

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Somalis in Leicester

At Home in Europe

17 September, 2014

This report is part of a set of qualitative comparative policy studies exploring the views and experiences of Somali communities and governments' policy responses and initiatives supporting their integration. The research was undertaken concurrently in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Leicester, London, Malmö and Oslo. In Leicester data were collected through 12 focus groups attended by 127 participants. Semi-structured interviews were held with 26 stakeholders in order to explore subjects in greater depth.

The presence of Somalis in the UK dates back to the late 19th century, when sailors and traders arrived (and some settled) in the UK. After the Second World War, there was further migration of Somalis seeking trade and education; family members also joined, forming more settled communities from the 1960s onwards. The Somali community of Leicester is one of the largest in the UK and Leicester's Somalis can be divided into three broad categories: British-born Somalis, Somali refugees and asylum seekers (who came directly from Somalia as a result of the conflicts) and Somalis who migrated to the UK from various EU countries such as the Netherlands.

On the whole, Leicester's Somali community could be regarded as fitting into the city's overall success story. Despite the challenges that are raised in this report, the early signs of settlement seem to indicate a community that has a strong sense of entrepreneurship and is quickly learning from the experience of previous communities that have settled in Leicester. One that clearly stands out is the energy and activism among Somali women, who occupy a very public role in the life of the community.

Population and demographics

Accurate data for the number of Somalis in the city are not available as the question on ethnic identity in the census does not contain a “Somali” category, so figures are extrapolated from language, country of origin or birth and ethnic data. Estimates often put Leicester’s Somali population at 10,000–15,000 people. In the sample accessed in Leicester for this search, the largest cohort (nearly 50 percent) was from the Netherlands and most of the sample arrived in Leicester between 2000 and 2005. A majority of Somalis (68 percent) live in four wards of the city: Spinney Hills, Stoneygate, Beaumont Leys and Charnwood.

Policy context

With a population of 329,000 in 2011, Leicester is the most populous city in the East Midlands. The city has one of the largest ethnic-minority populations in the UK in percentage terms (thought to have passed the 50 percent threshold), and is one of the most ethnically diverse cities outside the capital, with a strong reputation for its multicultural heritage. Nearly half of the councillors (21 out of 54) are of ethnic-minority background, though there are currently no Somali councillors. The council is dominated by the Labour Party, with only two councillors from other parties.

The downturn in the economy has hit the city hard. The city council has already planned to cut £75 million (about €87 million) from its annual budget and plans to cut a further £50 million (€59 million) per year by 2016. Such funding cuts have significantly affected community organisations that previously had access to grants and other public services and the organisations that remain in existence need to think hard about sustainability.

Identity and belonging

As one respondent in the research process described: “Somali residents in the UK are balancing a number of factors in their identities—Somali heritage and origin, Western culture, Muslim faith and black colour.” There was a range of views expressed about identity, with generational difference, some identifying predominantly as Somalis, others as European and others as British. A majority of respondents spoke positively about the city and felt a strong sense of belonging to it, though concerns were also raised about the negative portrayal of Somalis. Positive aspects of living in the city were identified as multiculturalism, tolerance and diversity, religious freedom and a strong Somali community. Negative areas included housing problems, crime and safety, and lack of employment.

Education

In 2013 there were 2,076 Somali pupils (4.27 percent of the total) in Leicester city schools, forming the third largest ethnic-minority group. Despite initially facing challenges in achievement, significant effort has been put in by various agencies to raise the standards and the results have shown marked improvement over the last five years. In 2008, 60.6 percent of Somali pupils were at Key Stage (KS) 2 national thresholds in English and mathematics; in 2012 this had risen to 76.8 percent. In 2008 26.6 percent of Somali pupils attained 5 A*–C in their GCSEs; in 2012 this had risen to 45.3 percent, close to the city average of 51.8 percent. Taylor Road primary school, where 46 percent of pupils are of Somali background (and 60 percent of the school are black and minority ethnic, BME) has been recognised by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED) and the Home Office for its positive performance. The chief strengths of the school have been the engagement of Somali parents as governors in the

school and the role of the community more broadly. However, difficulties do remain concerning deprivation, pupil mobility, language difficulties, a lack of support mechanisms, expulsions and cuts to services. Access to pre-school support by Somalis is also considered to be more limited and this can have a knock-on effect on language difficulties in early years.

