

Independent external review of Rethink Mental Illness' progress in becoming an anti-racist organisation

Summary Report by Oxytocin Learning and Rethink Mental Illness

Introduction

Oxytocin-Learning (Oxytocin) was invited to conduct a review of Rethink Mental Illness' progress in becoming an anti-racist employer, campaigning organisation, and service provider in the mental health sector. Oxytocin is a social enterprise providing tailored interventions to equip organisations and individuals to work effectively with racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse populations. The review was led by Dr Jacqui Dyer and Dr Anthony Salla who bring significant experience in relation to mental health and race equality and have been involved in several initiatives to mitigate the effects of racial bias.

Oxytocin's role was to provide an honest, impartial perspective on Rethink's policies and procedures, including an analysis of organisational culture. The outcome was to make recommendations to support decision-making. The methods used involved a review of Rethink Mental Illness' policies as well as qualitative research with over 10% / 82 people of the workforce engaged in in-depth interviews.

Throughout the process of the review, Rethink Mental Illness placed no boundaries on the process of independent scrutiny. Whilst it is important to be recognised for being so open to external examination as this can be challenging, it also brings risk as findings can be taken out of context. It is important to view the findings in the context of wider society and similar challenges existing for many organisations in becoming truly anti-racist.

Several recommendations have been provided by Oxytocin in terms of embedding values into action with plans, governance, and investment required if Rethink Mental Illness is to progress towards achieving its goal of becoming an anti-racist organisation. The recommendations point to immediate and medium-term changes focused on individual practice and system-wide improvements. A summary of the recommendations is outlined below. All full version of the report can be found on our [intranet](#)

Part 1 Organisational Values and Governance

Oxytocin recognises that Rethink Mental Illness has made equity a core value and that much of the current strategic planning involves a desire to give serious consideration to issues of race equality. Addressing the responsibilities leaders have in terms of their own individual journey and guiding the organisation through relatively uncharted times will be critical to making progress in Rethink's aspiration to work towards being an anti-racist organisation. Competency in relation to racial equality varies significantly at all levels. Among some there is an understanding of the challenges that must be overcome, a willingness to reflect on past mistakes and a commitment to equitable activities. At the same time, staff feel the need to be supported to be leaders on this agenda.

When considering leadership and documentation, Rethink Mental Illness' anti-racism statement must be tailored to the organisation. Governance is needed around race equality in terms of equality impact assessments, recruitment and monitoring, with positive action required in thinking, policies and support for staff. Opportunities to communicate effectively externally should be progressed further, such as promoting Rethink Mental Illness' own ethnic-specific services as a meaningful contribution against structural racism. Recognition should be given to the sources of funding that Rethink Mental Illness receives in terms of organisations who have historically been associated with racial atrocities.

Oxytocin found that in relation to race equity, and equalities more broadly, some members of the workforce feel that any action or commitments towards trying to become anti-racism will be short-lived. An external race equality advisory group providing expert, supportive challenge to the organisation is recommended to decrease the current over-reliance on staff raising concerns. Secondly, safe spaces and governance routes, including an internal race equality accountability committee is required to monitor implementation of recommendations from this report, and from the Rethink pledge groups. All of the recommendations are significant, and it would be beneficial that these proposed activities are sequenced for action and should be owned by the respective AD and XT.

Summary of Recommendations

- A coordinated and planned approach across XT and the wider leadership team is required to demonstrate ongoing leadership.
- Rethink Mental Illness should develop its own anti-racist statement and review policies, such as its grievance and disciplinary policies, to consider further support for staff and acknowledge that it endeavours to be an anti-racist organisation.
- There should be a greater focus and awareness on positive action and Rethink Mental Illness' anti-racist stance in the EDI policy and recruitment materials. Internal recruitment policies should be reviewed, and succession planning developed.
- Equality objectives relating to specific operations/programme plans should be incorporated into supervisory, performance and appraisal frameworks for all staff to build a culture of thinking in race conscious terms.
- Equality impact assessments should be embedded across the organisation with appropriate oversight.
- Analysis of workforce ethnicity data and service data should be prioritised.
- Quality assurance, evidence, and appropriateness of mental health support arrangements for minoritised clients should be reviewed.
- Equality should be a standing agenda item at each meeting of the Board of Trustees and one additional person be appointed to the Board of Trustees with expertise around race and mental health.
- An internal anti-racism accountability committee should be established to monitor the implementation of recommendations from the Pledge groups and this report. An external and independent advisory group should be established to meet quarterly to offer a sounding board to Rethink Mental Illness' outward facing activities, and to provide guidance to Rethink's race equality accountability committee.

