

Meeting the needs of Somali residents

Somali Tenants Engagement Project

Final Report

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Foreword

Over 10,000 Somalis live in Tower Hamlets – more than in any other London Borough. Despite this, Somalis are a community group who far too often experience poorer outcomes in terms of employment, housing and health, for a variety of reasons.

As the largest provider of social housing in the borough, Tower Hamlets Homes has responded to this inequality by working in partnership with a range of Somali community organisations and residents to make real improvements to people's lives.

Before the Somali Engagement Project, many Somali's did not sense that enough was being done to ensure that they were supported, and many felt excluded from being able to access to basic housing services.

By providing tailored support to Somali residents, services are now more accessible and hundreds of households have been provided with support, in particular regarding rent arrears and overcrowding.

The Somali community is one where strong cultural ties can be both a strength and a barrier. Through targeted engagement with its Somali residents, THH has helped to share knowledge and learning through the wider community.

For example, as a direct result of this project several overcrowded households have successfully moved to larger properties – having previously been trying in some cases for over a decade.

The success of the project has been great motivation to ensure that momentum is maintained going forwards. The Somali community in Tower Hamlets has been given hope and have sensed a real improvement in having their needs and aspirations met in relation to housing services.

The learning from this project can be used as a model for other public service providers and social landlords, to improve the quality of housing service provision for Somali's in London – and the rest of the UK.

Safia Jama

Tower Hamlets Homes resident
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Somali Integration Team Coordinator

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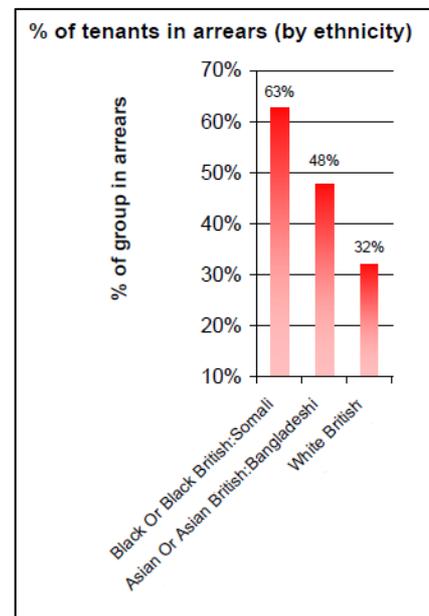
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Introduction

Tower Hamlets is one of the most diverse places in the UK and has a long history of migration and multiculturalism. Around 10,000 Somalis live in the borough, the largest group in any area of London. As the largest provider of housing services in the borough, Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) is committed to providing services that are accessible, inclusive and fairly delivered for all residents.

In August 2010 we found that Somali tenants were twice as likely to be in rent arrears as White British tenants (see chart, right). We knew of just 364 Somali households, for whom we held scarce information relating to access and communication needs. Through initial engagement with the Somali community and our own analysis, we found that Somali tenants were experiencing poorer outcomes across a range of our services.

The main objective of the Somali Tenants Engagement Project, established in April 2011, was to carry out a range of strategic and operational improvements to improve access to services and the outcomes they deliver, as well as improve the satisfaction with our services for Somali residents.



Through a combination of resident engagement, working with community organisations and developing innovative solutions to problems, we have successfully supported over 200 Somali households regarding rent arrears, overcrowding and providing information in accessible formats. In doing so we have dramatically improved our understanding of the needs of Somali tenants, ensured our services are more accessible, and improved outcomes for one of Tower Hamlets' most vulnerable community groups.

As a result of this project, the satisfaction with our overall service for Somali tenants has risen from 59% in 2009/10 to 82% in 2011/12. This report aims to share our practice and lessons learned across the social housing sector, for use by other housing organisations.

Objectives of the project

The Somali Tenants Engagement Project aimed to deliver specific objectives to reduce the inequality of services between community groups. These objectives were developed in partnership with the Somali Integration Team, a local community organisation which works with Somali women across Tower Hamlets.

