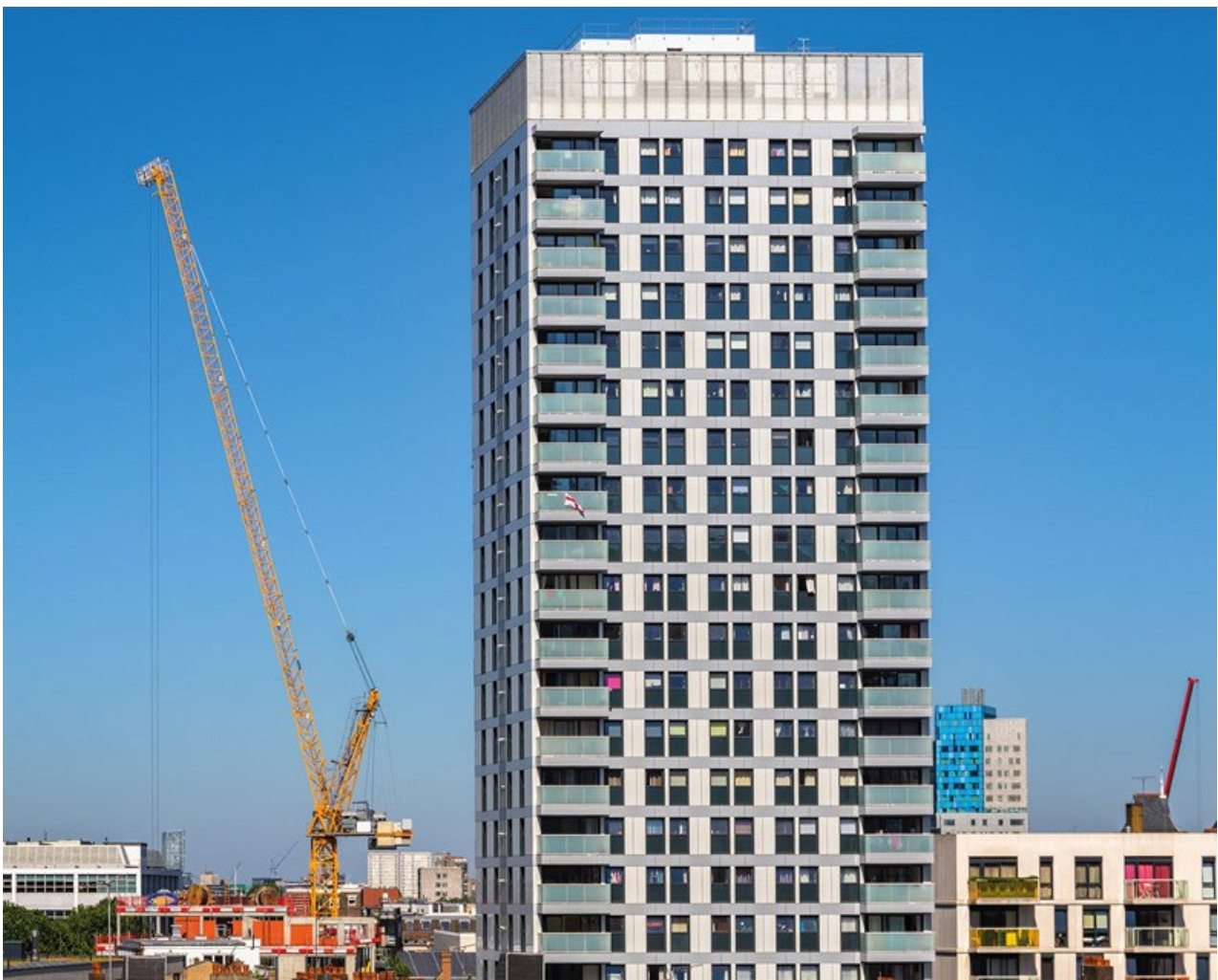


Research summary

Building Safety Regulator: Insight into non-English speaking residents of high-rise buildings

Insight and Service Design Team, Health and Safety Executive
Research conducted by Kantar Public

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Commissioning

This report summarises the findings of a qualitative research study conducted by Kantar Public between 1st October 2022 and 29th March 2023. The research was commissioned by the Insight and Service Design team in the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The contents of the report, including any opinions and/or conclusions expressed, are the views of the agency alone and do not necessarily represent the views of the Health and Safety Executive.

