

An evaluation of the Race Equality Network

Peter Somerville

This report evaluates the work of the Race Equality Network, set up to help housing providers improve their services for black and minority ethnic communities.

The Race Equality Network was set up in Yorkshire and Humberside and the North East to help housing providers improve their services for black and minority ethnic communities. This report reviews the substantial changes that have been made to the network since its inception, including its transformation into the Housing Diversity Network; how these changes are viewed by the network's clients, potential clients, and housing organisations in Yorkshire and Humberside, and the North East; and the prospects for the development of the network in the future. The paper contains a number of important recommendations for policy makers, in particular that similar networks should be developed in other regions, with support from the Housing Corporation and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.



**JOSEPH ROWNTREE
FOUNDATION**



**Available
in alternative
formats**

This publication can be provided in alternative formats, such as large print, Braille, audiotape and on disk. Please contact: Communications Department, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. Tel: 01904 615905. Email: info@jrf.org.uk

An evaluation of the Race Equality Network

Peter Somerville



**JOSEPH ROWNTREE
FOUNDATION**

The **Joseph Rowntree Foundation** has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the author and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP
Website: www.jrf.org.uk

About the author

Peter Somerville is a Professor of Social Policy and Head of the Policy Studies Research Centre, University of Lincoln.

© University of Lincoln 2006

First published 2006 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

All rights reserved. Reproduction of this report by photocopying or electronic means for non-commercial purposes is permitted. Otherwise, no part of this report may be reproduced, adapted, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

ISBN–13: 978 1 85935 436 0

ISBN–10: 1 85935 436 X

A CIP catalogue record for this report is available from the British Library.

Prepared and printed by:

York Publishing Services Ltd

64 Hallfield Road

Layerthorpe

York YO31 7ZQ

Tel: 01904 430033; Fax: 01904 430868; Website: www.yps-publishing.co.uk

Further copies of this report, or any other JRF publication, can be obtained from the JRF website (www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/).

Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Methodology	3
3	Views of HDN Board members	4
4	Awareness of HDN	6
5	The experiences and views of HDN clients	8
6	Experiences and views of volunteering/project placement	10
7	The HDN website	15
8	Promotion and development of HDN	16
9	Housing Corporation views of HDN	20
10	The future development of HDN	22
11	Conclusions	23
12	Recommendations	27
	Notes	30
	References	30

1 Introduction

In 1998, the Housing Corporation launched its new black and minority ethnic (BME) housing policy (Housing Corporation, 1998), focusing largely on the role that housing associations could play in reducing racial inequalities and meeting the needs of BME communities. A key aim of the policy was to:

... engender a cultural change in mainstream associations that will empower BME communities and integrate their needs and aspirations into everyday housing association activities.
(Matthias, 2001)

The policy was reinforced by:

- research reports for the Corporation on racial equality in housing employment (Somerville *et al.*, 2000) and in housing service delivery (Johnson *et al.*, 2001)
- the provisions of the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 requiring public bodies, such as the Housing Corporation, to review their contribution to race equality
- the recommendations of the Race and Housing Inquiry (2001) *Challenge Report*, in particular that race equality should be incorporated into the Housing Corporation regulatory code.

In order to progress the implementation of this policy, a feasibility study for the BME Forum in the North East was carried out by Margaret Smith (2001). This study investigated the possibility of applying for an Innovation and Good Practice (IGP) grant to set up a team of volunteers who would develop a framework to help housing associations improve their BME policies and strategies. The idea was that up to 60 volunteers committing themselves to two days per year would be able to carry out this work, managed by two full-time paid staff.

Accordingly, the Race Equality Network (REN) was set up in 2002 in Yorkshire and Humberside and the North East, with the following aims:

- to work in partnership with housing providers to help them understand the needs and aspirations of BME communities
- to develop products and services to meet those needs and aspirations

- to remove barriers to inclusion, participation and employment, and to maximise opportunities for personal and professional development for people from BME communities.

The work of REN was given further impetus by the publication in November 2002 of a Good Practice Note by the Housing Corporation on Race Equality and Diversity (known as GPN4). This Note prescribed deadlines for housing associations to set equality and diversity targets in seven areas of their activity (lettings; tenant satisfaction; dealing with racial harassment; staffing; governing body membership; tenant and resident association membership; and employment of contractors, consultants and suppliers) (April 2003 for the first five of these targets and April 2004 for the last two). The Note also set deadlines of one year later for the production of action plans to rectify any shortfall against the targets set and demonstrable improvements for each year after that.

In February 2004, the Housing Corporation went further and produced GPN8, which covers what the Corporation calls 'the wider equality and diversity agenda'. This Note requires housing associations to have an equality and diversity policy that covers all aspects of their work and all types of equalities, 'ensuring that equality and diversity issues are integral elements of everything that it does'. It also requires associations: to demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of needs and aspirations of the communities they serve, through a 'needs analysis'; to produce, on the basis of this analysis, a plan of action to meet those needs; and to set up systems to monitor the implementation of that action plan.

Following the establishment of REN in 2002, the Universities of Lincoln and Salford were commissioned by Joseph Rowntree Foundation to work with REN in developing their activities and evaluating their progress up to April 2005. To this end, an interim evaluation report was produced in April 2004. This report (Somerville and Steele, 2004) found that, in order to achieve its aims, REN was undertaking three main types of activity.

- *Consultancy services.* These are concerned mainly with assisting housing providers to review their performance on race equality and diversity, and to develop and implement effective race equality and diversity strategies and action plans.
- *Network promotion and development.* REN makes presentations to public forums, runs seminars and special events, and produces publications. Recently, it has launched its own website.
- Operating a *volunteer* initiative.

Since then, partly in response to the conclusions and recommendations of the interim report, partly in response to the framework introduced by the Housing Corporation and partly in order to ensure its survival and growth, REN has comprehensively reviewed its activities, designed new service products and packages, and rebranded itself as the Housing Diversity Network (HDN). This final report comments on:

- how these changes have taken place
- how they have been viewed by HDN's clients, potential clients and housing organisations generally in Yorkshire and Humberside and the North East
- the prospects for the development of HDN in the future.

