



**Ethnic Minorities
& Youth Support
Team Wales**

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Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig
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All Wales BAME Engagement Programme

Impact of COVID 19 Crisis on BAME Communities

Topical Forum – Employment, Businesses, Income

15th April 10:30-11:30 via Zoom link

Attendees: **Rocio Cifuentes** (EYST - Chair), **Ginger Wiegand** (EYST), **Leila Usmani** (EYST), **Pat Dunmore** (SWANSEA CAB), **Faith Walker** (FW Consultancy), **Robert Muza** (Newport City Council Community Connectors), **Heather Powell** (Newport City Council), **Usha Ladwa Thomas** (Welsh Government), **Patience Bentu** (Race Council Cymru), **Rena Ahmed** (EYST), **Sarah Bowen** (Ceredigion County Council), PaDavies, **Selina Moyo** (South Wales Police), **Shaheen Sutton** (National Lottery Fund), **Sophie De Marco** (EYST), **Paul Davies** (Carmarthenshire/ Pembrokeshire Council), **Michael Smith** (Ceredigion Council)

After a round of introductions, Rocio Cifuentes began by inviting people share top concerns and issues on the issue the impact of COVID 19 for BAME people and businesses in relation to employment and income. The following are primary concerns:

Access for BAME small businesses to COVID 19 support such as grants/loans

- There is evidence of low confidence that BAME small businesses will access all the benefits to which they are entitled and worry that BAME small businesses may be disproportionately affected by the application process.
- There are concerns about underlying and inherent institutional racism which has been proven evident in forms and application processes. Some are worried their applications will be rejected in the same way that employment applications are (based on “foreign” name).
- The UK Government should make the process transparent - clearly laying out how decisions are made to reward support and ensure robust equalities monitoring data

is gathered, reported and eventually analysed to measure the impact after this time period.

- Being self-employed is a challenge, and this COVID 19 process is new, but people must follow the process before making assumptions. If you follow process and collate your evidence, you can challenge any decision.
- No one will be compensated until June and that will be 80% of earnings, so will be low, especially if one is on low income already. There is also concern for people on zero hours contracts, who have applied for govt support - What happens between now and June?
- There is also concern about people being able to access advice. For instance, no one is aware of provision of advice in a language other than English.
- Some suggestions for places to access written advice:
 - Martin's Money saving programme - <https://www.moneysavingexpert.com/news/2020/03/coronavirus-self-employed-and-employment-help/#freelance>
 - Citizens Advice - <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/benefits/coronavirus-check-what-benefits-you-can-get/>
 - Business Wales - <https://businesswales.gov.wales/coronavirus-advice/>
- Local Authorities also have a role in administering these grants, so local authority webpages are a way to start. Newport City Council has an easy to read place on their website and NCC is looking about gathering info on protected characteristics.
- There is a lack of expertise of this type of benefit and advice-giving within BAME sector. Organisations need to upskill in this topic. CAB does have guidance on website that is easily accessible in English. RC and PD will converse further about potential for CAB to train people from BAME sector organisations and groups to be able to cascade messages and signpost people to accessing these benefits.
- Question was asked: Could Business Wales play a part in making sure advice gets disseminated in appropriate format to various groups? [Update – Business Wales has experienced extremely high call volume and is having trouble keeping up, but it does have access a flexible, discretionary Participation Fund to help overcome barriers individuals may face in participating in Business Wales services. The Fund can be used in a variety of ways such as providing translation services, tailored support for disabled people, costs of caring responsibilities and hiring of specialist equipment. The fund has also supported bespoke workshops for lone parents, ethnic minorities and young people.]
- One positive e.g.: One person knew of two BAME self-employed women who have been successful in getting loans/10K grants they need to keep business afloat. What helped them was having good records of business so far and use of accountant to

prepare those records. This did raise some concerns about businesses that just started out and didn't yet have good records.

Access to universal credit

- New applications to Universal Credit have sky-rocketed. Even to get through on phone has taken hours and days. In this scenario, will the five-week period will become longer? This has been flagged up by many charities, but does anyone know of any movement to mitigate this?
- Pat Dunmore believes there is an enquiry in Westminster via the Children's Society.

