless or threatened with homelessness. The term 'black and minority ethnic organisations' is used in this paper to refer mainly to voluntary organisations set up to cater specifically to the needs of black and minority ethnic communities. Conversely, the term 'mainstream organisations' is used to refer to local authorities and voluntary organisations that serve a wider population. The paper also considers the context for homelessness prevention in the UK, since this has been a dominant element of homelessness policy in England and Scotland during the last decade. In addition, it discusses issues related to the use of homelessness services by black and minority ethnic communities. Key areas where joint work is needed are then identified, along with examples of good practice and useful resources for developing partnership work.

## Addressing homelessness in the UK

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Recent developments directed at addressing homelessness in the UK have been formulated from a proactive, interventionist stance on preventing homelessness. In a key policy document, homelessness prevention was defined as: '*activities that enable a household to remain in their current home, where appropriate, or that provide options to enable a planned and timely move and help to sustain independent living*' (DTLR, 2002, para. 39). Three contexts in which homelessness prevention interventions need to be

developed were outlined: (1) early intervention: where individuals at risk are identified and services provided to prevent problems from escalating; (2) pre-crisis intervention: for example, in the form of advice services to prevent loss of home; and (3) prevention of recurring homelessness, extending beyond rehousing to ensure sustainability of tenancy ([DTLR, 2002](#)).

A wide range of projects to prevent homelessness has been initiated and evaluated by central government and the Scottish Executive/Government ([Pawson \*et al.\*, 2007a, 2007b](#)). These include: tenancy sustainment projects that support vulnerable groups in maintaining their tenancies; mediation services that prevent relationship breakdown; projects that support women facing domestic violence; liaison with private landlords; rent deposit schemes; and enhanced housing advice and information services. However, the uptake and use of these initiatives by individuals from black and minority ethnic communities has yet to be evaluated. Although the precise reasons for this are not known, anecdotal evidence suggests that ethnic monitoring is not uniformly practised. Further, little is done to publicise such services to black and minority ethnic communities, suggesting that uptake is likely to be low.

It is also worth noting that links between homelessness and worklessness have been a central feature of homelessness policy over the last decade. For instance, the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) developed the Spark programme in partnership with Big Issue Invest (part of The Big Issue group) and others to build and inspire social enterprise as a means of preventing homelessness. In support of this, [Singh \(2005\)](#) argues that while gaining access to housing is the most pressing issue for homeless individuals, services that enable them to access training or employment opportunities need to be viewed as part of core service provision. On this basis, strategic approaches to addressing homelessness, including within black and minority ethnic communities, need to continue to encompass labour market policies as well as housing policies.

## 2 Difficulties in accessing services

Although the body of evidence on the extent, manifestations and understandings of homelessness in black and minority ethnic communities in the UK is growing, there remains a dearth of evaluative studies on the effectiveness of possible solutions for preventing homelessness, including joint working between black and minority ethnic organisations and mainstream agencies. What is apparent is that access to homelessness services (including the finding and provision of accommodation, advice giving on welfare benefits and facilitating access to employment) is typically problematic ([Netto \*et al.\*, 2004](#); [Gervais and Rehman, 2005](#)). This has been attributed to low levels of awareness of homelessness services, fear of racial discrimination or insensitivity to cultural needs, difficulties in communication and a preference for voluntary or community support ([Netto \*et al.\*, 2004](#); [Gervais and Rehman, 2005](#); [Singh, 2005](#)).

A common complaint that has been made by black and minority ethnic clients of mainstream homelessness services concerns either a lack of responsiveness to fear or actual experience of racial harassment in social housing (both temporary and permanent accommodation) ([Netto \*et al.\*, 2003](#); [Netto and Fraser, 2007](#)). In [Netto and Fraser's \(2007\)](#) study of refugee housing in Glasgow, service providers expressed considerable difficulty in addressing such concerns, given the limited supply of social housing available. In light of this, a London-based study by [Auxo Consultancy \(2009\)](#), which is creating detailed maps of the location of black and minority ethnic communities and their housing aspirations in the

boroughs of Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Haringey, Islington and Westminster, may be seen as an example of good practice in alleviating concerns about potential racial harassment.