2 Methodology

All current HDN clients were approached for interview and all of them agreed to be interviewed. All current HDN Board members were also interviewed. All volunteers currently placed on projects were interviewed. Representatives of Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) across the region were interviewed most of whom had been interviewed for the interim evaluation, in order to gauge the extent of change over the last year. Two BME Board members were reinterviewed, for the same reason. Housing Corporation representatives were not interviewed for the interim evaluation, but it was decided that it would be appropriate to do so for the final evaluation. Finally, although several RSL staff below senior management level were interviewed in other capacities (for example, as volunteers), one further staff member who had no involvement with HDN was interviewed. Table 1 gives a detailed breakdown of interviewees.

Table 1 Type of interviewees

Type of stakeholder	Number of interviewees
Clients	13 (4*)
HDN Board members	5 (5*)
Volunteers	5 (0*)
Other RSL representatives	10 (7*)
Housing Corporation representatives	4 (0*)
BME Board members	2 (2*)
Other RSL staff	1 (0*)
Total	40 (18*)

** Number of these who had been previously interviewed.*

3 Views of HDN Board members

Since the interim evaluation was completed, HDN has conducted a comprehensive review of the nature and purpose of its work. The Board has identified three main reasons why the existence of an organisation like HDN will be needed for the foreseeable future.

- There is an evolving process of learning about equality and diversity within organisations, with developing good practice, stimulated by the Housing Corporation, etc. An organisation like HDN is needed to assist with this process.
- Communities are continually changing, and with them the nature of equality and diversity issues. Consequently, the political, social and organisational context is changing, and so organisations need to update their policies and practices regularly. An organisation like HDN is needed to assist with this updating process.
- There is a specific need for developing awareness of, and implementing, cultural and organisational change, which an organisation like HDN could deliver.

These conclusions are supported by comments from respondents in the final evaluation. For example:

We need a 'minder' on equality and diversity to sort out issues and give guidance – all organisations need help from time to time.

Nothing has happened to make me think that HDN should change [its main focus]. There's the same need for help and support on equality and diversity.

Board members had a clear idea of their role and of where HDN should now be going. They expressed confidence in the Director and staff of HDN. The main points that they made were as follows.

- All Board members agreed that the extra member of staff is welcome, and allows the business to be more actively promoted and to expand – 'Make haste slowly!', as one Board member put it. The basic point made was that the funding earmarked for the new post by B&N put an end to the difficult situation in which HDN needed to earn money to support itself but lacked the resources to achieve that. Two Board members felt that they hadn't got it quite right yet, arguing that more income needed to be generated and that further resources were required, as well as suitable partners (e.g. to help with marketing and communications);

one felt that a total of four to five full-time employees would be better.

- All Board members were happy with the change of name, indicating a clear focus both on housing and the wider diversity agenda. As one member put it:

We still feel that *housing* is where our expertise lies, and this focus should be retained for the foreseeable future. The focus is also still primarily on race, but we could adapt to a wider focus on diversity – the agenda is changing, particularly on disability.

- With regard to the geographical focus of HDN, Board members agreed that there were common housing issues and problems throughout the North (meaning the North West as well as Yorkshire and Humberside and the North East), and that it was therefore most appropriate for HDN to have a northern focus. In time, there could be one Network for the North, with three regional bases. This would, however, require additional resources. One Board member suggested that sub-regional partnerships (involving mixes of local authorities and housing associations) informed the regional agenda by playing a role in orchestrating a number of issues (e.g. on BME housing needs), while delivery took place at a local level (by individual housing organisations).
- The possibility of extending HDN's work to national level was raised with HDN Board members, and the general response was that this was unrealistic. One Board member stated: 'We can't just jump straightaway into a national role'. Another argued that HDN had its work cut out in building its reputation across the North: 'I don't know if it could ever develop to a national level'. A further Board member pointed out that the De Montfort University (DMU) toolkit, which was intended to have a national application, never really took off and this suggested that extending HDN's work to a national level would be unlikely to succeed. All of this, however, was quite compatible with accepting business on an opportunistic basis from clients outside the North, particularly if they were based close to the boundaries (e.g. Linx Homes in Lincolnshire and Chesterfield Borough Council in Derbyshire).
- The Board members were very supportive of the rebranding of volunteering as project placement (see below). They felt that this gave the service much more of a focus; it enabled volunteers to be slotted into specific projects and to develop their skills; it ensured that volunteers made a contribution to HDN's income-generating activities; and it was generally more efficient, more logical, more sellable and more practicable.

- Board members pointed out that the Board needed at least two more members, to increase the variety of experience and skills, but there had been problems in recruiting suitable people.
- In general, Board members wanted HDN to concentrate on developing products and services that they were good at and that would generate more income. Above all, HDN must 'attract clients to achieve a stable future'.

4 Awareness of HDN

The interim evaluation had established that there was general awareness of the *existence* of the Network among housing associations throughout the region. By the time of the final evaluation, this awareness clearly extended to the Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) in Leeds, but it remained unclear how well HDN's existence was known among local authorities. The evaluation did not assess this point, as the main focus of HDN's work continues to be on housing associations. It may be significant, however, that HDN has attracted its first local authority client (Chesterfield Borough Council).

The interim evaluation also established that its target audience generally saw HDN's objectives as:

- promoting and developing good practice on equality and diversity
- providing new services that help organisations to deliver that good practice
- encouraging and helping organisations to share their good practice with others, e.g. through developing mutually supportive networks.

Broadly speaking, the final evaluation confirmed that this is how HDN is viewed, although there was not necessarily much detailed awareness of the nature of HDN's products, except among HDN's clients.

Beyond its immediate clients, housing associations in the region showed little awareness of HDN's *activities*. Of the nine housing associations that had not been HDN clients, six knew little or nothing about its activities in the last year. Of the remaining three, one was meeting with HDN in the near future to discuss how HDN might help it develop its race equality strategy, one had attended a major HDN event and one had been invited by HDN to participate in a seminar.

Looking at the comments made by the six housing association representatives who were not aware of HDN's recent activities and comparing them with what they said a year ago, it was noticeable how interest appeared to have dropped off. The comments of one unaware interviewee perhaps give a clue to the possible reasons for this:

I've nothing to say really. I'm happy to support HDN, but I never thought we would use them ourselves ... I think [my HA] is quite self-sufficient on equality and diversity.

