

**brap**

making equality work for **everyone**

**COHESION GUIDANCE FOR FUNDERS:  
A RESPONSE FROM BRAP**

**MAY 2008**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

1. brap welcomes the opportunity to comment on the *Cohesion Guidance for Funders* consultation.
2. brap is a strategic agency working on equalities issues. While 'race' equality remains central to what we do, brap has for some years now been working to actively extend the boundaries of equalities work and in particular is interested in the potential for 'cross-strand' equalities working and human rights approaches to equalities.
3. brap warmly welcomed recommendations in *The Government's Response to the Commission on Integration and Cohesion* that all agencies, including local authorities, should not promote single group funding unless there is a compelling business or equalities case. It would urge the government to remain firm in its adherence to this principle.
4. However, brap has some reservations about the usefulness of 'community cohesion' as a tool for promoting equality across society. brap would therefore question whether the criteria for funding projects should involve the extent to which they promote 'cohesion'.

## 2. THE PRINCIPLES

### 2.1 *The concept of community cohesion*

5. The five principles outlined in the consultation are intended, ultimately, to help potential funders decide which projects promote cohesion and integration. brap broadly agrees with the principles, but, as stated above, has some reservations about how the concept 'community cohesion' is currently defined.
6. It is important to recognise that the focus of community cohesion has largely been on the issue of interaction and relations between people from different backgrounds. But this is a narrow and in any case partial view of cohesion that largely omits other factors, such as class, wealth, gender and age, to name but some. This has a further knock-on effect, in that current definitions of cohesion are not inclusive.
7. Current cohesion policies focus on people's backgrounds being "appreciated and positively valued".<sup>1</sup> While respect for other people's cultures and traditions is an important part of an integrated and equal society, there is a danger that the traditions and values society most readily recognises are culturally conservative ones that conform to the cultural stereotypes we have grown comfortable with.
8. There is the potential, then, that community cohesion will actually promote the culturally conservative values of 'closed' communities rather than the cultural freedoms and personal autonomies we might hope to see in more open, fluid communities. This would manifest itself as individuals having the personal ability and social 'permission' to exercise choice in determining their cultural affiliations, practices and identity.
9. So, by focusing on the difference between people from different backgrounds, rather than on relations between *all* people – i.e. between *human beings* –

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<sup>1</sup> LGA et al (2003) *Building a Picture of Community Cohesion: A Guide for Local Authorities and their Partners*. See:  
[www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/buildingpicturecommunities](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/buildingpicturecommunities)

current community cohesion strategies may inadvertently reinforce cultural difference. The emphasis cohesion places on 'the other' may in part be responsible for eroding the very thing it seeks to promote: good community relations.

10. Finally, brap would argue that the most effective method of establishing and maintaining good community relations is to eliminate endemic and structural inequalities and discrimination; that is, to create a more equal society.
11. Whilst there evidence to suggest that deprivation can and does erode cohesion, there is little evidence to suggest that cohesion actively reduces poverty. brap would therefore suggest that cohesion be seen as a means to promote equality and not as an end in itself: strategies to promote cohesion will only be truly effective as part of a package of policies that seeks to reduce inequality.
12. Having shown some of the problems with current definitions of community cohesion, brap will show how they relate to the principles the consultation document promotes.

## **2.2 Principle 1**

13. brap would agree that there is a clear link between equality and cohesion and would also recognise the need to work with particular groups to tackle evidenced need amongst particular communities or groups experiencing inequalities. As noted above, there is widespread evidence to suggest that equality is a driver for cohesion. Broadly, there are two reasons why this is the case.
  14. Firstly, economic inequality can lead to individuals feeling socially disenfranchised. brap concurs with the conclusions reached by Professor Richard Wilkinson that it is neither poverty per se nor local neighbourhood inequalities that have the most detrimental effect on a nation's wellbeing, but rather the scale of *inequality across whole countries*, where income differentials determine the size and importance of social class differences. This is also demonstrated in numerous studies looking at life expectancy, health and levels of violence.<sup>2</sup> Low status and wealth inequalities also reduce participation in civic activities and local democracy.
  15. brap therefore supports cross-government efforts to reduce economic inequality and would welcome policies that sought to promote some level of economic redistribution.
  16. Secondly, deprivation increases competition for scarce resources and fuels animosity between local people, especially where resources – or services, or 'political' influence – are perceived to be distributed on the basis primarily of ethnicity and to the advantage of one particular section of the community. Even if such perceptions are mistaken (or deliberately stoked by malicious propaganda), they can cause lasting damage. Indeed, this latter factor was identified as playing a major role in the Lozells disturbances in inner-city Birmingham during late-2005.
17. As such, brap welcomed the government's recommendation in *The Government's Response to the Commission on Integration and Cohesion* that all

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<sup>2</sup> Wilkinson, R and Pickett, K (2006) 'Income Inequality and Health: A Review and Explanation of the Evidence' in *Social Science and Medicine* (April 2008). See: <http://research.nottingham.ac.uk/NewsReviews/newsDisplay.aspx?id=239>

agencies, including local authorities, should not promote single group funding unless there is a compelling business or equalities case. brap does not believe that single group funding is the best way to reduce inequality in the long term and would urge the government to be firm in its adherence to the recommendations it proposed.