Employment

Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) indicate that unemployment rates in Leicester are higher than the national average (14.4 percent compared with the national average of 8 percent). Much less is known about Somali unemployment, though it is expected to be much higher. In our focus groups, the respondents articulated that barriers to employment include lack of recognition of qualifications, language barriers and discrimination. The translation of existing qualifications to ones that are recognised by UK employers was seen as a major problem and carrying recent educational success over into the workplace remains a challenge. Rates of self-employment appear to be high in the Somali community due to a combination of entrepreneurial spirit and the ease of establishing businesses in UK.

Housing

Housing stands out as an area where Leicester's Somali community expressed the most vocal need for improvement. There is generally a concern about poor housing conditions, the time taken to undertake repairs, high levels of social housing (council housing, indicating poverty) and housing stock that is small in size, leading to overcrowding. Moreover, Somalis strongly felt that they were being exploited by private landlords but did not know where to seek effective redress. Tenants need to be made more aware of their rights and the regulations that govern private tenancy, for example asking for energy efficiency certificates or understanding better the rules on eviction notices. The local housing department has brought in some changes such as employing Somali-speaking staff and translating information into Somali. However, comments from the focus groups pointed to persistent problems in this area. Forms of redress do exist but do not seem to be adequately accessed and utilised by Somali tenants, perhaps due to lack of awareness or language barriers. The city council is currently undertaking a wholesale review of the housing repair service.

Health and social protection

The health of Leicester's residents generally falls below the average for UK. To compound this, the city's Somalis live in some of the most disadvantaged wards: research shows a link between socio-economic disadvantage and poor health. Focus group discussions revealed that there appear to be some barriers to the use of health-care resources. Participants complained about many things: lack of referrals to specialists, misdiagnosis, perceived unfair treatment, lack of language support, etc. The most negative experiences seem to lie with GP services, where there were complaints about unwelcoming receptionists, the time taken to get appointments, and lack of time with doctors. Some focus group participants felt they had better experiences in other EU countries. Concerns were also raised about social services, mainly that social workers do not give adequate importance to the families' culture and traditions. However, a great deal of work seems to have been done to improve the engagement of Somali citizens with health-care and social services, and often some of that has been led by the community itself. But despite the progress that has been made, the sentiments expressed by focus group participants would indicate that more could be done.

Policing and security

The police are often under scrutiny in the press for the way they deal with ethnic-minority communities. Stop and search has been controversial as the police force in the UK has been accused of using these powers too much and Leicester was one of the places highlighted for this a few years ago. Participants in focus groups had mixed feelings about the police, on the one hand concerned about stop-and-search measures and the securitisation of the community, and on the other hand feeling that the presence of the police is reassuring for public safety. Concerns about extremism and links to overseas threats also featured in discussions in Somali communities. Recruitment and retention of BME officers have also been discussed by Somalis, who advocate the police force being representative of the people in the locality. Despite targeted recruitment campaigns there are currently no Somali police officers or police community support officers (PCSOs), but there are a few volunteers. The presence of Somalis is seen to have contributed positively to the safety and image of the city; St Matthew's estate is an example, where communities and the police have worked together to tackle prostitution, drugs and antisocial behaviour, thus bringing down crime in the area.

Participation and citizenship

While there is a sense of vibrant activism in civil society there seems to be a poor uptake of Somali citizens in the formal political process thus far. There are councillors from very diverse backgrounds in Leicester and in 2012 Councillor Abdul Usman became Leicester's first Muslim lord mayor. Focus group participants felt Somalis are still disengaged from the political process and, furthermore, felt that the blame for this lay often with their own community. In the 2011 local council election, the voter turnout among Somalis was higher than the previous election, following efforts made in the community to increase the numbers of voters. However, many of the Somalis who are entitled to vote had not registered on the electoral roll; this appears to be an issue of inadequate awareness rather than a conscious choice.

