

Public sector

Briefing

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The journey to race equality

Delivering improved services to local communities

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, housing, health, criminal justice and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.

I We have defined black and minority ethnic communities to include asylum seekers and the following census categories of ethnicity: White Irish, White Other (including white asylum seekers and refugees), Mixed (White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Asian, Any other mixed background), Asian or Asian British (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Any other Asian background), Black or Black British (Caribbean, African or Any other Black background), Chinese, and any other ethnic group.

- 1 People from black and minority ethnic communities continue to experience multiple inequalities and discrimination. That race inequalities still exist is partly explained by the slow and sporadic progress being made by public services, despite 27 years of race relations legislation.¹
- 2 Race equality is often viewed as a negative issue consisting of multiple ‘problems’ and requiring extra work that is separate to mainstream business. The association in the 1980s by some parts of the media between equal opportunities and the ‘loony’ left has resulted in a legacy of discomfort, despite some ground breaking and positive progress. This has contributed to the difficulty that people have in openly discussing race equality issues.
- 3 The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 (the Act) has created a new environment where public sector organisations must **positively** promote race equality. Local public sector organisations are facing two significant challenges in responding to this renewed agenda for race equality:
 - mobilising staff, members and non-executive directors to develop a locally specific, aspirational vision of the outcomes that need to change; and
 - understanding and tackling the institutional behaviours that get in the way of making progress.
- 4 Addressing these challenges is fundamental to overcoming negativity, promoting race equality as a positive benefit for the whole community, and making a real difference to the outcomes experienced by diverse black and minority ethnic communities experience.

What is race equality?

- 5 Local agencies need to develop a realistic and achievable vision for race equality, based on a good understanding of local needs. There are common perceptions about where inequality exists, reflected by national data. Despite this, many local agencies still struggle to be specific about what race equality means. We have identified key race equality outcomes where clear and focused action will improve the quality of life of diverse black and minority ethnic communities (**Exhibit 1**). It is for local agencies to think through the action they will need to take to deliver those outcomes in a way that reflects local circumstance.

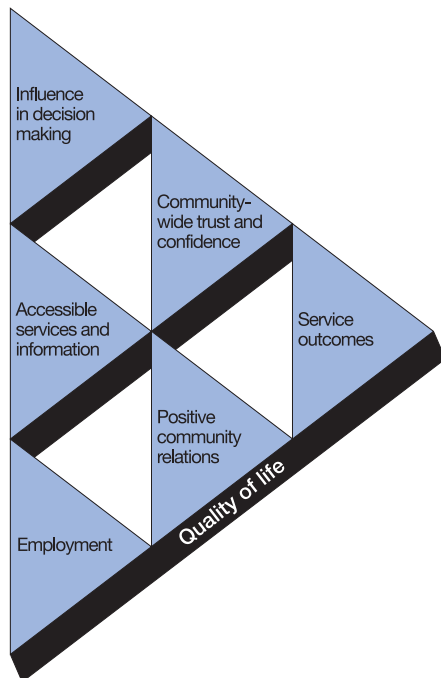
How the local public sector is responding

- 6 Most public services recognise that race equality is an important aspect of good performance. However, many are unclear about what they are trying to achieve and are focusing on complying with the requirements of the Act. Local agencies display different levels of optimism about progress. They are at different stages of the journey to race equality.
 - **Resisting** agencies believe that race equality is not an issue that affects them and have no understanding of race equality outcomes.

Exhibit 1

Local outcomes for race equality

Local agencies will need to deliver these outcomes in a way that reflects local circumstance.



Source: Audit Commission analysis

- **Intending** agencies feel over-confident, but have little motivation to make real change and are still working out the issues, despite having worked on race equality for several years.
- **Starting** agencies are motivated and ambitious, yet are under-confident. Outcomes are improving but this is patchy and reactive.
- **Developing** agencies have set ambitious targets for improvement and have a high-level vision for race equality; outcomes are being improved across all services.
- **Achieving** agencies have clear priorities for their local community and a track record of improving outcomes. They are highly driven to continue improving and to influence partners.

What prevents progress?

- 7 Organisations from across the public sector cite the same key barriers to progress, many of which are underpinned by unexplored assumptions. These assumptions can contribute to behaviours and attitudes that characterise institutional racism and they need to be challenged. We identified some key assumptions:
- **Race equality is a low priority.** Race equality is not an issue because of the small black and minority ethnic population, or because no one has raised any ‘problems’.
 - **Lack of resources.** Race equality work will always be too expensive, will always require additional resources and directly competes with other priorities.
 - **Confusion about ‘mainstreaming’.** Mainstreaming means not having specific officers or projects. Once integrated, race equality no longer requires explicit management.
 - **Difficulty connecting with local people.** Black and minority ethnic communities are hard to contact and difficult to manage, engaging them will unleash an increased demand for services, or a ‘white backlash’.
 - **Too many or too few targets.** Race equality is a low priority because there are no national targets. The workload is already unmanageable so local targets cannot be set.

Race equality and managing change

- 8 Delivering race equality potentially affects every aspect of public service delivery and can only be achieved by rethinking the way that things are done. This requires good change management, which depends upon:
- **leadership** – senior leaders giving consistent messages on race equality, demonstrating commitment through action and supporting champions at all levels;
 - **culture and rationale** – developing a rationale for why race equality matters and creating an open environment for discussion and action;

- **vision, priorities and outcomes** – being clear about local race equality outcomes and linking them to other local priorities;
- **engaging local black and minority ethnic communities** – using creative methods to find out what people want and developing the trust, confidence and capacity of different communities to engage;
- **capacity** – identifying and allocating resources, linking this to achieving existing objectives and taking action to fill gaps in the skills of staff, members and non-executive directors;
- **working with others** – developing a shared vision for the locality, harnessing existing partnerships; and
- **managing performance** – setting targets and using existing systems to monitor and review progress regularly.

Encouraging and sustaining progress

- 9 The Act has been a key driver of progress so far. While compliance is critical, agencies need to move beyond this to take active local ownership of the agenda. The key driver of activity must be improving local outcomes for all black and minority ethnic communities. Improving the quality of services for all black and minority ethnic communities will enhance organisations' ability to meet everyone's individual needs. Real local ownership requires the active engagement of members, non-executive directors and local communities in developing a shared, aspirational and outcome-focused vision of race equality.
- 10 National agencies and regulators can encourage and support progress along the journey to race equality by:
- setting a broad, national aspiration to deliver race equality within a specific timeframe;
 - integrating race equality into existing regulatory assessments, demonstrating that it is an important driver for service improvement;
 - taking tough action against those who wilfully continue to resist compliance with the duty to promote race equality;
 - providing outcome-focused guidance; and
 - supporting knowledge sharing and peer learning.

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