



## City of Sanctuary Sheffield

Creating a Culture of Welcome

18 September 2020

### **Written evidence submitted to Sheffield's Independent Race Equality Commission**

This submission is being sent on behalf of City of Sanctuary Sheffield (COSS). COSS is a Sheffield based charitable organisation whose purpose is to create a culture of welcome and hospitality for people seeking sanctuary in Sheffield. Asylum seekers and refugees are often some of the most marginalised members of our society, so we provide practical support and asylum advice, as well as awareness raising of asylum and immigration issues to promote greater understanding in the wider community. We feel, therefore, compelled to contribute to the Commission's request for evidence and while we acknowledge that racism and racial inequality go far beyond the scope of the asylum system, much of our evidence is based on the issues that we encounter in our everyday work with asylum seekers and refugees.

For and on behalf of  
City of Sanctuary Sheffield

TD Martin Director

- **Evidence of racial inequality in Sheffield**

- Inequality is endemic for refugees and asylum seekers when accessing mainstream services such as healthcare, education and housing.
- Refugees often do precarious, risky, low paid work, and the current Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the enormous number of frontline workers of BAME origin who have been subjected to working with inadequate Personal Protection Equipment (PPE).
- As most asylum seekers are prevented from doing paid work, by the time they are granted leave to stay in the UK the only jobs available, even to highly qualified people, are often jobs with zero hour contracts and paid the minimum wage. Zero hour contracts afford no guarantee of actual work (and therefore remuneration) from day to day, no paid sick leave nor paid annual leave. BAME workers can be sent home with no work, and with no questions asked. They cannot, however, commit to other things because of potential work.
- Some companies will access funding for training employees, but will only offer them an unpaid role at the end.
- More often than not, asylum seekers are forced to live in sub-standard accommodation, often having to share a room with a complete stranger from a different culture and who may speak a

different language, stripping them of the most basic privacy. The current pandemic has again highlighted the difficulties faced by asylum seekers having to share washing facilities with complete strangers and little chance to socially distance.

- For the asylum seekers who do not have any formal accommodation it has proved a lot harder for them to access homelessness relief during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Asylum support payments are, in themselves, a form of racism. Compare the 20% rise in benefits given during lockdown to the 0% rise given to asylum seekers.
- NHS staff and schools have been asked to report on asylum seekers and as such are behaving like border guards.
- Public health information early on in the Covid-19 pandemic was only in English and maybe one other language occasionally, which left people whose first language is not English at a great disadvantage.
- In general, the NHS does not have good information in other languages. It may summarise the information in a leaflet, for example, but does not provide a complete translation of the details.
- GPs, with the exception of the Mulberry Practice are generally not aware of the often complex needs of asylum seekers.
- There is a general lack of representation of BAME people in every facet of work, education and life.
- BAME categorisation is problematic in itself. It projects a sense of “other” to the people in the various communities the category encompasses. As a catch all for the rich variety of language and culture included, it becomes meaningless, and deprives the people and communities of their own identity.
- The government was comfortable with a countrywide lockdown around Eid, but already it is planning how to ‘save’ Christmas.

- **Our organisation's analysis of the cause or causes of racism or racial inequality in Sheffield**
  - The inherent fragility of small to medium VCS organisations and their funding structures.
  - Recruitment processes and competency-based applications that favour people of white British origin.
  - Advertising of roles often misses people from communities of colour and oppressed communities. People who work in the sector know where to look for jobs.
  - Having a seat at the table – BAME led community groups are less likely to be included in the meetings where decisions are made within the city or the UK.
  - When people have to reapply for immigration status, the Home Office can take in excess of 6 months to process applications. Employers are nervous about keeping people without full leave to remain in jobs. Employers (mainly small companies) often do not know about the employer checking service or don't bother using it. They will ask an employee for proof that they are eligible to work, but often refugees do not know, or cannot articulate their rights within the law. Zero hours contracts make it easy for employers to ignore, or get rid of, employees where there is any doubt about their right to work.