Employer treatment of workers both in relation to safety of workplace and furloughing employees

- There is evidence that people classed as essential workers are being asked by their employers to work without PPE and that some employers are not following social distance guidelines.
- There is evidence that some employers are classifying their workers as key workers even though that case may be shaky.
- There is evidence that people are being pressured by employers to work even though they feel the working environment is unsafe for them – or that the worker may make other persons in their household unsafe by bringing COVID 19 home from that working environment.
- There are no guidelines which require employers to furlough workers who live with someone who has had a “shielding” letter.
- There are widespread concerns about EU people being demanded to work in unsafe conditions by their employers. Newport City council had a lot of complaints around safeguarding of EU nationals.
- RE Furloughing (vs. letting employees go) – There are also concerns about people losing jobs with the employer not taking the consideration of furlough as an option. There is confusion among some employers about furlough and who qualifies and how it works. Likewise, there is a perception that some employers are taking advantage of the opportunity to cull staff numbers. Likewise, employers who

Provision of PPE

- There is group consensus that that provision of PPE is a big issue – to not just NHS workers but all key workers – including in factories, delivery, retail.
- As above, there are stories of workplaces where EU migrants do not get sufficient PPE.
- The group also queried the potential for very small businesses such as corner shops and small vendors to access and afford PPE for their employees. These shops are vital to neighbourhoods and also to supplying culturally appropriate foods.
- The group questioned but did not know if PPE was available for employers to purchase or if it was in general scarcely available.
- Funders urgently want to put money COVID 19 relief efforts– would PPE be covered? Per Shaheen Sutton, Big Lottery has given top up funding to previously organisations and are also funding new organisations up to £10,000. PPE has not come so far applications, but could imagine they could cover PPE for volunteers, for instance with organisations that work with older people in care homes. Most Big Lottery applications have been around food poverty and volunteers getting food to older people's homes – nothing around PPE.

Over-representation of BAME workers in essential sectors and over-representation of BAME people in COVID critical care patients

- BAME people and migrants are over-represented in essential worker sectors such as health and social care, distribution, transport, food processing, etc, particularly in precarious professions in the gig economy and low pay sectors.
- This is particularly concerning with emerging evidence that BAME people are hugely over-represented in critical care COVID patients.
- RCC has written letter to First Minister to scrutinise the disproportionate impact of COVID 19 on BAME people.
- Rocio Cifuentes sits on the COVID Moral and Ethical Advisory Group Wales will ask if they are collating figures in this respect and scrutinising those figures.

Workers in the informal economy – destitution risk

- There are concerns about people who were working off the books, have now been let go and will not have access to furlough pay.
- Predominantly concern for people working for restaurants.
- This can potentially have a knock-on impact of destitution for asylum seekers and new refugees.

Immigration status, Hostile Environment & No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

- Positively, WG has directed local authorities that the usual restrictions on providing support to people with NRF have been lifted and local authorities are now required to house people classified as NRPF.
- Newport City Council is supporting a few people with housing and reference concern with future fallout regarding questions as to whether the council will be able to continue to support those people in future.
- Likewise, there is a lot of debate legally regarding how councils can support people with NRPF and what kind of assistance they can get beyond housing, such as food and other things they need.
- Multiple of those present provided evidence that a lot of people with NRPF people are not coming forward and declaring themselves to local authorities, as they are concerned about whether housing and support will be available in coming months in Post-COVID environment or whether with resumption of Hostile Environment policies, they will lose the housing and possibly be outed to immigration authorities.
- Likewise, one service provider noted there is a lack of capacity to house people with NRPF in Swansea and that clients are still being asked about immigration status when presenting themselves. Does that mean that people presenting are still being judged on whether they have NRPF?
- One person provided an e.g. where a person who sent in a visa application recently, was placed in NRPF category in interim.
- There is also concern about immigration visas and work permits particularly for health workers who have been given one year extension. Will this be taken away when hostile environment resumes? But also concern for multiple categories of workers who may have to reapply for visa/work permit extensions under the new immigration system. How will effects of this crisis play out?

Important to recognise, celebrate and disseminate the positive and optimistic stories

- EG - a local community member making visors for frontline workers
- EG – the many BAME owned restaurants who are providing food to NHS workers at hospitals, inc. one who has adapted business model to have a fundraiser to be able to provide food
- We must be sure to use this opportunity to share positive stories and positive role models.

- Can Welsh Government do more to have a comms campaign to drive these messages?

Important to hold onto (and grow) the gains that emerge during this crisis

- After lockdown finishes, what will be next steps?
- There is political debate about work being properly recognised and rewarded in a range of sectors which have large number of BAME workers.
- The COVID 19 bill has presented an unprecedented increase in unemployment benefits. We should fight to keep these as standard employee benefits but also argue to expand living standards generally – for all people working and non-working.
- Likewise, keep up the emerging argument that broadband should be an essential household utility.
- Ceredigion Council is looking at economic strategy and how to get economy in Ceredigion on feet after work down and how recognition of WG fair work commission may play in that.

In conclusion

- The group recognised that there are several key sectors and interests not represented around the table, such as taxi drivers. The EYST Engagement team will follow up on some of these key sectors.
- There was consensus that it is early days and for now we must keep our eyes on the key issues raised above and follow up on actions and suggestions above and seek emerging solutions
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