



b:RAP briefing
no. 3.

“Do They Mean Us?”

BME Community Engagement in Birmingham

February 2004

Introducing b:RAP briefings

This is the third in what will be a continuing series of ***b:RAP briefings***. The purpose of these briefings is to examine key issues in public policy *from a clear and practical race equality perspective*.

While some briefings will cover topics that have a very clear and evident relationship to race equality, others will take less obvious issues and examine them afresh, teasing out the race equality dimension.

Each briefing will identify the key issues involved, highlight current trends in thinking and recommend practical action and solutions.

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Foreword

Engagement, involvement, participation. We use these words almost interchangeably, as if their meanings are self-evident and their purpose uncontested. But for BME communities this is far from the case. Underlying each of these concepts lies the much thornier issue of *representation* – who is represented, how and by whom; what does representation mean, exactly, and on what scale and to what depth can it be achieved? Who speaks for BME communities?

All too often, local engagement and representation are depicted primarily as issues of process or structure, when in fact they have over the years been profoundly shaped by much broader national and sometimes international thinking on race and ethnicity. Regrettably, this is a persisting trend, as we shall illustrate shortly with reference to current neighbourhood renewal policy.

It is our view that in Birmingham, the issue of BME community engagement cannot be discussed in isolation from wider issues of race equality. Indeed, it would not be overstating the case to say that in Birmingham the history of BME community engagement *is* the history of race relations and of public policy-makers' responses to "race issues".

b:RAP believes it is of fundamental importance to try and understand the complex questions that BME community engagement frequently conceals. This brief paper cannot offer all the answers, nor is it intended to. But it should be read as a wake-up call for a different and more thoughtful approach to community engagement issues and for a fundamentally different perspective on how and why and by whom BME communities are said to be represented.

1.0 RACE EQUALITY – SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

1.1 Introduction

Thinking about “race” and race equality has shifted through at least four distinct phases since the passage of the first race equality legislation, the Race Relations Act 1965, almost forty years ago.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, race equality had a much more politicised anti-racist character, reflecting the need for stringent measures to tackle what in retrospect can be seen as blatant racism and discrimination. A study of Birmingham politics and race relations during the 1970s, for example, found *amongst elected members* “a fairly widespread ignorance about the basic facts of the city’s coloured population mixed, in a large minority of cases, with an unmistakable degree of racism and bigotry”.¹ Racism was rife in local and national politics, in the workplace and in the trade unions. It is all too easy for those who didn’t experience the blatant racism of the 1950s and 60s to forget how highly charged the atmosphere of those times was and the often brutally crude – and unchallenged – racism which characterised life in those first black communities.

In the mid-1980s, race equality took on a more ‘psychological’ character, with an emphasis on changing or challenging white thinking and behaviour. During this period, ‘race awareness training’ (RAT) was a key tool in combatting racism in professional settings and workers in some sectors – especially education and the public sector – were required to participate in increasingly confrontational behaviour modification courses using techniques which had originated in the US military. Some black writers and thinkers – notably A.Sivanandan, director of the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) – were, and have remained, extremely critical of this awareness/consciousness-raising approach, believing that it placed too great an emphasis on ‘behaviour modification’ and consciousness and too little on the social, political, economic and *institutional* forces bearing down on oppressed minorities.

Many also felt that the promotion of ‘cultural diversity’ – of ‘multiculturalism’ – over anti-racism was instrumental in encouraging the separate ‘cultural’ struggles of individual minorities rather than the collective action of black communities as a *class*. The common interests – social, economic, political – of black and white working class communities were ripped apart and the primary beneficiaries were, in Sivanandan’s view, the new professionals of the ‘race relations industry’.²

¹ Second City Politics: Democratic Processes and Decision-Making in Birmingham, Ken Newton, Oxford University Press [1976], cited in “The Theory and Practice of group Representation: Reflections on the Politics of Race Equality in Birmingham, Smith & Stephenson, Dept of Politics, University of Southampton [undated – 2002?; abstract available from b:RAP].

² RAT and the Degradation of the Black Struggle, Sivanandan, *Race & Class*, vol. XXVI, 4, Institute of Race Relations [Spring 1985].

Since the mid-1990s, following the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent parliamentary inquiry headed by Sir William Macpherson which reported in 1999, there has been a further shift in emphasis to one of 'institutional racism'.

While many black activists have been critical of the inquiry, consistently condemning the lack of real change that has followed in its wake, other commentators – such as the former Home Office advisor, Dr Marian Fitzgerald – have been critical of the report's central premise of 'institutional racism', suggesting that the term is empty and that the Macpherson inquiry neither clearly defined what the problems were, nor offered any practical basis for action.³

More recently, Trevor Phillips, the Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, has also spoken out against the term 'institutional racism', claiming that it has become "an excuse for doing nothing". Institutions, Phillips has said, will quite readily "hold their hands up" to the charge of institutional racism, but this enables them to then claim that such racism is somehow the fault of the "system" rather than of the institution itself. Other commentators have reacted angrily claiming that Phillips has missed the point.⁴

Most recently the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 came into force, for the first time placing a duty on public bodies to promote equality and tackle prejudice. Some see this as the biggest change in race relations law in 25 years, while others see it as doomed to failure – an impossible attempt to enforce rights that many black people don't know they have and in any case lack the resources to defend. Yet others feel the Act focuses too narrowly on *access to services*, as if racism were primarily a matter of 'distribution'.⁵

1.2 Engaging BME Communities in Birmingham – A Historical Overview

It is important to recap the changing nature of the race equality debate here because although national and sometimes international in character it has nonetheless played a profound role in shaping Birmingham's responses. It is also immensely helpful to set the issues of BME community engagement and representation in this wider context.

