

# Inequality and Social Exclusion:

Third sector engagement  
in regional policy-making  
and strategy



June 2009

**A RESEARCH REPORT COMMISSIONED BY  
GOVERNMENT OFFICE WEST MIDLANDS**

**WRITTEN BY  
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## FOREWORD AND EXPLANATORY NOTE

For some years now it has been established practise for regional policy-making to include engagement and consultation with third sector organisations, especially where there is a perceived equalities dimension. This report has been commissioned by Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM) and it examines how, why and with what purpose regional agencies engage with third sector equality bodies in the course of regional policy-making.

Below we offer a short glossary of the key terms used in the report, as well as some additional background context.

### Third sector equality bodies

We use the term ‘third sector equality bodies’ to refer to all those third sector networks, forums and organisations having a regional remit and concerned either wholly or in part with equalities issues and the representation of specific equalities ‘constituencies’ (organisations working to support people with disabilities, for example, or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender [LGBT] groups, or black and minority ethnic [BME] groups).

There are certainly eight and possibly more regional networks and/or organisations that can be described as having a key interest in equality issues at a regional level. This report refers to these generically as ‘third sector equality bodies’. Within this, there are some variants, however. Some are stand-alone incorporated ‘organisations’; others are unincorporated and rely on an ‘accountable body’ to handle finances, secretariat services, and employment/personnel issues. Others are supported less formally by a facilitating organisation.

Around two-thirds are resourced (although at markedly different levels) and some employ one or more staff members. BME and faith equalities have received some government funding (respectively through initiatives such as the Regional Infrastructure Programme fund and the Faith Communities Capacity-Building Fund). Others have accessed charitable resources (such as BIG Lottery).

Almost all are open membership bodies or ‘umbrella’ bodies, their memberships comprised of other organisations. One doesn’t follow this model but has individual members recruited for their equalities expertise. Most are composed of organisations from a particular ‘sub-sector’ of the third sector (e.g. faith, disability etc).

### Regional agencies

We use the term ‘regional agencies’ to refer to all of the regional public sector bodies – whether government agencies or non-departmental public bodies – considered in this research.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Regional office of the Equality & Human Rights Commission; Capacitybuilders; Advantage West Midlands; Government for the West Midlands; Jobcentre Plus; Learning & Skills Council; Local Government Association; and the Regional Assembly.

## **Equalities terms**

A word about the usage of some specific equalities terminology may also be helpful.

### ***Equality strands***

The term 'equality strands' has been in use for some years now to describe the six 'strands' of equality covered by current legislation. These are:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender
- Race
- Religion or Belief
- Sexual Orientation

The equality bill introduced for its first reading in 2009<sup>2</sup> has extended public duties to also outlaw discrimination in relation to:

- Pregnancy and maternity
- Gender re-assignment

### ***Pan-equality***

The notion that equality can always be described by reference to six (and now eight) separate strands has seen significant rethinking in recent years, partly as a result of structural changes – the merger of the previously established equalities commissions into the single body, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) – and partly as a result of bigger legislative changes, such as the Human Rights Act and more recently the first reading of the Single Equality Bill (see below).

The establishment of the EHRC in October 2007 signalled not just a structural change in how equalities should be approached but also a philosophical one – the 'interweaving' of equalities 'strands' and the emergence of a more integrated 'whole person' view of equalities based on human rights.

Approaches that combine and integrate all of the equalities strands have become known as 'pan-equality', although it should also be noted that amongst many equalities campaigners this idea too is contested. Some race equality campaigners, for example, oppose the idea of 'pan-equality' (and some of the provisions of the Single Equality Bill) on the grounds that a necessary emphasis on colour discrimination may be diminished. Echoes of this and similar debates in other equality strands can be felt in the third sector's approach to engaging in regional policy making issues. This is arguably reflective of the fact that whilst the establishment of the EHRC was an important structural reform, it has not yet brought with it either greater simplification, better understanding or – most significantly – more effective and coordinated approaches to equality amongst the third (and indeed public and private) sectors.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.equalities.gov.uk/equality\\_bill.aspx](http://www.equalities.gov.uk/equality_bill.aspx)

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report has been commissioned by Government Office West Midlands (GOWM) to examine current approaches to engaging third sector organisations on equality issues at a regional level. Specifically, the report provides an indication of:

- Any development and support needs third sector and regional agencies may have regarding equalities-related engagement.
- Any differences between organisations' views on what constitutes 'effective' engagement.
- Where current funding is focused in relation to this agenda and the influence this might have on issues of representation, provision of strategic advice to regional agencies, and capacity building of the third sector.
- 'Models' that would enable more effective third sector engagement with policy-making on equalities issues at a regional level.

This is done with a view to providing regional public sector agencies with initial guidance and options for improving the effectiveness and scope of their engagement with the third sector.

## 1.1 Background to this project and wider context

The impetus for this research comes from a number of strategic discussions that have been held at a regional level over the last few years. An issue of particular concern has been barriers to accessing up-to-date evidence and input from third sector organisations to improve the region's approach to addressing inequality and social exclusion. For example, while some third sector organisations working in some sub-regions or on behalf of some excluded groups are able to feed their views and concerns on equality issues more readily into regional policy making processes, others struggle to access relevant engagement mechanisms.

It is felt that developing a more strategic approach to resourcing and improving the effectiveness of third sector engagement on equality issues will help the region to:

- Respond to the implications of the Government's Sub-National Review. Although each region's response to the review will be different, there will be some common themes that this region will need to respond to. For example, the ability to co-ordinate evidence of people's needs at a sub-regional level and feed that into regional structures (such as the Regional Leaders' Board and Joint Strategy and Investment Board).
- Meet public sector duties to engage the third sector in decisions concerning policy and allocation of resources. For example, the Local Government White Paper (2006)<sup>3</sup> reaffirms the duty of local authorities to establish effective processes for community engagement.
- Respond to new legislative guidance included in the Single Equality Bill (2009) which requires public authorities to promote equality in relation to *all* 8 strands. A new 'strategic duty' also requires public authorities to consider socio-economic inequality in all aspects of their planning, policy and service delivery and this will require a greater understanding of the needs of those living in poverty in the region.
- Develop some of the evidence needed to address economic exclusion in times of recession and address the region's large economic output gap

Yet, as in other regions, the West Midlands' approach to engaging the third sector in policy development on equality issues has been shaped by a patchwork of historical interventions, habits and practices. These have contributed to the region's unique landscape. This research began from the premise that in order to maximise the impact of third sector engagement with those agencies creating regional policies, there is a need to 'unpick' that complex landscape of engagement, to identify issues that may be preventing effective engagement with the third sector on equality issues and to understand where and why it is working well.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/strongprosperous>

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

This research has involved a short and contained programme of work conducted in three phases:

### Phase 1: secondary research

A desk-based literature review to consider existing research and examples of approaches to this subject in other regions. The literature review focused on the following key themes:

- Structures and processes for engaging the third sector on equality issues.
- Best practice in building capacity of third sector organisations working on equality issues.
- Key priorities and aims of regional agencies in addressing inequality in the region.

### Phase 2: primary research

There is a history of past engagement of a variety of stakeholder groups on this agenda in the region via a 'working group' structure. While this approach has ensured a wide cross-section of views have been heard, it often requires a large level of investment (both time and resources) to be meaningful and has not always resulted in the desired improvements.

Bearing these issues in mind, and the need for a rapid response, brap undertook a series of interviews with a relatively small range of stakeholder organisations that have an interest in or are engaged in activities that influence and shape the region's approach to addressing inequality. The sample included the following representatives from regional public agencies and third sector organisations:

- Equality and Human Rights Commission
- Capacity Builders
- Government Office West Midlands
- Advantage West Midlands
- Regional Action West Midlands
- West Midlands Race Equality Advisory Board
- West Midlands Faith Forum/ West Midlands Specialist Infrastructure Partnership
- Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender Consortium
- brap

Face-to-face interviews were carried out with all of these organisations. Email responses were received from the Regional Disability Network and Institute for Social Entrepreneurs (ISE) on issues from a disability perspective. Short conversations were held with the Regional Assembly and Age Concern.

### Phase 3: analysis and report writing

Findings from the interviews were combined with results from the literature review. A particular emphasis was placed upon comparing the views of stakeholder organisations in the region. It was felt that analysing the differences in these



positions would make it easier to identify barriers to effective engagement and to recommend models for improving it in the future. This comparative analysis and recommendations are included in this final report.

## **2.1 Scope and limitations of research**

The biggest challenge for any research project of this nature lies in accessing a representative view from the wide range of stakeholders that have an interest in this agenda. Researchers interviewed organisations that had specific knowledge of or were 'representing' the following equality strands:

- WMREAB (race)
- LGBT Consortium (sexual orientation and transgender)
- Regional Disability Network and ISE (disability)
- RAWM (engagement of the third sector as a whole)
- West Midlands Faith Forum (religion or belief)
- brap (race and other strands and human rights)

Obvious gaps in the sample relate to organisations having specific expertise on gender, age and transgender issues. Similarly, a range of groups representing the interests of commonly excluded groups not covered by legislation (e.g. lone parents) were not interviewed as part of this process. As explained above, given the resources and time available to produce this research the breadth of the sample was by necessity limited. It is hoped, however, that this research will be used as a foundation for entering into more detailed discussions with those interest groups that have not yet had an opportunity to contribute to this debate.

Where possible researchers interviewed those organisations or networks with a 'regional' remit in order to understand issues from across the region's diverse sub-regions. Yet as soon became apparent, those organisations or networks have differing levels of access and reach across the region, so the equality issues for all sub-regions will not necessarily be covered in this report. This means that an additional limitation to the sample was its geographic spread. This emphasises the need for increasing sub-regional engagement with this debate in the future.

### 3.0 FINDINGS

This research involved a *comparative analysis* of the views of a wide range of stakeholders on the issue of third sector regional engagement in equality related policy making. As might be expected, the issues discussed were wide ranging and complex and the research required a framework to enable analysis and identify common themes. With this in mind, the views of respondents reflected in this section are considered under seven broad headings:

- a) **The aim of third sector engagement on equality issues** – what are the aims of third sector organisations and how do these compare to the engagement requirements of regional agencies?
- b) **Methods of and approaches to engagement** – how stakeholders engage with the third sector or regional agencies on equality issues, what types of engagement structure or process is used
- c) **Skills and knowledge required to engage** – what types of criteria are used to determine who should engage in decision-making, what types of training or development do respondents think are required for those involved in engagement?
- d) **Reach, accountability and legitimacy** – views about the ‘reach’ of the third sector, who they represent, who they speak on behalf of and the depth of their knowledge of what is happening at a local level.
- e) **Outcomes and impact** – what the outcomes of engagement look like, and how respondents understand and judge the impact of successful engagement.
- f) **Relationship between engagement on equality issues and third sector infrastructure support** – how does capacity-building activity for traditionally excluded third sector organisations support or affect regional policy-making on equality issues?
- g) **Investment and resources** – how are resources currently invested in supporting third sector engagement in equalities-related policy-making, what plans are there for the future.

