

Race, Equality & Human Rights Network

Meeting Report

25 June 2026

The Bridge, Dumfries



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Building Community Cohesion, Democratic Participation and Anti-Racism

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Introduction and Opening Remarks

Lynda (Dumfries and Galloway Council)

- The conference opened with an overview of recent milestones and the core strategic vision for regional inclusivity.
- New Initiatives: The Depot has published a new cookbook featuring over 70 recipes from more than 20 countries, celebrating cultural diversity through food.
- Partnerships: Emphasis was placed on fostering strong, collaborative relationships between the Dumfries and Galloway Council, Police Scotland, local colleges, The Depot, and the Dumfries and Galloway Multicultural Association.
- Objective: The primary goal is to increase representation and collaboration among community organisations, local authorities, Scottish Government representatives, and local stakeholders to ensure more inclusive decision-making processes.

Yen Hongmei Nalci - Dumfries and Galloway Multicultural Association (DGMA)

- Dedicated to supporting ethnic minority communities by providing vital services, advancing race equality, and protecting human rights.
- Racism and systemic inequality do not exist in isolation; they directly impact housing, access to public services, and overall community life.

BEMIS Introduction

Facilitator: Charlotte Thomas, BEMIS

- The session began with introductions from all attendees, who shared their backgrounds, roles, and the organisations they represented.

- An overview of BEMIS and its ongoing work was provided, outlining the organisation's mission to promote equality, inclusion, active citizenship, and support for Scotland's diverse ethnic minority communities.
- Charlotte highlighted current challenges to community cohesion across Scotland, including recent racist attacks in Glasgow and the recent terrorist attack targeting the Muslim community in Edinburgh.
- She discussed BEMIS' ongoing engagement with the Scottish Government and Police Scotland, emphasising the need for a coordinated and strategic response to address racism, hate crime, and community tensions.
- Charlotte reaffirmed BEMIS' commitment to creating positive and safe spaces where ethnic minority communities can discuss issues affecting their lives and contribute to meaningful actions.
- The purpose of the meeting was outlined as an opportunity to foster positive dialogue, strengthen relationships between communities and organisations, and encourage greater collaboration on advancing anti-racism across Scotland.
- Attendees were encouraged to use the session as a space for constructive discussion, shared learning, and exploring collective approaches to tackling racism and promoting inclusion.

Understanding the work of AROS and The Anti-racism Delivery Plan

Scottish Government - Strategic Team for Anti-Racism

Speaker: Jeff MacDonald

- Presented an overview of the **Scottish Government's Anti-Racism Delivery Plan** published in March and its implementation approach.
- Explained the **collective coalition model**, which brings together partners across sectors to:
 - Deliver collaborative actions and partnerships.
 - Coordinate activity and build organisational capacity.
 - Measure, monitor, and evaluate progress and impact.
 - Maintain accountability to international human rights standards.
- Work directly alongside Gypsy/Traveller communities to address inequalities and support inclusion.
- Anti-racism is intended to be **mainstreamed across government**

- Jeff outlined how the **Race Equality Framework (REF)** provides the strategic structure for government commitments.
- Highlighted the six key themes of the Race Equality Framework:
 - *Overarching work*
 - *Community cohesion and safety*
 - *Participation and representation*
 - *Education and lifelong learning*
 - *Employability, employment and income*
 - *Health and housing*
- Emphasised the importance of embedding anti-racism across policy areas and public services to achieve long-term race equality outcomes.
 - Highlighted the importance of partnership working, accountability, lived experience, and evidence-based approaches in delivering long-term systemic change and tackling institutional racism across Scotland.
 - Jeff then answered questions from attendees regarding the plan.

Anti racism Observatory for Scotland

Speaker: AROS Representative (AR)

- AR gave an introduction to the work of AROS on Anti-racism in Scotland.
- Dual-Process Approach: AROS focuses on two key mechanisms: connecting with regional equality councils across Scotland and establishing direct accountability to affected communities through the Experience Panel (EEP).
- Engagement Barriers (Consultation Fatigue): A critical issue identified is that community members often feel used by consultation processes when they do not see immediate structural change. To address this:
 - Participants will be financially compensated for providing feedback.
 - Strategies must be developed to sustain long-term community interest and involvement despite slow-moving institutional change.
 - Increasing accessibility: AROS is working to launch a Digital Interactive Library. This platform will host accessible information using laymen terms to ensure it is understandable and useful to the wider community.