This interviewee's approach was actually rather inconsistent. He went on to say:

I'm always happy to hear of good practice things, though – these need to be published or circulated in some way, e.g. through the website.

Yet, earlier in the interview, he had stated that he had never visited the website.

A second unaware interviewee, who in last year's interview had regarded his organisation as being ahead of the game on equality and diversity issues, reported that, in a recent inspection, equality and diversity was identified as a key area for development. He agreed that there had been an opportunity for HDN to help them prepare for this inspection, but they just didn't take advantage of this opportunity.

A third interviewee felt that his organisation was well advanced on equality and diversity issues, and did not require the assistance of external consultants or whatever. He knew nothing about HDN and was not interested in knowing about its activities.

A fourth interviewee revealed that, because of recent staff changes, his organisation currently had no one who was responsible for completing equality and diversity action plans, etc. He knew nothing about HDN at all.

Housing association Board members also appeared to lack awareness of HDN's activities. One offered the following comment:

The Board are not aware of what HDN is doing. The issue of HDN has not been raised in Board meetings or in discussion. The onus is on us to keep abreast of things, though. Maybe a position statement by Amalia [the Director of HDN], would be helpful – just reporting to the Board that the association is contributing so many volunteers or whatever, and what those volunteers are doing. We could do with a general update, for promoting HDN and for spreading awareness.

5 The experiences and views of HDN clients

As in the interim evaluation, clients were found to engage the services of HDN largely through personal contacts and recommendations, and invited tenders. The nature of the work, however, had become more structured, as HDN developed specific products such as Board briefings, developing equality and diversity strategies and action plans, equality and diversity reviews, focus groups, and policies and procedures reviews. In addition, HDN now offered a variety of training services including bespoke services, open courses and the project placements described above. The total number of client organisations served by HDN exceeded 18 (compared with just nine a year previously).

All clients for whom HDN was currently doing substantive work or had recently completed such work were interviewed. All of these 13 clients were very satisfied with the work. No client identified any real problems or limitations of any kind in using HDN, though one mentioned that they needed a trainer, which HDN was now able to provide. Clients added the following comments:

Amalia's brought a fresh pair of eyes to equality and diversity. She has good ideas and good contacts. There have been no problems at all.

No problems. A very good service, good and efficient. They did what they said they would do and within the timescales they stated.

No problems – they did what they said on the tin! We were very pleased, and so were the inspectors!

I can't speak highly enough of the report and the whole process – very impressive!

A very positive experience. HDN are very professional, with very personal knowledge and a very practical output.

We are very impressed with Amalia – she turned things around very quickly. Everything was done on time and her report was of a good quality.

The momentum for race equality is just beginning to build in the North East ... It would be a great shame if HDN couldn't continue, it needs sustaining.

HDN work very hard and are a good organisation, especially for housing associations.

All clients rated as ‘good’, ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’ HDN staff’s knowledge, experience, understanding of the client’s requirements, ability to engage with the client’s staff and ability to meet deadlines. More than half of the clients (seven out of 13) reported that the overall service provided by HDN was ‘excellent’ (see Table 2). No clients rated HDN as less than ‘good’ (‘fair’, ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’) on anything.

All 13 clients unhesitatingly stated both that they would use HDN again and that they would recommend HDN to other organisations. Four of them added, unprompted, that they had already recommended HDN to another organisation, with two of these actually offering the name of the organisation in question.

Most clients were not aware of any other organisation that could do what HDN does. The only possible alternative organisations mentioned were RaceActionNet (by two clients) and Housing Quality Network (two). One client simply stated that it didn’t occur to their organisation to use them (RaceActionNet). A second client was emphatic that:

The only other organisation nationally that could do what HDN does is the Housing Quality Network, but they wouldn’t have given us anything like the quality of HDN’s services.

Another client reported that they used RaceActionNet for anti-social behaviour generally and for racist incidents specifically. A further client reflected as follows:

We had a long debate about whether we should use our own specialist staff in house and we decided in the end that it was important to bring

Table 2 Client views of HDN

Client views of HDN	‘Excellent’	‘Very good’	‘Good’	‘Don’t know’/ ‘Not applicable’/ ‘Too early to say’
Staff knowledge	4	5	4	0
Staff experience	4	4	4	1
Understanding of your requirements/needs	3	8	2	0
Ability to engage with your staff	5	4	3	1
Ability to meet deadlines	4	4	3	2
Overall service	7	5	1	0

someone in from outside the organisation. Housing Quality Network will probably develop something in the course of time, to meet the diversity requirements of the Audit Commission, and there will probably be some new organisations too in the equality and diversity field. KLoEs [Key Lines of Enquiry] are the key for both housing associations and ALMOs now.

One Housing Corporation representative suggested that there were a few housing organisations that could do what HDN does – for example, Banks of the Wear and Guinness Trust – but no other kinds of organisation.

6 Experiences and views of volunteering/project placement

The interim evaluation had identified a number of problems with the volunteering initiative, including:

- lack of clarity, confusion and misunderstanding about what volunteering might involve
- the need to rethink/revisit/rework the image of a ‘volunteer’
- difficulties experienced in organising suitable placements for volunteers
- the time and commitment required to manage a volunteer network, which allowed for a maximum of only about 20 volunteers based on current levels of staffing
- the apparent lack of organisations willing and able to make use of volunteers’ services
- the complexity of the three-way relationship between the volunteer, their host organisation and their employing organisation
- problems in accessing possible sources of funding for volunteering.

The evaluation found widespread awareness of the possible benefits of volunteering, for the host organisation, for the volunteer, for the volunteer’s employer and for society more generally, but a lack of understanding of the practicalities of volunteering: how to match volunteers with suitable organisations, how to train and manage volunteers, how to prepare an organisation to work with volunteers, and so on.

HDN took a range of actions to address the above problems, including the following.

- 1 Rebranding the volunteering function as 'project placement'. Project placements offer staff within the housing sector the chance to work with HDN for a specified number of days per year, helping HDN to deliver its consultancy services. Through such placements, individuals can develop their skills and experience in new contexts, and the overall understanding of race equality and diversity issues in the housing sector increases. Placements also encourage links between individuals and organisations as a basis for generating and sharing good practice, and facilitating joint working and other initiatives.
- 2 Offering placements with HDN only – although people placed in this way may well work in other organisations as part of HDN's activities, e.g. in consultancy or training.
- 3 Continuing to maintain a list of applicants to be placed in specific projects depending on their skills and availability, but not placing these individuals on their own within other organisations.
- 4 Using its website to allow organisations to place adverts for jobs, new Board members, and other opportunities for networking, mentoring and other voluntary work.
- 5 Using volunteers to help HDN develop and implement its own training and consultancy services.

