

Name of project/group

BEN Rainbow Network

Type of project

Community empowerment

Location

England

What was involved

Over the last 2 years BEN has trained over 230 ethnic minority environmental advocates and heritage/environmental professionals across England. This has helped participants to engage with the natural and historic environment, developing their skills to access new knowledge and expertise, and work with professionals from different sectors. Natural and historic environment professionals were also trained to help them engage effectively with ethnic minority communities to enable multi-faceted activities integrating social, cultural, environmental and economic dimensions. The professionals involved are now better positioned to enable equality of access for ethnic minorities.

The BEN Rainbow Network of advocate and professionals are now planning to engage and increasingly widen their scope to enable increased ethnic minority civic participation. The aim of the network is to create a web of empowered representatives who can act as a bridge between ethnic minorities and professionals to increase engagement, thereby releasing benefits to the community, as well as their contribution to the environment as a whole. In terms of the historic environment, the network will give ethnic minorities a greater voice in shaping their local area. The network provides a vehicle through which the historic environment can offer advice and guidance to groups involved in potential neighbourhood development plans. It can also provide advice and guidance on the views of ethnic minorities to local and central government on issues affecting the historic environment, and research and communicate knowledge about local areas.



Achievements

Historically, ethnic minorities have had lower participation rates in the historic environment. The lack of contact with key processes that determine the shape of the environment has added to any motivational barriers. The BEN training was therefore two pronged to deal with the barriers it considers ethnic minorities may face in participating. It focused on knowledge and experience, but also sought to address motivation. Therefore the training provided direct experience of inspirational sites, and showed participants the opportunities available to communities from the historic environment. Participants' motivation will be the driver for the network to continually break new ground, opening up benefits to ethnic minority communities.

One of the features of the BEN Rainbow Network is that advocates and professionals are committed to mutual support to increase ethnic minority participation in the historic environment. The network is now in place. Its future necessarily includes increasing knowledge, networking, and experience, working towards increasing engagement with areas of concern.

The BEN Rainbow Network is a new vehicle for increasing ethnic minority civic participation. All advocates have organised activities including:

- Setting up a faith and environment forum, Blackburn
- Leadership training for young people, Manchester
- Walking and arts project using parks and greens spaces, including historic properties, Bristol
- Applying for a Networks Development Officer in the North East Region
- Photography competition - what people love about their area/city in Gloucester
- Various healthy walk programmes in local parks
- Visits to newly discovered historic sites, e.g. Bamburgh Castle
- Application for an inter-faith project in Birmingham, using heritage and natural environment as a focus
- Environmental audits of community centres
- Food and community heritage projects, London
- Cultural gardens, Leeds

New knowledge gained by advocates included:

- Understanding issues - care and protection of the environment, conservation, climate change, volunteering, educational programmes
- Campaigning and advocacy
- The range of organisations within the sector and accessing expertise and opportunities they offer for engagement
- The design of multi-faceted projects integrating social, cultural, environmental and economic aspects relating to the needs of their communities, and their potential contribution to the care and protection of the environment

The new knowledge gained by environmental/heritage professionals included:

- Understanding issues such as - culture and religion, the history of arrival, and its impact and role of community organisations
- Effective outreach and engagement
- The reality of specific ethnic minorities, and their age and generational stratas
- Engagement with multi-faceted activities led by ethnic minorities
- The impact and potential meaning of adapting activities
- The need to:
 - purposefully introduce the full range of activities
 - enable contact with the natural and historic environment

- communicate effectively through the appropriate design and accessible language



Future plans

The future of the BEN Rainbow Network:

- A steering group is being set up to identify future directions and developments.
- A network support officer post is being considered to enable ongoing mentoring and act as a focus for network development.
- Discussions will be held with interested partners to develop the network.
- Future projects are being considered to extend the training of existing advocates and professionals.
- Potential projects are being considered to increase the number of advocates and environmental/heritage professionals.
- The Rainbow Network Project will be highlighted as an example of good practice at future events and conferences.

Lessons Learnt

The training and development of the network has been received with great enthusiasm. However BEN considers that a challenge for engagement remains in terms of the lack of staff capacity within organised ethnic minority community groups. In practice BEN has found that it often needs to engage with key individuals within community groups, and the pressure of workload can mean that the enthusiasm to engage is in competition with communities' diverse needs.

Within community groups there is a vision and will to cascade information and train volunteers to be advocates alongside the workers to strengthen their capacity, and BEN considers that with more support it would be possible to progress this, It would also be helpful to train an increased range of both professionals and advocates to underpin the development of the network. The current financial climate and its effect on the resources of the heritage sector pose challenges in this regard.

Project contact

<http://www.ben-network.org.uk/>

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