

Sheffield City Council Race Equality: Business & Employment Hearing Business and Investment Submission

Purpose

This document provides evidence and information to the SCC Race Equality Commission for the Business and Employment Hearing alongside other submissions on Sheffield's workforce.

This submission focuses on the business and investment activities of the Council within the City Growth Department, and specifically business support delivered pre and post COVID via Business Sheffield. It provides information on our work to support BAME businesses during COVID, and some of the key challenges BAME businesses have faced in accessing our services.

The Council has a key role in ensuring that race inequalities are systematically reduced and eventually eradicated, through the services we provide as one of the biggest employers and in terms of our civic leadership role. This paper recognises that although improvements have been made, further progress is required to deliver a powerful change in how we communicate and support BAME businesses across our business facing services.

Background: Business and Investment in City Growth

Sheffield City Council invests around £2.9m in 'Business and Investment' growth services, this delivers the following core services and covers associated running costs:

- Business Sheffield
- Invest Sheffield
- Regeneration and development services
- Marketing Sheffield and Business Conferencing
- Major Events Budget
- Economic Strategy and Programme Team

The investment leverages significant economic benefits but it also secures further income and funding to support key economic activities. For example, these services collectively bring in annual income, and secure external funding to deliver additional activity. In the previous 4-year period, at least £5million of additional funds and activity had been secured through bidding for ERDF funds to support Sheffield businesses, securing partner's contributions for the RISE programme and winning over £700,000 from Visit Britain. This level of match funding is the norm for the service although funding streams change, dependant on projects and financial opportunities available.

Within the new Cooperative Executive 'business and investment'¹ activity is led by the:

- Executive Member for Inclusive Economy, Jobs and Skills, who is responsible for: strategic economic policy, district centres, Business Sheffield and support to businesses, skills, employability and lifelong learning.
- Executive Member for City Futures: Development, Culture and Regeneration, who is responsible for Forward and Area Planning, including Local Plan, planning service delivery, housing strategy and delivery, all aspects of housing growth and new homes delivery, including HRA Business Plan, acquisitions and Council new

¹ 'Business and Investment' was the previous administrations Cabinet Portfolio.

build, regeneration of city centre, including City Centre Plan and Heart of the City II, cultural development, libraries and archives, city and community events and city centre management.

Stakeholders and Partnership Working

The delivery of business and investment services above, requires open and trusting relationships with partners, allowing us to act together to ensure the best outcomes for our city.

Partners come together through our civic boards and governance, but we also form task groups, collaborations, and project teams from across the public and private sector to make good things happen in Sheffield. During the pandemic there has been an unprecedented collaborative response, with the public and private sector working together to respond and find solutions to the challenges brought by the pandemic.

We have developed strong connections with the private sector through our Business Response Group. It is made up of Sheffield's leading business networks and support organisations, who are working together to help address the issues local businesses are facing now and into the future. It includes the Chamber of Commerce, Sheffield Property Association, Sheffield Digital, The Company of Cutlers, The Culture Consortium, Unight Sheffield, The University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University. The BRG co-authored a [Business Recovery Plan](#) and meet fortnightly to work collectively to develop solutions to key economic issues arising from COVID 19.

We are also part of the Mayoral Combined Authority and Local Enterprise Partnership. The MCA is supported by four Thematic boards; Business Recovery and Growth, Education, Skills and Employability, Transport and the Environment and Housing and Infrastructure, where partners, Cllrs and the private sector come together to shape the future of the region.

Achieving a private sector membership which is balanced and representative of Sheffield's business community across gender, ethnicity, business sector and size of businesses, is often discussed and forms part of our aims for the boards and project teams we convene. However, we do not always achieve this. The Council recognises that more needs to be done across our services to ensure that we: a) convene boards and groups that design in diversity as a criteria for success, not just an aim. b) alongside improvements in the diversity of our membership, ensure that BAME expertise and views are represented and sought at meetings we attend, and c) as senior leaders in the Council, test whether the stakeholders we meet and listen to are representing the city and our customer base, particularly BAME voices.

During Covid, we have also worked more closely with local community groups and organisations through the Council's Local Community Response Teams. Through the collaboration within these teams, we were able to work with organisations, such as Shipshape Health and Wellbeing Centre (where we now hold regular surgeries), and community forums in Page Hall. We have also worked with public health colleagues and engaged with BAME groups to discuss their needs and seek their advice and partnership in engaging and supporting BAME businesses.

Business Sheffield: Overview of services provided (pre COVID)

Business Sheffield offer a comprehensive service to help businesses thrive and grow, whether they be a start-up or an established business. Our service provision is designed to flex to any business, regardless of size or sector, be it micro, SME or large. There is no charge for any of the services we offer, and our sole aim is to help support business owners to develop a successful business.