Findings are compared to identify the variation in views across the region on each of these subjects. Where possible, this section identifies what respondents think is happening *now* on each of these subjects, and what respondents think *should happen in the future* (i.e. what best practice would look like).

#### 3.1 The aim of third sector engagement on equality issues

The aims of all third sector equality bodies interviewed included a reference to engaging with regional public agencies to inform policy making on equality issues. However, the purpose of that engagement and the degree to which organisations were prioritising this aspect of their work varied. The table below summarises briefly the main activities undertaken so far by each equality body reviewed either in interview or through secondary research.

## Summary of activities of regional equality bodies

### ***LGBT Consortium***

- Directly building capacity of LGBT third sector organisations so they can better deliver services to LGBT people in the region.
- Signposting LGBT people to specialised public services available to them.
- Supporting a forum where LGBT third sector organisations and individuals can come together to discuss policy and service provision issues. LGBT Consortium aim to feed those views in to regional policy-making, although this has been problematical due to limited access to regional policy making forums.

### ***West Midlands Faith Forum***

- Signposting faith groups to available infrastructure support.
- Speaking on behalf of the faith sector and arranging opportunities for faith-based third sector organisations to discuss key policy issues.
- Sitting on a number of strategic policy-making forums and advising on religion related equality issues.
- Responding to formal policy consultations.

### ***West Midlands Race Equality Advisory Board***

- Established as a strategic advisory board to offer input on issues affecting the BME third sector and race equality to regional agencies.
- Has conducted research and consultation with a number of BME organisations to understand their views on issues affecting the sector and race equality.
- Has not had an opportunity to engage in a sustained way with any regional agencies to develop race equality policy or practice approaches to the BME third sector.

### ***Age Concern***

- A number of regional support networks established to support age-related third sector organisations on key issues (e.g. volunteering, service delivery and tendering).
- These support networks feed into a broader regional network hosted by Age Concern England and run by volunteers. This network discusses key issues of age equality raised by members.
- Those key issues are fed into Age Concern's regional/national policy-making teams who then contribute to regional/national policy-making forums.

### ***The Collective***

- Established in response to BME third sector organisations' requests for a network/support group to influence regional policy, share best practice and undertake peer support following the 'Routes to Opportunity' programme
- No engagement undertaken yet although its accountable body (brap) has been engaging at a regional level to ensure the interests of BME third sector organisations are represented.

### ***Social Justice West Midlands***

- Established to facilitate 'pan-equality' collaboration amongst third sector equality organisations in the West Midlands. Members from all equality strands.
- No engagement undertaken yet with regional agencies.

### ***West Midlands Specialist Infrastructure Partnership***

- An independent body that exists to support collaboration among regional specialist infrastructure networks, partnerships and consortia.
- Aims are to engage with infrastructure networks and consortia, and to strategically coordinate specialist infrastructure development with the work of partners in other sectors.

### ***Regional Disability Network***

- Developed by the Council of Disabled People Warwickshire and Coventry. It provides a forum for disabled people's organisations from across the West Midlands to share information and influence regional, sub-regional and national decision making.
- Sub-regional organisations/ networks feed into this (e.g. Birmingham Disability Resource Centre, CDP)

The following are real examples of how engagement has been used by regional public agencies and represents some of the views of regional agencies about the 'aim' of that engagement:

- Consulting with diverse stakeholder groups in response to particular government policies and initiatives. More focus has been placed on consulting with the third sector on particular equality related issues (e.g. community cohesion policy) and less on other policy areas (e.g. criminal justice issues). "We don't have a 'corporate strategy' in terms of engagement with the third sector. I think that some departments do not engage with the third sector."
- Working with disability organisations to inform a regional agency's disability equality scheme (responding to legislative advice).

- Using third sector organisations as suppliers for delivery of particular equality related work (e.g. writing a race equality scheme, delivering business support to excluded third sector organisations to help meet regional priorities).
- To influence provision of fairer infrastructure support for third sector organisations in the region.

When comparing the types of engagement happening at the moment on equality issues there are some differences between what is being 'offered' by third sector equality bodies and what is being 'taken up' by regional agencies. Those differences potentially represent gaps and potential missed opportunities for engagement:

- There may be on-the-ground equality knowledge from particular 'sub-sectors' that deliver services on themes like employment, education and housing that is not being used to inform policy.
- Third sector organisations from only some equality strands are engaged.
- Third sector organisations are only engaged in response to specific legislative duties.
- Engagement with third sector organisations is limited to a relationship of supplier of services, and does not include engagement to improve types of services commissioned.
- The focus of policy-making that specifically includes or resources third sector equality bodies is geared towards equality within the third sector, not within the public sector.

### **Better future approaches to engagement**

Respondents were also asked to discuss their plans for the future and to discuss what better approaches to engagement in the region would look like. The views of third sector and public sector bodies are described below in turn:

#### *Third sector equality bodies*

- Longer-term scrutiny of regional public policy and ongoing evaluation and monitoring of policy in partnership with the third sector to understand the impact of policy over time.
- To develop a more strategic and formalised approach to the engagement of third sector equality bodies on particular equality issues at a sub-regional and regional level.
- To undertake more pan-equality work, collaborating with other third sector equality bodies to identify common equality issues that need to be fed into policy making. "A 'pan-equality' body could be very useful with the move to a Single Equality Bill but also in terms of the need for us to look at equality in a different way...There is potential to look at equality more creatively...the advantage I see is being able to work more actively across these 'strands' – and hopefully be able to work more collaboratively."

- To ensure that particular equality strands are not lost as part of a pan-equality agenda.
- To find and share evidence of inequality so the third sector and public sector can use it to address inequality.
- To influence equality and accessibility of third sector infrastructure support

#### *Public sector bodies*

- Would like to use third sector organisations to help them test and understand the impact and delivery of public agencies at a sub-regional level on Local Area Agreements.
- Would like to involve third sector organisations more in decisions of how to invest resources in the region to increase economic productivity.
- Would like to use the third sector to understand whether sub-regional decisions have been based on appropriate analyses of need.
- The ability to measure and benchmark progress on equality over a number of years and to understand whether specific policies and initiatives had had an impact.
- Would like equality organisations to be challenging and influencing the equality of third sector infrastructure support.
- Would like to see more connectivity between equality strands at a regional level: “The word ‘integrated equalities’ is good, but the [pan-equalities] vision hasn’t really been translated into the third sector in terms of integration.”

There are some broadly similar views here between both public and third sector bodies, but in order to build upon these areas of synergy in the future, respondents identified a number of challenges that will need to be overcome:

#### *Generating evidence of inequality and need*

- Most respondents agreed that there is a role for third sector organisations in generating evidence of inequality at a sub-regional/regional level and sharing this with the third and public sectors. However, generating evidence of inequality was viewed by some third sector organisations as being primarily the responsibility of public agencies. Some third sector equality bodies, however, have already started to consider how third sector organisations could be supported to generate evidence of inequality more effectively. Similarly, regional agencies had different views about their own responsibility in generating the evidence needed to understand and respond to inequality in the region.
- The region needs to take collective steps to emphasise the responsibility of public agencies in monitoring their impact and patterns of inequality in service provision, or in commissioned services. Similarly more needs to be done to raise awareness of the potential role of third sector organisations in gathering evidence of inequality and need at a sub-regional level, and in measuring

their impact (so as to inform future design of mainstream public services). In order for both of these steps to happen there is a need for investment in the skills of both public agency staff and third sector organisations working with excluded groups.

*Role of third sector equality bodies in improving the accessibility and equality of third sector infrastructure provision in the region*

- Research found that not everybody felt that 'generic' infrastructure organisations would be in a position to develop the skills and approaches necessary to improve the accessibility of their support and that this was the reason for establishing 'specialist' infrastructure providers.
- A key challenge for the region in the future will be maintaining specialist provision for those third sector organisations that need it, but also encouraging mainstream infrastructure providers (that are often better resourced and have more influence at a sub-regional and regional level) to provide more flexible and equality-proofed services.

*The need to monitor progress on equality over time and in relation to key policies and interventions*

- This was an almost universal aspiration amongst both public and third sector respondents. Many referred to the need to better understand the impact of Local Area Agreement interventions and to feed this into a regional overview of progress on equality over time.
- In order for this to happen, there is a need for better access by third sector organisations to LSP decision-making processes (plans for monitoring of National Indicator 7 'thriving third sector' under the new comprehensive area assessment should help to facilitate this). Similarly there is a need for more integrated/cross-sector benchmarking and equalities monitoring of progress on a range of LAA indicators.
- It should also be noted that few third sector equality bodies have direct plans to support third sector organisations to scrutinise LAA delivery plans in relation to equality or to improve their own monitoring of equality impact at a local level. There is a need to understand where and how the kind of analytical and lobbying skills needed to undertake this would be developed, if this is something the region thinks is important for the future.

*The need to develop more integrated / pan-equality approaches to addressing inequality in the region*

- There was broad agreement that this was something the region should be striving to achieve. However, the reasons respondents gave for wanting to do this were at times different. Reasons ranged from wanting to respond to the new Single Equality Bill, wanting to make consultation more efficient by engaging all equality groups at the same time, through to wanting to resolve some of the differences and conflicts between equality 'strands' and different excluded groups.
- As might be expected, differences in motivations for taking a pan-equality approach in the region influenced views about what should or could be

achieved by taking a pan-equality approach. For example, some respondents were worried about a pan-equality approach ‘diluting’ work that had already been done to raise awareness of their own equality strands, and as a result advocated a fairly ‘conservative’ view of what could be achieved through pan-equality work. Others see pan-equality approaches having the potential to re-invigorate their own equalities work and to help support those not being accessed through equality interventions in the region.

- There is a clear need for more work to encourage agencies and third sector equality bodies to think through the implications of a pan-equality approach in this region, to identify the potential benefits and risks and to encourage ‘buy-in’ for a shared vision on this issue in the future.

