

“Who feels it, knows it”

The experience of people from
Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
communities in the North East

Serving Tyne & Wear and Northumberland
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Contents

Introduction	2
A note on methodology	2
What is life like for people from BAME communities?	3
The daily experience of racism	3
Racism causes fear	3
Racism leads to isolation	3
Racism creates dependency	3
The search for employment	4
The importance of English speaking	4
The experience of happiness	4
Signal.....	5
Who are we talking about?.....	5
What are the priorities?	5
The impact of COVID-19.....	6
The role voluntary and community sector	7
Conclusion	7
Appendices	8
1: Origin locations of BAME populations	8
2: Ranked priorities, 2020	9

Introduction

In the North East, just over four percent of the population are “Black, Asian or Mixed”, according to the Office of National Statistics¹.

These communities are often geographically concentrated, resulting from historical ties, such as the Yemeni population in South Shields or the Chinese of Stowell Street in Newcastle, or government resettlement policies corresponding with different global events, for example, current refugees from the Sudanese war, following a wave of Kurdish refugees from conflict in the Levant. These new ethnicities become settled and exist as different (“other” in sociological terms) communities next to settled white communities. For example, in Newcastle there are “newly” arrived (in the space a one generation, which is soon to become a second) African asylum seekers in Cowgate and Walker and Romanis in Benwell; there are also much older populations who have been in the North East for generations, such as the Pakistanis in the West End of Newcastle and Middlesbrough, and the Orthodox Jewish population of Gateshead (Appendix 1). As such, in many cases they are delimited, almost identifiable with a border, and as was the case in the analysis of the Oldham riots in 2001, many communities are living separate, side-by-side existences but rarely coming together. In other individual cases, which may exist as isolated instances, such as a marriage or a family moves from other areas, or for professional or educational reasons, people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities interact on a more individual level within in the communities where they live and work.

In this diversity and inclusion report written for the Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland, we have attempted to capture the lived experience of people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups in our region. In order to contain and focus this report, we have concentrated our research on the lived experiences of BAME communities on Tyneside and have worked in partnership with a local voluntary sector organisation, Riverside Community Health Project, to do this.

A note on methodology

This report has been conducted by a North East social research sector specialist between February and July 2020. The COVID-19 lockdown happened at the start of the research cutting short face-to-face contact with BAME groups we had seen in Newcastle. As such we took a slightly different approach, working through the agencies they use and their representatives. We also looked at a unique and rich local dataset, Signal, which we discuss later in the report.

The community representatives we consulted were service users of Riverside Health, who accessed language classes and received health and well-being support from Riverside workers. These representatives came from an incoming population from Africa, the Middle East and parts of Europe (Albania, Romania), either escaping persecution or in pursuit of a better life and standard of living; some with low levels of English, others fluent. As a group, they know what it was like as an incoming person of different ethnicity into an unfamiliar and sometimes hostile situation, some with no/limited resources. We talked to people who had been living in the locality for up to 13 years, and others who had recently arrived. It is their comments that are presented throughout the report. We also look at the role of voluntary and community sector agencies and thus at the potential role of philanthropy.

¹ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest>

What is life like for people from BAME communities?

We have found that where BAME communities (especially those that are new) interface with existing communities then life can be difficult, especially when the effects of racism and poverty combine.

Life is more difficult for those who have no family and the scarcity of social networks and support increases stress and pressure. Anji says:

It's sometimes hard, sometimes easy ... you never have any time for yourself.

Newcomers to Newcastle emphasised the importance of their children in the decision to move to the UK. Self-sacrifice and hardship were felt to be worth it for a better life for their children. It was reported by parents that they felt that life was generally easier for them. Layla and Anji said:

If it was just me and my husband I would have stayed in my country, I came here for my children.
Life is better for them, they have friends they go to school, it's easy for them.

The daily experience of racism

Racist behaviour from local resident communities can be experienced on a daily basis, with children and young people being mentioned as particular perpetrators of racist behaviour. For example, Misha and Ali say:

Every day we experience racism.
I was walking behind two girls, and they were smoking and flicking ash at me.

The experience of racism is increased by the degree to which somebody does not look White British, in particular if wearing Islamic identifying clothing, such as the hijab or headscarf, for example, an Albanian had never experienced racism, whereas somebody from Iraq experiences it regularly. Muslims were most likely to experience racism. Fati and Eli said:

How different you look, makes a big difference ... once I had my scarf pulled from my hair.

In the estate, people are impolite, making me feel scared, this makes me lose confidence.

