

## **Voluntary Action Sheffield**

### **Submission to the Sheffield Independent Race Equality Commission**

#### **Introduction**

VAS's work ranges from providing support to individual refugees, supporting new and emerging community groups as well as established charities delivering services, hosting Healthwatch Sheffield, strategic engagement and influence with city leaders, decision makers, partnership boards, commissioners and funders.

We can identify racial inequality across all areas of our work. This submission gives an indication of the key issues that we see, based on the experience and feedback from our staff. It reflects wider experiences in the sector given leadership and coordination. However, in the time available we have not been able to consult and engage more widely, and we hope this initial call for evidence will be followed by further opportunities to bring forward information and material to inform the Commission's work.

We acknowledge that we are complicit in structural racism, with an all-white senior management team and under representation of people of colour on our Board of Trustees. We are strongly committed to addressing this, and have work to do to achieve this end.

Within the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in Sheffield there are many examples of organisations dedicated to tackling racism and racial inequality, including many which are BAME led with specialist expertise. The VCS and faith organisations play a key strategic role in the city, providing essential services and activities, enhancing and complementing services from the public and private sector, and very often meeting needs that would otherwise go unmet.

We recognise there are issues with race equality in the VCS, with divisions and a lack of coherence between organisations and communities. We are keen to work to identify and address these. We also want to recognise the diversity and expertise within the VCS, which makes a significant and positive change to the experience of BAME individuals and communities. The VCS has a key strategic and operational role to play in tackling racism, and as a sector is willing and keen to do so.

#### **1. Racial inequality in Sheffield**

Race inequality in Sheffield clearly exists, and is perpetuated across sectors. In this sense it isn't unusual or different to other cities or indeed the country as a whole. However, we think there may be some distinguishing factors it would be useful to explore further to understand their impact and help ensure the action we take has the greatest impact. For example, we have a mix of well-established communities and relatively recent growth in other communities – achieving equality for all these communities may require different approaches.

Further analysis of communities in the city and their experiences – including for example of the economy, education, housing, health and crime - would be welcome and should inform our approach as a city, as well as the VCS and VAS.

One clear manifestation of racial inequality is in strategic leadership and governance. We can see areas where we are more diverse – notably the relatively good representation from BAME people on Sheffield City Council – but far more areas of deficit, with very few BAME people in executive positions. Governing bodies, partnership boards, and other key groups and committees are often made up of all white members.

This is particularly problematic as it is these leadership groups which shape services, make funding decisions and set up opportunities. They draw upon a very narrow range of experiences and perceptions relative to the breadth of those who live in the city. They therefore often do not take in to account the needs of the BAME community. The structure of decision making is designed around the white business culture and language of meetings and networking, and this excludes the voice and experience of the BAME community. Where there is engagement, it is often where people have learnt to fit in with the dominant culture, rather than the culture adapting to having a more inclusive approach.

A pressing need is to extend the involvement of BAME people to shape decisions in Sheffield. We cannot wait for BAME people to be promoted to senior positions, but rather look for other ways to engage them in planning and decision making.

VAS will be recruiting new trustees to bring greater breadth to our board; we are extending the VCS representation on the Partnership Board to include BAME people and look to other sectors to do the same; we will look for other opportunities to shape decisions with a wider range of perspectives.

We also see structural racism in other areas. Our Volunteer Centre has a citywide view on volunteering across the whole sector and can see how organisations recruit, train and involve volunteers. These structures mean that refugees and asylum seekers are routinely prevented from volunteering – the current pandemic has dramatically increased this exclusion due to the additional resources and skills needed to volunteer, and the increase in people with those resources offering to volunteer, displacing refugees.

Funding structures and processes often exclude smaller groups and charities, which hits BAME organisations particularly hard. There is a conundrum around having capacity to be actively engaged in emerging partnerships and invest in bid writing and service development – many organisations cannot afford to invest in income generation given the commensurate risk of being unsuccessful. This perpetuates the more dominant position of better-established, very often white led organisations.

At VAS we recently engaged with the “anchor” organisations and looked to them to bring in smaller local organisations for the Healthy Holidays programme. We know this had issues, and we adjusted our approach to engage BAME groups directly. We need to look more carefully at how we foster partnerships in this way.

## **2. Your organisation’s, or your analysis of the cause or causes of racism and/or racial inequality in Sheffield**

The causes of racism and racial inequality are wide-ranging and deep-seated. Centuries of prejudice and discrimination, the legacy of slavery and colonialism, the current hostile

environment, discriminatory employment practices, white-designed and delivered education, healthcare, housing and so on, discrimination in the criminal justice services, very few BAME people in positions of power and influence, a white-dominated media – in virtually every sphere of like we find such causes.

We do not think Sheffield is necessarily different to other places – the causes of racism and inequality here will be the same as elsewhere. We do not, though, know whether the extent of these causes (or their symptoms) is different in Sheffield. We hope the Commission will be able to explore this in greater depth, to which we would be keen to contribute.

We also think it is necessary to consider the capacity and understanding required for change – as without this racial inequality can be perpetuated. We have attached an illustration of this drawn from the experiences of our Volunteer Centre.

### **3. Examples of good practice in relation to reducing racism and/or racial inequality**

Within the VCS in Sheffield there are many examples of organisations dedicated to tackling racism and racial inequality. These VCS organisations cannot all be listed here, but those listed below are an illustration of the crucial role they play.

Some are BAME organisations (SADACCA, PMC, ISRAAC, Roshni, SACMHA). Some are BAME led organisations that meet a wide range of needs (ACT, Firvale Community Hub).

Some are mixed organisations focused on BAME communities (SAVTE, SAGE). SHEBEEN / SEM was a partnership between SPAT-C (BAME led) and Heeley City Farm (white led).

