

Race Equality in Housing- delivering practical solutions

Joint Housing Policy and Delivery Group meeting – 7th November 2018

The Scottish Government has had race equality in the housing sector on its agenda for a few decades now.

Progress has certainly been made with anecdotal evidence at local and national level showing examples of good and improved practice.

However, in terms of robust, grass roots, effective race equality practice, the housing sector has not delivered policies and practice that make a real, tangible difference. It has failed to simplify and streamline service delivery for one of the most vulnerable groups of people in our society.

The root of the problem is that ethnic minority people are expected to deal with the multiple barriers they face in order to access information and services without any support, even in the most desperate situations. Many have no choice but to live with overwhelmingly challenging living conditions without knowing what help is available or where to go for it.

The problem is then compounded by the associated damage to their emotional wellbeing, as they experience a loss of self-respect and dignity. For many who have worked hard over the years to build up a standing in the community, they feel ashamed to expose their vulnerability and their dire need for support.

There's no doubt that there is value in developing a strategic overview in order to improve race equality, but it can only be effective if it is delivered through a programme of actions at the grassroots level.

The most vulnerable people in our society, in desperate need of services and support, aren't interested in the unveiling of a strategic plan or the showcasing of a small, one-off initiative as evidence of race equality. They need actions and outcomes across the country which provide tangible, straightforward access to services.

It is imperative that Scotland's housing sector grasps this nettle with real intention and looks at how solutions can be practicably rolled out at grass roots level.

A Fairer Scotland for All: Race Equality Action plan 2017-21 and its follow up report by the EHRC Commission, *Progress on Fairer Scotland* are an excellent focus at a strategic level. But the EHRC Commission's report highlights several areas where housing has failed to progress and concludes that "People from ethnic minority groups and disabled people were those most likely to live in poverty".

More needs to be done.

I firmly believe that in order to get results and ensure that people from ethnic minority groups are raised out of poverty and have access to services, we need to roll up our sleeves and get stuck in to developing and delivering initiatives which will change lives right now.

My top five suggestions for immediate action are:

Understanding Changing Needs

There is a lack of understanding of the current housing needs of ethnic minority people in Scotland. We need to draw a real picture of where the gaps in provision lie and find solutions.

At the moment the sector depends for information on reports from the providers rather than seeking the views of the people affected. We need to organise the direct participation and involvement of the people who need the services the most and listen to what they have to say.

The demographics of ethnic minority communities living in Scotland has changed without service provision keeping pace. The number of people with physical and mental health disabilities has increased with no coordinated change to services.

Often there is no joined-up provision to meet the needs of a single family with multiple and extreme requirements for support. For instance, one family might be living in poverty with a language barrier, mental health (dementia) issues, increased care needs with ageing, a carer who is unable to care with their own health and complex cultural and dietary needs. There is a pressing need for a re-structuring of the service so that a holistic approach to service delivery can be planned and delivered.

Information and communication

It is of fundamental importance that individuals faced with a change in circumstances have information, simply presented so it can be easily understood, on the housing choices open to them, empowering them to make realistic and workable decisions.

There are several projects where bilingual community workers relay information from service-providing organisations to communities and aim to facilitate the delivery of the service at a local level. From my grassroots experience, this service can be patchy, depending who you get on the phone. Some housing staff are more helpful than others.

There is a huge opportunity here to overhaul this critical point of intersection between the service provider and the end user. Both the service provider and the community workers have information, knowledge and expertise. If both teams were recognised as equal partners and worked together to share expertise and understanding of the issues involved, there is scope for a much more effective service delivery and mutual learning.

One of the problems faced by people involved in supporting ethnic minority people is drawing out the information needed to paint a full picture of their situation and needs.

From our experience many older ethnic minority people are first of all reluctant to divulge information about their situation, often believing it's not relevant or not having the confidence to articulate it.

Sometimes it is also the case that not only do they not speak any English, but they are unable to understand basic information, even in their own language, as they have had no education. For them, the complexity of the system is truly baffling.