Part 2 The Working Environment

Members of the workforce remarked how the murder of George Floyd brought a deeper and stronger sense of reflection and awareness about racial inequality than anytime previously. However, there was a feeling that the serious trauma and despair that racialised minorities endure through ongoing exposure to vicarious racism (hearing about or observing acts of racism or discrimination) in their daily lives had been, and could be, overlooked. Awareness raising and increased knowledge for staff is necessary in this area.

The pulse survey was seen as a good way of generating data and helpful for understanding internal dynamics. At present data, albeit not statistically significant, appears to indicate a strong differential experience for Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic (BAME) staff. Oxytocin fully endorse the Pledge Group's recommendation to initiate a BAME staff network and believe the network should be judged against a purpose of providing a staff space and driving forward initiatives that help Rethink's BAME workforce to feel valued and respected.

Summary of recommendations:

- A BAME staff network should be established to provide a safe space for BAME staff to share ideas, discuss issues and provide support to one another.
- Steps should be taken to acknowledge the effects of vicarious racism on the workforce and to raise awareness across the workforce.
- Equality objectives should be set relating to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination and/or foster good relations.
- Provision of bespoke counselling support to staff.

Part 3 Programmes and Delivery

This section covers external facing activity. Oxytocin identified one of Rethink Mental Illness' challenges as translating its values into work. Significant efforts are needed across the majority of services for the organisation's value of equity and the vision of equality to be realised in practice. One of the most obvious improvements required is a consistent approach as part of a structured equality management process that relates to planning, implementation, and regular review.

In programme planning, fundraising and the delivery of mental health support, further understanding and work is needed to decrease inequalities in service use and improve outcomes. Further genuine collaboration with race equality organisations is required in areas such as submitting joint/partnership funding applications with race equality organisations and working alongside service adaptations that would proportionately benefit minoritised groups. Planning around equitable approaches in service delivery is required including meaningful equality impact assessments.

There was a general sense that the flow of information across the organisation needed to improve. Secondly, whilst the connection between policy and communications on the one hand and operations on the other had improved, further work is required to ensure that policy is based on evidence gathered from Rethink Mental Illness's own service provision.

Summary of recommendations:

- Rethink Mental Illness should establish an internal race and mental health support group to provide guidance to its existing services to support them to be anti-racist.
- All strategic programme plans should be reviewed to consider the language considering Rethink Mental Illness' new anti-racist focus, and all service areas should develop at least one race equality objective.
- Ongoing engagement with race equality organisations in areas of potential and present delivery should commence to identify future project partners and facilitate work focused on equitable outcomes.
- Rethink Mental Illness should develop a robust policy and communications plan focussing on race and mental health, and play a more supportive role in its campaigning, endorsing the statements of race-equality organisations.

Part 4 Training and Support

Oxytocin report that Rethink Mental Illness' aim to be a race conscious organisation requires interventions at multiple levels. Recommendations to date are mainly structural interventions. While these can be beneficial, a broader and more contextualised approach is required to positively shift attitudes to be more race conscious or support people to implement any initiatives to their potential. Considering this, interventions are proposed at the individual and group level in the form of appropriate training and support.

A comprehensive and sustainable learning programme is required to address unconscious racial bias or to embed longer term organisational change, rather than training as part of induction or a one-off workshop. Significant learning is required across the organisation in relation to race and mental health. Oxytocin proposes a programme of 'habit formation' whereby Rethink Mental Illness should stage various interventions at regular intervals over several years. This approach is intended to improve overall awareness of racial bias, power dynamics, legal responsibilities with a significant emphasis on applying race-conscious thinking to practice.

Summary of recommendations

- Future training should be action-oriented and where possible linked to outputs and outcomes within the delivery of work and individuals' performance.
- Support sessions should take place among the leadership team so they can work collaboratively to ensure the organisation has a shared understanding of what it means to be an anti-racist in relation to service delivery.
- Spaces should be provided for people to express their uncertainties about race and racism and to highlight areas where they would like to enhance their learning.
- Future support should be ongoing covering areas such as service provision, understanding structural racism, differences in access, experiences, and outcomes, and how culture is critical to understanding the working environment.
- Rethink should establish a race and mental health forum to meet every 2-3 months with arranged seminars with external speakers relating to race and mental health inequalities.