

“A key to the future”

A Research Report on Problems with Sustaining Tenancies in Sudanese households in Toowoomba



*Researched and written by the Tenant Advice & Advocacy Service,
The Advocacy & Support Centre, Toowoomba
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Glossary of Acronyms

TAAS- Tenant Advice and Advocacy Service

TASC- The Advocacy and Support Centre

REA- Real Estate Agent

DIAC- Department of Immigration and Australian Citizenship

DOH- Department of Housing

RTA- Residential Tenancy Authority

RAMSSI- Refugee and Migrant Settlement Support Interagency

1.0 Background

The Sudanese population in Toowoomba was relatively small prior to 2001. However, since this time, there has been huge growth both in the number of Sudanese households settling in Toowoomba as well the number and variety of services and agencies supporting this community.

The TASC Tenant Advice and Advocacy Service Toowoomba decided to undertake this research in May 2007 as a result of a lack of contact with tenants from within the local Sudanese community. On this level, our service was failing to reach this community in any effective way and so we felt strongly that we had no real awareness of the issues affecting Sudanese households to secure and sustain tenancies in the local area. This was clearly a huge gap in our service given the local population.

2.0 Aims and Objectives

The limited recent experience of the TASC TAAS service working with the Sudanese community on tenancy issues, and the limited resources available for this research, meant strict parameters were required around this research.

- *To conduct a short piece of research to identify the top three issues that impact on Sudanese households sustaining their tenancies in Toowoomba.*

We decided that this outcome would be best achieved by talking to a representative number and type of REAs, community agencies and Sudanese households to more accurately establish the issues that concern each sector. Our interest lay in the 'soft' anecdotal information from each sector and it is for this reason that the same questions were asked of each group and were designed to be a catalyst for discussion rather than an attempt to collect solid facts and figures. A copy of these is attached at Appendix A.

3.0 Findings

There were a significant amount of themes common to all sectors whilst a few remained discrete to one or two groups only.

3.1 *Real Estate Agencies*

- Feedback largely focussed on the lack of effective communication by Sudanese households when dealing with REAs, specifically what was perceived as a lack of interpersonal skills and inappropriate behaviours on the part of the Sudanese community members [84% of REA's mentioned this as an issue].
- REAs also felt that, as workers, they were not adequately resourced to deal appropriately with prospective and current Sudanese tenants. It was stated that time spent with such households was often viewed, organisationally or individually, as wasted, time away from other tenants and therefore an additional burden on the workload. The belief is that this was the result of a lack of understanding of tenancy legislation, evidence requirements, property maintenance and repairs issues, large household size, unrealistic expectations of housing types and availability.
- There was suggestion that property owners often discriminate against potential Sudanese tenants at the point of application, preferring not to rent to this group in some instances. Reaction from Agents varied where this occurred, although most [70%] stated they could do little to change such perceptions by the owners and had to work within such a framework. They accepted that this is often this is mistakenly perceived as being the action of the Agents.
- There were a large number of positive comments from the majority of REAs. These confirmed that Sudanese households experienced most of the issues at the point of actually securing an appropriate tenancy

but, once housed, are generally excellent, reliable and approachable tenants.

- Agencies state that, overall, they tended to experience less than average number of issues with tenants from the Sudanese community than others.
- Some Agencies strongly disagreed with this position and stated that their negative experiences meant they would prefer not to deal with the Sudanese community at all and seek to actively avoid applications from or contact with this community.

3.2 Community Agencies

The diverse range of community agencies, including housing providers and support agencies, fed back similar themes.

- The main focus in responses was regarding issues around expectations of housing type, cost and availability by the Sudanese community. Of the 87% of community agencies who cited this as an issue, all were clear that this in turn often caused misconceptions and unrealistic expectations about housing. There was however, an appreciation that this is a cultural issue which has not been addressed to date by any formal education of African refugees and migrants to Australia. The recent release of the DIAC DVD, including information of renting in Australia, for all new arrivals should go some way to changing this.
- One important educative and preventative tool suggested was the provision of training in basic tenancy legislation. This was to include the importance of making regular rent payments,
 - Australian cultural norms about housework,
 - General living skills including cultural expectations around household size and property size,
 - Bond loans, and

- DOH waiting lists eligibility criteria, procedures and likely waiting times.
- There was recognition that finding appropriate, affordable rental accommodation within reasonable expectations and availability is a difficulty for ALL households in the current rental climate of high demand and low vacancy rates.
- However, it was expressed by 87% of community agencies that there is a real additional disadvantage to Sudanese households in this process as a result of discrimination by the larger community. This was variously expressed as perpetrated by REAs and property owners.
- Similar to the REAs, there was a strong belief that Sudanese households were very reliable and favourable tenants once they were adequately housed. Discrimination was felt to be largely an issue only at the point of gaining access to accommodation.
- In line with the REAs, most community agencies [87%] expressed their belief that Sudanese households are exceptionally house-proud tenants, ensuring their tenancies are kept very clean and in good repair and rent paid regularly.

