

Race Relations

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“What unites us as human beings is the aspiration to make the world better, more compassionate, with less conflict, less hate and hardship and with more tolerance and understanding”

Elie Wiesel

The *Racial Equality Strategy* (RES) is acknowledged in the Triennial Action Plan as a sister document to and one that complements the aims of *A Shared Future* (ASF). It is understood that the objectives of ASF should read across to the RES, which raises policy issues from within an equality framework. This paper aims to consider some of the good relations issues that exist within those documents with regard to black and minority ethnicity and faith-based communities. It is suggested that when policy is informed and led by those needs and rights articulated by citizens as much as it is by the legislative duty on Government, its departments and councils, then the ethos of equality, diversity and interdependence are implicitly to the fore.

Introduction

The question might be asked of all those with civic responsibility, both within and without government, ‘How do we meaningfully transform high-strategy from paper-based aims, into a set of informed, attainable and appropriate practice-based initiatives?’ In considering this in relation to issues of diversity of ethnicity and faith, it is as important to focus on the quality of the journeying and processes of consultation and partnership as it is on what outcomes can be measured.

Government and the black and minority ethnic and faith-based communities (BMEF) may not be singing in harmony, but their song sheets

both recognise that BMEF issues are not yet embedded in organisational thinking. They remain peripheral, at best championed by middle management equality officers faced with dual Sisyphean tasks:

- first of rising to new opportunities brought about by demographic changes and
- second of addressing organisational discrimination and ignorance in danger of calcifying into systemic and institutional racism.

The frustrations of these professionals are not dissimilar to those confronted by individuals and representatives from BMEF groups equipped with little or no human or material resources to service themselves (Lewis 2005). Research on BMEF groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on their behalf suggests that to date, their immediate needs in accessing and providing services and confronting racism are only being shocked into life by intermittent but emergency defibrillation. This *ad hoc* ‘help’ in the form of short term project funding and contracts might be more appropriately dispatched by the statutory agencies if, as NICEM’s annual report (2003/4) suggests, ‘the involvement, participation and empowerment of BME communities are a pre-requisite for successful and efficient service delivery.’ This basic tenet of community development acknowledges the expertise individuals can bring to matters affecting their lives. Reaching a consensus on agreed methods of working with the BMEF sector on the planning, development and implementation of policy, would assist this process. There is much to be garnered from the age and disability sectors in relation to such effective consultation and participation.

It is perhaps unsurprising that in such a rapidly growing sector misunderstandings can occur. This is particularly so when one organisation’s cultural use of language differs from another’s. A clear example of this might be found with the entry of the term ‘mainstreaming’ into occupational and colloquial speech. Mainstreaming does not exist merely because a policy is written into a strategic plan and ‘proofed’ by the existence of an equality impact assessment. That is a classic box-tick. Rather mainstreaming is a dynamic and processual state which develops through the asking and answering of questions which may at first be unfamiliar and uncomfortable and of addressing organisational and individual prejudices and discrimination.

Before getting lost in a jargon of mainstreaming, of benchmarking, of targeting and of disaggregating data, that will certainly map a particular route, let us first dispel any remaining myth (understanding) that the needs and requirements of those from BMEF groups are homogeneous. Migrant workers¹, committed to employment within Northern Ireland for a finite period of time and with families, homes and careers to return to, will have differing expectations of Northern Ireland than those seeking asylum and those who have recently become refugees². Those facing extreme poverty, social isolation and requiring acute clinical medical and psychological support³ are likely to have more in common with some indigenous Travellers than they do with members of their own or other minority faith-based groups who have established themselves within Northern Irish society over decades. And those from different faiths wishing to have their adherences to strict cultural practices and religious observances respected within the public domain, may find that they do not just experience mutual areas of discrimination in the provision of culturally appropriate facilities, instead it is when facing discrimination in other aspects of their identity such as their age or gender that they connect with one another.

While acknowledging the challenges facing those from BMEF groups, it may be helpful for us to start balancing the thinking about the development of good 'race' relations. We could instead subvert the assumption that all members of minority ethnic communities are in some way *de facto* vulnerable, at risk and in need. Let us begin the process instead by acknowledging what positive foundations of good relations have, over a period of time, been developed by and with those from minority ethnic communities who have been long established in Northern Ireland, who are indigenous to Northern Ireland as well as those who are more recent migrants. This is a simple way of denying that issues are all new ones for 'them' and 'us'. Rather, it acknowledges instead that these concerns and how we deal with them are collectively ours irrespective of ethnicity or faith and therefore core to how Northern Ireland develops democratically and equally.