The promotion of individual 'cultures' discussed in Sivanandan's paper, for example, can be seen to have informed the engagement mechanisms developed in Birmingham during the late-1980s and early-1990s, following the

³ 'New book slams Macpherson report', Guardian, 01/06/2001. See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/macpherson/article/0,2763,499858,00.html>

⁴ 'Institutional racism used as excuse for doing nothing, says CRE chief [Guardian, 01/09/03]. See: <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4744229-110247,00.html>

⁵ b:RAP has written elsewhere on the RRAA and implementing Race Equality Schemes: see "b:RAP Briefing No. 2 – Race Equality Schemes" [b:RAP, January 2004].

Handsworth riots of 1985 – ‘riots’ which rapidly came to be seen as insurrectionary in their scale and importance.

The local authority felt compelled to develop a response ‘post-Handsworth’ that would enable greater political engagement with BME communities and in 1988 proposed the establishment of new ethnicity- or faith-based ‘Umbrella Groups’, each with a democratic constitution. By 1993 there were nine such groups, each sending forward elected delegates to a ‘Standing Consultative Forum’, established in 1990 as a single, constituted consultative body.⁶

Relatively quickly, Birmingham City Council came under fire for failing to resource the Umbrella Groups/Standing Consultative Forum (UG/SFC) structures adequately and each UG was provided with a community development worker funded by the local authority and managed jointly by the UG and the Council.

During 1997 the local authority’s Race Relations Unit – which had nurtured and supported the UG/SCF approach – was disbanded and replaced by an Equalities Division and by 1998 the whole UG/SCF approach was under review, its effectiveness and sustainability the subject of widespread doubt. The UG/SCF model was felt to be a costly one and Birmingham City Council acknowledged that it had struggled to resource it at effective levels. Moreover, continuing budgetary pressures were combining with mounting demands by other ethnic/faith groupings for their own Umbrella Groups and funded workers, thus making future funding even more problematical.

But funding was only part of the problem. The SCF lacked capacity – including clerical and administrative support – and this factor alone made it evident that it was not operating on a level playing field. More importantly, grave doubts were beginning to be voiced about the UG/SCF ‘model’ itself – in particular the notion that entire communities could be *represented* on a faith or ethnicity basis by specific community organisations. The then Head of Equalities, Birmingham City Council, wrote:

“...even if additional funding were made available, maintaining the status quo will fail to address the weakness in the current situation which relate to:

- The effectiveness of consultation via SCF and the umbrella groups
- The *flawed model of specific faith and community groups actually representing their community*. [Emphasis added.]⁷

⁶ See The Theory and Practice of Group Representation, Smith & Stephenson [op. cit.] By 1993 the nine Umbrella Groups existing in Birmingham were: African and Caribbean People’s Movement (est. May 1991); Bangladeshi Islamic Projects Consultative Committee (Sept 1988); Birmingham Chinese Society June 1989); Council of Black Led Churches (Oct 1988); Hindu Council Sept 1988); Irish Forum (June 1993); Midland Vietnamese Refugee Association (June 1989); Pakistani Forum (Oct 1988); Sikh Council of Gurdwaras (Oct 1988).

⁷ Report of the Head of Equalities: Review and Development of the Standing Consultative Forum, Equalities Committee, Birmingham City Council [26/01/99], cited in Smith & Stephenson.

It is important that we should consider these factors in more depth because they are of direct relevance to continuing efforts to engage with BME communities in Birmingham.

First, the capacity issue. As the review of the UG/SCF makes plain, there were endemic capacity problems. Attendance at SCF meetings was generally quite poor and this in turn impacted on the ability of the SCF delegates to engage in policy-making. But the problem went further than this. Having gained local authority-funded community development workers, many of the UGs then not surprisingly left this policy-making role to these paid workers. In some cases it became apparent that the community development workers were effectively *representing* their Umbrella Groups at meetings of the Standing Consultative Forum. Thus, at times, the local authority was consulting with its own staff rather than engaging with local communities.

In retrospect it was acknowledged that *unrealistic expectations* had been made of the unpaid volunteer members of the UG/SCF structures. The commitment required of the Umbrella Group volunteers in particular was high, with local authority service departments and other public bodies too making a call on their time and efforts. They were treated, according to one interviewee at the time, “as if they were City Council officers”, their participation required in an ever-escalating number of meetings. **There must surely be lessons here for us today as we again watch the proliferation of new “governance” and representational structures – each almost certain to struggle afresh with the same weight of issues under which the Standing Consultative Forum finally collapsed.**

But the key policy re-evaluation taking place at that time focused on the role played by Birmingham’s Umbrella Groups – specifically, their ability to *represent* the diversity of “identities, experiences and perspectives from within their own heterogenous communities”.

