

# **We Speak Your Language**

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## Summary

"We Speak Your Language" is an innovative project which has made Tower Hamlets Homes' services more accessible to residents who can't speak or read English.

Tower Hamlets is one of the most diverse places in the UK and has a long history of migration and multiculturalism. Language is a common barrier to accessing housing provision. Over three-quarters of THH tenants are from a Black or Minority Ethnic Group, including White Minorities.

Almost 10% of residents have asked us to communicate with them in another language – over 1500 households. Bengali is the most commonly requested language, followed by Somali. There is also a growing need for Eastern European languages, such as Polish.

Through resident engagement with seldom-heard groups and community partnerships, we worked to develop innovative solutions to long-standing problems. "We Speak Your Language" provides a number of ways for residents to interact with Tower Hamlets Homes in languages other than English, including:

- Recruiting more officers who speak community languages
- Offering staff an 'honorarium' for using languages they speak with residents
- Providing audio and written translations via our website
- Advertising our services in other languages through Facebook and social media
- Producing a programme on a Bengali TV channel to give advice about welfare reform
- Producing picture-based reference cards for front counters
- Creating automated letter templates in Bengali and Somali

As a result of the project, the number of Bengali-speaking residents who feel that Tower Hamlets Homes keeps them informed about their housing services has risen; in 2010/11 it was just 59% - now it is over 76% in 2012/13 (year to date). In the same period, the number of Bengali-speaking residents accessing THH's services has increased from 80% to 95%. The number of Somali residents accessing our services has also increased, from 59% to 85% in the same period.

We can speak your language, please ask us.

**(Bengali)**  
আমরা আপনার ভাষায় কথা বলতে পারি, অনুগ্রহ করে আমাদের জিজ্ঞাসা করুন

**(Somali)**  
Waanu ku hadli karaa luqadaada, fadlan na waydii.

**(Polish)**  
Potrafimy mówić w Twoim języku, poproś nas tylko.

**(Arabic)**  
نحن نتكلم بلغتك، يرجى السؤال

**(Turkish)**  
Türkçe çeviri için bizden istekte bulunabilirsiniz.

**(Chinese)**  
我們可以用中文與你交談，請向我們查詢。

**(Vietnamese)**  
Chúng tôi có thể nói ngôn ngữ của quý vị, xin hỏi chúng tôi.

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## **Five key elements of the project**

"We Speak Your Language" has made our services more accessible for Black and Minority Ethnic residents unable to speak or read English. In summary, the project has:

### **1. Met the language and communication needs of residents**

Almost 10% of all residents have asked us to speak or write to them in a language other than English. Bengali and Somali are the most common community languages.

### **2. Improved access to housing services**

The number of Bengali-speaking residents who now access THH's services has increased from 80% in 2010/11 to 95% in 2012/13 (year to date). The number of Somali residents accessing our services has also increased from just 59% to 85% in the same period.

### **3. Increased the satisfaction of Bengali and Somali speaking residents**

"We Speak Your Language" has increased the number of Bengali-speaking residents who feel that THH keep them informed about their housing services - rising from 59% in 2010/11 to 76% in 2012/13 (year to date). Similarly, satisfaction with our overall housing service for Somali tenants has risen from 59% in 2009/10 to 82% in March 2012.

### **4. Developed a workforce more reflective of the community**

As a result of positive initiatives in our recruitment processes, we are now employing a higher proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) employees - over 55% of staff are now BME. We have recently recruited our first full-time Somali member of staff.

### **5. Recognised the language skills of staff**

We have launched a 'Community Language Honorarium' to recognise and reward staff who provide language translation in-house. This helps to build trust and confidence with BME residents, and provides a value for money alternative to purchasing external translation services.

## **Promoting equality and meeting diverse needs**

As the largest provider of housing services in Tower Hamlets we are committed to ensuring that our services are fair, inclusive and accessible to all parts of the community. This is the core principle of our Diversity Strategy, developed in partnership with residents and community groups.

Through extensive resident profiling between 2008-10 we learned that seven per cent of tenants (almost 1000 households) are unable to read English and nine per cent are unable to speak English (almost 1400 households). The most widely spoken languages - other than English - are Bengali, Somali, Polish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Turkish and Arabic. We need to deliver housing services to residents in 36 different languages.

We found that BME households are more likely to be in significant rent arrears, live in overcrowded conditions and be dissatisfied with housing services. Therefore it is especially important that BME households can access housing services, including lettings, repairs and financial inclusion and benefits advice.

We set up and managed the "We Speak Your Language" project through THH's Diversity Champions Network, a group of frontline staff who help to embed equality and diversity across front-line services. They consulted and agreed aims and objectives of the project with residents unable to speak English proficiently in order to access housing services.

"We Speak Your Language", helped us to:

- ▶ Learn more about the access and communication needs of BME residents;
- ▶ Improve access to housing services for BME residents;
- ▶ Increase satisfaction with services amongst community groups that had previously been dissatisfied;
- ▶ Develop a more diverse workforce that reflects the community we work in;
- ▶ Use and reward staff language skills.

## **Engaging with linguistic community groups**

The “We Speak Your Language” project meant that we had to engage with several hard to reach resident groups – specifically Bangladeshi, Somali and Eastern European residents. When we reviewed our existing engagement structures, we found that very few Bangladeshis - and no Somalis or East European residents - attended our service improvement groups, and were significantly under-represented on our Getting Involved Register.

By engaging with BME residents, local community groups and mosques, we gained a clearer picture of how we needed to tailor services to meet language needs. For example, we learned that many Somalis found it difficult to access housing services due to a lack of trust, as well as language and literacy barriers. As a result, developing a workforce that reflects the community has become a corporate priority so we can provide spoken translation services, but also to build trust with migrant communities.