### **2.3 Principle 2**

18. Given the reservations about the current interpretation of 'community cohesion' stated above, brap would argue that groups considering "how they should promote cohesion and integration" should employ a more sophisticated model of community cohesion that takes account of the various forms exclusion can take.
19. The current emphasis on 'bridging' activities between community groups is a welcome development in cohesion strategies but stops short of promoting equalities grounded in our shared humanity. brap believes that 'race' is a social construct and as such welcomes activities and projects that seek to move beyond notions of 'bridging'.
20. The development of the Equality and Human Rights Commission coupled with the findings of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion and the Equalities Review have all indicated increased emphasis on defining and negotiating the 'human rights' that all people share in UK society. Yet this has been accompanied by very little guidance and support for VCOs and organisations working to promote equality. How do local equality organisations begin to work together more closely and share experiences and evidence of inequality?
21. In many cases, some are better connected and have had more opportunities to publicise the particular needs of their community. This is an unequal arena for many smaller organisations, new arrivals or social groups that have only recently been able to benefit from equalities legislation. Local authorities and other public funders have a legitimate role to play here in creating a space in which people can come together on an equal footing to think through, discuss and negotiate the freedoms they need protected.
22. In some cases, local authorities for example will need to make funding decisions that mean some VCOs will not get the funding they need because resources will have a greater impact on a larger group of excluded people by funding a different VCO or making critical changes to mainstream service provision. In other cases, the activities of some VCOs will not be funded because activities they plan will conflict with the rights of others within that community or society as a whole.
23. Developing the kind of social climate where competing claims and inequalities can be discussed and negotiated from a perspective of mutuality and proportionality, rather than 'ethnicised' entitlement is still a long way off in many parts of the UK, not least because of the persistence of 'race' inequality and the pervasive influence of past approaches to thinking about equality practice. Yet brap believes local authority infrastructure providers could be taking the following steps to achieve this:
  - developing facilitation and mediation skills of funding officers and local capacity agencies to help broker conversations about critical equality issues and practice at a local level
  - work with local infrastructure agencies to explain to VCOs new approaches to funding and to support them in putting their case across and share evidence of discrimination and inequality

- being very clear about the limited amount of resources available to local VCOs and encouraging collaboration between VCOs to develop strategies and projects that address the needs of a maximum number of excluded groups. In the same way public agencies have needed additional resources to stimulate partnership working in the context of LSPs and CAAs, VCOs will need support and resources to strengthen working relationships and sharing of information at local level.

24. In suggesting these proposals, brap is drawing on a wealth of evidence that suggests merely getting people of different backgrounds and faiths to interact can create the superficial appearance of cohesion, but does little to reduce the structural inequalities that can cause deprivation.

### **3. FUNDING**

#### **3.1 Questions for funders**

25. brap broadly agrees with the questions for local authorities and other funders to consider when funding community-level activities. In particular, brap welcomes the first question and the emphasis it places on funders to improve, if possible, mainstream provision and services as a precursor to single group initiatives.

26. brap agrees with the conclusion reached by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in *Our Shared Future* that single group funding merely reinforces the notion of the 'other' between different communities. There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that single identity funding encourages competition between community groups and can thereby increase resentment. Provision within the consultation document to allow single group funding if there is a compelling business or equalities case allows sufficient leeway for BME third sector organisations to continue to target disadvantaged groups.

27. brap would further suggest that the criteria for funding decisions should include reference to a requirement for proven needs and impact assessments and analyses.

28. It is crucial that local authority and local infrastructure providers develop a more robust and coordinated approach to assessing community need, and, furthermore, that they liaise with small VCOs that work with excluded groups to help them develop their own tools to do so. A common standard for quality of evidence should be agreed at a local level. A stronger evidence base will help local authorities make more robust decisions about design of services and allocation of funding and support for excluded groups. It will also help other organisations to understand the reasons for that allocation.

29. However, more evidence is useless if decision makers do not have strong analytical and communication skills. When making decisions about allocation of funding, the following skills are crucial and the Department for Communities and Local Government should seek to embed practices within public agencies and funders to encourage them:

- strong, critical knowledge of equality practice (recognising the pitfalls with particular approaches to equality such as multiculturalism, assimilation, etc)
- an ability to identify similar barriers to accessing service delivery and shared needs across social groups (and the ability to identify where these barriers and needs are specific to a particular group)

- an ability to recognise the relative strengths and weaknesses to particular forms of community engagement (for example, engagement by community leaders will not always provide a holistic picture of the needs of the whole community)
- an ability to identify practical improvement to service delivery to recognise the influence of political considerations and to make funding decisions that will help the maximum number of local people at the same time
- an ability to clearly explain how funding decisions have been made to local groups

30. A move towards a more 'evidence-based' approach would not only create greater equity between those competing for funds but would also ensure that where single group funding is awarded, it is awarded on the basis of the difference that it will make rather than on 'who' or 'what' the organisation represents.

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