Essentially, project placement can be understood as a training and personal development opportunity, which can also be of benefit for housing organisations, for the development of HDN itself, and for wider understanding of equality and diversity in the housing sector.

Bearing this change in mind, the experiences and views of the five volunteers interviewed for the final evaluation can be added to, and compared with, those of the seven interviewed for the interim evaluation.

Overall, the 12 volunteers came to volunteering by a variety of routes (see Table 3).

The volunteers identified a wide range of benefits to be gained from their project placements. These can be grouped in terms of benefits to the volunteer, to their employers, to HDN and to society generally.

Table 3 Routes to volunteering (or project placement)

Route to volunteering	Number of volunteers
Request from HDN at staff meeting	2
Request from manager at staff meeting	1
Email request sent to all staff	3
Suggestion from line manager	2
Saw request on website	1
Saw HDN needed volunteers	1
HDN asked for my help	2
Total	12

For volunteers personally, there were the prospects of self-development, mentioned by nearly all (11) of the volunteers ('It's nice to get involved in something I believe in', 'It's a good experience', 'You get knowledge and skills from housing associations and local authorities', 'the chance to learn something', 'It's useful for personal development', 'It's keeping up to date, having a reason to do things, doing something constructive', and 'I like to get involved, broadening my horizons, opening up new opportunities, leading on to other things'), and career development, mentioned by three volunteers ('something to look good on your CV'). One volunteer expanded on the personal benefits of volunteering as follows:

For me, volunteering has always paid off. It's an opportunity to pick up new skills, knowledge, connections, insight – [the opportunities are] vast, really! If you get [responsibility for] a project as well, you can get recognition for your work; if you complete the project, you can get good exposure. If you don't volunteer, your experience can be very limited.

Since the interim evaluation, it was noticeable that volunteers were more positive and specific about the benefits that volunteering had brought or could bring them in terms of skills development. For example:

I've gained experience of introducing wireless technology and experience of working as a consultant, making me reflect on what I can do for people, and working with a client – a new type of working relationship for me.

And:

It's a different experience, with a different housing organisation. It involves more strategic work (I do housing management work in my usual job). I'm hoping that it will give me a different perspective on housing management, a more strategic perspective, and that it will improve my presentational skills.

For their employers, one volunteer mentioned that the benefits were:

Having staff who are more aware. We've now carried out a yearly survey of the Board's effectiveness, and they've added a whole section to it on equality and diversity. There will also be an internal review of the equality and diversity workplan, in which I will be involved, looking at policies.

Three volunteers mentioned wider benefits: 'It helps society', 'It's good to do something helpful' and 'It brings things more to people's attention. People get interested in learning more and more people get interested.'

Four volunteers felt that there were no drawbacks to volunteering at all. The others identified a number of drawbacks (actual or potential). Six volunteers referred to problems in fitting volunteering in with their paid employment ('added pressure', 'you have to give priority to your paid work', 'time taken off work means that work piles up back at the office' and 'resistance from employer to allowing time off'). Two volunteers mentioned travelling problems, especially for the carless; one suggested that this could be solved through car sharing and by allowing volunteers to claim travel expenses, and another speculated that work colleagues might possibly deal with some of the work that piles up when a volunteer is away. Two other volunteers said that they had used up part of their annual leave on volunteering work.

In the interim evaluation, the obstacles to volunteering most frequently cited by volunteers were lack of time (three) and lack of confidence about the extent and relevance of their knowledge and skills (two). In a similar vein, one volunteer mentioned 'a fear about what they might be asked to do, which they could not cope with'. Others referred to a lack of motivation and lack of clarity about what volunteering could do for them personally. It may be significant that, now the concept of volunteering has been more clearly packaged as the project placement service, none of the five volunteers interviewed in the final evaluation expressed any similar concerns, uncertainties, fears or other negative feelings.

Six volunteers thought that volunteering provided services that would not be available otherwise, but others were less sure about this. One of the latter suggested:

It's difficult for me to comment beyond my own experience. They could use consultants, I suppose, but my advice is free – other organisations such as private companies and universities would charge for their services.

In the last year, volunteers have been involved in: assisting with HDN's IT implementation, helping to deliver training services, compiling a factsheet on good practice in the governance of voluntary organisations, reviewing housing association employment procedures and working on an access to housing review. One volunteer commented on her work as follows:

Because it's research-based, about finding facts and figures, looking at websites, and so on, it works well how it's been set up. It can be done from a desk anywhere. Learning by doing is what it's all about, rather than relying on some external policy adviser or consultant. HDN provide a good range of placement opportunities, for lots of different kinds of work.

Another volunteer added:

The placement seems quite structured – I know what I will be doing and when.

In general, volunteers suggested that they did not know how their placements would help their career prospects, but they thought this was possible. One said: 'It might help my career prospects in a very small way, but not a huge help', and another stated similarly: 'It will give me more experience, but it's only three to four days' work'.

In contrast with the interim evaluation, all volunteers interviewed for the final evaluation stated that volunteering had furthered their understanding of equality and diversity issues. One stated that it had increased his awareness though 'not a lot!'. Another reported that she had learned much about the variety of opinion that exists on equality and diversity among housing associations.

Apart from the experiences and views of volunteers, it is worth noting that at least four organisations reported that they were actively considering making project placements for members of their staff. Comments included:

We have identified a number of staff (up to six) who might be suitable for project placements over the next two years, working with other organisations, especially BME ones.

We are recommending our management to look into the possibility of project placements with HDN.

7 The HDN website

HDN recognises that its website has to attract a significant number of routine visitors to be effective. It therefore has to be actively marketed. Knowledge of the website has to be spread throughout an organisation, to make it more likely that it will take up corporate membership.¹ Board members saw the website mainly as a means for developing and disseminating good practice.

