

## Evidence for the Race and Equality Commission – Provided by David Blunkett 22/06/21

### Summary of key points:

- 10 years on from the Fairness Commission much of what was identified in terms of inequalities remains and has been exacerbated by Covid
- Health inequalities could be helped by systemic changes to funding distribution from government
- Being heard and contributing to your local community with your own identity is key to civic involvement
- Much of the failures in relation to race and equality are systemic, cultural barriers are formed as a result. There need to be mechanisms to enable people to challenge and develop to fulfil their potential irrespective of Race.

Please see below my responses to the six areas you've chosen to address in respect of the Commission's inquiry.

I ought to stress that I'm drawing down on 50 years plus of experience of being involved in public life in the city - from my election as a City Councillor in 1970, my time as leader of the council between '80 and '87 and then as a Member of Parliament through to 2015. I have been able to keep in touch with events because of my role as the independent and honorary chair of the Sheffield City Partnership Board, but I claim no special expertise.

I do not think that Sheffield is any different to other major conurbations in the UK or, for that matter, in western Europe. We have all the same identifiable challenges and where inequality exists, the socio-economic challenges faced by all groups on similar income levels, housing conditions and job prospects will inevitably be underpinned, and therefore exacerbated, by historic or current injustice based on race, faith or perceived differences.

10 years on from the Sheffield Fairness Commission (2012), much of what they identified not only remains the same but will have been exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19 and the measures taken consequent on that pandemic.

In some ways, we have a greater challenge in Sheffield to face up to the often-hidden issues that you are addressing. I say this because we (and I am extremely relieved that this is the case) did not experience the riots of 1981, 1991, 2001 or 2011 (and others in between). Those outbreaks of frustration and self-destruction which took place in other major cities across Britain, both created raw tensions that were clearly difficult to handle, but they also focused minds on what needed to be done - albeit that good intentions were rarely carried through. I do not mean, by this, that we should do anything but rejoice in the fact that we did have a sense of identity, a sense of belonging and common purpose which allowed people to maintain a dialogue and find a way through without self-destruction, but rather, that it may have led to a danger of some complacency and a feeling that things were better than they really were, or are

today.

Before addressing each issue, I will offer some reflections on Sheffield City Partnership Board and its role in the city.

First of these are that the inequalities we see in Sheffield have been a major concern of the Partnership Board's and a key focus of its work. These have been highlighted clearly by the annual State of Sheffield reports that the Board has published since 2012. These reports are data led and have highlighted inequalities in health, education and employment outcomes, among others, with a focus on geographical variations. However, it has to be noted that these reports have not had a significant amount to say on ethnic or racial inequalities; generally where they have touched on ethnicity it has been in commenting on the structure of the Sheffield population. This is a consequence of the report being data-led: it is the case, as identified by the Public Health England reports into the unequal impact of the pandemic produced in 2020, that there is a lack of robust data collection on ethnicity in this country, which has made it hard for the issue to be interrogated in the way the reports have been approached.

The Partnership Board are in the process of reviewing the way they approach this analysis work to understand the state of the city, and are in the early stages of developing an online data observatory as a long term replacement for the State of Sheffield reports. However, this will mean little for our understanding of racial inequalities in Sheffield if we do not address the lack of data. Therefore, as Chair of the Partnership Board I would welcome recommendations addressing the collection and sharing of data on ethnicity by institutions in the city to allow us to go beyond the data that are currently available.

Secondly, I would like to reflect on representation at Board meetings. The City Partnership Board has its roots in the Local Strategic Partnership that was established under the New Labour government in the 2000s, with a focus on statutory, voluntary, and private sector partners working together to improve Sheffield for all. As a result, it is constructed from people in leadership positions in major Sheffield institutions, given a desire for those involved in discussions to be able to influence the direction of their organisations.

A consequence of this is that there is limited ethnic diversity in those who attend Board meetings, reflecting the broader leadership of Sheffield as a city. It must be accepted that this is not desirable, both to ensure as far as possible that the concerns of the whole population are reflected in Board discussions, and to ensure the improved decision making that comes from diverse perspectives. The Board is actively engaged in considering how it can address this, but ultimately the best way to do this is to ensure those in leadership positions reflect the diversity of Sheffield more accurately than is currently the case. Inevitably, even with measures of positive action, this will take time.

With this in mind, as Chair of the Board, I would welcome recommendations on measures to support the acceleration of talent from underrepresented groups into leadership roles in business, public service, the voluntary and community sector, and of course to elected office. Equally, recommendations would be welcome on how

measures might achieve progress in the short-term, thereby providing encouragement and commitment from all concerned.

I'll now take each requested issue in turn and then conclude.

## **Health**

The Fairness Commission, and much work since, has highlighted the very specific divisions that exist in Sheffield (a microcosm of the UK) in respect to both health inequality and outcomes. A great deal is known about this, and if we could get central government to agree to alter the distribution of funding – particularly to primary care – and appreciate the interrelated nature of other key factors (housing, income, nature of work and broad living environment), then we could make real progress. It will however, as the Partnership Board has identified on several occasions, require a joined-up approach by all those engaged in bringing about change. This is, of course, about the key services and institutions, but it's also about business, the council, community and voluntary groups and, above all, about building the community asset and social capital that allows people both to speak for themselves and to be a partner in bringing about change. Co-delivery and co-identification are what needs to be done.

