

Meeting the housing needs of BAME households in England: the role of the planning system

Executive Summary

Amy Bristow

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I·SPHERE
Institute for Social Policy, Housing and Equalities Research



Executive Summary

Introduction

The year 2020 saw the resurgence of the global Black Lives Matter movement, a Coronavirus pandemic that highlighted ongoing racial inequalities in the UK, the publication of the government-commissioned ‘Sewell Report’ which controversially denied the existence of institutional racism, and a resulting increase in debate and discussion around socioeconomic outcomes for BAME households. Previous research has consistently shown that planners lack an awareness and understanding of how planning policy and practice may be relevant to racial inequalities. This study sought to explore whether this has changed and investigate the current and potential contribution of the English planning system to addressing racial inequalities in housing and meeting the particular housing needs of BAME groups.

Key Findings:

- **The planning system continues to perpetuate socially conservative outcomes with regards to racial equality.** Planners and housing professionals lack the confidence, skills and resources required to actively address racial inequality in housing.
- **There is a view within the planning profession that formal equality of treatment is sufficient in pursuit of social justice,** meaning that planners and housing specialists can be reluctant to take steps to address the specific needs of BAME groups in policy and practice.
- **There is currently no requirement for local authorities to include ethnic and/or faith groups in an assessment of housing needs and therefore the evidence of this need varies between authorities.** While some areas nevertheless consider the housing needs of ethnic and/or faith groups in their Strategic Housing Market Assessment, this did not translate into specific policies aimed at improving housing outcomes for these groups.
- **Planning has the potential to influence the design and quality of new housing developments to meet the cultural needs of BAME groups, but less so issues of location and affordability.** Planning currently has little power to influence how BAME groups are housed in existing accommodation.
- **Public consultation opportunities can reinforce existing unequal power relationships by favouring those with the time, knowledge, and confidence to participate.** Not enough is currently being done to engage BAME, low-income and other less frequently heard groups, though new online forms of consultation deployed during the pandemic have witnessed some gains in this regard.

Introduction

Research has demonstrated that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups in the UK face stark and persistent socioeconomic inequality across the criminal justice, healthcare and welfare systems. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a disproportionate number of deaths amongst BAME communities and highlighted ongoing disparities in housing and working conditions that made it more difficult for many BAME individuals to follow government advice regarding shielding or self-isolating.

Studies around 'race and planning' conducted over the last four decades have consistently concluded that the planning profession struggles to relate issues of racial equality to its practices. This research sought to explore whether the way that planning deals with issues of racial equality has improved at all since past research was published, and to investigate the current and potential contribution of the English planning system to addressing racial inequalities in housing and meeting the particular housing needs of BAME groups.

Its findings draw on interviews with 8 national key informants with professional expertise in planning, housing or inequalities, and case studies in 4 local authority areas (Bradford, Harrow, Lambeth, Lewisham), which involved a review of key strategic housing and planning documents and interviews with 17 local stakeholders.

Key Findings

Social conservatism within the planning system

Tackling racial inequalities in housing and meeting the housing needs of BAME groups are not currently a core aim of the planning system, and are not explicitly included anywhere within the National Planning Policy Framework or *Planning for the Future*, the Government White Paper on planning published in 2020. Results from key informant interviews showed that, whilst the idea of an inclusive planning system has been long discussed, this has never been achieved in practice. It was also felt that the make-up of planning authorities and the ways in which planning processes work may be reproducing or even exacerbating inequalities rather than addressing them.

[In] government or local authorities or the public sector or the private sector, [the power] is in the hands mainly of white, middle or upper-class people... I think that the lack of empathy with those who are in poverty who will tend to be from minority ethnic backgrounds...will mean that it doesn't cross your mind that you could work differently... or that your policies impact on those communities – (National Key Informant, Housing Association)

Local case studies revealed an unwillingness amongst planning and housing professionals to prioritise the needs of certain groups over others, with the focus remaining on a formal equality of treatment rather than proactive intervention to address social disadvantage or inequality, including that experienced by BAME groups.

[T]he local plan is for all of society, and therefore...if it [addressing racial inequality] was an explicit aim, are we then being seen to be not giving that same sort of weight in relation to other groups in society as such? I think that would probably potentially be a risk. – (Local Stakeholder, Planning, Harrow)

There was also a suggestion that Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) are often completed as a 'tick-box' requirement and that any findings are rarely acted upon, leading to what one interviewee labelled 'conscious discrimination' by some local authorities.

