

COMPANION NOTES 05

REPORTING RACISM 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

Reporting racism isn't just about individual cases. It's a gateway to systemic change. When taken seriously, it helps organisations spot patterns, fix harmful systems, and build cultures of equity. When ignored, it protects the status quo and deepens racial inequality.

2

Organisations must shift from defensiveness to accountability when racism is reported. Instead of pushing back, they should see reports as chances for growth. This means moving beyond denial and towards learning, change, and real accountability.

3

To be anti-racist, organisations must reframe reports as tools for progress, not threats. A humane reporting system is one that empowers staff, centres wellbeing, and creates real consequences for racism, not just paper trails. Reporting must be safe, intersectional, and lead to structural change, not retaliation.

Introduction

Uncomfortable conversations can feel overwhelming. But they are necessary for change – and for communities to thrive.

Racism is one of those uncomfortable topics. It stirs feelings of shame, sorrow and isolation. It brings unconscious bias and deeply embedded societal structures to the surface.

But the most uncomfortable feeling of all is experiencing racism. Some of us have the privilege to avoid talking about racism. Many of us do not.

If we want a healthier civil society that centres wellbeing and equity, we need to talk about the elephant in the room. We can't avoid discomfort when racism runs through the bloodstream of society itself.

What if civil society saw reports as integral to anti-racism? What if we viewed them as tools to unlock long-term, systemic change?

What if the answer to creating equity and safety is already in front of us?

Maybe we just need to pause – and change how we see it.

Why reporting matters

Racism in the workplace doesn't just harm individuals – it weakens organisations and protects perpetrators.

When racism goes unreported, it becomes ingrained in workplace culture. Despite challenges, reporting is a powerful tool for systemic change, accountability and anti-racism when organisations learn from Black and Minoritised Ethnic experiences.

Reports can drive collective progress, tackling deep-rooted biases, inequities in promotion, and workplace discrimination – reflecting the social inequalities that persist in our society.

For reports to be meaningful, they need to be met with humane, transparent reporting systems that lead to real change – not compliance or dismissal. A fear of institutional backlash should never outweigh the need for racial equity.

If reporting leads to nowhere, organisations are complicit.

There is a better way forward.

WHY IS REPORTING ITSELF, PERCEIVED TO BE SUCH A PROBLEM?

Racism is a persistent problem in civil society – complex, deeply rooted, and [shaped by long-standing values and practices](#) embedded within our institutions and systems.

Civil society seems trapped in a [fear loop](#)—hesitant to confront racism, challenge leaders' self-perception, and engage in [uncomfortable but necessary conversations](#), all of which are tied to reporting racism.

This institutionally ingrained loop begins with Black and Minoritised Ethnic individuals experiencing racism in the workplace, fearing retaliation, and sometimes choosing [not to report](#). Those who do, however, find that reporting mechanisms—intended to protect—often result in reports not being taken seriously or leading to meaningful action ([Home Truths, 2020](#)).

Individuals are then left to carry the [emotional and harmful burden of experiencing racism](#), and organisations remain passive. Our structures are built on a lack of institutional will to address reports to avoid uncomfortable truths about our structures. If organisations embed anti-racism into their reporting culture – which welcomes [honest dialogue](#), true accountability, and transformative change – then they can turn reports into catalysts for systemic progress, not just compliance.

Silence allows racism to persist—reporting brings it to light and drives long-term systemic change.

DARVO

Institutional commitment to anti-racism is nowhere under more strain than when faced with reports of racism. It can deeply disturb organisational serenity, often triggering defensiveness and deflection, such as [DARVO](#) (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender).

Organisations reacting to reports may use DARVO to [push back on the existence of a problem](#), attacking the credibility or intentions of those who raise a concern about racism. This response deepens the harm, compounding the experience of racism.

One primary function of DARVO is to deflect accountability by refusing to confront the reality that racism is not an individual problem of [isolated incidents](#), but an institutional one. This tactic reinforces victim-blaming narratives, shifting the focus from [organisational failures](#) to the supposed personal failings of those who report racism. Therefore, this reinforces structural inequality.

Structural inequality looks like [determining whose voice is valued](#) and who gets promoted, leading to career stagnation and limited opportunities, which deepens racial disparities and discrimination.

Organisational culture also plays a key role in DARVO, especially in institutions lacking transparency and trust in addressing complaints. Without proper action on racism, they become defensive, prioritising reputation over accountability, framing racism as an outsider problem or reports as an existential threat.

Internal discomfort is another key factor. When leaders receive reports, they may confront their role in perpetuating systemic inequalities. This can trigger a level of discomfort that arises when a person holds conflicting beliefs or values – also known as [cognitive dissonance](#). They may think of themselves as anti-racist, but their actions say otherwise. This can feel threatening, especially when it challenges power, policies and structures. In response, defensive behaviours like DARVO emerge, protecting the status quo.

Institutional deflective responses deeply impact [the well-being and mental health of Black and Minoritised Ethnic people](#) and overshadow their experiences of racism in the workplace. This could discourage them from reporting as their voices go unheard and their experiences are minimised. This perpetuates a cycle where unresolved issues deepen racial inequality in civil society, illustrating the broader impact of individual actions on organisational culture. To break this cycle, institutions must recognise when DARVO occurs and actively dismantle the barriers preventing voices from being heard. This involves challenging deeply ingrained deflective habits and prioritising genuine accountability over the institution's comfort.

DARVO SOUNDS LIKE

DENY



I don't see how that could be racist. I was just being curious. If anything it was a harmless comment.

ATTACK



You're so quick to assume bad intentions; why are you trying to make me look bad.

