



**Consultation Response**

**Supporting a Stronger Civil Society  
Cabinet Office, Office for Civil Society**

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BECON takes this opportunity to respond to the government's consultation document on *Supporting a Stronger Civil Society*.

The response is informed by BECON's engagement with civil society organisations in the North East and its own research. A draft response to the consultation document was developed in discussion with frontline BME organisations that participated in our focus group. The draft response was sent to 144 frontline BME organisations and four locality based networks of BME organisations in four local authority areas of Newcastle, Stockton, Sunderland and Middlesbrough. Organisations that responded to this consultation and participated in the focus group are listed in Appendix 1.

BECON is working on race equality in the North East region. BECON supports front line organisations and four locality based networks through training, information dissemination, networking opportunities and support on local and regional policy development and delivers services to BME communities. BECON is also working nationally with other regional and national partners through Voice4Change England.

Since its inception, BECON has continued to work within its original remit and has contributed towards its strategic objectives which are:

- (a) be a regional catalyst for change for BME communities by helping strategic policy makers to identify the gaps and barriers they face, with particular focus on economic inclusion
- (b) advise on, and help to embed good practice on race equality and community cohesion in the region, within the third, public and private sectors
- (c) provide a platform and voice for the region's BME communities to influence policy at the national, regional and sub-regional levels

These objectives are operationalised through participating in building locality level network of BME organizations, working with regional and national partners/stakeholders on public policy and race equality and contribute and commission research in the North East to identify gaps

BECON welcomes the consultation on *Supporting a Stronger Civil Society* released by the government in October 2010.

## **Response to consultation questions**

### **Question 1: How can online services for frontline groups be improved?**

This question has an inbuilt assumption. This question assumes that all frontline groups have access to computer and broadband. Our recent research<sup>1</sup> with BME organisations in the region clearly demonstrates that most organisations work with volunteers and do not have a base or funding to purchase necessary equipment. Moreover, poverty in many BME communities limits their access to IT infrastructure that is now considered the norm.

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<sup>1</sup> BECON. (2010). *Impact of the Economic Recession on BME Voluntary and Community Sector in the North East*.

Our research carried out in 2004 demonstrated<sup>2</sup> that 28% of the groups were working in the region with an average income that was below £5000 annually. Almost 30 per cent of the organisations did not have access to any premises. Almost 58% of BME organisations did not have any budget for training.

In addition, there are other practical difficulties in accessing IT support. Some civil society organisations, especially Refugee Community Organisations, do not find impersonal information suitable because of unfamiliarity of the UK's social and cultural context which is extremely important to make information meaningful. These groups and their members in many instances also face difficulties in accessing information in English. Therefore, an emphasis on online advice will further reduce their access to information. Groups that generally involve older people will face challenges around access to IT infrastructure and language barriers in the region.

BME frontline organisations that have access to IT infrastructure and skilled staff, suggest that while skills are available within their organisations to access online support, they are uncertain about information that will be made available. There are further concerns about possible lack of social, economic and political context in which they operate in a 'one size fit' approach to support provision. As BME frontline organisations deliver a variety of services, there are concerns whether online support services will manage to cover the range of issues

It is our view, that for a large number of BME frontline groups, the best mode of delivery of support and advice must be built on outreach work.

**Question 2: What can Government do to forge more effective links and transfer skills between small civil society organisations and businesses or larger charities?**

It is our experience that participation by BME individuals involved in successful businesses in civil society organisations is widespread in the North East. However, this does not mean that these individuals do not have training needs primarily because the ethics and values of a civil society organisation are not premised on profit making. Moreover, as most frontline organisations work with little or no money, there is little incentive for these organisations to acquire skills from the private sector.

Where such skills may be useful, especially when a frontline organisation is keen to develop capacity in bidding for public service contracts, there are other barriers that frontline organisations face. The current requirement for minimum contract levels excludes not only small civil society organisations but also large, regional organisations. In this context, an emphasis on transferring business skills to civil society organisation will provide little support to an organisation.

Nevertheless, following areas may be considered on transfer of skills from businesses to small civil society organisations:

- (a) while organisations have skills in writing funding applications, they clearly lack skills on writing tenders and support in learning skills to write tenders will be of significant help
- (b) to make this transfer of skills most useful for BME civil society organisations interested in participating in tendering process, short turn around periods for

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<sup>2</sup> BECON (2004). *State of the BME VCS*.

tenders must be avoided. In absence of this change, transfer of skills will not offer much incentive to frontline organisations

- (c) networking with the wider business community and support will also be a significant that may be transferred to a civil society organisation

### **Question 3: How could brokerage of pro bono support be improved?**

Leaving aside the issue of bidding for public services, it is clear that BME civil society organisations will benefit from pro bono work of individuals with skills set that may be beneficial to an organisation in both developing its capacity to engage with strategic decision making and developing organisation's vision for the future in a changing context. We believe that this process is best managed in the region and through organisations that have a long history of work with BME communities and BME civil society organisations.

In the North East, four locality based networks and one North East wide organisation support the development of BME civil society organisations. Investment in these organisations is a clear step forward to improve pro bono support services of BME frontline civil society organisations. In the past eight years, these networks have developed their relationships with a range of BME civil society organisations underpinned by trust. These networks also have developed contacts with public and private sector organisations and are suitably placed to develop brokerage service for BME civil society organisations.

### **Question 4: What support might your organisation need to become more resilient?**

This question is again based on an assumption that organisations would like to bid for public service contracts. As highlighted in question 2, the minimum contract level requirement currently is an important barrier for BME organisations bid for public service contracts besides time scale involved in completing a tender. Unless there is a change in requirements to bid for public services, we cannot see why organisations will feel the need to change. These changes, in conjunction with identified training, will help organisations become resilient especially where they wish to deliver public services. It may also be helpful if commissioners from public bodies improve their engagement with BME civil society organisations while they develop service contracts.