### *The need to formalise and improve engagement between third sector equality bodies and regional agencies*

- It should be noted that few of the regional agencies interviewed had concrete plans to develop more formalised or equitable approaches to engaging the third sector on equalities issues.
- The lack of progress in achieving better engagement of this type was explained by some third sector equality bodies as being due to the fact most engagement opportunities are motivated by or driven by the interests of regional public agencies. One respondent said: “A lot of third sector equality organisations tend to be partnerships based in the public sector, in public authorities and are driven by public sector agendas. In a sense the agenda becomes almost synonymous with whatever is a priority for the public sector.”
- This remains a key challenge for the region. How do third sector equality bodies retain a level of independence and autonomy (and this was something that was seen as important by most respondents), but also respond to the engagement needs of regional agencies? One respondent suggested that third sector organisations run the risk of alienating regional agencies if they are not able to compromise and develop a more accommodating view of the ‘purpose’ of engagement on equality issues: “There is little core funding for networks and the only way forward is to compromise with funders – to try and bring funding agencies’ aims together with your own to deliver on both sets of aims.”

## **3.2 Methods and approaches to engagement**

We analysed the degree to which the methods and approaches to engagement that are being employed by both third sector equality bodies and regional agencies ‘fit’ with each other. For example, if third sector organisations are mainly relying on ‘campaigning’ models of engagement, does this fit with regional agencies’ approaches to organising more formal consultation programmes on particular policies? If regional agencies wish to engage primarily with organisations that sit on particular decision-making forums, does this fit with where third sector equality bodies are feeding-in their views and policy input?

Or if third sector equality bodies are not ‘membership’ organisations, does this mean regional agencies won’t engage with them? This was seen as an important issue because both public and third sector organisations have strong views about the ‘form’



third sector equality bodies should take, and about the most appropriate methods for engaging the third sector on equality issues.

An overview of the forms and approaches to engagement amongst third sector organisations is listed below, along with the aspirations they have to develop new approaches in the future:

### **Third sector methods of engagement**

#### *What is happening currently?*

As described in the foreword, there is some variation in the ten or so regional networks and/ or organisations that are expressly working at a regional level on equality issues. These variations relate mainly to their legal status, their membership base, funding base and geographic reach.

Currently these equality bodies are engaging with regional agencies mainly through sitting on key regional decision-making forums, or by responding directly to formal consultations. Although it is worth noting that access to decision-making forums varies widely across equality strands, as does access to the time and resources necessary to respond to consultations. One interviewee said: “[If we had a dedicated worker and more resources we could] have officers going out from 9 to 5 to meet with stakeholders and representatives at a time that is convenient to them, and also responding to requests for information – we would then have the capacity to respond equally to requests for information and to roll-out consultation events and activities as needed.”

There were relatively few examples provided of direct ‘campaigning’ activity on behalf of particular sub-sectors or equality strands. Where that had happened respondents reported low impact.

#### *Plans and aspirations for the future*

One equality body that isn’t currently engaging with regional agencies highlighted plans to work more closely with its ‘constituency’ to encourage and increase engagement with regional agencies. This equality body would want to undertake at least some of the regional engagement itself, but would also advise members and participants on how and where to engage regional agencies and where possible facilitate or broker meetings with regional agencies.

One equality body stressed the importance of establishing and sustaining ‘bottom up’ approaches to engagement (e.g. member organisations): “If you have a bottom up network...this gives an opportunity for a voice to come up on issues that don’t appear to be improving.” However, they also stressed the importance of establishing ‘top-down’ structures for engagement too, with these directly linked into established regional decision-making processes.

This same body also stressed the importance of building a clear mandate and ‘buy-in’ from regional agencies to any equality body or network that is established in the region. This should, they believe, include a commitment on behalf of both parties to monitor and evaluate the impact of policies over time and to allow each party to critique each other’s practice.

A common aspiration amongst the vast majority of third sector respondents is to create some kind of ‘pan equality’ structure – a network or forum that brings together

organisations representing *all* of the equality strands, thus enabling common equality and human rights issues to be identified and examined from a regional third sector perspective. As one interviewee succinctly put it: “I think we need both bottom-up networks focusing on particular equality strands and one that works across strands.” This joined-up, integrated view of equalities is seen as increasingly important, although some are concerned that this should not ‘dilute’ an awareness of the separate equality strands. “We also need to retain a distinctive voice for specific equality strands.”

It was felt that a pan-equality structure might offer a convenient port of call for regional agencies where the third sector could offer a level of independent critique and advice. The structure was also felt to be a place where third sector equality bodies could think through and test the implications of new ‘pan-equality’ approaches to equality and human rights and the implications this has for making strategic decisions about use of resources on equality. One interviewee said: “I think we need a space or a forum where issues like this can be discussed – and where the profile of excluded groups can be raised. I for one would be willing to ‘let go’ of my own interests in that case – in the recognition that is a potentially more pressing equality issue for the region at the moment.”

Another explained: “We have been concerned that with the need for consolidation from the Equality and Human Rights Commission there might a situation in which just one equality rep would get the chance to go to decision-making processes. But having bottom-up networks on particular strands would be very compatible with a pan-equality ‘mega-structure’ which could be slightly more strategic and aimed at CEO level.”

### **Public sector methods of engagement**

What is happening currently?

Most agencies currently access different third sector organisations depending upon the ‘strand’ of equality that needs to be discussed, but they recognise that “we need to think about how we bring multiple strands together”.

One agency engages the sector on equality issues through ChangeUp Consortia at a regional level, but recognised that these consortia (essentially concerned with issues of third sector infrastructure support) are not always best placed to discuss and examine sub-regional and regional equality issues.

One agency stated that they tended to use a number of ‘tried and tested’ third sector equality bodies, mainly larger infrastructure organisations or networks that can offer rapid and dependable access to other third sector organisations. “Naturally, you go to the usual suspects when they put quality stuff back in.” It is significant, however, that this same respondent could identify no benchmark of ‘quality’ (perhaps other than convenience of access) that would offer a framework for assessing the effectiveness of such an approach.

Where regional agencies do conduct consultation with the third sector on equality issues they tend to rely on ‘formal’ consultation approaches in response to a prescribed policy or initiative.

One agency suggested they would use third sector organisations in a fairly ad-hoc way by invitation if they needed them to fulfil a particular requirement. “I don’t think

we're using involvement properly, we have a knee jerk reaction on disability, but we need to get it right. We are open to having discussion about how to improve this."

One agency also suggested that they tended to *assume* that third sector engagement on equality issues had already happened at the local level before proposals for funding came to them at a regional level. Closer examination, they acknowledged, indicated that in fact this was highly unlikely to be the case.

One agency suggested – in strong terms – that regional third sector equality bodies should **not** assume that moving rapidly from being an unincorporated advisory body to a stand-alone incorporated organisation that could attract resources and deliver services was necessarily the right or the only development route.

### *Plans and aspirations for the future*

All agencies interviewed identified some of the potential benefits of establishing a 'pan-equality' forum where equality bodies could come together and interact with regional agencies. Their reasons for wanting this varied, however, but the assumption that such a structure would offer savings both in time and resources was common.

One agency wanted to establish a 'critical friend' relationship with third sector equality bodies, as opposed to one of 'scrutiny' and 'evaluation'. This would require a level of sustained or periodic contact between equality bodies and regional agencies to ensure advice is supplied and progress is monitored and discussed confidentially. It must also be noted that there are no pre-existing models for how such a 'critical friend' role can be formalised and made operational in the region. Other regions could offer some learning in this respect. For example Equality South West (the pan-equality third sector network for the South-West) has established a Service Level Agreement with their Regional Strategic Health Authority to offer equality related advice and sit on their Equality and Human Rights partnership Board.<sup>4</sup>

## **Gaps and areas of agreement**

### *Gaps*

There are clearly some gaps where current methods and structures of engagement do not result in sufficient connections being made between third sector equality bodies and regional agencies.

- a) Representatives of some equality strands and equality bodies have been unable to gain access to strategic decision-making forums because members were recruited a long time ago, and 'fledgling' equality strands (e.g. age, sexual orientation) have found it harder to access them. This reflects the fact that there is a tendency to resort to the 'usual suspects' without a robust indication of 'why' and without sufficient and fair judgement of the quality of their input.
- b) One of the aims of the Single Equality Bill is to 'equalise' the playing field of legislative protection in relation to all equality strands. There will be a need to review key policy-making forums and ensure views and expertise on all

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<sup>4</sup> Detailed descriptions of the work and structure of other regional equality networks in England was not included in this report for reasons of brevity, however these are available from brap should the reader require them.

equality strands are listened to. This will need to be handled sensitively and arguably should be based more on skills and equality-related expertise than simply 'representation' of a particular group, particularly given the wide diversity of views within each equality strand grouping. Similarly it will need to respond to and balance the needs that 'fledgling' strands have to establish their presence in a new regional policy-making environment, while also assuring more 'established' equality strands that their issues are not being diluted.

- c) Lobbying and campaigning activity by third sector equality bodies is not being received or used by regional agencies because of a heavy reliance on more 'formal' and prescribed consultation processes. There are other more complex concerns too. While some regional agencies want less 'scrutiny' and more 'critical friendship', many third sector equality bodies feel that some level of independent critique is necessary and that this would be diluted were they to operate solely in the confines of a public-sector 'sanctioned' engagement environment.
- d) There will be a need to respond to some of the frustrations experienced in the third sector by organisations who are feeling their approach to advocacy and campaigning is not working. To an extent a simple 'fix' would be to increase the receptiveness of regional agencies to more 'open' (and 'autonomous') forms of third sector consultation and engagement. Changing the 'rules of engagement' on this issue would help. However, achieving this is not straightforward as it would also require investment, skills development and changes in communication styles. In the section on 'skills and experience' that follows an analysis of different approaches to communication and advocacy illuminates these key challenges in more detail.
- e) There was some concern from third sector equality bodies about the timeliness of engagement, with some respondents feeling they were being involved 'too late' to make an impact on equality issues. The view that the third sector should be engaged *prior* to "regional agencies writing their delivery plans or specifications for work" was widespread. "The ideal scenario," one third sector interviewee said, "would be for there to be some strategic thinking across GOWM, AWM, Capacity builders, LSC, SHA etc with a view to putting together pieces of engagement work as required." While some regional agency interviewees agreed and expressed a desire that third sector equality bodies should be directly involved in the writing of specifications for regional commissioned projects, this view wasn't universally held. Some said that there often isn't enough time, or that the existing processes of engagement don't enable earlier engagement – ministerial meetings to which third sector representatives are invited happen at extremely notice, for example, or the national timetables for receiving the results of regional consultations are too tight.

#### *Areas of agreement*

There are some broad areas of agreement in terms of how engagement should be structured and approached in the region in the future:

- Most respondents identified the value of 'bottom-up' organisations as a structure for ensuring accountability and potential access to evidence about inequality (discussed in more detail in the section on 'reach').

