

BECON Position Paper on

***The Role of Further Education Providers in Promoting Community Cohesion,
Fostering Shared Values and Preventing Extremism***

(Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills)

BECON (Black Ethnic Minority Community Organisations Network) is the regional infrastructure organisation for the BME voluntary and community sector in the North East of England. BECON is a membership based organisation and primarily works with Black and Minority Ethnic voluntary and community sector in the region. BECON has been successful in establishing a network of over 144 BME groups. Currently BECON continues to support 90 front line groups and three locality-based networks through training, information dissemination, networking opportunities and support on local and regional policy development. BECON is also working nationally with other regional and national partners through Voice4Change England.

Over the last seven years, the rhetoric of community cohesion has become central to the government's thinking on 'managing race relations' and race equality in Britain. This approach, however, gives an impression of fundamental problems with minority communities incapable of living in Britain as 'citizens'. It is not surprising therefore that the first mention of the concept appears in Ted Cante's report on the disturbances in Northern cities. As an organisation working with the BME voluntary and community sector and on race equality in the North East of England, BECON is developing its general position on 'community cohesion'. This work is currently being undertaken as part of a working group organised by Voice4Change England, the national BME VCS partnership of 19 BME regional and national organisations.

This paper, therefore, is not a consultation response to *The Role of Further Education Providers in Promoting Community Cohesion, Fostering Shared Values and Preventing Extremism*. This paper needs to be read as a working position paper for BECON, while on a journey to develop a more coherent position on issues raised by 'community

cohesion' rhetoric in general and the consultation document in particular.

The document *The Role of Further Education Providers in Promoting Community Cohesion, Fostering Shared Values and Preventing Extremism* makes a direct and clear connection between 'extreme violence' and influence of Al Qaida. Although, the document stops short of equating such violence with Islam and the Muslim community in Britain and therefore take away the focus from one community in the document, in practice it will be difficult to develop a sophisticated discourse that continues to make this distinction between the threat of Al Qaida and Islam and the Muslim community in Britain. In this context, the document remains silent on developing a clear distinction between terrorism and the Muslim community. While the document does seem to suggest dealing with 'all kinds' of violent extremism, it does not clarify what other kind of threats the government perceives as damaging to the society and its cohesiveness and what impact they may have on the well being of community relations.

BECON is concerned that the rhetoric of community cohesion may brush aside any discussion on structurally entrenched inequalities of race and racism as unimportant or of not immediate importance. This seems to emerge from the language and conceptualisation of the document. Similarly, the document has no focus on the media, print and visual, that is replete with stories on Islamophobia and racism creating an environment of mistrust and hatred between communities. In dealing with issues that can be emotive, the government's focus in the document, and generally with the rhetoric of community cohesion, is to develop heavy handed practices than address fundamental issues.

The language used in the document, and other policy documents on community cohesion, allows the government to develop a national narrative of unity. This process in turn develops as a 'meta-narrative' of Britishness. Any other narrative, therefore, that challenges the 'meta-narrative' of Britishness, for example, race inequality, institutional racism and multiculturalism, are consigned as anti-British. One particular example in recent times has been the vitriolic response to the Archbishop's comment on possible incorporation of elements of Sharia law within the British legal system. While the

Archbishop was exercising his right to speech, a value enshrined in the document as a 'British value', the nature of Islamophobic material in the print and visual media does demonstrated the fragility and hollowness of the values heralded by the government of 'free speech' and 'campaigning by citizens for change'. In this context it is important to remind that all political parties summarily dismissed suggestions by the Archbishop without taking the trouble of going into a discussion and debate on what he suggested. This is another value enshrined in the document as 'British'.

Therefore, to not focus on the wider social environment within which communities are living is completely forgotten and neglected in the document. It is not our intention to argue that the document itself does not speak of 'tolerance' of different views and developing spaces for discussions and debates. However, as a set of principles, the document does not make any efforts to explore causal links with some of the pressing problems it sees facing the country and developing an effective, comprehensive and collective mechanism to deal with such complex issues. Instead, institutions of further education are considered as another mechanism to spy on pupils and their behaviour from the Muslim. The potential impact of adopting such an approach will in effect be to distance and marginalise law abiding Muslims and thus having an adverse impact upon community relations. Education establishments need to carefully consider the resources available to them such as the presence of Muslim students/Islamic Societies and to maximise these resources by engaging with these audiences and entering into a positive, open and transparent dialogue. They need to adopt strategies that combat extremism of all kinds and have 'buy-in' from their Muslim partners

In this context, it is interesting that while the document claims to address issues of 'violent extremism', five out of six examples directly link activities with Al Qada influenced terrorism. In fact some examples used may highlight scenario that may be appropriate for describing how to spy on others. In one such example (Example 1), leaflets left on a table in Arabic should be looked at suspiciously as some other papers in English had inflammatory titles. Quite clearly, racism that emerges from encountering the unknown is clearly expressed by this example. It is our contention, therefore, that the document, despite claiming to open up healthy debate on identity and cohesion etc,

does exactly the opposite by making a community an object of constant vigilance and control.

BECON's current position is therefore informed by the following:

- (a) The community cohesion agenda as public policy is based on Ted Cantle's report which has been criticized for being simplistic in its understanding of persisting inequalities, discrimination and 'parallel lives' in Northern Cities
- (b) Empirical and theoretical work on issues of identity, language, self and community. BECON's position is also informed by the process advocated by Lord Bikhru Parekh in his important contribution to the future of multi-ethnic Britain
- (c) Discussions on equality, especially race equality and links between equality and community cohesion.
- (d) Public policy around community cohesion is being developed vis-à-vis multiculturalism and therefore takes little or no cognisance of multiculturalism as a social reality.
- (e) Emphasis on 'cohesion' is leading to a public rhetoric where racism, institutional racism and Islamophobia are becoming respectful. We believe that such a scenario is a regressive step from a situation where UK led on development and implementation of race equality law. This process will increase the political space available to the far right in Britain.
- (f) This position does not defend or condone in any way criminal activities in which people may be involved. However, this position does raise certain questions where while the State demands certain outcomes from institutions of society of good community relations, it is less reflective and transparent on impact of its national and international policies on community relations.

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- (g) The single national narrative of Britishness is considered to comprise of a set of values that may transcend ethnicity or race. However several accounts of the rhetoric of Britishness have clearly pointed to the links between the values and 'whiteness' as identity.
- (h) While the ideal of 'free speech' is considered as a cornerstone in Further Education and Higher Educational institutions, the limits of free speech in Archbishop's situation, as discussed above, are clearly apparent.
- (i) While free speech and debate is considered central to Britishness, we also need to be open to the possibility that Britishness as a coherent and time tested value system can also be questioned and debated.

BECON(Black Ethnic Minority Community Organisations Network)

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