REVERSE VICTIM OFFENDER



I feel like I can't say anything these days without being accused of something.

It's natural for organisations to feel challenged when handling reports, but that should never be an excuse to deflect or to create a culture where Black and Minoritised Ethnic people feel isolated and alienated.

Only by addressing these issues head-on can organisations move from defensive responses to long term meaningful action, cultivating an environment where all voices are valued and then real change can occur.

Humane reporting systems and cultures

Creating a truly anti-racist environment requires commitment from every level of the organisation. While strategies will differ across organisations, the following actions can provide a roadmap for practical, meaningful change.

1. Empowering employees with knowledge

Ensure employees understand their rights, know how to report incidents, and have access to clear actionable policies – this goes beyond generic equality policies tucked away in the staff intranet, but proactive measures backed by concrete action and highlight deflection behaviours, such as DARVO, to ensure reports are taken very seriously.

2. Creating a safe and open reporting culture

A healthy workforce is one where employees feel confident that reporting racism leads to action, not retaliation. Trust must be built through transparency, consistency and accountability. Leaders must proactively reassure staff that their experiences will be heard, taken seriously, and addressed through organisational communications, such as town halls and facilitated discussions.

Workplaces are legally required to be free from racial discrimination, harassment, and victimisation under the [Race Relations Act \(1976\)](#) and the [Equality Act \(2010\)](#). These laws can be used as a foundation to create a non-discriminatory environment while actively addressing racial inequities.

3. Reframing reports

Instead of viewing reports as disruptions to organisational harmony, organisations should view them as essential tools for driving institutional growth and racial equity.

Senior staff should also set the standard by reporting incidents they witness, whether they involve [explicit racism, microaggressions, or systemic bias](#). This reinforces that everyone is responsible for tackling racism.

Leaders highlighting how past reports led to structural improvements and reinforcing that all reports will be taken seriously helps build trust for Black and Minoritised Ethnic employees. This can be frequently communicated through meetings, internal communications, and leadership statements.

4. Holistic reporting systems

A holistic reporting system recognises the [interconnected nature of identities](#), as employees facing racism may also face discrimination based on gender, religion, sexuality and/or disability. Reporting structures must be inclusive and holistic, rather than treating identities as separate and isolated, such as dedicated pathways for [Black and Minoritised Ethnic women to address racism alongside gender](#), or for [LGBTQ+ employees to report both racism and homophobia](#).

Organisations should hold themselves accountable by conducting regular audits to track reports on multiple discrimination outcomes and ensure meaningful action is taken.

5. Creating multiple avenues to report racism

Organisations should provide clear, accessible reporting options, including anonymous platforms, to ensure no one feels alone in seeking support.

63% of Black and Minoritised Ethnic staff are [more likely to report bullying/harassment](#) on an anonymous platform. Culture Shift provides secure anonymous reporting solutions, used by over 90 institutions, including [Amnesty International](#) and the [Barbican](#), both addressing past institutional racism through accountability.

Peer-to-peer networks can also be a safe forum for sharing experiences and navigating workplace challenges. These networks will thrive by prioritising safety and well-being to ensure employees feel heard. Senior leaders must act on shared experiences to build trust and implement genuine anti-racist initiatives, avoiding tokenism.

6. Seeking external support

Handling reports at work requires sensitivity and action. External support helps set clear goals and empowers organisations to lead change.

UNISON's free [anti-racist charter](#) offers a 12-month framework for assessing and improving anti-racist efforts. Signing it is a start. Action is what makes the commitment real.

External expertise, like an [ombudsman](#), can help mediate and ensure safe reporting spaces.

After an [internal review](#) exposed institutional racism, Amnesty International brought in DEI experts. Staff experiences shaped recommendations to embed anti-racism as a core value, with [action taken](#) through training, governance, and ongoing EDI planning.

REPORTS ARE INTEGRAL FOR RACE EQUITY

Civil society exists to [challenge power, promote transparency, and empower marginalised groups](#). But it is not immune to the power structures it seeks to dismantle.

Systemic inequalities, like neglecting reports, must be confronted. They do not have to persist. It's time for civil society to see reports as a catalyst for anti-racism. True change demands small wins and bold action by confronting racism at every level.

Every report, every conversation, needs to translate into action by dismantling systems of oppression.

Anti-racism requires ongoing effort, humility, persistence and a commitment to learning. Even when faced with resistance, continued engagement is key to breaking down barriers.

Conclusions

For long-term change to take place, we must bring reports to the forefront of progress. It's a journey and it doesn't have to be perfect. It doesn't need to start with a polished strategy, but the humanness of empathy, listening and learning. It starts with creating environments that speak from the heart, where Black and Minoritised Ethnic people feel safe, seen and heard.

If organisations are willing to show that commitment, we can build a civil society where anti-racism isn't an add-on, but a value embedded deep within its very structures.

We are here to support these efforts.

Please send your ideas, trials and triumphs to hometruthstwo@acevo.org.uk.

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We are interested in feedback on these Companion Notes and how we can make future editions as helpful as possible.

Useful resources

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

Home Truths 2 video catchup of session on [video catchup of session on Reporting Racism in Mainstream Civil Society](#)

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

Home Truths 2 [Warm Words, Cold Comfort: UK civil society's ongoing racism problem](#)

Home Truths: [Undoing racism and delivering real diversity in the charity sector](#)

Article from The King's Fund [Unprofessional Behaviours: Actions Need Consequences](#)

The Trade Union's [Anti-racist Charter pledge](#)

[Amnesty International](#) and [UNICEF UK](#)'s inquiries into institutional racism

Dr Jennifer Freyd's summary of [DARVO](#)