## **Civic life**

It would be wrong to think of those under the umbrella of BAME are all the same. This is one of the points with which I do agree in respect to the recent controversial report, sponsored by the government (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). As with education, there are very different trajectories and life experiences for people from a variety of backgrounds, with whom this Inquiry will be connecting. The critical area, in my view, in relation to this heading and as it is with white working-class communities, is people having a voice. They need to be heard, taken seriously and engaged in the process of change (see above). In other words, a communitarian approach rather than top-down. Seeing mutuality and reciprocity as absolutely key, but understanding that people do not want to be seen, or to feel, that they are victims unto which good works will be done, but key elements of our civil society; thinking, feeling and aspiring in exactly the same way as others, but with the need to be able to call upon support to overcome specific barriers, breakdown identified prejudice wherever it exists, and open up routes to successful engagement. It is possible to do this, as I often used to say 20 years ago, through “integration and diversity, hand in hand”. No one needs to lose their specific identity in the process of being an essential part of, and contributor to, the community they live in.

## **Crime and Justice**

From my previous role as Home Secretary, I'm painfully aware of the way in which the justice system fails so many people - not just because of identified discrimination, but a total failure to understand cultural norms and differences and to be able to incorporate, in public policy, measures which do not patronise or lay aside personal responsibility, but understand how the world looks from someone else's perspective. This, as with the identified issues above, requires participation and engagement rather than individuals or communities being almost seen as outside the norm. I know that a great deal of work is being done by the Police and Crime Commissioner, and will be

undertaken by the new Chief Constable and her team, on breaking down those barriers whilst recognising that communities most affected by crime are often the ones who need to engage most with the police in rooting out those who destroy the lives of the men and women around them. So much can be learnt from previous historic reviews (which is why I mentioned, in my opening comments, the disturbances of the past) which, whilst we did not have direct experience (thank goodness), should inform where we go forward. We should not be reinventing the wheel, but simply learning from what is known.

## **Education**

I could talk for Britain on this. So much progress has been made, and the differential outcomes for different ethnic or cultural groups, are well known. There is common purpose in relation to some minority ethnic groupings and white working-class youngsters (particularly boys). Again, there is a great deal which is already known about how to take on this challenge, learning from the *Excellence in Cities* programme, which morphed into the *London Challenge*, and has been replicated elsewhere in different forms. Listening to those who have been involved in substantial change would be much better than listening to me.

## **Sport**

I do not have a great deal to add in relation to sport, other than to say that when people feel that they are not welcome, then they know they're not welcome. There is still a great deal to be done in breaking down barriers, and once you identify the statistics and ask the questions, then challenging all those involved to come up with answers is, self-evidently, the way forward (if only it were that simple.) Sport, as with music and culture, is, however, a wonderful way of breaking down barriers, particularly in relation to young people, and a great deal has been done in these areas over the years. This has been true in relation to schools in the North-East of Sheffield, and the outreach to the community in respect of youngsters from the Slovak Roma community; and the same has been true of other minority cultural groups coming into the city. Identifying what we can share, and then opening up opportunities, is surely the way forward.

## **Business and Employment**

We have an enormous way to go here. There is incredible entrepreneurial spirit across the whole of the city, and we need to be able to build on it. There is no point in asking questions about the ethnic or cultural background of those in positions of authority if we have not done anything about building the ladder that enables people to reach that point. Again, people of all faiths and no faith, do not want to be patronised. You can't put somebody in a position that they have not grown into, do not have the experience or qualifications to be able to take on – not, that is, unless you want them to fail. So, a paternalistic approach to this is not acceptable. We must, very quickly, put in place the mechanisms to allow people to grow, flourish, use their talent and to rise to, what is sometimes called, "the top". Of course, it goes without saying that all the issues that we know about which also get in the way of this happening need to be dealt with, but the primary driver has to be to enable people to live, work and develop on equal terms. This is, of course, true in respect of gross, historic, intergenerational, economic and social disadvantage, where race and faith highlight injustice, which those with what is

described as "protected characteristics" shine a beam on what have been the underlying class barriers since before the Industrial Revolution.

## Conclusion

We have a number of reports, in addition to those from the Fairness Commission, including the reports on the considerable tensions in parts of the city (such as Darnall) which go back a very long way. Again, the Commission will have access to these, and I think it's really important that, without living in the past, we learn from anything that will guide us to dealing with the present and the future.

Where communities of different historic or faith experience can be brought together, this always has to be better than targeting communities specifically which then both alienate the recipients from those around (see the reports on Burnley and Oldham from 2001, linked at the end of this document), or cause resentment which can be used by racists to whip up prejudice and hate. Emphasising what people hold in common, have to face in common, but then acknowledging and dealing with the very specifics which require focused support, must surely make sense.

My own experience, over all these years, is that, quite often, things have gone wrong when the very best intentions have been promoted by those meaning extremely well, but out of touch with what is actually happening on the ground, or lacking an appreciation of the cascade effect of their actions. Hence, my emphasis on communitarianism and building from the bottom-up, rather than from the top down. Those who are in the know, know. But be careful that those who say they speak for others, actually do so, rather than speaking for themselves, or only part of the community they seek to serve.

If this were easy, we wouldn't require the Commission and the inquiry, and we would have resolved it by now! This is an ongoing process which should involve all of us in a participative, careful, but honest, dialogue. Small steps and modest improvements can often encourage people to optimism and hope. Those two elements trump bitterness and resentment any day of the week.

## Referenced reports

- (2001) *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team*. London: Home Office. Available from: <https://tedcandle.co.uk/pdf/communitycohesion%20cantlereport.pdf>
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- (2012) *Making Sheffield Fairer*. Sheffield Fairness Commission, Sheffield City Council: Sheffield. Available from: <https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/content/dam/sheffield/docs/your-city-council/our-plans,-policies-and-performance/Fairness%20Commission%20Report.pdf>
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- Information on Excellence in Cities:  
<https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/EIC14/EIC14.pdf>
- Information on the London Challenge: <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/our-key-themes/children-and-young-people/education-and-school-places/lessons-london/tim-brighthouse>