The housing organisations in the research were all asked whether they knew about the website, whether they had visited it and, if so, how often they had visited it. Although they all claimed to know of the existence of the website, there was a wide range of responses in terms of their use of it (see Table 4). Nearly half had never used the website.

Of those who said they had never used the website, three qualified their response. One stated: 'but I will do so now!'; a second: 'but my staff do'; and the third: 'but I have visited websites such as EOC [Equal Opportunities Commission] and CIH [Chartered Institute of Housing]'.

A number of interviewees offered comments on the website and these were all positive:

It's a good site, it's on my favourites list, but it has to compete with DMU [De Montfort University] and COFEM [Career Opportunities for Ethnic Minorities].

It's useful as a resource for recruiting, as somewhere to post job adverts.

I've used it to get general information, information on events and help/advice. It provides quite comprehensive information on equality and diversity.

Table 4 Frequency of use of HDN website by housing staff and Board members

Frequency of website use	Number of respondents
Many times	3
Occasionally ('once or twice')	4
Only when the need arises	5
Once only	3
Never used	14
Total	29

I've visited it a couple of times, to get contact details. It was most beneficial – there was a general report on the website, which was very useful. I think it's good not just for new staff members but for everybody, as it touches on the ethics for any organisation, not just a housing organisation. I found the website easy to access and the contacts I found there have been helpful.

One respondent suggested that the website could be used for supporting a network of volunteers:

Generally there's a lot of untapped talent around; there could be a wider, web-based network of volunteers helping other organisations and keeping them fresh.

In addition to these interviewees, a senior member of staff, with no particular responsibility for equality and diversity, working for a medium-sized housing association with a good reputation on equality and diversity, was interviewed. She knew nothing specifically about HDN's activities or promotion and development work, but she had visited the HDN website once and found it to be user-friendly and very useful:

I was looking for general information, an overview of equality and diversity, and I got what I wanted from it.

8 Promotion and development of HDN

It is probably fair to say that HDN has been substantially *developed* over the last year, for example, in terms of the development of its website, the packaging of its products and services, the clearer branding of its identity, the extension of its training and consultancy services and, most recently, the creation of a Corporate Membership Network. This means that HDN now looks equipped to *promote* its activities more effectively, through the website, the launch of the Corporate Membership Network and a planned series of seminars and open courses.

This changing reality of HDN was not fully known or understood by the respondents in our research. Those who did know about it, however, fully supported it. For example:

The change in focus (from REN to HDN) is good – it will attract more people into the scheme.

For the most part, though, respondents' comments seemed to imply a need for more work to be done in terms of updating and general promotion. Three respondents suggested that HDN send out periodic, circular, web-based emails 'to remind us and jog us into action' and 'to inform people of high-profile events'. Two other respondents felt that HDN's services needed to be advertised more. Another respondent stated that:

There is [still] a need for more awareness-raising of HDN – to reach potential clients.

One interviewee commented more specifically on how HDN followed up on public events:

The ONE [One North East] meeting was an ideal opportunity – to raise equality and diversity up the agenda, and to provide more regular events to maintain the momentum. However, there was no written follow-up, in terms of a record of what happened there, etc.

Looking at the suggestions made by respondents in the interim evaluation for improving the promotion and development of HDN, it is clear that most of them have been taken up and implemented – e.g. using the website, getting out and about and developing personal relationships, revisiting its aims and objectives and communicating these to others. Two suggestions, however, are perhaps worth reiterating. These relate to HDN's relationships with tenants, and specifically with BME tenants, and to the search for other sources of funding, and specifically charitable funding:

Attend tenants' conferences, co-ordinate information and research more, and develop a dialogue with BME tenants.

The bottom line is: how much money is available for this? We need to look at other possible sources of funding, e.g. as we did for the development of the website. We want to develop area-based networks and we need more IGP grants in order to do this. We are thinking of going for charitable status, which could help here.

In the interim evaluation, respondents were asked what activities they would like HDN to undertake and they came up with a large number of suggestions. The most commonly mentioned activity was training of staff on a wide range of equality and diversity issues. Beyond this, there were a number of comments about the need to provide specific kinds of services, e.g. for smaller, dispersed BME communities,

about compiling directories of locally available services and about dealing with racial harassment. Two comments are worth reiterating here. First:

Adrian Jones' research on BME housing needs in Calderdale identified two types of housing association: one that did not do much at all because it did not regard race equality as a priority and another that was well intentioned but was struggling to make any progress. REN could help the latter type of association, and there are many of them.

Evidence for the final evaluation supports this comment. HDN's client organisations generally tended to fall into the category of well-intentioned organisations trying to improve themselves, while the majority of other housing associations contacted for the research did not appear to attach the same priority to race equality.

The second comment relates to racial harassment. It is an important comment, but it is an issue that goes beyond the scope of this research and that needs to be considered by the Housing Corporation and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) as well as by individual housing organisations:

Racial harassment is the most urgent concern for many BME communities, but this is where the least progress has been made. I think that tenant participation for tenants on white estates should be a policy priority here, because low tenant participation is associated with a higher level of harassment.

In the final evaluation, respondents commented further on HDN's activities as follows:

I know that HDN will attend our cultural diversity meetings when asked, but I can't think of anything beyond that which I'd like them to do. Still, specific things could crop up.

I would like HDN to develop a management mentoring programme.

There is a need for more activities and types of activity – for example, mentoring, for those new to a particular field of work. This could develop more contacts and networks.

A seminar on how to develop a management agreement with BME housing associations would still be useful for us. [This was mentioned in the interim evaluation.]

I would like to see their services develop, with experts in the North for general advice and auditing, and reasonably competitive products.

We've looked at distance learning, to develop training at a national level. Could HDN help here?

It's all about keeping up to date with things. They could do more in the way of consultation with residents' groups and engaging with smaller BME groups.

I would like to see something for more dispersed areas of our housing with low BME populations – in the North East and Teesside. [A similar point was made in the interim evaluation.]

HDN could do something for the CIH newsletter and/or put up a stand at the CIH regional conference. They run successful events, which are well covered. Maybe they could write up case studies of what they've done – to sell themselves.

Maybe they could produce newsletters and act as a co-ordinating force for building good-practice groups. Maybe they could put more stuff in the housing press – *Inside Housing*, *Housing Today*, etc? There is a need to access people who don't know that HDN is there and this would be a good way to do it.

