Better
Housing
Briefing

1

Black and minority ethnic employment in social housing

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Race
Equality
Foundation

Key messages

1 Black and minority ethnic users of social housing want similar things to majority ethnic users, but they do find added value in having staff that share their own background

2 There are compelling arguments for increasing staff diversity that include value-base and ethical ones and a business case; but no approach on its own is enough

3 Positive action in recruitment and retention does work, but needs sustaining and following through to ensure staff and volunteers reach top levels

4 Regulation and legislation can be a strategic tool for effective organisational change. Tried and tested management and leadership techniques exist, but practice still lags behind

5 Provider governing bodies such as steering groups and boards are still not reflective enough of the people they serve. Increased confidence in the sector through this kind of representation can lead to increase in workforce diversity

6 There is work to be done to increase representation amongst contractors, suppliers and consultants employed in the sector.

Introduction

Research in the 1980s identified substantial discrimination in housing allocation. Studies in the 1990s showed persistent inequalities throughout services for black and minority ethnic (BME) tenants and potential tenants, which continue (CRE, 1993; and overviews in Somerville *et al,* 2002; Harrison and Phillips, 2003). For example, black and minority ethnic homelessness remains disproportionately high (Harrison and Phillips, 2003; ODPM/Ethnos, 2005; Netto, 2006).

This evidence drew attention to the lack of black and minority ethnic staff in the social housing sector, particularly at senior officer and management levels, plus the lack of BME-led housing providers. These findings were replicated during the 1990s, though one study found increased numbers, but just at lower levels (Bowes and Lemos, 1997; and overviews in Somerville *et al,* 2002; Bowes and Sim, 2001).

There were subsequent attempts to redress the balance and increase representation. Initiatives in the 1990s such as PATH (Positive Action and Training in Housing) increased recruitment and retention, and evaluations were positive (Julienne, 2001; DCLG, 1996). PATH has been described as the *'most effective'* and the *'most significant'* way of entering housing employment for black and minority ethnic people (Bowes and Sim, 2001; Bowes *et al,* 2002).

However, the 'scheme' was not taken up nationally. But at the time of writing, the PATH organisation has been funded to continue its work with under-represented BME groups, especially at management level (A4e, 2006; PATH National, 2006).

The Housing Corporation has played a crucial part in driving change, and continues to set targets for itself and the sector (Housing Corporation, 2002; 2005). Following on from research funded by them (Somerville *et al*, 2000) and the National Housing Federation (Somerville and Steele, 1998), an initiative called COFEM (Career Opportunities for Ethnic Minorities) evolved, now part of the Northern-England based Housing Diversity Network. COFEM's activities centre on recruitment and retention.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, however, the situation was not much improved, though some authors note that *'racist discrimination may have become harder to find in formalised housing practices....'* (Harrison and Davis, 2001). A study of housing association practice was less positive and concluded that *'.... most RSLs.... are not wholeheartedly committed to achieving equality of opportunity'* (Somerville *et al*, 2000). One survey found many housing associations 'perplexed' about how they could increase BME representation at more senior levels (Hann and Bowes, 2005), and a study of the client base of Housing Diversity Network (HDN) noted that *'the majority of other housing associations contacted for the research did not appear to attach the same priority to race equality'* (Somerville, 2006).

UK country governments have shown willingness to address under-representation through anti-discrimination legislation such as the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, plus policy directives and reviews (Welsh Assembly, 2003; Netto *et al*, 2001). But effective implementation is still a challenge. With the shift to a wider equalities agenda promoted by the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, it can be argued that the need for effective strategy is urgent, so race equality is not subsumed.

Black and minority ethnic staff add value to an organisation ⓵

Minority ethnic service users have identified positive attributes of specific services (Chahal, 2004). There is also evidence that BME-led organisations have more BME staff and service users than non-BME ones, and appear to have more inclusive recruitment policies, for example, in having both BME and white staff (Butt and Box, 1997; Somerville *et al*, 2000).

Housing circumstances- for example, severity of need, are important. Research carried out amongst minority ethnic homeless people in Glasgow found low trust in mainstream housing services which were perceived as unsympathetic and unsupportive of their cultural and linguistic needs. Conversely, BME- specific services were trusted and service users felt respected and supported (Lemos and Crane, 2004). A study of services for disabled black and minority ethnic people found examples of black-led organisations breaking

down misconceptions of services such as sheltered housing through visits, advocacy and support (Butt and Dhaliwal, 2005).

A study of black and minority ethnic tenants' experiences of social housing found broad consensus that BME housing associations were a good thing, but that the quality of service received was crucial, wanting *'good services, decent properties and a housing association that was prepared to listen and work with them'*. Black and minority ethnic tenants in receipt of poor services did not view BME-led organisations any more positively than non BME-led ones. The study also emphasised the need to recognise the diversity within the 'BME' label (Edwards, 2003).

