Summary: Anti-Racism Community Engagement Fund Report

Introduction

"Racism is a huge problem in Scotland."
(Group 3 participant)

In November 2024, GREC received funding from the Anti-Racist Observatory for Scotland (AROS) to give diverse ethnic minority communities in the North East an opportunity to feed into the design and future work of AROS. We hosted six in-person focus groups of 90 minutes to 2 hours each:

- *Group 1:* Syrian New Scots
- *Group 2:* African Community
- *Group 3:* Other diverse communities
- *Group 4:* Ukrainian Community
- *Group 5:* Muslim Community
- *Group 6:* Polish Community
  Note: Groups 1, 4 and 6 were conducted with Arabic, Ukrainian and Polish interpreters, respectively.

In total, there were 35 participants: 27 women and eight men, aged in their 20s to 70s (mostly 30s and 40s). They had a range of different ethnic backgrounds, including African, Asian, European, Arab, Kurdish and Mixed/Multiple. Just under half of participants had arrived in Scotland in the last 5 years; the rest had lived here for at least 5-10 years, and one was born in Scotland.

Experiences of Systemic Racism

Each group heard this definition of systemic racism, based on text from the Scottish Government:

- Unfair distinctions between people from different ethnic groups.
- Political and social disadvantages which shape the life chances of people in certain groups.
- Does not need to be intentional or malicious – often a result of historical, cultural or institutional practices.

While participants were asked to focus on systemic racism, many talked about interpersonal racism. However, these examples often took place during interactions with institutions, including schools, workplaces, healthcare, public services, and the justice system (including the immigration system). Broadly speaking, the sum of many interpersonal experiences reveals significant underlying patterns. As one African participant said: "You cannot separate institutions from individuals […] [Racism] is happening in every aspect of society." *(Group 3)*

Education and Children's Experiences

More than half of participants were parents, and the education system was a key area of concern, especially because children may not have strong coping mechanisms to deal with racism. There were some positive examples of teachers and school staff treating migrant children with kindness, offering help to parents, or seeking to de-escalate bullying. However, participants in all six groups felt that **rules are enforced more strictly** for ethnic minority and immigrant children, while Scottish children "get away with anything." *(Group 1)*

Beyond the classroom, ethnic minority children tend to face **social isolation, bullying and abuse,** with teachers either ignoring or minimising the behaviour, or even blaming the child targeted.

Employment

Similar to experiences in schools, most participants felt that ethnic minorities face **harsher standards** in hiring and promotion, workplace expectations, and thresholds for disciplinary action. For example:

> "Black men have to work ten times harder than white ones." *(Group 2)*

> "They know we really need the jobs, so they think they can just treat us badly." *(Group 3)*

In line with existing research, participants found they were called for interviews more often if they put **'British' names** on their CVs, and two were told directly that employers wanted someone 'White' or 'Scottish.' Several participants reported Scottish colleagues being promoted ahead of more qualified and experienced ethnic minority people, and Polish participants in particular faced resentment when they achieved managerial positions.

Overall, participants talked about **qualifications and experience being ignored,** and a general **lack of respect** in the workplace. As a result, many ethnic minority people are **under-employed,** working in jobs that do not make use of their skills, or pressured to work in specific fields, regardless of their preference. For example:

> "People assume we should look for jobs as carers, not professionals. […] that's all they think Nigerians can do. […] They don't believe I have a master's degree." *(Group 2)*

"You're not treated equally. You have to work extra hard, with a lower starting salary, you're not promoted. […] I was asked to clean all the time, even though it wasn't part of the job." *(Group 5)*

Within workplaces, ethnic minority people often faced **communication challenges**, even when they were excellent (or native) English speakers. Where customers and colleagues refused to speak slowly or clearly, participants struggled to understand local accents. At the same time, they claimed to not understand 'foreign' accents, demanding to be transferred to "someone who speaks English," or "someone in the UK" *(Group 2)*. African participants in particular were criticised for being 'too loud' or 'too direct,' and Polish participants felt that Scots consider their native language 'aggressive.'