Panel Discussion

Panellists:

Yen Hongmei Nalci (DGMA), AR (AROS), Sahar Azizi (Youth Leader), Dr. Justina Obaoye-Ajala (BEMIS)

Chaired by Charlotte Thomas (BEMIS)

Where Are Ethnic Minority Communities Missing from Decision-Making?

- Ethnic minority communities continue to be underrepresented in many local and national decision-making spaces.
- This includes public bodies, political institutions, community planning structures, and leadership positions.
- A lack of representation means that policies, services, and strategies may not fully reflect the experiences, needs, and priorities of diverse communities.
- Participants highlighted that decisions are often made without sufficient involvement from those most affected by them.

What Does Meaningful Representation Look Like?

Participants agreed that representation must be more than simply having ethnic minority people "at the table".

Meaningful representation includes:

- Having genuine opportunities to influence decisions and outcomes.
- Sharing power rather than only consulting communities.
- Valuing lived experience alongside professional expertise.
- Building trust and accountability between decision-makers and communities.
- Ensuring that engagement leads to visible and tangible change.
- Creating pathways for ethnic minority people to progress into leadership.

Main Barriers to Participation (Particularly for Young People)

Navigational Barriers

- Many individuals do not know who to approach or where to raise ideas, concerns, and proposals.
- Decision-making structures can appear complex and inaccessible.

Confidence Gap

- Some young people lack the confidence to engage with authorities and decision-makers.

- This can be particularly challenging for those whose first language is not English.

Integration and Adaptation

- Newly arrived communities often need time to understand Scottish institutions, culture, and decision-making processes.
- This learning period can delay participation and engagement.

Time Constraints

- School-aged young people may be unable to attend consultations, meetings, or engagement events held during school hours or weekdays.
- Other responsibilities can also limit participation opportunities.

Additional Barriers Raised

- Experiences of racism and discrimination.
- Limited access to networks and opportunities.
- Lack of confidence that participation will lead to meaningful change.

Practical Changes to Improve Representation

Participants identified several actions that could make decision-making more representative over the next year.

Restore Hope and Trust

- Demonstrate that community participation leads to real outcomes.
- Show communities that their time, views, and contributions make a tangible difference.

Empower Communities

- Support marginalised groups to recognise and utilise the influence they hold.
- Build confidence, leadership skills, and opportunities for participation.

Strengthen Mentorship

- Encourage people already in leadership and decision-making positions to mentor others.
- Create clearer pathways into decision-making roles for people from underrepresented communities.
- Increase support for future community leaders and young people.

Improve Access and Inclusion

- Provide more accessible engagement opportunities.
- Consider paid participation where appropriate.
- Offer leadership development and outreach programmes.

- Create direct routes for ethnic minority communities and young people to shape local and national decisions.

Open Dialogue Scenario: Community Safety, Trust and Belonging

Hosted by Justina Obaoye-Ajala (BEMIS)

Participants were seated in small groups at tables. Justina read aloud the scenario below and posed a series of follow-up questions, inviting participants to discuss their responses and reflections within their groups.

- Who is seen as “local enough” to represent a community?
- When does scrutiny become discrimination?
- How do institutions unintentionally reproduce exclusion while promoting diversity?
- What does meaningful participation look like when some voices must constantly defend their legitimacy?
- And what responsibility does a community have in ensuring democracy is safe for everyone not just in law, but in lived experience?

Scenario: “Who Gets to Belong in Democracy?” – A Dumfries & Galloway Case Study

Amina Yusuf, a 34-year-old British-Somali community health advocate, has lived in the region for nearly a decade. She is well known in local schools and community centres for her work supporting mental health access for migrant families and isolated rural residents. After years of being asked, “Why don’t people like you stand for office?”, she finally decides to run as a candidate for the local council.