[I]n my borough, it's very much a tick box... [I]t's something that I brought up when I was first a councillor and they were explaining that they have to do these assessments because they can't discriminate unless they've considered it. So I was like...you can discriminate as long as you do it consciously? – (National Key Informant, Local Councillor)

EqIAs are usually completed in fulfilment of the public sector equality duty (PSED), and whilst there is currently no statutory requirement to action any findings, it is possible for planning authorities to be subject to legal challenges if it can be proven that proposals have an adverse impact on any groups with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. Therefore, EqIAs can be a basis to prevent negative outcomes for BAME groups, even if the push to ensure this comes from outside of the local authority.

When [X London borough] was demolishing [X council housing estate] there was a public inquiry into that brought by the leaseholders, so the residents who owned their own properties. The public inquiry actually found in the leaseholders favour and said...that the compulsory purchase order breached the Equality Act 2010 as the majority of those affected were from Black or Minority Ethnic backgrounds (Local Stakeholder, Independent, Lambeth)

Failure to adequately assess BAME housing needs

There is currently no explicit requirement for local planning authorities to consider the needs of ethnic and/or faith groups in fulfilling their statutory assessment of local housing need. Despite this, in three of the four case study areas, the needs of these groups were considered in the respective Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA). However, this evidence did not translate into specific policies aimed at addressing the housing needs of BAME groups.

Key informant interviews identified data gaps within local authorities when it comes to how decisions and policies impact on BAME groups. Across key informant interviews and the case studies, it was acknowledged that Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) and public consultation processes, together with SHMAs, could all be used to build an evidence base relating to the housing needs of BAME groups. However, these were described as 'soft tools' and whether and how they are used in pursuit of this agenda is currently at the discretion of local authorities as there is no obligation to act on any findings.

[There should be] requirements within the planning system to demonstrate that your consultation has sought and achieved the participation of a range of groups ... Then, that consultation being effective [and] being required to have an impact on [policies being developed] – (National Key Informant, Housing Campaigner)

The challenges of participation

A key finding from both key informant interviews and local case studies was that public consultation processes within planning urgently require improvement and refocussing to be proactively inclusive of a more diverse range of voices within decision-making processes. Current consultation processes

can work to reinforce rather than challenge existing power inequalities. In particular, BAME groups and others who are marginalised or on low incomes seem much less likely to engage as they can often lack the spare time to devote to participating, an awareness of how to get involved, or the specialised knowledge needed to understand documents that include language specific to planning.

How you access [the planning system] as a member of the public...it works, and you can follow it and you can interact with it if you have a lot of time [and] if you are fairly either well educated or confident enough in your own knowledge to know where to access it – (National Key Informant, Community Organizer)

Increasing engagement is likely to require dedicated and properly resourced outreach work. Examples were given of how diversity of respondents has increased since consultation processes were held online during the pandemic. In Bradford, consultation processes including local housing providers, BME housing specialists and community faith leaders had positive outcomes as they led to a reference to cultural housing needs being included within the local authority's housing strategy, and the design of regeneration projects being changed to better meet such cultural needs. Therefore, it is possible for stakeholders to have meaningful involvement in consultation processes if leadership is shown on this issue.

One of the feedbacks that we have had and reflected in our [regeneration] programme was specifically from BAME households around the design... [S]ome of the houses...were quite open plan downstairs... Which wasn't an attractive layout to certainly Asian families... That resulted in us adapting and changing that particular layout, particularly in locations where we were likely to have large numbers of BAME families who might be seeking to move into that accommodation – (Local Stakeholder, Housing, Bradford)

The limits and potential of planning

It was acknowledged that there are a number of relevant areas that planning departments can struggle to exert influence over. For example, few levers are available for improving poor-quality existing housing stock, which is often home to BAME families due to the cheaper costs associated with it, and also the location of new developments as this is dependent on the availability of land in the area. Moreover, planners were felt to have very limited influence over the viability of new developments and the genuine affordability of housing for local residents.

We don't get 50 per cent affordable housing on many sites after you've gone through your financial viability assessment. If we were to get 50 per cent affordable housing on all the housing that was built in Harrow we would have a lot more to meet demand than we currently do and that would make a significant difference – (Local Stakeholder, Housing, Harrow)

However, the planning system remains a significant policy area in which to try and tackle racial inequalities in housing due its key role in housing delivery. Moreover, it is recognised that strategic spatial planning e.g., the location of housing in relation to other infrastructure such as schools and green spaces, can impact on wider socioeconomic outcomes. Therefore, the planning system was described as having “untapped potential” with regards to the contribution it could make to tackling racial inequalities in housing and meeting the accommodation needs of BAME households.