HDN could act as a clearing house for Board members, linking to COFEM on issues of skills and knowledge – for example, if a COFEM mentee wanted to get broader experience, they could get a project placement through HDN, who could put them in touch with an appropriate housing association.

HDN could act as a sounding board for independent BME consultants, who could be associates of HDN. HDN could go for bigger projects with help from these people.

One report on the HDN website said they would have seminars and conferences on different topics, for example work ethics, how to work with other communities and BME issues. I think these could be run on a regional basis, for anyone to attend. The main issue is one of cost (for courses), so they need to be cheaper – £200 or more per day is too expensive. This is a definite barrier for people. If it's really important, it

should be free (or the bare minimum cost). This is so as to get as many people as possible to understand what's needed.

It's all about identity and reputation for delivery. The relevance of HDN ultimately depends on the range of services they can deliver, across what area and to what organisations.

9 Housing Corporation views of HDN

The Housing Corporation has recently reviewed its BME policy and drafted an action plan accordingly. In line with the shift that has taken place in HDN, it seems likely that the Corporation will move further towards a wider equality and diversity agenda. In time, it may develop a Diversity Equality Scheme as a single document, with separate chapters on race, disability, gender, age, sexuality, etc.

Housing Corporation representatives interviewed for the purposes of this research were all very supportive of HDN and positive about its activities: 'Amalia has contributed well to some of our work. I'm very supportive of HDN.' They were very clear about how HDN had been helpful to the Corporation:

HDN helped to develop our BME strategy, informing and consulting stakeholders. They went into greater depth, making the strategy better understood, fitting more coherently with an organisation, into their budgets, etc., their risk strategies and their business plans. They've taken the weight off Board members and senior managers, they've got staff to take ownership of the equality and diversity plan. In many organisations, there was a fear factor, a low base of knowledge and understanding – HDN takes the mystery out of the situation and puts it in a simple way.

I talked to Amalia about the Housing Corporation's approach on the regulatory code. It was a joint effort – we went through each target in the guidance and decided what sorts of action were appropriate for housing associations to take; we made sure we were singing from the same hymn sheet with regard to the seven target areas.

The representatives had no qualms about promoting HDN to housing associations. For example:

I promote HDN myself because I always suggest them if anyone asks for someone who could help them comply with our equality and diversity regulations. Most housing associations know about HDN already. I know about the healthchecks that HDN have done – I've seen the reports! Associations have up to three years to improve following one of our inspections. They still have a lot of work to do on things like racial harassment and procurement, so we need to ask them questions and push for improvements. But we're not aware of any associations [in the North] that are really struggling on equality and diversity at the moment.

One representative made an interesting point about the relationship between HDN and volunteering:

Originally, HDN was just Amalia, so there was a need for a pool of volunteers to assist her. This is still an interesting resource area, but it is hard to sustain. It needs funding to make it work but it is promoted because of a lack of funding – Catch 22!

Another representative understood how this dilemma had led HDN to change its approach to volunteering:

It's changed from being a mutual exchange idea to one of people paying for HDN's services. This ensures funding for HDN to make the idea work. It's still about sharing good practice, but not necessarily for free.

Corporation representatives agreed with the change of name (from REN to HDN) 'because GPN8 is about a wider diversity agenda':

It makes sense. Race is a starting point for diversity work, but it needs to be widened – to age, disability, etc. There's no problem in dropping the word 'equality' – anyway, it's a funny word, as we don't treat people equally though maybe we treat them equivalently.

One representative, however, was not sure whether HDN had the capacity to deliver on this wider agenda. Another suggested that: 'HDN needs to develop stuff on other aspects of diversity, for example on disability – to get ahead of the game!'. This respondent pointed out that 'CORE returns show a significant number of people in wheelchairs living in wheelchair-inaccessible homes'. She suggested that:

Amalia could do well to identify organisations such as Habinteg who could help skill her up on disability issues. Many of the specialist housing

associations are linked to national charities, which often helped to establish them. Perhaps these charities could advise?

One representative mentioned the Corporation's endorsement of HDN's work with Hallam Housing Society and suggested that this endorsement could be used in HDN's promotional literature.

10 The future development of HDN

Respondents were asked to give their views on the possible future development of HDN in terms of its organisational focus, its geographical sphere of activities, and its treatment of equality and diversity issues.

Geographical scope

The *regional* focus of HDN now appeared to be widely accepted, in line with the clear views expressed by HDN Board members. However, in view of the commonality of issues across the three northern regions, it was generally felt that co-ordination of activity across these regions would be beneficial, and could be led by HDN. One respondent stated:

I still think there is potential to develop in Oldham, Rochdale and other parts of the North West, and for links with BME housing associations in the Manchester area. Currently, there is a lack of co-ordination, and HDN could play a part here.

The Project Director's view was that HDN could be replicated in other regions outside the North and that the Housing Corporation needed to look into this possibility. HDN itself, however, had no ambitions to work outside the North but would do so if asked and if it had the capacity to do so. HDN did not actively promote itself outside the North, but had recently been asked to tender for training and consultancy work in Wiltshire and had agreed to do so.

Organisational focus

The extension of HDN's client base to ALMOs and local housing authorities was generally supported. It is also notable that the new Corporate Membership Network

explicitly encourages membership applications from local authorities and voluntary and community groups. As the Project Director put it: 'It's an issue of their relevance and regional focus rather than the type of organisation they are'. One respondent, however, suggested that HDN's work would be equally applicable to local authority departments other than housing. If this were to happen, it could force another name change, to something like Housing and Employment Diversity Network!

Treatment of equality and diversity issues

Some respondents highlighted potential difficulties in HDN extending its activities to look at disability in particular. This is not to say that HDN should not develop in this way, but that it may need to skill itself up in order to maintain its current high reputation. One respondent drew attention to the complexity of the 'mix' of race and disability issues:

We've got to look more closely at core issues on race and disability. For example, we haven't been helpful to extended Asian families with a disabled person because we have seen them only as Asian or only as disabled.

Another suggested that disability diversity was qualitatively different from racial and ethnic diversity:

Disability introduces different issues. There are some misconceptions here, for example, on what is required to make homes physically accessible. The Disability Discrimination Act has much broader implications [than race], and the standard 'appreciating diversity' training doesn't cover this.

