

Action being taken to tackle racial harassment

Researchers from Lemos&Crane interviewed 250 agencies tackling racial harassment in 67 local authority areas where the majority of black and minority ethnic people live in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The study found that:

- f** Multi-agency forums exist in most areas, although the larger cities outside London appear to have the greatest difficulty sustaining them. Some forums have experienced conflict, sometimes lacking purpose or resources.
- f** Most agencies feel under-reporting is still a problem - though the publicity surrounding the murder of Stephen Lawrence has greatly increased reporting. Even when racial incidents are reported, they are not always recorded as such. Incidents did not always receive the appropriate response because the racial motive was not taken into account, and the problem is still being understated.
- f** Efforts to establish 'third-party' reporting centres for racial incidents are patchy, as are reporting arrangements outside normal working hours other than to the emergency services. Many practitioners questioned whether third-party centres would really increase reporting.
- f** Most specialist agencies have made efforts to publicise an anti-racial harassment stance. Little evidence was available about the effectiveness of this work. In many areas information for victims had also been produced.
- f** Support for victims is more likely to be available in areas where there is a specialist agency working on racial harassment. Support included the provision of advice, counselling in a few areas, personal alarms and mobile telephones, and home security improvements for social housing tenants.
- f** Very few social housing tenants are transferred as a result of racial harassment; many social landlords feel that the priority is dealing with perpetrators, not moving victims.
- f** Action against perpetrators is still rare. Ten to fifteen per cent of reported incidents resulted in criminal action and only a tiny proportion of cases reported to social landlords resulted in possession action. The use of injunctions to stop harassment was rare, while anti-social behaviour orders had only been used in three of the areas surveyed.
- f** Most frontline staff in the police and housing departments had received some training in equal opportunities or race awareness. Specific training on racial harassment was less common.

Background

The Macpherson report into the death of Stephen Lawrence drew attention to the extent and seriousness of racial attacks. But racial harassment is not new. In the 1980s, Select Committees and the Home Office brought the problem to the notice of the police, local authorities, social landlords and independent campaigning and advocacy groups. Since then, many suggestions of good practice have been made by a range of statutory and independent groups.

For this study, the researchers interviewed 250 practitioners working with victims or perpetrators of racial harassment in 67 local authority areas. The interviewees were mainly drawn from the police, local authority community safety units, social landlords, specialist and voluntary organisations.

The respondents were asked to describe the types of action being taken by their own organisation and by other agencies working in the area to tackle racial harassment. The questions concentrated on five main areas:

- multi-agency working;
- reporting and recording;
- support for victims;
- action against perpetrators;
- training.

The extent of racial harassment

The number of incidents reported varied widely between local authority areas. In eight areas, the number of recorded incidents of racial harassment from all agencies was less than 100. At the other end of the range, 13 areas reported more than 1,000 incidents in the last year. Organisations in the London Borough of Newham had received most reports - 2,134 - during 1999-2000.

The agencies in the survey had received a total of 41,925 reports of racial harassment between April 1999 and March 2000, a mean of 635 reports per area (in one borough, no agency was able to give a recent figure for the number of reports). This compares with a total of just over 23,000 racial incidents recorded by all British police forces during the year.

These figures refer only to reports of racial harassment, not the actual level of harassment. Almost all the organisations in the sample had seen a significant increase in cases reported to them since the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry; many police divisions reported a doubling of reports during 1999-2000. But several respondents felt that under-reporting (or under-recording by the agencies themselves) was still a significant problem for some groups, such as refugees.

Multi-agency working

Multi-agency groups or panels have been set up in 53 (78 per cent) of the areas. In some areas the multi-agency forum's work was restricted to a strategic role, usually the development of joint policies and the

monitoring of local trends in reporting.

Often a separate panel of practitioners from key agencies considered individual cases, using 'depersonalised' (anonymous) data on victims. These casework forums existed in 34 (51 per cent) of the areas in the survey.