1 For discussions relating to new migrant communities and workers see Soares 2002, Animate 2004, 2005, Bell et al 2004, Betts and Hamilton, 2004, Jarman 2005, Holder and Khaoury 2005

2 See Tennant 2000 and Threlfall 2005

3 See Equality Commission 2003, O'Rawe 2004 and Revest 2006

It allows for the consideration of the practical steps that need to be strengthened as well as put in place, monitored and evaluated for outcomes. And further, it recognises the need to challenge the way we think and approach an understanding of democracy and equality. It removes the emphasis from communities and replaces it onto society.

If we change the focus of how we consider BMEF issues, policy makers and practitioners are influenced from a more informed and participatory perspective when building on existing work initiated and on-going within communities themselves. They are then partnering more equally with those communities when working to eradicate areas of racism, discrimination and social exclusion, which regrettably are still very real for individuals and communities.

Developing a policy context for mainstreaming BMEF issues

In addition to the publication of ASF/RES, there is the potential for the Equality Commission's Review of S. 75 to impact significantly on the sector. Chief Equality Commissioner, Bob Collins⁴ acknowledges its value as an 'anticipatory intervention', rather than the traditional anti-discriminatory legislation underpinning mainstreaming of equality issues. The ECNI Review of S75 and the 5 year Review of Equality Schemes could, indeed should, be seen as inter-locking if not inter-dependent with RES.

The Equality Commission hosts one of a number of fora and working groups in place facilitated both by the statutory and NGO sector that profess to represent the interests of those from BMEF groups. Yet they meet irregularly and the membership continue to search for consensus for their *raison d'être* beyond being asked to rubberstamp a flurry of glossy best practice guides, toolkits and publications relating to BMEF issues that have emanated from the statutory sector. Such fora actively provide an opportunity to consider and address within the context of good relations what the grass roots activists consider is currently missing. Yet it would appear that it has been all too easy to dismiss the demands of a fractured sector as inarticulate or ill-structured wish-lists.

4 Bob Collins, "The Nature, Impact and Future of Section 75", Seminar given at QUB Human Rights Centre 20.01.06

Before organisations begin a process of mainstreaming BMEF issues they might first consider what barriers exist and what can be put in place to provide support for those from BMEF backgrounds wishing to participate and contribute more actively to society. (The absence of BMEF public appointments has been noted on many occasions). To address this, internal organisational policies and protocols and recruitment practices, for example might be BMEF-proofed from their inception. This would mean not just assessing policies for negative impacts, but actively developing ones that promote positive action in relation to BMEF issues. Adding to that we might ask what are the cultural barriers, such as gatekeeping and guardianship, as well as practical barriers including the need for interpretation services that might need to be considered. There are several existing examples of good practice within some areas of the public sector to be drawn on by others, for example relating to bi-lingual advocacy services. Here success can be measured not just in quantifiable performance targets, but also in the experience and relationships between the clients and their advocates.

In order to demonstrate commitment to the process of mainstreaming, internal roles within organisations for equality officers might be beefed up. This would ensure that organisational weight is given to their suggestions where Chief Executive Officers and Boards are not yet BMEF-friendly but are merely compliant with legislation/statutory duty. The RES (5.12) called for the appointment of senior management to be held accountable for this work and government departments have named their 'champions'. However without individuals whose function are dedicated to conducting the outreach necessary for the successful realisation of this work and who have an in-depth knowledge and commitment to the sector, there is the danger of these roles being seen as peripheral.

Who are the BMEF communities?

The Northern Ireland Census of 2001 indicates that 0.85% of the respondents, 14,279 out of a total population 1.68m self-describe as coming from non-white communities.

Demographic Changes and Policy Implications**Table 1.1: Ethnic groups in Northern Ireland, 2001**

Ethnic group	Number	%
White	1,670,988	99.15%
Chinese	4,145	0.25%
Mixed	3,319	0.20%
Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi	2,485	0.15%
Irish Traveller	1,710	0.10%
Other Asian	194	0.01%
Black African	494	0.03%
Black Caribbean	255	0.02%
Other Black	387	0.02%
Other	1,290	0.08%
Total	1,685,267	100%

Source: Census of Population 2001

Table 1.2: Birthplaces of persons in Northern Ireland not born in UK or RoI, 2001