Significant barriers also exist in terms of accessing services provided by specialist groups set up to support individuals from black and minority ethnic communities (Singh, 2005; ROTA, 2007). For instance, the vast majority of the black and minority ethnic service users who were interviewed for the London-based Race on the Agenda (ROTA) study (2007) either had never heard of black and minority ethnic organisations or had not used them for support. When told about them, the majority of participants felt that accessing these organisations was important, indicating a need for more effective promotion of such services. The main reason given for wanting to access these organisations was a perception that they would be well placed to understand black and minority needs and experiences. This concurs with Netto *et al.*'s (2004) study, which found that black and minority ethnic organisations were perceived to be better at providing appropriate services for people from these communities due to their ability to recognise and respond to linguistic and cultural issues. This included a sensitivity to dietary needs and to religious and gender-based preferences, and was linked to the higher proportions of staff from black and minority ethnic communities. Such organisations included those that worked with a specific minority ethnic group, as well as those that worked with a range of such groups.

### Nature and patterns of service provision

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Local authorities are a major source of referrals for black and minority ethnic clients in both mainstream voluntary organisations and black and minority ethnic organisations (Netto *et al.*, 2004; ROTA, 2007). However, the survey of homelessness organisations carried out by ROTA (2007) found that mainstream homelessness organisations took significantly fewer referrals from black and minority ethnic agencies (7 per cent), whereas the latter took considerably more referrals from the former (19 per cent). This also concurred with Netto *et al.*'s (2004) finding that black and minority ethnic agencies were more likely than mainstream agencies to both receive referrals and refer their users to other agencies. Consistent with this finding, mainstream agencies admitted that they tended to be responsive rather than proactive in reaching out to black and minority ethnic communities (Netto *et al.*, 2004).

Both studies revealed that a large proportion of black and minority ethnic agencies were generic (offering services related to health, social care and access to benefits, as well as housing services), rather than specialist homelessness agencies. This is likely to account for the finding in the ROTA survey that only less than half (48 per cent) of the black and minority ethnic agencies in London reported high levels of knowledge about homelessness issues in these communities, compared to 68 per cent of mainstream homelessness organisations. Many black and minority ethnic agencies involved in this survey expressed a wish for more knowledge about homelessness. In contrast, many mainstream homelessness organisations reported a lack of information on the needs of black and minority ethnic homeless individuals. Encouragingly, both types of agency expressed a willingness to offer each other training in their areas of expertise.

**Box 1 HACT: joint training programme**

One example of joint training involves HACT, the housing action charity. HACT realised that there was a need for refugees to be able to access housing information and then to provide this to their communities, and for front-line staff in housing associations and other housing organisations to be able to understand the housing needs and rights of refugees.

By involving refugees and housing association and local authority staff, HACT developed a training course that promoted mutual support, relationships and networking between refugee community organisations, housing providers and local authority staff. This course focused on the specific needs and areas of concern relevant to refugees, including racial harassment, mental health issues and the needs of refugee elders (HACT, 2010).

For further information, visit: <http://hact.org.uk/refugee-training/989>.

Netto et al.'s (2004) Scotland-wide study found that both kinds of agency considered access to welfare benefits to be one of the main areas of primary concern. This is supported by Lemos & Crane (2010), who argue that improved money management skills are key to enabling homeless and other vulnerable people to improve their circumstances. However, black and minority ethnic agencies were more likely to offer translation and advocacy services that cater to the specific needs of these communities. They were also more likely than mainstream agencies to ethnically monitor service usage; engage in multi-agency work that involved a black and minority ethnic component; and involve users from black and minority ethnic communities in the design and delivery of services, although this was not universal. Despite these strengths, gaps in service provision were also evident. These included a lack of rent deposit schemes that would facilitate access to the private rented sector and mediation schemes to prevent relationship breakdown

**4 Need for links between agencies**

Both black and minority ethnic and mainstream homelessness organisations appear largely to deliver their respective services independently of each other, with few links between them. For instance, research conducted by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM, now CLG), on involving black and minority ethnic housing associations in stock transfer and community development, revealed the critical need for more effective partnership working between these and mainstream organisations (Mullins et al., 2004). Jones and Mullins (2009) offer insights into how such links could be forged and relationships managed in the case of refugee community organisations, including conditions for (and barriers to) successful partnership working, which may be more widely applicable.

Less than half of black and minority ethnic and mainstream homelessness agencies participating in the ROTA (2007) research reported formal links with each other; black and minority ethnic agencies were more likely to work together than mainstream homelessness agencies. Where these organisations did work together, this appeared to be largely at the operational level, involving activities such as information

sharing, training and advice giving and other forms of direct support (ROTA, 2007). Examples of strategic working, such as involvement in joint funding applications to develop new homelessness prevention initiatives for one or more specific minority ethnic groups, were scarce.

