

A 'Compact' built on equality and anti-racist practice – too good to be true?

Work to develop a 'Compact' between the voluntary and statutory sectors in Birmingham – a framework of mutually agreed principles and objectives – began in late-2001. Initially under the auspices of the independent Voluntary & Community Sector Commission, evidence was gathered under the five 'thematic' headings of governance, partnership, funding, commissioning and BME issues. Smaller theme groups continued this work during 2003, with b:RAP convening and supporting the work of the BME issues group.

The Compact is now the responsibility of the City Strategic Partnership (CSP), which has recently issued a draft version for consultation. b:RAP is providing this briefing paper as a contribution to the consultation process.

Has it been worth it?

Yes. It has been a long and sometimes frustrating process, but nonetheless the Compact – if fully implemented – has the potential to revolutionise relationships between the statutory and voluntary sectors. It can also be of particular benefit to BME communities and the voluntary organisations that serve them. There are two reasons for this.

Anti-racism and community cohesion

First, the Compact has been conceived with equality, cohesion and anti-racist practice as its founding principles. It recommends, for example, that the statutory sector 'unlearn' the habit of considering the 'BME voluntary sector' a single, homogenous whole and learn to distinguish more accurately between the different *kinds* of groups that exist based on their aims and expertise rather than the convenience of their ethnicity. It recommends that an equality framework developed by b:RAP be further worked up and adopted as the basis for this approach.

It also advocates that work should be undertaken to develop a better cross-sectoral understanding of race equality issues, beginning by examining such key concepts as 'race', 'ethnicity', 'faith' and 'culture' and the relationship between these.

Key recommendations of the Compact

Second, some of the key recommendations in the Compact address concerns which historically have been especially keen amongst BME groups.

- Capacity-building and organisational development – central to the sector's sustainability – are recognised as a particular issue for BME groups. b:RAP strongly supports the Compact's recommendation that support measures should emphasise 'mainstreaming', with robust and appropriate BME support 'locked in' as part of mainstream provision rather than 'bolted on', or left to specialist providers. This is an important part of overcoming BME groups' exclusion from the mainstream voluntary sector.

- Where BME organisations are involved in wider community engagement processes, the Compact recommends that this should be based on an analysis of their *skills and expertise* rather than assumptions about their 'representative' relationship to particular BME communities. b:RAP has long advocated this.

- BME groups have long been concerned that statutory funding is a far from level playing field. The Compact has the potential to address this concern and recommends that common approaches should be established to enable longer-term funding cycles, 'full cost recovery' and the meeting of core costs. There should be simplified and more transparent access to funding streams and programmes and statutory agencies should develop clear, corporate strategies that enable a fair and consistent approach to funding.

- The Compact recommends that the equality framework developed by b:RAP be used to underpin the commissioning of key services from the voluntary sector.

Conclusions

We should not under-estimate the ambitions of the Compact. It has the potential to address much of the poor practice that has historically disadvantaged the sector. Equality, cohesion and anti-racist practice are its defining characteristics. We should welcome it with open arms.

But its successful implementation will require more than just our goodwill. It will also require *political will* if the resources necessary for the Compact's implementation are to be secured. The coming months will indicate whether this exists. We truly hope it does.

b:RAP