BECON (Black ethnic minorities Community organisations Network) came about as a result of a Government Regional initiative around Equalities.

Starter funding and support came from the Active Communities Network at the Home Office and was a project of Paul Boetang. The Government Office North East (GONE) were tasked with developing a regional BME network.

Representatives from all the little BME organisations met for months to discuss and agree on the shape, purpose and reach of an umbrella BME organisation and how it could be a resource for all the diverse needs. There were discussions about what was meant by BLACK, what were the needs of all of the various groups, was it possible for one organisation to represent all of the different cultures, perspectives, challenges? Finally 2001 BECON was born. Initial aims were to be an infra-structure organisation, to create BME networks across the region, to advocate for BME orgs in the Region, to ensure that BME people were represented at policy and decision levels across the Region and to be a becon to get funds for the Sector at Regional Level. It was specifically decided not to deliver services so there wouldn’t be competition with other BME orgs. Even with this proviso it was still a big effort to get all the BME organisations to trust BECON and to become members. We started off with employing an admin person and a CEO, Beverley Prevatt-Goldstein and within a couple of years the staff team had grown to 9 and had representation at the North East Assembly, regular meetings with the GONE, including scheduled regular meetings with the Director of GONE, ONE, Sport England, Arts England. BECON set up BME Networks across the Region through funding from The Big Lottery and developed a committed and diverse Trustee Board.

Louise Evan-Wong was the first Chair of the Board from 2001 – 2004 then she was coopted back 2006 for a year to help out in a sticky patch. 2010 BECON celebrated a decade of work. At this time BECON had a multitude of projects across a wide range of subjects, Community Champions, Childrens Partnership Project, Sports Development, Employment Support, Learning and Skills, BME Leadership, Mental Health Project, Youth Integration to name a few. The office was a welcoming and safe space for BME people across the Region to come and visit and feel valued.

In it’s life time BECON raised the profile of BME people and BME issues by having a seat at the table with decision makers and facilitating Local BME Networks which created safe spaces for BME people to congregate and share successes, challenges, solutions and support and of course enjoy great food. These sub-regional networks were particularly important as geographically Northumberland is a large area with poor transport which meant that many BME people were fairly isolated and any issues or problems were viewed as individual issues or problems but when people could gather together and discuss life issues they realised their challenges were not just individual but shared by many others and people were able to share solutions

BECON created opportunities for BME people to recognise their worth and gave them the tools and support and to challenge the racism in everyday lives.

This was possible through learning sessions, funding, sharing resources, committed workers, partnership working and perseverance in spite of many barriers such as tradition, culture and internal barriers from being socialised in a predominantly white male power structure.

In the early days of BECON staff were often not invited to the decision makers table as they thought BME people would be adequately represented by current members even though none were BME. BECON staff had to support each other and attend in pairs to fend off the hostility, until eventually they learned that BECON did have valuable contributions to make. BECON also created events that the power brokers could attend and see for themselves BECON ways of doing things which were inclusive and welcoming and enjoyable!

BECON grew with each new project, grew in reputation and in personnel. As it grew it became easier to access funds to grow even more.

One great project was the Community Champions Project. It had a significant effect on everyone that was involved with it, and on their organisations. The BECON Community Champions project was tailored for the specific needs of BME people. There was induction training for individual development and each champion was funded to attend a maximum of 3 national conferences and in return they would have to share the information they gained with their organisation through BECON newsletters or presentations at network meetings. Over the 5 yr period of the Project more than 200 individuals participated and 5 community Champions won National Awards for their contributions to the North East

BECON showed that BME organisations can work together and united can be a strong contributor at all levels and that when BME people are involved at decision making levels – more inclusive decisions are made as they involve lived experience.

Sadly BECON was wound up in 2018. Every organisation has a life span and there comes a time when it needs to wind down and probably BECON reached this some time before 2018. There was a change of Government and the priorities changed from Regional to Local, all the GONE, ONE’s staff were dispersed and it became very difficult to obtain funding for Regional Organsations – this was certainly one of the factors for dissolving BECON

Plus the emphasis was on service delivery and this was something we had always agreed not to do so as not to be in competition with local BME orgs.

At this point BECON should have wound up and dissolved instead of trying to survive by slimming down it’s staff and moving into some service delivery. It had achieved everything it set out to do and more, and a difficult decision should have been taken to dissolve the company as it had come to a natural end of life

BECON is no longer – but as with all organisations there are highs and lows and the lows have purposefully been omitted because people will tend to remember them as their BECON memory and that would be catastrophic, however it would be good to learn from them and maybe there could be an all BME forum where the various challenges that occur in the life of BME organisations could be shared and solutions discussed.