

Racial Equality and Engagement with Police Scotland: Evidence Submission from the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights

The Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER) is a Scottish strategic anti-racism organisation which works to eliminate racial discrimination and promote racial justice across Scotland. We were significantly involved in the development of the Scottish Government's [Race Equality Framework for Scotland](#), which has several goals addressing racial equality in the justice sector. We have participated in consultations on the Strategic Police Priorities, the Policing 2026 Strategy, and the development of Police Scotland's equality outcomes under the Public Sector Equality Duties. We have also recently engaged with Police Scotland on issues related to recruitment, hate crime reporting, external advisory groups, and engagement with BME communities.

Our primary concern in relation to Police Scotland's approach to engagement with BME communities is the importance of having a more representative workforce. If police officers do not accurately reflect the demographics of Scotland, engagement will always be challenging. Beyond this, measures can be taken to move towards genuine, sustained engagement with communities.

Race Equality Framework for Scotland

Several of the key goals set by the Scottish Government in its Race Equality Framework are relevant to this roundtable evidence session:

- Access to justice and safety for minority ethnic individuals is improved and the effectiveness of the justice process in dealing with racism is reviewed.
- Scotland's police workforce is better able to tackle racism and promote equality and community cohesion in the delivery of police services.
- Police Scotland's workforce better reflects the diversity of its communities.

CRER believes there are four key improvements that must be enacted by Police Scotland to meet these goals: improving representation with the police force, improving police officers' responses to racist incidents, improving collaboration between the police and the third sector, and improving the accessibility and transparency of the police services.

A representative police force

For BME communities, a critical aspect of engagement with Police Scotland is ensuring that police services are reflective of Scotland's communities. Only 1% of police officers, police staff, and special constables have a BME background,¹ relatively unchanged since 2013. The proportion of BME police officers has never risen above 1%. A lack of diversity in this respect is perhaps the most significant barrier for BME communities in engaging with police services locally and nationally.

¹ Police Scotland (2017). [Equality and Diversity Mainstreaming Progress Report](#).

Ethnic origin of Police Scotland police officers (2016 data)²

	White Scottish	All Other White British	White Minority	BME	Choose not to disclose	Unknown
Current staff	83%	9%	1%	1%	4%	1%
Applications received	80%	11%	2%	3%	2%	2%
Newly appointed staff	61%	9%	2%	1%	<1%	26%

Police Scotland Equality and Diversity Mainstreaming Report

Further to this, we know there is a particular problem with retention of BME staff once recruited. This needs to be examined, as if the pattern continues, any additional efforts made to increase recruitment may not lead to a more representative workforce. There is no point in bettering recruitment if BME police officers and staff continue to leave Police Scotland in high proportions.

This lack of representation has a knock-on effect across the criminal justice system. It affects how BME communities perceive Police Scotland and safety in the community, and how police officers engage with and act towards BME individuals and groups. Furthermore, it contributes to the perception (and experience) of institutional racism within Police Scotland. If Scotland wants to be a nation in which all of its citizens feel safe, protected, and included, then concerted and deliberate action to increase BME representation within Police Scotland is needed.

Police Scotland should consider further positive action measures, effective bespoke recruitment campaigns, and the internal culture of the organisation to address this severe under-representation.

A responsive police force

For many individuals, the first encounter with police will determine their perception of Police Scotland and whether they are open to additional engagement opportunities. For BME communities, a poor response to a racist incident or hate crime fuels distrust in the police services, and causes communities and individuals to feel unsafe and isolated. Responding to incidents effectively and efficiently should be a priority for Police Scotland when considering improvements to engagement.

In our experience, many people who report ongoing racial harassment (often culminating in violence or serious damage to property) have previously complained to the police services about issues such as verbal harassment or minor vandalism. These complaints are often not resolved at an early stage or not taken seriously. Not only does this discourage individuals from reporting more serious incidents to police, it also contributes to an apprehension of and distrust in police services.

In one such case, the person being harassed had complained repeatedly and no action had yet been taken against the perpetrators. When he was eventually attacked on his doorstep, he fought back. The police arrested him instead of the perpetrators, and held him for some time. He eventually received an apology, but this does not change the lack of support and unfair treatment he experienced throughout his engagement with the police services.

² Ibid.