Our intended outcomes by the end of March 2012 were to:

1. **Pilot providing front line services** relating to rent arrears and overcrowding - requested by local Somali community groups and residents;
2. Use **name-based intelligence, to proactively contact and profile Somali tenants** and ensure that we are better able to meet the specific and diverse needs. We aimed to collect over 80% of profile information relating to gender, age, disability, sexual orientation and religion and belief;
3. **Develop and publish the largest number of written Somali translations in the UK** compared to other social landlords with significant Somali customer groups. This will reflect the significance of the Somali population in Tower Hamlets, and ensure that our communications are more accessible;
4. **Develop a suite of Somali talking leaflets** in consultation with Somali customers and partner organisations, to overcome language and literacy barriers;
5. **Provide employment opportunities for Somali women**, who are under-represented in the labour market in the borough;
6. **Develop a range of business tools** in order to support the provision of services to Somali customers, such as automated letter templates;
7. **Produce and publish a report** to share learning and best practice with other UK social landlords;
8. **Improve satisfaction of Somali tenants** with our services overall, specifically relating to communications and engagement.

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1. Knowing more about our Somali customers

In August 2010, we knew of only 364 Somali households, out of around 12,500 tenancies. We were advised by Somali community workers and our Somali residents that the true number was likely to be much higher.



In order to meet the needs of Somali residents, and be able to ensure that equal opportunities and outcomes are provided for Somali residents, it was essential for us to learn more about who was living in our households. By collecting, analysing and using this information, we can better identify inequality and address the reasons for it.

A common problem for Somalis relates to how monitoring forms fail to identify them, by using generic “Black” or “Black-African” ethnic categories. This prevents thorough equalities analysis to understand the specific needs of Somalis as service users, such as language, communication and cultural needs. Early in the project, **we learned that it is essential to ensure that ethnic monitoring processes allow residents to define their ethnicity** – in this case Somali – and where new migrant groups are identified, that processes and systems are updated to allow for high levels of collection for new and emerging communities.

✓ **A common problem for Somalis in the UK relates to how monitoring forms fail to identify them, using generic “Black” or “Black-African” ethnic categories instead**

We worked with the Somali Integration Team in order to use **name-based intelligence to proactively contact over 200 tenants who we believed may be Somali** and ask them about themselves.

We collected the information through telephone calls to those households, by utilising **a Somali-speaking project officer**. This overcame language and trust barriers which we had learned had prevented equal access to our services in the past. We used a market research company to purchase phone numbers for those properties we did not have contact details for. We then posted forms and visited tenants at home to collect outstanding information where possible.

This resulted in a 7% increase in households we now know are Somali. We now know more about the gender, disability, age, sexual orientation and religion and belief of Somali tenants than any other ethnic group. We now also know that 54

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Somali tenants would like written translations every time we communicate with them, and have collected an additional 38 telephone numbers for Somali households to facilitate verbal communication.

Table: Somali Resident Profile Collection Apr 2011 – Mar 2012

Characteristic	Measure (Somali tenants)		Target	Target met?
	Apr 2011	Mar 2012		
Ethnicity	100%	100%	80%	✓
Gender	100%	100%	80%	✓
Disability	56%	85% (of whom 12% disabled)	80%	✓
Age	100%	100%	80%	✓
Sexual orientation	37%	81%	80%	✓
Religion and belief	74%	82%	80%	✓
Known households	364	403		+ 7% increase

2. Showing leadership and building partnerships



In August 2010, THH did not employ any Somali employees. We learned from initial engagement that this meant that Somali residents did not trust the organisation as a result. We needed to engage with Somali residents, who for THH were a seldom heard-from group, but it soon became clear that we could not do this alone. We worked with two local Somali community organisations to

overcome these barriers.

The **Ocean Somali Community Association (OSCA)** is a voluntary organisation established in 2001 by professionals and Somalis, with the goal of strengthening communication and links between service providers and the Somali community.

The **Somali Integration Team (SIT)** is a non-profit voluntary organisation established in 2004 to support disadvantaged female Tower Hamlets residents to become independent and socially included. SIT focuses on supporting the needs of Somali women and promoting social cohesion within the wider community, though they work with all women, regardless of ethnicity.

Working with these two local Somali community organisations enabled us to carry out extensive engagement and outreach work specifically targeted at Somali tenants. Through both organisations, we seconded two officers who could speak, read and write Somali. One worked in our rents team to provide financial inclusion services, and one worked in our corporate Business Development Team to deliver strategic improvements, such as carrying out resident profiling, translations and facilitating focus groups.

