



Analysis of Feedback from a Programme of Information Sharing and Consultation on Community Planning- Targeted at Minority Communities across Scotland

1. Background

BEMIS, as well as various other intermediary organisations, were granted a limited funding by Communities Scotland to carry out activities and a programme that would

- a) Inform BME voluntary and community sector about the emerging community planning concepts, processes and structures
- b) generate feed back on how these processes and structure could best evolve to ensure they included minority communities and properly fulfilled the aims of the process in:
 - Making sure people and communities are genuinely engaged in the decisions made on public services which affect them; allied to
 - A commitment from organisations to work together, not apart, in providing better public services. (Local Government in Scotland Act 2003)

2. Context

Implementation of Community Planning

Community planning as a possible model for local service delivery was first described in the mid 1990s but became instructed by statute as mentioned above in the Local government in Scotland Act 2003. The regulations and schemes drawn up by the executive following the enactment left a degree of flexibility in interpretation of concepts and in timescales. This coupled with the fact that delivering public services and governance issues of the 'local state' are fairly complex fields has led to a certain degree of ambiguity and asymmetry across the country in the manner in which the model has been introduced. This was a known factor before the work was carried out but the findings of the work by BEMIS clearly underline this view. It is not within the scope of this work to determine the merits or otherwise of this approach however it is important to make this point as a contextual backdrop to the exercise.

Engaging with BME Communities.

Even those that advocate participatory democracies as the ultimate model of local governance admit the challenges in engaging communities meaningfully in designing and implementing public services. These challenges have been well discussed. However it is clear that engaging BME communities for this end has the same challenges compounded by several other factors including.

- Language Barriers.
- Significant Cultural and Conceptual Differences
- Weak group identification in some communities.
- Direct and Indirect discrimination.
- Reluctance from stakeholders to engage at policy and decision making levels.

3. Method.

It is in this fluid and difficult context that BEMIS had to design and implement a programme of information and consultation concerning Community Planning. The programme implemented consisted of the following elements

- a) A series of one day events largely designed and implemented by local partners who would have the best local network and background knowledge of the local environment.
- b) Attempts to include as wide range of groups and organisations working with and from BME communities.
- c) Input by the Local Authorities and partners to describe their progress and plans for Community Planning in the area.
- d) Workshop based discussions on both the state of the Community Planning plans and local public services in general.
- e) Recording of main points raised in discourse.
- f) Flexibility within the method to best meet local needs and conditions

Location of Events

Events where held in:

Glasgow: Bemis in partnership with Taleem Trust 23.9.04

North Lanarkshire: Bemis in partnership with North Lanarkshire Council on 12.8.04 and again on 7.10.04

Inverness: (BEMIS alone) 28.1.05

Aberdeen: BEMIS in partnership with ACVO on 28.2.05

Glasgow: BEMIS in partnership with GARA 19.1.05

Dumfries: Bemis in partnership with Dumfries and Galloway Multicultural Association and Dumfries and Galloway Council 22.11.04

Fife: Event planned to be held soon in partnership with Frae Fife.

Analysis of Discussions.

Broad Local Service Issues

It was inevitable and expected that any group of citizens asked to engage with authorities on issues concerning public service delivery would feedback a very broad range of concerns. These are listed in detail in the appendices. They are almost inevitably to a large extent a list of problems. It should be remembered that when carrying out such an exercise, human psychology dictates that people are going to focus much more on what is wrong than what is right. However in this particular case it should also be brought to mind that BME communities are often the most marginalised and excluded in terms of employment, health, access to services, and levels of interaction with state bodies which is below what is required for the local state to fulfil its minimum commitment to its citizens in terms of an exchange of 'rights and responsibilities'

The areas where the events were held were very different in terms of socio-economic make up, population type and density and in overall geography. However there were recurring themes which arose from the discussions as described below. There were also local, more detailed issues which are noted in the appended reports. A third category of feedback that was recorded were strongly expressed views that were local but deemed to be significant. It was felt that it was worth detailing these within the body of the report.

Inverness Highland

Issues raised in these areas stressed the lack of engagement and even knowledge of the process on community planning while the whole community plan was developed and published without consultation with any BEM COMMUNITY GROUPS. It was felt there was an underdeveloped COMMUNICATION STRATEGY WITH local infrastructure to support BME people. BEMIS through training and support was viewed as part of the solution to this. There is a serious need to address this issue and encourage all stakeholders to engage with the diverse communities present there.

