Enhancing resilience and sustainability:

Developing and supporting the black and minority ethnic community and voluntary sector in Leeds

Executive Summary

- **Background:** This research project has been funded by Transform Leeds and overseen by a consortium of BME organisations in Leeds, namely:

Equality Leeds (lead partner)

CODESA

Hamara

PATH (Yorkshire) Ltd

Annette Morris of transform Leeds also provided valuable support throughout the project.

Transform Leeds was an 18 month programme of work which sought to improve support and development services for third sector organisations in Leeds.

The purpose of this piece of research was to contribute to the legacy of Transform by interrogating the specific issues, challenges and concerns of the black and minority ethnic community and voluntary sector and, in particular, to uncover the infrastructure support needs of the sector.

- **Timescale and process:** The research began in June 2013 and concluded in September 2013. A research framework was produced whose key activities were: desk research; a summit for black and minority ethnic (BME) community and voluntary sector organisations; semi structured interviews with 12 BME community and voluntary sector organisations; and – supported by additional funding from Transform Leeds – semi structured interviews with 5 infrastructure and support organisations (ISOs).

- **June 2013 Summit:** Organised at short notice, the Summit nevertheless attracted 29 delegates representing a range of BME organisations from across the city. The Summit provided individuals with an opportunity to help shape the research; to work together to develop a blueprint for infrastructure support to the BME sector; and to

critically analyse the challenges and opportunities which the sector is likely to encounter in the coming years.

We were surprised and pleased at the level of engagement from the sector. All delegates were clearly keen to contribute to the research and to collaborate positively with other BME organisations.

- **A changing BME sector:** The past few years have been a time of rapid change and uncertainty for the community and voluntary sector as a whole. Anecdotal evidence suggests that BME organisations have been particularly vulnerable to changes in public spending arrangements; at the same time there has been a rapid growth of often volunteer led organisations which have been developed to meet the specific needs of newer migrants to the UK.

  Traditionally, when we have referred to BME communities we have tended to mean South Asian and African / Caribbean communities and these communities have tended to live in a handful of (mainly) inner city wards. The arrival of newer communities has seen a greater dispersal of the BME population and has also seen a growth in white Eastern European communities and African communities. In short, the BME category has become much more internally diverse.

- **Common characteristics and shared concerns:** The term BME encompasses an increasingly broad spectrum of organisations. Our interviews with 12 organisations included African Caribbean, African, South Asian, Irish, Polish and Lithuanian groups as well as advocacy and refugee support groups which work across a range of nationalities and ethnicities. Without exception, groups stated that despite their obvious differences, BME groups shared some common characteristics and concerns. Whilst some of these concerned language issues, other areas of concern included: a perception that BME groups lose out in an era of mainstreaming; that infrastructure support is not always geared to the needs of BME groups; and that stereotypical assumptions abide about particular groups.

  ISOs were not necessarily as inclined as organisations to feel that BME groups shared common characteristics. For a number, BME organisations' needs were felt to be broadly indistinguishable from those of other small organisations.

- **Experiences of infrastructure support:** Without exception, BME organisations had accessed infrastructure support and had benefited from a range of guidance and training. On the whole, feedback was positive. It was felt, however, that there is room for improvement both in terms of new support areas and the manner in which support is provided.

Interestingly, a number of the BME organisations we interviewed themselves provided informal infrastructure support and guidance to new and emerging groups in their own communities.

- **Retaining specialisms in the context of a mainstreaming agenda:** This was a recurring theme over the course of the research period. Many BME organisations felt that their services were under threat because of the mainstreaming agenda. In their view, commissioners and funders are most inclined to provide services which meet the needs of the broadest demographic. However, organisations were concerned that many of their service users would not access mainstream and / or that a key role of their organisations was to facilitate access to the mainstream. They were very concerned about how best to advocate for high quality specialist services in an environment where there is increased pressure on spending.

- **Pressures on ISOs:** ISOs are not themselves immune to pressures on funding. Three of the ISOs we spoke to had experienced cuts of varying severity over recent years. The remaining two ISOs felt less vulnerable because they were less reliant on public funding, managing on a combination of fees for services, private sector support, donations and small grants.

- **Sector intelligence:** We know that amongst ISOs there exist many examples of good practice in delivering to the varied needs of the BME community and voluntary sector. We also know that the mainstreaming and specialist agendas need not be mutually exclusive. However, the sector does not always feel that its needs are adequately taken into account – the mainstreaming agenda as we have seen is the source of much frustration for the BME sector.

Since the BME sector is likely to continue to grow over the next several years, if ISOs are to sustain their credibility, it will be more and more important that they are able to demonstrate that they meet changing needs.