Her campaign slogan is simple: “Safety, dignity, and belonging for everyone.”

At first, there is curiosity and cautious optimism. Some residents welcome her candidacy, saying it reflects a “modern Dumfries & Galloway.” Others, however, quietly question whether she “understands rural Scottish life” or “can represent traditional community values.” Anonymous online comments begin circulating, suggesting she is “an outsider with an agenda,” despite her clear local ties. A few comments escalate into openly racist and Islamophobic remarks, forcing her campaign team to report repeated incidents.

Despite this, Amina continues door-to-door engagement, where she encounters a mixed reality:

Older residents who appreciate her support during loneliness initiatives

Young people who express excitement at seeing “someone like me in politics”

And others who politely but firmly say, “I just don’t think this area is ready for change like this”

Within her political party, Amina faces a different kind of challenge. Senior members publicly endorse diversity, but behind closed doors, she is advised to “soften” her messaging on race and inequality to avoid “alienating the base.” She is not invited to key strategy meetings where winnable wards are discussed. When she raises concerns about discriminatory online abuse, she is told to “focus on positive campaigning.”

Her family is divided. Her mother worries about her safety and asks her to reconsider, remembering stories of public hostility toward visible minorities in politics. Her younger siblings are proud but anxious, constantly monitoring social media for racist remarks. Her husband supports her fully but notices how the emotional toll is affecting their home life.

In the community, tensions surface in subtle ways. At a local hustings event, a resident asks her, “But where are you really from?” Another questions whether she can be “neutral” on issues like policing and migration. Yet others step forward to defend her, sharing how her work in mental health outreach has changed their lives.

As election day approaches, Amina receives a police advisory about potential targeted harassment online and in public spaces. She begins to question what “community safety” truly means- Is it just about policing and crime prevention, or does it also include the safety to participate equally in democracy without fear?

At a community forum, a 17-year-old Scottish-Pakistani student asks her:

“If you are helping this community, but still being questioned about whether you belong here, then what does safety and belonging actually mean?”

The room becomes quiet. The question lands differently for everyone present.

Amina pauses not just as a candidate, but as someone reflecting on the human rights principle that participation must be free, equal, and safe.

The election is no longer only about a council seat. It becomes a mirror reflecting deeper structural questions:

Group Discussion

- The case study prompted a highly engaging and thought-provoking discussion among participants. It encouraged reflection on the meaning of belonging, representation, and participation within communities. Several participants drew on their own experiences, particularly in relation to racism and discrimination encountered while working within community organisations and public-facing roles.
- Despite the challenges discussed, there was also an overwhelming sense of solidarity and community within the room. Participants demonstrated a shared commitment to creating more inclusive and welcoming communities where everyone feels they belong and can participate equally.
- Many groups fed back their reflections to the wider room, focusing particularly on the following questions:
 - **What does meaningful participation look like when some voices must constantly defend their legitimacy?**
 - **What responsibility does a community have in ensuring democracy is safe for everyone, not just in law, but in lived experience?**
- A key theme emerging from the discussion was the importance of investing in and supporting ethnic minority communities to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. Participants highlighted the vital role that community organisations play in building confidence, skills, leadership, and civic engagement. However, there was recognition that these organisations are often expected to deliver significant outcomes with limited resources. This is especially significant in areas of Scotland outside the central belt, in which there may only be a couple of ethnic-minority-led organisations supporting a huge area.
- Several participants emphasised that adequate and sustainable funding is essential if community organisations are to continue supporting individuals to engage with democratic processes and public life. Without this support, barriers to participation can remain entrenched, particularly for those who already face discrimination or exclusion.
- The discussion also highlighted that meaningful participation is not simply about creating opportunities for people to be present in decision-making spaces. Rather, it requires ensuring that individuals can contribute safely, confidently, and without having to continually justify their right to belong or be heard.
- Points were raised about the importance of visible role models and diverse representation in politics, particularly for younger people who may not otherwise see themselves reflected in positions of leadership.
- Recognition that lived experience can be a valuable asset in decision-making and leadership, bringing important perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked.

