

The Quality Leaders Project: Conference Report

by John Vincent (from "Information for social change", 11)

reports on the Social Exclusion Action Planning Network/Quality Leaders Project Joint Conference 5 June 2000.

Over 40 people attended the first Joint Conference of the Social Exclusion Action Planning Network and the Quality Leaders Project on 5 June 2000 at the London Voluntary Sector Resource Centre.

The afternoon session of the Conference was chaired and introduced by John Pateman, Head of Libraries and Heritage, London Borough of Merton. In welcoming delegates to the Quality Leaders Project [QLP], John said that the key threads for the afternoon were taking action and involving library authorities and their communities. In his authority, they had a very small budget, very few Black staff, yet some 20% of the population are Black - how can action be taken to correct this imbalance?

To give some context to the current work, John highlighted some previous missed opportunities and potential for future action:

* 1995 - the ASLIB report ignored race (and, of course, pre-dated any talk of social exclusion);

* 1998 - the Roach & Morrison report was published, but with very little effect on public libraries' performance

* 2000 - the Public Library Policy and Social Exclusion report is to be launched on 10 July, and will be an opportunity for library authorities and staff to commit to change.

At the same time, there is now a range of guidance and direction which should assist library authorities in providing services to tackle social exclusion effectively. These include the CRE Standards and the McPherson Report. Tackling social exclusion is a national policy priority, monitored through Annual Library Plans, and being developed by DCMS via Libraries for all and the public library standards. In addition, the four eC's of Best Value can also be used to develop relevant services to the local socially excluded communities.

John suggested that library authorities and individuals considered joining the Social Exclusion Action Planning Network, as a key way of becoming part of this development of relevant services; and that library authorities also committed themselves to the QLP.

Shiraz Durrani, Strategy and Commissioning Officer, London Borough of Merton then briefly looked at some of the elements of racial exclusion (covered in greater depth in his paper) and how these had led to the establishing of the QLP. He spoke about the urgent need to "move the centre" (as Ngugi wa Thiong'o puts it), to correct the imbalance of the past 400-500 years, and emphasised that attempts to change society here had led to further problems - for example, the idea of mainstreaming

services to Black people had led instead to the strengthening of a "white mainstream", and attempts at changing funding, such as the introduction of Section 11 funding had marginalised Black staff and services to Black communities. Finally, there was the mystery of the "missing Black librarians": there has been a number of training initiatives aimed at Black staff, yet where, today, are all the Black librarians who supposedly went through these courses?

There is an urgent need for change, and the responsibility for seeing this through rests firmly with elected members and with managers; there needs to be a commitment to these changes, a need for social justice, a need for Black library workers' voices to be heard.

The QLP starts with the needs of the community, and, in working to meet these needs, Black library workers are trained and developed.

Paul Joyce, Director, Management Research Centre, University of North London, then introduced the QLP research project. He said, as background, that the Management Research Centre looks at public sector innovation; another piece of work in which they have been involved has shown that, consistently, despite successes in education, Black people end up in poorer jobs than their white counterparts. It was clear that there were still major inequalities with regard to employment and training, despite some progress in the 1980s in Black staff's getting access to management programmes. Some authorities' policies clearly worked - by 1990/91, there were more Black people in posts in local authorities, but they were bunched in the lower grades. Progress into higher-level posts was very slow.

The crucial questions to look at now are: should we be paying attention to who is getting value from our services? Or employment in providing those services? Or both?

In the past, we have tried to work through employment (recruitment/training, etc), but this has not worked. In addition, in a Best Value climate, the emphasis has to be on assessing and meeting the needs of the local community; therefore, we need to turn round this model, and look at simultaneously serving the whole community and confronting the necessity for new skills and values for public library workers.

The QLP research took place between December 1999 and March 2000; interviews were carried out in three library authorities - Birmingham, Bradford and Merton - with a small sample of Black users and potential users, librarians and senior managers. The library users/potential users were asked to raise unmet needs and problems which were then presented to librarians and senior managers.

The most noticeable result of this piece of work was that everyone had a sense of what the problems were, but little was given in terms of solutions. Librarians and senior managers also often felt that they knew what the problems and solutions were, but, in practice, they often missed the key issues.