There was mounting concern that the electoral process amongst the Umbrella Groups had largely served to bring forward representatives who all too frequently were “male, middle-aged and often first generation” and not always best-suited to speak on behalf of “young people and women, particularly in the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities”. Birmingham City Council’s own review of the UG/SCF structures put it this way:

“The perceived notion of *homogeneity* of minority ethnic communities has informed a great deal of race equality work to date. The effect of this...has been to place *an over reliance on individuals who are seen to be able to represent the needs or views of a whole community and resulted in simplistic approaches toward tackling community needs.* [Emphasis added.]⁸

⁸ Ibid – Smith & Stephenson.

The crux of the problem, then, was that despite the democratic structures and processes which were intended to underpin the UG/SCF approach, it came to be seen as largely a matter of ‘community leaders’ speaking on behalf of ‘their’ communities – and in this approach two massive assumptions were made: that delegates were themselves *representative* (with some kind of accountability and legitimacy that flowed from something or someone) and that BME communities were sufficiently uniform and similar in kind to be represented in this way. Increasingly, the evidence on the ground and the thinking of policy-makers was denying this view.

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Despite the intervening years, the notion that particular voluntary and community organisations or indeed specific individuals can speak on behalf of entire communities has not disappeared. It has not disappeared because the task of shifting the thinking on race equality is a relatively slow process: the number and kind of agencies and institutions that need to be influenced is huge and growing and the rate of ‘buy-in’ to possible replacement models is slow, differential and gradual – even in those areas where compliance is enforced by legislation. But there is a further reason. There is a persisting unspoken assumption that the views of BME communities need mediating in some way – perhaps because diversity as it stands is too “messy”.

And yet, as recently as 2002, research commissioned by b:RAP⁹ confirmed again how strongly many people from BME communities – especially women and young people – resist the idea that community leaders of any kind should be presumed to be speaking on their behalf. The research concluded:

“...BME communities are anything but homogenous, but the people who live in them often feel that they are treated as if they are. Class, intra-religious and gender differences...mean that many feel under-represented or even misrepresented and that more inclusive methods of consultation are necessary.”¹⁰

The limitations of “ethnicity”

There has, though, over the past few years, been a growing awareness of the limitation – in some respects the *crudeness* – of ‘ethnicity’ as a guiding principle of engagement (and thus representation too in many cases). Interviewed by Smith and Stephenson during 2000 in the follow-up to their earlier paper, Birmingham City Council’s then Head of Equalities said:

“We need meaningful mechanisms for engagement – a different kind of engagement based on recognition of experience and knowledge... We’re bedevilled by the idea of representation.”

⁹ Beyond Racial Identity, Jackie Beavan for b:RAP [2002].

¹⁰ Ibid.

Broadening the “engagement front”

Similarly, there has been a growing recognition that race equality activity and BME engagement needs to be *conducted on a broader front* than simply relationships with local authorities:

“...we need to give communities the opportunity to challenge other organisations in the city.”¹¹

This broadening of the ‘engagement front’ is echoed elsewhere too. A review of the operation of race equality councils conducted in 1997 by the Commission for Racial Equality concluded that:

“...if racial equality objectives are to be promoted effectively at a local level in the future, resources will need to be attracted from a wider set of sources than has been the case in the past, and that the active participation and involvement of a range of local partners will be required in order to drive real change through. They are the sort of partners who, typically, are now coming together in an area, on the basis of mutual self-interest, to promote economic and social regeneration, or community development, or community safety... Racial equality, potentially, faces the challenge of moving to that sort of structure.”¹²

And the Macpherson Report [1999] took a similar line, advocating that there should be

“...coherence [in race equality action] across all institutions and organisations, as part of a national framework for change. Without this, any change will be merely piecemeal, limited and unlikely to be long lasting.”

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In order to gauge the extent to which these historical lessons are being taken on-board, we need to examine an area of policy-making where issues of community engagement and representation are currently to the fore. Neighbourhood renewal offers us this opportunity and we examine this in the next section.

¹¹ Then-Chair of Equalities Committee, Birmingham City Council, interview July 1999, cited in Smith and Stephenson.

¹² A Fundamental Review of the Public Service Role of Racial Equality Councils, Commission for Racial Equality, London [1997].

2.0 NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL – REGENERATION & RACE EQUALITY

It is instructive in light of the foregoing historical overview to examine an area of public policy-making and delivery where issues of BME community engagement and representation are central issues. Neighbourhood renewal offers such an opportunity.

The Government decided to hold an early review of its community participation strategies for neighbourhood renewal, publishing “A Review of Community Participation – A Report for Public Consultation” in May 2003.¹³

The review tends to regard successful community participation and engagement as primarily a matter of ‘mechanics’ – of getting the neighbourhood renewal “delivery chain” right [p.5] and of meeting what are stated as being the core aims of “neighbourhood renewal and the implementation of wider government policy”:

- ❑ Governance
- ❑ Social capital
- ❑ Service delivery
- ❑ And social inclusion and cohesion

There seems to be an underlying assumption that getting delivery right in these areas will necessarily address race equality. Given that at least two out of these four terms are vague and in many quarters highly contested – “governance” and “social capital” – this it seems to us cannot be taken for granted.