Ethnic minorities also faced **discrimination and segregation** in the workplace. For example, African and Polish participants heard colleagues make disparaging comments about their ethnicity, but supervisors refused to take action. In one case, Scottish staff were paid on time, while African and Indian staff frequently had to 'hassle' bosses for their pay *(Group 3)*. One participant also explained the kinds of **extra responsibilities** associated with being the 'non-Scottish' person on a team:

"Scottish [colleagues] say, 'oh, I don't know how to help [ethnic minority clients].' It […] puts extra pressure on us. We also have to do everything relating to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, on top of our main jobs." *(Group 5)*

Healthcare and Public Services

Some participants felt they had been treated differently by the NHS because of their ethnicity or religion (wearing a hijab), while others attributed waiting lists and difficulties getting appointments to lack of capacity in the system. In several instances, participants could see both sides, acknowledging that explicit racism in other contexts might be influencing their views of the NHS. This emphasises the importance of addressing racism across all areas of society, if only to reduce the risk of misinterpretation.

Despite broader systemic issues, many participants discussed **difficulties with healthcare and public services** faced by ethnic minorities in particular:

"Women of colour face more complications during childbirth because their concerns are dismissed. And they're pushed into C-sections, while Scottish women get a choice." *(Group 5)*

"If you don't speak good English, public service staff lack patience and treat you differently." *(Group 4)*

"I was at the GP, and the receptionist assumed I could translate for someone from my home country. But what if I wasn't there?" *(Group 3)*

Public transport was another area participants raised concerns about. For example:

"When you're waiting for the bus with other Africans, sometimes the driver sees you but he doesn't stop. If there's a white person, he always stops." *(Group 3)*

"Working as a bus driver, some teenagers told me I should go back to my country." *(Group 6)*

"I was looking for my bus ticket […] and the driver refused to interact with me. I think it's because I was wearing a hijab." *(Group 1)*

"Some teenagers followed an African guy onto the bus and assaulted him. […] They got away with it. Nobody did anything." *(Group 2)*

In support contexts, participants felt that **ethnic minorities received less help and understanding**. For example, one participant explained that a local charity is very strict with ethnic minority clients, limiting them to the bare minimum of supplies. On the other hand, Scottish clients are allowed to take "whatever they want, sometimes […] really more than they need" *(Group 5)*. Another participant described a teenage girl being harshly criticised and spoken over by her support worker, where a Scottish girl would not have been treated this way.

Police, Social Work and Legal System

Structures to protect people should work equitably for everyone, buy several participants described experiences of **discrimination or bias.** For example:

"My son […] was assaulted in his flat by ten men. It was reported and he went to hospital, but no action was taken. The inspector's report said it was an 'argument' not an assault. […] Officers said 'we can't take ten people to jail.' Why not? Is it because he's an Arab?" *(Group 1)*

"I had to seek trade union help when a colleague accused me of stealing something. The manager believed it, but when they checked the CCTV, the manager had to apologise." *(Group 3)*

"A Muslim woman was attacked by a drunk person at a cash machine, then *she* was charged with assault. […] There's bias in how foreigners are treated, we're judged more harshly." *(Group 5)*

"I had to stop working when I developed cancer. With No Recourse to Public Funds they wanted to take my youngest child away. My oldest had to drop out of university to work, we had to fight to keep the children together." *(Group 2)*

There were also several examples of the authorities being used as a means of discrimination or bullying, or "**harassment through bureaucracy**," as one participant put it:

"My neighbour calls ACC every week about so-called antisocial behaviour, complaining that my service dog is barking too much, we don't cut the grass, stupid minor things. So, officers come out all the time. They never find any problems. It's a real nuisance." *(Group 6)*

"My child missed a jab at school because they were unwell that day. The teachers reported me the next day, and social workers came to inspect my house." *(Group 3)*

Participants also discussed **barriers to reporting racism**, whether hate crime or less severe incidents in workplaces, schools and other contexts. The process was described as 'complicated,' 'onerous,' and 'exhausting' – and sometimes pointless:

"Once you report someone, now you're a bigger target. They try to segregate you, raise their voices, use swear words. Managers just allow it. They don't take you seriously." *(Group 3)*

"When you raise something, they say, 'maybe it's a personal issue.' They try to ignore it. […] And if you insist they report it, they usually try to label it as bullying, not racism." *(Group 2)*

Media Representation & Everyday Racism

Nearly all groups raised concerns about the role of the media in **perpetuating negative stereotypes** about Muslim and immigrant communities:

"The media demonises migrants […] They encourage low-income people to believe they're being fleeced by immigrants." *(Group 5)*

"Immigration is used to score political points, we're blamed for everything." *(Group 2)*

At the same time, participants identified a **lack of reporting about racist incidents**, which hides both the extent and consequences of racist behaviour.