Racism causes fear

The experience of racism is common and influences the behaviour of people who are from Black, Asian Minority Ethnic Communities. Racism not only affects those who experience it but also those who hear about it and it impacts upon their daily lives and routines. Anji and Diba said:

I hear about this a lot and I get scared, it makes me scared to go out with my little kids.

I fear for my kids going to school on their own.

Racism leads to isolation

As a result of the experience of racism and the fear it creates amongst people, it can lead them to remove themselves from community activity. People report it often curtails their activity, reducing their role and influence in the community. Diba and Fati said:

I prefer to stay at home when I hear this.

When this happens, I'm going to my house and stay there, and makes me feel scared.

Racism creates dependency

As a result of the racism and fear caused by racism, women report having to wait for their husbands to accompany them when they wish to go somewhere in public. Elaheh and Anji said:

I hear about this and I get scared to go out with my little kid without my husband. If ever I want to go somewhere, I must wait for him.

Often, I will not go out without my husband.

The search for employment

As we can see from other local data (see below), striving for an improved quality of life is a high priority and the reason why many people came to live in Newcastle.

There was a frustration that the level of spoken and written English held people back when looking for a comparable position to the one they had when they were in their country of origin. People reported having senior positions but being unable to take up similar posts in this country. Rani and Elois said:

In Iran I was a supervisor in a safe house but when I came to the UK, I could not get job like this, so have to work at a low level.

If your level of English is not good enough, then you cannot get this job I have 10 years of experience in my country.

The importance of English speaking

For those coming to the United Kingdom, where English is not spoken, learning the language is key to assimilation and integration; it is a foundational stage in social and professional life satisfaction.

Language skills can be difficult for BAME women, especially those who have come from a patriarchal society and accompanied by a male partner and their family. Women can find themselves living in the UK for a number of years and being unable to speak English as a result of limited interaction between themselves and others from the settled community being permitted. There are many real and potential dangers within this situation, including perpetuating controlling and abusive behaviour from the males in the household, deteriorating mental health and people never reaching their potential.

The experience of happiness

During a group, we took a straw poll using a 0 to 10 scale, with 10 being positive, on life satisfaction. The average score for people was six out of 10. Women reported feeling happy that they lived in a country where women's rights were a high priority, unlike from some of their countries that they came from with repressive regimes. People reported being happy to be in an English language class with other people similar to themselves. Creating friends and connections was considered vital to the resettlement process and feeling like you belong to a community and it was expressed as a priority. People found a shortage here, i.e. opportunities to meet people, and one which they wished could be improved (and a function of Riverside Health that they really appreciated). Many people said they feel lonely. Eli said:

Mostly it's a hard life, especially if you don't have any family, and no friends, it is difficult.

There was an expression of lost confidence in individuals as a result of the impact of the collection of issues experienced in west Newcastle: unable to communicate; little understanding and knowledge of services and systems; being without family; working at a lower grade or different profession; the experience of racism; and the effects of poverty. Anji said:

In my country, I was a very confident person, but now I have lost my confidence...

in the following section, we use a local dataset to increase our understanding of the daily lives of people from BAME communities.

Signal²

Riverside Health has been using Signal to help them in the work they do with BAME service users.

Signal is a measure of poverty and a methodology to help people get out of poverty. It enables people to assess their level of poverty and to carry out personalised strategies to overcome their specific situations/deprivations. The system works through a user completing forms on a computer or phone, mostly in the company of a support worker, where they go through six thematic areas (see table 1). This result is the creation of a *Lifemap* which contains priorities which they and their support organisation works through. The objective is to change thinking and behaviour by focussing time and effort on the underlying causes of poverty, not the symptoms. Going through the process creates understanding, agency and control for households and also allows organisations to redefine or refine their own social goals and approach. It is fundamentally a participatory and democratic process, bringing service users and service providers together at the same level, representing a redistribution of power in communities.

Riverside Health has been one of four organisations operating in the same locality working with similar BAME populations (the others being Jobs Employment Training (JET project), the Millin Centre and Reviving The Heart of the West End). These, along with Transmit Enterprise CIC, have given us access to this data³

Table 1 Categories within Signal



which provides a useful context to the daily lives of BME populations. Using data provided by signal, we can expand our sample and look at issues affecting BAME communities across the entire West End of Newcastle.

Who are we talking about?

The local data is similar to the patterns we have seen in the face to face work: the majority of people are from the Middle East, particularly Iran and Syria, and Africa, especially Sudan. Employment amongst groups run at between 12 and 2 percent with Africans more likely to be in work (about 11% of Africans are employed), than those from the Middle East (~2%). Africans are also less likely to be in receipt of social welfare payments (34%) compared to those from the Middle East (43%). In terms of education, between a quarter and a third have completed university, although an equal number did not complete school and so have no qualifications. People are living in the community in either social and private rented housing.