In this sense, then, the review is a good illustration of the tendency to reduce community engagement issues to matters of *process*, largely ignoring the more ‘philosophical’ questions of representativeness, legitimacy, accountability and authority.

What little the community participation review has to say on the issue of *race equality* is muted:

“Community participation aims to develop empowered communities – communities which are then able to tackle complex problems...are capable of developing a common vision, a sense of belonging and a positive identity where diversity is valued and celebrated...” [p.8.]

¹³ Review of Community Participation: A Report for Public Consultation, NRU [May 2003]. There is a PDF version at: <http://www.communitysafetynetwork.org.uk/index.php?page=pages&menuid=17>

The fact that a significant proportion of British society views diversity as a cause for suspicion rather than celebration and would prefer to live in areas where people all share the same ethnic background is simply not acknowledged.¹⁴ And while the review notes that “67% of ethnic minorities are likely to live in one of the 88 most deprived local authority areas...compared to 37% of the white population” [p.13.], the deep historical roots of racism, exclusion and oppression in *some of the very black and white working class ghettos that neighbourhood renewal seeks to address* is also largely ignored.

“Neighbourhood Renewal – Race Equality Action Plan”

It is acknowledged however that race equality must be “embedded into every aspect of neighbourhood Renewal policy” and a separate race equality action plan for neighbourhood renewal was published in October 2002.¹⁵ Writing in its foreword, the then-Minister for Regeneration Tony McNulty notes that recent community cohesion reports on Bradford, Oldham and Burnley indicate that BME involvement

“...must look beyond simple proportionality... We need to consider how, in addition to championing race equality, we can promote cross-cultural and cross-community working.”¹⁶

And yet despite the numerous initiatives described in this report, the document does not explain what might be entailed in looking “beyond simple proportionality”. Nor is it evident that the many initiatives are progressing according to plan or interlocking in the way that the report suggests is intended.

Although the action plan notes that a team of ‘community facilitators’ is gradually being built up and will be deployed in areas “at risk of disorder” – to promote conciliation, resolve conflict, promote good community relations and bring people together and foster dialogue – it says nothing in broader terms about how ‘cross-cultural working’ will be encouraged as a core aim of community engagement. Surely ‘cross-cultural working’ – however this might manifest itself in practice – matters in *all* areas, not just those at risk of disorder?

But what most clearly highlights this essentially bureaucratic, “process-driven” approach to race equality is its profoundly inward-looking nature. Whilst crammed with initiatives it contains **no robust examination of racism** and says nothing about any kind of *action-based* race equality measures that

¹⁴ See MORI poll “Can we have trust and diversity” at <http://www.mori.com/polls/2003/community.shtml> and commentary at http://www.redhotcurry.com/news/mori_poll.htm. A 2004 poll conducted by ICM for the Jewish Chronicle also indicates a rising levels of xenophobia and distrust of diversity. See http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,1129233,00.html.

¹⁵ Race Equality Action Plan Summary: ‘Race Equality in Neighbourhood Renewal – A New Approach’, NRU/Office of the Deputy Prime Minister [October 2002] and Neighbourhood Renewal Fund: Race Equality Action Plan (full report), NRU/ODPM [undated – October 2002?].

¹⁶ Ibid – see Neighbourhood Renewal Fund: Race Equality Action Plan (full report).

might actually engage with people in their communities, in a language that they understand. **There is a grave danger that “professional” race equality is simply becoming too rarefied and is losing sight of the real issue: racism and anti-racist practice to tackle it.**

“New Deal for Communities Race Equality Guidance”

The earlier race equality guidance drafted specifically for the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme¹⁷ is a different matter and worthy of comparison. It is an altogether tougher and more outward-looking document. It acknowledges racism and discrimination, says something about how racism manifests itself and emphasises the need to adopt explicitly *anti-racist* practice in order to counter racist discrimination. It states that “Black and minority ethnic communities have not benefitted equally from previous regeneration initiatives” and that

“...in deprived neighbourhoods where everyone experiences some level of exclusion based on prejudice about the area, Black and minority ethnic residents’ experience of being excluded is made worse by the existence of racial discrimination. This added dimension of racial discrimination...needs to be addressed specifically if regeneration efforts are to be effective.”
[p.10.]

Racism takes many forms, the NDC guidance says, but often involves:

- ❑ Making assumptions about people (and their culture and lifestyles) without checking that these assumptions are based on fact;
- ❑ Ignoring the needs, views, skills, resources and experiences of specific groups in a local community;
- ❑ Thinking of racial/ethnic diversity as threatening and allowing that to stop us including others whom we regard as different when planning services and programmes;
- ❑ Treating people the same, regardless of their different needs.

Drawing on the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report [1999] the NDC guidance explains that ‘institutional racism’ arises from organisational neglect or lack of knowledge, but may also arise

“...from the adoption of ‘colour blind’ policies and practices (which ignore the differing needs, views and experiences of minority interests). It is not enough for an organisation to treat everyone the same – without paying

¹⁷ New Deal for Communities: Race Equality Guidance, DETR (now the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister [February 2000]:
http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm_urbpol_608049.pdf.

attention to different needs and cultures within any local community – because that will result in unintentional racial discrimination.” [p.12.]

