

'Building Community Links' – Project Report

Jan-July 2005 – a project to build the capacity of voluntary groups from Black and minority ethnic communities.

1 Background

Building Community Links was initially conceived by Oxfordshire Community & Voluntary Action (OCVA) in November 2004. The local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) was at the time engaged in agreeing a 'Compact' between itself and the voluntary sector. The LSC was offering some funding within Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, to help with the process of engaging Black and Minority Ethnic voluntary and community groups in the 'Compact'.

OCVA was aware that strategic processes relating to the voluntary sector (e.g. Compact) had not been very good at engaging with voluntary groups from BME communities. At the same time, OCVA had some experience of working with small, newly emerging community groups and activists from BME communities, via the 'Community Champions' scheme (2002 onwards). So OCVA put in a proposal to run a capacity-building project. The project would include the LSC's aim (engagement with the Compact), but also other elements of capacity-building. OCVA hoped to be able to work in partnership with Black-led organisations and groups, and identified OREC and the Black Professionals Network as potential partners.

2 Objectives of the project

- to increase OCVA's knowledge of BME groups in Oxfordshire
- to raise the awareness of BME voluntary groups about infrastructure support services, so that they can benefit from accessing these services in the long term, and can helping to shape the services that will be useful to them
- to lay the foundations for improved participation of BME voluntary groups, and BME individuals, in strategic decision-making processes
- to specifically widen participation of BME voluntary groups, and BME individuals, in the Oxfordshire Compact and its attached codes (particularly the Learning & Skills code).



Participants at the 'Black Perspectives in Community Work' training day, 11 May

3 What did Building Community Links achieve?

3.1 Sharing information with BME voluntary groups

The project worker made contact with over 90 groups, sending information about the Compact and the networking/training events. There was two-way contact with many groups, which helped the project worker to build up a picture of some issues for voluntary groups (e.g. barriers to receiving information, training needs, etc).

3.2 Database of BME voluntary groups

The database of groups includes more than 90 groups, including an extra 36 that had not previously been on OCVA's database of voluntary groups in Oxfordshire. Link Africa has also been helped to put together a database of specifically African voluntary groups.

3.3 Workshops to discuss the idea of a BME voluntary forum

2 workshops were held in March 2005, and 19 people participated. There was some enthusiasm for the idea of a forum. Some individuals volunteered to join a steering group, whilst others suggested making a fact-finding visit to other BME voluntary forums in the country. Other feedback from the workshops showed that there is suspicion of tokenism, when umbrella organisations seek to engage with BME groups.

3.4 Training events: 'Meet the Funders'

2 workshops were held in April, to bring together some Oxfordshire funding grant-schemes, and BME voluntary groups. 8 people attended, and 3 grant schemes helped run the session (Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire Community Foundation and Community Champions.) The aim of the workshops was to provide additional opportunities for networking, and also to try to increase the success rate of applications from BME communities.

3.5 Training event: 'Black Perspectives in Community Work'

Following initial feedback from some of the people who participated in the project, an additional event was planned and put on in liaison with OCVA's training programme. 21 people took part in the one day course in May on 'Black Perspectives in Community Work', which was delivered by the Federation of Community Development Learning. The training day was very well received and demand for further training was indicated.

3.6 Links with other events for BME communities

The project also sought to raise awareness about other local initiatives. The project publicity included information about Oxfordshire County Council's one day conference on 'Good practice in working with BME communities' in June. Additionally, the project sought to work with the Black Professionals Network (BPN), particularly in regard to the BPN's annual conference in June. Unfortunately there was a communication breakdown between the project and BPN which made relations difficult. However, the project did sponsor some places for BME voluntary groups to attend the June BPN conference.

3.7 Fact-finding visits to learn from other BME voluntary forums

Following the suggestion of participants at the March workshops, a plan was made to gather a group of participants to plan and make a 'fact-finding' visit to other BME Voluntary forums in the UK. The aim was to help build momentum towards a forum for Oxfordshire, in an involving and empowering way. The project worker undertook research into other forums. Unfortunately the timescale for the fact-finding visits was very tight, which meant that none of the interested participants was able to attend.

4 What lessons have been learnt?

- Sending good, relevant information to the 'contact' person for a voluntary group does not mean that the information gets to the right people
- Terms such as 'forum', 'voluntary and community group', 'networking' may be jargon to some groups, and to the contact person that opens post for a group
- Voluntary groups from BME communities are cynical about top-down attempts to work with 'BME communities'
- People are more likely to participate in an event or workshop if they are invited by name/personally, rather than sent a flyer
- Capacity-building takes time. In particular it takes a long time to truly involve groups that have not often participated - short term projects will always have a limited effect. At the same time, a snappy series of events can be useful to give a project momentum and make it worth noticing.
- A piece of work that seeks to engage with 'BME groups' may need to employ project workers/facilitators from several different communities, in order to fully reach those communities and overcome prejudices.

5 What could happen next?

5.1 Sharing information with groups on the database

OCVA owns the database that has emerged from the project. OCVA is hoping that it can be combined into an overall, shared database of voluntary groups that is being put together for the OVID consortium of VCS infrastructure organisations. There may be a value in organisations like OCVA using the specific BME Groups database to regularly send out information about opportunities.

5.2 A forum of voluntary & community groups from BME communities

Several resources from this project could be used to carry on the work of setting up a forum. There is the list of names of people interested in volunteering, and also the research that was carried out into other forums in the UK that are willing to be visited as part of a 'fact-finding' programme. It was originally hoped that, although Building Community Links was a short term project, the work of setting up a forum could be a long-term goal. There may be an opportunity for the new OVID Additional Spend project (based at OREC) to take on this work?

5.3 Training events

OCVA's training programme is funded until Dec 2006. There are opportunities to follow up the successful training events. Many participants requested a further 2-day course on 'Black Perspectives in Community Work' which OCVA is planning to host in Autumn or Spring.

5.4 Capacity-building support for newly-emerging groups

The project identified a need for ongoing community development support of some specific groups. For example, one group worked with the project worker to identify their training needs. There would be many advantages to having a community development post focused on voluntary groups from BME communities.

5.5 Better ways to involve BME voluntary groups in existing training, networking and decision-making processes for the voluntary sector

There are many ideas for making extra effort to involved groups that have not had much chance to participate. The OVID Additional Spend project (based at OREC) is taking on a worker to help involve underrepresented communities in the OVID work to find out what support voluntary and community groups want .

David Fisher, Learning & Development Officer
Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action
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