

ELGC COV 04
Ymchwiliad i COVID-19 a'i effaith
Inquiry into COVID-19 and its impact
Ymateb gan: Cyngor Hil Cymru
Response from: Race Council Cymru



12th May 2020

The Equality, Local Governments and Communities Committee
Senedd Cymru

Dear Committee members,

Re enquiry into the Covid-19 outbreak in Wales

In response to the call for submissions on the Covid-19 pandemic in Wales, we write this report to highlight the challenges and disproportionate effects of Covid19 on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities across Wales.

Who We Are

Race Council Cymru (RCC) was established in 2010 and acts as an umbrella organisation supporting and representing approximately 252 BAME organisations across Wales to strategically challenge racial inequality, prejudice and discrimination.

Our projects and groups are all based within grassroots communities where we facilitate and support five Ethnic Minority HUBS across Wales (Newport, Cardiff & Vale, Swansea, Carmarthenshire and North Wales), supporting over 177 different Ethnic Minority Organisations; and we facilitate and support 3 Windrush Cymru Elder groups in Cardiff, Newport and Wrexham which support over 120 BAME elderly people.

RCC delivers a number of projects that include; Windrush Heritage, Black History Wales, BAME Cultural & Digital HUBS, Race Hate prevention, Community Champions scheme, Crossing Borders Music & Heritage (working with young ethnic minority musicians and dancers), Youth Parliament and a National BAME Youth Forum which provides a national network of young BAME individuals throughout Wales enabling their voice to be heard on key agenda items at a local, regional and national level.

In all our work we ensure our projects, activities and events are linked to Welsh Government and public sector organisations ensuring they are shaped and aligned to provide strategic delivery that meets the local needs across Wales.

OVERVIEW

In the period of the Covid-19 lockdown, RCC has organised and held regular meetings and consultations with our HUB members and grassroots BAME communities and organisations across Wales. We have continued to convey feedback to the Welsh Government as well as Public Health Wales on the effects and challenges of Covid-19 and the lockdown on BAME people living in Wales. Through research, media reports, consultations with our grassroots community partners and feedback, RCC supports the findings that the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown has had a disproportionate effect on BAME people living and working in Wales. Pre-existing racial inequalities have played a major role in exacerbating the risks that ethnic minorities have been exposed to during the period of this pandemic. Significant socio-economic factors have led to the increased health risks, economic and social challenges of this pandemic on BAME communities. It is vital that this committee interrogates the characteristic components of the demographics of this group. We are convinced that this approach will provide an accurate picture of the unequal socio-economic susceptibilities which have resulted in the disproportionate effects of Covid-19 on this group of people in Wales.

The consultations conducted by our organisation reveal responses from our grassroots communities and presents them in sub-themes to provide information and outlines the risk factors involved in the effects of Covid-19 and the associated lockdown. Our findings are by no means encompassing of all the effects and risk factors; rather it draws upon the more popular themes and repeated responses that came from our broad consultations. We are convinced that beyond the boundaries of these findings, there are several individual and collective challenges that can be drawn over time and with further consultation.

BAME Frontline Workers Deaths

We are aware that the workforce of the NHS in Wales is made up of a considerable number of BAME workers, both in the medical and non-medical units (plus agency staff in both areas). We do not doubt the fact that one of the biggest challenges for frontline workers has been the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Although we acknowledge that this challenge

pervades every aspect of frontline work, there are reports of its specific effects on BAME workers. In a response to the alarming number of health and frontline workers who have contracted and died of the virus in Wales, the Welsh government has set up an Advisory Committee, thereby launching an inquiry into the factors that have led to this. Some of the specific effects that have been noted through our network engagements include:

- BAME frontline workers working longer hours, more unsociable shifts, nights and weekends
- BAME frontline workers at higher risk from the virus due to certain underlying conditions prevalent in this category of people, such as Diabetes Type 2, Cardiovascular conditions, sickle cell etc. This is further outlined in the next sub-heading.
- Work placements where BAME workers are sent to high risk units where it is ascertained there is a shortage of, or no PPE. This has been reported to have connotations of racial discrimination in the personal experiences of the some BAME workers.

