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Government funding needed to continue vital work of BME regional networks says Voice4Change England

Serious questions about the future of the English regional Black and Minority Ethnic infrastructure and the Government's aspiration to involve BME communities in its work are raised in a position paper – *The Continuing Need for Government Support for the Black and Minority Ethnic Regional Voluntary and Community Sector Networks in England* - released today by Voice4Change England, the national policy voice for the BME Third Sector.

The paper makes the case for continued Government support of the BME regional networks and claims that if the withdraw of their funding proceeds at the end the end of this financial year then it threatens the variability of all nine English regional BME networks working with around 15,000 organisations delivering services to diverse communities. The BME Networks are an important resource for public sector bodies to develop and deliver on regional policy, in particular regional economic policy and to ensure that local authorities meet the requirement of Local Area Agreement National Indicator Standard 7 to build a thriving third sector in their local area.

"Unless funding for the BME regional networks continues the essential function they perform in speaking up for BME communities and helping the government deliver on its equalities programmes will be lost," says Vandna Gohil, Voice4Change England's Director.

Funding for both generic and BME regional networks began in 1999 and continued in 2005 with the strategic objective 'to promote and support the effective engagement, contribution and influence of the VCS [Voluntary and Community Sector] as partners in regional policy development and implementations'.

Vandna Gohil added: "There is a continuing need for strong BME regional infrastructure organisations facilitating the engagement of the BME Third Sector with government at all levels. Without them the voice of the Sector would be patchy and fragmented. The BME regional networks also provide a vital link between local and national levels."

According to Voice4Change England the likely consequences of the Government funding ceasing and no secure alternative source being found are:

- A loss of the voice of BME communities in the development of integrated regional and sub-regional strategies
- A loss of the investment of the past eight years in building and then mainstreaming support and services for BME Third Sector organisations
- A loss of the enabling support that BME networks provide to the Government in delivering policies on equality, cohesion, and human rights.

Voice4Change England and its Partners, including all nine BME networks in England, have been lobbying the Office of the Third Sector to ensure that funding for the networks continues. At present there has been no response from the OTS to the demand that government support continue.

Vandna Gohil stated: "The BME Third Sector has been historically under-resourced and in the current economic climate is likely to be further pressed by the decline in grant-making

as local authorities in particular are more financially restricted. Losing the BME regional networks would be a double whammy in an already fragile situation. The evidence is that these networks are as vitally necessary today as when they were conceived. They are unique in bringing a race equality perspective to the development and implementation of policy. Crucially they play an important role in challenging the discrimination that the BME Third Sector still faces in accessing mainstream infrastructure support. Without the Networks the Government would not be able to deliver its vision of a more cohesive and inclusive society.”

Concern about the end of Government funding has been expressed by the following V4CE regional and national Partners.

Rupert Daniel, Chief Executive Officer of the **Black South West Network**.

‘While BME communities are becoming more confident in asserting themselves, it is still the case that they are only being engaged where the infrastructure already exists. Regional Development Agencies in particular need to do much more to invest in BME communities and involve them in the implementation of their policies on economic inclusion. However, the evidence shows that BME Third Sector organisations are experiencing funding cuts. A July 2008 BSWN survey in response to a request from Government Office South West for information about the funding crisis for the Third Sector revealed that 55.6% reported cuts in funding this year and that 86.7% of those that lost funding do not anticipate being able to replace those sources within the year. Such findings illustrates the devastating impact of one size fits all policy shifts, on small marginal organisations working with deprivation and disadvantage, struggling to meet the needs of their community. This impact of this will be that marginalised communities won’t receive the services designed to meet their specific needs and that inclusions policies are likely to be impeded within LAA and exclusion deepened, impacting on community cohesion and equality outcomes at a time of looming recession which will further disadvantage BME Communities . ’

Rafiu Williams, Head of Networks for the London BME regional network **MiNet**.

‘Withdrawing funding support for the BME regional networks smacks of folly in government policy! Why this move at a time when most of the networks are now firmly rooted and demonstrated the tremendous impact they are capable of making with the OTS grant? More significantly, the BME regional networks are now well positioned as trusted gateways for the government and public sector agencies into the BME Third Sector and communities. If this move goes ahead, government will be robbing itself of arguably the only opportunity left to it to demonstrate a commitment to race and the channels we all laboured very hard for, to establish to help facilitate government’s engagement with the BME Third Sector and communities in policy development.’