- Concerns about the impact of online abuse, misinformation, and hate speech on people's willingness to engage in public life and democratic processes.
- The need for communities to continue to foster a culture of belonging, where diversity is seen as a strength and where all residents are recognised as valued members of the community. There were examples drawn from the current World Cup in which communities have been brought together across cultures to celebrate the shared love of the sport.

Final Remarks and Closing

Justina and Lynda closed the event by thanking participants for their engagement and contributions throughout the day. They reflected on the positive discussions and the opportunity to bring together people from different backgrounds, sectors, and communities.

There was a shared sense of commitment in the room to advancing race equality across Dumfries and Galloway. Participants recognised the importance of continued collaboration and left with a renewed determination to promote inclusion, belonging, and equality within their respective roles and organisations.

Acknowledgements

BEMIS would like to extend its sincere thanks to **Dumfries and Galloway Council** and the **Dumfries and Galloway Multicultural Association** for their support in organising this meeting, helping to make it such a valuable and successful day. We are grateful for the opportunity to hold our **Race Equality and Human Rights Network (REHRN)** meeting in Dumfries and Galloway and to engage with local partners and communities.

A special thank you is also extended to **Abdulrahman** for the wonderful lunch provided, which was greatly appreciated by all attendees.

Reflection on the day from Participants

"We are lucky in Dumfries and Galloway to have a community of people with a shared common purpose and belief. Our future is bright with courageous, inspirational young people like Sahar. The links which were made on the day between colleagues, partners from different organisations will enable further positive cohesion work. Those with lived experience need to direct the work. Ensure that we don't just get the right folk round the table but that we enable those folks to meaningfully participate - use trusted voices, trusted people and trusted places."

"The event was relaxed and inclusive. Everyone was enabled to communicate. The round robin at the start enabled everyone to understand who was present, what their role was and what connections could be made."

REHR Network Meeting Agenda

Building Community Cohesion, Democratic Participation and Anti-Racism

Date: Thursday 25 June
Time: 11:00am – 3:00pm
Location: The Bridge, Dumfries

Agenda

11:00 – 11:10 Welcome, Introductions and Purpose

Led by: Lynda (Dumfries & Galloway Council) and Yen Hongmei Nalci (Dumfries and Galloway Multicultural Association)

11:10 – 11:25 Scene Setting: Race Equality, Human Rights and Community Cohesion: National and Local Context

Led by: BEMIS

11:25 – 11:45 Understanding AROS and the Anti-Racism Delivery Plan

Speakers:

- **Introduction to AROS** – AR (Anti-Racism Observatory for Scotland)
- **Presentation on the Scottish Government's Anti-Racism Delivery Plan** – Jeff Macdonald (Scottish Government, Strategic Team for Anti-Racism)

11:45 – 12:05 Participant Questions, Reflections and Discussion

With: AROS and Scottish Government speakers

12:05 – 12:15 Comfort Break

12:15 – 12:45 **Panel Discussion: Increasing Representation within Democratic Structures**

Facilitated by: Charlotte Thomas (BEMIS)

Panellists:

- Yen Hongmei Nalci (Dumfries and Galloway Multicultural Association)
- AR (AROS)
- Sahar Azizi
- Justina Obaoye-Ajala (BEMIS)

12:45 – 1:10 **Small Group Table Discussions**

Facilitated by: Lynda Irving (Dumfries & Galloway Council)

Participants reflect on the panel and consider:

1. What would meaningful ethnic minority representation look like within the work you do in your organisation?
2. What practical changes do you think are needed to ensure meaningful participation?

Groups then Feedback and Share Reflections

1:10 – 1:55 **Networking Lunch**

1:55 – 2:25 **Open Dialogue: Breaking Down Barriers to Participation**

Facilitated by: Justina Obaoye-Ajala (BEMIS)

2:25 – 3:00 **Reflections, Next Steps and Closing Remarks**

Facilitated by: BEMIS

Closing remarks by: Yen Hongmei Nalci (Dumfries and Galloway Multicultural Association)