Background and objectives

Business context

Following the Grenfell Tower tragedy in 2017, the Government commissioned an Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety led by Dame Judith Hackitt. This review found that the current system for ensuring fire and structural safety in high-rise residential buildings was not fit for purpose and made 53 recommendations to address these failings.

Subsequently, the government introduced the Building Safety Act 2022. This established a new, independent Building Safety Regulator (BSR). It also created new legal requirements that apply to higher-risk buildings (HRBs) as defined. Some of these new laws are already in force and others are expected to come into operation in 2024. The intention of these new requirements is to make sure that residents of higher-risk buildings are safe, and feel safe, in their homes.

BSR recognises that people who speak little or no English and live in HRBs may face additional barriers in relation to the new legislation. Communication barriers they face are likely to have implications for residents' ability to access building safety information, raise concerns about day-to-day safety, and understand and respond to an emergency situation.

Research objectives

HSE commissioned a two-phased qualitative research project to explore the experiences and requirements of non-English speaking residents living in HRBs so that BSR services and interventions can be designed to ensure these residents feel safe and are safe in their homes.

Research methodology

Phase one

Phase one involved a review of existing research on non-English speaking residents living in HRBs¹. In addition, ten 60-minute online depth interviews were conducted with stakeholders who have experience of engaging with non-English speakers to understand how other organisations and services currently communicate with this audience group.

Participants were:

- 1 central government department (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, DLUHC)
- 2 executive non-departmental public bodies (the Health and Safety Executive, HSE; the Housing Ombudsman)
- 2 regional/local government authorities (London Borough of Camden Resident Safety Engagement; Birmingham City Council Public Health)
- 2 landlord engagement stakeholders (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Consultancy for Tenant Engagement, Positive about Inclusion; Tenant Engagement Experts, TPAS)
- 1 community engagement consultant
- 2 community group representatives (Chinese Community Centre, Birmingham; Lansbury Estate Muslim Association, Tower Hamlets)

Phase one aimed to understand the profile of non-English speaking HRB residents, including the prevalence of commonly-spoken community languages across England, and to identify any broad experiences and characteristics of residents that may impact on engagement that differ from the broader HRB resident population.

It also aimed to identify good practice principles and examples in relation to how best to engage with and run services for residents who speak little English.

¹ Underpinning Resident Insight Research, BMG and Kantar Public, September 2022: [Insight into High-Rise Building Residents Research Summary \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk/research/insights/insight-into-high-rise-building-residents-research-summary)

Phase two

Phase two involved 22 non-English speaking HRB participants, who were recruited to four, language-specific, 90-minute focus groups:

- A Polish language group in North London (6 participants)
- A Bengali language group in East London (6 participants)
- A Cantonese language group in Birmingham (4 participants)
- A Somali language group in West London (6 participants).

The language groups were selected with reference to available data regarding language prevalence and insights from phase one, to ensure a range of cultural insights could be elicited across the sample.

Participants were recruited by local intermediaries working within the community. All four focus groups were held face-to-face in local settings. Three groups were moderated by bi-lingual moderators and one group (Cantonese) was moderated in English and translated by an interpreter.

The focus groups explored communication and engagement requirements in relation to BSR, such as the resident complaints process and residents' rights and responsibilities; good practice principles identified in phase one; and experiences of high-rise living, including any social and cultural influences that may affect engagement with building safety. By exploring the experiences of these residents, the research sought to identify the full range of issues (beyond being unable to speak English) that may limit residents' ability to feel safe and engage with building safety.