Birthplace	Number	% of NI population
Other EU countries	10,355	0.61%
Asia	7,004	0.42%
North America/Caribbean	6,093	0.36%
Africa	3,116	0.18%
Oceania	2,166	0.13%
Eastern Europe, non-EU	707	0.04%
Western Europe, non-EU	515	0.03%
South America	374	0.02%
Other	229	0.01%
Total	30,559	1.81%

Source: Census of Population 2001

Table 1.3: Adults and children from Minority Ethnic Communities

Ethnicity	Adults	Children	Total
Irish Traveller	1,040	670	1,710
Mixed	1,299	2,020	3,319
Indian	1,181	386	1,567
Pakistani	408	258	666
Bangladeshi	150	102	252
Other Asian	153	41	194
Black Caribbean	195	60	255
Black African	333	161	494
Other Black	292	95	387
Chinese	2,788	1,357	4,145
Other Ethnic Group	989	301	1,290
Total	8,828	5,451	14,279

It is noteworthy that the highest number of BMEF individuals are under 18 and the highest cohort are aged between 0-5. NISRA's⁵ statistics predict an increased ageing population, and interim findings of a NCCRI⁶ report for OFMDFM estimates a projected population in 2030 of 1.8 million with an increase of 5% based on the above figures. Therefore it should come as no surprise that both younger and older age groups will have significant impact

5 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2003) *New Northern Ireland Population Projections* Press Release 18 December 2003

6 NCCRI 2006 'How Public Authorities provide Services to Minority Ethnic Groups in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Scotland.'

on future policy planning and service provision in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, as significant numbers within the census self-described as 'other' – individuals from multiple heritage backgrounds will challenge policy makers who have previously relied on somewhat essentialist notions of race, ethnicity and nationality.

Even at the time of its release the census data was considered to be a gross under-representation and problematic in its forms of classification. Suggestions were made that those from minority faith communities whose ethnic status may be recorded within the indigenous 'white' category were unaccounted for and of those who were born within European countries, excluding the UK and Ireland, many might in fact be, but were not considered members of minority ethnic communities (Jarman and Monaghan 2004). Reliance on those figures does not account for the dramatic changes in inward migration in particular relating to the increasing number of nationals from the A8 countries that joined the European Union in 2004, nor for the high number of Portuguese, and Brazilian nationals working in the food processing industries and the active recruitment of nursing staff from South Asia and the Phillipines that has subsequently taken place. The NGO's scepticism is born out by Government figures indicating that between April 2003 and the end of January 2006 there were 45,560 applications for National Insurance numbers from non-nationals from either the United Kingdom or Ireland. It is noteworthy that attempts are being made to monitor the inward flow of migrants through applications for work permits but currently there is no attempt to record the length of stay or outward flow of migrants. There are considerable rights implications to consider and debate as to what if any appropriate channels and instruments there are with which to conduct such an exercise.

Outline and evidence of good relations issues

The RES (p.6) outlines six aims which in effect mirror the 13 objectives outlined in ASF 1.2.2. In essence, these are also the fundamental areas which minority ethnic communities have repeatedly voiced concern about, namely:

- Elimination of Racial Inequality,
- Equal Protection,
- Equality of Service Provision,

- Participation,
- Promoting Dialogue, and
- Capacity Building

The implementation plan for the RES issued in April 2006 and the Triennial Action Plan are intended to demonstrate how departments will realise these aims by providing clarification on their actions, output measures and target dates. All the contributors, (which includes all Government Departments, the NIO, and PSNI) designated and named to carry out the work appear to rely heavily on ‘in reach’ from BMEF groups rather than committing to ‘outreach’. Target dates are ‘ongoing’, and action plans are peppered with nebulous propositions such as ‘will seek to’, ‘intend to strengthen links with’ and to ‘actively welcome applicants’. There appears to be an assumption that measurements are of principal value when quantifiable rather than qualifiable. Decoding the language provides a glimmer if not an active highlight of the fact that there remains an inconsistency in departmental commitment to BMEF issues.

In keeping with the acknowledgement in ASF (Section 2.6.9) that the DCAL has an important role to play in promoting cultural diversity, this department demonstrates a developed programme committed to implementation of RES detailing its activities and commitment to archiving, recording, project development and data collection of both faith based and secular arts and language programmes. But the lack of clarity currently available from other departments both undermines on-going good relations work and underlines concern that departments are not yet willing to proactively embed issues of minority ethnicity into their thinking. They appear to remain imposed bolt-ons. Consequently a comprehensive audit of on-going and potential work is urgently required.