3.3 Sudanese household members

- Without exception, all members of this group interviewed cited the most significant issue as a seeming lack of communication between housing providers [mostly REAs] and Sudanese tenants and potential tenants. This was variously expressed as
 - including feelings of being wrongly advised by housing providers and/or
 - of being taken advantage of by housing agencies because of either a lack of English language skills or familiarity with tenancy legislation.

This was in line with comments from the community agencies who stated a real concern about signing up Sudanese tenants to tenancy

contracts without adequate explanation of these, deliberate use of technical terminology to confuse and a lack of communication.

- These factors combine to ensure that Sudanese households expressed a fear of exercising their legal rights for fear of retribution by the housing provider. This fear was specifically expressed as fear of eviction, failure to renew a lease and/or being viewed as a troublemaker. Given the generally longer period of time for a Sudanese household to secure accommodation in the first instance, this is a particularly important factor.
- Another major theme expressed by 75% of this group is the issue of discrimination as experienced by Sudanese households in seeking and securing accommodation. Mostly this was experienced from REAs and it is unclear whether this is the consequence of this being the most dominant housing provider group.
- There was a real feeling amongst the community that certain REAs have a better reputation and working relationship with the community with the result that they are much more approachable for housing. Similarly, there was mention of a few Agents who the community avoid in their search for accommodation because of negative experiences by other community members.

4.0 Summary

Within this research paper we recognise that all parties have a role to play in sustaining tenancies within the Sudanese community in Toowoomba. However, a few key issues were identified across two or more sectors included education, discrimination, communication, misconceptions, repairs and other (refer to table). However the report focussed solely on the top three issues.

4.1 Discrimination - Tenants expressed this as a real experience for them primarily at the point of approaching Agents for potential accommodation and during the application process [for example, when applications for housing are unsuccessful without a reason given] but occasionally during the period of a tenancy. This view is supported by community agencies who acknowledged the difficulties in dealing with REAs who were often reluctant to accept applications from Sudanese households. The result of this is that both agencies and the community have REAs they favour and deal with on a regular basis and others they avoid because of occasional or constant negative experiences with them. This is consistent with our experience of the Agents in our interviews for this research. Some REAs stated their preference is not to deal with the Sudanese community in any way, and perceived that any interaction is likely to lead to a complaint to the Anti Discrimination Commission. Most REAs however stated they generally had no issues dealing with such households.

It is difficult to know whether the Agents' practice or the community's perception came first but there is little doubt that there is a clear breakdown between these groups such that, in some instances, they no longer deal with each other wherever possible. It is our view that such attitudes and practices are at least partially the product of internal REA policies and personalities.

What is clear from these experiences, however, is that Sudanese households experience a proportionately higher level of disadvantage, real and perceived, in securing rental accommodation in Toowoomba. Nevertheless, general consensus is that tenants from the Sudanese community are to be recommended once appropriately housed. Evidently there is much work to be done in the area of matching potential Sudanese tenants' to housing providers in a much more constructive and non-discriminatory way. This would seek to eliminate the experience of discrimination in accessing rental accommodation.

4.2 Lack of Education – this refers less to formal education and more to awareness of tenancy legislation and Australian cultural norms. Both REAs and community agencies mentioned this as a central factor in their dealings with the Sudanese community, citing a strong sense that expectations of housing type, price and location were unrealistic among the Sudanese newly arrived community. This was variously presented as properties being turned down by prospective Sudanese tenants on the grounds of wrong building materials [i.e. wood and not brick] or deemed to be not in sufficiently good condition.

This was viewed by support agencies and community members alike as a frustrating and time consuming process for all involved. It was generally felt that community households accept a property only after a number of similar properties had been offered over a period of time and support agencies had intervened in educating the household about realistic housing options. As such, most suggestions focussed on a need for an education programme as to what is realistic in an Australian and local housing context. Most agencies anticipated that the tenancy information contained in the new DIAC DVD for all new arrivals to Australia will have a positive impact on these expectations but this is unlikely to be sufficient to eradicate all of these issues.