Prior to COVID, Business Sheffield resources were divided into four key areas:

- **Business Sheffield Gateway team** – four individuals providing administrative and customer service support including taking phone calls and email enquiries, organising the workshop programme, CRM data entry and collating project evidence for funded contracts.
- **Launchpad** – Business Sheffield is the delivery partner for the Sheffield City Region programme providing start up support and support to small SME's with up to 10 employees. The team includes 2 x Start Up Advisors, 2 x General Business Advisors, 1 x sales and Marketing Expert. It provides a comprehensive face to face workshop programme delivered quarterly using the expertise of Advisors or business experts from the private sector.
- **Growth support** - for manufacturing businesses and tech start-ups and scale ups through contracting of 3 Growth Advisors (freelancers working with us on a consultant basis) with strategic growth experience of supporting manufacturing businesses to grow, and 3 Tech Scale Up Advisors (again freelancer experts and founders of their own successful tech businesses) helping tech starts to reach minimum viable product and supporting established tech businesses with scalability to grow and access investment.
- **A quarterly networking event** – Pre Covid this was one of the largest in the city, with a real mix of businesses at different stages with approx. 100 attendees at each event.

Ethnicity data of businesses accessing Business Sheffield (pre Covid)

Business Sheffield Customer Relationship Management (CRM) includes data collection from individuals and businesses, including ethnicity information. This helps the service to understand if it is providing an accessible service that is reflective of the business population in Sheffield. As an example, from the period 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020 Business Sheffield recorded working with 834 businesses, of which 18.32% identified themselves as BAME.

The Business Sheffield service has consistently been accessed by a diverse client base from across all of Sheffield. BAME businesses attended our workshops and networking events and added value to these sessions. For businesses who did not speak English as a first language, we would offer a 1-2-1 with a business advisor with a business colleague or family member to help translate.

The table below shows the information businesses provided when asked about their ethnicity. Please note that this data reflects how people self-identified their ethnicity rather than a set list:

Ethnic Group	Number s	%	Description of ethnic group
Asian or Asian British	48	5.75%	includes any Asian background for example Bangladeshi, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani or other East or South Asian
Black, African, Black British or Caribbean	52	6.23%	includes any black background
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	35	4.19%	includes any mixed groups
Another ethnic group	18	2.16%	includes any other ethnic group for example Arab
White	497	59.52%	includes any white background
Preferred not to say/declined/blank	185	22.16%	Did not provide ethnic group and preferred not to say
	835	100.00%	
BAME	153	18.32%	

Business Sheffield: Overview of Covid Business Support

The economic climate has been very challenging for most businesses over the last 15 months. Sectors that are most reliant on social interaction or deemed non-essential, such as retail, hospitality and culture have faced prolonged closure and even as they now reopen, continue to face reductions in demand, as consumer confidence takes time to return.

The demand for support through this period has been vast; the Council has distributed over £200million in grant funding, and Business Sheffield has responded to over 10,000 calls and provided over 6,000 1-2-1 business advisor sessions since March 2020 to support businesses through lockdown. The Council has distributed its 'Reopening Guide' to 8000 businesses directly and via partners such as The Chamber, Sheffield Bid, Hoteliers Association, etc. A set of business checklists have also been produced and distributed, including translations, to help businesses understand what it expected of them.

To respond to new levels of demand we scaled the Business Sheffield service (working remotely) from a gateway of 4 to 20 people (at its maximum) to create the Business Sheffield Covid helpline (investing in new enabling systems to do so) and expanding expert advisor team contracted support from 6 to 10. The shape of the service was redesigned to include:

- **Business Sheffield Covid Helpline** – The first point of contact for businesses, often distressed, to diagnose their needs and providing up front information about grants and referring to a Business Advisor for critical support.
- **Business Advisor Critical Intervention Support** – Expert support was brought in on a consultant basis to do detailed critical interventions with

businesses, including helping businesses to access financial measures including all the grant regimes administered by the Council for businesses, and advice on government loans including support to access CBIL's and BBIL's, furlough and job retention support. They also provided assistance on opening, social distancing working with colleagues across the Council including Environmental Health, Licensing, Housing and Property Services.