✓ **Working with local community organisations was crucial to engaging with this seldom heard group**

In 2011, the Somali Tenant Engagement Project was shortlisted as a finalist for the Equality and Diversity category in the Chartered Institute of Housing UK Housing Awards. The project also won the Tenant Participation and Advisory Service 2012 regional Excellence in Equality and Diversity Award, and has been shortlisted for the National Awards in July 2012.

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3. Engaging customers and improving satisfaction



In March 2011, no Somalis were participating in our resident engagement structures, and Somalis were also significantly under-represented on our Getting Involved Register. To understand why, we carried out personal interviews with a sample of Somali

tenants and community agencies. **We learned that many Somalis found it difficult to engage with THH due to language and literacy barriers**, plus a lack of trust. They told us that providing childcare would help Somali women engage more effectively. We also found that a Somali-speaking officer would be necessary to translate at any group engagement activity, to ensure that all residents could participate.

✓ **Provision of child care and Somali interpretation was required to engage with Somali women.**

As part of the project, we held two focus group sessions with Somali tenants.

Through a focus group with overcrowded Somali households, we learned that **many households had not even registered to move**, due to a lack of knowledge and inaccessible communication formats. Somali residents were not aware of the impact being in rent arrears can have on the ability to move and were not aware of the Somali homeseeker bidding line. **We provided overcrowding assistance on a case-by-case basis**, providing tailored support from a Somali Engagement Officer, as well as through written and 'talking' Somali leaflets.

✓ **Somali residents were not aware of the impact being in rent arrears can have on the ability to move.**

A second focus group, held in November 2011 with Somali tenants, sought feedback on the accessibility of rent statements and arrears letters. As a result, **future rent statements and correspondence will be written in Plain English** and the importance of letters will be **distinguished visually through colour coding** to alert those tenants who may have language or literacy barriers. Satisfaction with THH on providing opportunities to get involved in things we do is now 91% for Somali tenants (2011/12).

Satisfaction of Somali tenants with THH keeping them informed has risen from 58% (2010/11) to 81% (2011/12). Similarly, satisfaction with THH returning calls when we say we will rose from 43% (2010/11) to

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76% (2011/12). The outcomes of the project has moved Somali tenants from one of least satisfied community groups, to one of the most satisfied.

Satisfaction measure	Somali tenants		Increase
	2010-11	2011-12	
Rating overall service from THH as good or excellent	58%	82%	+ 24%
Rating neighbourhood as a good or excellent place to live	76%	83%	+ 7%
Rating communal cleaning & caretaking as a good or excellent service	60%	69%	+ 9%
Rating THH at keeping residents informed about things that may affect them	75%	81%	+ 6%
Rating THH staff on returning calls when they say they will	43%	76%	+ 33%
Satisfied with final outcome following contact with THH		73%	
Rating THH on providing opportunities to get involved in things they do in the local area		91%	

To share lessons learned, have published **easy-read Resident Tenants Engagement Impact Assessments** on our website.

Resident Tenants Engagement Impact Assessment

Activity	Somali Overcrowding Focus Group
Dates	11 July 2011
Overall Assessment	
Description	A focus group with nine Somali women whose households were overcrowded. Some were already on the housing register for transfer, some had not registered.
Aims	To explore under-reporting of Somali overcrowding, and reasons for perceived lack of progress in transferring to suitable-sized accommodation.
Costs	£143 to hire room, with crèche facilities and refreshments
Staff involved	2
Staff hours	21 (14 Somali Tenants Engagement Officer; 7 Customer Insight Officer)
Residents involved	9
Residents hours	18 (2 each)
Reflectiveness of residents engaged (ethnicity, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion and belief)	 This group was aimed specifically at Somali women, and was reflective in terms of age, sexual orientation, disability and religion and belief.
Lessons learned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of awareness in the community about the impact of being in arrears on preventing tenants from bidding for alternative properties; • Residents not aware of the Somali bidding helpline; • Lack of joined-up work between THH and LBTH in linking overcrowding/bidding eligibility with arrears in their respective communications with residents; • Lack of Somali staff in THH and LBTH undermines trust of residents;
Outcomes or changes made	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 of 9 households represented have been successfully transferred (one had been on housing waiting list for 18 years); • Developed positive relationships with Somali customers and community organisations; • Developed a plan of action which will assist LBTH and THH in making our services more accessible and inclusive for Somali customers.
Barriers to access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The provision of childcare is particularly important in order to provide Somali women with the opportunity to engage. • The presence of an officer who speaks Somali was vital to this form of engagement to provide verbal translation. • Trust and confidence is a key barrier to engagement and service provision for this community.
Value for money	The lessons learned by residents have been transmitted through the community, and attendees have informed us that other tenants not present have now registered for transfer and been successful in bidding, having addressed their arrears. As such, this focus group has reached beyond the nine individuals directly involved.