The four major issues identified by the research were:

1. problems with the materials stocked and events: many library materials in stock were not relevant (for example an emphasis on stocking Black lifestyle material from the US rather than from the UK), étop 10' music rather than a wider range; and there was a need for a more dynamic relationship with the Black community to ensure that events are relevant;

2. consultation: there did not seem to be much consultation with the community going on, consultation needs to get beyond the official community organisations to 'ordinary' users (otherwise there is a danger that the library will lack real knowledge of the community and what is required), there was a lack of trust by the community (which linked into the pessimism expressed by staff), and there was "consultation fatigue" amongst many key community groups and individuals;

3. there are limited opportunities in libraries for Black library workers.

4. the treatment of service users by the staff (although many of the Black people interviewed saw this as a problem for everyone, not just how Black people were treated).

Dean Bartlett, Deputy Director, Management Research Centre, University of North London, then looked at what UNL's involvement in the QLP might be. He said that the QLP was rooted in action, and that the outcome of the QLP needs to be very effective: to achieve this, it needs to be evaluated thoroughly, and this is where UNL came in. The evaluation of the QLP would involve:

1. an assessment of how far the needs of under-represented groups were met;

2. evaluation of what training is, and what is needed for Black library workers (this is not necessarily similar to the training required by the usual management development programmes);

3. an evaluation of the QLP within the context of Best Value (looking, for example, at the robustness of any Best Value indicators).

Paul Joyce concluded by asking if Best Value was a burden or an opportunity - if we are to develop services within the Best Value framework, then everyone should be getting value. Best Value can help you mainstream your efforts - for example, try to get your indicators included in the authority's Best Value Plan.

Finally, he asked if the QLP was feasible - there is enough evidence to show that there are some serious issues which have been overlooked, and that library services can tackle them: what is needed now is management commitment.

In the questions session that followed, there were firstly some general points:

1. as Black staff rise up the systems, they experience greater

isolation

2. many Black staff find themselves in dead-ends, leading to disillusionment (and possibly therefore poorer services)
3. the system needs to be changed to allow for greater positive action
4. targets should be set and monitored
5. no one should forget the extent to which discrimination plays its part.

These were followed by specific Questions about the QLP:

1. will it involve setting quotas of Black staff? No.
2. timescales for Stages 2 and 3 of the Project: Stage 2 will last about 6 months, and will involve the preparation of the team to carry out the Project. Stage 3 was expected to last about 18 months, and would be the implementation of the Project.
3. funding: not likely from the Home Office, so Shiraz is pursuing other sources. In addition, participating authorities would be asked to contribute towards the costs (obviously, the more authorities that became involved, the lower the costs for each would become).
4. six authorities have expressed interest so far: Birmingham, Bradford, Coventry, Kensington & Chelsea, Merton, Sutton.
5. Birmingham staff thought that the QLP was an invaluable piece of practical research which is accessible and different - by its very nature, the QLP will ensure that issues are moved on. There were concerns that, as a Project, it would become time-limited, but we would need to find ways of moving it all on: being part of a national Project gave it status.
6. what kind of project could the QLP include? Starting with the research report, there are lots of ideas around stock and service development.

The way forward

1. the 6-months development project would be led by libraries with support from UNL via evaluation, therefore commitment at this stage by elected members and senior managers is vital.
2. an Advisory Group was being set up: the Head of Service and/or senior managers needed to be involved in this to give their commitment to the QLP. The Advisory Group would decide the success factors for evaluating the 6-months projects.
3. participating authorities would need to commit:

* support from elected Members and Heads of Service

* resources to create the part-time Project team

* a 6-month part-time secondment for a Black library worker to head the team

* mentoring of the team leader by the 'sponsor' (the Head/Assistant Head of Service)

* contributions to cover the cost of the project

4. participating authorities would develop local performance indicators, within a Best Value context, for assessing services for the Black community

5. a Website for the QLP is being created

6. the Advisory Group will meet on 20 July, with the aim of starting the first round of QLP 6-months projects in September 2000.

- John Vincent, Social Exclusion Action Planning Network