It is important to emphasise that this was a small-scale qualitative research study and, as such, was limited in the number of communities and participants that could be involved. Findings should, therefore, be taken as indicative of a range of views, rather than as representative of the full spectrum of non-English speaking HRB residents.

Main findings

Context for non-English speaking residents

Census data shows that 9% of the general population do not speak English as a first language and, of these, around 20% cannot speak English well or at all². Previous research amongst HRB residents highlights that this figure is three times higher for high-rise residents (27.6% do not speak English as a main language). Previous research amongst HRB residents also highlights that non-English speaking residents are more likely to be social renters and live in multiple occupancy dwellings³. Furthermore, they are less likely to be in full-time work and use the internet, have lower awareness of BSR, and are less likely to know whether their building has flammable cladding.

Stakeholder interviews during phase one corroborated a number of these findings. Additionally, some stakeholders highlighted that while certain non-English speaking residents may be able to verbalise some words in English, literacy levels may be low not only in English but also in their own native language; especially for older residents. Stakeholders also emphasised that, where non-English speakers have a long-term health condition and/or a disability, this compounds barriers to communication and engagement as it creates additional accessibility considerations.

In considering propensity to engage with building owners, stakeholders reported that non-English speakers have often had negative experiences of interactions with authority figures. For example, stakeholders mentioned that non-English speakers may feel that the way in which some organisations engage with them appears to them to reflect some form of underlying discrimination and prejudice, and that the result of these experiences is that trust in authority is damaged. Non-English speakers' failed attempts 'to be heard' can lead to feelings of being undervalued, which can mean that some communities feel that nothing changes or that terms of engagement are set by people in positions of power.

As a result, stakeholders asserted that certain organisational factors can influence how well organisations engage and communicate with non-English speaking residents. These factors include: the extent to which leadership prioritises a culture of belonging and respect, and how this manifests at different organisational levels; whether community-based approaches to resident engagement are used; and whether recruitment and training

² 2021 Census, [Language, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk)

³ Underpinning Resident Insight Research, BMG and Kantar Public, September 2022: [Insight into High-Rise Building Residents Research Summary \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk)

strategies are in place so that a workforce reflects and has some understanding of residents' lived experiences.

The findings from phase one identified considerations and approaches to communicating with non-English speakers that fall across a spectrum, ranging from translation of information to targeted outreach. Examples cited included:

- Online translation facilities, such as Browsealoud, that enable online content to be audibly translated into 99 different languages
- Commissioning of formal translation services, rather than relying on residents' family members, or Google Translate to translate information such as leaflets, letters and surveys, which are available online, via social media, in community spaces and distributed via mailouts and door drops
- The use of QR codes that are added to leaflets or posters to allow readers to access up-to-date content in multiple languages
- The enhancement of messages using visuals and infographics
- Service provision in residents' first language, such as live webchat, text messaging facilities and virtual face-to-face conversations, so that residents can report and book home repairs and discuss housing issues with a member of the housing team
- Outreach in residents' first language provided by bilingual staff, interpreters, community connectors or partnerships with trusted sources, such as faith groups, who facilitate conversations at community events and spaces, estate walkabouts and via door-knocking

Stakeholders felt that outreach is a worthwhile channel to communicate with non-English speakers because it supports engagement and can make experiences of interactions with authority more positive and meaningful for residents, and ensures cultural appropriateness. Engagement can build trust, by being open and honest, and by finding solutions from within the community. It can improve residents' experiences of service providers by demonstrating a willingness to listen, work equitably together and engage with residents on their terms. It can also create meaningful dialogue by listening to residents and dedicating time for them to ask questions and input ideas.

In addition to this, digital and social media platforms were recognised as a valuable channel for communicating and engaging with non-English speaking residents when used in conjunction with other channels (e.g. outreach, digital and print), thereby leveraging a multi-channel approach. The factors that stakeholders believed were important to consider when developing digital engagement were: digital access and the devices and models frequently used; as well as platform appropriateness, e.g. which digital platforms are used in residents' native countries; and who are trusted messengers for the group in question.

