Community Cohesion Conference: 11 December 2003

Combating Exclusion, Promoting Cohesion

Introduction

First, I would like to thank you for inviting the CRE to share our experience and work in this area. I feel honoured to be sharing a platform with such distinguished speakers and I hope that what I have to say today will add to the richness of the debates and discussions you will be having throughout the day.

I am certain that all of us here today will agree that the goal of achieving community cohesion is not a simple one. It is a long-term goal which requires sustained programmes of activities. So, I am sorry to disappoint, but what I offer today is not necessarily a shopping list of 'what really works' - as we have not yet been able to effectively measure the impact of our current work.

Instead, I will offer an insight into how we are currently attempting to understand and respond to matters relating to exclusion and the

promotion of cohesion and make you aware of the significant role that the CRE plays in this regard.

It is impossible to cover the range of projects that we are involved in with in 20 minutes but I will attempt to give you a flavour of the types of initiatives (directly related to addressing exclusion and promoting cohesion) that we are currently working on.

These initiatives are core to the work of a specific directorate within the CRE (Countries, Regions and Communities Directorate) and influences and shape all our other areas of work within the CRE.

More specifically, my presentation will highlight…

i) The background to our work in this area

ii) The current context within which we approach the promotion of community cohesion

iii) Delivering cohesion: examples of current initiatives

With regards to

i) The background to our work in this area…

In many ways, the CRE has a long history of trying to create inclusive communities. Indeed we have been at it since 1976! But our focus, traditionally, has been very much determined by the Race Relations Act (1976) which established us. We have for much of our existence concentrated on the circumstances surrounding post-war immigrant communities.

Our principle duty being
- the elimination of racial discrimination and the promotion of equal opportunities
AND more relevant to today's discussion- the promotion of good race relations

Yet, despite attempting to achieve these objectives for some 28 years, the events of Summer 2001 in the North of England left us in no doubt about the level of progress we had made in this regard.

I could give you a number of reasons for our limited success, but I will offer just one: Quite simply, as Robert Putnam would say… "we were bowling alone…"- for some quarter of a century!

Prior to the Amendment of the Act in 2000, there was little serious engagement with such issues by statutory and non-statutory agencies. Whilst at a political level, Ministers dipped in and out of aspects relating to integration and race matters - the private, public and voluntary sector more often than not completely ignored aspects of diversity in their policy and practice.

Thus the amendment of the Act in 2000 has been a turning point for us at the CRE.

It not only re-ignited discussions across Britain around racial inequality but also helped to shift the debate beyond race to include broader aspects of cohesion.

So…

ii) the context within which we currently approach the promotion of community cohesion

is somewhat different in scope and method but still grounded within a context of migration.

Historical migration and current migration has contributed greatly to the diverse nature of our society and we see this as being a central feature in building stable communities

This approach presents an opportunity for the commission to engage both with traditional concerns relating to discrimination facing post-war immigrant communities…

- as well as emerging issues surround newer migrants

- the non-tolerance of diverse religions and beliefs

- the non-acceptance of those who choose alternative life-styles(Gypsy travellers)

- the tensions around nationality (anti-English sentiments)

As you will note our areas of focus have broadened out to cover a wider range of excluded communities.

Our current approach to addressing exclusion and promoting cohesion has been influenced by a number of factors, including:

- a greater concern for local democracy

- The political desire for social inclusion and civic renewal (re-engagement of people at local level)

- the changing role of the voluntary sector (Best Value)

- The modernising agenda (governments drive towards people focused public services

- Government's community cohesion initiative

In sum, we now see great potential to promote cohesion and address exclusion through engaging key stakeholders and partners at local level.

So how is the CRE delivering Community Cohesion?

The CRE is uniquely placed to assist in the delivery of Community Cohesion, especially with its strengthened powers through the Amendment of the Race Relations Act in 2000.

Take Migration for example,

At the CRE (within the context of our work with migrant communities) we recognise that integration and cohesion does not mean assimilation - it is a two way process in which migrants (old and new) need to adapt to UK society and the institutions of UK society need to open up to meet the expectations of Migrants

We work to foster a better understanding of the expectations of individuals as well as advising institutions on inclusive ways of engaging with both minority and majority groups

Our approach is to prevent racial and ethnic discrimination in all its forms by using the power of persuasion where possible and the power of the Law where necessary

Clearly, we would wish to avoid the harsh approach and work mainly within the promotional framework by working in partnerships for common outcomes.

In our work to build **whole** communities the central focus is around the development of strategic partnerships with a range of key stakeholders in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors.

Specifically we are seeking to work with Government to develop strategies and programmes of work which will re-engage people around common goals; rebuild trust and confidence in public services; widen and strengthen networks and partnerships and develop social capital and highlight inequalities.

Another Two key areas of our work in this regard relate to:

Creating a sense of belonging and

Building safe communities

Our key areas of work to foster a <u>sense of belonging</u> are currently focused on three key initiatives: fostering a better understanding around religion and belief; asylum and immigration; and promoting good race relations between diverse communities.

With regards to the latter, we are currently preparing a guide for public authorities on how to promote good community relationships

Our work to build <u>safe communities</u> is developing around the *Safe Communities Initiative* (launched by our chair early this year) which aims to provide:

- Strategic support to prevent and respond to community tensions and conflict
- Guidance on conflict management
- Alternative techniques and models for conflict resolution, including mediation
- A source of intelligence to government and community agencies

We are also undertaking project work to look at the activities of the far right and how these can be countered and addressed across the UK

Ultimately, our approach to community cohesion and integration is built around a desire to foster civic renewal. In order to achieve this we are working towards encouraging the re-engagement of people; promoting and reviving the notion of the common good and addressing issues and concerns around questions of race, identity, equality, belonging and being British to try and change negative perceptions and attitudes into positive ones

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to end by perhaps stating the obvious … community cohesion will not be achieved in the short-term. We are in it for the long haul…we are still at the beginning of a long journey and it does not have to be a lonely one.

The CRE is there as a Partner in delivering Cohesion

We are aware that since the establishment of the *community Cohesion Unit* there are a wide range of organisations both statutory and voluntary, engaged with activities to promote cohesion.

Whilst this is encouraging, there is danger that we might be duplicating effort and creating confusion for the beneficiaries as well as those delivering them

It is therefore essential that there is greater partnership around the design and delivery of initiatives so that we can have consistent outcomes across the UK.

In our role as facilitators and co-ordinators of the promotion of race relations, we have relevant policy tools, the geographical reach and partnerships with equalities bodies across Britain-we are ideally place to support the delivery of the governments agenda on cohesion and would welcome working in partnership with both statutory and voluntary agencies on joint initiatives.

We also have a body of knowledge, mainly on promoting race equality but increasingly on matters relating to other equality and

diversity matters which could assist in supporting the work of others in this area.

The desire for a stable, cohesive and socially integrated society is a collective one. We ought to address it collectively.