- Potential for a pan-equality structure that is fed into by 'single strand' equality bodies. Agreement that a structure of this type would need to be 'high level' and strategic, but there were different views about what it should do and how.
- Widespread agreement that regional third sector equality bodies need to 'embed' their relationships with regional agencies to ensure that they are on the 'regional radar'. Clearer rules of engagement are also required to ensure that regional agencies have a 'mandatory' responsibility to engage with and consult third sector equality bodies (discussed in the Conclusions section below).

### **3.3 The skills and knowledge required to engage**

There were differing views about the types of skills, experience and knowledge required to engage in regional policy-making. Comparing the expectations of different sets of respondents on this issue is particularly illuminating so findings are arranged in relation to the following four headings:

- Skills third sector equality bodies have and would like to develop.
- Skills regional agencies expect from third sector equality bodies.
- Skills regional agencies have and would like to develop.
- Skills third sector equality bodies expect from regional agencies.

#### **Skills third sector equality bodies have and would like to develop**

Respondents identified the following types of skills that they currently have:

- Ability to provide a strategic voice, and an understanding the nature and extent of regional inequality.
- Ability to provide capacity-building support to other organisations in equality 'sub-sectors' (e.g. disability organisations, LGBT organisations).
- Ability to identify what organisations in that sub-sector require support on and to convey that to funders and decision-makers.
- Ability to signpost excluded communities to specialist services.
- Ability to demonstrate impact of capacity-building support.
- Ability to facilitate discussions with a range of stakeholders on particular equality issues (strand-specific).
- Ability to run a network requires the "ability to act politically with a little 'p' – when to go along with things if it will help you, and when to dig your feet in if necessary."

Some third sector equality bodies interviewed said that they had not yet had the opportunity or resources to develop those skills.

In terms of skills that third sector equality bodies would like to develop, these included:

- Ability to improve awareness of the issues faced by organisations in their 'constituency'.
- Ability to offer consultancy and advisory support to regional agencies and marketing those skills more clearly.
- Ability to generate evidence of inequality, to analyse and interpret that evidence and feed this in to policy-making.

It is worth noting that an awareness of or concern with the development needs of other third sector organisations was not universal amongst third sector equality body respondents. Similarly, some respondents had aspirations to deliver on particular issues, without considering fully the level of investment and skills that would be required to deliver on those aspirations in the future.

### **Skills regional agencies expect from third sector equality bodies**

- Skills to deliver equality-related consultancy work.
- "Organisations we work with need to realise it can't all be me, me, me."  
Another regional agency said: "Everybody is facing tough times, we're getting people coming to us and saying can you fund us because our grants are running out, and it's been very difficult to get past those conversations". There is a need for third sector organisations to find compromises when engaging with regional agencies and to respond in part to regional agency priorities.
- Access to data and evidence about service need and ability to present that in a useable way for regional agencies. "One third sector organisation came to me and said we have more people coming in to ask for help after the recession, but we don't have figures... I need a good evidence base"
- "Third sector organisations need to invest time in understanding our organisation, understanding our priorities and how we work etc. For example third sector organisations need to understand how much of our work is actually decided by localities and not by us."
- "We want a critical friend-type approach where we can work in partnership and get advice. Sometimes when you set up involvement groups all you do is...get beaten up for not doing something. We don't want to get beaten up, we want to be supported."
- Also there is a significant fund for a regional 'equality' network focusing on the BME sub-sector. The criteria for the current regional networks fund run by Capacitybuilders which will fund a 'BME' network in this region include:
  - Financial viability and management of the body.
  - Accountable (membership scheme, constitution or terms of reference).
  - Inclusive (membership criteria, equalities policy, example of specific work or priorities).
  - Effective (evaluation reports, overview of monitoring or performance management systems)

### **Skills regional agencies have and would like to develop**

There was not much opportunity for reflection on this issue in the research. However two important points were made by regional agency respondents:

- Participants in engagement need to be of sufficient seniority or have access to senior decision-makers, so change can be made by that agency.
- Regional agencies need to think about the different ‘cultures of engagement’ that they encourage. Some agencies are seen by third sector organisations as too ‘corporate’ and unapproachable and those agencies need to develop the skills needed to engage in different ways.

### **Skills third sector equality bodies expect from regional agencies**

When asked how engagement could be improved, there was not much reference to or reflection on how the skills of regional agencies could be improved. Mainly equality organisations referred to the need to remove barriers associated with a lack of power, status and resources within particular strands of equality and the third sector more generally.

#### *Gaps and areas of agreement*

Comparing the four sets of views above, one can see a number of areas where each sector’s expectations of the other are not matched by the skills and knowledge present or in development. Some of the gaps are listed below:

- Regional agencies require third sector equality bodies to develop the research and analytical skills necessary to understand local and regional equality needs in relation to key public service areas. However only one or two respondents identified themselves as having or as planning to develop the skills necessary to do that.
- Regional agencies require third sector equality bodies to develop greater awareness of regional agency priorities, however this was not referred to by thirds sector equality bodies as a priority.
- Regional agencies were keen to see more collaboration between equality bodies through ‘pan-equality’ approaches. However, only some third sector respondents referred to the skills development that would be necessary to achieve this shift, and not all were keen to prioritise development of those skills. Regional agencies did not refer at all to the skills development that would be necessary to respond to a different ‘pan-equality’ environment.

Addressing the gaps and barriers to developing these skills and developing a more consistent view of what skills are needed requires both short- and long-term responses.

In the short term, there are some actions third sector organisations and regional agencies could take to respond to these issues. For example:

- Infrastructure support for sub-sector organisations (e.g. BME organisations) at a sub-regional level that could help to gather evidence of inequality and

could offer advice on ‘what works’ in addressing the needs of traditionally excluded groups.

- Developing consultancy and advisory skills amongst third sector equality bodies to address the needs and concerns of regional agencies.
- Providing regional agencies and third sector equality bodies with information and practical examples of how a ‘pan-equality’ approach to equality could work and testing out new approaches to equality in the region.

However, in order for any of these short-term measures to work, there is a need to address an issue that will require a longer-term solution. This relates to developing better communication skills and, as will be explained later in this report, in order to develop those skills, *investment* will be needed, as will a different interpretation of the ‘*rules of engagement*’.

But before that, the diagram below illustrates some of the communication skills that currently need to be developed in the region to achieve more effective engagement. This simple diagram imagines some of the responses and communication habits that are currently taking place in the region on issues of equality. On the left hand side are common public sector questions and information requests – broadly these can be described as a language of ‘strategic commentary’: regional agencies inviting strategic commentary on their work. On the right hand side are some common third sector equality body responses – these can be described as a language of ‘advocacy’.

Regional agency		Third sector equality bodies
What’s my impact?	→	You’re excluding us!
What should I invest in and why?	→	Invest in us – we’re excluded!
Who am I missing/inadvertently excluding?	→	Please include us!
Am I making progress?	→	We don’t have the resources to measure this, but we know you haven’t been mindful of our concerns
<b>Language of strategic commentary</b>	→	<b>Language of advocacy</b>

Although obviously the responses in this table are slightly ‘tongue in cheek’ they do raise a serious point. How can better and more consistent communication styles be established between regional agencies and third sector equality bodies? Part of the problem is that the two sets of communication styles were never really designed to connect or match. The language of advocacy is not seen to be objective enough by regional agencies, nor is it seen to respond to their concerns. Similarly the language of strategic commentary doesn’t allow third sector organisations to express their concerns (nor draw on their core skills and values of campaigning and advocating on behalf of excluded and marginalised groups).



If as a region we want to develop better and more effective dialogue around the types of issues in the previous diagram, a different relationship will need to be established between regional agencies and third sector equality bodies. And arguably investment will be needed on both sides. This could enable third sector equality bodies to develop skills such as:

- Understanding regional agency priorities.
- Understanding how those regional agencies are judged by national agencies to which they are accountable.
- Understanding how to gather, analyse and present evidence on inequality in a useable way for regional policy-making.
- Understanding how to manage the views and priorities of a large range of stakeholders in order to achieve one's own goals.

Similarly, regional agencies will need to develop skills necessary to:

- Develop more robust approaches to assessing who should take part in engagement.
- Demonstrate why particular equality bodies were approached for engagement over others.
- Identify where strategic investment should be made to help the broadest range of excluded groups (and equality 'constituencies') to improve their engagement skills in a regional policy-making environment.

However, responses from this research project would indicate that the chances of this skills development happening look fairly slim without a number of other significant changes in the way the region measures the outcomes and impact of engagement and the way the region invests resources on this issue. Similarly, development of these skills will only make an impact if changes are also made in the 'rules of engagement'.

### **3.4 Reach, accountability and legitimacy**

Although not asked directly about the 'reach' of third sector engagement on equality issues many respondents referred to it. In particular respondents identified the importance of ensuring views from diverse interest groups and diverse areas of the region are included in engagement. There were relatively similar views from both third and public sector respondents on this issue. The main issues identified are set out below.

#### **Third sector equality bodies**

Most respondents suggested that the ability of third sector equality bodies to engage on equality issues can be judged in part by their 'reach' – their ability to connect with 'grass roots' organisations and 'hard to reach' groups throughout the region. In this context, 'reach' can be taken as including:

- The geographic 'spread' of membership organisations.
- The diversity of members (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity etc).
- The diverse skills, knowledge and experience that members 'bring to the table' (e.g. knowledge of particular service areas, such as housing, employment etc).

The reach of equality bodies is considered to be important for a number of reasons:

- The ability to consult with member organisations directly involved in specific sub-sectors (housing or homelessness groups, for example, or disability groups) reinforces **legitimacy**, particularly when equality bodies are speaking on behalf of or representing a specific sub-sector.
- Ensuring the maximum **accountability and transparency** is important to third sector equality bodies, especially those representing or working with or on behalf of excluded groups. This generally involves including excluded groups in decision-making about the equality body's direction and ensuring that there are mechanisms for reporting-back to the constituency or sub-sector concerned.
- Overcoming the limitations of '**representation**': some third sector equality bodies increasingly acknowledge the limitations inherent in conventional models of 'representation' – such as the tendency to assume, for example, that an excluded minority community can be inclusively represented by a 'community leader'. Having broader 'reach' in a particular community was seen as a way of overcoming such problems to some extent.

It should be emphasised, however, that virtually all of the third sector equality bodies interviewed during this research also acknowledged that the extent of their 'reach' – and hence the degree of inclusivity – is ultimately determined by available resources. Consequently, few if any claim to be able to engage comprehensively on all aspects of regional policy-making with *all* organisations from a particular constituency. Consequently, many have developed *indirect* methods aimed at extending reach and involvement. A key method has become that of supporting 'hard to reach' organisations through capacity-building and sign-posting to other sources of support. While in the much longer-term capacity-building that strengthens organisations and enables them to operate more effectively *may* increase the chances that smaller and more marginalised groups will engage more with regional policy-making, it must be noted that this is not the primary purpose of such capacity-building. And even if it was, it would be extremely difficult to demonstrate a causal link between 'generic' capacity-building and third sector engagement in regional policy-making.

