

Identity and infrastructure:  
Supporting groups that work in the  
areas of ethnicity and sexual orientation



## Supporting groups that work in the areas of ethnicity and sexual orientation Research Summary

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# Introduction

This document outlines findings from a study that the Big Lottery Fund (BIG) ran in 2009 and 2010 to consider whether organisations that work with particular types of groups – in this case, groups that support people from similar ethnic backgrounds or who share a similar sexual orientation – need to receive development support from other organisations that share that identity.

By development support, we mean activities that build a group's skills and confidence to run itself well – in areas like finance, employing and managing staff and looking for funding.

BIG was concerned that we were hearing conflicting messages about support needs. Some groups had told us that they were not happy with support available from 'mainstream' agencies because it did not meet needs related to their specific identity. Because we also fund many mainstream agencies, it was important for us to find out more about these questions so that we can ensure that our funding will benefit all types of organisation.

This is a sensitive area that many people have strong views about. So it is important for us to be clear from the beginning that:

- ▶ the study was not about whether there is a need to fund projects that only deal with particular types of **people** in society.
- ▶ it does not consider whether there is a need for support organisations that work to represent the views and interests of specific types of group.

The study is more about whether basic organisational development support is, can be and should be equally available to all.

The research project was undertaken by a team of researchers led by Equal to the Occasion. You can find out more about the study and its findings in the full report, 'Equal support: Do identity-based voluntary and community groups need identity-based organisational development?', available from BIG or on our website.

This document is based on the contents of the report but is BIG's interpretation of the findings.

## Main findings and conclusions

- ▶ Overall, front-line groups working in the areas of ethnicity and sexual orientation tend to be small, and their concerns are similar to those of other small groups. In general, they are more concerned about the quality and availability of support rather than the identity of those who provide it.
- ▶ Working with discrimination and disadvantage brings extra and specific challenges. Mainstream providers need to be aware of these if they are to provide services that both make a difference and include all.
- ▶ There is a need for both mainstream and specialist services to provide better evidence of need, demand, track record and results. There have been many claims made by various parties in the past but little evidence to back them up.
- ▶ The experiences of front-line groups vary between countries of the UK as a result of demographic and political factors and provision has to take account of this. It is also often more difficult for groups to set up and to receive support and funding in rural areas because there is not a large, identifiable local population of people from the relevant background. Many groups are more concerned about gaining recognition for the needs of their beneficiaries than about organisational development.
- ▶ Demand for support, and particularly for one-to-one support, outstrips what is available. The current economic climate means that this is unlikely to improve. Partnership working and better links between mainstream and specialist support organisations may well be an effective way of improving opportunities for specialist front-line groups.

# How the study worked

## Infrastructure and organisational development

We use the term 'infrastructure' in this study to refer to organisations and specialists who provide support to front-line voluntary and community sector groups. The way that the infrastructure is organised varies. It includes organisations like Councils for Voluntary Service (CVSs) that typically provide a broad range of support to other agencies in a specified geographic area, usually a local authority.

But there are also many specialist infrastructure agencies. They may, for instance, provide support in particular fields of expertise – such as research or finance – or for groups that share a particular type of beneficiary group or identity. We often call the last of these 'identity-specific' infrastructure organisations in this summary and in the full report.

Infrastructure organisations can provide a number of broad functions for the groups that they serve. This study used a model developed by COGS\* to separate infrastructure functions into four general areas of benefit. These are about supporting voluntary and community sector organisations to:

- be skilled, knowledgeable and well-run
- reflect and promote diversity and equality
- make links with each other and collaborate
- influence policies and programmes.

Although most infrastructure agencies carry out several if not all of these functions, this study focuses on the first function, which is about organisational development. We asked the researchers to do this because we felt that the types of support required were likely to be similar for all front-line groups.

\*COGS is an organisation that specialises in community development and public policy and practice development. See [www.cogs.uk.net](http://www.cogs.uk.net) for more information.