Research with four Somali communities in England illustrates this diversity amongst black minority ethnic people. Respondents were not critical of the practices of BME agencies but felt that even BME-led organisations could have a 'one size fits all' culture that meant their needs 'slipped through the net'(Cole and Robinson, 2003).

2   **The moral and ethical and business case for race equality and diversity are both important**

Somerville *et al* (2002) summarise the arguments for making race equality (and other equalities) a core value of an organisation, including a core business value. Good business outcomes from promoting equality include having a wider pool of talent, retention of minority ethnic staff, lower staff turnover and better performance from BME staff. The ability to deliver a more appropriate and culturally matched service is also a likely outcome. They note the argument that organisations can thrive as businesses without taking equalities seriously, so stress the need to include equality as a core business value. The authors also discuss the 'learning organisation' approach as a way of increasing BME employment, which values and supports individuals and seeks to realise their potential through effective management practice. Omission of promoting equality as a core value may also allow institutional racism, ethnocentrism and other discriminations to prevail.

3   **Positive action in recruitment and retention does work**

A survey of BME employment in non-BME housing associations published in 2000 noted 3.7% making up senior management posts, just over half the level of their representation in the total registered social landlord (RSL) workforce (6.4%). Only two non-BME housing associations out of the 72 surveyed had a BME chief executive (Somerville *et al,* 2002).

The Housing Corporation's FRESH initiative was set up specifically to address under-representation of BME staff within the Housing Corporation, and is said to owe some of its success to the will of the Board and Executive management, that included a BME executive (Housing Corporation, 2005b)

The Housing Corporation's BME Housing Policy evaluation found a number of examples of good recruitment and retention practice, but also noted under-representation at senior levels (Hann and Bowes, 2005).

The success of the positive action training schemes has been hampered by their struggle for sustainability. Initiatives accorded 'project' status often suffer from short-term funding, and BME-led initiatives frequently have this temporary status.

Positive action in employment schemes can also be criticised for focusing on individuals' skills development thereby implying a deficit model when there is evidence that BME people are not less well educated and qualified than their white majority ethnic counterparts (Julienne, 2001; Somerville *et al*, 2002). This focus on individuals can detract from the responsibility of organisations to change their institutionally racist practices, and accounts for some of the 'glass ceiling' effects consistently reported in the literature (Julienne, 2001).

With the requirement for public housing providers to assess the impact of their race equality policy and action plan on those most affected by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, the emphasis is now on the institution to demonstrate that they are competent and remove barriers to progression, rather than the minority individual.

Hann and Bowes' evaluation recommended that the Housing Corporation continues to prioritise its own work in this area and be as demanding on itself on short and long term targets and delivery as it is to other agencies, for example, in its strategy document for London (Housing Corporation, 2000).

Regulatory frameworks, leadership and management strategies	**4**

Since 2000, the Housing Corporation has been open to such recommendations and open to change. Its BME policy became incorporated into its regulatory role instead of being an 'add-on' (Housing Corporation, 2002). The organisation has also been prominent in its leadership, regular guidance and publications which have been positively evaluated and felt to be ahead of many other sectors on the issue of race equality. Its role in asking specific questions of housing associations relating to race equality in the annual Regulatory and Statistical Return (RSR), commissioning research and other proactive measures led to the comment: *"..In short, the Housing Corporation's regulatory approach to race equality is now seen to have 'bite'"* (Hann and Bowes, 2005).

Regulation has also improved with the introduction by the Audit Commission of the Key Line of Enquiry (KLOE) on Diversity, which, amongst other things, includes clear criteria on composition of board members, staff and contractors (Audit Commission, 2006).

Current BME leadership initiatives in England such as that funded by the Connecting Communities Plus grants programme (A4e, 2006), PATH in Scotland and COFEM (see resources) are using mentoring as a key technique (Khanum,

Resources 4

Positive Action Training in Housing England (PATH)

www.pathuk.co.uk

PATH National Ltd is a skills development agency whose mission is to:

"Address under-representation and inequalities of Black and minority ethnic groups in management and the professions through the provision of innovative training, career opportunities, motivation and support to individuals and organisations wishing to create a workforce that reflects our diverse communities".

PATH Scotland

www.pathscotland.org

PATH Scotland provides structured traineeships for people from black and minority ethnic communities in partnership with host organisations. It works to the same mission as PATH National above.