Underlying Health Conditions

The underlying conditions which have been discussed above amongst frontline workers, cascades through the general population of BAME people both in Wales and the rest of the country. Some of the suspected health conditions that potentially place BAME people at risk include:

- Obesity, which 73% of the nation's black population battle with, at 10% higher than the white population and 15% higher than the Asian population.
- Diabetes - Findings indicate that Black and South Asian ethnicities have a higher risk of diabetes. In elderly people, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean people are more likely to report these conditions, which place them at risk of Covid-19, than their white counterparts in that age bracket (IFS, 2020). These conditions are currently being carefully studied to determine the extent of effects on BAME people and their exposure to Covid-19.
- Vitamin D deficiency - highlighted with frontline workers, this is another area of risk for BAME people that is undergoing further research. The hypothesis is that where there is a lower absorption of Vitamin D from sunlight on darker skin, the vitamin D deficiency leads to immunity being reduced.

Education

Predictive Scoring

- Access to Laptops and/or WIFI

The closure of schools has resulted in children accessing their school work and educational resources online at home. There are many BAME pupils who are either children of refugees and asylum seekers, people on benefits, people in low income jobs and other with 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) categories. What this means is that these children have either no laptops/computers, no access to WIFI or both in most cases. Additionally, they are unable to access online resources through Council libraries, which are now shut in the current situation. This has caused untold difficulties for such families with their children, not being able to access and complete school work. Although the Minister for Education has announced increased funding to enable children access laptops with WIFI through their schools, and to asylum seekers via Local Authorities, the eligibility guidelines as to who qualifies for one is still unclear, and seems not to successfully be solving any of these problems.

- Predictive Scoring

This challenge is two-fold for ethnic minority families. On the one hand, BAME parents of children who do have had access to online resources, generally worry that racial discrimination will impact on their children's predictive scoring by schools. On the other hand, parents whose children have not been able to access online resources face a double jeopardy when it comes to predictive scoring – the lack of access and the fear of racial discrimination leading to an underestimation of grades. There has been a research report in support of the increase in the anxieties of most BAME families in Wales (Huffington Post, 2020).

Housing/Isolation

The household structures of BAME families is such that poses an infection risk to them in the transmission of Covid-19, as well as impacting on their mental health and wellbeing in a lockdown.

- Housing

Many families culturally live in large households with extended family members, such as parents, grandparents, in laws etc. This has made it very difficult for people with symptoms of Covid-19 to self-isolate or for the elderly members of the household to

shield as advised by government. This potentially puts such families at the risk of faster transmission of the virus.

- Asylum seeker/Refugee Accommodations

These are often overcrowded houses that have two separate families, who do not know each other, sharing a house; or rooms where unrelated individuals are sharing all facilities. This also does not provide any space for self-isolating or social distancing, and potentially puts such individuals at risk of faster transmission of the virus.

- Accommodation Layout

BAME families who live in houses or flats with no back gardens have struggled to keep their children indoors and have no easy access to safe outdoor spaces. This has had an effect on the mental wellbeing of both the parents and children.

- Social isolation

The feeling of being socially isolated has been very high amongst certain BAME groups of people who live alone and have no immediate family in the country. Amongst this group of people are International students in universities, who have felt isolated, are self-funding their University fees, have now lost their work and without knowing what help is available to them in an emergency, especially as they fall within the category of 'No Recourse to Public Funds'.

Faith Burials and Funerals/Costs

As cultures differ amongst BAME people, there are a range of funeral practices depending on faith and culture.

- Funerals/Burials

There were challenges at the early stages of the Covid-19 lockdown, when social distancing guidelines on funerals and burials was announced. BAME communities of various faiths and cultures were mostly affected as there were no considerations for their funeral and burial practices. For instance, there were no clear instructions for Sikh and Muslim funerals and burials. However, the result of several consultations between our community groups and the Welsh Government resulted in modifications being made in guidelines, with considerations for different faiths and cultural funeral and burial rites. These modifications are undergoing further clarity as consultations continue.