I suppose the question [might be] where can you add value? If there is untapped potential in the area of planning, which there may well be to address racial inequalities...then that's a great thing to focus on – (National Key Informant, Health Analyst)

Though it was acknowledged that most planning authorities do not do this well at present, it was felt that the tools required to gather robust evidence on the housing needs of local BAME groups may already exist. Therefore, with more funding and appropriate staffing, the planning system could be the appropriate vehicle for developing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the housing needs of BAME communities in respective local authority areas.

I think the planning system can be the starting place...for developing that understanding [of housing outcomes for racialized groups]... Within planning there are the foundations of really good tools for doing that in housing need assessments [SHMAs] and the general skills and knowledge of the planning discipline in...shaping cities and places to meet particular outcomes based on particular priorities and principles – (National Key Informant, Housing Campaigner)

Where it was agreed that planning does have a major role to play is in influencing the design of new developments so that they do not exclude groups with particular cultural needs. Participants in Bradford and Harrow were able to give examples of where this has already been done:

... A lot of people that may be put into affordable housing tenure, due to cultural reasons, prefer to have separate cooking areas compared to eating and living areas, so we can try to influence the arrangements of houses... [For] larger intergenerational households which are maybe more predominant in BAME groups... larger household types in terms of three or four bed dwellings [is] something which we can influence as well – (Local Stakeholder, Planning, Harrow)

[The BME housing association] were building properties that were culturally appropriate for the South Asian community...where there was a separate living room [and] dining room...Particularly things like the direction of [the properties] as well and separating out toilets [and] facilities like that. That was influenced by [their] desire to build properties that were meeting the needs of the community... [S]o if you know you're actually targeting a particular community, then the planning systems can then be used to meet that need – (Local Stakeholder, Housing, Bradford)

Overall, there was a general consensus across all four local authority areas that planning could exert significant influence over the exterior design and interior layout of new properties, and that both of these factors could potentially be utilised in order to meet BAME housing needs.

Conclusions

Despite its limitations, the planning system remains a critical tool in addressing racial inequalities in housing as it is the key mechanism for delivering new homes in England and has significant untapped potential in tackling this form of social injustice. It does not follow from the lack of progress on these issues to date that the planning system cannot play a substantial role in addressing social injustices impacting BAME groups in the future, and any improvements made in pursuit of this aim could add real value in an effort to tackle such issues holistically across multiple policy areas. A wide range of policy and practice implications therefore arise from this research, as noted below.

Policy and Practice Implications

Recommendations for central government

- Mainstream equalities considerations throughout any proposed planning reforms. This would compel local authorities to take account of issues of racial equality in all planning decision-making and therefore prevent these considerations from being simply a tick-box exercise.
- Expand the NPPF's presumption in favour of sustainable development to include an aim of striving for racial equality in all planning processes, so that this overarching aim can feed into all aspects of the planning system.
- Resource local planning authorities to keep up-to-date records of housing needs in their area and to prevent a reliance on outdated records in between censuses.
- Attach a clearer statutory duty to EqIAs that obligates local authorities to act on any findings that reveal adverse impacts on groups with protected characteristics.
- Equalities and Human Rights Commission should issue clear guidance to local authorities specifically detailing the requirements of the PSED as regards to planning policy and practices.

Recommendations for local authorities

- Include specific information of the needs of ethnic and/or faith groups when conducting an SHMA. By doing so, planning departments would develop a better understanding of the housing needs of their BAME residents when completing their SHMA and this could then provide the evidence needed to pursue a specific focus on the housing needs of BAME groups in planning policy.
- Actively undertake outreach work in order to ensure that the views of BAME communities are included in public consultation opportunities, including producing documents in different languages, and liaising with established community leaders. Efforts should also be made to promote the inclusion of more marginalised members of BAME communities, such as children and young people, women, and low-income or homeless households.
- Continue to utilise new online forms of consultation, which have led to increases in public engagement during the Coronavirus pandemic, whilst also maintaining an awareness of who may be affected by the wider issue of digital exclusion.
- Work in partnership with any specialist BME housing providers operating locally, and also any housing providers known to house large numbers of BAME or low-income residents, to foster mutual learning and to share data and information on the needs of BAME groups.
- Include references to any cultural needs of local BAME groups in any local design guidance drawn up.