Interviewees frequently raised resources as a problem for the multi-agency forums. In addition, in some areas there were tensions between partner organisations. However, there were also examples where the partners co-operated efficiently. For example, the Glasgow case group had met within hours to co-ordinate the support and re-housing of victims in particularly serious cases.

Reporting and recording

Third-party reporting centres collecting reports and passing them on to key agencies had been developed in 37 areas (55 per cent). They included advice centres, places of worship, community associations, and sometimes also doctors' surgeries and public buildings (such as libraries and schools). Staff in independent centres needed training, which required time and money. Some interviewees expressed disappointment that third-party centres did not generate large numbers of extra reports, while others felt that their value lay in the fact that people using them were unlikely to report to other agencies.

Common reporting forms were generally viewed positively in the 39 areas (58 per cent) where they were in use, although some agencies were concerned about the potential breach of confidentiality involved in passing information to another organisation. Most areas using common reporting forms stored the data on a central database for monitoring purposes, often maintained by staff at the local racial equality council or a specialist agency.

Support for victims

In most of the areas the police or the housing department were willing to provide *alarms* for vulnerable tenants experiencing harassment or living in high-risk areas. These were usually linked to the local council's twenty-four-hour careline for older and disabled residents. The consensus among practitioners was that alarms provided a high degree of reassurance to frightened tenants.

Less than a third of areas had a *twenty-four-hour helpline* that could give advice to victims of racial harassment. In many other districts the reporting lines were only answered during office hours, with an answerphone taking messages at other times.

Respondents stated that *counselling* was available in a third of the areas. But few areas have in-depth counselling by trained staff familiar with racial harassment. In most other areas 'providing advice', rather than 'counselling', would be a more accurate description.

Most housing departments had made *security*

improvements to individual properties. The most common ones were stronger locks and doors. Fencing and improved lighting around the property were also mentioned by several housing managers. More extreme forms of 'target hardening', such as fireproof letterboxes, were less common.

Council housing departments and social landlords were divided about their approach to *rehousing* victims. In some areas housing managers were reluctant to grant transfers, arguing that it allowed perpetrators to drive tenants from 'white' estates. Other councils considered the victim's security to be paramount and offered transfers (or temporary rehousing) whenever it was requested. Twenty-seven of the councils in the survey had rehoused a total of 138 households because of racial incidents. Given the high number of reports of racial harassment, such a low level of transfers strongly suggests that fears expressed by some housing staff that tenants may claim harassment to jump the transfer queue are unfounded.

Action against perpetrators

Social landlords in the survey had taken *possession proceedings* in a total of 124 cases because of anti-social behaviour that had a racial element. Their main criticism of the procedure was that it was too slow, although there was a feeling that judges had become more prepared to grant possession in racial harassment cases than in the past. In general, housing managers felt that suspended orders or threats of eviction had the desired deterrent effect on racist tenants.

Recent figures on *criminal prosecutions* were available in 35 of the areas. In total, 2,451 had been brought in these areas in the last year (an average of 79 prosecutions per borough). Around 10 to 15 per cent of reports to the police ended in a prosecution. Some police officers felt that the Crown Prosecution Service did not always stress the racial element enough in prosecutions for racial harassment.

Anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) had only been taken out against racial perpetrators in three of the areas. Applying for an order was often seen as a time-consuming and uncertain process; for example, one council's attempt to obtain an order for racial harassment was thwarted when the perpetrator changed his address.

Twenty-seven local authorities had taken out 124 *injunctions* against perpetrators of racial harassment; an average of 5 injunctions in each of these boroughs. In general, injunctions were seen as a quick way to take action in serious cases. Where councils were not using injunctions, housing officers often attributed this to excessive caution by legal staff. Questions were also raised by some respondents about the training and competence of housing managers in the use of injunctions.

Since the organisations in the survey had received over 40,000 reports of racial harassment, legal action

was being taken in only a small proportion of cases. Victims and witnesses were said to be reluctant to make statements for fear of reprisals. Interviewees reported that attempts to overcome this with *professional witnesses* had generally been expensive with disappointing results, while non-legal solutions such as *mediation* were often seen as inappropriate in racial harassment cases.

