

After Lawrence

Kevin Wong comments on implementation of the Lawrence Inquiry Report recommendations by police and local authorities.

'Britain has a mountain to climb before we have a decent, modern multicultural society we can all be proud of.' Tony Blair 1999

Sir William Macpherson's inquiry into the murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence has raised the standard of racial justice and race equality and, as we ease into the next century, has turned the spotlight not just on Police services but on all public services.

There is little new or original about the recommendations from the Lawrence Inquiry Report. Commentators have noted their similarity to those encapsulated in the Scarman Report (1981)¹. What is different on this occasion is the willingness of senior politicians and senior figures in public services to take the recommendations seriously; to implement them and be seen to be implementing them.

Sixty of the seventy recommendations from the Lawrence Inquiry report apply to Police services, many of these apply also to 'other criminal justice agencies', others apply specifically to the judicial process, Crown Prosecution Service, local authorities, local education authorities and community safety partnerships. While there is a numerical imbalance in favour of recommendations for the police, other public bodies are taking a wider view of their application. The Local Government Association (LGA) Guidance Document² identifies 30 recommendations that apply either directly or indirectly to local authorities.

The purpose of the recommendations can be broadly categorised into: those that respond directly to the inadequacies of the Metropolitan Police investigation; those that seek to challenge racism and institutionalised racism within public services; those that seek to enhance the effectiveness of measures to deal with racial attack and harassment; and those that seek to eradicate the formation of racism amongst children and young people.

In many cases the

recommendations draw on existing good practice, but their inclusion within the report has established national benchmarks and standards. The definition of racist incident as '...any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person'³ provides a nationally recognised definition that all agencies can subscribe to and which can accelerate the process of ensuring that 'all information about racist incidents and crimes is shared and is readily available to all agencies'⁴

The test for 'Lawrence' will inevitably be how many of the recommendations will be implemented by agencies across the country and how well they are implemented. On this the Government is taking a lead; in December 1999 the Home Secretary, Jack Straw announced a new bill to bring Police Services within the scope of the Race Relations Act 1976⁵. He has also set two national policing priorities for 2000/2001 one of which is 'To increase the trust and confidence in policing amongst minority ethnic communities'⁶

Police services, which feature most prominently within the recommendations, are responding to the challenge spurred on by 'Lawrence' and the HMIC reports 'Winning the race'⁷ and 'Winning the race revisited'⁸. No doubt the new national policing priority will add extra impetus to their efforts.

Away from London and the high profile 'lay advisors group' established by the Metropolitan Police, other police services have adopted a less well publicised but inclusive approach to initiating change within their services.

On Merseyside the police service has set up a community and race relations task force headed by the Deputy Chief Constable and have co-opted 35 'expert advisors' drawn from local community and voluntary sector agencies to work with officers on implementing the Lawrence Inquiry Report recommendations and those outlined in the two HMIC reports. The recommendations have been assigned to eleven task groups for implementation, these are overseen by a quality assurance team and ultimately by a steering group chaired by the Deputy Chief Constable. 'Expert advisors' are involved at all levels of the process and their participation has been co-ordinated through the independent Merseyside Racial Harassment Prevention Unit.

Aside from the Police, local authorities appear to be making greatest efforts to respond to 'Lawrence'. However, to date LARRIE (Local Authorities Race

Relations Information Exchange) have only received 'notice from 60 authorities that they are working on the Lawrence Inquiry'.⁹

Of these Leicester, with a relatively large black and racial minority population, is proposing to implement all of the recommendations from the June LGA guidance document. Plymouth, with a black and racial minority population of 0.9%, has established an anti-racism task force and Greenwich, the local authority which takes in Eltham where Stephen Lawrence was murdered, is developing a multi-sector plan to facilitate a co-ordinated and rapid response to racism.

While there are clearly differing ways in which agencies can and should implement the Lawrence Inquiry recommendations, 'Inaction is not an option...'¹⁰ irrespective of the size of local black and racial minority populations. If agencies want help and guidance, they can turn to their local race equality councils, local multi-agency racial harassment groups where they exist or to national bodies such as NACRO's Race Unit or Crime and Social Policy Section.

The Lawrence Inquiry report is a clarion call for change and for greater understanding. In a world of competing priorities the pursuit of race equality and racial justice must be sustained and all of us must ensure that the opportunity offered by the Lawrence Inquiry Report is not squandered.

Kevin Wong is a Programme Development Manager for NACRO's Crime and Social Policy Section and Project Manager of the Safer Merseyside Partnership Social Programmes Unit.

Notes:

- 1 The Brixton Disorders - Lord Scarman 1981
- 2 Initial Guidance for Local Authorities: Responding to the Lawrence Inquiry and Home Secretary's Action Plan - Local Government Association et al June 1999
- 3 Recommendation 12 - The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry February 1999
- 4 Recommendation 17 - The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry February 1999
- 5 Recommendation 11 - The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry February 1999
- 6 Recommendation 1 - The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry February 1999
- 7 Winning the Race - Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary 1996
- 8 Winning the Race revisited - Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary 1999
- 9 The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry - further guidance for Local Authorities. Local Government Association et al November 1999.
- 10 Ibid