

Black and Minority Ethnic Housing Strategies



The Housing Corporation, London, as part of its Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) housing strategy, has set up a series of seminars on different aspects of BME policy and practice. The seminars are aimed at practitioners in London RSLs and Local Authorities. Their purpose is to share relevant research in each area and good practice developed by various London players. It is an opportunity for delegates to share good practice from their own organisations and raise problems they are having with a view to finding out how others have overcome them. It is also an opportunity to make links with people to facilitate future sharing of information to improve BME strategies and their implementation across the capital.

The first seminar was held on 9 April 2001 on 'Identifying BME Needs and Aspirations and Developing Strategies to meet them'. Notes of the main points raised are set out below.

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Document Links:

BME Housing Policy (May-1998). Website: www.housingcorp.gov.uk/library/documents.htm

BME Housing Strategy for London (Jul-2000) Website:

www.housingcorp.gov.uk/aboutus/offices/london/londonpubs.htm

London's BME Action Plan 2000/01 (Dec-2000) Website:

www.housingcorp.gov.uk/aboutus/offices/london/londonpubs.htm

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A. Ben Wilson, Chief Executive, Horizon Group

Ben stressed the business case for Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) having good BME housing strategies and action plans. Decisions based on stereotypes, misconceptions and exclusive behaviour are bad for business as its costly to give people what they do not want.

Best value can only be achieved with input from consumers and as London is a multi-cultural, multi-racial city this must involve BME communities.

For RSLs to be competitive and effective in growth areas, such as stock transfers and neighbourhood renewal, they must show potential tenants and local communities that they listen to them and act to meet their requirements.

B. Bob Blackaby, Freelance Consultant

Bob is the co-author with Kusminder Chahal of the Chartered Institute of Housing/Federation of Black Housing Organisations book 'Black and Minority Ethnic Housing Strategies - A Good Practice Guide'. This is a very practical guide on how to go about preparing and implementing such a strategy.

Bob pointed out:

1. **We still have a long way to go**

- Only 18% of LAs have a written BME strategy
- 62% have written harassment policies/procedures
- But, 29% did not know how many racist harassment cases in last three years
- Only 33% have specific mechanisms to consult with BME people
- 44% do not regularly analyse their housing register ethnic records
- Only around 25% of authorities could identify changes resulting from ethnic monitoring

2. **Black and Minority Ethnic Strategies**

Essential Conditions:

- Commitment from the 'top'
- Not just a paper exercise
- Take time to design the process

- Make the process inclusive
- Clear analysis of the problems and options
- Recognise diversity
- Clear strategy that spells out what, who and when
- Effective communication of the completed strategy
- Evaluation and review

3. **Engaging the Communities and Other Stakeholders**

Range of Interests:

- Communities
- Service users (not just tenants)
- Board/councillors
- Staff
- Partners

Maximising opportunities - using existing mechanisms and creating new opportunities.

Honest, open, importance of feedback.

Practicalities - location, specific interests etc.

4. **Using Information Effectively**

Using the data you have already got:

- Monitoring: lettings, repairs, complaints, 'exits', transfer requests, grants
- Customer feedback
- Existing studies

Specific Research:

- Collaboration
- Focussed
- Appropriate methods
- Careful choice of research agency

5. **Examples of Good Practice**

- Croydon - joint work between the council and local RSLs to assess needs
- Rochdale - joint work between council and BME RSL to produce a strategy. Annual review
- Bristol - wide ranging strategy based on consultation.
- Gloucester - joint work on sheltered housing scheme

- Glasgow and Edinburgh - 3 RSLs employ an equal opportunities officer
- Birmingham - five RSLs - a trust to spearhead regeneration
- Camden, Swansea, Bradford etc. interagency work to tackle racist harassment.

6. **Turning Strategies into Action**

Need for:

- An action plan: what, who, when
- Clear communication with all those involved
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Involvement of communities and stakeholders in evaluation
- Monitoring that is regular, action oriented, reported to decision makers and open to scrutiny

C. **Key Points from Workshop Sessions**

Workshop 1 Facilitator: Ben Wilson Chair: Duncan Bowie

1. **“What gets measured gets done!”**

Horizon Housing Group has used De Montfort University’s research to benchmark its own performance against other RSLs. Having established its strengths and weakness, the RSL was able to establish priorities for implementing its strategy.

Family HA has also adopted an action plan and will be measuring and monitoring its performance against this plan.

