



The Housing Pathways of Somali New Immigrants in Sheffield

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Introduction

This report presents an overview of the experiences of Somali new immigrants in Sheffield interviewed as part of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded project exploring the housing experiences of new immigrants during the first five years of settlement in the UK.

In-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with 39 new immigrants, including nine Somali people - three women and six men, aged between 19 and 42 years old. All nine had arrived into the UK as asylum seekers and eight had been granted leave to remain in the UK (one respondent was appealing against a failed asylum application). Seven were currently living alone (although three had families living elsewhere). Eight out of nine were living in social rented accommodation (one in a temporary property after being made homeless) and one was staying in temporary private rented accommodation arranged by a refugee support agency.

The History of Somali Immigration into Sheffield

Sheffield's Somali population is thought to date back at least to the 1930s, when Somali seamen who had originally settled in port locations were drawn to industrial centres, such as Sheffield, by employment opportunities. These early settlers were followed in the 1950s and 60s by migrants who moved to the city to fill shortages in local industries. The Somali population has grown dramatically since the 1980s, with the arrival into the city of people who fled Somalia following the outbreak of civil war and came to the UK seeking asylum. In recent years, Somali households are also reported to have moved to Sheffield from other EU states (in particular, the Netherlands and Sweden).

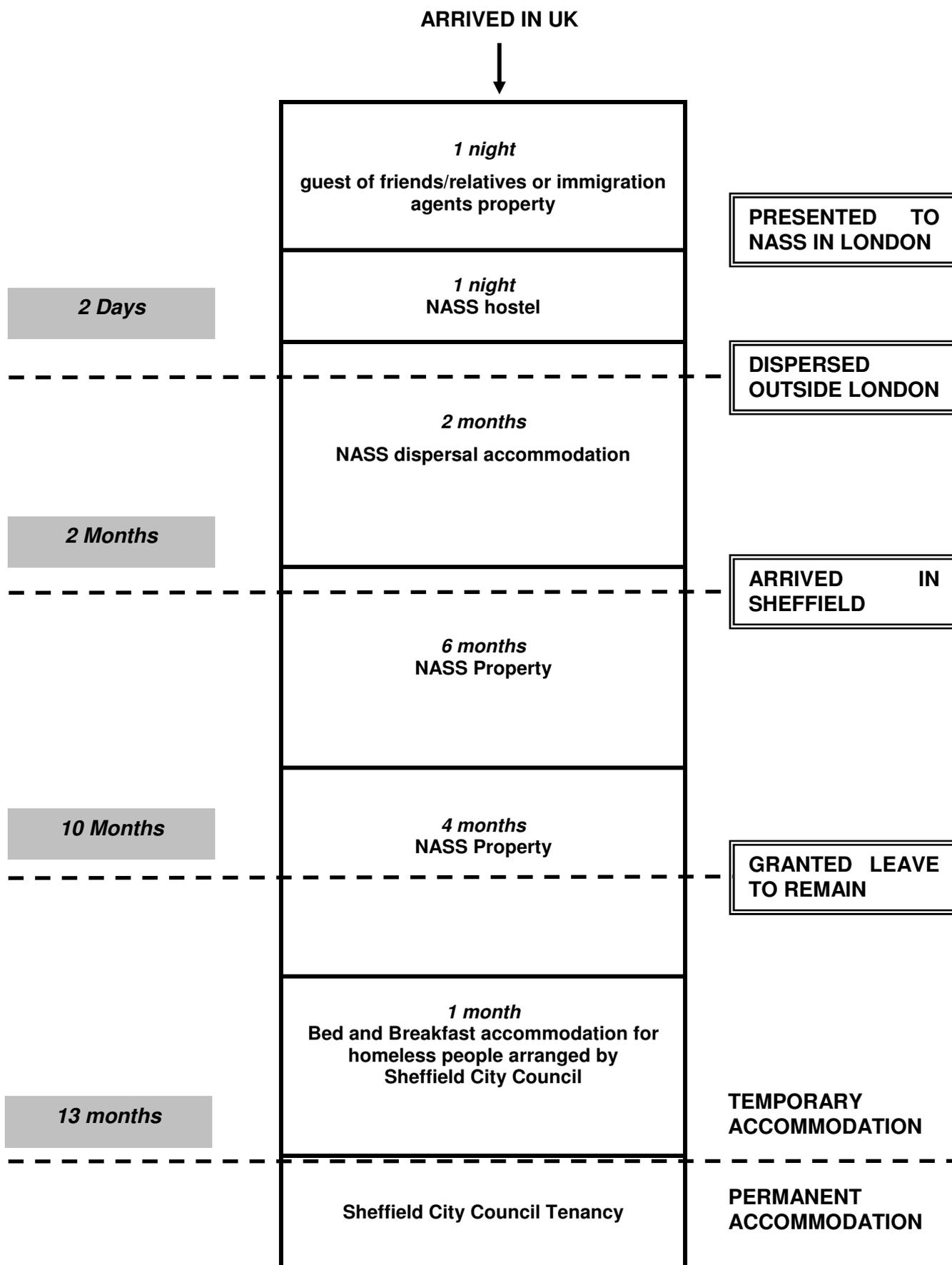
The Housing Careers of Somali New Immigrants

Key Findings:

- the package of rights and opportunities associated with being an asylum seeker was an important determinant of the arrival experiences of the Somali new immigrants
- most Somali new immigrants were directed to Sheffield by the NASS dispersal programme. Since arriving in Sheffield all had decided to 'hunker down' and remain
- Somali new immigrants followed a far longer and more complicated pathway into permanent accommodation than the other new immigrants interviewed.