We are also aware of cases in which people have been discouraged from reporting a crime as being racially motivated; usually this occurs in face-to-face contact with officers, with the officers putting forward alternative motivations or asserting their own opinions in a way which diminishes the complaint being made. For example, one person who received a threatening, racist email was repeatedly asked if it could be 'just a prank' and whether it was 'worth the hassle' to pursue the complaint. Being treated in this way and having racist incidents invalidated contributes to a belief that the police do not understand racism and that engagement on race equality issues is futile.

Individuals should be encouraged to report 'low level' incidents, and police services should respond appropriately and take allegations of racist intent seriously. If not, BME communities will feel as though it is useless to report racist incidents and will hesitate to report more significant offences and further engage with the police.

A collaborative police force

Given the lack of representation of BME communities in Police Scotland, it is critical that officers partake in purposeful and long-term engagement, both with communities themselves and with third sector bodies who represent them.

CRER is aware of some positive steps in collaborative working between Police Scotland and the third sector. For example, in Glasgow, the Community Planning Partnership has made efforts to engage with BME communities in partnership with local BME organisations. Of particular note was an engagement meeting in which a police officer was able to listen and respond to community concerns and individual complaints. As well as feeling that their voices had been heard, community members who had problems previously with the police greatly appreciated the efforts of this officer to support them in addressing outstanding issues. While public bodies often dislike hearing negative messages from community members and therefore try to frame engagement as an improvement process, this open and honest dialogue was much more beneficial, and allowed problems to be identified and relationships mended.

However, there are also areas in which collaboration between Police Scotland and the third sector has weakened since the restructuring of previous regional forces. Many BME community organisations report that while they used to have good relationships with Community Liaison Officers, these relationships have now broken down due to reassignment or changes in the work of the officer, and no other officer has replaced them.

To these points, a sustained partnership approach with the third sector can allow police services to learn from communities where failures have occurred, and allow individuals to feel heard, understood, and respected by the police.

Throughout the engagement process, it is important that police services not only consult community leaders, as this leaves out significant portions of communities, especially BME women and young people. Engagement across and within communities is crucial. Furthermore, it must be recognised that BME groups are not homogenous. Police services will need to engage with all communities, and not assume that the issues are the same across the board.

An accessible police force

In addition to going into communities themselves and engaging with individuals, efforts must also be made to ensure the workings of Police Scotland are accessible and transparent. The lack of representation in Police

Scotland can make this difficult. However, there are definite actions the police could take to ensure it is accessible (and accountable) to communities.

We are aware of the designation of LGBT Liaison Officers, who engage with the LGBT community and lead on related equality issues. CRER is not aware of a race-equivalent at present, but we believe the appointment of particular police officers who would lead on race equality issues would be measurably beneficial.

Communities have noted that, in the past, there has been particular officers who built relationships with and inroads to their community, but then transfer or are reassigned. This damages the trusting relationship that has been fostered, and the process begins again. Designating particular officers as Race Liaison Officers, and ensuring they are a consistent presence in communities would go a way towards making Police Scotland more accessible.

Efforts should also be made, where possible, to engage directly with BME communities themselves. For instance, the promotion of third party reporting centres, in which individuals can report a hate crime to local community or third sector body rather than the police, can have an unintended consequence of limiting engagement with the police. Rather than encourage BME individuals who are uncomfortable reporting directly to the police to use these centres, consideration should be given to why individuals feel this way. Efforts should be made to repair damaged relationships and improve engagement, rather than encouraging groups to report to third parties, which carries the underlying message that the police will not be responsive and understanding. Improving accessibility should be key.

Alongside this, an aspect of bettering engagement between BME groups and the police is improving transparency. CRER is aware of a number of police steering groups that are not transparent with their agenda or membership. Publication of minutes and membership of these groups would be a significant step forward for accountability and transparency. Additionally, more transparent data collection, monitoring, and publication would allow for a collaborative consideration of race equality issues, which would, if done correctly, improve engagement.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Police Scotland must root out any and all institutional racism from its structures, policies, and practices. High ranking members of Police Scotland have denied that institutional racism exists, which indicates a misunderstanding of the issue (as articulated in the Macpherson Inquiry), as well as a refusal to acknowledge the experiences of BME individuals and the discrimination they have felt. The problem of institutional racism (both within Police Scotland itself, through its low levels of BME staff, recruitment, and retention, and within its service provision, through its treatment of and engagement with BME communities and handling of racist incidents) must be named and acknowledged before it can be addressed.

Contact

For further information on this issue, please contact:

Rebecca Marek, Policy and Parliamentary Officer, CRER

rebecca@crer.org.uk

0141 418 6530