

VOICES

FROM EXPERIENCE

Somali Community and Community Anchor — a winning combination

With the support of Broomhall Forum, Somali parents have joined together to provide a positive impact on the futures of their children and to promote community cohesion in their local community in Sheffield.

Somali parents in Broomhall, Sheffield, have formed a constituted organisation that encompasses all four local Somali groupings. This is a unique community response to the challenges that Somali parents face in bringing up their children in an inner city area. Parents from the different groups started talking a year ago and are now looking to develop a joint action plan with parents from different communities. Community cohesion is seen as key – especially with other BME communities

Broomhall lies adjacent to Sheffield city centre. It has a history of diversity in terms of the communities living there, and comprises social housing, private occupation and an increasing private rented sector.

Somali residents comprise some of the newer communities in the area, and belong to four different cultural groupings. Concerned by issues affecting and impacting upon the whole community, development work has begun to identify solutions and pave the way for a more integrated and peaceful neighbourhood.

The Broomhall Forum has been in existence for many years but until recently had struggled to find effective ways of working with people from across the Somali community to tackle issues, particularly those concerning young people.

Residents and the Community Forum have become increasingly aware of a hostile neighbourhood culture. Two recent events have catalysed community action and led to a recognition that working together is vital. Firstly, an attack on a young woman and then an ethnically based shooting. The joint response has been very positive.

The role of the residents

An initial informal grouping of Somali parents identified that their children need appropriate education and to be better integrated into the wider community. Two key community leaders have worked slowly but surely to gain support across the Somali community and formally constituted the Somali Parents Forum as an umbrella group concerned for the future of their children.

Resident concerns primarily stem from:

- the high numbers of Somali children excluded from schools

- the lack of appropriate education for children recently arrived in the UK and the subsequent poor education attainment
- inter racial tensions, and an increasing gang culture
- young people at risk particularly in relation to drugs
- lack of adult education for Somali elders
- lack of knowledge and understanding between the Somali community and service providers (including structures, systems and procedures).

Responses proposed by the Parents Forum include:

- Encouraging greater parental responsibility
- A closer relationship with schools to find joint solutions
- Contact with African Caribbean parents to create an environment in which there is greater friendship and integration between children
- Work with other BME communities and white residents to find solutions to the lack of cohesion and to create a more peaceful and creative neighbourhood

An immediate issue the Parents Forum is tackling relates to the clashes between young people travelling by bus to and from school. Flashpoints occur at bus stops and on the journey and the parents want to take some action and assert their responsibility. They have devised a bus monitoring project whereby local people will travel with the young people and deter the aggression and violence. With advice and support from the Community Forum, they applied for funding to run a pilot project. The Area Committee has agreed £8K to pay community members to act as bus monitors. The parents see this as a mutually beneficial project and hope that this will kickstart a more positive and productive relationship with the bus company and the schools in the future.

The Somali Parents Forum has taken the first steps in its own action plan. Future plans include providing access to teachers within the neighbourhood, improving training opportunities (especially IT) for young people, establishing a sewing group as a route to women's engagement, and support for young Somalis to be role models for younger children. But these parents know that there is a bigger challenge – to engage all parents in creating a cross community action plan for the neighbourhood.

The role of the community forum

Broomhall Forum is a community governed neighbourhood support agency which provides youth and community work support to the local neighbourhood.

A slow and sensitive approach has led to greater integration between the Community Forum and the Somali community. Forum staff are aware that community tensions can easily arise from one grouping within the community

being perceived to receive more support than another. They have taken a hands-off approach – constantly encouraging but only responding to needs as they are identified by the Somali parents.

It is a slow process involving gentle coaching, encouraging and persistence. The Somali community is primarily oral i.e. face to face communication is key and community meetings are therefore frequent in order that everyone can exchange information and feel involved. *"Everything needs to and has come from the parents – what they want to do, what funding they need"* (Community Worker)

A dialogue has now opened up between the community forum and the Parents Forum. Forum staff now have access to a wider range of the Somali community - there is a greater understanding of how the Broomhall Forum can operate in a way that complements Somali culture, and there are more opportunities to inform the Somali community, and sometimes challenge misunderstandings e.g. in relation to service provision in the area. Indeed, with the help of the community forum workers, a series of drop-in sessions with service providers is about to start in a Somali 'owned' centre.

This outcome is based on sensitive partnership development between Broomhall Forum and the cross tribal Somali Parents Forum. It has resulted in a win-win situation – the approach of the Forum's community workers has helped to build trust between the neighbourhood body and the Somali activists and has enabled opportunities for increased knowledge on both sides about community politics and different ways of working. The community workers have allowed themselves to be guided by community leaders e.g. effective ways to engage with the Somali community and have been clear that the parents must determine the starting point regarding their needs, the projects they want to pursue, the funding they need. Trust and respect has developed on all sides allowing a greater understanding and closer community partnership working.

The neighbourhood now has an active parents self help group which crosses cultural boundaries, and a more relevant neighbourhood body which has many members from the Somali community including a Somali director.

This study has been produced by the National Empowerment Partnership in Yorkshire and the Humber. For further information contact COGS, 0114 255 4747 or email mail@cogs.solis.co.uk