In addition to a large number of community organisations there are six Somali mosques in Leicester, four in St Matthew's and two in Highfields. There are also madrassas, independent schools and many religious activities for young and old. It is clear that the Somali community has started to make a significant impact on the city and its role in civil society is growing and becoming more organised. There is genuine successful social entrepreneurship in the Somali community that needs to be supported and encouraged, and harnessed into a stronger sense of political and civic engagement.

Role of the media

Discussions about the media in the focus groups largely concentrated on the national media's portrayal of the Somali community in the UK. There was a general perception that British mainstream media portrayed minority groups, including Somalis, in a negative light. This was considered to be a central cause of their negative image in the wider society. The only positive story was that of Mo Farah. One of the key points that came out of the focus groups was that many of the participants did not engage with UK-based media outlets due to the language barrier. In particular, many of the older members of the community were unable to understand English and therefore relied heavily on Somali media for information and entertainment. Despite the fact that some interviewees had appeared in mainstream local media, day-to-day engagement tends to be limited due to a lack of connection.

At first glance, given the recent arrival of Somalis from a difficult context of conflict and disruption to families, one might expect this to be a somewhat fragmented and beleaguered community, but the surprising reality is far from that, as can be seen in this report. As a result of the community's own desire to get on, coupled with the city's forward-looking policies encouraging settlement and inclusion, progress has been good. However, the perception of discrimination, not just from the wider society, but also from fellow Muslims of South Asian heritage, stands out as a stark sentiment from focus group participants. Nevertheless, throughout this research, despite participants' feelings of exclusion and of being judged, a language of optimism and aspiration could still be heard. Somalis do not want to be seen as a problem or as marked out for special treatment, they want to settle and contribute, they want to work hard and earn their place. Participants wanted to be valued, recognised and supported in making a good life in the place they have made home.

But such optimism cannot sustain itself if grievances and frustrations are not revealed and overcome. The impact of deprivation on health, education and housing has important consequences, so more needs to be done, as identified in this report. Influential Somalis have decided that their community must succeed, but they know that it cannot succeed by being passive recipients of help. It wants to carve out a place for itself in the footsteps of earlier communities and of earlier successes, and in so doing it also recognises that it can and must do more for itself.

Recommendations

- Consult Somali communities more effectively and represent better in service delivery.
- Ensure targeted recruitment of Somali staff into priority service areas such as housing, education and health.
- Embed the monitoring of key integration indicators into the Council's Equality Schemes and identify interventions to address inequalities experienced by Somali residents.
- Support a Somali Cultural Day in order to recognise the music, poetry, literature and other cultural features of Leicester's dynamic Somali community.
- Deliver classes on life in the UK, including English instruction and activities for introducing Somalis to the public services and institutions of Leicester.
- Create a schools forum for teachers and schools to share information, monitor progress and exchange good practice.
- Collect better data in the pre-school sector (nurseries) in order to inform people and prepare children for school.
- Encourage parents to play more of a role in the schools, especially as governors (through training).
- Explore the establishment of a small loans and grants system to facilitate small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the city.
- Put on a careers fair or conference for young Somalis to advertise careers and ways to get into different professions.
- Establish a diversity kitemark for employers based on models such as "Diversity Works for London".
- Implement a much higher quality threshold for private landlords so as to improve the quality of rented accommodation in Leicester.

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- Set up a housing taskforce to review the accessibility and effectiveness of housing provisions for Somalis.
 - Improve access to translators / interpreters and leaflets in Somali language in order to promote health awareness and engagement with local GPs.
 - Improve Somali participation in engagement structures between the police and the community.
 - Raise awareness of voter registration and active engagement in civic and political life and enhance the general political education of Leicester's Somali citizens.
 - Develop training and support to develop the effectiveness of community groups to access a range of media skills (including social media) and communication strategies.
 - Put on media events to exhibit the achievements of the Somali community and encourage media professionals to expand their contacts in the Somali community.

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