Written evidence submitted by Dorset Race Equality Council

Summary

- Dorset Race Equality Council is a charity dedicated to eliminating race and religious based discrimination and promoting equal opportunities and social cohesion across Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole. We do this through case work, supporting cultural groups and working with partner agencies.
- Since May 2016 we have received 29 reports of race or religion-related discrimination or hate crime/ incidents.
- Through our contact with the community we have identified numerous barriers to reporting hate crime (detailed below). Partnership working is key to overcoming these issues.
- We have personally experienced the role that social media companies can play in preventing the prosecution of race hate crimes. However, we have also witnessed good practice that can be emulated.
- Our experience of challenging the attitudes that underpin hate crime are a testimony to the value of community-led partnership work.

Who we are

1. Dorset Race Equality Council is a charity operating in Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole that works to promote strong, safe and sustainable communities in which diversity is valued and people of every race, ethnicity, nationality, religion and belief have equal opportunities and live free from discrimination.

2. Our aims are as follows:

   - Ensure that ethnic and religious minority individuals and communities in Dorset feel empowered to challenge racism and discrimination and have access to support and information

   - Promote the celebration of ethnic, cultural and religious diversity in Dorset society and strengthen local ethnic minority organisations

   - Work towards making public, private and voluntary sector agencies in Dorset fully representative of, and responsive to, the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of the population; offering equal opportunities and equal access to all.

3. We achieve these aims through the provision of advice, information and advocacy for individuals; capacity building for cultural groups and training or other strategic Equality and Diversity input into key services and institutions.
4. We have particular expertise in the area of hate crime due to our role as a third-party reporting centre and we are active member in ‘Prejudice Free Dorset’: an inter-agency panel dedicated to tackling hate crime through addressing barriers to reporting. We also participate in the Wessex Crown Prosecution Service Hate Crime Scrutiny panel which provides independent community oversight of the prosecution of hate crimes.

5. In addition to these activities we organise two quarterly meetings between Dorset Police and key community groups: the ‘Muslim contact group’ and the ‘BME contact group.’ These meetings provide a forum for discussing issues related to hate crime and community policing. We have also liaised with senior police officers and the Police and Crime Commissioner to offer strategic input around boosting reporting of hate crime.

The barriers that prevent individuals from reporting hate crime, and measures to improve reporting rates

6. In May we reviewed the way in which we collect information regarding hate crime and incidents to incorporate all anecdotal information provided by community members, as well as our discrimination cases. Since May 2016 we have received 29 reports of racially and/or religiously motivated hate crime, hate incidents or discrimination, only two of which had been previously reported to the Police. Five of these reports referred to multiple incidents experienced by individuals or members of a particular community group. Victims included Muslims and ethnic minorities of Black, Asian and European origin, as well as one White British person and the incidents took place across Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole.

7. Through our extensive engagement with communities around the issue of hate crime reporting, we have identified the following barriers:

- Low-level abuse is so common-place for some individuals (e.g. name-calling) that it becomes accepted as a part of daily life
- People don’t always realise that they can report low-level abuse, such as name-calling, to the Police, i.e. that it is a Police matter
- People don’t think there is any point in reporting abuse to the Police if they don’t have evidence (either of the incident itself or of the race-hate element)
People can be reluctant to go to the ‘hassle’ of calling 101 because of long waiting times and having to repeat their stories to different people and they can also be reluctant to provide personal details.

People don’t want to ‘make a fuss’ and exacerbate tensions in the community/attract further problems.

Some people mistrust the Police, either because of negative experiences with the Police in this country or abroad.

Undoubtedly additional barriers exists for those who do not speak English and for undocumented migrants.

8. The ‘normalisation’ of hate crime and hate incidents is a major barrier to reporting and people will sometimes wait until harassment and abuse have escalated to the point of violence before they make contact with the Police. Coordinated work with private, public and voluntary sector partners is needed to convey the clear message that verbal abuse is a crime and it has consequences. For example, in 2013 Dorset Race Equality Council participated in a partnership initiative with the Borough of Poole and Dorset Police to produce anti-racism stickers and posters for display in taxis and take-aways bearing messages about the fines and convictions received by offenders for racist behaviour. Such partnership initiatives can also be used to convey other key messages around the process and impact of hate crime reporting, to encourage victims to come forward.