Somali respondents had followed a longer and more complex pathway into permanent accommodation than the other new immigrant populations studied, moving house far more frequently, living in many more locations (within and beyond Sheffield) and having to wait many more months before securing longer term accommodation. Central to this distinctive early housing career was the status of Somali respondents as asylum seekers. With limited rights of access to the opportunities afforded by the welfare state, barred from formal employment and with few personal resources, respondents had little option other than to approach NASS for accommodation and assistance while they waited for a decision on their application for asylum.

A Typical Somali Housing Career: From Arrival to Secure Accommodation



Almost immediately upon presenting to NASS, either in London or Liverpool, respondents were dispersed to other towns and cities and placed in temporary accommodation. Sometimes living in hostel accommodation and sometimes sharing a house or flat with other people seeking asylum, respondents passed through numerous temporary accommodation settings in different towns and cities while awaiting a decision on their application for asylum. By the time they finally received notification that they had been granted leave to remain in the UK, eight out of nine respondents were living in NASS temporary accommodation in Sheffield in inner city neighbourhoods such as Pitsmoor and Burngreave.

Upon being granted leave to remain in the UK, they were given 28 days to vacate their NASS accommodation. Most Somali respondents approached and were accepted by the City Council as homeless and in priority need of housing, under the terms of the homelessness legislation, and moved into hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation, while awaiting an offer of long term accommodation. All seven Somali respondents who were offered a council or housing association tenancy accepted and moved into flat accommodation. At this point in their housing career, Somali respondents had, on average, been resident in the UK for 13 months and lived in five different temporary accommodation settings. One respondent, however, was not recognised as being in priority need under the homelessness legislation following receipt of a positive decision to remain in the UK and ended up sleeping rough.

All Somali new immigrants accepted the first offer of permanent accommodation they received from the City Council or a housing association. In sharp contrast to the diverse, multi-ethnic inner city neighbourhoods where their temporary accommodation had been located, many of the Somali new immigrants interviewed found themselves living on council estates with little history of minority ethnic settlement and limited experience of accommodating diversity and difference.

Housing Situations and Experiences

Key findings:

- Somali new immigrants reported housing experiences (poor living conditions, restricted choices and insecurity) similar to the recognised experiences of other disadvantaged groups within the housing system (in particular, homeless people).

The pathway through temporary accommodation situations (arranged by NASS), into a more secure accommodation situation (typically a council tenancy) was often fraught with difficulties. Two particular problems were evident within the housing experiences of respondents: insecurity and poor living conditions.

During the early years of settlement in the UK Somali new immigrants were reliant on the assistance of key institutions - in particular, NASS and the City Council - for accommodation. The decisions and actions of these institutions emerged as a key determinant of the housing situations and residential security of respondents, which in some cases led to insecurity and homelessness:

- Farduus, a 32 year old woman, arrived into the UK seeking asylum. Her claim for asylum was unsuccessful and she left the NASS accommodation where she had been staying in Sheffield. Over the next two and half years she stayed in 14 accommodation situations and countless homeless situations (including nine months sleeping rough), moving frequently between Sheffield and London, while appealing against her asylum decision
- Yousef, a 19 year old man, had been granted leave to remain in the UK. Upon receiving his positive asylum decision he was required to leave his NASS

accommodation in 28 days. he duly approached the City Council for help but was not recognised as in priority need under the homeless legislation. Yousef slept rough for two weeks, until he was put in touch with a solicitor by a homeless advice worker, who subsequently advocated on his behalf and managed to secure a place in a hostel arranged by the local authority. Two weeks later he was offered a permanent tenancy by the council

- Hussein, a 37 year old man, was granted leave to remain in the UK, was recognised as homeless by the council and subsequently moved into a ground floor council flat on a peripheral estate. Hussein recounted how he did not want to move into the area, having lived in temporary accommodation in a more diverse neighbourhood adjacent to the city centre. However, he reported being informed that if he did not accept the offer he would lose his right to housing. Soon after moving into the property Hussein started to experience racist harassment, which escalated into violence, which led to him fleeing his home with the help of the police and moving into a homeless hostel.