### **Question 5: What do you think should be the priority for a bursary fund?**

Based on what has been discussed in questions 2 and 4, we do not see how the bursary fund will support organisations moving into public service delivery. If there are changes made to contracting requirements, we think that bursaries placed in the hands of frontline organisations will be of immense value. Our focus group identified the following training areas:

- (a) skills in writing tenders for staff and volunteers
- (b) training to trustee board members to help understand changing social and economic
- (c) engagement with Commissioners

### **Question 6: How could any bursary fund be delivered simply and fairly?**

For this question, it is important to reflect on whether the eligibility criteria and application process will take into account specific conditions of BME civil society organisations in the North East. Based on our experience of work with BME civil society organisations, we think it is best if money is devolved to sub-regional level. Our experience of working with Grassroots grant fund (currently held by Community Foundation Tyne and Wear) demonstrates increased funding applications from BME civil society organisations. It is our suggestion that

the Government should use existing routes into the civil society organisation which have developed relationships of trust with frontline civil society groups.

**Question 7: How could consolidation grant help ensure that sustainability and efficiency of infrastructure services?**

It is our view that there cannot be a 'one size fit' approach to consolidation for infrastructure services. Any approach that is not based on evidence will end up creating inefficiencies within the sector and distrust amongst organisations that currently receive these services. For example, because of historical marginalisation faced by BME civil society organisations in the North East, BME activists and professional community workers have invested resources and time in creating infrastructure in the last ten years that has been noted and supported by stakeholders and partners. While this infrastructure is still patchy and requires further resources, significance of this development is based not only on the reach of BME infrastructure organisations but also commitment of the infrastructure to support positive engagement between the public sector organisations and BME civil society organisations. As BME communities are dispersed thinly in some part of the North East, the current infrastructure takes into account this dispersal in developing its services. Any change should take into account the evidence that currently exists so that BME civil society organisations are not adversely affected.

**Question 8: Are there ways that expert intervention can support areas which are lacking social capital to improve relations and develop a stronger civil society?**

Social capital essentially refers to people's personal relationships and networks, and is considered the 'social glue' that makes society work. There are three main types of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking. An IPPR North<sup>3</sup> study found that the North East has similar levels of social capital to the rest of the country. In terms of specific elements in their study, the report found:

- (a) **Stronger communities:** 62% of people in the region reported meeting with relatives at least once a week significantly more than national average (49%). People in the North East are also more likely to speak to their neighbours once a week (80%) compared to the national average (74%)
- (b) **A Sociable Place:** People in North East are more likely to enjoy a social relationship with their neighbours and family members.
- (c) **A culture of informal volunteering:** The proportion of people volunteering both formally and informally in the North East is largely the same as other regions.

It appears that it is not social capital but access to public funds that challenge the large part of civil societies in the North East in general and BME civil societies in particular. It is significant to note that the social capital in the region is high or equal to the national average despite that the North East demonstrates lower level of economic activity, employment and average annual wage. This clearly means that there are other processes at work because income poverty has not led to a sharp decline of loss of social capital.

We thus challenge the assumption that is being made about social capital in the document from the evidence we have from the North East. It is our view that expert interventions are needed in the region not only to build on the level of social capital that exists in the North

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<sup>3</sup> Schmuecker, K. (2008). *Social Capital in the North East: How do we measure up?* Newcastle: IPPR North

East but also to prevent the negative fallout from public spending reductions that will hit the North East harder.

It is our view that BME civil society support services working across the North East provide that expertise to the Office of the Civil Society. In a context where the employment gap for BME communities stood at 16% (nationally the gap was 14%)<sup>4</sup> before the recent economic recession, there are indications that reduction in public spend in the North East will adversely affect people from BME communities clearly worsening their material conditions. It is our view that expert interventions should seek to support communities increasing their interaction with public and private sector organisations through appropriate investment in the infrastructure.

**Question 9: How can central Government best work with national infrastructure to support and deliver the Big Society?**

We think there is a great mismatch between what the Government intends to achieve through the Big Society programme and its intention to only support national infrastructure. Organisations that responded to this consultation felt that support in the region was required without which they would struggle to engage with national organisations. In the North East region, BME civil society sector is still fragile and under-resourced and is generally supported by volunteers. The ground reality for many organisations is that they must prioritise their local work which means that they are limited in their capacity to engage with national organisations.

We feel that in the absence of clear relationship between national infrastructure and local frontline organisations (where both capacity and trust is involved), this approach will not achieve intended outcomes. It is clear that regional support is required for BME civil society organisations for its meaningful engagement with national infrastructure. In its absence, we remain of the view that voices of the BME civil society organisations will not be heard.

**Question 10: Do you have further suggestions or comments on how the Office for Civil Society can help frontline groups become more efficient and effective?**

In conclusion, our advice to the OCS is to consider carefully the impact of proposed changes to support services to different parts of the civil society. At this moment, these proposals are based on a view of the civil society which is homogenous. This is certainly not the case. The evidence gathered in the region and nationally on BME civil society organisations clearly suggests that these proposals on support services do not consider specific conditions of BME civil society organisations and will negatively impact if implemented in their current form.

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<sup>4</sup> Northumbria University. (2008) *Ethnic Employment Gap in the North East*.

## **Appendix 1**

Black and Minority Ethnic organisations that responded to BECON's consultation draft:

Black Emphasis Project (Barnardos)  
Breckon Hill Community Centre  
Cultural Awareness Integration  
Newcastle African Association  
Pakistan Cultural Society  
Roshni  
Sunderland BME Network  
Stockton BME Network



# BECON

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