



Report on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Voluntary Sector - Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee Enquiry – 5th November 2020

Background

Race Council Cymru (RCC) was established in 2010 and acts as an umbrella organisation supporting and representing approximately 300 BAME grassroots organisations within our multicultural hubs across Wales, we have 127 organisations in our Black History Wales network, 300 young people in our National BAME Youth Forum for Wales, and this includes our Crossing Borders Young Roots project and 120 Windrush Cymru Elders and their families to strategically challenge racial inequalities, prejudice and discrimination.

Our projects and groups are all led by and based within grassroots communities where we facilitate and support five Ethnic Minority HUBS across Wales (Newport, Cardiff & Vale, Swansea, Carmarthenshire and North Wales), supporting over 300 different Ethnic Minority Organisations; and we facilitate and support 3 Windrush Cymru Elder groups in Cardiff, Newport and Wrexham which support over 120 BAME elderly people.

RCC delivers a number of projects that include; Windrush Heritage, Black History Wales, BAME Cultural & Digital HUBS, Race Hate prevention, Community Champions scheme, Crossing Borders Music & Heritage (working with young ethnic minority musicians and dancers), Youth Parliament and a National BAME Youth Forum which provides a national network of young BAME individuals throughout Wales enabling their voice to be heard on key agenda items at a local, regional and national level.

In all our work we ensure our projects, activities and events are focussed on the needs of our BAME grassroots communities, many of whom are in the margins of society and we work with the Welsh Government, public, private and third sector organisations ensuring they are shaped and aligned to provide strategic delivery that meets the local needs across Wales. We also represent BAME grassroots group on the Third Sector Partnership Council facilitated by WCVA.

OVERVIEW

As images of the Covid 19 deaths began to emerge, it was clear that more BAME people were dying in significantly higher numbers than their white counterparts and RCC Chair, Judge Ray Singh CBE and vice Chair Professor Emmanuel Ogbonna were invited to work with the British Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (BAPIO) to lead the First Minister's advisory committee on the impact of Covid 19 on BAME groups in Wales.

In the period of the Covid-19 lockdown, RCC has organised and held regular meetings and consultations with our HUB members and grassroots BAME communities and organisations across Wales. We have continued to convey feedback to the Welsh Government as well as Public Health Wales on the effects and challenges of Covid-19 and the lockdown on BAME people living in Wales. Through research, media reports, consultations with our grassroots community partners and feedback, RCC supports the findings that the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown has had a disproportionate effect on BAME people living and working in Wales. Pre-existing racial inequalities have played a major role in exacerbating the risks that ethnic minorities have been exposed to during the period of this pandemic. Significant socio-economic factors have led to the increased health risks, economic and social challenges of this pandemic on BAME communities. It is vital that this committee interrogates the characteristic components of the demographics of this group. We are convinced that this approach will provide an accurate picture of the unequal socio-economic susceptibilities which have resulted in the disproportionate effects of Covid-19 on this group of people in Wales.

The consultations conducted by our organisation reveal responses from our grassroots communities and presents them in sub-themes to provide information and outlines the risk factors involved in the effects of Covid-19 and the associated lockdown. Our findings are by no means encompassing of all the effects and risk factors; rather it draws upon the more popular themes and repeated responses that came from our broad consultations. We are convinced that

beyond the boundaries of these findings, there are several individual and collective challenges that can be drawn over time and with further consultation.

The Effects of the Pandemic on the Voluntary Sector

The majority of our staff work contracted hours tailored to the projects they are assigned to. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, they offered extra hours of work voluntarily in order to support the rising needs of our communities which were suffering from the disproportionate effects. Particularly, there was a growing need to provide continuing support for our Windrush elders who were suffering loneliness and isolation on top of not having help with shopping, medication and other deliveries. The long hours our staff and volunteers spent working meant that they were paid very little or in most cases nothing and a feeling of “burn-out” began to set in. This puts an emphasis on the first and major challenge faced by ours and most voluntary organisations working with grassroots groups, which is the continuous lack of core funding to employ and maintain staff and pay volunteers’ allowances. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, although our organisation adapted to alternative ways of working, the duties of running the organisation multiplied as a result of the disproportionate effects of the virus on our BAME communities. These effects were both health wise and socio-economic, hence requiring urgent attention to interface between the Welsh government and the communities to mitigate these adverse effects. With the ongoing second spike, it has become necessary for our duties within the communities to continue, therefore also, the need to be able to pay staff salaries and volunteers’ allowances that will sustain our work through the second spike and into the post-COVID recovery period, to ensure that the recommendations of the BAME Advisory committee are implemented efficiently to our communities.