Both Notting Hill Housing Group and Bethnal Green and Victoria HA are also setting targets to monitor progress of the implementation of its strategy. But they are setting individual targets for staff as well as corporate ones.

2. **Impact of focusing on “cultural change”.**

English Churches Housing Group has recognised that the implementation of a BME Strategy tends to be watered down as it is disseminated throughout the organisation.

One of its action points is to recruit, retain and train BME staff to enable them to occupy posts where they can make a difference.

Horizon Group has also recognised the importance of focusing on culture. As a result it has prioritised governance, staffing issues, delivery of maintenance and is undertaking a review of key policy areas.

Wandle HA is also addressing this issue by delivering the strategy at different levels so that people within the organisation can commit to it. Notting Hill Housing Group is taking a similar approach - different solutions for different departments.

View from the group was that an effective BME strategy looks at relationships, incorporates an understanding of peoples’ needs and seeks to listen and act upon what people are saying.

3. **“Better to do something - no matter how small - rather than take no action”.**

Notting Hill Housing Group’s Chief Executive (Peter Redman) said that it was better to implement its BME strategy on a small number of issues rather than take a scatter gun approach, and trying to work on too many fronts. In the case of Notting Hill the issues chosen were culture and perception.

Family HA is taking a similar approach by looking to deliver on specific areas. Family HA believe that delivering on promises made is the only way to enthuse staff and convince residents that the organisation is committed to implementing the policy.

Southern is also focusing on three areas of its BME strategy - lettings, staff and governance - in an attempt to make its strategy real.

The message from a number of other RSLs present was similar - think small, take practical measures and achieve change.

4. **An effective strategy needs to be informed, but time now for action not more research.**

Robert Isaac (Family HA) stressed that while a BME strategy needs to be informed, the time has come for action and implementation.

The general view of the group was that if RSLs feel that additional research is required, then they should seek the opinions of their own BME staff and Board members.

5. **Impact of ensuring that the implementation of BME strategy is part of an RSL's business process.**

Family HA believes that the RSL sector needs to rethink the way that it does business if as a movement it is going to have any impact on reducing inequalities.

Other RSLs agreed that an RSL's Equal Opportunities/BME strategy needs to be a fundamental part of its overall business strategy. Only by being a core business requirement will real change occur.

6. **An individual RSL needs to recognise that it can only do so much, but needs to take what action it can rather than set agendas for other organisations.**

While RSLs need to work in partnership with other organisations, particularly those responsible for strategic direction, for example, local authorities, too often BME strategies set agendas for other organisations.

The group considered it important that an RSL identifies what an RSL can achieve and not simply highlight agendas for others.

Notting Hill Housing Group have found that identifying what action each individual member of staff can undertake to meet an objective is a very powerful tool in implementing a BME strategy. Staff then take individual responsibility for implementation of the strategy and this can be reflected in work targets.

7. **Need to measure impact of actions within BME communities, not simply assume that such communities benefit and that their needs are met simply by investing resources in an area.**

LB Hackney has in the past worked on the assumption that investing resources in the worst housing will automatically assist BME communities who tend to be over represented in the poorest housing. LB Hackney is concerned that this may not necessarily be so, and that BME issues may not have been fully reflected in regeneration issues.

LB Hackney believe that it is essential that an organisation's BME strategy is incorporated into its regeneration work.

8. **Equal opportunities is not about common levels of service delivery and common standards.**

A number of surveys have found that residents from BME communities express lower levels of satisfaction with RSL services than white residents. A wide range of factors appear to be leading to this outcome, but in general terms this is about different expectations.

Different communities expect different services in order to fully meet their needs. Equality of opportunity means an organisation must be able to offer different services delivered differently to meet diverse needs.

Circle 33 HT have found that residents from BME communities have less choice in the selection of their homes. But their research has also found that residents from different communities use their homes differently and so have different requirements. Their conclusion is that as an RSL it needs to offer greater flexibility and choice in the way it delivers services including the design of new / refurbished homes.

9. **Equal opportunities is not about treating everyone the same.**

Bethnal Green and Victoria Park HA highlighted their experience that to be effective a BME strategy has to find out what BME communities need.

The strategy then needs to address these needs through actions which makes them equal and gives them equality of opportunity.

Bethnal Green and Victoria Park HA now advertise for staff using a very simple application form, no longer set minimum qualifications and offer appropriate on the job training.