In all six groups, participants discussed the **subtle and pervasive nature of racism** they experience in social contexts and everyday life:

"Some Ukrainians have lost everything, but people accuse us of sitting on benefits or being handed everything. It's not true." *(Group 4)*

"As immigrants, we have to be on our toes all the time, we have to fight for everything. It's tiring. We have to know the law […] show that we know our rights. Otherwise we get nothing." *(Group 2)*

"As children, we were often shouted at, made to feel inferior. Micro-aggressions are very common." *(Group 5)*

"They try to make it as subtle and passive as possible, they know it's wrong but they see what they can get away with." *(Group 3)*

Tensions Between Migrant Groups

There were several instances where participants discussed **racism between different ethnic minority groups.** For example, while African and Asian parents felt that their children were being targeted because of visible markers of difference – skin colour, religious clothing – some Ukrainian and Polish participants felt that schools take racist incidents more seriously when racialised pupils are involved. Other examples included a participant being rejected for English classes by a Turkish teacher who gives preference to Turkish students *(Group 3)*, and people from Poland and Lithuania complaining that Ukrainian refugees get too much support, compared to other Europeans *(Group 4)*.

Recommendations for AROS

After reading a leaflet about AROS, participants were enthusiastic about its potential to make positive changes across Scottish society. They shared a wealth of ideas to ensure its success, ranging from the broad to the specific, and from the abstract to the practical. They alsio identified key institutions that should benefit from AROS's work, including schools, the NHS, the Police, public transport, local government, the public sector more broadly, the media, and the private sector.

Funding and Scope

Above all, participants highlighted the need for AROS to have **stable, long-term funding**. They emphasised that anti-racist work takes time; many had experienced frustration and disappointment when projects ended too soon, or were consulted repeatedly on the same questions over the years. Some pointed out that long-term funding is actually more cost-effective than repeatedly 'reinventing the wheel' or 'starting from scratch.'

There was a strong sense that **tackling racism will benefit everyone** in Scotland, not just ethnic minorities, so AROS should remain a priority, even if other political priorities change. Along these lines, all groups felt that **AROS must pursue practical goals**, not become a 'talking shop.' For example:

"Don't just paper over the problems, you need to do something about it." *(Group 2)*

"We need to see practical results, otherwise what's the point?" *(Group 1)*

"It shouldn't be symbolic, I want something that will create a positive change." *(Group 3)*

Inclusion and Participation

While the word 'racism' tends to be associated with racialised groups, especially Africans and Asians, participants felt that AROS should be **inclusive of all ethnic minorities**, as even 'white' ethnic minorities experience racism. There was particular concern about **immigrants and religious minorities**, whose experience of prejudice often intersects with other forms of racism, driven by similar patterns of judgement on appearance and cultural expression.

"**Equality of geography**" was also highlighted. As one participant said, "there's too much focus on the central belt, they need to remember other parts of Scotland, too. Not just the cities, but towns, rural places, islands." *(Group 5).* Overall, participants felt it would be unwise to exclude any groups from AROS's remit, and that different groups would have valuable insights to share with each other.

Along these lines, all groups agreed that **ethnic minority individuals and organisations should play key roles** in AROS from the start. Not only would this bring insight and use existing networks and relationships, but it would also demonstrate, on a practical level, that AROS is serious about listening to people affected by racism, and **taking their views seriously**. As one participant explained through a Nigerian proverb: "Only the person wearing the shoe knows where it pinches." *(Group 2)*

Facilitating and Enforcing Anti-Racist Policies

Participants felt that AROS could help organisations **develop effective anti-racist policies**, by providing advice and guidance to employers, trade unions, local authorities and others. In some cases, these kinds of policies already exist: several participants suggested that AROS could compile 'gold standard' examples of policies and codes of conduct for others to learn from. For example:

"I used to work for [an international company], and their EDI is perfect. Zero tolerance for racism. There's loads of trainings, and they take complaints seriously." *(Group 3)*

"There's the Race Equality Charter award […] This kind of scheme could apply to other public organisations." *(Group 5)*

Similarly, while there was a general consensus that racism is considered unacceptable in Scotland, most groups felt that AROS should **improve enforcement for existing laws and policies**. As one participant put it, "they say racism is a crime, but how often do you see it prosecuted? Never." *(Group 3)* Another said, "regulations are good, but they're not enforced." *(Group 6)* Participants made several suggestions on how to address this:

