



OASIS Leading in Practice

Helping people learn and develop

Developing understanding of Diversity in the Workplace



'The Housing Corporation is strongly committed to equality and diversity. We have both a service led and a moral obligation to respond to the diversity needs of our communities and to ensure this is integrated in our policies and practices. We must ensure that the services we provide are fully reflective of the communities in which we live.

This is very important not only because it is a moral obligation but also because it is a business dynamic without recognition of which we will eventually fail'.

*The Rt Hon Baroness Dean of Thornton-le-Flyde
Chairperson of the Housing Corporation, September 2003*

The Initial Impulse

Although the Housing Corporation's support of diversity was one part of the impetus, developing a diversity agenda has been strongly alive in Impact Housing Association since November 2001. Following a workshop on equal opportunities and diversity presented to the Chief Executive and Directors, Alison Coupe, Director of Community Investment was mandated with the responsibility for holding and developing an organisational approach to diversity.

Impact Housing Association is an innovative Housing Association working mainly in Cumbria, basing its work on improving people's quality of life. It provides good quality, affordable social housing for people on low incomes as well as a substantial amount of supported housing for vulnerable people. It is also actively involved in regeneration activities, training and the development of specialist projects such as Cumbria's first Foyer and a large financial inclusion project.

One of the key challenges facing the organisation was to create a process which met the Housing Corporation agenda of promoting race issues whilst also making sense to people working in an organisation which serves an area with a low BME (Black, Minority Ethnic) population; Carlisle for example is 99.1% white.

A number of approaches were explored. Some were rejected on the basis that they would involve applying an externally designed and potentially rigid process onto the organisational form that is Impact. Whilst clearly able to help Impact to 'get on with the job in hand', these approaches would not necessarily recognise nor validate the important work that Impact, in collaboration with the Oasis School of Human Relations, had already undertaken - particularly in identifying values and of internal ways of working.

Shaping a way forward

Throughout 2002 work continued on the shaping of an organisational definition and the development of a shared understanding towards diversity. Out of this valuable work it was possible, in June 2003, to identify a way forward which, it was anticipated, would:

- reflect organisational values of collaboration and participation
- recognise the context in which Impact is operating
- focus on a specific area of service delivery
- meet a number of external criteria and requirements e.g Housing Corporation Race Agenda

This way forward involved the creation of a process specifically designed to reflect the context in which Impact is operating. The purpose was to explore, with a group of staff (all of whom agreed to take part in the study), their understanding of and approaches to both diversity in general and race issues in particular. In order to both gain the most from the exploration and to ensure that the process made sense, the study was set in a part of Impact's service where staff came most into contact with clients from BME communities, i.e. a Women's Refuge.

The study was a success from two very important perspectives, firstly the staff experienced the process as 'very positive' in the sense that it both raised awareness of diversity within the service and also recognised and reinforced good practice. Secondly, it was possible to identify and highlight staff development and training needs which previously may not have been considered as necessary or important.

Engaging in this process as a 'first step' also had immense value in terms of developing a tailor made, in house programme on difference and diversity within Impact. This two-day programme, which has been developed in partnership is co-facilitated by an Associate from the Oasis School of Human Relations and a Manager from Impact Housing and is receiving very positive evaluations from participants. One of the key elements appreciated by those who have taken part is the way in which the programme is highly reflective of both the context in which the organisation is currently operating and what it sees as the way forward.

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