

COMPANION NOTES 04

# MISSION-DRIVEN RACE EQUITY IN MAINSTREAM CIVIL SOCIETY

Home Truths 2 - Race Equity Series  
For the anti-racist curious

**ADVISORY NOTICE**

Racism is complex. There is no simple fix. We recommend that these companion notes be read reflectively. And please aim high to help mainstream civil society play its part in building a life-affirming anti-racist future.

## Key points

**1**

If civil society is to undertake long-term work for anti-racism and race equity then these have to become core issues for the sector.

**2**

Embedding anti-racism and race equity deep into mainstream civil society organisations is not straightforward. But its organisational status can be reality checked. For example, whether it is institutionalised or reliant on a few individual champions?

**3**

Ultimately, making race equity a mission-driven pursuit, requires a shift in institutional culture. Culture change requires ambitious and steadfast organisations that are prepared to take the work of anti-racism and race equity to heart.

## Introduction

There are moments in time when racism and anti-racism attract a lot of attention and interest. These peaks often follow moments of crises, such as COVID 19; the murder of George Floyd in 2020; and racist and xenophobic riots in England and Wales in the summer of 2024.

But attention is not the same as action.  
And curiosity is not the same as commitment.

What is more, history suggests that, compared to racism, mainstream efforts for race equity lack a certain staying power.

One explanation for this stamina shortage is that mainstream organisations treat racism as a sideline rather than a core issue. Such efforts as there are may be half-hearted and time-limited.

But, what would it look like if anti-racism and race equity became fundamental to mission for mainstream civil society organisations? And how might we tell if organisations were heading in that direction?

## No straightforward fix

In previous parts of the [Race Equity Series](#), we have explored different ways in which organisations can take serious action on anti-racism.

A number of mainstream civil society organisations have, in one way or another, committed themselves to becoming anti-racist as part of delivering their mission. For example, in 2021, [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) announced that:

“We cannot truly be an anti-poverty organisation unless we are also an anti-racist organisation.”

In doing so they draw the line between racist ideologies and practices and experiences of poverty today.

Elsewhere, organisations, such as the [Wellcome Trust](#), have acknowledged past complicity with racism.

Facing up to racism is critical. But there is much else to do for institutions to make anti-racism and race equity part and parcel of who they are and what they do.

And the practical work of embedding anti-racism into institutional life can upturn an organisation and make profound new demands on it. And, perversely, the more that anti-racism is understood as a departure from the status quo, the more there may be resistance within organisations.

This idea of internal resistance was laid bare in the Home Truths 2 Chatham House [session](#) with anti-racist and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion leads.

All the participants worked in organisations with officially sanctioned efforts towards anti-racism and race equity. However, there was much discussion about the ways in which people inside organisations – actively or passively, gently or aggressively – push back against change.

From this session, and our [broader research](#), we can conclude that institutional progress on anti-racism and race equity is precarious and comes with no guarantees.

## Positive signs

While things are not straightforward, there are some ways in which mainstream civil society organisations can be judged to be moving anti-racism and race equity (from the sidelines) to something more central to who they are.

### RESPONSES OVER REACTIONS

An important feature of embedded and mission-driven approaches to anti-racism and race equity is steadfastness and consistency. In the aftermath of the murder of [George Floyd](#), many mainstream civil society organisations scrambled to respond with newfound energy to fight racism.

If a crisis jolts an organisation into meaningful action in a sustained way that is positive – even though one can ask where was this commitment beforehand. But the risk is organisations that react because of high profile events may do so in a performative way. And when the spotlight fades institutions may revert back to inaction.

By way of contrast, the organisation moving towards a mission-driven anti-racist approach will avoid scrambled or face-saving actions. They prioritise long-term responses and steadfastness over short-term reactivity.

### MORE THAN THE PEOPLE INVOLVED

Another positive sign for anti-racism and race equity is that work is institutionalised rather than individualised.



This means that the effort does not rely on a few people in the organisation – even if they are senior. Neither does the labour live on the shoulders of Black and Minoritised Ethnic people, i.e., those most harmed by racism.

An important reality check for anti-racist efforts is what happens if key people leave the organisation. Does the work continue with equal vigour? Would the trustees ensure this is the case? Or, do these efforts lose direction and momentum? If it's the latter then the institution needs to build firmer anti-racist foundations.

This kind of durability doesn't just happen. It can start by building an understanding in the organisation that anti-racism is everyone's business.

Staying power is assisted when institutions do important groundwork. For example, by confronting how organisations may have been complicit with racism or [benefitted](#) from it. It is also advanced when organisations have processes to deal productively with [big feelings](#) – such as fear, anger and sadness – perhaps especially among white colleagues. And making sure that discomfort does not derail purposeful change.

### REFLEXIVITY

Organisations trying to internalise and tie anti-racism to their mission will engage in an ongoing, active process of self-examination. And where their anti-racist efforts are falling short, they will seek to understand why and adjust their approaches rather than downgrade their ambitions.

Part of reflexive effort is to deepen understandings of how racism and therefore anti-racism works. That can mean ending specific forms of racist discrimination, e.g., in [recruitment](#). But it also means seeing racism as something beyond discrimination.

Seeing racism as an [overarching ideological framework](#) based on racial hierarchy, helps organisations to understand how apparently natural events or 'colourblind' institutional decisions can lead to [racialised harms](#).

This insight, in turn, calls for different kinds of institutional responses. These include efforts to [mitigate](#) against disproportionately negative racialised outcomes – even in the absence of an obviously racist action. And institutions playing a part to dismantle the ideologies of racial hierarchy that underpin racist harm.

## Culture counts

The path towards mission-driven approaches to anti-racism and race equity is uncertain.

It is hard to say what percentage of mainstream civil society exhibit one, let alone all three, of the positive signs outlined above.

Each of the elements can be seen to be part of the important but elusive idea of re/building institutional culture.

Culture can be defined as shared beliefs, values and practices. It manifests as 'commonsense' ways of thinking, feeling and acting. And, in our original [Home Truths report](#), we concluded that mainstream civil society has an underlying, and therefore culturally-embedded, racism problem.

Anti-racism and race equity work is therefore often countercultural. These efforts require extra amounts of energy and focus. And this in turn can explain – but not excuse – the stop-start nature of progress that require a return [time and again](#) to questions of racism.

That said, recognising the scale of the challenge is part of the work of securing transformation and steeling oneself for what is to be done. And, while cultural shifts do not come easy, they do happen.

As Sally Engle Merry emphasises, institutions can change their own and wider culture. She notes that, 'as institutions ... change, so do beliefs, values and practices.'

## Conclusions

Culture change towards anti-racism and race equity is within reach. But it requires organisations that are ambitious and steadfast.

Most of all, it calls for institutions that are prepared to do what it takes for transformation and to bring anti-racism and race equity to heart.

We are here to support these efforts. Please send your ideas, trials and triumphs to [hometruthstwo@acevo.org.uk](mailto:hometruthstwo@acevo.org.uk). We are also interested in feedback on these Companion Notes and how we can make future editions as helpful as possible.

**Please send your ideas, trials and triumphs to:**  
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## Useful resources

As well as the links in the text you may find the following resources helpful:

Home Truths 2 (HT2) video catchup of session on [Reporting and Responding to Ethnic Pay Disparities](#).

HT2 blog on [the challenges of doing anti-racist work inside civil society organisations](#).

Gary Younge on how [disproportionate harms come from systemic racism](#).

On [institutional culture and culture change](#).

On [discomfort](#) that can come from facing up to racism inside organisations.