Similarly, only a few equality bodies referred to being able to gather evidence *directly* from member organisations to inform regional policy-making. Most are concerned with what is *possible* in an environment of inadequate resourcing. One contributor said: "We conduct some engagement with member organisations on larger policy issues and feed this in at a regional level via consultation events organised by regional agencies, or via regional and national policy consultation processes. However, this is not always possible due to resources and time constraints and we rely on an experienced Chair and Vice Chair to engage on the sector's behalf."

The task of collecting local equalities information – whether from equality bodies at the local level, or amongst individuals from particular excluded groups – is also felt to be further complicated by wide divergences in both the level and quality of engagement in local strategic partnerships. For example, while Coventry has an established LGBT working group connected at the highest levels to Coventry City Council, other cities in the region have a much lower level of engagement of LGBT groups in decision-making. This has implications for the amount of additional support that would be required in order to build broadly comparable skills levels amongst LGBT groups across the region and the same is true for other equality 'strands' too.

## Regional agencies

One respondent suggested that more clarity is required in order to understand the 'reach' that equality bodies in the region have: "We need to be quite upfront about the reach of networks in order to understand how to plug more people in". Regional agencies also had a slightly different take on how reach should be assessed, emphasising:

- Geographical representation (having members from a wide area, or having evidence of what is happening in that area).
- An ability to consult with smaller third sector organisations.
- Being able to access evidence and research from a local level.
- Covering all equality strands and 'representative' of diverse groups.

There was a feeling among all respondents that there are currently some gaps in equalities-related consultation on regional policy-making, particularly in relation to the 'geography' of the region. For example, there is a key challenge in connecting information from the 'rural' and 'urban' areas of the region.

Some contributors raised the issue of the Sub National Review, suggesting that this will create a need not just to better understand the quality of evidence currently collected sub-regionally, but also to consider how such evidence can be collected more effectively and fed into sub-regional and regional decision-making (e.g. sub-regional investment plans or the regional economic strategy).

## Gaps and areas of agreement

### *Gaps*

Some significant differences were evident between regional agencies and third sector equality bodies in their interpretations of 'reach'.

For regional agencies, 'reach' tends to mean one of two things. It is either interpreted as having access to a range of third sector equality groups in order to satisfy particular legislative responsibilities. Or it is interpreted as having access to up-to-date local evidence of need and inequalities. For third sector equality bodies, however, 'reach' tends to be more about establishing a regularised and in-depth relationship with their 'constituents'. This is seen as more important because it helps to establish a level of accountability, transparency and legitimacy. Third sector equality bodies are also much more likely to see this as being part of the 'core business'

The question of local data and evidence is a vexed one. Our interviews suggest that regional bodies assume that sub-regional and regional data-collection and evidence-gathering by equality bodies is much more widespread than it actually is. Most third sector respondents made it abundantly clear that they lack both the resources and in many cases the skills and capacity to engage in such data-collection. There is a clear case for additional regional investment in building the evidence-base on inequalities, and for building third sector skills and capacity to contribute to this evidence-base. Indeed, it seems plain that without this any meaningful progress in this area is impossible.

One other area of significant difference was also evident, however, but this is of a more philosophical nature. Regional agencies by and large still believe that 'reach' is ultimately only limited by equality bodies' abilities to devise sufficiently representative means of engagement. Equality bodies, on the other hand, increasingly recognise that 'super-diversity' presents a serious challenge to conventional models of community representation where the assumption is that some notional 'community leader' can speak for an entire group. This needs further examination and consideration. Is there evidence to suggest that improved 'representativeness' will necessarily help in bringing forward 'better' evidence, or in producing more equitable outcomes?

This is a difficult issue, not least because of the somewhat knee-jerk reliance that most government policy-making and guidance tends to have on 'representativeness'. There is still a widespread assumption that effective consultation and engagement is only really about getting the 'representative' models right.

#### *Areas of agreement*

An issue on which regional agencies and equality bodies are in broad agreement is the need for improved geographic reach in engagement practices. There is widespread recognition that current approaches to engagement do not respond sufficiently to the geographic diversity of the region and the different needs and equality implications inherent in this.

Any models for engaging the third sector on more effectively equality issues in the future will need to recognise the importance of geographic diversity and the logistical difficulties this poses. Can the results of sub-regional engagement exercises be 'joined up' to form a cohesive and co-ordinated regional whole? Or is there a need for more a more nuanced approach in which sub-regional equality priorities are responded to on a sub-regional basis?

### **3.5 Outcomes and impact**

Respondents were asked how they judge the impact of equality-related third sector engagement in regional policy-making. The views of third sector and public sector respondents are arranged below.

#### *Third sector equality bodies*

Few if any equality bodies are undertaking structured work to understand their impact on regional policy-making. Generally speaking, third sector equality organisations tend to base judgements regarding the success of their engagement in regional policy-making on securing a 'seat at the table' rather than on the effectiveness or outcomes of engagement (their 'intervention'). Many respondents, however, also cited a lack of access to decision-making forums or the lack of impact on regional policy-making once they had gained access. However, any evidence for this is 'impressionistic' and anecdotal rather than empirical.

Where impact assessment is happening amongst third sector equality bodies it relates mainly to understanding the effect of the direct capacity-building support some offer and project-related activity. For example:

- Needs assessments of organisations supported and tracking the effect of support over time (e.g. whether an organisation received more funding or increased service delivery capacity).
- Measuring the number of people attending consultations organised for a particular 'sub-sector' (or 'constituency').
- Monitoring outputs to meet funder requirements for projects.

Those wanting to do more evaluation, monitoring and impact assessment in the future had the following aspirations:

- “We need to be able to do some impact assessment across third sector equality networks. We as a sector really need to grasp the importance of that, for example recognising the influence our activity has on delivering on LAA targets at a local level.”
- To measure increases in membership.
- To measure how many organisations from a sub-sector are being supported to access funds.
- To contribute to the evaluation and monitoring of key policies and interventions over time.

### *Regional agencies*

A number of contributors highlighted the challenges inherent in assessing the impact and effectiveness of third sector engagement. One said: “Because we’re not always clear what we want, we don’t know whether we got it.” Another said: “We haven’t really thought about how we judge the impact of consultation because we end up moving from one [consultation exercise] to the next.” The fact that in some cases analysis of consultation responses is not undertaken at the regional level but is passed ‘up the chain’ – sometimes to a government department – brings additional difficulties to understanding the impact and quality of consultation.

One agency suggested that they judge the impact of engagement primarily by whether it helps them find solutions to the problems they exist to address. In this instance, accessing evidence of what works and what doesn’t work in their priority service areas was seen as the barometer for successful engagement. So for example, that agency wanted to gather “a really good evidence base” through engagement. They were also keen to see engagement create a better awareness and understanding across the third sector of that agency’s work to address inequality.

### **Gaps and areas of agreement**

A key issue worth noting is that neither public nor third sector participants are currently able to assess whether engagement/consultation actually has a positive impact on either policy formation or outcomes for West Midlands’ citizens. Where assessment does happen it normally relates to *access* to engagement mechanisms, as opposed to the *outcomes* of that engagement. Similarly evidence is largely emotive and anecdotal as opposed to empirical and measurable.

There are differences in how the effectiveness of engagement is 'valued' and judged and this difference is affected largely by the differences in views about the 'aims' of engagement (see 3.1). For example, if meeting legislative targets is the most important reason for engagement, then effectiveness is judged by the 'representativeness' of consultation processes. If engagement is required to generate evidence of an agency's impact, then the quality and analysis of data supplied is the most important issue in gauging effectiveness of engagement.

Some of the more 'emotive' responses from third sector respondents demonstrate the importance of 'power', and the distribution of resources and influence in the region. A number of third sector equality bodies interviewees talked about the 'powerlessness' they feel in shaping the engagement agenda. Implicit in a number of responses was their inability to affect the way the quality and effectiveness of engagement is judged. Lacking the power, resources or influence to: secure earlier involvement in the engagement process; help shape shared 'rules of engagement'; help determine the agendas to be discussed; dedicate time to background reading and attending strategic meetings meant that many feel participation in engagement and consultation is far from a level playing field. The issue of resources in particular is discussed in more detail in section 3.7.

Despite the undeniable difficulties, more objective measures for assessing the impact and effectiveness of third sector engagement in regional policy-making are undoubtedly required. And to be truly useful, any such measures would have to have to some reference to outcomes. Doing this would require stakeholders to reflect on what those measures of effective engagement might look like. There will be a value in some of the more emotive or 'softer' evidence measures – such as how people 'feel' about engagement. This is particularly true given that much of engagement relies on relationships and work outside the 'day job' of many agencies, so it is important to understand where feelings of frustration or apathy stem from in order to prevent 'disengagement'.

There are other types of softer measures that include things like:

- How many people attend engagement events?
- Whether the 'right people' are around the table (are people representative?).
- Whether usable evidence and local intelligence is provided by equality bodies participating in engagement.
- Whether an equality body had been 'listened to' and had been able to influence the shape of regional policies.
- Whether a regional agency has managed to get its message on equality issues across to the wider third sector.
- Whether an equality body has managed to have a follow-up meeting with a regional agency on an issue they are concerned with.
- The model or type of engagement happening is seen to be equal.

However, using softer measures like this alone will be of very limited help in assessing the *effectiveness* of engagement, in assessing the *equality of outcomes*, and especially in informing future decisions regarding investment and distribution of resources. The region will also need to develop harder and more objective measures of effective engagement. For example, what effect has engagement had on policy and in turn what effect did those changes have on equality outcomes for those in the region affected by the policy. This is an extremely difficult thing to do and is something that a number of national agencies are currently thinking through. However, there are key places in the regional policy-making machine (that are rarely

discussed or evaluated) where some of these harder measures might be developed and recorded:

- Reviewing the content of policies and whether they have been influenced by specific engagement interventions (discussing this with policy makers/authors directly – and understanding whether this matched the intentions of those involved in engagement).
- Assessing the impact of policies on service delivery/implementation plans.
- Assessing the impact of implementation plans on actual service delivery and behaviour of public services staff.
- Reviewing the effect of changes in service delivery on accessibility and quality of services (customer satisfaction, take-up rate, equalities monitoring of service users).

