

BAME-Led Groups Voice and Influence Workshop

Date: 15th July 2021

Time: 14:00-16:00

Location: Zoom

Workshop Facilitators:

- Peter Okali (PO) - Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Service
- Abimbola Junaid (AJ) - Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Service
- Gilles Cabon (GC) - Greenwich Inclusion Project

Workshop Observers:

- Pauline O'Hare (PO'H) - METRO GAVS
- Andrew Kerr (AK) - METRO GAVS

Groups in Attendance:

- Afyah Centre
- Anchor of Love
- Barnfield Education Limited - Supplementary School
- Big Red Bus Club
- DG Community Organisation
- Greenwich Parent Carer Participation Forum
- Indian Cultural Society
- Kids Festival CIC
- Marvellous Girls Club Ltd
- SEND Friendly Initiative
- Somali Teaching Group
- South London Counselling and Support Services

Workshop Aim and Approach

The BAME-Led Groups Voice and Influence Workshop aimed to provide a safe space for Greenwich-based BAME-Led groups and organisations to explore experiences, barriers, and solutions to engaging with and influencing 'the system' and local decision-making structures about the issues that matter most to them and their service users.

Due to the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, the decision was made to hold the workshop virtually, with attendees registering with METRO GAVS. In total, twenty-nine people registered to attend the event, with twelve attending on the day and fourteen no-shows. Two participants cancelled in advance. Attendance consisted of a range of BAME-Led groups and organisations of varying sizes and stages of development. A sample of the non-attendees were contacted after the event, and all explained that they were unable to attend due to other meetings or events which were happening at the same time.

The structure of the workshop was designed and developed by an external facilitator from Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Service, Greenwich Inclusion Project, and METRO GAVS. The workshop was based around five questions to facilitate discussions on the different aspects of engagement and influence with regards to decision-making within Greenwich. It was envisioned that the workshop will include a number of virtual breakout rooms, however, due to the smaller attendance numbers, it was decided to conduct the workshop as one group. Comments outside the discussion were collected via the chat function within Zoom as well as the Jamboard programme.

Prior to the workshop, two groups contacted METRO GAVS to explain that they would not be in attendance due to the following:

- Had provided feedback regarding the workshop topics in previous correspondence with METRO GAVS
- Lack of payment for their attendance and recognition of the value of their further contribution to the wider, on-going discussion
- Concerns about the competence and suitability of the facilitator for the piece of work in question as per the evidence provided within their bio

Virtual meeting technologies have several advantages in terms of enabling groups and organisations to meet more flexibly, especially during the pandemic, However, without greater access to virtual meeting technologies, the full benefits of this approach will not be fully realised and will ultimately limit the amount of insight which can be achieved. Moreover, for one group / organisation, it was not possible to attend the workshop due to financial limitations within their group / organisations.

Discussion 1: Examples of the Ability to Effectively Influence Public Policy and Practice

In general, attendees reported that they had little-to-no experience and/or opportunity to influence policy and practice through their groups and organisations, although some attendees noted that they felt like they were starting to be listened to. Although this is because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact of this engagement is yet to be fully realised but it was a positive step. Where groups and organisations had the opportunity to engage with statutory sector organisations, the feedback received was often that the statutory sector was surprised at the level of work and breadth of engagement that was already being undertaken by groups and organisations within the borough. Where groups and organisations reported that they felt like they had made some impact as advocates for their service users, they also reported that they felt like there was a limit to what they could achieve in terms of influencing as an individual organisation.

With regards to specific examples of effective influence, groups and organisations provided the following:

- Increasing the presence of Muslim women in employment
- Addressing of stop and search practices
- Highlighting the need to engage with 'grassroots' organisations as well as the needs of specific communities
- Championing community participation, engagement, and development
- Leading BAME-specific focus groups around housing and accommodation
- Raising the profile of specific wards within the borough (i.e. Glyndon)

Discussion 2: What Were the Factors that Made that Influence Effective? Can That Experience be Replicated Across Public Institutions?