Recommendations for planning professionals

- Planning professionals and the planning system as a whole should abandon naïve attachment to formal equality of treatment and accept that proactively addressing BAME housing needs and racial inequality is necessary to achieve more socially just outcomes.
- The RTPI should continue to pursue their "Change" Action Plan¹ to increase equality, diversity, and inclusivity in the sector, and should provide guidance for local authorities detailing how they too can increase diversity in the planning profession. This should go beyond junior or entry level

¹ Details of the RTPI's "Change" Action Plan for Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity can be found here: <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/new/our-strategic-priorities/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/change-action-plan/>

roles and seek to ensure that both diversity and the skills needed to take real account of equalities issues are also increased in senior roles and positions of leadership.

- The RTPI should work with external stakeholders in housing, race equalities, and academia to develop educational resources on 'race and planning' which can be accessed by local authorities and planning professionals.
- Planning professionals in local authorities should issue guidance and information for local communities on the requirements of the PSED so that they can hold local planning authorities accountable should they fail to adhere to this duty.

Recommendations for housing professionals

- Housing professionals should have the confidence to develop policies aimed specifically at meeting the housing needs of BAME residents where there is evidence that these needs are not being adequately met. As with planning professionals, there must be shift away from formal equality of treatment and a willingness to actively promote equalities agendas where necessary.
- The National Housing Federation should support housing associations, particularly specialist BME providers but also those associations with large numbers of BAME or low-income residents, in lobbying for increased partnership working with local authorities.
- National Housing Federation should issue guidance to housing providers in order to raise awareness of how decisions relating to the design and location of new housing developments could inadvertently make such housing unsuitable to some BAME households.

Recommendations for universities

- Ensure that planning degree programmes includes teaching on how race equality and other social considerations are relevant to the study of planning, including education on the limits of formal equality of treatment in addressing systemic inequality and disadvantage.
- Make efforts to raise the profile of the planning profession amongst a diverse range of potential students from BAME and low-income backgrounds, e.g. by providing targeted bursaries or financial support.

About this research

This research was carried out by Amy Bristow, I-SPHERE and Oak Foundation Research Intern in 2021, and supervised by Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Beth Watts (I-SPHERE at Heriot-Watt University).

It was supported by a Research Advisory Group that included: Huw Thomas (University of Cardiff) (chair); Sue Brownill (Oxford Brookes University); Sarah Lewis (RTPi); Cecil Sagoe (Shelter); Priya Shah (BAME in Property); Lara Oyedele (Olmec); Anna Minton (independent author and journalist); and Raji Hunjan and Paul Wishart, (from the project's funding organisation, the Oak Foundation).

Many heartfelt thanks are extended to all research participants and members of the Research Advisory Group for their assistance and invaluable support over the course of the project, without which it would not have been possible to complete this report.

The full report, **Meeting the housing needs of BAME households in England: the role of the planning system**, is freely available at <https://i-sphere.site.hw.ac.uk/2021/08/23/role-of-planning-in-meeting-housing-needs-of-bame-households-in-england/>

About the I-SPHERE / Oak Foundation Internship Programme

The Oak Foundation is an international philanthropic foundation funding projects in conservation, human rights, abuse, housing, learning disabilities, and other social justice issues. In its Housing and Homelessness Programme, the Foundation focuses on preventing homelessness by funding sustainable solutions that improve the economic and social wellbeing of marginalised youth, adults and families. The Institute of Social Policy, Housing and Equalities Research (I-SPHERE) at Heriot-Watt University is a leading UK research centre in the fields of housing, poverty and social policy with a strong international reputation. I-SPHERE staff specialise in research on homelessness, destitution, complex needs and other forms of disadvantage. Oak Foundation and I-SPHERE run an internship programme to support the development of a stream of early career researchers to undertake high quality policy and practice applied research.

Find out more at: www.i-sphere.site.hw.ac.uk www.oakfnd.org

About the Author

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Amy Bristow was the fifth I-SPHERE Oak Foundation intern, completing her internship between November 2020 and July 2021. Amy completed her postgraduate degree in urban planning in 2020, and developed a particular interest in how urban planning may be used to tackle social inequalities after writing her dissertation on planning's role in mitigating the impact of infectious pandemics such as COVID-19. Amy is now working as a Planning Project Officer at the Improvement Service, where her role includes providing business support to Heads of Planning Scotland (HOPS), supporting the implementation of the Planning Skills Programme for local authorities, and assisting the Data and Intelligence Team in their work with planning data.

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