But such an approach would require a paradigm shift in views of the *purpose* of engagement with third sector equality bodies. It would require an understanding that the explicit purpose of engagement is *not* to respond to legislative measures, or to the expectations of particular communities of interest, but rather to help improve the effectiveness and equality of *outcomes* in the region (whether outcomes deriving from a specific policy objective, or those linked to particular public services).

But what comes first, the chicken or the egg? Without evidence of the positive impact of engagement on *outcomes*, the kind of investment necessary for such sophisticated monitoring is unlikely to be forthcoming; and without investment, systematic development of new forms of impact monitoring will not be possible. This is too big a gap to be ignored and some bold and futuristic steps are needed at a regional leadership level to take this issue forward.

### **3.6 The relationship between engagement on equality issues and third sector infrastructure support**

Section 3.4 illustrated that most third sector equality bodies see some role for themselves in regard to capacity-building smaller or less experienced organisations in their particular sub-sector or equality ‘constituency’. Regional agencies’ expectations of what third sector equality bodies can achieve are somewhat different, however: in addition to assuming that equality bodies will have a capacity-building role, regional agencies also assume that they will engage in sector consultation, data-collection and more strategic evidence-gathering.

This short section explores the implications of this in more detail.

As many equality bodies noted, the available resources that they can hope to access are most typically associated with capacity-building in some form or other. Resources are rarely if ever available targeted explicitly at enabling engagement in equalities-related policy-making. Equality body interviewees identified a need for resources that would assist with:

- Getting up to speed on public policy issues related to their equality strand.

- Developing relationships with regional agencies and gaining access to strategic decision-making forums.
- Research on issues affecting their sub-sector or their equality strand.
- Engaging with those working in other equality strands to develop collective views of equality challenges facing the region – with a view to sharing those with regional agencies.

Despite a clear desire on the part of regional agencies to engage with third sector equality bodies on strategic issues related to public policy and service transformation, the resources and support available to equality bodies tends to be focused on the provision of specialist infrastructure support. There is a gap between the strategic objectives of third sector engagement and the available resourcing.

Admittedly the lines between specialist infrastructure provision, advocating on behalf of a particular sub-sector and advocating on a particular equality strand are blurred. And rightly so in some cases. Yet offering infrastructure support to or advocating on behalf of particular sub-sectors is *not* the same thing as promoting equality, nor does it necessarily support the regional policy-making process. There are a number of reasons for this:

- Sub-sector organisations are not always working equitably – e.g. they may be working only with particular groups when there is potential to support more.
- Advocating on behalf of a sub-sector may be both useful and necessary, but its impact may also be limited. For example, it will not necessarily ensure that regional or local public sector agencies will be better equipped or will want to *mainstream* the lessons from sub-regional third sector work in service reform or other initiatives to address inequality.
- Learning and evidence about inequality and need, as previously noted, is not always gathered from sub-sector organisations. This diminishes equality bodies' abilities to inform, advise and critique regional policy and investment decisions.
- The type of infrastructure support offered to sub-sector organisations is typically focused on helping organisations to develop, generate income, and improve service delivery. Support is not always geared towards empowerment and developing the skills needed to engage on equality issues in public-policy making. Nor is it geared towards evaluation and impact assessment – expertise which would contribute significantly to the regional policy-making process by helping sub-sector organisations to generate evidence about inequality and what works to address it.

Naturally the distinction between specialist infrastructure provision and organisations working to promote equality in regional policy-making is often a false one, with elements of both types of work being undertaken by equality bodies. Yet the two activities do require different and highly specialised types of skills, both of which are not always present in equal measure due to historical patterns in funding certain types of projects and activities amongst equality bodies. Equality bodies also tend to have a 'loyalty' to – and certainly some degree of responsibility for – sector support and development. This is because by and large they have grown out of a variety of



'network' models where 'accountability' to network members is a primary consideration.

And it remains the case that specialist infrastructure provision is important for the region. Equality bodies are supporting some of the smallest and most marginalised groups and it is these especially that have struggled most with declining core funding and the transition to contracts and commissioning. Strengthening these organisations and helping to ensure their sustainability and survival is therefore critical. Many of these smaller organisations are working with those that are marginalised from or have been forgotten by mainstream services, and so there is a wider 'equality dividend' inherent in providing infrastructure support.

That said, there are a number of challenges to be overcome if the potential of equality bodies to address inequality – in regional policy engagement *as well as* infrastructure provision – is to be maximised:

- It must be recognised that not all specialist infrastructure providers see it as their role (or have sufficient resources and capacity) to engage in regional policy-making. There therefore needs to be a better targeting of resources *and* a better targeting of purpose. Additional resources are also required if equality bodies are to be able to disseminate information to their sub-sectors and networks, provide quality information and briefing services on policy issues, and create viable sub-sectoral structures and processes for engagement, consultation and discussion.
- It must be recognised that the types of infrastructure support provided by equality bodies (or taken up by organisations) may not necessarily be supporting improved engagement in policy-making on equality issues. Investment in gathering, collating, analysing and presenting local evidence on inequality is essential. There should also be additional support on advocacy, stakeholder management and strategic meeting skills. Where this is happening there is a need to consider the 'reach' and relevance of support and whether it reflects the political environment organisations from particular equality strands are working within.
- The presence of third sector equality bodies in regional decision-making forums may help regional agencies 'tick boxes' but greater attention to the nature and quality of their input is also required. Input about the developmental needs of their members, for example, may be useful in a broader sense but it is not directly related to *equalities-based public policy-making*. Greater awareness and understanding of, and honesty about, the quality, character and focus of third sector engagement on regional equality issues is required. This should be a two-way process, with regional agencies *and* equality bodies prepared to negotiate the level and quality of input if either's expectations are not being met.

Overcoming these challenges will not be easy, and investment will be key. The next section covers the issue of investment in more detail.

### 3.7 Investment and resources

This section maps some of the resources that have been invested and are currently available to third sector equality bodies and looks at what investment is needed in the future. This is then compared to regional agencies' views on future investment plans and priorities. Naturally, this cannot offer a definitive examination of investment plans. The primary aim is to promote discussion and to help stimulate a more co-ordinated and strategic approach to investing in the third sector's contribution to addressing inequality in the future.

#### Third sector equality bodies

There is a fairly mixed picture of investment in third sector equality bodies at a regional level. Only two networks (BME and faith) have received dedicated resources as part of government programmes to support regional networks on particular equality issues (a regional infrastructure programme for BME networks and the Home Office Faith Communities Capacity-Building Fund). Others have received funding from a range of charitable trusts (mainly Big Lottery) and from Capacitybuilders. A number are not currently resourced at all. All of the available funding relevant to equality bodies in the region is project based and time-limited – one to three years – and therefore it is likely that in the near future a range of projects and activities will in any case disappear.

Respondents suggested more consistent funding would be needed to support current activities to build infrastructure of particular sub-sectors. One said: "There doesn't appear to be a particularly strategic approach to funding capacity-building across major commissioning bodies, so you get piece-meal pieces of work. And this can be confusing for third sector organisations because they don't know where to go for support." Another explained: "It is very difficult to find solid funding for equality networks. When you do get it, it tends to be provided by public sector organisations with particular outcomes to deliver."

Interestingly, when referring to more investment being required for specialist infrastructure provision, few if any respondents referred to the need to improve the equity and accessibility of services provided by 'generic' infrastructure providers in the region. This is a model of improvement for second-tier providers that is currently being piloted at a national level by brap and NCVO in relation to the BME sector through a Capacitybuilders-funded project (Beyond Survival). More discussion of this issue amongst specialist infrastructure providers in the region would be beneficial and could help to establish more mainstreamed, long-term approaches to improving the equality of infrastructure provision in the region.

Some respondents also referred to the additional resources required specifically to improve the engagement of equality bodies in regional policy-making. They identified the following in particular:

- The need for investment to create more strategic forums for regional engagement on particular equality issues (which are fed into by sub-regional level equality bodies from particular equality strands).
- The need for a co-ordinator who can "go out 9 to 5 to meetings" and fit in with the schedule of regional agencies, and a secretariat to undertake administration for members.

- The need for resources to attract new members and to reimburse them for time spent in regional policy engagement.
- The need for resources to develop a better knowledge and understanding of policy issues.
- Investment in building the knowledge-base – i.e. generating evidence of inequality in relation to particular equality strands at a local/regional level.
- The need to invest in ‘bottom up’ activity (e.g. member-based networks) for each equality strand as well as ‘top down’ engagement of third sector organisations (e.g. their involvement in regional strategic forums).
- The need to invest in a pan-equality structure of some type that would enable equality bodies to:
  - Come together and identify common equality challenges faced across equality strands;
  - Develop a shared and independent equalities voice for the sector which can be used to influence regional public policy making;
  - Discuss and if possible reconcile differences and conflicts between the needs or views of particular excluded groups and equality strands;
  - Share good practice and evidence of inequality.

An investment of time and resources was seen as required to create a level playing field for different equality bodies to engage in pan-equality discussions of this type. This would include the need to encourage and develop skills of mediation and engagement and to balance the (often competing) needs of different interest groups through informed discussion of regional equality priorities.

### Regional agencies

Regional agencies do not have specific plans to fund regional equality bodies in the future (apart from Capacitybuilders as a continuation of the Government’s Regional Infrastructure Programme for BME third sector networks). However, regional agencies do have plans to fund or invest in particular equality-related *outcomes* for the region. It is in these plans that regional agencies will have an opportunity to consider the role of the third sector in progressing equality. Some of the key investment issues are outlined below:

**Equality and human rights commission:** EHRC plan to build an event to explore what timely and effective engagement on equality issues should look like in the region. They would like to make links with third sector equality bodies in doing that because they feel there is a potential to create more “connectivity” between those working on different equality strands with the sector.

**Sub national review:** One regional agency is currently considering how to respond to the sub-national review. There may be a role for that regional agency in investing in support for third sector equality bodies to provide evidence and input on equality issues at a sub-regional level to improve targeting of sub-regional investment plans. A key consideration will be the number of sub-national investment plans required –

assuming these are used. If it is a large number, then available resources may be spread too thinly across sub-regions to make an impact.

**Equality-related infrastructure support:** One regional agency identified difficulties associated with funding specialist third sector infrastructure support: “We couldn’t fund seven different equality organisations at a local level, for example. That’s why we’ve often backed off from funding infrastructure organisations, because as soon as you fund one, you get, ‘hang on, you’ve funded a disability one, what about a race one, what about a gender one?’ and so on.”