There was also a feeling expressed by all sectors that the Sudanese community did not understand their tenancy rights and responsibilities. This

included issues around the tenancy application process, paying a bond, waiting lists for DOH, the importance of making regular rent payments, repairs issues and numbers of occupants allowed. The Sudanese community members quite clearly expressed a desire for training and up-skilling in basic tenancy legislation as a means of improving their own position and knowledge and reducing their feelings of vulnerability in the area of their housing.

Discussion around the most effective way to achieve tenancy education focussed on

- TAAS training of key community members to act as initial points of tenancy knowledge within the community,
- improved links between the TAAS service and the community for specialist tenancy advice and advocacy services, and
- translation of key written tenancy information into appropriate languages including Dinka and Arabic.

All sectors supported the development of a tenancy resource pack for Sudanese households, including DOH fact sheets on a variety of issues, a translated Form 17a Renting a Home from the RTA, and possible development of written information on the most common issues by local REAs. The benefits of this were thought to be twofold including enabling community members to educate themselves at a time convenient to them and also to keep written information until it becomes relevant to their individual circumstances. This would overcome some of the difficulties expressed by Agents and community members alike in securing appropriate information in a timely manner.

4.3 Communication – There was an unequivocal recognition of all parties interviewed for the need for greatly enhanced communications between the Sudanese community, REAs and supporting agencies in order to best achieve secure sustainable tenancies. All sectors viewed a major gap in the availability of support services, especially assistance to Sudanese households

to access mainstream services such as housing providers. While it as felt that newly arrived households were adequately supported in terms of resources, the issues raised concerned mostly households who had been living in Toowoomba for a longer period and who appeared to have less access to support services.

Both REAs and the community saw a huge for a third party support person to be present with Sudanese households where there was language or other difficulties to ensure effective communication for all. There was frequent reference to a time when a local support agency was able to undertake this work but also recognition that the increase in community numbers means that limited available resources no longer meets the community need. This loss was presented as the source of significant miscommunication and frustration between the sectors and there was interest expressed in pursuing increased funding for such an expanded local service again.

Both Agents and community members expressed a need for the Industry to meet and agree consistency in the practice of housing provision as well as develop responses to some of the main issues arising. It is unclear whether there has been a regular meeting of local Agents on joint issues but this was put forward by a few Agencies and others as a useful approach. It was felt that this would allow and enable joint development of resources and practice in this and other areas.

There is also an apparent lack of communication among the community sector also. We spoke with agencies and individuals who were aware of projects happening locally to address some of the issues arising. However, there appeared to be little coordinated communication of such projects with the result that many community agencies and others remained unaware of local developments. Suggestions centred around the need for a meaningful community forum on this issue although this does already happen in the

RAMSSI meetings. This would enhance local awareness and referral to local projects as well as assist in developing a whole of community response.

5.0 Summary of Recommendations:

- *To establish outreach tenancy advice sessions in an effort to increase access to tenancy advice and advocacy services to the Sudanese community.*
- *To develop and distribute a paper Tenancy Resource Pack for the Sudanese community to improve understanding and awareness of tenancy rights and responsibilities and encourage realistic housing expectations.*
- *To revive RAMSSI housing subcommittee as an appropriate forum for raising issues and awareness of local housing issues and the Sudanese community.*
- *To dramatically increase the availability of third party support needed to enhance community and agency referral and communications*
- *To establish basic tenancy training/up skilling of key Sudanese community members to act as key referral points between the community and TAAS and other services*
- *To re/establish regular and meaningful communication within the REAs sector in the form of interagency meetings.*
- *To enable Sudanese community members, housing providers and community agencies to meet on housing issues on a regular basis and in an effective way. This was viewed as a longer term objective.*

At the outset of this research, the TAAS service was keen to assume a lead role in implementing these recommendations. It was anticipated that this would be achieved through development of outreach tenancy advice sessions and training at TRAMS, and up skilling of key Sudanese community members as a first point of contact and referral point for the community on tenancy issues. However, due to staff involved moving on from the organisation this is not going to be possible for the foreseeable future. As such, we are keen for

this report to be considered a starting point for the local Toowoomba community as a whole to work together in finding solutions to the issues raised.

6.0 Appendix

Appendix A

Questions asked of all interviewees;

1. What do you consider to be the main housing issues currently preventing Sudanese's households sustaining tenancies in Toowoomba?
2. What do you think could have helped prevent these situations occurring?
3. Have you had any bad/ good experiences with REA's with dealing with any Sudanese Families?
4. Are there any other local Agencies that should be involved?