CONFERENCE REPORT

ME²PN MINORITY ETHNIC ELDERS’ POLICY NETWORK

SOUTH REGION CONFERENCE
POLICY AND PRACTICE IN AGEING
Wednesday 7th FEBRUARY 2007, CENTRAL HALL WESTMINSTER

“Each one of us can make a difference. We can raise issues with the people who are supposed to give us a service. If that doesn’t work, go higher and higher. Tiny drops of water make a mighty ocean. Even a tidal wave is made up of tiny drops of water. Let us be that tidal wave.”

Dr Efua Taylor, Elders’ Panel

The purpose of the South Region Conference POLICY AND PRACTICE IN AGEING was to engage BME elders and representatives of BME voluntary organisations on key issues and to stimulate delegates to engage in the process of helping to shape the policies that affect them. Delegates were given a clear message that it is essential for them to have a voice in ensuring that reforms are fit for purpose and respect the culture, language, life history and specific needs of BME elders.

Some of the key issues to emerge from the conference were:

- The need for BME elders to have a voice in shaping policies on ageing
- The value placed by policy makers on information from minority ethnic elders and voluntary organisations
- The need for culturally appropriate services on physical activity, mental health, housing and palliative care
- Supporting minority ethnic communities to plan financially for old age
- Increasing the capacity of BME organisations to secure funding

The necessity for BME elders’ voice in shaping policies in ageing

“BME elders are less visible...in the way they stake their claims. PRIAE is here to bring change and I urge everyone to engage in a dynamic way and make the future of elders a better one.”

Dr Chai Patel CBE FRCP, PRIAE’s Patron

Dr Patel told delegates he has been involved in policies pertaining to the elderly for over 20 years since he was a junior doctor. He stressed the importance of perseverance. “Policy should not be seen as a dry issue discussed by academics and politicians. Policy affects you.” He identified improvements but stressed more needs to be done to improve elders’ claim on the national budget, and to help organisations adapt services on a local level.
“Never underestimate the effectiveness you have, which must be based on your experiences. Unless you put forward your case nothing will ever happen, so do not underestimate the power you have.”

Lord Navnit Dholakia OBE DL, PRIAE Vice Chair

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**Elders’ Panel**

Dr Efua Taylor, a mother of five and grandmother of 10, crystallised the views of delegates and those working with BME elders when she told the conference that older people just want the same as everyone else: a roof over their heads, warmth, good food, social interaction, financial security, to feel safe, respected and relevant to their communities.

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**The changing face of health services**

“Information is key and that’s why PRIAE is key. What PRIAE does in an exemplary way is drawing together what is right.”

Professor Antony Sheehan, Director General for Health and Care Partnerships, Department of Health

“I am a bureaucrat involved in the machinery of government. But I hope you won’t see me as too frosty”, said Professor Sheehan as he outlined current and future services for the elderly, noting that the NHS is starting to give elderly people the respect they deserve.

In his keynote speech he said the Department of Health wanted to hear from diverse groups and that PRIAE would be incredibly important in terms of aligning voice, experience, and intelligence to help determine policy.

He emphasised that the government’s modernisation programme indicates a commitment to tailoring service provision and adopting a new approach to care that is appropriate to the life experiences of users with culturally distinct needs.

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**WORKSHOP: Active ageing with mental health**

“We need to develop culturally appropriate services for older people with mental health problems and be careful about the language we use because there is still a lot of stigma attached to mental health in some BME communities”, Angela Richardson from the Care Services Improvement Partnership told attendees.
The main recommendations to come out of the workshop were: encourage more cross-cultural activities among older people; promote community awareness in old age; and use inter-generational games to bring people of all ages together.

**WORKSHOP: Fighting poverty – pensions reform and take up**

One quarter of all pensioners in the UK live below the poverty line. For millions of older people in Britain today poverty means everyday misery. This workshop looked at ways to reduce the risk of poverty.

A key point to come out of the workshop was that not enough people are making provision for older age, too many people are retiring early, and people without adequate pension provision need protection. Women, ethnic minorities and those living in deprived areas are at greater risk of poverty.

**WORKSHOP: Funding of BME organisations**

“The government is very keen to engage with the third sector including community groups and charities, but these groups have a responsibility to work collectively so they can be more effective in terms of presenting their proposals to government. The government cares about BME elders, that is why they set up Capacitybuilders and a specific programme called Improving Reach which has £11m to fund BME organisations.”

*Gilbert George, Director of Research and Planning, Capacitybuilders*

The main recommendations to come out of the workshop were: assist small organisations to complete funding applications to increase their chances of success; and BME organisations should try to network more effectively among themselves to obtain the available information on funding. Smaller groups are less likely to be receiving funding so BME organisations should form alliances to create a louder voice, and effectively target suitable funding.

**WORKSHOP: Housing options for BME elders in London**

It was clear from this workshop that BME elders often feel let down and alienated by their negative experiences of mainstream provision.

A number of key issues for BME elders were identified:

- A lack of knowledge about legislation and rights are the key reasons why many of the elder population face difficulties and this is more acute among BME elders.
- Key housing drivers fail to include the needs of older people from all backgrounds. There is significant neglect of BME elders’ needs because of poor housing planning, lack of political will and national directives, and the lack of legal mechanisms across London for care funding.
- There is a pressing need to lobby local Councillors for dramatic policy change to raise standards for all older people of the general population, and particularly BME elders, so they feel they are living and not just surviving.
WORKSHOP: Journey through end of life – palliative care

This workshop discussed social and cultural attitudes towards death, the implications for older people and end of life care, as well as the psychological needs of patients to help them die peacefully, without pain and with dignity.

A number of key issues for BME elders were identified:

• One problem is that palliative care services are not readily available to all elderly because too often they are focused on those with cancer.
• Securing provision can be a postcode lottery. Inequalities in access also stem from a perception that palliative care is only for cancer patients, a lack of understanding by professionals about who to refer and when, and a reluctance among patients because of fear and misunderstanding.

Shaping the future

"The target over the next two years is to create sub-networks of BME elders and organisations championing the cause of key areas they want to focus on, to create a concentrated approach around funding of organisations, continue systematic collation of information and experiences of BME elders to provide case studies and raise media awareness on issues."

Professor Naina Patel OBE, Founder and Director of PRIAE

"If we get things right for BME elders by definition we’re getting it right for all elders and everybody benefits. It’s about quality and respect for each individual in their cultural setting and belonging to their ethnic group. We need to design services with a lot more care, precision and involvement."

Liam Hughes, PRIAE Trustee

In his concluding remarks, PRIAE Trustee Liam Hughes outlined PRIAE’s effectiveness in influencing decision makers by bringing BME elder issues into mainstream discussions. He said the way forward is to move from generalised to practical discussions about particular themes which make people feel emotionally and physically stronger.