As our work is embedded within BAME communities, our long hours of work have spanned across all sectors to highlight the challenges of our communities in housing, education, employment, local businesses, transport and so on. We have had to pull together, drawing strength from other voluntary sector organisations, to ensure that diverse voices within the communities are heard. Integrating these voices has not been an easy task but we have been able to do the best we can within the given pandemic, to proffer innovative advice tailored to meet the communities’ challenges and bring the necessary change.

The Welsh Government has been committed to its support of BAME communities. This commitment led to the setup of the Advisory committee with its two sub-committees, which explored the Health and Socio-economic factors associated with the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on BAME communities. Additionally, funding has been provided to support the associated work of voluntary organisations in this area. However, another challenge has been the long turnaround time of funding applications, which staggered the prompt delivery of support and services. Many of our partners, who are smaller community groups also complained about the difficult requirements of funding applications, which they could not meet and therefore, struggled with meeting the needs of their communities. We commend the resilience of the communities in pulling together to support each other in this very difficult time and also the dedication of the Welsh government in ensuring it develops the best Race Equality Action Plan for BAME communities across Wales.

The death of George Floyd in the United States during the pandemic sparked off the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaigns and Wales was not left out. Young people from various regions of Wales came together to organise safe and socially distanced protests to decry the thriving institutional and systemic racism in our society. Racism is now one of the main reasons that has been found to exacerbate the deep disproportionate effects of the pandemic on BAME communities. The young protest leaders were determined to carry on their campaigns against racism beyond being one-off protests. As a BAME organisation, RCC has supported BLM regional leaders from twelve regions of Wales – Rhondda Cynon Taf, Wreham, Bangor, Merthyr, Cardiff, Port Talbot, Carmarthenshire, Abergavenny, Caerphilly, Swansea, Bridgend and Caernarfon – to form Black Lives Matter Wales. This group has enabled the regional leaders to engage with themselves and their communities to continue to tackle racism. Additionally, they have designed and presented a Manifesto to the Welsh Government, listing some of the desired outcomes they would like to see to stamp out racism and make Wales a free and fair place for all to live and thrive. As an Organisation, we look to the Welsh Assembly to pass laws that will hold institutions and organisation in the public and private sectors, accountable for tackling racism, which has existed for too long. It is unfortunate that we should still be listing this as a challenge drawn from the pandemic. However, the pandemic significantly brought this challenge to the fore.

Some statistical examples we have gathered in our work show a lot of the existing inequalities that have racial connotations. Data shows that 5.8% of key workers are from a BAME background, as compared to 5.2% of all other people in employment; 5.2% of Wales' workforce identify as BAME; 40% taxi drivers are BAME; as are 11% of healthcare workers. Residence and deprivation statistics also show that almost 11% of people living in the most deprived areas of Wales are of BAME background and overall, BAME people are more likely to be living in the most deprived 10% of small areas as compared to people from a white background. Other data on the effects of COVID on BAME women specifically, finds that 42.9% of BAME women are believed to be more in debt than 37.1% of white women and 34.2% of white men; 23% BAME women struggle to feed their children; and that BAME women are less likely to gain government support when out of work. These are but a few evidences that makes our work within our communities even more challenging and enforces our dedication to ensure that these statistics are reduced to the barest minimum, if not completely eradicated.

Race Council Cymru has been a lead representative on the Third Sector Partnership Council (TSPC) for the past 6 years and we have engaged in many meetings that have explored the challenges of the voluntary sector in the time of the pandemic. A lot of attention has been focused on the strain that the pandemic has had on formal and informal volunteering activities. These concerns resonate with us as an organisation facing these challenges. The challenges of the pandemic have made it vital that the TSPC set up a recovery group, to enable its members to explore the numerous challenges and proffer solutions, which are expected to be fed back to the Welsh Government on how best to plan the survival of the voluntary sector during the recovery period.

We urge the Senedd members to work closely with the voluntary sector to understand its challenges and engage with the diverse voices of BAME communities in order to pass innovative solutions into laws. We are convinced that this integrated engagement will progress a healthy post-pandemic recovery, strengthen the voluntary sector, and is an approach that will ensure the future wellbeing of Wales. Furthermore, it will guarantee the significant role of the Senedd in legislatively securing the Race Equality Action Plan of the Welsh Government.

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