We wanted the study to consider the following:

- ▶ What has been published about these issues, and what relevant policies are there?
- ▶ What do front-line organisations that work in the areas of ethnicity and sexual orientation think about the question? What do infrastructure organisations – both specialist and mainstream – think?
- ▶ What do we need to consider in developing policies and procedures in this area?
- ▶ How far can we apply the conclusions and recommendations from this study across the UK and across other equalities areas?

To answer these questions, the researchers first reviewed a wide range of research and publications relevant to the area and identified a number of interested organisations and individuals to speak to. From this, they worked up a number of key research questions to investigate.

They then conducted further interviews and discussion, particularly by holding focus groups in each country of the UK. In England, they held focus groups in London (for London and England-wide views) and in Birmingham and Manchester. They were careful to ensure that a range of groups with differing perspectives took part – for instance, they took care to include groups from rural areas. The research team also ensured that others could contribute their views via an on-line survey.

The researchers also set up a reference group of people with expertise in various areas relating to the study, but who were not involved in the voluntary and community sector (VCS). That group provided advice about the approach and critical reviews of draft reports.

The next sections of this document outline some of the discussion and evidence from the main stages of the study.

# Current policy and evidence

This study took place at a time of great uncertainty for the voluntary and community sector and for the infrastructure services that support it. Government and other funders had invested a lot of money to support the VCS but much of that funding would soon end. At the same time, the wider economic climate was changing to one in which cuts to public sector funding overall were virtually certain. For funders, it is increasingly important to ensure that our investment makes the most difference that it can – but we also need to ensure that our support benefits all sections of the community.

This all means that it is increasingly important for infrastructure services in particular to provide evidence that they are making a real difference to the groups that they serve.

# What front-line groups want

The main priority for front-line groups was to seek and win funding. Many focused strongly on providing services to their clients rather than considering their own organisational support needs, and when they did, they tended to think in terms of support that would help them to attract more funding. Most of the groups involved in the study were small, and this is important because most groups felt that their own needs were similar to those of small groups in general – getting to know their way around systems and finding support that suits their organisational needs, such as out-of-hours provision, which is essential for groups run by volunteers who often have full-time jobs elsewhere.

But there were some specific types of need that front-line participants identified. These tended to arise from working with marginalised communities, and included getting recognition for their perspective from mainstream providers and funders, making links to the ‘mainstream’ voluntary sector, recruiting the right staff and volunteers from a limited pool, and dealing with more complex equalities issues in their own communities. Participants often emphasised the importance of trust and confidence in building relationships with other agencies.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) groups also emphasised the importance of access to safe meeting space, publicity and marketing in a hostile environment, and providing evidence of need, which is particularly hard because there are no reliable figures about the LGBT population.

Black and ethnic minority (BME) groups identified additional needs for newer migrant communities who may not be confident in English or understanding UK systems. This was especially marked for asylum-seeker organisations, where people involved might not know if they would still be in the country from one week to the next. More generally, BME groups wanted support to deal with the politics of race relations – and notably, to deal with what many reported as closer scrutiny of BME groups by funders.

There were also specific problems in rural areas. While some groups reported higher levels of discrimination, there was a more general difficulty in providing services to individuals scattered across wider geographic areas. So the equalities focus of infrastructure in rural areas is often on raising awareness within ‘mainstream’ organisations to support individuals rather than on supporting new BME or LGBT groups to develop.

Overall, groups felt that it was most important for infrastructure organisations to understand the context that front-line groups work in. Part of this involves acknowledging the reality of racism and homophobia and being seen to challenge them within their own organisations and in the wider community.

It is worth noting here that because the study was only considering the support needs of specific types of group, we cannot be sure whether their needs are more urgent than others’. Some of the needs identified also overlap with other infrastructure functions (as outlined in “Infrastructure and organisational development” on page 4).