10. **Other Issues Discussed**

During the discussion concerns were raised about the following issues and the apparent failure of policy makers to consider the BME dimension:

- a) Choice based lettings - will BME communities be disadvantaged because of language, cultural issues etc.
- b) Local strategic partnerships - need to have a BME strategy.
- c) Does Best Value embrace BME issues?

Workshop 2 Facilitator: Martin Cheeseman Chair: Dino Patel

1. **Brent LA (the second most ethnic LA in the country):**

- In later half of 1990's tried to put policies & words into "actions" by setting targets of delivering about 20 % of budget to BME RSLs. There were also targets set for transfers and management agreements. Established BME development protocol to ensure that where a large RSL was developing on behalf of a BME one, there was a framework within which decisions could be taken jointly to avoid the BME RSL being left with properties which did not meet the needs of their tenants or at too high a price. Brent also involved the CRE in auditing the

LA's work to ensure they set up clear auditable targets for housing BME people.

2. **Lessons learnt for Brent LA:**

- Good intentions are not enough
- Development of policies has a lot to do with officers in post at the time
- Large RSLs who are part of process still need to be coaxed
- Protocol agreements can work and are effective, provided you don't keep making exceptions
- Size matters - ensure small RSLs don't get forgotten, because they may be specialists.
- Ensure all different BME communities are provided for, its too simple to group purely by race - important to understand the make up of the BME population and changes emerging

3. **Organisations are more likely to develop good BME housing strategies if they have BME people in senior positions.**

How can RSL's get more BME representation on their Boards?

Recruitment in general was recognised as an issue for some RSLs, although good practice points are that :

- The National Housing Federation maintains a list of prospective board members
- Housing for Women Chief Executive suggested using BME publications and housing press, found there was a lot of interest
- Peter Bedford HA found direct approaches to BME RSLs worked best
- London Housing Federation felt there needs to be more scope for secondment between mainstream and BME RSLs including small RSLs
- HC suggested maybe several RSLs advertise together or National Housing Federation might wish to co-ordinate
- Other delegates stated preference for recruiting board members from local community
- For staff, the PATH scheme to develop staff into management posts, but considered expensive for a small RSL
- To develop staff, monitoring within RSL & with other RSLs would help give staff practical experience.

4. **Housing for Women, as part of South London Federation of Small HAs (SOLFED) group, had recently formulated a race & housing strategy, looking at harassment and how their staff felt, collaborative work with their Board and with tenant focus groups. Their**

Chief Exec' said they 'were horrified by the Salford University outcomes''

5. **Brent had approached Commission for Racial Equality for advice on getting themselves assessed on complying with standards on internal policies and service delivery - both part of the equality action plan. On recruitment & development, had set themselves very public targets, with commitment of minority parties. Best Value inspection, recently completed, concluded Brent were too protective of consultation structure, and need to develop more flexibility (eg. in allocations policy)**

6. **Delegates considered whether Social Housing Grant should be linked to drawing up BME strategies?**

Most delegates thought there needed to be a stick as well as a carrot approach.

The ‘stick’, should be specific to each individual RSL approach / actions, or lack of them, rather than a blanket approach. However certain minimum standards should be required, such as tenant satisfaction surveys every X years and changing board members every Y years.

A co-op delegate expressed concern at a ‘stick’ approach for co-ops and small RSLs as it was difficult enough to get co-op members to attend meetings.

7. **Performance Indicators (PIs) could be useful in benchmarking RSLs performance on BME issues:**

- PIs need to break down between BME groups and need to be fairly sophisticated
- By our ranking PIs in performance tables, this may lead RSLs to focus on quantitative and overlook the more subjective qualitative PIs
- PIs and targets should not be absolute, but continuous improvements
- Kensington and Chelsea suggested that HC RSR should request localised information/PIs rather than stock wide.

Workshop 3 Facilitator: Vilma Redicon Chair: Barbara Perry

1. **Vilma Redicon - Chef Executive of Black Roof Community Housing Association gave a presentation on their approach to producing a BME strategy. The basis of the presentation was the two BME questions asked in the RSR and how BRCHA approached them.**

Vilma stressed that Best Value goes hand in hand with BME and Equal Ops strategies and the importance of benchmarking clubs in terms of focusing on BME strategies, issue and quality.