Health

Health issues are surprisingly not key within ASF. They do, however, feature within RES. Within the DHSSPS, the boards, trusts, hospitals and surgeries, disaggregated data collection remains at best inconsistent, at worst absent. Just as in the provision of housing, developing a culturally responsive

health service provision with base-line data and the provision for capacity building support for BMEF organisations to develop bi-lingual advocates is crucial to addressing inequality and discrimination. With 70% of asylum seekers and refugees on income support⁷, the effects of poverty on diet and nutrition impacts both directly and indirectly on opportunities for integration. With an increasingly diverse population within the Republic of Ireland, new areas of service demands are already appearing and established there which can be expected to ultimately influence service delivery Ireland-wide.

In the fields of sexual and reproductive health and in the delivery of elective surgical practices such as male cultural circumcision service providers are having to respond reactively rather than pro-actively to the needs of service users as well as to providing support in relation to the cultural awareness and competencies of staff.

Racism

Core to successful good relations work is the need to acknowledge existing racism in all its formats (individual and organisational) (RES 2.10), and to address the protection of those it impacts on. The provision of mandatory anti-racist training for all departmental and council staff is key to addressing this and it is noteworthy that the DHSSPS has undertaken a major piece of work on Racism within the Health sector. Likewise, the Department of Education are able to point to a commissioned scoping exercise of Racism within the Further Education sector. At the time of writing it remains to be seen what commitment the departments undertake in relation to the recommendations contained therein.

Racism is identified in both ASF (1.3.6) and RES (p.16) as ‘cancer that eats at the body of Northern Ireland.’⁸ And while the intention of eliminating systemic racial inequality is considered to be mainstreamed into organisational culture when endorsed within strategic plans, for it to impact in real terms on the ground requires a detailed and consistent commitment to anti-racism programmes and training throughout organisations. Too often there is a

7 See O’Rawe and interim findings from Revest, Jean-Luc *Black and Minority Health and Well Being Development Project* Belfast: NICEM/North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust, The Royal Hospitals, The Mater Hospital and the Eastern Board

8 For a further discussion about racism in NI see Jarman 2003, Jarman and Monaghan 2004, Holder and Khaoury 2005, NIAC 2005. Radford et al 2006.

tendency to rely on the trickle down of a soft, two-hour cultural awareness programme which can rely on reinforcing stereotypes rather than addressing the twin evils of sectarianism and racism. Racism in Northern Ireland occurs within a different context than it does within Great Britain and Ireland. The demographics of the communities are not the same. Unacceptable levels of sectarian violence here may well have affected the wider community's responses to minority communities (RES 1.18) which means that we need to develop specific local responses to the condition.

Between 2004–2005 the PSNI recorded 813 racist incidents, an increase of 79.5% on the previous year. Despite this increase, racist crime is not seen as a policing priority by people in Northern Ireland. Recent survey data (NIPB, 2004) suggest that just 2% of survey respondents in Northern Ireland as a whole placed this issue among their top five policing priorities.

Education

Research indicates that racist incidents are most likely to occur in public places and be perpetrated by and against young people⁹ and the Stephen Lawrence Report¹⁰ recommends that racist incidents in schools be recorded and published. Yet despite commitments made through the Joint Consultative Forum on Education to revisit recommendations made by Save the Children, NICEM and the Youth Council for Northern Ireland, on this matter, neither the boards nor the Department of Education have to date undertaken to collect disaggregated data as part of their anti-bullying policies. Educational provision both within schools and colleges of further education offers a significant opportunity to integrate those from minority communities with the JEDI initiative in which the Youth Service partner, that could be further developed throughout the sector (ASF 2.4.12).

The review of the religious education core syllabus (which was not undertaken in consultation with faith leaders from outside the Christian churches), the teaching of citizenship and the enriched curriculum in schools all have the potential to make some difference to addressing racism. Throughout all the Education Board regions, for example, a four-year training programme on embedding citizenship throughout the curriculum subjects has

9 Jarman and Monaghan (2004) Radford (2004)

10 Recommendation 68, The Report of the Stephen Lawrence Enquiry, McPherson

been piloted in post primary schools and is intended to be completed by 2007. Yet there is justified concern that when the Education and Library Board officers overseeing the programme are no longer attached, the momentum will be eased leading to the demise of this work, just as previous initiatives such as EMU have faltered. As ASF 2.4.1 indicates, clearly the Department of Education and the Boards have duties under Section 75 – but the curriculum is not the sole mechanism through which they might address their commitment to integration.