11 Conclusions

Our final evaluation confirms that the Housing Diversity Network is highly valued: by its clients, by those undertaking projects with it, by the Housing Corporation, by those who have attended its seminars and by all those who have come into contact with it. The feedback from its clients is especially positive and holds out great promise for its future development. The general view is that HDN adds value that no other organisation can match. We suggest that there is nothing equivalent to HDN anywhere else in England or Wales, though it is possible that PAIH (Positive Action in Housing) may play a similar role in Scotland.

1 From REN to HDN

Although rebranding is inevitably always a risky exercise, we found that the change from REN to HDN was widely understood and supported among those who might be affected by HDN's activities. The name change actually reinforces HDN's focus on housing, and highlights its intention to take on board the wider equality and diversity agenda as set out in the Housing Corporation's GPN8. HDN's equality and diversity Healthcheck focuses on an organisation's strategic approach and on inclusivity generally, so there is no good reason to restrict this service to matters of race only. The extension of HDN's activities to include issues of disability, gender, age, sexuality, etc. should not necessarily dilute the focus on race but could, on the contrary, enhance it, e.g. by highlighting issues of diversity within (as well as across) different ethnic groups.

2 The changing agenda on equality and diversity, and the continuing need for HDN

HDN has already developed substantially, to ensure its own sustainability and to respond to the wider diversity agenda. The constant change in the agenda means that housing organisations are always in the position of having to catch up and therefore may require the services of an organisation like HDN. There is much more to be developed in the way of good practice (e.g. on governance, procurement, community cohesion, travellers, and engaging BME tenants and young people), new issues keep arising (e.g. European enlargement, asylum seekers and refugees, new communities, and legislation on human rights and on religious discrimination) and new regulation regimes make their appearance. A good example of the latter is the Housing Inspectorate's Key Lines of Enquiry (KLoE) on Diversity published in December 2004. This KLoE appears to be much more rigorous, explicit and detailed than GPN4 or GPN8 and, on the basis of evidence about their performance hitherto, it seems very unlikely that many housing associations are delivering what the KLoE calls 'an excellent service' on diversity.²

3 The value of the website

The HDN website is an important development. It is an ideal example of a new service to meet the needs and aspirations of BME communities (the second original aim of REN when it was set up). It has become a key focus for the dissemination of

good practice in equality and diversity, and it is now the site for the new Corporate Membership Network. Those who have used the website have found it informative, helpful and valuable. It is concerning, therefore, that the website is substantially underused, even though HDN and its work are generally known among housing associations.

We would suggest that there are two possible reasons for this. One is that housing associations do not feel that they need the assistance of an organisation like HDN – a view implied by some of the respondents in the research. We would question this view, partly because of the lack of evidence that these associations are providing an ‘excellent service’ on diversity and partly because of the fast-changing agenda in this area, which associations are likely to have difficulty in delivering. We would expect a good association on diversity to be one that is actively seeking all the help that it can get.

The second possible reason is that many housing associations do not yet routinely use websites as a training and educational tool. Arguably, an organisation that gives a high priority to equality and diversity is one where the staff (under the leadership of their senior managers) routinely update their knowledge and understanding of the topic area, e.g. through the use of appropriate websites. This did happen in some of the associations in the research, but there were a significant number where it clearly did not. Some senior managers said that they were interested in knowing about good practice on diversity and/or were aware that the practice of their organisation was not good enough but, on their own admission, did nothing to seek out good practice or to promote it.

4 From volunteering to project placement

The transformation of HDN from the original idea of a ‘volunteer task force’ to a project placement facility has been possibly the largest single change in the organisation since its inception. This change was necessitated by several factors: a lack of core funding to sustain the management of such a task force, except on a very small scale; a lack of sufficient people willing and able to act as volunteers; and a lack of sufficient organisations prepared to act as hosts for volunteers. The occurrence of these factors suggests that, with the notable exception of housing association Board members, the *voluntary* housing movement exists only in name. The emphasis within associations is increasingly on becoming more businesslike, which includes working on a paid basis. Arguably, housing associations are no longer clearly part of the voluntary sector, but have become a new hybrid public/

private sector type of organisation. The original aim of working in *partnership* with housing providers (to help them understand the needs and aspirations of BME communities) has therefore transformed into one of working *for* housing providers.

The rebranding of volunteering as project placement has made it more manageable, and more directly beneficial to both HDN and the volunteers themselves. Rather than seeing volunteering as a rather fluffy exercise in philanthropy or civil renewal, it is now seen more clearly as a means of staff development and of adding value to HDN itself (arguably, this provides more valuable opportunities for BME personal and professional development, in accordance with the original aims of the Network). Even the wider social benefits are clearer under the new scheme. The scheme is still in an embryo form, but we think that it has considerable potential for development and could even become a 'model' for other networks to follow.

5 *The further promotion and development of HDN activities*

The employment of a third member of staff has provided HDN with an opportunity to expand its activities. The plan is to achieve a virtuous circle, in which further income will be generated by training and consultancy activities, which will then be sufficient to fund further posts, eventually making HDN a relatively stable and permanent organisation, offering a comprehensive range of products and services on housing diversity. With the termination of core funding from the ODPM in April 2005, the coming financial year is crucial for the future of HDN. On the basis of the evidence compiled for this evaluation, we conclude that the prospects for HDN are good.

6 *The future scope of HDN – organisational and geographical*

The overwhelming consensus among the respondents in our research was that HDN should focus its work on housing associations and local authorities. HDN is only just beginning to make an impression on the latter, so the potential for future expansion is huge. HDN is also building its links with other organisations working in the same field, as evidenced in particular by its coming merger with Building Positive Action, based in the North West.

There was also a general view that HDN should continue to have a regional focus, although opinions differed as to the meaning of 'region' here. We conclude that, while continuing to be based in Yorkshire and Humberside, HDN could play a leading role in developing networks not only in the North East (as it is currently doing) but

also in the North West. This could happen as and when the opportunity arose, in a measured way, following the expansion of HDN's general activities. Beyond the North, however, it would seem more appropriate at this stage for other bodies to be responsible for the development of regional housing diversity networks.