What are the priorities?

When we looked at the priorities across the group, we could identify two sets of priorities expressed through their Lifemaps; one group of three high priorities and the other a group of three priorities. These are common to all ethnicities and both genders. The three very high priorities are:

- Increasing household money (above the poverty line)

² This has been developed by Poverty Stoptlight (<http://www.povertystoplight.org/en/>), an international movement of organisations committed to poverty elimination. In the UK, this is

delivered by Transmit Enterprise CIC (<https://clearsignal.org>), who provide training and support for organisations.

³ Consisting of 145 surveys, mostly from Middle East and Africa and a 55/45 male to female ratio.

- Diversifying sources of income household
- Registering to vote

The three priorities are:

- Household insurance
- Increasing family savings
- Increasing knowledge and skills in order to generate income.

These are expressed amidst a range of other needs, including conflict solving, entertainment and stable housing (see appendix 2).

When we overlay these issues with those that came up in the group discussions, we see a preoccupation with working towards improving their standard of living and increasing earnings into the household. This was expressed in the group conversations as being behind the desire to improve levels of English; it was identified by members of the group that insufficient levels of English created the blockage to finding employment and thereby increasing household income. The issue of household insurance became apparent during the creation of the *Lifemaps*; households often did not have insurance as a result of the expense, and as such felt vulnerable to theft or fire. Insurance is an example of a “hidden barrier”: not having insurance can contribute to social isolation and can prohibit people from progressing to employment opportunities, e.g. because fear of being burgled can mean that people are unwilling to leave their house to attend “back-to-work” programmes⁴.

It is noteworthy that registering to vote is a high priority as it is indicative of settlement/being settled, and particularly important for women who recognise the importance of voice and influence (which may have been repressed in their own countries).

The impact of COVID-19

People from BAME communities are at least twice the risk of death from COVID-19 than other ethnicities and this is after the social determinants of health are taken into account⁵.

However, people from BAME communities are more likely to live in areas of deprivation, live in persistent poverty (one in four compared to one in 10 for White British households) and more likely to have pre-existing health conditions, e.g. Type 2 diabetes is more prevalent among people of South Asian, Chinese, African–Caribbean and black African descent; higher rates of some serious mental illness such as schizophrenia are consistently reported⁶. These combined factors increased both risk and fear during the pandemic.

BAME communities in the North East are more vulnerable to crisis events such as COVID-19. A lack of resilience to shock is the result of combinations of inadequate social networks, poor literacy, lack of knowledge of service networks and other effects of poverty. There have been particular problems around communication and accessible information for those with low levels of English literacy. As such, there have been increased levels of anxiety and concern within communities who are unaware of what is going on and how to access basic needs.

As we have seen in other areas, the local voluntary and community sector have insured that the vulnerable or in our communities are taken care of (see following section).

⁴ R.Webb. Pers. Comm. 03.08.20.

⁵<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/methodologies/coronavirusrelateddeathsbyethnicgroupenglandandwalesmethodology>

⁶ HealthWatch Gateshead. 2017. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Groups, Health Needs Assessment

The role voluntary and community sector

There are a number of organisations across the region that provide services, ranging from advocacy to peer support to education, to BAME communities in need of support and assistance.

These include organisations in: Newcastle, such as West End Refugee Services, JET (Jobs Education & Training), Reviving the Heart of the West End, The Millin Charity, Acane (African Community Advice North East), Haref, Angelou Centre, Action Foundation: Stockton, Halo; Sunderland, International Community Organisation; South Shields, Sangini, Young Asian Voices; Gateshead, GEM Arts; Middlesbrough, Open Door, BME Network. There are a host of other “non-BAME” organisations which provide focussed BAME services such as law centres and rape crisis organisations across the region. These organisations find demand outstrips supply, a number of their work is complicated by Intersectionality (additional factors which increase vulnerabilities, such as being disabled and poor or being a black woman) and they often work with meagre resources and where funding is tight.

As mentioned, the voluntary and community sector has been instrumental in the effective response to supporting vulnerable community members at this time of pandemic. Riverside Health and its local partners have responded quickly and effectively to the COVID-19 crisis by identifying and supporting the most vulnerable. These have included many members of the local BAME community, including those we have consulted with.

Conclusion

This report has just presented a brief picture presented from one community in the north east. During the consultation we asked those community members to think of experiences which are common to them as members of local BAME communities. However, there must be the caveat that other communities may have different experiences of daily life.

