



An investigation on the economic impact of Covid-19 on the Black residents of Kensington and Chelsea

Introduction

The KCSC (Kensington and Chelsea Social Council) Policy and Voice Development Officer led a series of focus groups investigating the economic impact of Covid-19 on the Black residents in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC). Organisations operating in RBKC were invited to share their observations as part of the initial stages of information gathering that will be used to shape the next stages of KCSC's direction of thinking. The aim of collecting this information is to help inform stakeholders and decision-makers about the impact Covid-19 has had on the borough's black residents and what needs to be considered in the borough's post lockdown rebuilding efforts.

The Policy and Voice Development Officer spoke to 15 organisations from March to May 2021 about financial security, barriers to receiving support and the impact the pandemic has had on the mental health of their respective Black service users. Due to service provision organisations and groups working locally tend to develop a wealth of knowledge about the communities they interact with. This knowledge-sharing exercise could be used to not only support KCSC work but the sector broadly.

Background

The economic data that has emerged both nationally and across London suggest that the Black and minority ethnic community has been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. With limited available data on the impact Covid-19 had on KCSC's residents, and specifically the Black and minority ethnic residents, KCSC wanted to find out what was happening within the borough.

In February 2021, the Policy and Development Officer met with the Grenfell Network Group to present the plans for this research project and invited them to share their ideas for how it should be carried out. Following that discussion, the Policy and Development Officer developed a few discussion areas to guide the focus groups with the aim of identifying and extracting key themes that would underpin a survey going out to black residents later this year. However, due to potential survey and questionnaire fatigue and the wider strain of the lockdown on KCSC capacity it was decided that any initial findings from the focus groups would be discussed with our members where next steps can be decided.

The term BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) was disaggregated to focus on Black African and Caribbean residents for three main reasons; 1) Not all ethnic groups have the same experiences and using such a term could erase important nuances in experiences 2) the Black African and Caribbean demographic in RBKC has changed considerably over the years with little knowledge of their financial security 3) focusing on a smaller group for research may not necessarily be easier but a more targeted approach might prove more useful at later stages of this work.

Key findings:

Employment

Organisations shared that many of their Black service users had either lost their jobs or were put on furlough. There were several cases where black services users had been put on furlough only to eventually lose their job. From the discussions organisations identified that many of their Black service users were on 0-hour contracts, front-line workers or employed in the hospitality industry. From UK employment data these industries or types of work are the hardest hit due to lockdown restrictions (e.g., change to working hours and business closures). Participants often highlighted that before lockdown residents never considered this to be insecure work but have struggled to find work after losing their jobs. Some organisations suggested that lack of qualifications or skills have been a barrier for many Black residents to switch careers or access senior positions during the pandemic. Some of these issues existed before the pandemic but since then there has been greater urgency in needing to find work.

Ability to cover necessities

Organisations who provide or distribute food during the pandemic have noticed an increase in younger people of all backgrounds needing access to food and basic supplies. There have been cases where Black residents have been reluctant to visit a soup kitchen or other services because they did not want to be seen asking for help. This has required workers to actively check in on families and individuals assure them that they are entitled to access food and make alternative arrangements for them e.g., setting aside packages, delivering items, or organising specific times for collection. The impact of job loss and an uncertain labour market has also meant that older black residents have taken in other family members (especially children or grandchildren) which has strained resources further. Interestingly several organisations mentioned that some Black residents have been unable to receive food of both cultural and nutritional value prompting organisers to request suppliers and donors to donate a range of different food items (but often only receive such items in limited supply).

Impact on savings

Very few participants could say for certain whether the savings of their Black service users had been impacted during the pandemic. However, of those that did usually hear about it when signposting advice and support services. Organisations acknowledged that an increase in unemployment meant that savings had been negatively impacted.

Some participants claimed that financial literacy and savings had been a problem within the Black community since before the pandemic alluding to cyclical low-paid employment, distrust of banks and language barriers (for specific communities) that put the black community at a disadvantage when the pandemic hit.

Support services

Participants, in both their professional and personal capacity, highlighted that many Black African and Caribbean communities were receiving financial support from 'community pots.' In general terms this describes an agreed sum of money that those members of a community group pay into at fixed intervals (e.g., monthly) to be accessed by any of the members during

hardship or to make investments. This form of money management is not new and was made increasing common when marginalized communities could not access loans or have bank accounts due to racism in the UK in the 1960s. During the pandemic organisations believe this is how many groups have been receiving support (to varying extents). Similarly, organisations believe family and friends have stepped into support each other to reduce financial strain including babysitting, lending money, or sharing basic supplies.