It is significant then that the earlier NDC guidance on race equality attempts to develop a picture of what racism actually is, how it manifests itself and the kind of actions that *contribute* to it as well as assist in tackling it.

It is important too in that it makes clear that discrimination can arise equally from treating people the *same* as it can from treating people *differently*, can arise equally from focusing *negatively* on ‘colour’ as it can from ignoring ‘colour’, and that the key underpinning principle should be that our assumptions – about race, ethnicity, colour; about ‘sameness’ or difference – are **checked against the facts**.

We strongly agree with this point and believe that while different needs within communities should be recognised, these needs should be examined from an evidence-based perspective. Does the evidence bear out the claims of this or that group? When ethnicity becomes the primary guiding determinant of community need – as we saw from Birmingham’s experience with the Standing Consultative Forum and Umbrella Groups structures [see 1.1] – there is a grave danger that this will generate irreconcilable demands for ever more finely delineated ‘ethnicised’ services rather than fundamental, longer-term change in *mainstream* services and practices.

The NDC guidance also makes the valuable point that discrimination is

“...not only relevant to partnerships in areas with a large number of people from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds. It is a mistake to link race equality issues with the numerical or proportional size of the Black and ethnic minority population in an area.”

To someone experiencing racial discrimination, the guidance explains, it is immaterial whether they are from a community that constitutes a large or a small proportion of the local populace: “Racial disadvantage should be challenged in any area or institution.” But where BME residents make up only a small part of the population, then “...the need for race equality measures is possibly even more crucial [p.13].”

3.0 ENGAGEMENT: MOVING FROM 'REPRESENTATION' TO 'ADVOCACY'

We have seen that arguments regarding the best means of BME community engagement have a long and persisting history in Birmingham. Nation-wide, these debates have again been brought to the fore partly as a consequence of neighbourhood renewal policies. The Government's desire to see the community "in the driving seat" in matters of neighbourhood renewal and regeneration means that issues of community engagement – and hence of representation – remain central to the question of race equality.

b:RAP has for some time now been convinced that one of the crucial steps forward to be made is that of effectively decoupling the two quite different – but routinely conflated – functions of *engagement* and *representation*. As we saw in section 1.2, Birmingham City Council's own review of the Umbrella Groups/Standing Consultative Forum structures concluded that representation was the real stumbling block and acknowledged that all models of community representation in Birmingham had up until that time been built on the mistaken assumption of the homogeneity – the sameness, the uniformity – of BME communities. It is vital to understand how radically different this view is from that taken of "white" communities. With "white" communities, their tendency to be made up of "communities of communities" has long been recognised; their plurality – of age, gender, educational background, wealth and especially class – taken as a given. We rarely if ever view a "white" community as somehow bonded by its shared ethnicity, or culture, or skin colour. And yet, until very recently, this was precisely the view taken of BME communities.

For these reasons, then, we felt that finding a way to decouple engagement from representation was an essential step. The process is worth rehearsing here as a means of putting this thinking in its wider context. We have spoken for some time now about moving **beyond 'racial identity'** – about a shift from an ethnicity-based approach to an issues-based approach – but what this means in practice is perhaps not widely understood.

Essentially, it has three defining characteristics:

- i) In an effort to move beyond relationships determined by ethnicity and/or faith – the model which determined membership of the Umbrella Groups and Standing Consultative Forum structures in Birmingham – we have advocated an issues-based approach in which **what organisations and people do or know** is used as an underpinning rationale rather than their ethnicity or faith.

In pursuit of this approach, a series of issues-based Race Action Forums (on health and social care, housing, and education, for example) were established, thus drawing together groups, agencies and institutions with specific expertise or responsibility in a range of

service delivery areas. The thinking behind this was that Race Action Forums offered a vehicle whereby BME communities and their organisations could pool their expertise and understanding **in a spirit of mutuality**, rather than competing with each other to secure resources and/or influence using their faith or ethnicity as a ‘lever’ of entitlement.

- ii) Membership of each forum comprises **‘community advocates’** rather than ‘community leaders’. This is intended to reinforce an understanding that the community advocates are there to advocate on behalf of an issue, service or need rather than to represent some notional community. In this sense, they must be able to think outside of their own narrow self- or community-interest. This is a crucial idea in the ‘advocacy model’.
- iii) **Community advocates are selected by interview rather than election.** This is an attempt to broaden the base of community knowledge from within BME communities and to encourage cross-community working – a key objective of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit. But it is also a way of reinforcing the distinction between engagement and representation. Thus advocates are chosen for their ability, expertise, knowledge and experience, rather than elected because they have had some kind of representative role delegated to them.

In the context of the Race Action Forums, then, engagement is seen clearly as a consultative and not a representative function. As Smith and Stephenson noted in their paper, achieving

“a form of community engagement based on knowledge and experience meant breaking the perceived connection between community involvement and elected representation.”