Experiences of high-rise living

Feelings of safety

Phase two highlighted that, as for the wider HRB resident population, building safety (as defined by HSE) had very low salience among non-English speaking research participants. Rather than being associated with fire safety and evacuation plans, it was linked to issues of security, such as crime and anti-social behaviour, or issues with amenity maintenance and repairs.

Knowledge of basic safety principles and systems was low. For example, participants assumed that Fire and Rescue Services, rather than building managers and residents, had responsibility for fire safety and some were unfamiliar with sprinkler and smoke detector systems (what they are, how they work and who is responsible for testing and maintaining them). Variations in this knowledge were apparent in the research sample. For example, Cantonese participants were not aware of the 'stay put' policy; and Bengali and Somali participants believed that residents could use a lift to evacuate a high-rise building in an emergency.

Low levels of proficiency in English affected how safe residents felt. The lack of opportunity to discuss safety with building managers in their own language decreased feelings of safety for many participants. Some non-English speakers described how they did not understand why building work was being carried out and had received no clarification or assurances from building management as to what materials were being used in remedial work or adaptations. As a result, participants reported feeling like they had very little control over their own safety in their building and home.

In addition, low confidence in calling and communicating effectively with national emergency services in an emergency situation reduced levels of safety for non-English speakers in practice. Awareness of the 999-emergency number was high, although most residents described how they were uncertain whether they would be understood by call handlers, which would deter them from calling such services. Likewise, low confidence in being able to communicate effectively in English affected residents' ability to alert other residents in their building to an emergency situation.

Raising and resolving issues

Non-English speaking residents were more likely to report both building issues and issues related to their own flat to building management than other resident types, in spite of their language barriers. For the most part they are invested in their flats and their buildings and are motivated for these to be well-maintained, safe and clean. Non-English speaking participants mentioned that they would be likely to raise issues regarding: health and safety, e.g. concerns about anti-social behaviour, security, and health matters such as damp and mould; utilities, including wider communal building services like access to hot

water, heating, broken lifts and faulty doors; and amenities, such as recycling issues and fly-tipping.

Despite low levels of English and digital confidence, most participants were aware of and familiar with different channels for reporting issues to building management and were resourceful and had generally worked out a way of doing this that suited them. Participants described using a range of channels to report an issue, such as telephone, email, face-to-face, housing apps and online portals. They were often supported in this by a family member or friend, younger or grown-up children and/or local advocacy services, e.g. the Polish Community Centre, or aided by Google Translate or conversation translation apps like 'sayhi'. It was felt that non-verbal approaches, which many non-English speakers felt more comfortable with, were discouraged by building management. However, several participants reported knowing some bilingual housing and letting staff who spoke their language.

Although the reporting process was frequently described as relatively easy, as with the wider HRB resident population, non-English speaking residents were largely dissatisfied with the response they received from building managers. Residents frequently described being ignored, receiving contradictory messages from building managers and onsite contractors, and having no opportunities to discuss issues. This led to participants feeling frustrated, that they had no control over decisions relating to their home, and limited their confidence in the quality of work; all of which eroded trust and diminished feelings of safety.

Furthermore, the cultural characteristics of non-English speakers magnified feelings of dissatisfaction. The language barrier meant that communication with contractors and following up on complaints could be harder than for English speakers. Some residents described feeling isolated and demotivated in their attempts to chase complaints. Bengali and Somali participants, in particular, felt that building managers were prejudiced against them, although participants from other communities also described instances in which they felt they had experienced discrimination, such as being accused by building management of damaging property and threatened with fines. Intersectional characteristics, such as digital exclusion and lower literacy or levels of education, exacerbated these negative experiences of non-English speaking residents' attempts at issue resolution.



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