However this was also seen as wider issue than simply that of funding infrastructure support. A number of regional agencies spoke of the need to respond to the new Single Equality Bill. But they also spoke of the need to develop more efficient and potentially cost-effective methods of engaging the sector on equality issues in order to solve key issues for the region. A pan-equality body or approach was seen as one way to address that:

“We need to recognise that the Single Equality Bill is coming and we don’t want to pay seven strands seven times to comment on a particular strategy, for example, because they may disagree with each other. How do we get a collective view? Where can we get a cohesive view? But it’s always been difficult for us to have [these] conversations. We say, ‘we think the most important equality priority for the region is X’, [but the response we get is] ‘we used to get a grant off you, but now you’re trying to close us down’. Everybody is facing tough times, we’re getting people come to us and saying ‘can you fund us because our grant has run out’, rather than ‘we’ve got this problem in the region...and what do we do to address that?’ It’s been very difficult to get past those conversations.”

Another regional agency noted, “We do resources for particular types of activity, we do not fund core activity” and suggested that commissioning a number of small, focused equality-related projects from third sector organisations would generate more useful input and evidence than funding a full time regional co-ordinator post would – “someone who does other things for other partners and forgets what we wanted”.

**Capacitybuilders:** The only dedicated funding available to equality bodies or networks in the region in the next two years is the Capacitybuilders Regional Network Fund for BME networks.<sup>5</sup> The intended outcomes of that fund are:

- Outcome 1: By 2011, regional third sector networks are better able to demonstrate influence over regional and national policy affecting the third sector.
- Outcome 2: By 2011, regional third sector networks are able to demonstrate improvements in their leadership, income diversity, and efficiency.

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<sup>5</sup> Up to £25k will be available to a BME network in the region in 2009-10 and up to £30k in 2010-11. The same will be available to a ‘generic’ third sector network (RAWM in the case of the West Midlands). In 2010-11, some discretionary funds may be available to a network wishing to make significant changes for the future – such as merger, restructure or other organisational change.

Capacitybuilders has stated that they will explore the following options (in this order of priority), against their likelihood of achieving the outcomes and priorities for the fund:

- Grants to networks currently in receipt of strategic funding under the OTS programme.
- Grants to networks currently in receipt or benefiting from funding from the programme to deliver core activity.
- Grants to alternative, existing organisations to deliver agreed outcomes for both the BME sector and wider third sector.
- Funding for a new initiative or organisation only if there is broad stakeholder support and credible plans for sustainability beyond 2011.

It is also worth noting that OTS has announced plans for Capacitybuilders to administer a new £750,000 scheme which will identify and promote innovative ways for the third sector to act as a strong voice specifically for the most disadvantaged people in society. There may be resources available through this for the region, although there will be significant competition for this fund.

### **Implications**

Thus far it could be argued that by and large regional agencies do not see that they might need to *pay* for third sector engagement on regional policy-making in relation to equality issues. But without this, it is evident that regional equality bodies face severe limitations on what they can achieve in terms of widening third sector engagement.

But even if regional agencies *were* to invest in third sector equality bodies' involvement in regional policy-making, there is still potentially a gap between what regional agencies require – in the way of data, input, evidence – and what is available. For example, equality bodies generally are unable to gather local and regional public sector equality monitoring data – partly because of lack of time and resources, and partly because they are dependent on the monitoring that public sector bodies carry out. They cannot gather what doesn't exist. Similarly, little data exists from third sector organisations regarding inequalities in access to public services. Primarily this is because those organisations operating at the local level – those in closest contact with disadvantaged groups – lack the skills, resources and expertise to undertake such data-collection. Again, third sector equality bodies cannot collect what doesn't exist. Clearly, significantly greater clarity – and realism – is required regarding what the third sector can and cannot do.

While regional agencies and third sector equality bodies both identified the need for some kind of pan-equality body (or forum), third sector equality bodies on balance are more aware of the investment and time that would be required in order to develop the new thinking, practice and approaches inherent in pan-equality engagement.

Overall, then, there is a need for a more co-ordinated and strategic response across regional agencies to identify gaps in funding for third sector engagement. Much greater recognition is required of the need to invest in third sector engagement on equalities-related policy issues – as well as an understanding that effective engagement cannot be achieved at nil- or even reduced cost. As far as regional third sector engagement is concerned, there are a range of investment options, but it is abundantly clear that there is no cost-cutting option.

## 4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Conclusions

This research identified a common interest across both public sector and third sector respondents in creating regional policies that will have more impact on addressing inequality. Yet evidence also suggests there is a mismatch between what public sector regional agencies want from third sector equality bodies in that process – and what those equality bodies can and want to do. There is also evidence of quite widespread misconceptions amongst regional agencies regarding the capacity of third sector equality bodies.

New demands are now being placed upon equality bodies. Many of those bodies working at a regional level have developed organically, through self-organisation, their development driven largely by their members or ‘equality constituency’ identifying a need for the network body – typically a need to support particular interest groups. It is only relatively recently that regional agencies have identified a more formal consultative and engagement role for these equality bodies in particular with regard to regional policy-making. Consequently, third sector equality bodies are now asked to engage in ways that they were not necessarily set up to do.

A common theme emerges in the findings set out throughout section 3.0: that there a number of very clear ‘mismatches’ in a number of different areas when the views and expectations of regional agencies and third sector equality bodies are compared. These can be summarised as follows:

**Purpose:** Stakeholders take part in engagement for different reasons and as a result have different views about how it should be done and what successful engagement looks like. For example, there is an overall assumption that part of the role of equality bodies is to gather (and where necessary originate) evidence of inequality and feed this directly into the policy-making process. But these are frequently mistaken assumptions. Many organisations lack the means to systematically collect evidence of inequality or good practice from the constituency of organisations they support or work with, and in turn these ‘member’ organisations typically lack the means to generate it. Third sector equality bodies and their members also typically lack the financial resources to fund such evidence collection.

**Methods:** The way that third sector equality bodies prefer to engage either means they aren’t connecting with regional agencies, or when they do are unable to provide regional agencies with what they want (and vice-versa). Formal consultative and engagement roles also frequently do not reflect (or utilise) the campaigning and advocacy roles that are at the forefront of what most third sector equality bodies consider their ‘core business’.

**Impact:** Regional agencies and third sector equality bodies have markedly different views of what a successful outcome of engagement on equality issues should look like, and there is no robust way of knowing whether those outcomes have been achieved, or whether engagement was of sufficient quality. There are no commonly shared and understood *expectations* of what engagement will achieve, nor ‘rules of engagement’ for how it will be carried out; there are no

shared views of the responsibilities and accountabilities involved. The absence of these are additional barriers to assessing the *impact* of engagement.

**Reach:** Equality bodies and regional agencies have different views of what the 'reach' of engagement means and how it can be judged. ('Reach' has a number of different possible dimensions: geographical reach; reaching hard-to-reach groups; urban vs. rural reach; reaching deeper into specific communities of interest, and so forth.) They also have different views about how and why reach can be nurtured and extended.

**Skills:** Different views about the purpose of engagement and the best way to do it means that 'skills', knowledge and expertise are valued in the engagement process in different ways by different stakeholders. There is no shared view of what constitutes 'engagement competencies' nor how these might be assessed.

**Investment:** Regional agencies in the past have not expected to 'pay' for (nor explicitly invest in) engagement despite their being a 'value' (and a cost) attached to this type of work.

## 4.2 Recommendations

One of the purposes of this brief was to offer some 'models' or structures of engagement that could help the region to respond to some of these mismatched views and gaps. Our recommendations offer some clear options for re-modelling both the structures and processes of engagement and for setting these on a more sustainable footing, underpinned by commonly shared and understood 'rules of engagement'.

### 4.2.1 Future models of engagement

#### (a) Pan-equality

There is clear demand for a 'pan-equality' structure of some type that will enable third sector equality bodies and regional agencies to come together in a strategic equalities environment which reflects the continuing shift in equalities thinking and practice towards a more unified 'single equality' approach. This would reflect recent structural changes in UK equalities (such as the merger of existing equalities commissions into the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, which opened for business in 2007) and policy changes (the publication in April 2009 of the Single Equality Bill). Indeed many regions have already established similar 'pan-equality' third sector structures.

Third sector respondents suggest that the structure would need to:

- Be 'high level' in terms of membership (i.e. senior management level), thus capable of bringing together senior staff with decision-making authority.
- Be 'member based' and include third sector equality bodies that are themselves 'umbrella' bodies with an established constituency.

- Provide a collective third sector voice on equality issues – but also allowing individual members to speak on behalf of their constituency or equality strand when relevant.
- Enable the sharing of learning and good practice between equality strands on what a ‘pan-equality’/human rights-based approach to equality should look like and be capable of addressing the acknowledged complexities which exist in ‘operationalising’ a ‘pan-equality’ approach.
- Provide a space for members to discuss, interpret, share and store evidence and data of inequality in the region across equality strands.
- Provide a space for discussion and resolution of conflicts between particular interest groups where possible.

Regional agency respondents suggested the structure would need to:

- Be a ‘one stop shop’ for engaging the third sector on equality issues in regional policy-making (having all relevant interest groups in the same place).
- Help regional agencies respond to the new duties outlined in the Single Equality Bill.
- Help regional agencies to access particular interest groups or member organisations from particular sub-sectors or equality strands for more in-depth consultation.

### **(b) Member-based ‘single-strand’ equality bodies**

Arguments for a ‘pan-equality’ structure should not be seen as superseding or removing the necessity for single-strand third sector equality bodies. These continue to play a vital role and should be encouraged. Specifically:

- As noted earlier, regional third sector equality bodies have often arisen as a consequence of self-organisation. They exist in most cases because a body of ‘members’ or a constituency of interested groups has seen the need for an umbrella or network body. Consequently, the involvement of grassroots organisations is generally strong in these networks and groups actively working to support and advocate on behalf of hard-to-reach and excluded groups are well-represented. This is to be encouraged as a vital element in the region’s commitment to equalities and support (financial and otherwise) which will help strengthen and extend such third sector equality bodies is essential.
- Where appropriate third sector equality bodies (especially those capable of providing a co-ordinating, ‘umbrella body’ role) do not exist there is a clear case for regional agencies and the third sector to work together to encourage their formation.

### **(c) Geographic reach**

In terms of ‘reach’, a number of different but related issues need to be addressed: sub-regional reach, under-representation in rural localities, inclusion of excluded and hard-to-reach groups, and inadequate involvement of particular equality strands. Of



these, sub-regional reach appears to be one of the most significant. Not only are there demonstrable gaps at the sub-regional level in terms of third sector equality bodies able to offer a co-ordinating, umbrella body function, but the sub-regions may also be inadequately represented in the membership of regional equality bodies. Consequently:

- There is a need to ensure that the views of all sub-regions are feeding into regional policy-making on equality issues.
- A membership-type structure of regional equality bodies would help with this but it should be noted that not all are currently constituted on such a footing.
- Where regional equality bodies are not able to engage with particular sub-regions in a consistent way, there is an argument for sub-regional equality bodies (or forums or networks) feeding directly into regional policy-making processes.