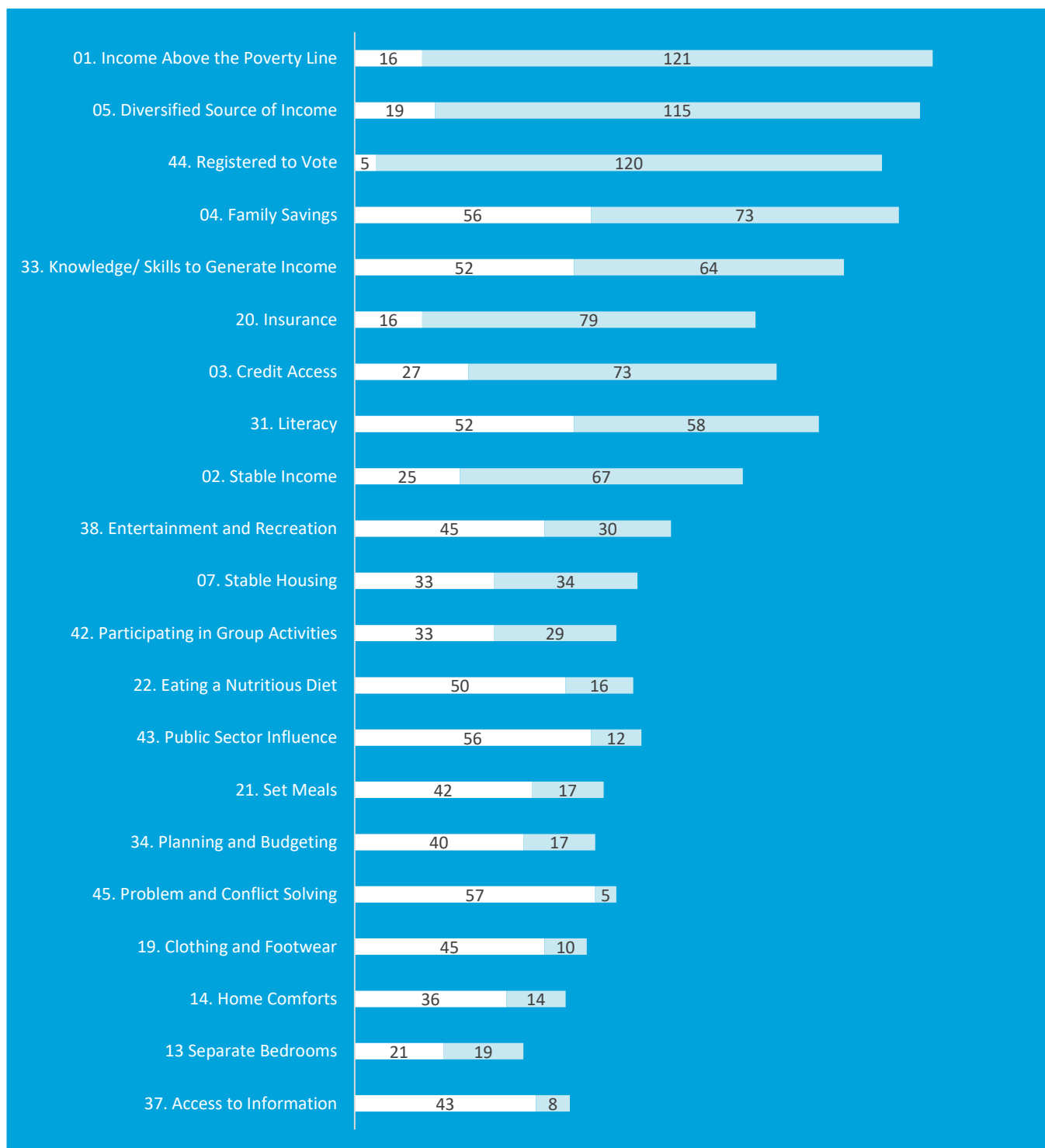
Taking the North East as a whole, the area has changed from being predominantly white, 30 years ago, to being increasingly ethnically mixed, largely as a result of immigration and asylum. Government resettlement policies of housing those seeking asylum in disadvantaged areas, creates clear tension between local communities, who think incomers receive preferential treatment in key basic needs areas, such as housing and benefits, which in turn fuels racism. However, from these situations of conflict come first generation children who grow up together, form friendships and other positive relationships (along with the experience of racism). It is from here where integration comes and this can be encouraged and speeded up, or not.

Appendix

1: Origin locations of BAME populations



2: Ranked priorities, 2020



Let's talk

We hope that this report will inspire more of you to give to causes that address diversity and equality issues.

If you would like to discuss this report and what you could do to help, please contact us:

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