**Box 2 Collaborate: six partnerships that explored collaborative strategies towards tendering for Supporting People contracts**

<http://hact.org.uk/collaborate/879>

Much of the housing-related support provided in the UK has traditionally come from small, specialist local voluntary organisations. The introduction of competitive tendering processes has made it increasingly difficult for small providers to win new contracts and continue delivering services.

Collaborate (2007–2009) was developed by HACT, in partnership with Sitra (the housing with care and support agency) and the National Housing Federation, to test how different types of consortia would fare under the new Supporting People framework that supports independent living for ‘vulnerable’ people. The project comprised six partnerships – in Durham, Liverpool, Redbridge, Rotherham, Southend and Suffolk – with each exploring a different collaborative approach. Insights and learning from the project have been developed into a resource kit for small providers and local authorities.

The second phase of the Collaborate project is now testing resource-sharing models in Bolton, Nottingham, Durham and London.

A series of eight worksheets is available, as well as other learning, on the Collaborate resources page. One of the worksheets covers writing bids for funding.

<http://hact.org.uk/collaborate-publications/717>

SNAP, a consortium in Suffolk and one of the six partnerships, has also produced a document on the learning derived from its experiences.

[www.carasnap.org](http://www.carasnap.org)

[http://hact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/SNAP\\_findings\\_recommendations.pdf](http://hact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/SNAP_findings_recommendations.pdf)

**Practice points for future joint working**

5

Despite the limited evidence base relating to homelessness service provision for black and minority ethnic communities, differences in service provision and management between such agencies and mainstream agencies clearly indicate considerable scope for partnership working, building on the strengths of both kinds of organisation. Gaining information about each other's agencies was commonly viewed as a means of initiating partnership working (ROTA, 2007), with a directory of both kinds of organisation in the same geographical area being cited as a useful first step. Below, four areas for increased partnership working are identified.

*Increasing awareness of homelessness services and facilitating early intervention*

Closer joint working between mainstream and minority ethnic agencies is likely to raise awareness of the existence of homelessness services among individuals from black and minority ethnic communities and to increase the possibility of early intervention, thus preventing homelessness. The generic nature of many black and minority ethnic agencies that offer a range of services, including health, support with accessing benefits and education, suggests that these agencies may be well placed to identify at an early stage individuals who are at risk of becoming homeless, and may be able to work with homelessness agencies in resolving housing issues. Publicising the availability of crisis homelessness services among black and minority ethnic agencies and communities may also help reduce or prevent homelessness; for instance, among women facing domestic violence. This may involve the targeting of specific groups through work with these agencies. Mainstream agencies can also raise awareness of the services provided by minority ethnic agencies by publicising these services in key locations, such as homelessness hostels. They can also support black and minority ethnic agencies in working with homeless individuals by providing training on homelessness law and statutory processes to overcome some of the barriers to accessing homelessness services.

**Box 3 *Newham Asian Women's Project (NAWP)***

The services provided by NAWP were developed under a holistic framework of violence prevention, early intervention and direct provision, which involves joint working with mainstream agencies. This model has proved to be effective in achieving positive outcomes for women and their children by increasing their self-esteem and confidence and encouraging them to address the issues of domestic violence that affect their lives.

NAWP provides services in five key areas:

- safe and emergency housing provision in hostels, including housing support services to encourage women to move on to independent living;
- training in accredited and non-accredited courses to enable women to increase their opportunities and improve their chances of employment;
- mental health services, including counselling services and work on self-harm;
- awareness raising around sexual health and provision to address sexual abuse and exploitation;
- rights-based advice and information services.

For further information, visit: [www.nawp.org](http://www.nawp.org).

*Supporting vulnerable groups through enhanced tenancy support services*

Many mainstream homelessness organisations in the [ROTA \(2007\)](#) study were interested in forging links with black and minority ethnic services catering to a specific client group, including young people, ex-military personnel or individuals involved in substance abuse. While these partnerships were often described in terms of referral links, scope exists here for developing joint initiatives to support clients from a specific group in gaining access to accommodation and maintaining their tenancies. Enhanced tenancy support initiatives developed to support former rough sleepers and funded by the CLG ([Lomax and Netto, 2007](#)) may provide a model for future service development.