The structures of the integrated schooling sector, which has so much to offer in the breaking down of sectarian divisions, remains firmly rooted in achieving parity between those from the majority communities wanting to address diversity. This focus on bi-polarity in good relations is clearly evident in the NICIE anti-bias curriculum where the commitment to exploring race, ethnicity and non-Christian religions is minimised due to a focus principally on British/Irish cultural identity from within a majority white/Christian framework. Colleges of further education too can be seen to contribute to societal segregation with their two-tiered system of charges and services to asylum seekers and overseas students wishing to learn English

As in other sectors, data collection on faith and ethnicity in education is inconsistent. Returns by schools to the department do not assess the impact of race/faith/ethnicity in relation to pupil attainment. What material that the Department do hold on schools is gathered annually, inaccurately reflecting a rapidly changing demography. Budgets set in April and based on the previous school year, do not fulfil the needs of the intake of new pupils occurring the following September. Within the Newry area in 2005, there was an increase during the school year from 12 to 150 pupils requiring EAL.

At the time of writing, all English as an additional language provision has been withdrawn from schools. Some pre and primary school children where English is a second or third language used at home, are currently unable to communicate and therefore less likely to successfully integrate with their peers. Consequently the likelihood of bullying, ghettoisation and a culture of silence fuelled by fear, is *de facto* perpetuated. Equally, without the provision of classes for languages spoken in the home or community of origin, for those from single or multiple heritage identities the value of inter-generational communication and the transmission of cultural traditions is significantly hampered.

Classification

As always, any data monitoring brings with it the dangers of inaccuracies and misuse and, in relation to individuals from BMEF backgrounds, the additional danger of essentialising communities and individuals.

It is important to recognise, for example, that a Palestinian asylum seeker, born in the Lebanon who has lived in diaspora since childhood chooses to consider himself as part of the Muslim *Ummah* (Brotherhood) rather than by his nationality, citizenship or places of long-term residence. In this instance, separating religion or faith from ethnicity will capture data that does not reflect the subject's understanding of his identity

Yet without accurate and regularly updated data collection, those from minority communities will continue to be discriminated against. It is also important to consider that as members from BMEF communities are not necessarily resident in particular geographical areas, their numbers can mitigate against the provision of culturally focussed services.

Housing/Planning

The successful integration of an elderly sheltered housing project, Ho Ling Gardens, exclusively for Chinese community members within the heart of a nationalist enclave in South Belfast, is a model respected (if not coveted) by some of the elderly from within the Hindu and Jewish communities. It enables those wanting to live in a society where they can access camaraderie and amity from within a specific cultural tradition to do so, whilst being able to draw on support from peers and professionals from the wider communities. Such a model might indicate that brokering ways to share spaces and harmonise resources does not result in ghettoisation.

However, it is equally noteworthy that members of the Chinese Welfare Association had less satisfactory attempts to integrate within the area. It took much locking of horns with the Planning Service over two years in their efforts to develop a community centre within a ward close to Ho Ling Gardens. The effect of this stalling on their time-bound funding proved incrementally problematic in other areas of their work. Such a response indicates that not only do departmental plans need to be developed that are BMEF-proofed, but also that service and individual work-plans need to be put in place as a matter

of urgency with management responsibility designated to specialist and equality champions.

Representation

In relation to performance monitoring, 4.8 of the RES indicates that OFMDFM has undertaken to expand the membership of the Racial Equality Forum to include representatives from business and the Trade Unions. The Forum currently only meets four times each year, with subgroups on Travellers, Language and Racist Incidents also convened. Representation of individuals from minority ethnic communities remains disproportionately low and it is of concern that the majority of those members from BMEF communities who have been invited to the Race Forum do not do so as members of departments, but specifically within their capacity as individuals or members of BMEF communities.

If it is essential that if public bodies are reflective of the society they serve, the low representation of members of communities on a forum such as this is disappointingly indicative of the wider society. Yet district councils and other employers could easily ensure that changes to recruitment practices might remove barriers to inclusion.

In order to address any potential disadvantage within the PSNI, a review of their recruitment process involved the removal of a spelling and grammar section from their latest campaign, which it had been identified as being the key barrier to appointment from the BME sector.