Although attendees reported that they had little-to-no experience and/or opportunity to influence policy and practice through their groups and organisations, where influence did occur it was clear this was due to individual perseverance. With this came a significant amount of learning from those individuals, including a sense of having to navigate a complex system alone. This represents a barrier to engagement and influence due to the increased effort which is needed to even 'get a seat at the table'. Once groups and organisations were able to meet with the statutory sector, they felt that it was important to be able to show integrity and it was expected that the individual will be able to champion the voice of the whole community. From a practical perspective, what would help the groups and organisations is knowing when and where influencing opportunities arise and who the decision-makers are to engage with across a range of policy areas.

Discussion 3: Examples of Unsuccessful Attempts to Influence Public Policy and Practice

Some groups and organisations reported that they have not been able to influence public policy or practice. In these incidents, the reasons given were complex governance structures within the statutory sector with regards to consultation. However, groups and organisations also reported that they were not financially able to commit to influencing public policy and practice due to not having the time and skills to do so. Moreover, it was mentioned that BAME-led groups and organisations do not receive the recognition they deserve, and there needs to be an increase in the participation of those who identify as both BAME and female. Groups and organisations did also mention that it would be beneficial to receive updates around public policy and practice that they have been able to influence.

Discussion 4: What Were the Barriers to Effective Influence?

The overarching barrier to effective influence was groups and organisations not having the time or skills to engage. This is partly an issue of these groups and organisations being unfunded / not officially commissioned by the statutory sector, as well as the challenge of the additional work required. For example, understanding statutory sector language and terminology, the time required for engagement which would otherwise be spent delivering projects, programmes and services as well as ensuring that contributions based on lived experience are recognised and treated as valid.

With regards to specific examples of barrier to effective influence, groups and organisations provided the following:

- Funding – influence can only be pursued once the group / organisation is financially able to, including have the time and skills to do so
- Access to decision makers within the statutory sector, with these decision makers possessing a lack of cultural understanding of the communities living, working, studying, and socialising within the borough

It was also noted that there was an increase in mistrust between local communities and the statutory sector as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic due to the disparities around infection and death rates.

Discussion 5: What Methods and Approaches Should be Adopted in Greenwich to Improve BAME-led Organisations' Influence?

Several methods and approaches were discussed which can be summarised as follows:

- Statutory sector institutions need to do more to recognise and value the work carried out by and the lived experiences of BAME-Led groups and organisations within the borough, including projects, programme, and services they are already delivering – this can be partially achieved by mapping current project, programme and service delivery but also considering how meetings are structured and who is involved as well as acknowledging intersectionality
- Financial support for unfunded / non-commissioned groups and organisations in the form of imbursement for their time if and when possible and necessary, with strategic and core funding for 'grassroots' groups and organisations
- Groups and organisations coming together to build their own capacity and financial literacy through a collaborative forum in order to engage with and influence the statutory sector in partnership with the statutory sector
- Development of funding opportunities for policy influencing and engagement, flexible to the changing needs of local communities

Next Steps

The BAME-Led Groups Voice and Influence Workshop was the first of three workshops designed to explore the experiences, barriers, and solutions to engaging and influencing the system about the issues that matter most to voluntary and community sector organisations and their service users within Greenwich. The decision to hold three workshops was taken due to the size and diversity of the sector and to enable a range of voices to be heard. A second event for small organisations not commissioned by the Council and/or NHS with a turnover of less than £200,000 will take place on 30th September 2021. The third workshop, due to take place on the 11th November 2021 will be aimed at commissioned groups and organisation and/or those groups / organisations with turnover of more than £200,000. A report will follow all three events, which will culminate in a Conference on 9th December 2021, inviting senior colleagues from across the system to discuss the findings of the workshops. The Conference will aim to establish concrete ways forward for the sector to effectively engage with and influence the system.

For further information, please contact the following:

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