So what's the solution to communicating effectively with this vulnerable group and helping them secure the support they need? I believe housing providers need to have a housing advice service that does more than provide information and advice when it is requested. I believe the housing advice service needs to be re-positioned as a service that works in partnership with the community worker, walking with an individual step by step through the support journey until all the services are in place. Every person is different, with different needs and different capabilities and I believe they can only be supported effectively when "relationship" is put at the heart of the communication process. It will also help learning to meet the needs of ethnic minority communities and to make it part of the delivery process.

Employment

There is an urgent need to increase the number of ethnic minority people employed in Scotland's housing sector. The race equality scene in Scotland's housing sector will not change if the sector fails to increase the number of ethnic minority individuals working in it. Currently, the number of ethnic minority people working at a management level is too few and has actually decreased in recent years.

Further work also needs to be done to retain people in housing once they have entered the sector, as too many negative experiences will result in housing continuing to be not a profession of choice.

Commitment by all

The housing sector must embrace a commitment to improve race equality right across the board. Unless the desire and will to improve race equality in housing is accepted by everyone working in the sector, it will remain an add-on or become a box ticking exercise in tokenism.

The housing sector must take a look at current practices and gaps and move away from a tendency to use the fact that ethnic minorities can be hard to reach to do nothing.

The culture needs to be shaken up and a new emphasis put "**reaching out**" not "**hard to reach**".

There must be a focused approach on changing this culture and leadership needs to be held accountable if it continues to fail to deliver.

At the heart of an outreach culture there has to be a greater understanding of the legal requirements under *Equality Act 2010* by the housing policy makers and providers. (The Equality Act 2010 public-sector equality duty (PSED) requires public authorities to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and foster good relations. This duty also covers RSLs in the exercise of public functions.)

The equality legislation is mentioned in all strategic and policy documents as a statement, but its implementation is not considered in processes and delivery guidelines. It is vital to make Equality Training mandatory for decision makers in order for them to ensure it is understood and becomes an integrated part of the service delivery. It will also help achieve Scottish Housing Charter's following milestones:

Equality - Every tenant and other customer has their individual needs recognised, is treated fairly and with respect, and receives fair access to housing and housing services.

Communication - Tenants and other customers find it easy to communicate with their landlord and get the information they need about their landlord, how and why it makes decisions and the services it provides.

Housing Options - People looking for housing get information that helps them make informed choices and decisions about the range of housing options available to them.

Sheltered and Care Housing for ethnic minority communities

The Scottish Government had made a decision not to follow example of England to have BME led housing association in Scotland. However, there are Chinese sheltered housing developments in most of Scotland's major cities, managed by housing associations. These developments have Chinese staff who speak the language and food which meets their cultural and dietary needs. With the Chinese population ageing, there is a need for care housing for those requiring 24 hours support. There is no sheltered or care housing for South Asians and I believe there is now a need for similar facilities for them where their language, cultural and dietary needs can be met.

The demand for care housing for ethnic minority older people has accelerated. The tradition of the joint family is becoming nonexistent as children move away to live in other cities or countries with their own families. As they age, ethnic minority older people are no longer able to live in their current housing, some have dementia and often the partner is unable to care for them due to their own health and failing abilities. These older people are struggling to cope, and mainstream care providers are not equipped to meet their needs.

Recommendations

- For any progress to be made, it is important to understand the current needs and demands of ethnic minority people in order to start developing new solutions. It is recommended that the group considers research into the housing needs of ethnic minority communities in Scotland to identify gaps.
- Develop a holistic approach across Scotland to be adopted by the housing providers which has general information about housing options and availability at a local level. Housing and Community staff should work in partnership for mutual learning.

- Consider and improve measures to increase employment opportunities of ethnic minority people in housing. It should also investigate retention and promotion.
- Equality training for decision makers and housing providers
- Sheltered and care housing developments for ethnic minority older people which meet their needs.

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