# How support is currently provided

The front-line LGBT and BME groups reported that they looked for and got support from a wide range of sources. There was general agreement that what is available cannot meet demand, that it is patchy and its quality is variable. What this means is that groups often feel that they have little choice about the type of support and who provides it, and so they do not feel that their needs are being met.

Again, many of the groups' concerns were similar to those of small groups in general – support is too costly and too far away, and often not available at convenient times. Some LGBT groups raised the point that they had been turned away by borough- or district-based providers on the grounds that their beneficiaries lived in more than one area, while the providers' support was focused on groups working with people in one area. Few infrastructure providers collect information about the 'identity' or beneficiary groups of the organisations that they support, a situation that makes it hard to determine whether services are reaching all groups – and that all groups are approaching them.

The front-line BME and LGBT groups noted that technical expertise, understanding and empathy were more important to them than the identity of the provider, but many nevertheless chose to go to identity-based providers because they expect to receive at least that understanding and empathy.

This suggests the importance of mainstream providers making efforts to reach LGBT and BME groups – and being seen to do so – in order to ensure that they really are working with all sections of the community. Some ways of doing this appear in the box on page 8. Again, many of these factors are likely to be shared with or to be adaptable to a wide range of other small groups.

### Good practice in supporting small LGBT and BME groups

- ▶ Offer a one-to-one service tailored to the needs of the group.
- ▶ Listen carefully to find out what issues groups face and what they are most concerned about.
- ▶ Find out about general cultural issues, history, context and barriers facing BME or LGBT groups.
- ▶ Use community development approaches.
- ▶ Use needs assessment tools to take a holistic approach to identifying needs.
- ▶ Be willing to challenge ineffective practice, duplication or unrealistic goals.
- ▶ Try to ensure that the same individual works with the group – this will help to build trust.
- ▶ Help with funding applications to establish credibility and to identify other issues and support needs.
- ▶ Offer a community building or access to office space – this allows small groups to take up support and advice under the same roof.
- ▶ Offer support at evenings and weekends.
- ▶ Use positive images and examples in literature, training courses and posters so that groups know that you are aware of them and their needs.
- ▶ Make sure that your own staff team is diverse.
- ▶ Undertake active outreach with BME and LGBT groups so they know what you have to offer – and that it is relevant to them.

Another promising approach is to develop closer links between identity-specific and mainstream providers. Different types of provider are likely to have different strengths. For instance, identity-specific providers are more likely to have good links with and to have won the trust of small groups, while mainstream agencies may have more experience in and capacity to provide more 'generic' types of support. By working together, providers can ensure that they develop approaches to support that will better meet the needs of small BME and LGBT groups. Increased co-operation between providers may also help front-line groups to be more

confident about using mainstream services.

Most participants in the study accepted the benefits that better networking and partnerships could bring to everyone involved. Some examples appear in 'Examples of effective joint working' on page 9. But many participants also emphasised that while partnership working is a good idea, it can be difficult for a number of reasons – for instance, competition for funding can reduce trust, not all parties are necessarily equal, and it can take a lot of time, effort and money to set up and run them well.

# Examples of effective joint working

More detail about each of these appears in the full report.

**LGBT front-line groups in London** have better access to specialist accountancy support as a result of joint working between the Community Accountancy Service (CASH) and the Consortium of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual and Transgendered Organisations.

**BME organisations** can get factsheets on performance management which are specifically written from their perspective, thanks to a partnership between Voice4Change and Charities Evaluation Service.

**Small frontline groups working with transient communities in Southall** benefit from local support through Southall Community Alliance – free, on their doorstep and in a culturally friendly environment, rather than having to go across the borough to the bigger CVS.

**Cumbria Equality Resource Centre** was set up by three partners that specialise in different areas – BME, LGBT and disability. It supports new and often isolated groups in a rural area, and work with Cumbria CVS to produce more relevant resources and services for those groups.

