

A BLACK VOICE IN HOUSING

Housing associations have learned that talking (and listening) to local people has positive outcomes for whole communities, and the good news is that they especially want to talk to you if you're Black or Minority Ethnic.

Stephen Morris explains

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Cosmopolitan HA
Photo: Stephen Morris



Housing associations manage massive budgets and influence everything from litter collection to the regeneration of derelict land. Much of their work is in neighbourhoods with large ethnic minorities and so, without a Black voice on the board or residents' association, a significant chunk of the community is rendered mute. Of course associations (and local councils) need to communicate effectively with all residents but in dealing with Black and Minority Ethnic groups there is a greater urgency because minorities are seen as particularly vulnerable to the consequences of poor dialogue. This may be, for example, because poor language skills mean applicants don't understand the signing up procedure and the contract; but more fundamentally, the inevitable linguistic and cultural barriers mean that substantial parts of the community fail to be heard in a debate which intimately affects them and their futures.

Liverpool's Black and Minority neighbourhoods (and here that means L8), have experienced dramatic changes to housing and environment in the last ten years or so, and are now on the cusp of more changes through Housing Market Renewal. No one yet knows what HMR will mean for L8, as the Council is still to deliver its assessment, but even in an area grown accustomed to change this could be a big one. To engage the BME community with better housing provision and

issues around future change, the City Council has funded the BRM, a network of volunteers (and three staff) to get people involved and talking - delivering ideas and opinions from the BME community which will shape the future of housing in the city. Tracy Hilton is an L8 resident and BRM chair. Once the opinions and ideas delivered to the group have been distilled and combined with existing good practice we'll have an action plan which in practice, says Tracy, 'will be a way for minorities to access better services and appropriate housing'.

Like most British cities Liverpool has long experience of housing ethnic minorities. Cosmopolitan HA is one of half a dozen social landlords with 35 years' experience of inner-city Liverpool and of working with the BME community. The Association's

Regeneration Team headed by Darlene Martin manages a local office in Lodge Lane, one of the UK's most deprived wards. For Darlene the Regeneration Team has to deliver real, physical change, and encourage local community groups and individuals to build skills. From capacity-building training (highly praised by the participants) came, amongst other things, a team of women who advised on the construction of culturally-sensitive houses for rent; houses that Cosmopolitan built on the site of a once-derelict factory. The Lodge Lane office is an open door to community groups and holds housing surgeries by all social landlords in the neighbourhood. Unusually the Association produces a newsletter solely for BME tenants which, for Housing Manager Alec Gaston, 'is a way of reaching people who have a particular, even unique



Mary Seacole Close, Liverpool 8.
Great homes, low rents, from Cosmopolitan HA.
Photo: Stephen Morris