A few areas were developing schemes to change the *behaviour* of perpetrators. Examples included work with racist offenders by probation officers and community justice schemes for young offenders. However, programmes of this sort were rare.

Training

In 50 areas (75 per cent) frontline staff in at least one of the organisations contacted had received specific training on racial harassment.

Housing officers and police staff were most likely to receive some training, although this was often rather limited and some police officers expressed concern at the slow implementation of force-wide training schemes.

Innovative practice

Examples of innovative practice from the four case study areas included:

- Single Regeneration Budget funding for casework and co-ordination in Ipswich;
- work with young people in sports clubs in Leeds;
- lay advisors to the police in racist incidents panels in Leeds;
- restorative justice in racial harassment cases in Reading. A trained police officer chairs a meeting between the perpetrator and the victims, confronting the offender with the impact of the harassment and agreeing on the amends to be made. The 'restorative caution' can be taken into account if the perpetrator reoffends;
- self-help groups for victims of racial harassment in Reading;
- witness mobility scheme in Waltham Forest;
- use of specialist agency in Waltham Forest;
- specialist lawyer in Waltham Forest.

In other areas, examples of innovative practice included:

- public awareness campaigns against race and hate crimes;
- cable TV to encourage reporting;
- one-stop shops and information hotlines for reporting racist incidents;
- mapping racist incidents;
- counselling for victims;
- home/school liaison;
- anti-racial harassment worker in private sector housing unit;
- proposed refuge and advice centre for victims;

- probation and police working to change the offending behaviour of perpetrators;
- anti-social behaviour orders;
- mediation.

Conclusions

This research investigated the type of action being taken in the boroughs. A key theme that emerged from the interviews was the need to evaluate the effectiveness of action. In particular, there appears to be a case for:

- local crime surveys to establish the true level of racial harassment, as opposed to reported incidents, as well as action research to improve reporting and recording;
- evaluation of third-party reporting centres - for example, do victims get the practical and emotional support they need after reporting incidents?
- research into the long-term impact of racial harassment for victims and guidance to agencies on the emotional and social impact of racial harassment on the lives of victims and the development of effective counselling services;
- guidance to social landlords on the rehousing of victims and the provision of other places of safety for victims;
- evaluation of the action taken against perpetrators – looking especially at why civil legal remedies are not more frequently used and at newer approaches that attempt to challenge the attitudes and behaviour of perpetrators.

Policy implications

The report suggests consideration of the following innovations in national approaches to dealing with racial harassment:

- A national reporting and helpline for victims of racial harassment;
- A national network of specialist support services;
- National standards of training and competence for front-line staff in the police, local authorities and social landlords;
- A national programme of positive work to change the offending behaviour of perpetrators.

About the study

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with more than 250 practitioners working with victims or perpetrators of racial harassment in 67 local authority areas.

The local authority areas were selected because

they had the highest numbers of black and minority ethnic inhabitants at the 1991 Census. Because of this, it may be dangerous to extrapolate the findings to other parts of Britain.

In addition, more detailed case studies have been written up of four local authority areas where most of the existing recommended good practice was being followed - Ipswich, Leeds, Reading and Waltham Forest. A number of examples of innovative practice from elsewhere were also collected. A directory of contacts and action drawn from the survey, along with a discussion forum, legal guidance, learning materials and case studies of innovative practice, will be available to agencies dealing with racial harassment on a password-protected website from early 2001 – www.RaceActionNet.co.uk.

How to get further information

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The full report, **Racial harassment: Action on the ground** by Gerard Lemos, is published by Lemos&Crane (ISBN 1 898001 71 5, price £9.95 plus £1.50 p&p). Copies are available from Lemos&Crane's distributors: Plymbridge, Estover Road, Plymouth, PL6 7PZ (tel: 01752 202301; fax: 01752 202333).