**The Highlands and Islands Equality Forum** enables communities and VCS groups to learn about and respond to equality and diversity issues and to create a positive environment for groups and individuals who currently face isolation and discrimination in rural Scotland.

**The Refugee Council and Refugee Action** set up the England-wide Basis Project to help groups working with refugees and asylum-seekers to work more closely with mainstream support providers – brokering new relationships and helping to adapt generic services to the needs of a wide range of community groups.

# Overall conclusions

Overall the study found little evidence to suggest that groups working in the field of ethnicity or sexual orientation needed organisational development support from an infrastructure provider who shared their identity. But there are important roles for the specialist infrastructure in this area:

- to represent and campaign on behalf of their members,
- to act as intermediaries who help to network identity-based groups with each other and into mainstream networks, and
- to educate mainstream providers and to act as critical friends to ensure that mainstream services do in fact design and deliver services for all sections of the community.

Perhaps the most practical response to increasingly limited funding available for capacity-building is to promote partnerships between mainstream and specialist providers. But forming and running partnerships can be a challenge in itself.

The study shows that there is a great range of needs, views and circumstances among front-line BME and LGBT groups themselves. The situation also varies markedly between the countries of the UK – and notably between urban and rural areas.

We also asked the researchers to consider whether what they found would apply to other areas of equalities. We believe that the general principles set out here and in the recommendations on page 11 are likely to be relevant to many other types of group, and we would encourage all those with an interest to think about and comment on this. It would be useful to find out more about how different approaches to organisational development work with various beneficiary groups.

# Recommendations

The study makes six broad recommendations:

## **1. Make funding of organisational development support more coherent.**

Funders and providers should be clearer about what they want, expect and can provide in organisational development. There needs to be more thought about fitting different sources of funding together meaningfully at local, regional and country level.

## **2. Allocate funding on the basis of evidence of need rather than ‘representation’.**

Rather than setting aside funding for each ‘equalities group’, funders should take account of local need and demand, as well as what is already provided. More marginalised communities and groups that support them may well require more outreach and one-to-one support; this may often also apply in rural areas.

## **3. Improve the quality of organisational development support.**

Any idea of ‘quality’ in this area should include awareness and understanding of discrimination and disadvantage; specialist infrastructure organisations could help to ensure this. It is probably more effective to fund providers with a proven track record to extend their provision, although partnerships are likely to include new groups. Think more about and extend the use of agreed quality standards in this area.

## **4. Make mainstream provision more inclusive.**

Generic providers should recognise that front-line groups working with communities facing discrimination and disadvantage may need more intensive support. Providers should consider thoroughly whether and why they are meeting the needs of ‘hard to reach’ groups and undertake more monitoring to support this. All parties – front-line groups, specialist and mainstream providers – should work together to produce guidance on inclusive and effective

organisational development support. Funders should support sharing learning between these groups, and support identity-based infrastructure organisations to act as intermediaries.

## **5. Invest in effective partnerships.**

Providers and funders should recognise the timescale and resources required to develop and manage partnerships. National organisations and funders should promote examples of good practice in partnership work (with evidence of outcomes) and assessment guidance on the characteristics of effective partnerships.

## **6. Stimulate honest debate.**

We all have a responsibility to provide and to ask for evidence about need and meeting the needs of specific communities and of groups that work within them.

### **What happens next?**

BIG commissioned this study to find out more about what many people feel is a complex issue – both in supporting front-line groups and in making decisions about funding.

As we have noted, there are many different points of view and circumstances relating to these questions. We have looked at two areas of equalities work and set out some general principles that should help us and others to consider issues in more depth – across different equalities areas and across the different countries of the UK.

There are no easy answers, but our experience of running the study shows that people from all perspectives are happy to talk openly and frankly about the issues involved – and we hope that that will continue to be the case.

BIG has organised a launch event for the study. We hope that that will be just the beginning of wider consideration and discussion.