Resident Tenants Engagement Impact Assessment

Activity	Rent Statements – Somali Focus Group
Dates	17th November 2011
Overall Assessment	
Description	A focus group with 11 Somali tenants split into two groups; one group was literate in English and the other unable to read English. They were shown a variety of rent letters sent to tenants and asked for their feedback.
Aims	To find out how easy it was for residents to understand THH rent letters and statements and to get ideas of what could be done to improve them.
Costs	Approximately £150.
Staff involved	3
Staff hours	6 (2 Somali Tenants Engagement Officer; 2 x 2 rent officers)
Residents involved	11
Residents hours	16.5 (1.5 each)
Reflectiveness of residents engaged	 This group was aimed specifically at Somali tenants, and was reflective in terms of age, sexual orientation, disability and religion and belief of this community group. However, the group was not reflective of gender as the group consisted of no men – for example through Al Huda mosque.
Lessons learned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a general lack of understanding of the rent letters/statements sent to residents; • Residents were unable to understand which letters were most important.
Outcomes or changes made	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future rent statements and rent letters will focus on plain English to be more accessible; • Importance of letters will be clearly distinguished visually to alert those tenants who are unable to read English – for example, using red type for urgent letters; • Removing unnecessary information such as a fax number which is no longer in use; • Have a message in Somali to inform tenants to turn over to view translation services; • To ensure translation information is provided on the back of statements the same as our normal headed paper letters; • To engage with Somali men as well as Somali women within our tenanted profile.
Barriers to access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The provision of childcare is particularly important in order to provide Somali women with the opportunity to engage; • The presence of an officer who speaks Somali was vital to this form of engagement to provide verbal translation.
Value for money	Valuable insight has been gained from this group. We understand that the Somali customers unable to read English rely on family members, members of the community and Somali support organisations to translate letters which they perceive as important. This can cause significant delays in action being taken to address arrears etc. Taking this on board and making the proposed changes should have a positive impact on all tenants who face the similar barriers, and also improve our rates of rent collection.

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4. Improving access and customer care



As part of an equalities analysis of our rents service in 2010, we found that Somali customers were disproportionately represented amongst those customers in arrears; **63% of all Somali tenants owed us rent.**

Whereas in other ethnic groups, age was the key determining factor for a tenant to be in debt, **for Somali tenants rent arrears was identified as being high across all age groups.** In response, **we developed a Somali financial inclusion service,** enabling us to address the disproportionately high rent arrears amongst Somali tenants living in Tower Hamlets.

To understand the reasons for this inequality, **in-depth interviews were held with a sample of Somali residents and community agencies.** From the interviews we learned that many Somali tenants:

- Had not sought advice at an early stage before their arrears got out of hand;
- Did not understand how to manage debt;
- Had multiple debts;
- Found it difficult to talk with Tower Hamlets Homes staff due to language barriers; and,
- a lack of trust.

Working in partnership with the Ocean Somali Community Association (OSCA), we worked to understand and address the barriers to communication and rent collection. Crucially, **we identified that providing tenants with written translations from English to Somali was not sufficient** because of the low levels of literacy in both languages within the community. This was a significant barrier for many first-generation and older Somali migrants in particular.

Through OSCA, **we seconded a Somali-speaking community worker to work in our rents team one day a week.** This helped us to overcome language and literacy barriers, by phoning Somali customers in arrears and

✓ **Trust, language and literacy were barriers to access for many Somali residents.**

✓ **Low levels of literacy in both Somali and English meant that written translations alone were ineffective.**

carrying out home visits where required. By providing advice in spoken Somali for the first time, we reduced arrears owed to us by approximately £12,000 for a total outlay of just £1,000, from £48,442 to £36,126. The average arrears per case at referral also dropped from £682 to £509. This work provided a template for how we can develop our services in the future to ensure that they are more accessible and inclusive for Somali customers, and potentially other new migrant groups.

