

Letter to Mayor of Tower Hamlets about possible discrimination around housing

Sian Berry or type unknown

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Complaints by Somali residents about the Housing Department in Tower Hamlets Council

Dear Mayor Rahman,

Re: Complaints by Somali residents about the Housing Department in Tower Hamlets Council

On 16 May 2023, I had a meeting at City Hall with 14 women from the Somali community in Tower Hamlets. They all shared with me their very similar stories of poor experiences over many years in connection with staff in the Council's Housing Department including:

- Bidding since 2010, 2012 and 2015 to no avail, with one woman not being offered any properties for three years.
- Bidding for seven years, yet still only achieving positions such as 300, or moving higher temporarily and slipping back again.
- Reports of bids being 'skipped' if the bidder places in the top positions for a property, by a number of women.
- Being offered unsuitable upper floor properties despite having a child with mobility issues.
- Being offered a property, filling out the necessary forms, then being told: "as all the necessary details hadn't been supplied," that the home is no longer available.
- Providing medical notes multiple times and being told they were not received.
- Being moved into temporary accommodation while their existing home has repairs carried out to fix damp and mould work, and then having to move every week for three months into different hotels all over London.

- Inability to get through to officers, officers not returning calls, and when they do, sometimes being abusive and aggressive. Officers have told some women that there is no point in bidding as there are no homes available, that they do not have time for a resident, and have also outright refused to help them.
- Maintenance issues, such as damp and mould, particularly in private rented sector temporary accommodation that is not inspected properly or chased up by council officers.
- Housing accounts being paused with no explanation, with some women reporting their accounts show they have refused bids without them having made any bids or viewed properties.

In addition, the women shared details of what they describe as discrimination against them because they are Somali. Examples include:

- The system being confusing for those people for whom English is not their first language, and the provision of translation services for Somali residents being inadequate.
- Being asked about their skin colour.
- Being placed in a hotel with no halal food available and being told children do not need halal food.
- Differential treatment and a perception that if you know the right person on the Housing team, you can get a home.
- Being ignored by Housing officers because of their background.
- Having additional bureaucracy applied because of their background.

Finally, the women tell me they have tried to have direct meetings with you, but have been unable to make appointments, or been told by your team just to keep bidding, or go to another town, such as Bradford.

It would be useful to know how you monitor the success rate of people of different backgrounds applying for Council homes. Would you be able to share with me the data that Tower Hamlets collects on these metrics?

And, given this testimony from this number of women – who tell me they know many others who have had the same experiences – I hope you will investigate the potential for systemic issues within the Housing Department at Tower Hamlets Council.

I look forward to hearing from you shortly about this very serious issue.

Yours sincerely,

Sian Berry

Green Party Member of the London Assembly

cc Cllr Nathalie Bienfait, Bow West ward, Tower Hamlets

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