

## **British Humanist Association Response to Communities and Local Government Tackling Race Inequalities: A Discussion Document. May 2009.**

### **About us**

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity representing the interests of the large and growing population of ethically concerned non-religious people living in the UK. It exists to support and represent people who seek to live good and responsible lives without religious or superstitious beliefs.

The BHA is deeply committed to human rights, equality, democracy, and an end to irrelevant discrimination, and has a long history of active engagement in work for an open and inclusive society. In such a society people of all beliefs would have equal treatment before the law, and the rights of those with all beliefs to hold and live by them would be reasonably accommodated within a legal framework setting minimum common legal standards.

Our expertise lies in the 'religion or belief' equality strand, which includes non-religious beliefs such as Humanism, and how that strand relates to and intersects with other protected characteristics. We also work closely with others on wider equalities issues in a range of forums. For example, many BHA members work alongside those with different beliefs on their local SACRE. We fully support inclusive strategies to develop social cohesion and involvement in the community and are involved in promoting social cohesion both at a strategic and a grassroots level, with our efforts aimed in particular at ensuring the non-religious in the community are engaged with by government and others and not excluded by policy initiatives.

The BHA has a Local Development Project, which was part-funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) in its first year and seeks to build the capacity of humanists and the non-religious to contribute to local authorities' work around both 'religion or belief' equality issues, and projects of inter-cultural dialogue and good relations.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this important consultation. As humanists, we base our morality on the value of each and every human being and are committed to universal human rights and individual liberty, including freedom of belief and speech. We want to help build strong and positive relationships between people of different backgrounds and believe that all people should be involved in this debate.

### **Terminology**

We note and welcome the use of correct terminology throughout Sections 2, 5 and 6 of the document which refers to 'religion or belief'. However, the terms 'faith' and 'multi-faith' are used in Sections 1, 4, and 6. We believe that the term 'religion or belief' should be used throughout the document, as:

- This is the correct definition under law – the Equality Act Part II makes it clear that this phrase covers all individuals with a religion, with a belief, without a religion and without a belief.
- The term 'faith' gives the impression that those who do not follow a religious tradition are not or should not be involved in community cohesion and equality work. Cohesion is only possible when all individuals and groups are engaged with on an equal basis.

- Using terms such as 'faith' which disenfranchise non-religious people may contribute to low engagement by this group – non-religious people will not see such work as being for them. In turn, this segregation could create distrust between religious and non-religious people at local level.

## **Identity**

There appears to be a crossover in the document between 'race' and 'religion or belief' (or, as the document states, 'faith').

For example, on page 26 of the document, the case study of the Windsor Fellowship mentions the LEAD programme which brings together Londoners from different 'faith communities' and works to reduce conflict between different 'faith' communities. It should be noted that 'inter-faith' work is different to race equality work due to the following factors:

- 'Religion or belief' is not an innate characteristic and everyone has the right to change their 'religion or belief.'
- Connecting two very different strands of work can lead to confusion and to stereotyping- ie suggesting that race and 'religion or belief' are linked in ways in which they are not.
- The purpose of a 'race equality strategy' should be to reduce inequalities due to the characteristic of race, rather than inequalities due to the characteristic of 'religion or belief.'
- 'Inter-faith' work rarely includes representation from non-religious belief groups. It is our position that ignoring the full equality strand of 'religion or belief' in such a context can only lead to disempowerment of non-religious individuals, particularly non-religious people in ethnic minority communities.

**Therefore, we recommend that any race equality strategy is written in a way which does not equate community cohesion work based on 'religion or belief' with equality work regarding race.**

The BHA is pleased to note that a full Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) will be done when the full strategy is being written. However, we have seen many flawed assessments which only measure the possible impact on religious people and groups rather than looking at the full strand of 'religion or belief.'

**We recommend that any EIA on the forthcoming strategy must cover the 'religion or belief' equality strand in full by analysing the possible impact of the strategy on people with non-religious beliefs.**

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