#### **(d) 'Purchasing' arrangements for engagement**

A number of regional agencies described the potential for a 'purchasing'-type relationship with third sector equality bodies where specific programmes of engagement (or specific engagement tasks) are purchased. Such an arrangement has the potential to meet the needs identified by virtually all third sector respondents for additional resourcing that could help underpin and improve the engagement services they are able to offer. An additional benefit, however, is that a purchasing model would require *specifications* to be developed for each purchase and this has the potential to bring significantly greater clarity of purpose and outcome to the engagement function.

A 'purchasing'-type model would require regional agencies to:

- Agree the amount of time required, the type and quality of input required from third sector equality bodies, and the skills expectations and quality thresholds.
- Agree who they would like to hear from and why.
- Explain how information collected through engagement is to be used.

A 'purchasing'-type model would require third sector equality bodies to:

- Facilitate engagement within their sub-sector or constituency.
- Adhere to *clearly specified* contractual obligations.
- Be clear with the purchaser from the outset regarding the reach, purpose, extent and expectations of engagement.

#### **(e) Different models of communication**

Third sector respondents highlighted the need for more accessible models of engagement with regional agencies that are more 'sector-led'.

In particular there was a call to establish more 'open' forms of engagement that also allow for lobbying and campaigning activity led by regional equality bodies to be

utilised alongside the more 'formal' models of engagement run by regional agencies in response to particular policies.

#### (f) **Direct participation in service improvement**

A key message in recent government policy (in the 2006 local government white paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, for example, and in the 2008 community empowerment white paper *Communities in control: real people, real power*) is that local people should be much more directly involved in decision-making. It can be argued that this is the government's most ambitious project yet – a bid not just to establish 'people power', but to fix declining democratic involvement, rebuild civil society, create a climate of social and democratic renewal, and "rehabilitate politics as a legitimate and worthy activity"<sup>6</sup> – a tall order even before the MPs expenses scandal of recent weeks.

If the region is to respond to these demands, then third sector equality bodies will need to be involved more directly and at an earlier stage not just in consultative exercises and engagement, but also for example in service reform and redesign, and in the development of service commissioning specifications. Models of engagement will also need longer lead times in order for grassroots organisations and local communities to be comprehensively involved.

#### 4.2.2 **'Rules of engagement'**

The mismatch of views and expectations highlighted above and the confusion arising from this is potentially damaging for the region. The structural changes outlined above will go some way to putting third sector engagement in regional policy-making on a more effective and sustainable footing. But in order to reinforce the foundations of engagement something more is needed – we have called this new 'rules of engagement' and the intention of these rules of engagement is to establish a shared and agreed set of parameters or protocols that can be applied in any and every engagement exercise. This will require a re-evaluation of – and mutual agreement to be reached on – such key issues as:

- **Content** of engagement (what is talked about and why);
- **Impact** of engagement (what engagement achieves and how this is measured);
- **Behaviours** of engagement (how stakeholders act while taking part in engagement);
- **Skills** of engagement (the skills, knowledge and competencies required to undertake effective engagement);
- **Responsibility** for engagement (whose responsibility is it to ensure that engagement is adequately invested in).

This final section of our recommendations proposes some simple rules or protocols that could help to ensure a common understanding of the responsibilities and accountabilities of engagement, the shared expectations of engagement, and of the competencies and quality thresholds required.

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<sup>6</sup> *Communities in Control*, p.106.

### **(a) Content of engagement**

It will be necessary to agree some key themes for or parameters of engagement over a period of time, based on priorities for the region. For example, these might include:

- Implementation of equalities legislation
- Employment discrimination
- Impact of recession on equality

These themes will need to be 'refreshed' on a periodic basis, but can also be modified as priorities change or as additional fine detail emerges in regard to specific policy areas.

Investment in engagement on particular themes will help to encourage a strategic and shared focus on engagement with the sector. It will also help third sector equality bodies to understand which issues regional agencies are considering amending policy on.

This type of theme-based engagement could also happen alongside more open forms of engagement that allows third sector equality bodies to utilise their core activities of campaigning and advocacy.

### **(b) Impact of engagement**

What engagement consists of and how its effectiveness, utility and outcomes can be measured are complex questions and solutions will have to be worked towards rather than presented fully-formed in the context of this report. However, there are some useful pointers in the proposals already touched on. For example, one of the key reasons that an objective view of the effectiveness of engagement is rarely possible is the frequent failure *to state at the outset* what engagement is intended to achieve – i.e. what 'engagement outcomes' are expected.

Purchasing arrangements will go some way in addressing this. Purchasing 'specifications' for individual engagement programmes or tasks should as standard practice include objectives and outcomes. These might be as simple as the numbers and types of organisations to be consulted or involved, but could also be more sophisticated – the development of specific policy alternatives, for example, or information (with specified levels of detail) about a particular issue, service, group or community of interest. These would provide measures against which the effectiveness of engagement could later be tested.

Beyond this, however, some measures would also be required which would enable the *effectiveness of engagement itself* on addressing in equality in the region (as opposed to the 'products' of engagement) to be assessed.

### **(c) Behaviours of engagement**

This is mainly commonsense, but would help to ensure more effective engagement and there should be sign-up to it.

### *Accountability and transparency*

- Willingness to share results of consultation with all involved in good time and to explain the rationale for making final decisions (identifying any relevant resource restrictions, political influence or persuasive counter-arguments).
- Being willing to explain the 'parameters' of influence early on in consultation processes, and agreeing the boundaries of input required.

### *Going beyond 'usual suspects'*

- Willingness to extend the scope of those involved in community engagement.
- Placing increased emphasis on 'what people know' as opposed to 'what people look like' (i.e. emphasising competencies rather than 'identity').
- Recognising that 'representation' from communities of interest can help to meet public expectations on equality and diversity. But also recognising public and private agencies play a role in changing those expectations if they are not realistic and they require a broader range of local people to engage.

### *Using the right tool for the job*

Regional agencies aren't always clear about the purpose of community engagement and as a result may not use the best approach or consult with the right organisations or people. Specifying the parameters and expectations of an engagement exercise will go a long way towards addressing this, helping all parties to understand what kind of engagement or consultation is required – with a high-level strategic equality body? with hands-on service-user involvement? grassroots organisations? various communities of interest? – and then choosing the right approaches and tools for the job.

### *Duplication of community engagement and consultation overload in communities*

- Agreement to consider alternative sources of information and research before undertaking consultation to identify community needs (e.g. checking – has this been done by another agency, or by somebody else in my agency before?).
- Agreement to share (where possible) the results of community engagement with other relevant regional agencies.

### **(d) Skills of engagement**

- Develop a clearer rationale for when to engage with third sector equality bodies – and when not to.
- Develop a clear statement about the skills and competencies that may be required.
- Identify what quality thresholds are acceptable.

All of these factors will tend to point to some organisations rather than others thus enabling engagement to be more effectively targeted, with a clear understanding of the expected outcomes.

**(e) Type of input/evidence required**

Specify the type of input you require. The term ‘evidence’ is widely used but is open to wide interpretation (and misinterpretation). Again, the use of ‘purchasing specifications’ – even in circumstances where technically no ‘purchase’ is being made – would still be good practice and would establish a much more accurate picture of what is required.

**(f) Responsibility for engagement and investment**

A key question raised throughout this research has been whose responsibility is it to invest in regional engagement? And whose responsibility is it to do it?

These are not easy questions to answer, but some more co-ordination and agreement at a regional level could help to make the situation clearer for third sector equality bodies and will help them and others to respond to opportunities for investment.

In line with agreed ‘themes’ of engagement, regional agencies have an opportunity to see where investment might be needed to gather the information and intelligence needed to inform regional policy-making on specific themes. Equality bodies can play a role in ‘delivering’ on those engagement outcomes.

There are examples of third sector ‘strategic networks’ being established and funded by regional agencies. And the agendas of those networks are often largely driven by regional agencies. If equality bodies were to be funded in similar ways, they would need to realise that in a relation of that type the parameters for engagement and issues that are discussed will be largely dictated by regional agencies. There is arguably a ‘trade-off’ here for equality bodies in terms of independence and influence. This may entail some difficult balancing as there is also a need – especially in the field of equalities – for equality bodies not just to maintain but also to *exercise* a level of independence. For public agencies they have an important role to play as critical friends. There are two possible options for achieving this more successfully in the future:

The first (and more preferable) is that regional agencies invest in engagement on equality issues, but that they also commit to a ‘critical friend’ relationship – which many of them want – which has independence ‘designed in’ to it. As this research has shown, the critical friend relationship has not always worked well, particularly when regional agencies feel boundaries are crossed, when equality bodies feel their voices are not being heard, or when regional agencies feel they are being ‘told off’ by equality bodies. Addressing this will involve confronting some of the ‘behaviour’ issues raised above. The parameters of the critical friend role will need clear and unequivocal description. It may also need joint public/third sector working to develop a viable operational model for such a role – it should not be assumed that this already exists as there are few if any instances in which it does. It will also require equality bodies to develop the skills needed to act as a critical friend (e.g. consultancy and advisory skills).

The second option is that equality bodies and the third sector itself invest in improving engagement with regional bodies. Many regional equality bodies have

developed through self-organisation, because members have wanted to support each other, or to advocate on particular issues. This has often been done with little funding. Some equality bodies may prefer to continue in this way – operating with little or no funding – precisely because it best preserves their independence and their primary loyalty to their member organisations. Increasingly, third sector organisations are having to find ways of generating income that can ‘cross fund’ certain kinds of less popular or ‘unfundable’ work – work which is not tailored to specific funding streams but which is nonetheless central to their social mission. Perhaps engagement activity with regional agencies is no exception here?

However if the second option is taken (and this is the model which currently exists to a large extent in the region), there will need to be a greater realisation from regional agencies that they will not get what they want from engagement. This type of model is particularly hard when many public funders have still not recognised the importance of full cost recovery mechanisms in their commissioning processes.

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We believe that regional agencies and third sector equality bodies could engage more successfully in the context of the terms set out above. These would not necessarily create an absolutely ‘level playing field’ for all equality bodies – and certainly there would still be a critical issue involving excluded and marginalised groups that have yet not formed or do not belong to established networks or bodies – but they would create an environment in which the terms, expectations and outcomes of engagement are mutually understood, while also laying the foundations for a system of specifying and resourcing engagement activities which would have a lot in common with other emerging ‘third sector commissioning’ practices. This would be a huge step forward.

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