Ila Chandavarkar, Chief Executive Officer for east of England BME regional network **MENTER**.

‘The tragedy is that BME communities continue to have poor access to services. Usually the only bridge to accessing services is through the hard efforts of BME volunteers in the VCS – efforts that may range from helping someone get to hospital to helping young people volunteer to providing debt and other advice. The Government may fail in some of its more important policy agendas and preside over growing inequalities and poverty if there is no

good understanding of the role played by the sector and if there is no clear development of policy to ensure proper investment and support for what the sector provides.'

Abdul Khan, Chief Executive Officer of north east BME regional network **BECON**.

'One consequence of the establishment of the EHRC is that anti-racism has disappeared from the public policy agenda, with the emergence of cohesion as a replacement for anti-racism is creating a default position to fund generic organisations rather specialist services. At the same time the economic climate threatens the funding from local councils that a large part of the BME Third Sector depends upon. The BME Third Sector is responding to these challenges by improving its evidence gathering to demonstrate its worth, but the Sector needs to be more active in promoting itself to politicians in particular.'

Paul Harris, Project Director for **One North West** BME regional network.

'Regional BME Infrastructure provides a much needed link between public and private sector partners and BME communities. With a strong push nationally for a Single Equalities Act as well as the increasing popularity of Single Equalities Schemes in regional and local public sector agencies there is a growing requirement for advocacy around the needs of race within a wider equalities framework. Equalities and diversity across the strands is vital but must not be to the detriment or serve to dilute the identity of individual strands. Investment in BME regional "strategic influence" and "voice" functions must be strengthened to safeguard the continuing role of BME communities in the regional agenda as well as to embrace pan-equalities work. The Cabinet Office: Office of the Third Sector Regional Infrastructure Programme is key to making this happen at a regional level, without continuing this programme of support Regional BME Networks will struggle to maintain and grow influence at a regional level and empowerment of BME communities over the regional agenda is likely to fail.'

Jeremy Crook OBE, Director of the **Black Training and Enterprise Group**.

'A decade ago the Black Training and Enterprise Group recognised the need for black and minority ethnic communities to have a voice in all the regions to help improve social and economic outcomes. Today there remain unacceptable gaps in education, employment, health and housing in the most disadvantaged areas where most black and minority ethnic people live, and these communities should have a voice in their regions independent of local authorities. The BME regional networks help to empower these communities and this is critical especially as we head towards a recession.'

Karl Oxford, Director of **Urban Solutions (International)**.

'There is no question of the invaluable support that frontline BME organisations give to Black and Minority Ethnic communities who are affected by multiple forms of deprivation and disadvantage. BME infrastructure organisations support these groups on the frontline - if that tier of support is lost through a lack of resources then 'osmosis' would definitely be perceived as the number one government strategy towards overcoming racial inequalities in the delivery and outcomes of key services to our communities.'

Shamsher Chohan, V4CE Founding Partner.

'There is a lack of understanding of how cohesion works and little recognition of the contribution BME communities make in building social capital. Further, the move to commissioning and procurement is leaving BME Third Sector behind as the value of small grant funded organisations isn't always appreciated. A number of BME Third Sector organisations are already folding and the much reduced situation the Sector will find itself in the next financial year is very worrying.'

Notes.

- 1 Further comment and details from Martin Ball, V4CE's Head of Campaigns, on 020-7843 6131 or 07794-424591.
- 2 A copy of the paper is available on request.
- 3 The Regional Infrastructure Programmes was set up in 1999 to fund a generic and BME VCS network in each of the nine English regions to meet strategic objectives of unlocking further funds for the sectors, to advocate for the sectors at regional level and to increase the effectiveness of the sectors in each region.

For updates and information about Voice for Change work please go to www.voice4change-england.co.uk

Voice4Change England (V4CE) is a national policy body dedicated to strengthening the Black and Minority Ethnic Third Sector as a positive force for change and building a thriving future. It provides co-ordinated policy advocacy for BME groups at local, regional, and national levels to all types of policy-makers.

You can learn more about how you can get involved in V4CE by becoming a Subscriber from www.voice4change-england.co.uk