12 Recommendations

For HDN and similar networks in other regions

- 1 The core activity should be consultancy and training activity, as this is the 'bread and butter' of their existence; this activity adds significant value, and therefore should be developed and expanded so far as is practicable.
- 2 The focus of activity should continue to be on housing organisations in the relevant region.
- 3 Consequent on (1), the focus of promotion and development activity needs to be primarily on communicating to housing organisations the ways in which their products and services can help them to deliver on equality and diversity generally.
- 4 Dedicated websites should be used as a key medium for regular general updates on relevant activities; periodic, circular, web-based emails should also be used to publicise network services and activities throughout the region; and there should be more links to the dedicated websites from other sites.
- 5 Networks should proceed with caution in broadening their focus to include diversity issues other than race; they should consider working in partnership with other organisations with expertise in these other areas of diversity, for example, disability organisations and supported housing organisations.
- 6 More generally, such networks should give priority to working in partnership with organisations such as Positive Action for Training in Housing (PATH), which share similar objectives.
- 7 There is a need to explore a variety of sources of funding, including charitable funding, in order to ensure their long-term stability and independence.

- 8 In the absence of grant funding for this specific purpose, volunteering schemes should be kept to a manageable size, to be activated where there are specialist tasks to be completed that can be matched to the skills of individuals offering their services for free; however, grant aid and/or more active participation by housing organisations in the future in providing placements could make a great difference to such schemes.

For HDN specifically

- 9 HDN's Corporate Membership Network should continue to be actively promoted and should be used to raise its profile in the housing world, not only regionally but also nationally.
- 10 For the foreseeable future, HDN should concentrate its development on the three northern regions, though this should not preclude it from accepting offers of work from organisations based outside these regions.
- 11 HDN is reaching ordinary BME tenants and residents in the North, but needs to do more to make itself known to different BME communities, in particular smaller and dispersed ones, and provide appropriate services for them.
- 12 HDN should continue to hold periodic seminars in different parts of the North on relevant topics, for example, developing management mentoring programmes, dealing with racial harassment, developing management agreements with BME-led housing associations, work ethics, procurement and working with other communities.

We also recommend that the Housing Corporation and ODPM should

- 13 Take on board the lessons learned from the development of HDN with regard to how to progress the equality and diversity agenda in housing organisations.
- 14 Support the development of similar networks in the rest of England, i.e. in the West and East Midlands, the East of England, and South West and South East England; HDN could provide assistance in this process.
- 15 Provide long-term core funding and other relevant support to maintain such regional networks, which will be responsible for assisting housing organisations in meeting their equality and diversity requirements; these regional networks could

be co-ordinated on a national scale so as to provide a unified input and response to policy changes and legislative reforms, working directly with decision makers to advance the equality and diversity agenda.

- 16 Together with other relevant bodies such as the National Housing Federation, the Local Government Association and local authorities generally (and possibly also other government departments such as the Home Office), take on board fully the findings of Hann and Bowes (2005), in particular with regard to the dissemination to housing associations of relevant material on equality and diversity; and consider using the HDN website as one possible outlet for the dissemination of this material to housing and other organisations.

The housing sector in each region should

- 17 Provide appropriate support for the development of such networks, whether it be through the regional offices of the Housing Corporation or National Housing Federation, Regional Housing Boards or the regional bodies of the Chartered Institute of Housing, or through another relevant regional body.

Housing providers generally should

- 18 Recognise that there is a continuing need for them to review their policies and practices to ensure that they keep abreast of the changing equality and diversity agenda.
- 19 Consider engaging the services of independent organisations, such as the Network, to assist them in carrying out such equality and diversity reviews.
- 20 Where such reviews reveal shortcomings in the organisation's performance on equality and diversity, formulate strategies and action plans to address the shortcomings within reasonable and practicable timescales.
- 21 Ensure that all their staff, contractors, tenants and customers are fully informed and updated on the equality and diversity agenda, and fully involved in the organisation's equality and diversity reviews, and in the formulation and implementation of their strategies and action plans.
- 22 Recognise the potential value of being part of a network of organisations that can come together on a regional basis to identify issues and priorities, and facilitate reciprocal learning between its members.

Notes

- 1 HDN has recently launched a Corporate Membership Network, which offers benefits such as access to HDN's enquiry line, job advertising (including publicising Board member and secondment opportunities), e-briefings and briefing events, in return for an annual fee that varies according to the type and size of organisation. Five of the interviewees in our research showed awareness, unprompted, of the development of this Corporate Membership Network; one of these was keen to become a paying member.
- 2 Interestingly, a report by Managing Diversity Associates for the Housing Corporation has recently found that many housing associations do not even know where to find information on race equality, and their progress in attracting contractors and suppliers from BME communities and in engaging with BME young people is particularly unsatisfactory (Hann and Bowes, 2005).

References

- Hann, C. and Bowes, E. (2005) *The Housing Corporation's Black and Minority Ethnic Housing Policy: Assessing its Impact*. London: Managing Diversity Associates
- Housing Corporation (1998) *Black and Minority Ethnic Housing Policy*. London: Housing Corporation
- Housing Corporation (2002) *Good Practice Note No. 4*. London: Housing Corporation
- Housing Corporation (2004) *Good Practice Note No. 8*. London: Housing Corporation
- Housing Inspectorate (2004) *Key Lines of Enquiry No. 31: Diversity*. London: Audit Commission
- Johnson, M. with Tomlins, R., Brown, T., Duncan, J., Harrison, M., Line, B., Owen, D., Phillips, D. and Ratcliffe, P. (2001) *A Question of Delivery. An Evaluation of How RSLs Meet the Needs of Black and Minority Ethnic Communities*. London: Housing Corporation

Matthias, J. (2001) *The BIGPicture: Meeting the Needs of Black and Minority Ethnic Communities*. London: Housing Corporation

Race and Housing Inquiry (2001) *Challenge Report*. London: National Housing Federation

Smith, M. (2001) 'A black and minority ethnic volunteer task force', unpublished report

Somerville, P. and Steele, A. (2004) 'Race Equality Network: interim evaluation', unpublished report

Somerville, P., Steele, A. and Sodhi, D. (2000) *A Question of Diversity: Black and Minority Staffing in the RSL Sector*. London: Housing Corporation

