

Sheffield BAMER Covid-19 Action Group

The evidence to be presented to the Sheffield Race Equality Commission By Sheffield BAMER Covid-19 Action Group and the organisations they represent .

It is tempting for us as members of the Black community to think that the broad recognition of inequity and resulting activism by Black community organisations during the pandemic and in times of struggle is enough to bring change to our institutions. But of course, we understand that meaningful and long-lasting action to support grassroots community organisations requires strategic vision and intent. This of course is the critical issue that the commission should address to change the status quo and bring about some equity . We wish to take the opportunity to thank the Chair of the Commission for meeting us on two separate occasions to listen to our concerns as grassroots organisations.

The commission may find the following information helpful in reaching its conclusions. We in BAMER communities have been giving evidence for the last fifty years and see this commission as an opportunity to make progress and develop a new relationship with authority, a relationship based on mutual respect and understanding. So far the progress made to achieve equality of opportunities is disappointing to say the least .

It has become increasingly clear that people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are being disproportionately affected by the outbreak of COVID-19. Existing inequalities have worsened through this crisis with organisations like ours struggling to survive with very limited resources. It is now more important than ever that support is given to bona fide BAME community-led organisations that can deliver services.

It is worth the Race Commission noting here, that during the pandemic our community organisations have worked and are working extremely hard to provide services to communities and this has been recognised and appreciated locally and nationally. There are heartfelt stories of community support including the delivery of food parcels to the vulnerable, communicating government and local guidelines in different languages and the production of face masks and a befriending service, innovative and in some cases transformative thinking, heroism and deep love being shown, which in our opinion is what we need. We need to hear such stories and celebrate them as they give us hope about the nature of humanity in our community and a small insight into potential individual and collective futures of our BAME organisations and the city as a whole.

However, this excellent collective work by BAMER Covid-19 Action Group and other black organisations in Sheffield in dealing with the impact of Covid-19 on our communities has clearly demonstrated our collective resilience and highlighted our struggle and unnecessary limitations without proper funding and capacity.

The pandemic has exposed existing health and economic inequalities. We are being treated as passive disaster victims with no sense of the support required. During Lockdown we stood up for ourselves. We wanted to re-energise our community through self-help support and community unity, providing clear and consistent messaging in different languages and making connections with the hard to reach communities such as refugees and smaller groups. Much of this work was paid for by community and individual donations.

Our connections in the community and our knowledge base were key factors in getting access to BAME communities who generally stand at the intersection of multiple dimensions of deprivation.

Statistical modelling shows that a large proportion of the risk difference of Covid-19 mortality of ethnic groups can be explained by demographic, geographical and socioeconomic factors:

- People who are in the low paid key worker groups: cleaners, hospital ancillary staff, domiciliary care staff, shop workers and taxi drivers.

- The economically vulnerable: who need to juggle school, work, and family issues around Covid. As income is core to them there is a temptation to be 'creative' about interpreting and following the rules.

- Clinically vulnerable, housebound and isolated people

- People living in high population densities and extended households

- Tenants of private landlords and houses of multiple occupation.

- People for whom English is not their first language and others who couldn't speak any English at all

- People who are excluded from online virtual services and groups.

. Young people engaged in drugs and gangs with no hope in life . Many issues here relating to the judicial system where many young BAME people are locked up.

. Increase in domestic violence

. Inappropriate and sometimes absence of appropriate and targeted care services .

- Poor/deteriorating mental health: increasing anxiety, uncertainty, isolation, dealing with trauma etc.

. The treatment of Muslim woman and their issues with regards to employment opportunities and career prospects.

.The Education system is losing out by failing to engage with the vast skills base within almost 20% of Sheffield which can contribute greatly to Sheffield's economy. With Brexit upon us, it is time to engage with the many languages available to the City. Dealing positively with this alone will deliver on many fronts, not least anti-

racism. Where having multiple languages represented in the classroom had always been presented by some sections of the media as a backward step - we believe it is quite the opposite, it is the most valuable asset which has enormous potential.

BAME organisations have been surviving for decades without proper investment. Those few surviving organisations (many of which have been in existence for up to five decades) have ended up relying on volunteers without a clear steer or support from the system, as survival beckons. To rescue the BAME third sector, locally in Sheffield, we need more than words or political gestures – we need a clear plan and investment; a strong keel, a new direction, an anchor to ride the current and future storms. Sheffield City Council and leading agencies need to develop an immediate rapid response plan in consultation with these BAME community organisations and provide them with much needed investment, reversing decades of neglect, countering racism and austerity. Now is the time to acknowledge the need to deal with the structural problems in our city which have led to these inequalities. Our community organisations own or lease buildings that have deteriorated and require refurbishment, staff capacity is very low indeed and many have no hope of survival financially.

It is our opinion that our community organisations working with the grassroots in our community should be in the driving seat, not politicians and bureaucrats. Public Services should recognise that our black community organisations are well placed to improve both the design and delivery of many public and community services. We have as community leaders realised that we are kept divided by the very system that is supposed to serve us. We realised that by working alone and in isolation we become divided, hence politically ineffective.

Our inability to come together at times of struggle was our single biggest problem. During the pandemic we saw the opportunity for the BAME Covid-19 Action Group to collectively define our mission and support each other. It has now become absolutely necessary and feasible to form a new partnership with local institutions including Sheffield City Council - based on a critical appreciation of the importance of our organizations and the work they do to serve members of the community. This, in our opinion, requires an understanding and appreciation of our respective roles. It means creatively engaging the programs of large organizations like local government, health providers and Education services that reach out to communities and invest properly in their development. Our aim is to achieve:

. Greater understanding between different BAME communities and public agencies

- Enhanced community cohesion as a consequence , sharing of ideas and supporting each other
- Greater partnership working between different community organisations and public agencies in the interest of our clients
- People identifying more positively with their neighbourhood
- Local services much more aligned and appropriate to the cultural needs of our communities

The approach we want to take to achieve our objectives, is openness, communication, creativity, empathy, patience and trust. It is always with eyes on the prize of safe, enjoyable, harmonious and well-functioning communities. None of our organisations seek hostility but rather a constructive approach to building bridges and correcting the wrongs of the past .

Abdul Galil Shaif
Chief executive of ACT and BAMER executive