To date, BMEF groups have not demanded affirmative or positive action measures, yet current recruitment practices do appear to be a barrier to full integration when

- overseas qualifications are not recognised or are undervalued;
- ethnic classification systems are not in line with the changing demography
- employers do not recruit from specialised magazines/websites;
- jobs are ring-fenced for internal or local applicants who may need to demonstrate 6 months continuous service; and
- policies relating to annual leave and terms and conditions of work are weighted against those with faiths from non-Christian communities.

Resourcing the Sector

The RES section on resourcing the implementation of the strategy (6.3) states that: ‘Where necessary departments will bid for resources for specific racial equality initiatives. These bids will be assessed against the competing priorities within Government.... (6.5)

It also draws attention to the OFMDFM managed fund committed to ‘help minority ethnic groups and other groups to foster integration’.

The need to identify additional core and project funding for organisations is oft-cited and essential. There is a need for departments and councils to commit to quantifying and ring fencing funds specifically to undertake outreach and capacity building with hard to reach groups. Furthermore, they might consider the need to ensure that all grant recipients, indicating programmes and project work with those from BMEF groups, have their evaluation of engagement more stringently monitored and independently evaluated. Many communities only continue to exist because of volunteering – yet the demands on them to respond positively to external agencies inquiries for inter-community work or to respond to consultations overstretches their capacity to deliver essential services within their own communities.

Some specialist organisations have been singled out by Government through this and other forms of resourcing to help develop the BMEF sector. A focus of NICEM’s work has been on developing training and capacity building opportunities membership and they are following up this work with a variety of social economy packages ultimately aimed at enabling individuals to deliver services to wider society. They have built a reputation for responding to international as well as local policy initiatives within the sector. Their accorded status has enabled them to undertake vital work staging conferences and seminars and recently to draw on good practice from other jurisdictions in their attempts to mobilise society to consider ways in which to implement the Race Equality Strategy. Consequently, they are very often the first port of call for service providers, academics and community groups wishing to conduct research and work with individuals or community groups.

Yet there is currently no elusive Holy Grail of a one-stop shop for all minority ethnic and faith-based issues. Perhaps due to its size and diversity as well as an over-reliance on (and under-resourcing of) particular organisations as representative, there is, regrettably, a tendency for the sector to mitigate

against cohesion. It is perhaps unsurprising that it is inclined to be fractured. Much remains to be done to build the confidence of the sector and the capacity of activists within it to work in equal partnerships. Similarly, there is much work needed to forge meaningful connections with those individuals and smaller communities who are currently not yet adequately represented within society as a whole.

What role for Community Relation Council?

Ultimately, each department and each district council will find its own culture of responding directly to the Racial Equality Strategy. But the rapidly expanding BMEF sector clearly requires a consistent and on-going commitment to promote inclusion by design that Government may not always respond to as rapidly as is required. Consequently, there is an urgency to secure the funding for and development of imaginative research, of specialised training and of the development of appropriate resources and codes of good practices that will capture the imagination of wider society in taking this work forward. It is through the promotion of these positive messages and images distributed in a range of formats that BMEF issues will become embedded and remain mainstreamed in societal thinking. It's a "Field of Dreams" model – ('If we build it, they will come') – enabling a cultural change of hearts and minds by its very existence that does not rely on old-style wheel and butterfly lobbying and advocacy techniques .

The Community Relations Council's ethos of community development and partnership values users' centrality to the development of services. It is therefore well-placed organisationally to support and develop creative and innovative approaches to enable those from within the BMEF sector to raise the profile of their contribution to society. Perhaps it is an appropriate organisation to develop a specialist expertise, through research and practice-based work, in BMEF issues in order to complement and fund the work of those organisations already committed to seeking to represent the sector. It is already in a unique position, developing work that will enable those who are disenfranchised, at risk of further marginalisation, reluctant or lacking in the capacity and resources, to engage in core debates about ethnicity, faith and good relations issues. Furthermore, it has begun to play a more active role in the dissemination of learning and information about the BMEF sector throughout wider society. That is a matter for internal debate.

But what is clear, is that given the fragmented nature of the sector, some independent body, unconstrained by government and membership interests and acceptable to those within the sector needs to be put in place sooner rather than later. Their role would be to impartially facilitate and broker the administration of projects, the allocation of funds and to undertake a rolling programme of policy and advocacy, research and development (including population profiling), aimed at achieving inclusivity within the BMEF sector. The aims of such a body would be to provide an autonomous and stand alone service to ensure that participation, capacity building, equality of service provision, the elimination of racial discrimination, the equality of service provision and the promotion of dialogue, all the aims of A Shared Future, are not an ‘add-on’, for some, but an essential for all.

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