

take part

African Caribbean and Asian Forum (ACAF)

Review (4th Nov 2010)

This review was provided as part of the East Midlands Take Part dissemination process.
The review was provided by the East Midlands Take Part Champions, the Workers' Educational Association East Midlands and the University of Lincoln.





Introduction

The African Caribbean and Asian Forum (ACAF) is a voluntary sector organisation that has served Nottingham's Black and Minority Ethnic communities for over 25 years. The organisation currently works with a number of small community and voluntary sector groups. ACAF has delivered contracts with Nottingham City Primary Care Trust and Nottingham City Council in relation to, for example, health, public involvement, volunteering and adult social care.

Take Part evaluators met with Andrew Campbell who is the Chair of ACAF and is also the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) representative for One Nottingham, which is the Local Strategic Partnership made up of organisations such as Nottingham City Council, NHS Nottingham City, Nottinghamshire Police and Nottinghamshire Fire & Rescue service. Andrew was elected BME representative by the voluntary and community sector. Andrew is a volunteer who gets involved in the local area, runs projects and events, and attends meetings at all levels, from small community meetings to strategic commissioning boards. Andrew outlined his own personal story as part of the Voluntary Sector within Nottingham City, primarily in St. Anns and Radford. His is a story of inequality, politics and common misconceptions, and attested to a scepticism of government agendas and policies.

A. Review and Evaluation

The purpose of the Take Part review and evaluation was to enable the participating groups to review and evaluate their progress over the last year and to generate a report reflecting this. The report can be used by the group to contribute to its external evaluation. Take Part in the East Midlands was using the review to generate information about the skills and attributes of community organisers/active citizens.

Successes and Sustainability

In representing ACAF, Andrew has experienced a range of personal successes, in terms of policy and practice impact. He has helped the NHS recognise the drugs problem faced by Nottingham City and has helped to create a Drugs Treatment initiative and also influenced Mental Health treatment. He has also influenced how Commissioning Groups give funding, how the funding is spent and how his local area is managed, and has also advised on the creation of a number of Strategic Documents.

In terms of sustainability, he commented how he is not 'grants orientated', which makes things a lot easier, especially in the current climate. As Andrew commented, "this game is a long game, not a short game – it's taken years to see these changes come about".

Strengths and Limitations: what could have gone better?

Andrew said that he is more than happy with the things he has managed to influence and doesn't focus on the things that perhaps haven't worked out. He says that you cannot win everything and it is important to realise this. He believes that the way forward lies in commissioning and maintaining a good degree of customer care at all levels.

Asked about how he sees other people helping him he said *'I've got my team – I've got the contacts, I've got the evidence, what the evidence says is what you must focus on, nothing else will do'*.



B. Active Citizenship

What do the following words mean to you?

Active Citizenship

Andrew believes this is nothing new and not a phrase we should focus on too much. As he says, people have been doing this for years under whatever phrase or buzz word is popular at the time. He doesn't think it is relevant and would argue that it is already happening; this variant is just another re-branding of an already existing practice.

Big Society

Andrew was very negative about this concept which he sees as the government simply expecting people to do their jobs for free in line of the severe public spending cuts they are making. His key argument is that a 'core structure' is still needed – paid workers, admin staff and running costs. He also mentioned how he feels the idea is cyclical and that it keeps coming around – people become interested and proactive then become disillusioned or it is no longer relevant, or ultimately feel they cannot change things in the wider world.

Getting involved

On this Andrew believes that there will always be a place for people to get involved, particularly in their local area. He stressed that local people can certainly make a difference on a local scale, but that they are, generally, never going to change the 'bigger' things – agendas will be in place and no matter how people lobby against it they aren't ultimately going to change it in the end.

He said *'you can make a difference in a small, local area. If someone gets involved you can make changes...but if it's something at a higher level, you cant!'*

However, Andrew feels that, historically, people have been able to change things but only at key times, in other words when change is needed and therefore inevitable. Again he stressed that 'cyclical' theme and used the example of government; when the Conservatives came to power they enjoyed success under Margaret Thatcher and, in the beginning, under John Major but in the end it was time for a change and in 1997 Labour were voted in,. They had their turn and were in power for 13 years and again were quite successful and popular for the first ten years or so but then momentum began to change, people became disillusioned and society opted for change again, allowing the Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition. But we all know that that won't last forever and change will come again, and Andrew firmly believes that is how it works on all levels in society. So yes, get involved and try and influence the small things and if the time is right, you may just help change the bigger things.

A final comment summed up Andrew's beliefs and expectations and showed that, through experience, he understands the extent of local power:

'Its all about levels – its easy on small, local levels. If its part of the national picture, then yes, that's it, you can feel you have influenced things. It's what your expectation is. "Getting involved" improves communities – "Big Society" is about public spending cuts, an ideology, no matter how they try to dress that up'.

C. Reflection

In this final part, Andrew talked about his own interests, goals and achievements. He said how he had always been interested in local politics and got involved from an early age. The main reason, he said, was to tackle or at least stand up against the inequalities that existed in his local area of St. Anns and Radford. He brought his knowledge and understanding of local and national politics to the table and quickly won the support of the local community – as stated above he has recently been voted in to represent the BME community on the One Nottingham board, a huge achievement for someone who has always performed his role on a voluntary level.

Along the way, Andrew knows that certain key individuals have helped him and guided him, and that these individuals have also helped to shape and influence local power. And that idea of ‘power’ is what drives him on – he is extremely interested how power and influence works and how it can be channelled on a local scale to help affect policies, procedures and initiatives.

Finally, Andrew was asked what key skills and qualities make a good ‘community organiser’.

He replied that you need to:

- be able to argue your corner
- have a good, persuasive argument backed up with knowledge
- be able to carry people with you – leadership skills

Andrew believes that it is important to realise that your view is not the only view, that there will always be a number of views and you must be able to use your own skills and knowledge to successfully argue that your way is the right way – ‘you need to know how to use your argument for your own good and to do that you must adopt the right language’.

One point he made was that, largely, the idea of community has disappeared from our values today, and that MTV influences more young people than any ‘initiative’ put forward. It is understanding those factors – knowing your audience / community we might say – that is the key to his success. If he knows his community want a certain thing, he doesn’t try to impose something different on them, he fights to give them the thing they want. As he says, what is the point in engaging with people if we are not going to listen to what they say? So another key skill is listening and then utilising the right tools to influence the end ‘product’.

His final thought was *‘look, you can only do so much, the key is to understand what’s happening around you. A good politician (or community organiser we could add) “listens” to the feeling on the ground, and if that doesn’t match your ideas, then reform your ideas. Over the years I’ve watched people go up, people go down...people come in, people drop out...they need to understand its not about them or you, its about the community’*.