- **Business Information Officers** – Funded through ERDF Reopening the Highstreet Safely project, Business Sheffield has a total of 7 Business Information Officers going from door to door on Sheffield's high streets, in district and local centres, targeting independent retail and hospitality businesses to; ensure that businesses are COVID-secure and supporting where they were not; helping businesses understand the guidance on QR Codes, face mask wearing and social distancing guidelines; working longer term with the business on their viability from accessing grants, to cash flow forecasting, e-commerce and customer engagement. The Business Information Officers had experience of working with BAME businesses and were able to break down barriers and work with the local community to build rapport and develop trust.
- **Business Sheffield Workshops** – Business Sheffield normally offers an extensive programme of in-person workshops, training sessions and networking events, so the team had to look at new ways to continue providing this support. The workshop programme was reintroduced as a Virtual Business Workshop Programme in June 2020, with sessions being delivered via video meeting platform Zoom. To date, the team have now delivered around 200 workshop sessions online. The programme continues to cover a wide variety of topics each month, for both start-ups and established businesses, delivered by business advisors along with industry experts, while incorporating up to date COVID specific content. The team also devised a special series of one-off workshops and webinars to support High Street Businesses most impacted by restrictions. These sessions were recorded live so that they could then be hosted as an online video resource after the event and made available to all businesses. The links for these were sent out to thousands of businesses via the Gov Delivery emailer system and promoted on social media.
- **Hospitality, Accommodation and Leisure** – The Business Conferencing Team were redeployed to focus on business support across the sector. Weekly contacts including webinars and Q&A sessions were set up (subjects such as Tier regulations, reopening guidance, national accreditation schemes etc), with presentations to monthly hoteliers meeting (open Q & A). A Reopening Hospitality Guidance document has been produced at each point restrictions have changed.

Key issues and challenges for BAME businesses in accessing Business Support

During COVID, Business Sheffield has supported at least 10 times the number of businesses than pre-COVID levels. This has given us insight into a wider spectrum of the business base than ever before. Critical to this have been the Business Information Officers working with our local high street businesses. On a weekly basis we would bring advisor teams together to gain feedback on the key issues businesses on the ground were facing.

We also conducted business surveys throughout the pandemic, to enable us to understand business need and shape our COVID response. The most recent survey was done in partnership with the University of Sheffield, and we would be happy to share the results of the survey when it is available.

Our understanding of the nuances of different businesses and the barriers they face, both during the pandemic and in accessing our services has grown significantly during this time. We have taken positive steps to ensure that we work to overcome key issues. With respect to BAME businesses, the below issues highlight the challenges we understand from our work on the ground, that BAME business were facing, and how we sought to support them.

Getting the message out to BAME businesses

A key part of the Business Sheffield's activity in the last year has been marketing and communications to actively promote the availability of financial support, guidance and COVID resources for local businesses at every stage of the pandemic. This has been communicated to all businesses across Sheffield, and our data includes many BAME businesses.

Our RHSS Business Information officers have worked with all high street businesses across Sheffield. This has included a wide variety of BAME businesses. Our officers have engaged with these BAME businesses with an understanding of their needs, and ensured the businesses have access to the SCC resources they need in the appropriate language.

We have worked very closely with the Local Community Response teams who have been invaluable in providing links to local business forums, community support groups (e.g. Shipshape and the local Pakistani and Muslim radio station). Business advisors have been able to deliver business surgeries in the communities and have worked with elders and local mosques, churches and synagogues to get the grant and business support message out in all communities of Sheffield.

Our communications have been coordinated across SCC business facing services to include Business Advisors, Information Officers, Health Protection teams, Licensing, City Centre Management and Local Community Response Team networks. Activity has included:

- Weekly media releases on latest schemes and recaps
<https://sheffnews.com/category/business-city-development>
- Email bulletins to 9,000 businesses via Gov Delivery mailer system
- Weekly newsletter to top employers in Sheffield

- Video business case studies to support grant messaging via social media
- BBC Radio Sheffield interviews
- Hallam FM radio advert campaigns
- Business updates for Member/MP Covid Bulletin
- Grants summary postcard – hard copy and digital- to provide a practical summary on what grants were available
- Grants flowchart (hard copy and digital) to make it easier for businesses to understand which grant they might be eligible for
- Concentrated social media campaign to help combat confusion on business grants (myth busters)
- Direct emails to all Sheffield Accountancy businesses to help them support clients on guidance
- Digital promotion of Business Impact Surveys to ensure all businesses had the opportunity to respond

We have proactively focussed on getting messages to and engaging with BAME businesses. This has included:

- Video business case studies to support grant messaging via social media with a specific focus on BAME business owners
<https://twitter.com/sheffbusiness/status/1364948953133953029?s=21>
- Community newsletters, local papers and community radio programmes identified by the Local Community Response Team leads including the local Pakistani Muslim radio station, Shipshape Newsletter, Darnall Community Newsletter, Look Local and others.
- Business resources and posters in Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, English, Italian, Kurdish, Polish, Punjabi, Slovak, Somali, Urdu (see next section)
- Grant postcards available in Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, English, Italian, Kurdish, Polish, Punjabi, Slovak, Somali, Urdu

Interpretation and understanding of guidance

To enable business to better understand and apply guidance during each phase we have developed a suite of materials for businesses to access. These materials have been developed to help business do three things:

1. Understand the government guidance (and the difference between guidance and law). Materials were designed to signpost businesses to the relevant areas of gov.uk and broken down into easy to manage checklists, 'How to' Guides and practical tips on things to try.
2. Communicate key messages to their customers/workforce. With the onus on businesses to ensure customers and staff follow the rules, we developed materials such as posters for staff rooms and front of house areas reminding customers and staff of key things, e.g. wearing face coverings, reducing transmission in the workplace by doing simple things like taking breaks outside or opening windows.
3. Understand where to go for help. Our reopening guide contained a range of contact points to help businesses get further information. All materials and communications work consistently raised awareness of the Business Sheffield helpline as a first point of contact for anything of which a business was unsure.