Although we have so far focused primarily on distinguishing between community engagement and representation, and why this is necessary, we need now look more specific and look at the precise ways in which community engagement is actually conducted because it is in this connection that the wider voluntary and community sector (VCS) moves to the fore. Current neighbourhood renewal thinking – and indeed an ever increasing range of Government policy-making – emphasises a central role for voluntary and community organisations, whether participating in decision-making, service delivery or facilitating wider community engagement. For many public institutions, VCS organisations are *the* primary conduit through which wider community views are gauged.

This is not a practice which can be changed over night – and indeed there will be many who see no reason for it to change: VCS organisations are close to their client groups and deeply rooted in their local communities, the argument runs, and are therefore legitimate routes in to wider community engagement.

Discussions amongst VCS organisations themselves, however – especially in the context of Birmingham’s emerging Voluntary and Community Sector Compact – suggest that the practice of engaging with VCS organisations is nowhere near as straightforward as might at first appear. Many VCS organisations feel it is sometimes misguided and frequently lacking in transparency. And as we learnt from the b:RAP research conducted during the writing of “Beyond Racial Identity”, there are many, especially women and younger people, who have found this means of engagement as exclusionary as much of what went before.

If VCS organisations are to serve as facilitators of wider community engagement – and in some cases as crucial components in the mix of community consultation – then b:RAP believes that a more structured and thoughtful approach needs to be taken which will enable public institutions (or any other kind of agency for that matter) to assess the contribution that specific VCS organisations can make to race equality, inclusion and community cohesion.

We have begun the process of designing a framework which we think can assist in these circumstances. We have tentatively called this a ‘Race equality & community cohesion framework for assessing the contribution of VCOs’. While the present version focuses on the role of VCS organisations, it would seem eminently possible to adapt the framework to a number of different purposes. The version reproduced here is tied explicitly to the Race Relations Amendment Act but equally could be based on other outcomes – community cohesion, given the central role this plays following the Cantle Report, would seem to be an obvious candidate. While local authorities could use such a framework to assess their community engagement objectives, it could also be used by Community Empowerment Networks or even Local Strategic Partnerships. **Crucially, there is of course no reason why it should only be used with BME organisations: in its general principles it offers the basis for a way of thinking about all kinds of engagement with all kinds of organisations.**

While the template may at first appear time consuming to implement, we believe it is the kind of exercise that would become more rapid with practice. However, time consuming or not, the fact remains that some way needs to be found which will make engagement with the wider VCS a reasoned and examined process rather than one based on assumption and, frankly, open to widespread misuse and even abuse.

While the template undoubtedly needs further development – it may, for example, require some kind of guidance notes to make it more useable – the version reproduced here will demonstrate its general principles. It utilises three mini ‘assessments’ – a simple organisational assessment followed by two race equality assessments (looking at specific duties under the act and then at the wider impact/benefits that might flow from engaging with this organisation).

Race Equality & Community Cohesion: A Framework for Assessing the Contribution of VCOs

1. ASSESSING THE ORGANISATION	Response	
What is your purpose in engaging with this organisation?	<input type="checkbox"/> Contract/service delivery <input type="checkbox"/> Partnership <input type="checkbox"/> Community/neighbourhood representation	
What type of organisation are they?	<input type="checkbox"/> Strategic/umbrella organisation <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediary organisation <input type="checkbox"/> Faith-based organisation <input type="checkbox"/> Service provider <input type="checkbox"/> Campaigning group <input type="checkbox"/> Self-help/community group <input type="checkbox"/> Community/neighbourhood representation	
What is the organisation's primary purpose?	<input type="checkbox"/> Sector representation/strategy <input type="checkbox"/> Service provision/assistance to other VCOs <input type="checkbox"/> Provision of generic services (to the public) <input type="checkbox"/> Provision of specialist/culturally sensitive services (to the public) <input type="checkbox"/> Race/equality specialist <input type="checkbox"/> Single issue campaigning <input type="checkbox"/> Self-help/community grassroots work <input type="checkbox"/> Community/neighbourhood representation	
Is the organisation a "specialist BME" group?	Yes	No
Do you require a "specialist BME" group for your purpose?	Yes	No
Is this the right kind of organisation and engaged in the right kind of activity for your purposes?	Yes	No
Will engaging with this organisation assist you in fostering cross-cultural contacts at all levels?	Describe:	

2. CONTRIBUTION TO RACE EQUALITY

Describe

What aspects of race equality (and specific duties under your Race Equality Scheme, if applicable) will engagement with this VCO assist you in meeting?*Tick all that are relevant***Will this engagement/service/contract help you to assess whether your functions and policies are relevant to race equality?**

Will it help you monitor your policies to see how they affect race equality?

Will it help you to monitor and better manage your organisation's "race equality monitoring"?**Will it help you to communicate the results of your consultations, monitoring and assessments more effectively?**

Will it help you ensure that all sections of the community have access to the information and services you provide?

Will it help you to train and/or resource your staff more effectively in the new duties they have regarding race equality?

3. GAUGING THE IMPACT OF ENGAGEMENT WITH VCOs

RESPONSE

How will VCO engagement impact on your organisation's race equality functions in the following areas?

