



RESPONSE TO “TACKLING RACE INEQUALITIES: A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT”

FROM THE YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER REGIONAL FORUM

The Regional Forum is the strategic organisation for the voluntary and community sector, (VCS), in the region. The Forum promotes and supports the contribution of the VCS in improving the quality of life for people, especially those who are disconnected from society and the economy, or who live in disadvantaged communities across our region.

This response has been produced by the Regional Forum but it has been informed by the views and opinions of a range of voluntary sector groups, including the regional BME Panel, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, and the Northern Network of Travelling people.

Introduction

There was consistency of view on three underpinning and important points;

- Whilst it is clearly important for the government to have a strategy on tackling race inequalities, there has to be greater clarity on what is needed to make a strategy work in practice. In particular, detail is required on how implementation will be monitored and who will be responsible and accountable for delivery.
- The Government needs to be aware that some of its policies are inconsistent with the goal of tackling race inequality; especially in the areas of community cohesion and employment.
- If the strategy is to succeed it *has* to be underpinned by appropriate legislation.

How can we make sure that race equality maintains a distinct profile within a wider programme of work to address multiple disadvantage?

The groups we consulted were concerned that, because the proposed Single Equalities Bill will cover everyone regardless of race, disability, gender, age, religion, or sexual orientation, individual and specific issues would inevitably be diluted. The discussion document itself recognises this on Page 19. The groups and individuals we talked to were not convinced that race equality would maintain a distinct profile within a wider programme of work. Indeed, they felt that this approach would inevitably lead to a confused situation because the solution to individual issues will often come into conflict with the solutions to others. By attempting to please everyone the government may well end up pleasing no-one.

Having a distinct strategy for tackling race inequality should maintain a distinct and high profile; it sends out a clear message that the government believes the issue to be a priority. It should not be subsumed into the single equalities agenda. There is also a

concern that this policy direction could lead to a withdrawal of funding for single issue groups, particularly during the current economic downturn. This would clearly be inconsistent with the consensus view that the proposal to move away from understanding single issue concerns was a mistake.

There is a wider concern about the lack of long term funding for race equalities work. There are lots of examples of good work and projects that simply come to an end because the funding stops. Clearly this is an issue that applies across the voluntary and community sector, but there needs to be an understanding that much of this work is small scale by its nature. It relies on grants and the move towards a commissioning culture simply does not fit with what is required.

It is clearly important to monitor the situation regarding race equality by collecting, analysing, and disseminating data at community level. This “intelligence” should be shared with groups and organisations working on race equality, and they should be involved in decisions about strategies and policy.

What are the Priority areas for government action on race equality?

The groups we consulted felt that there was a continuing need for factual information to tackle uninformed prejudice. In its role as a shaper of public opinion, the government should be sending out a stronger message that racial prejudice, in all its guises, just cannot be tolerated in society.

There was agreement that the discussion document articulates the work already done and the key issues comprehensively. The problem is not the vision or the strategy but the *will to make it happen*. It is about how existing law is enforced. For example, schools already have clear guidelines on the issue of race equality and behaviour but they are seldom used. Similarly with race Impact Assessments and public agencies. In many cases these are seen as “tick box” exercises; when they should actually be community led. What is really needed is clear leadership at all levels to deliver on the commitments already made.

Should we expand our policy areas?

The view is that the government should concentrate on delivering policies and strategies in the five key areas first.

How can we encourage the public sector, such as local councils, criminal justice agencies, and NHS Trusts to prioritise their work on race equality?

Our groups believe that the government has to be pro active in this and be much more assertive in ensuring that race equality is a priority. Perhaps “encourage” should be replaced by “ensure” in the question? In particular, the government should try to encourage public sector organisations not to close down their Equalities/ Rights specialist teams. These have provided an important element of local leadership for the equality agenda.

What role does the VCS have to play in prioritising race equality at the local level?

We believe that the values underpinning the work of VCS organisations at local level demonstrate a commitment to equality and inclusiveness in all its forms. More specifically, the VCS can have a key role to play in helping to ensure that local councils are

accountable to their electorates by being part of the formal structure on race equality issues. The sector is also well placed to help bridge the communication gap between the Government and local communities, to ensure that the former understands what is really happening in BME communities.

There are already a number of successful VCS local projects designed to promote race equality in communities. This good practice needs to be captured and disseminated effectively across the public sector and then mainstreamed into race equality strategies. This will, however, require co-ordination and resources to enable it to happen.

Can we disentangle the role that race and ethnicity play in driving disadvantage from other factors; eg socio- economic status?

The view expressed to us is that it is important not to confuse race equality with economic disadvantage. Whilst it is certainly the case that socio- economic status and poverty cut across all disadvantaged groups in society, there are nevertheless specific issues related to race and ethnicity that require targeted actions from government.

There was agreement with the statement on Page 23 that “we need to make sure that whatever mechanisms we do put in place are tailored to the needs of particular communities”.

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