The VCS has many mixed organisations with an intentional focus on developing a workforce of staff and volunteers representative of the community served to deliver appropriate services to the communities they support. Citizens Advice Sheffield is a larger mainstream organisation which has done this successfully

The asylum seeker and refugee sector is extensive. ASSIST Sheffield has provided cash support and accommodation to destitute asylum seekers since 2003. National legislation prevents Sheffield City Council from giving this support – a clear example of the VCS providing essential support due to public and private sector failure to meet need.

City of Sanctuary, borne out of Sheffield's Victoria Hall Methodist church, is now a national movement to create welcoming cities for asylum seekers.

Cohesion Sheffield is a cross sector project highlighting activities that build cohesion and supporting organisations to do this.

The SPRING Partnership, managed by VAS, is largely delivered at the Sanctuary – bringing service delivery agencies in to a place where refugees are comfortable. However, statutory services often refer people to the SPRING project, rather than offer support people are entitled to in the statutory sector. This experience is widely replicated across the VCS and has increased during COVID.

Some of these organisations and their work stretch back decades - SADACCA can trace its history to 1955. Others are much more recently established, reflecting the changes to Sheffield's population and changing needs.

Volunteering plays a key role in civic life in Sheffield, and is a key route to building social capital, skills and personal resilience. It is crucial that it is open and available to all. The VAS Volunteer Centre and New Beginnings project has supported refugees in to volunteering and worked with the voluntary sector since 2004 to address barriers to this.

The Volunteer Centre has a role to support and enable organisations in the city recruiting volunteers to do so fairly. We have developed minimum quality standards requiring organisations to pay travel expenses and offer support as a minimum. The Sheffield Volunteer Standard has inclusive volunteering embedded in the evaluation asking organisations to demonstrate how they do this. Around 30% of the people using the Volunteer Centre are BAME.

New Beginnings challenges racist practices and supports organisations to develop inclusive volunteering approaches. The service supports organisations to develop their understanding of refugees and to develop roles and approaches to welcome and enable refugees to volunteer. It also provides the personal referral route that opens the door to refugees volunteering. Few other cities have a service like this.

#### **4. What you or your organisation believe would be the best way to tackle racism and/or racial inequality in Sheffield**

Some immediate areas we would point to are leadership; values and behaviour; engagement; funding; education and training; and analysis of data to bring rigour of understanding.

Developing BAME people into leadership positions is fundamental to addressing differential experiences across the city. Addressing this issue would in turn ensure decisions taken reflected a wider set of experiences and that more communities felt connected to governance structures and hence able to influence and shape decisions and action.

Values and behaviour need to change. We think everyone in a position of influence and power in the city should do anti-racism training; everyone should seek to exemplify really positive anti-racist behaviour.

Beyond leadership, the engagement and empowerment of BAME people and communities in most of the core planning, decision making and action-taking processes in the city is weak. We need to establish new ways to engage and empower people, especially from BAME communities.

Funding and commissioning structures often exclude smaller organisations, with structures and requirements involving complex and time-consuming processes. If groups don't know the system they can't apply for funding, creating perpetual exclusion as track record is key to success. This particularly affects BAME communities.

Education and training are similarly fundamental. Perhaps the desire to be inclusive and representative is there, but the knowledge and experience of how to create truly inclusive organisations and services, and the capacity to make these changes is less so. People can both think diversity is good, and not believe in structural racism. Education, understanding and engagement is critical to enable change as change happens best when people want to make the changes.

We think we must keep looking at the data and analysis - we must keep reminding ourselves about the extent of racial inequality - hopefully as a driver for change.

VAS and the VCS look forward to further participation in this commission as we have not been able to include here all of the suggestions that have come back to us from partners, staff and volunteers from the projects that we are directly involved with, nor the VCS organisations that we work with.

Meanwhile, VAS is focusing on making changes ourselves:

- Making VAS an anti-racist organisation
- Addressing diversity at governance level.
- Analysing and being intentional about who we work with.
- Addressing how we work with groups to learn and implement anti-racist practices.
- Using our influence circles to open doors to decision makers for the BAME groups we work with.
- Using culturally competent approaches, different languages, images.
- Sharing where we are doing well and where we need to do better.

**Maddy Desforges**  
**Chief Executive**

**18 September 2020**

## **Appendix**

### **The capacity and knowledge needed to bring about change**

Volunteering management illustrates how service design and lack of funding create racial inequality. When people are too short staffed to cope with their urgent tasks inclusive practices are threatened. When people are made aware of the New Beginnings project, and how to be inclusive, they are overwhelmingly keen to learn, adapt and develop more inclusive practice. This understanding creates empathy and a personal desire to make changes, but overstretched staff often struggle to make the changes happen.

Most organisations want volunteers with defined skills to deliver services, much like a job recruitment process, and take the best volunteer who will deliver fastest, with the least training and support. They want volunteers they can trust, which is why 66% of volunteer recruitment is by word of mouth.

This is understandable when volunteers deliver services and capacity is stretched. Charities need skilled reliable long term volunteers to deliver the services, the majority have limited funding and capacity to train and develop people to volunteer. Personal development of volunteers is a bonus if it happens, not a primary focus – meeting the charitable objectives is the primary focus, volunteers are a means to that end.

This approach excludes refugees and BAME individuals as they don't have a 'referral from a friend' who can recommend them, and are often perceived as needing more support and are not given the opportunity to develop.

VAS surveyed 245 volunteering organisations during COVID, less than 10% said they had capacity to involve refugees.

COVID has meant that many volunteer roles now require a car, internet at home, a laptop and a mobile phone with enough minutes to use for volunteering. This put a stop to New Beginnings being able to place any asylum seekers in volunteer roles over the last 6 months.