Organisation's Policies	Describe:
Governance structures	Describe:
Knowledge/intelligence around race and equality issues	Describe:
Leadership of your organisation	Describe:
Service Delivery	Describe:
Target-setting and review of activities and outcomes of race equality functions	Describe:
Monitoring of race equality activities and outcomes	Describe:
Is this activity designed to target a specific ethnic group [If yes explain]	YES NO
If yes explain the reasons for this targeted approach, including evidence to support exclusion in favour of this ethnic group	Yes No

3.1 The Profile of BME Groups in Birmingham

A further reason that the proposed assessment framework might prove useful is the nature and profile of BME groups in Birmingham. While we are not advocating that the framework should only apply to BME groups, there are some particular factors about the known profile of BME groups in the city that may make it of especial use.

Recent research commissioned by b:RAP to examine the profile of BME voluntary and community organisations in Birmingham established that there are between 500—600 BME-led groups in Birmingham.¹⁸ But it also established two other key facts:

- That there is a higher level of ‘informal’ voluntary activity amongst BME communities – i.e. conducted by informal ‘circles’ or groups which are not constituted, have no legal or organisational structure and little financial or administrative capacity or infrastructure.
- And a higher incidence – perhaps up to one-fifth – of what are essentially “one-man bands”, often operating from home, often also employed in full-time work and often only sporadically contactable.

This tendency within BME communities to provide care and other forms of social support on a largely informal basis, and largely outside of established voluntary sector funding or purchasing arrangements, has been borne out in recent years by at least two other pieces of research in Birmingham.¹⁹

These factors are significant for any agency or institution seeking to work with BME organisations because of their supposed ability to engage with, ‘represent’, or provide a conduit to otherwise excluded communities.

If there is a higher proportion of largely informal, under-resourced groups on the one hand, and a greater incidence of what we might call ‘privatised’ one-

¹⁸ The Black & Minority Ethnic Voluntary & Community Sector in Birmingham, Mike McLeod, David Owen and Chris Khamis, the University of Warwick and the CSR Partnership [June 2002]. Commissioned jointly by b:RAP, BVSC and Birmingham City Council. (Source: manuscript, b:RAP.)

¹⁹ In April 2003, a report on ‘*Volunteering Development in Birmingham*’, funded by the Active Communities Unit and commissioned by BVSC, concluded that black and Asian residents volunteer **informally** in rather higher numbers than white residents (white 27.4%; black 34.1%; Asian 31.0%), with Asian women, while not the largest source of volunteers numerically, volunteering for significantly *greater periods of time* per month, in some cases up to *twice* as long as the average (which was found to be 27.7 hours per month) and in a minority of cases even longer than that. **Source:** *Volunteering Development in Birmingham, Stage 1 Comparison of Data*, BVSC/Third Sector Services [April 2003; manuscript, BVSC]. The research included an on-street survey of volunteering trends in Birmingham – the first of its kind – conducted by Quality Fieldwork & Research Services [March 2003]. Research funded by the ACU.

Similarly, research during 2000 to examine volunteering amongst black elders in Birmingham also identified high levels of informal voluntary activity within BME communities and drew the conclusion that small, often informal/unconstituted groups, operating mainly outside of established voluntary sector funding and/or purchasing regimes – and therefore a largely unrecognised reservoir of voluntary activity and social support – are heavily represented within BME communities. **Source:** *Black Elders Project – Summary of Findings*, Birmingham Volunteer Action [2000; manuscript, BVA].

man band providers on the other, then the capacity of such groups to take on a broader community engagement role must in these cases be carefully reconsidered. The proposed Race Equality & Community Cohesion framework could help in these circumstances.

See Appendix 1 for a summary of the key findings from the Warwick University research.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

We hope that this brief paper has if nothing else served the useful purpose of setting out the historical case against BME community representation conducted on a faith or ethnicity basis. The city has been there and it failed. Moreover, it was not representative, it did not serve communities well and, once examined, its potential for in some instances a quite insidious kind of exclusion became evident. It is time to move on.

We would argue then that there is a need for us all to think differently about community engagement and to make a conscious distinction between engagement and representation. For too long these activities have been wrongly conflated. We need to be much clearer about the purpose of community engagement and what it is intended to achieve – and we need a fundamentally different approach to representation. A failure to tackle these issues – as the longer historical view illustrates – will condemn virtually any so-called representative structure we might try to failure.

While there is a need to get processes, procedures and structures right, this is not the whole story. As we have seen from examining recent neighbourhood renewal policy, it is possible to focus over-much on the processes at the expense of examining the more fundamental issues involved. Serious thought needs to be given to methods and techniques of engagement that move beyond the notion that particular ethnic or faith groups can speak on behalf of entire communities. Engagement with BME communities should be from a starting point of ‘heterogeneity’ – i.e. should recognise that even within diversity there is diversity – and that class, gender, life experience and cultural identity all need to be taken account of.