2. **How to get people to participate, how do we engage with BME tenants, how to move on?**

- Need to be creative and innovative re: consultation
- Surveys are only one way to get tenants views
- People need to feel valued. RSLs may need to look at the way they have ‘treated’ their tenants previously, in terms of consultation and feedback

- Suggested tapping into recourses eg: by getting in touch with community groups, BME ‘key players’, alter the time and venue of meetings, combine with other events, eg: celebrations, etc
- Need to build trust, look at other avenues of consultation/participation
- RSLs need to demonstrate that they do want tenants views. Need to take time to build up trust. Realise that it is a long, labour intensive process
- Strategies need to lead to practical action - not just a paper exercise.
- Need to create the right ethos within an organisation - the right image - not a you, us and them culture
- Experiences showed that it took some time to ‘get it right’ - need to start little and get bigger
- Need to engage tenants and other stakeholders by whatever means work - eg: separate women’s sessions, youths and elders
- Work with existing community groups
- Need to invest in the community to enable engagement within the community.
- Build links and get better involvement with tenants
- RSLs need to build a presence within the community

3. **There are a few Local Authorities with appropriate BME strategies - what does this say? Why did equalities fall off the agenda? Its about commitment - political and non-political - at all levels:**

- RSLs need to work with LAs and the HC
- Partnering
- BME strategies not just about current need but about aspirations as well. Strategies need to look ahead to the society you want in the future
- Need committed staff and board members. Need development and training
- Lettings choice - what implications for BME groups? Have we the ability to focus on BME needs? LAs do not compare performance of other RSLs in other boroughs - ie: who is housing who? who is meeting targets?
- Need to look at past relationships between LAs and (BME) RSLs.
- Part of problem is to keep looking back. This time real and fundamental changes must be made. There is a worry that changes won’t be fundamental enough. Need to recognise the fear amongst BME population

Workshop 4 Facilitator: Ertanç Hidayettin Chair: Clare Winstanley

1. Important learning points during the development of London Borough of Islington's (LBI) BME Strategy have been:

- Be prepared to revise the initial objective. LBI started with the intention of devising a BME Strategy for RSLs but realised it needed to develop a wider, more comprehensive strategy
- The need to get all communities within LBI involved in development of the strategy
- The importance of high-level commitment within LBI to the objectives
- The importance of a comprehensive housing needs survey which has taken account of the needs of all communities in LBI
- having a project group to drive the issue forward
- Sorting out terms of reference at an early stage
- Talking directly with communities as well as with perceived community leaders
- Having SMART targets with realistic timetables
- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation arrangements involving senior management
- A recognition that any such strategy needs to be dynamic and will evolve and change.

2. Points arising in discussion:

- It was helpful to have had senior councillors on board for the work from across the political parties
- It was useful to have broad membership of the project group which reflected various sections of LBI
- LBI had gained from talking with other LAs perceived to have developed good practices. More widely several workshop participants felt that there should be more proactive sharing of good practice amongst housing associations, and amongst LAs
- Leadership on this issue, both managerially and politically, is important and London's Mayor might now take more of a lead on this issue
- It is important to get out and talk directly with communities about intended strategies and actions, not least because general written paper/event based means of seeking views might fail because of language issues: 'don't expect people to come to you'
- When initially developing a strategy it is more effective to put initial proposals to people for consideration rather than starting with a blank sheet of paper

- Local resident forums (as part of Best Value reviews) are a good way of getting residents engaged in discussing these issues, particularly BME residents
- Some people may not be able to make prolonged contributions, but will have something to say and should be encouraged
- When assessing progress against targets it's important also to ask all staff, especially front-line staff and BME staff, how they see things are going
- There is a need to be alert to institutional factors which may lead to entirely inappropriate outcomes for individuals which can then lead to negative messages going out to those individuals' BME communities - the example discussed was of a LA having offered 4 (institutionally driven) housing 'solutions' involving separation to a large extended BME family of 5 adults and 5 children which did not wish to be separated. This had not met the family's needs at all and was likely to have led to negative messages having gone out to that BME community about the LA's approach
- LAs need to have up-to-date housing needs surveys and to recognise the speed at which communities change
- Reminding them of legislation is one way to get governing bodies of RSLs which have been slow to recognise BME Strategy issues to recognise and accept the need to act
- LAs and housing associations need to discuss the current and future demand for larger sized units and how these can be provided. The provision of larger units may raise funding issues for the Corporation.