

Case Study; Duty to involve

Southwark Ummah report

Background

The 2001 census recorded Southwark as having a Muslim population of 16774 people (7% of the Borough's population). These people have a wide range of ethnic and national backgrounds including African, South Asian, Turkish, Albanian. Over 1000 of them described themselves as British. Since 2001, the Southwark Muslim population has expanded to include people from Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, Sierra Leone and North Africa as well as new converts from the British population.

The council decided to commission research into the nature of Southwark's Muslim community and its needs for two key reasons:

- The council provided support to the Southwark Muslim Forum but had become increasingly aware that the Forum was being criticised for not being "representative" of the whole Muslim community. The research was intended to provide a deeper understanding of the community to enable the council to assess whether the Forum continued to be the most appropriate channel of communication with the Muslim community.
- The evaluation of Southwark's Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) programme undertaken by Goldsmith's University specifically recommended that Southwark Council map both the risks of violent extremism within the borough and the "needs of and services to the Muslim community."

The research was jointly and equally funded by Southwark Muslim Forum, the Southwark Active Citizens Hub and Southwark Council's youth offending team. It cost £9000.

Processes

The project steering group decided to take an action research approach to the project and to recruit local Muslim residents to act as volunteer researchers. The council's community involvement officer led the recruitment process, emailing a wide range of residents already known to the council as "active citizens" asking if they were interested in becoming part of the team. From 12 respondents to these emails, a team of seven were eventually recruited. The team had a range of backgrounds and motivations for becoming involved:

"This was a new experience for me because I had not done research before."

"I did the research because I wanted to know more about my own community, how we live our everyday lives and what we need from public services..."

“I took on the challenge to educate myself further on the needs of the Muslim community in Southwark.”

The team members all had an affiliation of some kind to voluntary and community groups in Southwark, for example, the Southwark Muslim Womens Association, the Sierra Leone Muslim Community and the Southwark Muslim Forum.

The team received training in research techniques, covering topics such as “what is research?” and how to run a focus group. The Goldsmith’s University team supported the training. The researchers were paid £15/week for the ten weeks of the project to cover their expenses.

The team were then invited to draw up the research questions. The council put their issues to the team but the team also identified issues themselves, including jobs and housing. The whole process was influenced by two national reports:

- The Change Institute report on “Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities” (April 2009) which looked at experiences and issues of life in the UK through the eyes of 13 different ethnic Muslim groups, concluding that communities were most heavily influenced by their pre-migration context and their educational and employment opportunities in the UK. This report also noted a desire for “multiple identities” and the existence of inter-generational tensions.
- “Evidence from research and development work in Bradford” (October 2009) which reported on the shared commitment of White British and Pakistani residents of Bradford to their geographical community and their desire to meet each other across community boundaries.

The community researchers then organised and ran a series of focus groups, recruiting participants through their own community networks. The focus groups were intended to reflect a range of ages, genders, ethnicities and nationalities. The 45 participants came from a wide range of walks of life including people who were employed, unemployed, self employed, volunteers, parents and carers and from a range of occupations. All Southwark’s Muslim ethnicities were represented with the exception of the Turkish community. Each focus group was facilitated by a community researcher and supported by a member of the council community involvement team which also provided an opportunity to check for consistency and quality.

Participants were very engaged with the focus group discussions. As one community researcher commented “at first they were a bit reserved but once they got started, it was hard to keep them on track!”

Council staff took notes at most of the focus groups. Once the notes were typed up, the officers extracted the broad themes. Those themes were double checked with a wider group from the Muslim community via a face to face survey involving 82 people. Finally, a workshop was held with the community research team at which the conclusions described in the report were drawn out as a team exercise.

Key issues

The findings covered a variety of issues and included both specific recommendations (for example about modesty in hospitals and single sex swimming sessions) and more general aspirations for example for more integration between different Muslim communities. The principle findings included:

- The need for a single meeting place in Southwark for Muslims similar to the East London Mosque and community centre in Tower Hamlets. This was linked to a need for Muslim communities to integrate more, to overcome the tendency to “build walls” and to counter the problems experienced by Muslim communities such as the Sierra Leone community who do not have a mosque of their own. There is a need and a desire to hold big community events such as a big Eid festival in the same way as the Latin American and Black communities have big events to create a sense of comradeship and sharing within and across Muslim and non Muslim communities. The other side of this coin is a need for service providers to recognise the importance of outreaching to the different ethnic communities specifically.
- Issues around employment were important to many focus group participants. People felt that Muslims were discriminated against in the jobs market. There was a need for training, access to business advice appropriate for Muslim businesses and more role models.
- Problems around homelessness in some communities and overcrowding in other communities were raised.
- Health issues were extensively discussed. There was considerable interest in developing a more integrated approach to health promotion which takes account of conventional approaches, religious advice and alternative therapies.