North Lanarkshire

While a recurring theme it was felt particularly strongly in North Lanarkshire that consultation was targeted at selected individuals. Funding support to BEM communities and access to information from the local authorities and the area community partnership. A concern, again, was registered about the lack of real consultation with the grass root BEM community groups in the area.

Dumfries

There were particularly issues concerning the ability of the authorities to engage with communities of small population numbers. However, there is a real commitment to engage and the support of BEMIS has been essential in enabling this and supporting the engagement of diverse BEM communities.

Glasgow

With the most diverse population in Scotland Glasgow has had to lead the way in diverse provision however the development of provision still fell short of the need. It was stated that investment in appropriate community infrastructure would greatly assist the prospect of community planning in redressing the shortfalls in equal access to public services. In addition, a recurring theme stated that for most there is a lack of knowledge of the make up and who the local Community Partnership is

Common Themes

Common themes that emerged across the events where:

- Inability of authorities to properly explain or 'sell' community planning at a grass roots level.
- UN willingness to engage from communities arising from 'a nothing will change' attitude AND 'we are not really allowed to engage' at higher levels'.
- Lack of clarity about mechanisms or resources available for engagement and how to influence decisions.
- Equality and Diversity continually viewed as an 'add on' box to be ticked on the way to some other objective rather than as an objective in its own right.
- Feeling that this was a rearranging of existing power structures with no real shift in power.

Strategy Issues.

The problem of power.

As stated earlier, community engagement is not a specific problem to BME communities and while attempts to engage with these communities are frustrated by additional factors i.e.

- low civic confidence
- lack of or confused civic identity
- relatively underdeveloped civil society infrastructure with their own community
- and barriers to connect to existing civil society networks.

The condition which many think drive disengagement with the state in mainstream communities would appear to have the same or greater impact on minority groups. Again and again the people were able to say what they thought could be improved in their public services and even in the processes of decision making and resource allocation but there was no real understanding of how they could affect that change and no real hope that any change they advocated could come about. Now of course there may be a whole range of reasons why any changes suggested here or elsewhere where not feasible or even desirable and somebody somewhere must make a judgment on that. However the judgement on what is worth doing and what is not should be open and transparent and as close to the community it effects as possible. The criteria against which decisions are made should be clear and agreed by the community. It is this lack of transparency in local decision making which still appears to be a major problem. While to a wide variation of degrees, the Local Authorities have tried to put into place new structures and processes to engage communities in decisions on their public services. The criteria against which decisions would be judged good or bad was felt to be predominantly the criteria of the Local Authority and while this may coincide with people and communities priorities at some points it must be recognised that large organisation structures such as Councils and Health services are separate communities in their own right and have different cultures and objectives than those of the communities they seek to serve. The most frustrating thing for the BME communities was that while most of the Community Plan documents included words such as 'ensuring Equality ' and 'celebrating diversity' It was felt that the expressed agenda i.e. the things that where written down ,the glossy documents where only partially ever the real agenda . Local politics, inter-departmental politics , pet projects, conspiracies of mediocrity, easy life etc. were just as important internal factors in influencing the decision making process.

Statements such as:

'Community planning sounds good on paper but it has been planned by the council now they are telling the community'

'Is community planning the process where they take the two words that it isn't in order to describe it?'

The key issue, as always, is an issue of power and the problem is in an imbalance of power between those that have access to the apparatus of state and those that don't. Community planning should fundamentally be about trying to redress that imbalance of power. It appears from this analysis that up to now there has been a lot of 'deckchairs rearranged'

Recommendations.

1. That the community planning bureaucracies recognise the challenges and accept the analysis above. A large part of the problem is a culture which maintains if something is written down as an objective then 'that's what we must be doing'. This is not a call for more monitoring or measurement but a request for a deeper understanding of the challenges that state structures have in fulfilling the needs of communities. They must admit they are at least partially separate from the communities they seek to serve and must aim to behave selflessly as a corporate entity.
2. An ongoing 'community education development and engagement' programme to continually run alongside roll out of community planning.
3. Recognition that there are informal and formal social structures in place reinforcement of them and connection with them may well be a more successful approach than trying to create artificial networks for the objective of governance.
4. Those that hold power at all levels from junior officers to council leaders must be prepared to relinquish power more often and to take risks in allowing people to make decisions for them.
5. A link between 'voice and choice' it is when communities request are met and seen to be met that the 'engagement' between community and state are reinforced. This must be a continuous process of reinforcement and a major objective of the community planning process
6. Devolution of decision making and services design to as small a geographic area as possible