*Developing a holistic approach to addressing homelessness*

Given the close link between poverty and vulnerability to homelessness, tackling homelessness among black and minority ethnic communities extends beyond finding individuals a home to enabling them to sustain that home by facilitating access to training, further education and employment. The holistic approach towards service provision offered by many generic black and minority ethnic agencies, and the specialist approach of homelessness agencies, suggests scope for a joint approach towards addressing education, employment-related and housing issues. This should incorporate in-depth knowledge of homelessness law and statutory processes to facilitate access to statutory homelessness services. Here it is worth noting that an England-wide evaluation of Homelessness Strategies developed by local authorities found that most of these exercises were 'an impressive success'. This study drew on the views of service users, other agencies and other council departments (ODPM, 2004). However, the same study also highlighted that some client groups were frequently overlooked in the provision of services, including clients from black and minority ethnic groups. Within these groups, former asylum seekers, refugees and Gypsies and Travellers were additionally identified as groups that were missed (ODPM, 2004). Homelessness Strategies developed by local authorities should ensure that homeless people who are ready and able to work, including those from black and minority ethnic communities, are supported in doing so through training and employment initiatives. Black and minority ethnic agencies should also be included in such initiatives.

*Increasing user involvement in developing services*

It is widely accepted that user involvement can help improve services for the homeless and empower many to take more initiative to improve their own circumstances. Hence, the current low involvement of black and minority ethnic homeless individuals in the development of *all* homelessness policies, practices and service development should be addressed through partnership working between mainstream homelessness agencies and black and minority ethnic agencies. The good practice example described in Box 4 illustrates the potential for agencies to involve homeless individuals in influencing service-related developments, although the extent to which individuals from black and minority ethnic communities are involved is not clear.

**Box 4 Groundswell: involving homeless people in developing effective solutions**

Groundswell provides a range of services that involve homeless people in multi-agency work. These services include:

- a directory that enables homeless people's self-help and service user groups to contact and learn from each other and be involved in creating practical solutions to their problems;
- peer-led research generating insight into clients' views and needs, feeding into service and strategy reviews for local authorities and service providers;
- consultancy for organisations and training in how to gain maximum benefit from client involvement;
- training for homeless people on how to become involved in service development and how to run their own projects;
- grant funding for user-led projects;
- campaigning to promote the voices of people experiencing homelessness.

For further information, visit: [www.groundswell.org.uk](http://www.groundswell.org.uk).

The good practice example cited in Box 5 illustrates the positive outcomes that can be achieved when black and minority ethnic communities – in this case, refugees – are involved effectively in partnerships that address their housing circumstances.

**Box 5 *HACT's Accommodate project: five partnerships that delivered tangible outcomes to improve refugee housing and integration***

HACT's Accommodate project (2002–2007) was based on the belief that effective partnerships between refugee community organisations, housing providers and local authorities and other statutory organisations can improve refugee housing. Five partnerships – in Leeds, Sheffield, Birmingham, Bradford and Bolton – tested practical ways of improving refugee housing.

Each partnership was led by a different type of agency and focused on a different issue: from self-build housing to involving refugees in regeneration projects. They have raised awareness among mainstream agencies, increased housing options for refugees, influenced local policy and demonstrated the validity of locally based projects.

For further information, visit the Accommodate resources page at: <http://hact.org.uk/accommodate-publications/683>.

You can also download copies of two insight documents relating to Accommodate – *Success Factors* and *Pioneering Change* – as well as the Executive Summary of the project evaluation report.

[http://hact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/Acc\\_Success\\_factors.pdf](http://hact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/Acc_Success_factors.pdf)

[http://hact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/Acc\\_Pioneering\\_change.pdf](http://hact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/Acc_Pioneering_change.pdf)

[http://hact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/Acc\\_exec\\_summ.pdf](http://hact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/Acc_exec_summ.pdf)

## Conclusion

Black and minority ethnic and mainstream organisations need to work in partnership with homeless individuals to develop both in-depth knowledge of the causes, manifestations and perceptions of homelessness in black and minority ethnic communities and more effective solutions. Current gaps in expertise and service provision in minority ethnic organisations and mainstream homelessness agencies can be addressed through more collaborative work at the strategic and operational levels. Partnership working can increase awareness of the range of services available and the likelihood of early intervention, establish more appropriate referral links, develop jointly funded initiatives to support vulnerable groups and inform policy development.

## Resources

### **HACT, the housing action charity**

[www.hact.org.uk](http://www.hact.org.uk)

HACT, the housing action charity, works with housing providers to improve the housing conditions and well-being of poor and marginalised people. HACT's projects deliver lasting change by harnessing the energy and enthusiasm of local people, housing providers and other organisations. HACT works with refugee community organisations to prevent homelessness and to support self-help and partnership working.

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