Our suite of materials was made available in 9 languages (matched to the business community) - Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, English, Italian, Kurdish, Polish, Punjabi, Slovak, Somali, Urdu. We began with a flyer that was handed out to businesses to inform them of our reopening guide, the area of the SCC website they should go to for specific business/grant information (www.sheffield.gov.uk/coronavirus-business) and our Business Sheffield phone line. Subsequent materials included checklists for reopening businesses (retail, close contact, outdoor hospitality, indoor hospitality, wedding venues), avoiding transmission in the workplace, better ventilating the workplace, and accessing testing. We also included posters for staff rooms to encourage wearing face coverings along with 'How To' Guides on downloading QR codes. They are updated every time guidance changes and are available here:

<https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/home/business/coronavirus-business-resources>

We have maintained a close working relationship with Disability Sheffield on all of our information to businesses and included a Top Tips section in our reopening guide. We signposted to their wider resource via our weekly bulletin to c.9,000 businesses and via our social media channels.

<https://www.disabilitysheffield.org.uk/accessibilitytipsforshopscafesandpubs>

Barriers to grant application due to technical nature of the process and eligibility evidence required.

Through our outreach, we discovered that often BAME businesses were not accessing grant support they were entitled to, because:

- English was often not the business owner's first language, and businesses struggled with the information on the Council's business pages to understand how to complete the application form (the website is written in accessible English and for a reading age of 12, however when requiring technical information in an application this has often been difficult to interpret)
- There was a lack of understanding about eligibility
- Some BAME high street businesses have been mainly cash businesses and often struggle to provide the evidence required in the application process.

Information Officers and business advisors, who are experienced in working with businesses whose owner's first language is not English have been able to identify those businesses and support them to make applications. Before our Business Information Officers were in post (Sep 2020) where a business has contacted us on the phone for assistance, our business advisors helped them to apply over the phone, often using friends and relatives to assist the business owner in the process of amalgamating information. Once the Business Information Officers were in post, we ensured any enquiry from a business who did not speak English as their first language got a 1-2-1 visit at their business premises to help them to apply for the grant.

Although Business Sheffield, alongside other business facing services in the Council such as Business Rates, Licensing and Environmental protect, have worked hard through the Council's COVID response to support BAME businesses, we do not have data on the number of BAME businesses that have accessed our COVID business support, or received grants.

Amid the pandemic and the overwhelming demand from businesses for support, temporary data capture systems were set up to allow the speedy capture of business information, to allow the business to be directed to the most appropriate support at speed. Furthermore, due to remote working, which was in its infancy, and the limited ability to access our usual CRM system, data capture was done through a series of spreadsheets, which did not include ethnicity data.

In addition, national grants schemes do not require the capture of ethnicity data, as they focus on the business entity, not the business owner, and as such we do not hold data on BAME owned businesses that have received grants.

This demonstrates that as an organisation we still have issues to address and positive actions to take to help ensure equitable service delivery.

Concluding remarks:

Pre COVID, the service had processes in place to ensure equal access to our services, which we monitored. Adaptations to service provision were made to allow equal access to services, taking ethnicity and language barriers into account.

However, we have learnt through COVID that more is required. Being in touch with a wide range of businesses on the ground through the deployment of Business Information Officers and handling the sheer number of enquiries and grants, has exposed the service to new businesses, new barriers, and new insight into how the Council and our business facing service can evolve.

We have operated with an aim of 'equality of opportunity'; whilst this is important, it is not sufficient.

The Council acknowledges that there are also structural inequalities in the wider business ecosystem. We have reached out across our sectors and communities to a diverse range of businesses and proactively engaged them through the pandemic. We now need to engage with them further on their growth aspirations and any barriers within the business ecosystem. We need better data and intelligence about how our services are meeting the needs of our BAME customers.

In terms of best practice, we note the report by the Federation of Small Business 'Unlocking Opportunity: The value of ethnic minority firms to UK economic activity and enterprise' (July 2020). This has shaped our Covid response, and we will seek to further implement its recommendations.

The Council welcome recommendations and any additional resources from the Commission to help us understand how we can further improve our services and utilise our position as a leader in the city to embed equality and inclusivity into all aspects of business and enterprise support.