Over 150 Somali households have now been supported in addressing their rent arrears, helped to claim benefits and agree payment plans. This has **reduced the likelihood of eviction and restrictions on bidding for larger properties** for Somali tenants.

In April 2011, we found that **Somali households were more likely to be overcrowded than the average**; at least 18 per cent of Somali households were in properties that are too small, compared to 13 per cent overall. In addition, in summer 2011, **52 per cent of Somali tenants told us that they thought that their household had too few rooms**, compared to 28 per cent of tenants overall. This suggested that there were **potentially over 100 more Somali overcrowded households that had not registered for a transfer** or asked for help. As a result, the focus group held in November 2011 to discuss overcrowding helped us to understand how we could address this problem.

✓ **52 per cent of Somali tenants think that their household has too few rooms – more than any other ethnic group.**

We discovered that a number of tenants had been on the transfer list for over 10 years or more and had come to a point where they felt the system was fundamentally letting them down; one had been waiting since 1993. Tenants did not understand the new Choice Based Lettings system or how the transfer process worked. **As a result of our focus group, three of the nine Somali households transferred to larger homes within just two months.** These early successes have started to build trust between the Somali community and THH which we hope will create more of a sense of belonging and inclusion.

In terms of both rent arrears and overcrowding, Somali tenants are now in a significantly better position than would have otherwise been the case, by providing tailored support in partnership with local community organisations. In addition, several Somali residents have also attended free courses to improve their English, have received assistance with finding a job or worked with us to arrange for utilities debts to be written off.

To promote improved access across the full range of our services, we have worked with Somali residents and community organisations to develop a number of innovative solutions, overcoming language and literacy barriers.



We produced “**talking leaflets**” – for which THH has been nationally recognised by the National Federation of ALMOs – to provide a sustainable way of making information available for Somali tenants who are unable to read either Somali or English, but understand spoken Somali. These can be stored on the smart phones of officers carrying out home visits to provide extra support when required.

Automated letter templates allow staff who cannot write Somali to produce standard home visit and appointment letters in the language.



By developing **pictorial communications cards** available at our front counters, we have enabled better communication between staff and tenants unable to speak or read English. We are now planning on developing similar cards for all of our caretakers, to allow easier communication with our Somali and other Black and Minority Ethnic residents on our estates.



After benchmarking our previous level of provision, we have developed and published the **largest number of written Somali translations in the UK**, compared to other social landlords with significant Somali customer groups. This is both to address feedback from Somali residents and community organisations, but also to reflect the significance of the Somali population in Tower Hamlets and the support they require.

5. Developing a progressive and diverse workforce

In Tower Hamlets, there is a significant worklessness problem which affects Somali women - **around 70% of BME women in the borough are economically inactive.**

Simultaneously, **the fact that THH had previously not employed any Somali workers had undermined the trust of Somali residents**, preventing successful engagement and fair delivery of services. Employing Somali officers through local Somali community organisations ensured that we were able to quickly and efficiently deliver services to Somali residents, and build trust to enable improved provision of services in the longer term. The Somali residents that we invited to workshops told us that they were pleased to see a Somali person working within THH and that they hoped the number of Somali workers would increase in Tower Hamlets Homes moving forwards

✓ **A failure to recruit Somali workers had meant that Somali tenants did not trust us to deliver fair services.**

Through this project, we **have provided employment for three Somali women** by working with two local community organisations. We have also **advertised jobs through over a dozen Somali community organisation**, which are better able to reach Somali job seekers than many mainstream media outlets. We have also learned the **importance of providing flexible and part-time working opportunities** in order not to indirectly disadvantage particularly black and minority ethnic women who are looking for work in Tower Hamlets.

Moving forwards, we have committed to recruiting **two Somali Housing Advisors for 2012/13**, to provide sustained front-line access to services for our Somali residents. **We will also provide employability training for Somali job-seekers**, to ensure that they are in an improved position when applying for work with us and our partner organisations in the future.

At a higher strategic level, the project has helped Tower Hamlets Homes to recognise how important it is for our workforce to reflect our customer profile. As a result, **recruiting and developing Black and Minority Ethnic staff and women is now a core element of the vision of the organisation.**

Conclusions

The Somali Tenants Engagement project has enabled us to engage specifically with Somali tenants and work with local community organisations to develop innovative solutions to problems.