"Maybe a structure focusing on racism like Action for Fraud." *(Group 2)*

"There needs to be accountability, with actual consequences for racism." *(Group 6)*

"The government needs to be strong and proactive in enforcing the laws and preventing segregation. They need to ensure that everyone is treated as human." *(Group 1)*

Education and Training

While a systematic approach is key, participants also emphasised the need for **anti-racist education**, whether in schools, workplaces, or society at large:

"The biggest focus should be schools, to create cultural change in the new generation." *(Group 1)*

"Build a culture of anti-racism from the start, in primary schools." *(Group 6)*

"Start from the schools – you get the kids, but also the parents." *(Group 2)*

Participants also highlighted **workplace equality, diversity and inclusion training** as an important tool for changing attitudes. For example:

"AROS should push for training to address systemic racism, especially in the public sector." *(Group 5)*

"Diversity training is only required when someone starts a job. […] I have to update my first aid training every 3 years, why not diversity training too?" *(Group 3)*

Media

Beyond formal education and training, the media was identified as the place where most people learn

about the world, and where many negative stereotypes are perpetuated. All groups emphasised the importance of **challenging media narratives about ethnic minorities** and working to expand people's understanding:

> "The media is such a big factor in how things are perceived, and it's not in our favour. Can AROS try to influence the media?" *(Group 3)*

Participants suggested a range of ways to promote positive narratives, including personal stories, 'myth busting' facts and statistics, conversations between locals and immigrants, and humourous videos. Suggested formats included kids' TV programmes, YouTube adverts, videos, other social media, library displays, newspaper articles, posters, promotion of foreign films, and in-person events. Regardless of format or content, they emphasised the importance of **long-term commitment**, through consistent and serious communication efforts, using **clear and straightforward language**.

Positive Messaging and Cultural Mixing

Many participants highlighted the importance of **promoting positive messages**, especially when mainstream media narratives present diversity as a threat, and EDI policies often focus on punishing bad behaviour. Several groups suggested different ways to **encourage cultural mixing**:

> "Racism is worse in Scotland than in Canada and New Zealand. There's lots of local projects for immigrants there, gets people talking to each other. I think it helps." *(Group 3)*

> "Getting to know people clears away hate and prejudice. It works both ways." *(Group 2)*

> "There should be more small festivals, places for groups to show what they're doing." *(Group 3)*

Representation and Leadership

Several participants noted that racism 'comes from the top,' whether from politicians and celebrities, or upper levels of management in an organisation. All groups felt that AROS should work proactively with decision-makers to **promote accountability and anti-racism with leaders** across sectors:

> "Cultural change from leadership makes all the difference. If your manager supports you, it's much easier to stand up for yourself. The same is true all through society." (Group 2)

> "You can't change individuals but you can give them less power, restrict their ability to be racist on a wider level." *(Group 6)*

More broadly, participants felt that AROS should **challenge the lack of diversity** in public institutions:

> "What's the representation of ethnic minority people in society? Who can speak? Who's being listened to? Who's being taken seriously? Who's making decisions?" *(Group 3)*

> "AROS should ensure there are more ethnic minorities represented in public sector jobs. We need to challenge the system to be inclusive and reflect society's diversity." *(Group 5)*

Other Tasks for AROS

Some groups emphasised **data collection and research** to support AROS's goals. They suggested it should maintain clear, publicly-available data on topics like health inequalities, media bias, and workplace discrimination. As one participant said, "we want data, we want to have information that can prove the level of oppression." *(Group 2)*

Another key task was **supporting communities experiencing racism**, including providing targeted mental health support, and providing space to report problems.

Community Engagement

In discussing how their community would like to engage with AROS, all six groups were enthusiastic about taking part in future conversations, with a wide range of suggested approaches. Crucially, participants wanted to be **kept informed** of AROS's work through newsletters and social media, which could also help to recruit people for more active participation. For **contributing to AROS's work**, face-to-face events were preferred by some groups, while others preferred online meetings and social media engagement. Regardless of format, all felt that **information should be provided in 'clear and simple' language,** with translated materials and interpreters where needed. They also felt that **ethnic minority voices should be central**, with AROS's role as providing a platform, rather than 'just talking at us.'

Finally, participants emphasised the importance of **working with existing organisations and community groups**, including faith-based groups, ethnic minority social groups, migrants' groups, international student groups, charities and small businesses. They highlighted libraries, community centres, schools, colleges and universities as good sites for outreach, and suggested recruitment processes through social media and leaflets.