Next steps

The research has now been published as a report. The council intend the immediate next steps to include:

- Taking the report to the Mosques and asking them to continue the dialogue

- Organising meetings with council officers responsible for specific issues and asking them to take them forward. Examples of this include referring the reports of homelessness amongst the Sierra Leone community to council homeless advice experts, pressing the PCT to take up the Nigerian Muslims' suggestion of holding a workshop involving a doctor, an Imam and a herbal medicine specialist.

A further specific outcome from the research was the conclusion that the report had produced sufficient evidence to justify continuing to support the Southwark Muslim Forum; "The sheer diversity of the community means that cherished projects such as the building of one place for all Muslims to pray and meet in can only be carried out by a pan-Muslim community organisation. At the same time, more practical help to all sectors of the local Muslim community will bolster the Southwark Muslim Forum's leadership role."

The research has also raised other broader based questions which the council will continue to investigate in partnership with the community. These questions include:

- How can Muslim women express their voices locally
- How can Mosques become community centres and bases for outreach services as well as religious centres
- How can a single place be created where all Muslims can go to pray and socialise
- How can the wider community support the Southwark Muslim Forum so that a single well known voice for the whole community emerges?

Impact

For the council, the impact of the project has gone beyond the information gathered and questions addressed. It has demonstrated the value of an action research approach using community researchers. This has allowed the research to be more "nuanced" in the way it addressed the different communities. It has resulted in a team of seven people who have become a new part of the council's thinking about these issues and has prompted the council to consider in what other ways they can use this valuable new resource. The project has created new routes into communities which will be helpful for opening up outreach work and helpful for encouraging support for the 2011 census.

For the communities themselves, the project has provided recognition. It has demonstrated that the council is willing to recognise the differences between different Muslim communities and respond accordingly and it has shown that the council is willing to take the time to understand those differences in some depth.

For the individual community researchers, the project gave them new skills and built their confidence. One of the researchers is about to embark on a project to make a documentary about the Mosques in Southwark which will use a group of young volunteers as the film makers. Although the documentary was already being planned before the research project took place, the researcher now intends to use the research questions within the film, this time asking them of religious leaders and administrators. Once the film is complete, it will be screened at the Tate Modern with post show discussion sessions; ideas expressed within the filming process and at these screenings will be incorporated into a report on the needs of and services for Mosques in the borough which will be circulated to the council and other public services.

The research and the duty to involve

Southwark council has had a culture which supports community involvement and engagement for some time – evidenced by the existence of the community involvement team. However, strategically, the introduction of the duty to involve has been important in giving added impetus to this activity. Southwark Council strives to be seen as a high performing council; the recognition that the Audit Commission will take account of activities of this nature in its CAA assessments has facilitated officers in undertaking them.

The research stems directly from the duty to involve, linking in to the new requirement to “create a culture of engagement and empowerment.”¹ It did this by involving local residents as researchers to give a voice to members of their own community (empowerment) and by doing this across a spectrum of communities of interest (engagement). Authorities are now expected to demonstrate “an understanding of community interests”.² This research was specifically intended to enable the council and other partners to understand a particular section of the community in a sophisticated and layered way, going beyond a consideration of their needs solely as “Muslims”. The fact that the project was a partnership and that it addressed issues such as health and employment beyond the remit of the local authority alone contributed to the requirement to “coordinate engagement activities with partners”.³ The determination of council officers to ensure that points made by the focus groups were acted on by relevant statutory agencies contributes to making engagement “central to service delivery, policy and decision making.”

¹ Duty to involve briefing April 2009; Involve.

² ibid

³ ibid

For the council, the lasting legacy in terms of duty to involve requirements is the existence of a team of trained and motivated residents who are now able to use their skills to pursue projects and issues themselves or with other members of their community - in other words “local people know how to get involved...”

Summary

The table below identifies the key success points and limitations of this project and matches them to specific aspects of the Duty to Involve.