2001). Additional activities identified in organisations' action plans include:

• BME staff forums (Housing Corporation, n.d; Manchester City Council, 2003);
• increasing representation of BME staff on recruitment panels;
• team specification- where the ethnic make–up of a team is seen as a requirement of doing the job effectively;
• specific positive action training such as COFEM (Manchester City Council, 2003);
• succession planning- where for each job potential future candidates are identified and coached for success;
• using the ethnic make up of their 'travel to work area' as a benchmark for diversity in staff recruitment rather than just limiting it to the ethnic make up of the Borough itself (London Borough of Richmond-upon-Thames, 2005).

Authorities such as Huntingdonshire with a small minority ethnic population have set outcomes about governance, procurement and staff make-up that strive to reflect the communities they serve (Huntingdon District Council, 2005).These initiatives, however, need to be part of an overall strategy to address institutional racism.

5 | **Better representation on steering groups and boards is needed**

Evidence on lack of BME representation at different levels in housing organisations has been a lever for action, but is only part of the problem. Tenant participation and representation has also been found to rely on 'the usual suspects'(Mullins *et al,* 2004) and the situation needs improving and regularly monitoring. The Mullins *et al* survey found good representation, with seventy-nine per cent of Large Scale Voluntary Transfer Registered Social Landlord boards in areas where the BME population is more than three per cent having at least one minority ethnic member. However, a follow up survey that also included Arms Length Management Organisations and Private Finance Initiatives shadow boards found significantly lower representation of BME members, indicating that BME involvement is a continuing issue to be addressed and that there is a need to guard against tokenism.

Recruiting BME tenants onto boards and steering groups of housing organisations can make these bodies more reflective of the communities they serve. However, the authors stress that effective involvement needs clear planning and is built by recruiting quality candidates, ensuring accountability to local communities and 'tapping into' board members' networks. Succession planning is also needed to refresh boards and provide skills and confidence for new members (Mullins *et al,* 2004). The authors suggest that actual representation of local communities on boards and groups is not realistic in the majority of settings, and that 'reflecting the communities' is more possible. The Housing Corporation London Region has produced guidance in this area (Housing Corporation London, n.d.), and their strategy document (Housing Corporation London, 2000) makes clear suggestions for improving representation. Success factors in this area have been housing associations working closely with BME led organisations on the issue, and engaging consultants to target particular under-represented groups.

6 There needs to be more BME-led representation amongst contractors, suppliers and consultants

A study published in 1995 found few minority ethnic companies benefiting from large contracts on housing association development schemes (Harrison and Davis, 1995). In the ensuing years there had been some, though still not enough, improvement (Tomlins *et al,* 2001). Later studies still found severe lack of representation, discrimination, stereotyping and general lack of appreciation of both the value-base and the business case for inclusion. For example, Steele and Sodhi (2004) found BME contractors winning tenders they identified as ....*'the less lucrative repairs and maintenance work, and of relatively low value'* whilst research with minority ethnic built-environment professionals (Caplan and Gilham, 2005) revealed barriers to access and achievement at all levels.

A review carried out by Mullins *et al* (2004) notes 'wider benefits' of training and employment to BME people, and that the money spent on meeting the Decent Homes Standard could also support the creation of 'local jobs, community owned businesses, and increase the skills of local people'. Section 8 of the report gives examples of two organisations that have created and supported the development of employment and business opportunities such as building sub-contracting and refurbishment. One, for example, appointed two community outreach workers who built bridges to BME employment and used 'clout' with bigger contractors to extend sub-contracting opportunities to BME businesses.

The review concluded that more leadership is required by housing associations to ensure that contractors meet targets in this area. In addition, that the Housing Corporation should produce guidance, examples of good practice, and consider carrying out further research possibly jointly funded with the construction industry. The researchers make the point that the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 applies indirectly to contractors, through the outsourcing of work by public authorities.

Conclusion

It is important that the pressure for change continues, and that workforce diversity and development stay on the agenda of the social housing sector. The report published by the (then) ODPM (Mullins *et al,* 2004) contained a force-field analysis that put the goal *'Recruit diverse and motivated staff team'* as a relatively easy solution to the barrier *'Staff not representative of community'* compared with other barriers they identified. The implication is that on a scale of difficulty, this goal is quite easily achieved. The regulatory framework is in place and there is plenty of evidence and good practice to support it. However, the framework is not enough, and many housing organisations will still need to be pressured to take their responsibilities seriously. The challenge is not for BME staff to have to work to break through a glass ceiling but for regulators and communities to challenge these housing organisations and their discriminatory practices.

Resources 5

Positive Action In Housing (PAIH)
www.paih.org
Positive Action in Housing is a Scottish wide minority-ethnic led charity whose mission is to work with communities and others to enable everyone to have an equal chance to live in good quality, affordable and safe homes, free from discrimination and the fear of racial harassment and violence.

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