The Somali new immigrants did not readily raise concerns about the accommodation situations they had lived in since arriving in the UK. However, questioning revealed people to have been exposed to poor living conditions in temporary and permanent accommodation. Problems with privacy and restrictions on personal freedoms were reported in hostel and bed and breakfast accommodation. The behaviour of other residents was also frequent cause for concern in shared accommodation and problems were reported living in mixed gender hostels. Poor physical conditions and failings with basic services (such as heating) were reported by people who had lived in a temporary flat or house provided by NASS (when applying for asylum) or by the city council (while awaiting a tenancy offer). The most commonly reported problem with permanent accommodation was the lack of furniture - most Somali respondents' first tenancy was an unfurnished property with no fridge, cooker or furniture. Respondents reported being unsure where to go for cheap furniture or how to get financial help to purchase white goods. Some people survived for days and even weeks without such basic necessities.

The Importance of Place

Key findings:

- place was more important than housing to the residential preferences of the Somali new immigrants
- affiliation to particular places often developed during the first weeks and months of settlement, when people were living in NASS accommodation
- the Somali new immigrants had definite views about parts of the city that they did not want to live, typically because of fears for their safety.

Somali new immigrants attached great importance to nature of the place where they lived, prioritising place concerns above housing issues when discussing residential preferences and mobility. For these new immigrants the priority was to negotiate access to particular places within the city where they 'fitted in' and which provided access to community facilities and social and cultural networks which were perceived to be crucial to their well-being, sense of belonging and security, and to their residential satisfaction. Over time, as awareness of the city developed, this prioritising of particular types of place was translated into preferences for specific locations (for example, Burngreave, Pitsmoor, Upperthorpe, Netherthorpe, Broomhill). These mental maps of the city were also informed by personal experience and second hand stories of the problems that Somali new immigrants can encounter living in what might be referred to as 'new contact zones of immigration' - areas with little history of accommodating difference and diversity - such as peripheral social housing estates.

The experience and fear of harassment was reported to be impacting on the freedoms of Somali new immigrants living in such areas. Respondents reported devising safety strategies, which involved avoiding certain streets at certain times of the day or avoiding being out and about in the local neighbourhood at certain hours of the day. Some Somali respondents even reported spending little or no time in their local neighbourhood, frequently travelling across the city to spend the daytime in neighbourhoods where other Somali people were living and they recounted feeling a sense of belonging and safety, only returning home to sleep.

Engaging with the Housing System

Key Findings

- the early housing careers and associated settlement patterns of Somali new immigrants reflect the decisions of key institutions (NASS and the City Council)
- through time, Somali new immigrants increasing choice about where they live, as new rights are secured and resources are accumulated
- engagement with housing agencies (such as social landlords) was often dependent upon information and advice received from both formal and informal sources.

Somali new immigrants were often reliant upon their own resourcefulness to find a place to stay immediately upon arriving in the UK. In several cases respondents found themselves outside Heathrow airport with no money, no possessions, limited English language skills, nowhere to stay, and no knowledge of where to turn for help. Shortly after entering the UK, however, all Somali respondents had approached NASS seeking asylum and were bound into the dispersal programme.

Somali respondents had little opportunity to choose where they were dispersed or what accommodation they lived in, although there were examples of respondents asking to be dispersed to Sheffield after hearing that the city has a relatively large Somali population. Once granted leave to remain in the UK and required to vacate their NASS accommodation, Somali respondents were advised by NASS to approach the local authority as homeless. Two people were not recognised as being in priority need and became homeless. The other respondents typically reported being offered tenancies on peripheral estates largely unknown to them and which they had not identified as a preferred location during the application process. Having 'gone through the motions' of selecting areas of preference only to be allocated a property in an completely different neighbourhood they were understandably unimpressed with this outcome. However, under the impression that turning down the first tenancy they were offered would result in them losing their 'priority need' status and their right to housing under the terms of the homelessness legislation, they all accepted this offer.

Somali refugees had moved relatively frequently (although never between tenures) since being granted leave to remain in the UK, often in a bid to escape problems (including harassment) in their local neighbourhood. Three forms of support, advice or assistance were reported to be critical in allowing Somali new immigrants engage with key institutions in the housing system and move house:

- *informal support provided by kith and kin* - including Somali-led community groups that provided an alternative to and a bridge into statutory provision
- *chance encounters with key actors or gatekeepers* - sympathetic to an individual's plight and willing and able to assist

- *engagement with third party advocates* - able to draw on professional expertise and standing to challenge the decision-making of housing agencies, such as social landlords

There was also some evidence that Somali new immigrants benefited from long-standing presence of a Somali community within the city, local agencies, for example, being geared up to provide translation and interpretation services.

About the Study Team

The study was undertaken by Rionach Casey, Kesia Reeve and David Robinson from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University. The Somali interviews were conducted in partnership with Hassan Aden and Kaltum Osman Rivers.

For more information

The full report - The Housing Pathways of New Immigrants - by David Robinson, Kesia Reeve and Rionach Casey is available free to download from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation; www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop. The summary reports profiling the experiences of the different new immigrant populations surveyed (Liberian, Somali, Pakistani and Polish) are available to download free from the CRESR website; http://www.shu.ac.uk/cresr/publications/publication_downloads.html.