Success point	Relationship to duty to involve (as set out in “Creating strong, safe, prosperous communities”; guidance on the duty to involve.)	Comment
The development, management and funding of the project as a <i>partnership</i> between the statutory and voluntary sectors.	“There are three ways in which authorities should think about involving the third sector as part of the new duty...finally third sector organisations might be able to provide relevant expertise and specialist knowledge that might help the authority in reaching out to marginalised and vulnerable groups.”	With this project, the involvement of community groups was crucial in reaching focus group participants.
The active involvement of <i>individual residents</i> as community researchers.	“representatives of local persons refers to a mix of local persons ie a balanced selection of individuals, groups, businesses...authorities should consider the diverse groups within the community who might be...interested in a particular function.”	Involving individuals per se as opposed to people who get involved as representatives of groups can be challenging for authorities. Although most of the researchers were connected with a community group, their involvement was not necessarily in a leadership role. This project succeeded in engaging and developing seven individuals who are now much more likely to continue that involvement than they were before.
The development of the research questions as a partnership between the researchers and the project	“Authorities should offer..opportunities to have their say about decisions and services that affect them.”	Although the council started the project with a clear idea of issues they wanted to address, the

managers.		scope widened considerably once the researchers became involved. The focus groups tackled issues which met both the community and council's service review agendas.
<p>The implementation of the project as a robust and rigorous piece of research, including building on the work of other researchers which would have credibility throughout the council and beyond and which could reliably be used to inform service and policy development</p> <p>The commitment of the project managers to achieve change as a result of the research, to identify a number of pathways for that change and to build an ongoing agenda for dialogue between the council and this set of communities.</p>	<p>"Authorities should be able to demonstrate...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that they understand the interests and requirements of the local community. • They have an appropriate corporate approach..that flows through their organisation from strategic policies to individual service delivery – and they coordinate their engagement activities with partners where appropriate 	<p>This piece of work demonstrated the beginnings of this process. The community engagement team acknowledged that the report would be welcomed at a strategic level because it would assist in gaining a strong assessment from the Audit Commission. The team were keen to ensure that specific findings were brought to the attention of service delivery colleagues (eg the homeless team) and of colleagues in other services (eg PCT) but recognised that influencing their priorities would require some effort.</p>
<p>The use of the project to develop sustainable community research skills in the researchers.</p> <p>The capacity of the project to support individual further action on the part of some of the community researchers.</p>	<p>"Authorities should be able to demonstrate...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local people...will know how to get involved..." 	<p>The project has demonstrated some success in building skills within the community which will support the continuing engagement with that community, potentially at an increasingly sophisticated level which will enable the authority to move from consultation to co-</p>

		production.
<p>The capacity of the project to hear complex messages about identity and to apply those to different forms of service delivery.</p>	<p>“ we recognise that many authorities are well aware of the need to engage a diverse range of groups within the community and to take action to ensure that all groups within the area are engaged. ..authorities should be aware that equality requirements will apply to the duty to involve.”</p>	<p>One of the aspects of this project most valued by both the authority and the participants was its success in breaking through a generalised characterisation of a growing section of the local population. Developing a more layered understanding of Muslims, recognising that national and gender identities are equally important will enable the authority and its strategic partners to design services in a much more targeted and appropriate way.</p>

Limitations

Limitation	Relationship to duty to involve (as set out in “Creating strong, safe, prosperous communities”; guidance on the duty to involve.)	Comment
The inevitably small sample of residents involved in the focus groups and survey (some 120 out of 16774 or more).	<p>“Authorities..need to make decisions about how best to engage their local community..we would expect them to consider...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportionality...the extent of the engagement should be proportionate to the significance of the issue... 	Arguably, this issue is of such significance locally and nationally that a much higher proportion of the Muslim population should have been involved or offered the opportunity to become involved. Larger numbers involved would also have increased the extent to which information about services and priorities was disseminated.
The lack of opportunity to explore potential solutions in real depth and for residents to have a clear role in defining those solutions.	<p>Authorities should provide opportunities..for...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • local people to co-design...policies and services 	This is an important next step. Although the council team were committed to following up the ideas which came out of the research, pathways for doing so were not clearly mapped out.
The lack of explicit mechanisms immediately arising from the research to continue the involvement in council services and policy not only of the 7 researchers but also of the 45 focus group participants.	<p>“Authorities should...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide feedback <p>Authorities should... Consider previous engagement and involvement...”</p>	Although the council is committed to taking forward the dialogue initiated in this project, there were no clear plans for doing so built into the project design.

Conclusion

This project was important for the approaches it took, the information and insights it provided the partners and its impact on the personal development of the researchers. Although it has limitations primarily in terms of the absence of a pre-planned pathway for addressing the issues which came out of it, proposals have subsequently been made for building on this work by both the council and individual researchers. This suggests that all involved saw it as a starting point and that it has created the atmosphere of trust and partnership which will allow a longer term and mutually beneficial dialogue to take root.