- Funeral Costs

The increase in Covid-19 deaths has exposed many BAME families to the reality of funeral costs. The fact that many BAME people are in low paying jobs or have no jobs at all, in the case of asylum seekers and refugees, this is a further struggle for them to give their loved ones a befitting funeral. In many cases within our communities, donations pots have been set up to cover costs. This has brought to light the reality of the disproportionate economic equality of BAME people.

Shopping and Food Access

- Shopping

The effects of the lockdown have made it difficult for vulnerable BAME people, such as those living with disabilities and the elderly, to access shopping. Although this has been a general problem, many BAME people required extra support because many lacked the knowledge and communication on where to access help.

- Food and Essentials

Many have also had to rely on foodbanks for food items and essential needs, such as toothpaste, shower gels etc and food parcel distributions organised by community groups because they cannot afford these any more. The challenge with the foodbanks is that many families are unable to access the cultural foods they are used to and end up having to settle for what they are forced to adapt to eating for survival. Often times, food parcels delivered end up being wasted as they do not meet cultural or religious requirements.

Hate Crime

- Covid-19 specific Hate Crime

Police reports have indicated that the level of hate crime has significantly reduced in the time of the lockdown. However, there have been pockets of incidents targeted particularly at the Chinese community, blaming them for causing the virus. Chinese business have had hate graffiti on the walls of their buildings.

- Online Hate Crime

Reports from our communities, point to a shift in hate crime methods to online attacks. This shift has made it difficult for Hate Crime and Community Cohesion Officers to respond effectively, as it is a new wave that will require training and support to deal with.

Businesses, Income and Earning

The fact that many BAME people are in low income jobs has been mentioned earlier. Family income and earnings have been affected by the lockdown, which in turn has placed more families at risk. Many ethnic minority people are on zero hour contracts and rely on additional cash (tips) to survive. Whilst some workers have been furloughed, many do not qualify, or are unaware of their rights and have language barriers that prevent access to clear information so they struggle from day to day with living expenses such as:

- Rent payments
Those who are renting privately struggle with keeping up payments of rents. Whilst the central government has provided guidelines to Landlords, there is growing anxiety amongst BAME people on what will happen if they are thrown out of their homes.
- Bills
Insufficient income and earning means apart from rent, bills such as electricity, gas, Council, water, Wi-Fi and so on, remain in arrears and at the risk of being suspended.
- BAME small business owners have indicated their worry about the support provided to businesses by the Welsh government. This stems from the lingering racial discrimination that BAME people experience in every sector, where having an ethnic minority name seems to cause delay and denial of support in comparison to their white colleagues. Their preference with the funding application process is for absolute transparency and sharing of information on how BAME applications are treated.

Language Barriers

Where English is not the first language, all vital information distributed in English and Welsh only and not translated in multiple languages, is not reaching our BAME communities. Although much of the standard instructions regarding personal safety and distancing were provided in as many languages as possible initially, there are regular updates which have not. This makes it difficult for BAME people to keep up with updates concerning the rulings and their personal safety.

Conclusion

These are by no means a sum total of all Covid-19 related challenges and risk factors affecting BAME people in Wales. Although the specified word count for this report hinders us from

going into details, we have highlighted briefly on the major risk factors and challenges. Our organisation, on behalf of all our grassroots BAME partners and groups, commend and appreciate the special effort of the Welsh Government. Specifically, we recognise the unrelenting determination of the Deputy First Minister and Chief Whip, Jane Hutt AM, in ensuring that all equality characteristics receive a fair response during this pandemic. We anticipate that as this unfortunate situation begins to relax, your committee will rely on this report to inform policies that will address the racial inequalities in all sectors, that have led to this disproportionate effects BAME people have suffered, culminating in their higher exposure to Covid-19. We have carefully outlined our findings from the communities and backed it up with references from some media publications as evidence of our submission.

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