

Minority attraction

Scores of mentoring and befriending project leaders are unsure how to attract more BME volunteers.

Dominic Wood talks to the experts to find some practicable answers

Persecution, blame, fear, and intolerance are all reasons why a black, Asian, or east European person might not volunteer. These are unlikely to be the answers that top polls, but they lurk behind the modern day rhetoric of Britain's multicultural society. Belonging is born out of love and an open-armed welcome, not being blamed for the "suspect" package or local graffiti. But, how many readers can truly claim they are doing everything in their power to welcome outsiders?

A workshop on the subject at the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation's recent conference found more than a dozen project leaders scratching their heads, at a loss to explain their lack of (and in one case the loss of) BME volunteers. And if they're not volunteering, BME communities are unlikely to be accessing a project's essential services.

You might think the issue isn't a burning one; after all, 60 years have passed since the first wave of mass-migrating BME groups came to Britain. Yet attracting volunteers from BME communities still remains hard work. But it only becomes impossible when creative thought and the desire to back it up are absent.

Success stories

Recruiting BME volunteers in numbers can be, and has been, done. Chance UK ran a hard-hitting recruitment campaign on 100,000 bus tickets in the heavily black-populated Tottenham area of north London to entice 15 new male BME volunteers to mentor young children. The campaign helped the charity to reverse potentially damaging numbers, which it had faced since inception (*see Rapport, Spring issue p6*). Azuka Befriending Service too, which launched in Nottingham six years ago, currently has 15 black Caribbean befrienders on its books, including four men.

They are not the only ones. Age Concern Warwickshire's befriending services are inclusive, but its current leader Zainib Hussain admits it had no BME volunteers when she began in 2004. Now it has eight. "My personal passion has brought in our first BME volunteers. Five are male and, unusually, one is the priest of the local mosque."

Gateways to BME volunteers

The project leaders that complain and look the other way should take note. There are many ways to try to attract BME volunteers, if you look hard enough. Hussain says organisations that truly want to attract BME volunteers should repeatedly show their faces in different BME communities until they have gained their trust. "Through my contacts I managed to meet the

priest. I was told that I had to wear a scarf, so I did, but after that there was no need. You have to change your tactics to be welcomed through the gateways.

"You need to get people from your service to act as gateways before you can get to your desired level of BME volunteers. It isn't difficult to gain a simple understanding but I had to start, like anyone else, by gaining trust from each diverse community."

Dangers to avoid

Hussain guards against jumping in, which she says "can do more damage than good". She gives the example of a woman who was all set to befriend others but later told Age Concern she couldn't because her husband wouldn't allow it. "In that case I had to separate my personal views about women's rights from my professional ones that respected his culture." Hussain warns against stereotyping after dealing with such an issue. "You can't give up. You must look at the individual and the background to see the whole person."

Hussain highlights two culturally difficult scenarios. The first is to beware of acting in a way that can be perceived as setting your organisation up as a threat to different communities. "If I prompted the woman who wouldn't stand up to her husband, he might have seen us as a threat to his way of living and might have voiced that within his community."

The other scenario relates to the eastern tradition of naming professional friends as family members. "I befriend Asian people who call me 'daughter'. I am aware that the terminology defeats professional boundaries but I am comfortable with it because I understand why they use it."

Bridging the culture gap

Azuka's team co-ordinator Val Ewan says it is very important that staff members or volunteers are from the same ethnic communities as their clients. "Here we have many nationalities including African and Caucasian staff. Our staff and volunteers understand the needs and cultures of the people that come into this office, which makes them feel more comfortable. But that doesn't mean we understand everyone who comes through our doors. There are many new groups to help, but we do have enough African volunteers to make it likely that someone will understand their needs."

"Other groups must make their service friendly enough by embracing other backgrounds to make ethnic minorities welcome. They should do some field research by asking what the relevant people in the community want."

Ewan allows volunteers to shadow support workers to save money and time; two crucial factors that can hinder recruitment. "We ask them to shadow a support worker before filling out our main forms to see if the scheme is appropriate for them. Training costs a lot of money so we have built shadowing in as part of our volunteers' pre-training."

Share knowledge internally

Hussain says one easily addressed reason for so many failed attempts to

How to attract BME volunteers

Break down barriers

- **Actively seek BME volunteers** by getting out of your comfort zone. They will rarely automatically come to you
- **If your staff is traditionally white and middle-class**, discover if one of them has a basic understanding of different cultures, or recruit a volunteer with such knowledge
- **Don't assume that a token black staff member** will know any more about other BME groups than the rest of you. Get everyone to pitch in ideas during planning stages

Self-publicity

- **Get any existing BME volunteers or staff to translate publicity material.** As little as a few words will help. Be aware though, this won't make your publicity totally inclusive. What about illiterate people?
- **Ensure your website is as good as it can be** on the resources you have. It's an invaluable source of self-promotion
- **Hitch a ride on your project's other publicity**

Target outside help

- **Ask local leaders** of faith groups, schools, community centres and radio/TV producers to let you appeal to their audiences at churches, schools, community halls or on the airwaves or digital connection
- **Court specific local editors** to gain free advertising in local BME-orientated press
- **Similarly, find a local advertising agency** that wants to boost its pro-bono efforts
- **Specifically target your BME audience** with your recruitment campaign
- **Review past or present local or national campaigns**, and adapt them to suit your needs
- **Remember from the start that the large BME audience is not one group.** Target varied religious groups and races differently
- ... and lastly, **when you do attract BME volunteers**, treat each person individually and on their merits

recruit BME volunteers can be attributed to a lack of information sharing. "Too often, there is not a strong mechanism for information sharing at organisations, which rely on one person for most of their diversity-related output. That's why I think diversity training should be mandatory. It's too easy to question your organisation's commitment to being

fully inclusive when it doesn't ensure that its own board members are involved enough in these issues. The diversity issue isn't given the necessary importance as perhaps health and safety. So, how can any organisation get an appropriate message out when it doesn't know how to convey that message internally?" The answer lies with you all.