Without a fundamental rethink, then, there is a real danger that we will simply replicate the ethnicity- or faith-based approaches to ‘representation’ that have been tried in Birmingham in the past and have failed. This, in a city which is growing more demographically complex by the day – and which some commentators predict will be the first “Black majority” city within the next twenty years – would be disastrous.²⁰

Our view, then, is that all groups – and by this, we mean *all* groups, not just BME communities – need assistance and encouragement to think outside of their own narrow community- or self-interest. This should be a guiding principle in Birmingham and with the advent of the City Strategic Partnership we have an appropriate city-wide structure within which to adopt a more thoroughgoing and strategic position on all aspects of race equality. This opportunity should not be lost: race equality and community cohesion should be underpinning principles of the CSP, spanning all aspects of its work and all themes and activities that its members engage with.

²⁰ See proceedings of Birmingham Race Summit, January 2003: <http://www.brap.org.uk/article/69/>.

The missing dimension

But even this is not the whole story and in itself is not enough. We must be realistic about what the newer governance structures – such as the CSP – can hope to achieve and we must acknowledge the likelihood that they will reach out to only a tiny proportion of Birmingham citizens. The vast mass of people will remain untouched by Community Empowerment Networks and Local Strategic Partnerships, frankly irrespective of how much money the Government chooses to pour into such initiatives. These measures are important – indeed, should under no circumstances be neglected – but in our view they should be conducted hand-in-hand with a much broader grassroots educational campaign for anti-racism.

Racism breeds in ignorance and misunderstanding – the current political climate surrounding asylum-seekers and refugees is ample evidence of that – and we should be seeking to better equip people, organisations and entire communities too, with the tools they need to understand and challenge racism.

If institutions need a better understanding of the complexities of race and ethnicity – and we have all said they do, over and over and over again – then communities do too. These are complex social and political issues and yet we do so little at a grassroots level to try and ensure a better understanding, a greater level of awareness and indeed of *self-awareness* regarding race equality and racism. There is a gigantic educational job to be done and it does not begin and end with the city's major public institutions.

We need a Birmingham that pursues not just race equality but anti-racism.

b:RAP
February 2004

Appendix

Appendix 1

The Black & Minority Ethnic Voluntary & Community Sector in Birmingham, Mike McLeod, David Owen and Chris Khamis, the University of Warwick and the CSR Partnership [June 2002]. Commissioned jointly by b:RAP, BVSC and Birmingham City Council.

Key Findings

- a) There are between 500—600 formally structured BME organisations in Birmingham, their presence roughly coinciding with those areas of the city in which the greatest numbers of residents from BME communities reside and where there are the highest levels of deprivation.
- b) Over half of the BME organisations identified have been in existence for ten or more years and only one-eighth for less than three years.
- c) The average organisation employs between 4 and 5 staff but about one-third have no paid staff at all.
- d) About 80% of organisations are able to draw on the services of 2 or more volunteers – the average is 5—6.
- e) There is a correlation between paid staff and volunteer levels. Those with fewest paid staff tend to have more volunteer helpers, while those with ten or more staff have fewest volunteers.
- f) The most commonly served client groups are (in order) Pakistani, then ‘all ethnic groups’, then Caribbean, then Indian.
- g) 20% of BME organisations identify themselves as ‘faith-based’.
- h) The most frequently cited services provided are ‘advice and advocacy’ (over half of all BME organisations provide some level/combination of advice and advocacy services), education and training, then health, community care and cultural services. (Community care is most frequently provided in conjunction with some other kind of service, however.)
- i) 25% have an income of less than £1,000 per year. Some have no income at all. Average income appears to be around £65,000 but one-eighth were revealed as having incomes in excess of £200,000. Most commonly, income is thought to be between £10,000 and £50,000.
- j) Taken together, BME-led organisations in Birmingham are thought to have a combined annual income of around £11million, with about half of this coming from Birmingham City Council funding in 2000/2001. (Local authority funding to BME organisations in 2000/2001 was estimated to be £11.5m. Source: *Challenges for the Future*, report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Commission, Birmingham City Council.)
- k) It is estimated that only around half of BME-led organisations are connected with, or participating in, established purchasing, funding or service provision programmes (such as Social Services Department, Connexions, or regeneration schemes/areas, for instance).
- l) Time and capacity (and in a lesser number of instances inclination) to participate in policy-based forums or other decision-making structures is limited, but most groups recognise this as a critical means of building their own influence and capacity to influence service provision and other decisions that affect them and their client-groups.
- m) A critical constraint, with over 10% of organisations identifying this, is that of ‘official recognition’: a significant number of groups feel that “the authorities do not recognise us”. Lack of suitable premises and equipment and lack of funds (20% of organisations) are also critical constraints on the capacity of BME-led organisations to provide the services they consider are needed.

- n) Around one-third of BME-led organisations are or have been engaged with quality- or capacity-building initiatives such as PACE²¹ or PQASSO,²² while around one-third have managed a local authority grant or similar. Only around one-quarter however have been *contracted* by a statutory body to provide services.
- o) About two-thirds of BME-led organisations have sought and received some kind of external support. It is worth noting that based on the Warwick research figures, however, this would still suggest that in the region of 200 organisations haven't.

²¹ Practical Award in Community Excellence (PACE). A self-funding, stand-alone project within the Tenant and Community Initiatives department of Black Country Housing and Community Services Group.

²² Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations (PQASSO), launched in 1997 by the Charities Evaluation Service.