As a result, we have:

- successfully supported over 200 Somali households to tackle issues such as rent arrears and overcrowding;
- changed how we provide information and developed innovative ways of making it accessible – producing talking leaflets and picture cards for those who don't read either English or Somali;
- helped three local Somali women find employment;
- recruited a Somali tenant onto our Resident Scrutiny Panel;
- begun an engagement project with the local mosque set up by the Somali community;
- dramatically improved our understanding of Somali tenants' needs, made our services more accessible, and improved outcomes for one of Tower Hamlets' most vulnerable community groups;
- increased Somali satisfaction with our overall service from 59% in 2009/10 to 82% in 2011/12.

Overall the Somali Tenants Engagement Project has helped Somali tenants from being one of least satisfied groups of Tower Hamlets Homes' residents, to be one of the most satisfied. Our services are now more accessible, inclusive and fair for this community group.

Our work to provide support for overcrowded Somali households has helped to ensure that several households have moved to a more adequate-sized property after years of waiting and unsuccessful bidding, whilst also promoting greater awareness amongst the Somali community of the housing application process and support available to them.

In continuing to improve the quality of life for Somali residents, and indeed all residents, we will continue to work with statutory and community organisations in order to ensure that services are accessible, inclusive and fair. As a result we hope that the success can be replicated elsewhere, to improve the quality of housing service provision for Somali's in the rest of the UK.

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Accessibility

This is a report by Tower Hamlets Homes. If you need help to understand it or if you have any questions, please contact us by phone or email or visit one of our offices. We can also provide accessible options that meet your needs including Large Print, audio or electronic formats, and we can provide written information in another language. We can also offer a meeting with a member of staff and an interpreter.

Waa farriin ka socota shirkadda guriga iska leh ee Tower Hamlets Homes. Haddii aad u baahan tahay in lagaa caawiyo inaad fahamtid ama su'aalo qabtid fadlan naga soo wac telefoonka, ama iimayl soo dir, haddii kalena booqo mid ka mid ah xafiisyadeenna. Haddii aad codsatid waxaa laga caawin doonaa fahamka sida iyadoo qoraallada lagugu siinayo far waaweyn iyo qoraallo ku diyaarsan luqaddaada. Waxa kaloon kuu diyaarin kamaa kulan aad la yeelatid xubin ka tirsan shaqaalaha iyo turjumaan.

এটা আপনার ল্যান্ডলর্ড টাওয়ার হ্যামলেটস্ হোমস্'এর কাছ থেকে একটি মেসেজ বা বার্তা। আপনার যদি এটা বোঝার ব্যাপারে সাহায্য দরকার হয় অথবা আপনার কোন কিছু জানার থাকে, তাহলে অনুগ্রহ করে টেলিফোন বা ইমেইলে আমাদের সাথে যোগাযোগ করুন অথবা আমাদের কোন একটি অফিসে আসুন। আপনার যে ফরম্যাট সুবিধা, অনুরোধ জানালে সেরকম কোন কিছুতে তার ব্যবস্থা আমরা করতে পারবো, যার মধ্যে বড় অক্ষর ও আপনার ভাষায় লিখিত কপি থাকবে। আমরা একজন স্টাফ এবং ইন্টারপ্রিটারের সাথে আপনার ইন্টারভিউ'এর (সাক্ষাৎকার) ব্যবস্থাও করতে পারি।

هذه هي رسالة من صاحبة العقار مؤسسة تاور هامليت هومز. إذا أنت بحاجة إلى مساعدة لفهم محتوى هذه الرسالة، أو كان لديك استفسار حولها فيرجى الاتصال بواسطة الهاتف أو بواسطة البريد الإلكتروني أو بزيارة مكتبتنا. ويمكننا عند الطلب تزويدك بنسخة منها بشكل مناسب لك أي تفهمها، بما في ذلك تقديمها مطبوعة بحروف كبيرة أو مترجمة إلى لغتك الأم. كما يمكننا عرض مقابلة مع أحد موظفينا بحضور مترجم.

這是你的業主塔橋房屋發給你的信息。如果你需要協助以了解其內容或如有任何疑問，請致電、發電子郵件，或親臨我們其中一個辦事處與我們聯絡。我們可以應要求以適合你的需要的通訊形式提供資料，包括大字體版，及提供中文譯本。我們亦可以為你安排在傳譯員協助下與一位職員會面。