

Submission to Sheffield Race Equality Commission from Citizens Advice Sheffield

Introduction

- Citizens Advice Sheffield delivers advice and advocacy services to Sheffield communities. We also deliver national services such as consumer service. Our Sheffield advice services help about 25,000 people (unique clients) each year with more than 65,000 different issues. We also deliver some national services including contribute to the delivery of the national consumer service and universal credit help to claim service. We deliver information, advice and representation primarily in benefits, debt, immigration, housing and employment.
- We run Sheffield Advocacy Hub and deliver statutory advocacy services to about 3000 people each year.
- Around 30% of the people we help through our advice services describe themselves as belonging to a BAME community. We have a long history of close working with BAME communities including our involvement in services such as SPRING project, services based in community settings such as Chinese community centre and Aspiring Communities Together. We have the benefit of a diverse workforce (both paid staff and volunteers) and the additional knowledge, skills including language skills and reach into communities they bring.
- We help more people who live in the poorer areas of the city. Our client postcode data shows a strong correlation with areas the highest levels of deprivation. Many of those areas are also areas where there is the highest level of BAME residency.
- Since C-19 all our services have been delivered by phone, text, email and via our website. Our client profile data including the % of BAME people helped, has not significantly changed despite this change of delivery channel. However we are not complacent in this area and are very sighted on the importance of action to reduce barriers to receiving advice and advocacy and being able to act on the advice given. For example the Board has recently approved a race equity action plan and we are implementing actions to improve access to our services.

Our evidence

Through our data collection system, we hold a significant amount of evidence about who we help and what we help them with. We would be happy to provide

more in-depth information on this to support the commission, if this would be helpful.

As a summary, here are some of our observations :

- Our evidence tells us that BAMER communities disproportionately experience financial insecurity. There is a greater likelihood of being in employment with poor working conditions and lower pay or being classed as self-employed but with lower incomes. There are the added issues for some groups such as having no recourse to public funds, insecure immigration status, issues relating to establishing evidence of right to reside in the UK and unstable housing. It follows that C-19 has had a disproportionate economic impact on BAMER communities. There is a wide body of emerging evidence that tells us that it is likely that the weight of redundancies / failed self-employment (an expected 20,000 plus in Sheffield) will sit disproportionately with BAMER employees (and other groups including disabled people and women with child care responsibilities). It is critical that this is recognised in key city strategies including the emerging tackling poverty strategy, employment and skills strategy and the range of strategies intended to impact on health inequalities.
- Language barriers and lack of information in community languages make it more difficult for some BAMER communities to access advice and support and exercise and enforce their rights particularly to welfare benefits. We know that, whilst the speed and efficiency of the processing of universal credit claims has been better than anticipated, those claimants who cannot, for example, easily provide identity evidence or there is an issue about right to reside, face significant delays in the payment of benefit. There is evidence of significant under-claiming of benefits particularly in relation to pension credit and to some disability benefits. There is a lack of a city wide approach to overcoming language barriers. We depend on our bi-lingual staff and volunteers (at last count 18 community languages spoken but capacity in some languages is in very short supply) or the expensive and sometimes inadequate provision from language line. We are in the process of strengthening our offer and will be shortly commencing a service delivery pilot in particular community languages.
- The demand for immigration, asylum and related advice outstrips capacity leading to people having to rely on other and sometimes less trusted sources of help. There is not a city wide integrated offer on legal advice for both asylum seekers and refugees. This situation is exacerbated by the inadequacies of legal aid in this area and the subsequent drawing back of private practice solicitors from provision in this area of law. Our offer is part of the picture and we have recently strengthened our provision and higher level (OISC level three) capacity but current capacity does not meet demand.

- We provide advice on issues arising out of discrimination including race discrimination. For example, we advise people who have faced race discrimination in relation to their employment. We have also seen an increase in issues relating to hate crime. However, again primarily because of the restrictions in legal aid, this is an area of law which would benefit from added investment and a building of capacity to enable detailed casework to be undertaken to challenge race discrimination.
- Most of our work is about helping people navigate through the social security and welfare legal system. There is a body of evidence that tells us that these systems are biased and, arguably, institutionally racist. We see the impact of this, in so many ways, on the people we help and the barriers they face.

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