



2007-2008  
*Increasing Voluntary  
and Community Sector  
Service Delivery*



## Case Study No. 12 – Croydon BME Forum

### INTRODUCTION

Croydon's BME Forum was established in 2002 in response to the need for a representative body to look specifically at key local issues and their impact on Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities.

The BME Forum represents Croydon's BME voluntary organisations and communities and is a strategic voice within the borough. It is a sub-group of the Community Network.

The Forum provides training and support to enable BME voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations to engage in Croydon Strategic Partnership (CSP) structures and build the capacity of their organisations.

Through the Forum, BME communities can elect their own representatives onto the CSP and its various themed groups, the Community Network and other bodies. This ensures that leadership in Croydon is more accountable through maximising the participation of BME communities.

The Forum also provides an opportunity for local groups to work together to create a learning community where the services being provided collectively are more likely to meet the needs of BME communities.

There are over 130 BME VCS organisations and individuals in membership of the Forum, including; Asian Resource Centre, Croydon, Croydon Supplementary Education Project, Croydon People's Housing Association and the Kurdish and Arab Family Association.

### BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The Forum has three main functions:

1. Engagement - ensuring that BME organisations get to participate in decision making across the borough.

2. Capacity Building – working directly with member organisations to improve their capacity, leveraging in funding and supporting increased delivery within the BME sector.
3. Strategic Race Equality for Croydon – working with all the public agencies in Croydon including the Council, to respond to duties under the Race Relations Act and providing support to ensure they meet those duties.

### **Leadership and management**

The Forum has a board of directors, with overall responsibility for the focus and work of the organisation. The nine board members are selected from BME organisations within Croydon and represent a range of BME communities, with a balance of male and female board members.

The Forum is run by a full-time director, Nero Ughwujabo, who provides support to the board and to all representatives of Croydon BME Forum. There are also two community development workers and an office manager.

Croydon BME Forum is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity.

### **Funding**

Croydon Council provides the core funding for the organisation. For the current financial year (2007/08) their level of funding is £85k. The Forum has also been proactive in bringing in funds to assist with various projects and activities. It recently secured £75k from Croydon Primary Care Trust to employ four BME mental health community development workers. They have received a further £30k from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (former Commission for Racial Equality) to enhance engagement from the BME community. The Wates Foundation fund £10k towards core running costs.

### **Representation**

There are various discussion groups that support representation onto the CSP, Croydon Community Network, and other bodies within the borough:

Big Forum Meeting – in each quarterly meeting, there is discussion around an issue to be considered by the CSP. This ensures that the BME community representatives are aware of the views and key priorities of their community. Members, individuals and invited guests from key agencies attend.

There are five BME thematic groups: education; employment and local economy; health and social care; housing and environment; and community safety. These are closely linked to the borough's neighbourhood renewal target areas. The groups look in more detail at issues affecting the community in their particular areas. The quarterly meetings bring together BME organisations whose primary work falls within the particular theme. These groups will also meet on a more regular basis to engage with the Council or relevant statutory agency on various issues and agendas.

## **Achievements**

Since Croydon Council began funding the BME Forum in 2002, the organisation has made significant progress in developing BME groups and supporting their participation in local decision making structures.

Forum director Nero Ughwujabo says: “We have managed to make sure that the BME voice is represented in key strategic partnerships, we have supported over 60 organisations to develop their core structures and systems and secured significant sums of money to do activities within the borough. In the past year we secured in excess of £300k for organisations to do activities.

“We have supported a significant number of members to register as charities and companies. In the past two months alone I have arranged this for five organisations operating in areas where there are significant gaps for the voluntary sector.”

He explains: “Primary to our role is provision of capacity building and support to organisations. We work very closely with the groups. We are not just writing bids for the organisations, we’re actually developing the capacity of the organisation so they have more to demonstrate to the funders. We hand-hold organisations to develop their projects, so that they are manageable.

“One example is the Kurdish and Arab Family Association. A group of Kurdish communities’ from Iraq recently arrived in the UK and wanted to start a community group to help themselves. We helped to establish the organisation and supported them to register and secure £7k initially for language classes for their children.

“There are quite a lot of groups that are now significantly more sustainable than before we were here. That is why our members are close to us and work with us because we are addressing needs that they have as organisations.”

He adds: “The Forum has also doubled its own income this year by securing money to employ four BME mental health community development workers in partnership with an organisation called Off the Record. They will work with all BME communities in Croydon; two will be employed by the Forum, and two employed by Off the Record.”

## **Examples of projects**

**Well London Programme** The BME Forum was approached by the Council to be the Croydon co-host for the Well London programme. The London-wide strategic initiative aims to improve physical activity, healthy eating and mental wellbeing by working with residents. In Croydon the programme will concentrate on one of the most deprived areas of the borough. The partner co-host is South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLAM).

**Focus on Youth** is run by a group of young people all under 15 years old. The BME Forum secured £7k for them to engage with their fathers in activities designed specifically for them to improve relationships with their fathers.

Because they are a group of minors, the Forum holds the funds on their behalf. Focus on Youth work in partnership with the Focus on Fathers group.

## **GOOD PRACTICE POINTS**

Mr Ughwujabo explains: “Before the Forum existed, the main difference was the level of engagement from the BME community. There was no representation on CSP, just an individual nominated by the Council and we didn’t participate in the Chief Executive’s Group. Now we can raise issues and we even chaired the Chief Executive’s Group this year. We have also supported our members to be active in representing BME issues across all of the themed partnerships under the CSP. So there is a greater sense of community within the BME sector and people working together to represent the issues. This has enhanced our relationship with the Council.”

He adds: “We do get a lot of support from Council officers. We also have direct contact with the Chief Executive of the Council in quarterly meetings to put our concerns forward and hear issues of concern for the Council.

“We have also been invited to contribute to a lot of things such as Beacon presentations, and we get to be part of all the meetings around the voluntary sector. This contributes to our knowledge of what is happening within the borough and nationally, which is helpful.”

He adds: “There is trust between the Forum and the Council so we can raise issues in a healthy environment. We have access to senior officers as well as councillors and that helps to raise and address key issues of relevance to the BME sector. We also operate as a ‘critical friend’ to the Council and I would say that there is a respect for that role, and the independence of the organisation is respected despite the fact that we are funded by the Council. So when we need to say some harsh words we are able to do so.”

The respect for the input of the BME community is illustrated by the setting up of a new CSP themed partnership. Following representations from the BME Forum to the CSP, an Equalities and Cohesion Partnership will be set up under the CSP to tackle inequality in the borough.

Overall, Croydon’s BME Forum has contributed to more effective representation and consultation within the local area. It has also provided an opportunity for key local agencies and statutory providers to access information from the grassroots and to ensure that BME concerns are taken on board in the planning and delivery of public services.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION AND REFERENCES**

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