9. At Dorset REC, one key barrier that we have identified is the use of the terminology ‘hate crime’ and ‘hate incident,’ which can be confusing for the general public because they suggest that only those offences committed by a person who literally ‘hates’ their victim are worthy of reporting. For example, in race-related cases the use of the term ‘racial incident’ is much easier to understand.

10. Partnership working between the Police and third party reporting centres is an effective way of capturing much greater detail about the nature and prevalence of hate crime and incidents in our community: organisations that have a relationship of trust with community members are well-placed to draw out the relevant information and either support people to report their experiences directly to the Police, or capture details that would otherwise be lost in cases where the victim decides not to come forward.

11. However, our role goes beyond third-party reporting alone, to one of relationship-building and mediation between Police and minority communities. People have come to us to report all kinds of issues with the Police: from harassment and assault
to racial profiling in the use of stop and search powers at the more extreme end of
the scale, to poor customer service and lengthy ‘101’ waiting time at the other.

12. It is important to recognise that BME people do not only contact the Police about
hate crime. Like any other member of the public they may make contact about a
stolen bike, a noise disturbance or any number of incidents. The response they
receive will influence their trust in the Police and the likelihood of them reporting
any sensitive race-hate issues in the future. For example, we intervened upon one
occasion when a minority religious institution contacted us to complain that they
had reported fly-tipping to the Police and officers had refused to intervene: referring
them instead to the council (standard practice). However, the religious leader was
most upset about this issue not being taken seriously and the resulting conflict
threatened to jeopardise a relationship with this community that had been
painstakingly nurtured over many years. We liaised with the Police to secure a
successful resolution to this matter and preserve good relations: sometimes it is
necessary to go the extra mile to build the trust of a community and this will pay
dividends in all aspects of policing.

The role of social media companies and other online platforms in helping to
identify online sources of hate crime and to prevent online incidents from
escalating

The problem: a case study

13. In 2014 Dorset Race Equality Council and a local community group we support were
subjected to racially-motivated abuse on Twitter. We reported the issue to the Police
in May and two months later we received a follow up email from the investigating
officer offering her apologies for the delay and stating:

14. “I am doing some investigation which in itself due to data protection is time
consuming, to obtain the details from Twitter may take some time as Twitter is not
based in the UK, and even when we fill in our forms they seem to always ask us
further questions before letting us have the information.”

15. A further two months passed before we received the following email:

“Apolgies for the delay, I was hoping that in the past week I would have a response,
but still I have had nothing from Twitter with regards to the information that we
have requested.”
16. If I may explain why indeed this is taking so long....When we deal with a social media site we have to apply to them for the information, and so dependent on where the site is based depends on the laws and regulations that we have to apply to gain that information. Unfortunately Twitter is not a UK based company and therefore we have to make an application first abiding by our laws and for the application to be approved by a Dorset Police superintendent. We then have to apply to Twitter, they then respond asking us to comply with their own regulations and also laws in their country. Their policy is that when they have an application for data they will alert/inform the user that the police are investigating and have applied for some information, of course we have to request that this does not take place and give justifications. We have completed all the relevant forms and requested that they delay telling the user. We are now awaiting the information from them, I would like to reassure you that we have been prompt in responding to Twitter, but they are not so prompt responding.

17. The application that we do is authorised through until the 13th of October and if we still are awaiting information from Twitter, we will of course reapply. I am hopeful that we will obtain the information from them eventually.”

18. Another month later and there was a glimmer of hope: “I had an email from HQ asking for the IP details of the Tweets that you had received, so these have been sent to them. It seems outrageous that they are taking so long to give us the information, although they are very large company and will have no doubt numerous requests for data like this from all around the world.”

19. But ultimately the case was closed unsuccessfully at the end of January 2015: “I have this afternoon spoken to the Single point of contact (SPOC) at HQ. This is the team who I submit my applications to for information. We have to follow the Regulations of Investigations Act when we apply to another company for information, to do this I submit the application, and it has to be authorised by a superintendent. It is then sent to the SPOC at HQ then to the SPOC for the company to which the request needs to go. I have reviewed the Tweets and the applications that I have submitted and found the following:

20. The data that Twitter sent us was the IP address at the time of registering with the Twitter account, that was 2010. Unfortunately Hotmail and Virgin only retain the IP log on for 12 months, and therefore they would not be able to give us any information based on the IP address. Twitter do not hold every IP address for every tweet as they do not have the capacity within their servers to do this as millions of tweets are sent every day.
21. I also noted that the tweet sent as 21-03-14 was sent by Haze on 5th of May 2010, so we would not be able to get any information regarding this from either Hotmail or Twitter.

