

Planning system in England is perpetuating racial inequality

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New research published by the Institute for Social Policy, Housing, Equalities Research (I-SPHERE) based at Heriot-Watt University has found that the planning process in England is reinforcing racial

inequality, despite having clear potential to support the needs of ethnic minority residents.

[The study](#), which was funded by Oak Foundation, focused on exploratory case studies and key informant interviews conducted over the past nine months.

The team found that planners and [housing](#) professionals lack the confidence, skills and resources required to actively address [racial inequality](#) in housing, perpetuating socially conservative outcomes and limiting opportunities for achieving [racial equality](#).

The findings also revealed a view within the planning profession that formal equality of treatment is sufficient in the pursuit of social justice, but it is not translating into equality of outcome for multiple groups. This means planners and housing specialists can be reluctant to address specific resident needs in policy and practice.

Public consultation opportunities were found to reinforce existing unequal power relationships by favoring those with the time, knowledge, and confidence to participate. The evidence showed that currently, not enough is being done to engage residents from ethnic minority, low-income and other less frequently heard groups.

While online forms of consultation deployed during the pandemic did go some way to improving accessibility, these in turn have the potential to reflect patterns of digital exclusion, therefore an overhaul of the process is still urgently needed.

Amy Bristow, I-SPHERE researcher based at Heriot-Watt University, said: "While the last few years has seen a positive shift towards policies that support the needs of ethnic minorities across multiple areas, accelerated by movements like Black Lives Matter, the planning system

in England has remained stoically traditional.

"This has resulted in a system that lacks any meaningful approach to tackling ingrained inequalities, and one which has remained largely unchanged for 40 years. Our research highlights that planners continue to hold a belief that equality of treatment will result in an equality of outcome; as researchers, we know this is an outdated approach that's not effective in achieving socially just results. There's currently no requirement for [local authorities](#) to include ethnic or faith groups in an assessment of housing needs. While some areas do consider the housing needs of these groups in their Strategic Housing Market Assessment, this doesn't translate into specific policies aimed at improving housing outcomes for diverse groups or communities.

"Tackling racial inequalities in housing and meeting the housing needs of ethnic minorities are not currently core aims of the planning system and are not explicitly included anywhere within the National Planning Policy Framework or Planning for the Future, the Government White Paper on planning. While our study found that planning has the potential to influence the design and quality of new housing developments to meet the cultural needs of different groups, this isn't happening often enough in practice and that has got to urgently change."

Priya Shah is founder of BAME in Property, an organization for BAME and non-BAME professionals who are passionate about increasing [ethnic diversity](#) in the property and planning sectors. She said: "I grew up in Harrow, so I've witnessed first-hand the importance of diversity in the planning process in this particular borough. This new report and through the work of BAME in Property, we are urgently calling for more diversity in property and planning to ensure the right people with different backgrounds and lived experiences are making the decisions for those most excluded from planning decisions. Focusing on the next generation of planners is key and this report's recommendations to build

diversity into the higher education curriculum should begin this academic year. We have delayed for too long and it's essential that changes are made now."

Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick, director of I-SPHERE based at Heriot-Watt University said: "Our research showed a consensus across the local authority areas we examined that planning could exert significant influence over the exterior design and interior layout of new properties, and that these factors could be better utilized to meet the housing needs of multiple communities."

The report's authors are now calling for equalities considerations to be embedded throughout any proposed central government planning reforms to compel local authorities to take account of issues of racial equality in all planning decision-making and to prevent these considerations from being tick-box exercises.

Provided by Heriot-Watt University

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