We found that Polish residents are more likely to access our services electronically through our website or email; they also value being able to speak to employees who can use a mixture of Polish and English. We have used Twitter and Facebook to promote housing services to these groups in a variety of languages - one in five of those who view our Facebook page are native Polish speakers.

We held focus groups with Bangladeshi and Somali tenants to help make rent statements and arrears letters clearer and more accessible. As a direct result, rent statements and correspondence are now written in plain English, and letters’ importance distinguished visually through colour coding to alert tenants who may have language or literacy barriers.

By engaging with hard to reach groups on language needs, some of these residents have now joined other engagement groups, including the Diversity Working Group. This means that these groups are now more representative of the community, and helps to ensure services are more accessible, inclusive and fair.

## **Innovative, value-for-money solutions**

“We Speak Your Language” has helped us to develop a number of innovative solutions to meet residents’ language needs, in partnership with residents and local community organisations. We have:

- ▶ Developed a diverse workforce more reflective of the community we work with – with over 90 staff who can speak at least 26 different languages, including British Sign Language.
- ▶ Launched a Community Language Honorarium and a corporate staff language network with at least 70 instances where external translation would have otherwise been needed, saving £3,500. 12% of all staff have provided language translation in the last 12 months delivering front-line services. The Community Language Honorarium shows BME staff and jobseekers that THH recognises and rewards diverse skills to overcome inequality. Based on a staff survey in October 2012, 70% of all staff now think Tower Hamlets Homes respects individual and cultural differences. Amongst Bangladeshi staff this figure was 74%.
- ▶ Produced “talking leaflets” to make information available for tenants who can’t read English, Bengali or Somali but understand spoken languages. Available on our website, these can also be stored on officers’ smart phones to provide extra support on home visits.
- ▶ Following a resident’s suggestion, we are piloting using flags on staff name badges to show language skills. This shows tenants at a glance if the staff member can speak their language.
- ▶ THH staff helped produce a TV show on Bangladeshi community channel NTV to provide information about the impact of welfare reform on tenants in Bengali. The show is now available on Youtube so it can be used for other Bengali-speaking social housing tenants across the UK.
- ▶ Developed picture-based communications cards for our front counters, to aid communication between staff and tenants unable to speak or read English.



- Created automated letter templates for home visits and appointment letters in Bengali and Somali.

## **Improving access to services for all community groups**

“We Speak Your Language” has helped us to improve access for residents through a range of measures.

Working closely with residents unable to communicate in English has helped us to overcome language barriers and build trust with BME residents. We have seen our overall satisfaction figures increase significantly amongst these community groups as a result. For example, satisfaction of Somali tenants with THH keeping them informed has risen from 58% (2010/11) to 81% (2011/12), and satisfaction with THH returning calls when we say we will rise from 43% (2010/11) to 76% (2011/12).

Through resident engagement with non-English speakers as part of the project, we have also improved access to our engagement structures and promoted confidence for non-English speakers to participate in them. Satisfaction with engagement opportunities has increased amongst BME residents who don't speak English. For 2011/12 this was 91% for Somali residents, and 81% for Bangladeshi residents, up from 75% the year before.

Residents told us that they wanted our workforce to be more reflective of our resident profile. Also in Tower Hamlets, 70% of Black and Minority Ethnic women are economically inactive. We have made recruiting and developing Black and Minority Ethnic staff, especially women, a corporate priority. We now proactively advertise jobs locally, via BME press and community groups and promote benefits on offers such as child care vouchers, flexible working and job sharing opportunities. As of April 2012, over 55% of THH staff are from a Black or Minority Ethnic Group, whilst the percentage of Muslim staff has increased from 13% in 2008 to almost 20% currently.

As a result of improved monitoring, positive action recruitment initiatives and a Community Language Honorarium, we have narrowed the average salary gap between White British staff and BME staff to £3,693 as of November 2012, compared to over £5k throughout 2011.

## **Legacy of the project**

The “We Speak Your Language” project has helped us to meet the language needs of local people, and will have a lasting legacy for residents and staff in Tower Hamlets. Housing services are now significantly more accessible for residents who do not speak or read English, through a range of service improvements and tools:

- ▶ Our community language web pages have been used over 700 times so far by residents downloading written and audio translations;
- ▶ We have the largest number of published Somali documents of any UK housing provider, and are launching a Somali housing advice surgery in 2013;
- ▶ A Bengali repairs reporting telephone line provides instant access for our most used housing service. In partnership with Tower Hamlets Council, we provide a housing bidding line in Bengali and Somali, as these groups are more likely to be registered for a transfer and live in overcrowded conditions;
- ▶ All staff have language identification cards, and we have launched a phonetic tool kit for staff to learn basic Bengali, Somali and Polish;
- ▶ We have produced Braille leaflets in partnership with Tower Hamlets Council’s Sensory Impairment Service;
- ▶ Our more diverse workforce use community languages to build trust and deliver services with residents, continuing to improve performance and satisfaction;
- ▶ We have worked with a local organisation to provide free English for Speakers of Other Language classes for female BME tenants, as well as public speaking and communication skills sessions. This helps to empower local women and promote economic activity in an area where female unemployment can be as high as 70%;
- ▶ As a result of working with THH on language needs, BME residents have joined other engagement groups, including our Diversity Working Group, Resident Scrutiny Panel and mystery shopping programme. For this reason, our success with engaging with Bangladeshi, Somali and East European tenants has increased significantly.