- Employers often don't accept the right form of ID. A Biometric Residence Permit (BRP card) should be enough for an employer to determine the status of an employee.
- Getting two references can be hard for refugees who have fled from their country of origin, leaving friends, family and work colleagues behind. Rules on referencing can, therefore, be discriminatory.
- Tokenistic funding for BAME community support can just mislead people. Funding is needed for longer term roles to make employment more secure.
- The BAME community and refugees and asylum seekers often don't have a safety net of family, friends and community to support them, especially when people are deliberately dispersed around the country to discourage them from putting down roots in one place.
- Digital exclusion of the asylum seeking community. Asylum accommodation for example, does not provide internet access for residents.
- There is not enough legal provision for asylum seekers and refugees – there is a dearth of good immigration specialists.
- Disproportionate policing of BAME communities.
- The government is explicit about barriers for asylum seekers – they are not allowed to work while their asylum case is ongoing so they don't get to learn about how to survive independently which in turn can lead to dependance. It also prevents asylum seekers from becoming familiar with the culture in a work environment. Asylum seekers live with the constant fear of detention.

- **Examples of good practice in relation to reducing racism or racial inequality (from Sheffield, elsewhere in the UK or overseas)**
  - At COSS we anonymise applications for jobs within our organisation. By redacting the names from applications for example, the selection panel is not aware of the cultural origins of the applicant.
  - COSS has been actively raising awareness of asylum and cultural issues in Sheffield for several years. We go into schools and places of worship giving children and adults the chance to learn, mostly first hand, from people from different cultures who have been through the asylum process themselves.
  - During the current C-19 pandemic, we (and other voluntary organisations in Sheffield) have made a concerted effort to translate Public Health information in various community languages (including Arabic, Amharic, Farsi, French and Tigrinian).
  - COSS is a centre for the reporting of hate crime. Many people who are subjected to racial abuse are not always aware that racist slurs and other abuse come under the banner of 'Hate Crime' or that it is illegal. We actively try to raise awareness of this within the BAME community.
  - During the recent pandemic and consequent lockdown, our Connections Team and SPRING project actively made outreach calls to check in with asylum seekers and refugees to help reduce the sense of isolation. We are continuing this work beyond lockdown.

- Other organisations within Sheffield, such as Who is your Neighbour? (WIYN), hold safe space dialogues, often in white working-class communities throughout South Yorkshire, where people often feel disenfranchised. COSS has worked with WIYN, holding conversations which allow people from different communities to talk through things, get things off their chests in a safe environment in the hope that they develop an appreciation and understanding of people from different cultures and backgrounds.
- **What we believe to be the best way to tackle racism or racial inequality in the city**
  - Awareness raising for issues related to BAME communities to the right people (white disaffected people, professionals who don't appreciate that what they are doing is creating a barrier. This could be employers, NHS staff, transport and other frontline staff.
  - Parliament, Sheffield City Council (SCC), organisations and employers should aim to reflect the communities they work in. This could be done through positive discrimination/affirmative action/ensuring diversity through minimum quotas.
  - Small organisations should provide regular anti-racism training; they should follow policies that are not only non-racist but are actively anti-racist.
  - Improve recruitment practices.
  - Education: Decolonise the curriculum. Represent refugee and other children of colour in curriculum material such as reading books etc.
  - SCC should provide more education about housing issues and the causes of these issues. Publication of what council policy is for housing would be useful.
  - Ending policies on a national or local level that disproportionately impact BAME communities negatively.

- Training for specific public sector organisations particularly involved in these issues (i.e. SCC, Police)
- Giving community organisations a 'seat at the table'.
- Call out hate from media outlets. The recent channel crossings in small boats by people seeking sanctuary in the UK were met with a barrage of hostility in the British press and by the British Government. This needs to be challenged.
- When investigations or enquiries into racist practices have been held, it is incumbent on all of us, to see that local and national governments ensure that the recommendations of previous enquiries are upheld.
- Bring back the "How your city works" community development course.
- Proactively reach out to other BAME organisations as well as individuals.
- Campaign to 'Lift the Ban' on asylum seekers not being able to work while their asylum claim is ongoing.
- Campaign to reform the asylum system in general