22. I had a long conversation with the SPOC, as like you I was concerned about the time that it has taken to ascertain some detail, and that detail is not achieving very much. Basically, the Home Office are aware of the situation involving applications for data to companies outside the UK, and they are working with them to try and come to agreements wherever they can. The issue is of course that a large majority of companies like Twitter, Facebook, Microsoft, do not have to comply with our laws or regulations and so in theory they are able to say No to any requests that we make. We are having to justify the reasons as to our application, and also in Twitter circumstances to request that they breach their own agreement with the user to hold off telling them that the police have a interest in the account. I have been assured that the Home office are aware and are approaching these companies in hope to come to agreements and common ground so that we are then more efficient in investigating crime.

23. Based on previous applications and the large amount of work done so far, I do not feel that further requests from Hotmail and Virgin will lead us any closer to “Dave Haze”. We have intelligence information in the form of the screen shots and the tweets that we are able to securely retain should “he” reappear.”

24. Please forgive the lengthy text on this matter, but we feel that it really serves to illustrate the sort of frustrations that people experience when they report online abuse. Needless to say many victims would not persist, as we did, for over 8 months in what was ultimately an unsuccessful investigation and a frustrating waste of Police time. It is even less likely that anyone would retain any faith in the ability of the justice system to prosecute such crimes after such an experience.

   Good practice

25. On the other hand, at Dorset REC, we have also managed to secure some positive progress through our work with the local newspaper ‘Bournemouth Daily Echo’ regarding the monitoring and control of their website and social media to prevent them from being used as an online platform for racist abuse and incitement to racial hatred.
26. As a result of our intervention, the Bournemouth Daily Echo now disables the comments facility on their website for certain articles that historically generate a lot of racially abusive comments: particularly those reporting on Gypsy, Romany and Traveller (GRT) encampments. Facebook does not allow comments to be disabled but the media company has now created a list of ‘banned words’ and comments including them are not visible. All stories containing reference to GRTs come with a warning that offensive comments will not be tolerated and offenders will be banned and readers are encouraged to report any offensive posts that slip through the net so that they can be removed at the earliest opportunity. However, there is still no dedicated member of staff monitoring social media at the Bournemouth Echo and their system does rely on members of the public ‘reporting’ comments, so it remains an imperfect system.

27. Social media sites can also facilitate the creation of virtual communities in which victims of hate crime can share experiences and offer mutual support. One such initiative is the ‘Worrying signs’ Facebook page that was created in response to the national spike in race hate incidents following the referendum. There is growing recognition that the new technologies that have been exploited by the perpetrators of hate crime also offer a wealth of untapped potential for those working to tackle these issues by promoting diversity and acceptance and seeking justice for victims.

The role of the voluntary sector, community representatives and other frontline organisations in challenging attitudes that underpin hate crime

28. We are glad to see that the important role of the voluntary sector in challenging hate crime has been recognised in the 2016 Hate Crime Action Plan with support for the work of organisations such as the Anne Frank Trust, Streetwise and Kick it Out, among others. We would also like to advocate for greater support of the smaller, more local community-based organisations, such as Dorset Race Equality Council, who are under threat as a result of cuts to support from traditional local authority funders, despite offering an irreplaceable service to the communities to which we belong.

29. Community work is most effective when it is carried out by the community for the community. Organisations such as Dorset REC are in a unique position to facilitate genuinely grassroots projects that are tailored to address the specific needs of our local communities. For example, in line with the national trend, over recent years Dorset has experienced an increase in hostility towards people of Muslim faith. This is not necessarily reflected in official police statistics, but we know this from the first-hand testimonies of the people we work with on a daily basis.
30. We have been working with these people to identify local priorities for a ‘One Community’ project that will address the most pressing issues for our Muslim communities (we are even hiring Bengali and Arabic-speaking Community Consultants to make sure all voices are heard); we have used our extensive network of local contacts to gain support from named contacts in key agencies such as local authorities, the Police, education providers and voluntary sector partners; and we have consulted with a broad cross-sector of the general public from diverse faith and cultural groups to people attending academic events or community festivals: they have told us what exactly is needed to make this project work most effectively in Dorset and there is no substitute for this local knowledge.