Organisations shared that often Black residents were reluctant to apply for universal credit because of the stigma attached to benefits. Many Black residents have prided themselves on working and paying their bills, regardless of how challenging times could get, and found it difficult to ask and receive help from strangers. Again, the issue of (dis)trust reemerged with some residents fearing that later down the line they could be penalised for accessing universal credit.

Impact on mental health and self-esteem

All organisations shared that they were worried about the mental health of their Black service users. The impact of losing jobs, searching for jobs and not being able to look after themselves and their families has been a common theme raised in the focus groups. There are often reports that the Black community struggle to access support for mental health and reluctant to accept diagnoses which leads to worsening health outcomes. Participants suggested that black service users who had just been 'managing' or suffering 'mild' mental health issues have had their problems worsen with the economic consequences of the pandemic.

Fears of returning to 'normal' life or mixing with the wider public were other points raised by organisations. Especially for the older black community in the area, some participants said some residents had already said that they had felt isolated during lockdown and now feel overwhelmed by the easing of restrictions.

Another interesting point raised in the focus groups was about communications surrounding vaccinations and covid deaths. Participants felt that the narrative surrounding the spread of covid-19 and the disproportionate impact on Black and ethnic minority communities almost felt like an attack on their intelligence. They heard from their service users that the adverts and articles made the Black community feel scapegoated at times but increased their anxiety towards accessing essential service or interacting with others in a safe way. Some participants who work specifically with Black communities in the area felt the NHS and government should have emphasized the historical relationship between the Black community and medical treatment that shapes a lot of vaccination attitudes. They said more needs to be done to build trust between the Black community and the health sector to ease anxieties, improve services and better health outcomes for the black community.

Barriers to receiving or accessing financial support

Participants identified digital exclusion as a common barrier preventing Black African and Caribbean residents accessing financial support during the pandemic. The complexities and novelties of receiving guidance, navigating devices, and communicating effectively prevented many people from receiving the support they needed.

As usual face-to-face community support services stopped or went online, many residents saw their support networks, who would usually talk them through processes, vanish also. The covid-19 restrictions revealed how important face-to-face interactions had been for signposting and resource circulation. Participants mentioned that residents did not like the bureaucratic processes that came with digital support and preferred the personal and empathetic aspects of in-person interactions. Similarly, language barriers meant that non-English speaking residents found it difficult to communicate needs.

There are also concerns that the Black residents in the borough were not always aware of the support available to them which raises questions on the effectiveness of engagement methods used by companies providing financial support on offer during the pandemic. This gap may also be explained by the lack of confidence and trust there seems to be between black residents and financial services.

Participants mentioned discrimination, both perceived and experienced, to be another factor preventing Black residents from accessing financial support. Some examples include accessibility of loans/credit, level of engagement, patronising tones used by companies, dismissive attitudes, and invasive questioning.

Recommendations

Employment

- Specific targets should be set where possible for the recruitment of residents from black residents including local apprenticeship programmes and other local employment and skills development schemes. Regular reporting should be made public by the council on how these targets are met.
- Provision of training and up-skilling should be tailored and culturally appropriate to the needs of Black residents. VCS providers that specifically meet this need should be contracted to deliver such services.
- Maintain and enhance funding for s employment advice and support programmes for Black residents
- Ensure p of English and literacy classes for residents with English as second language is maintained and enhanced
- Ensure that the digital inclusion work within RBKC reaches the needs of the black residents to ensure maximum opportunities for seeking training and employment opportunities.

Ability to cover necessities

- Additional funding to provide ongoing support for organisations and groups with food provision and delivery (including transport costs and vehicle hire)
- Being cognisant of ongoing financial impact on residents due to ending of furlough and potentially the Universal Credit uplift – an agreement or contract between wholesale

providers, supermarkets, and local government for coordinated food supply efforts across borough for the remaining 2021 would be welcome

- Data collection and analysis on food provision and shortages during 2020/2021 with findings set out in a public report
- Sourcing of cultural foods and labelling nutritional value of food in meal packages
- Increased advertising of volunteers and food donations to residents

Savings

- Review ongoing financial support through a hardship fund for all Black residents
- Provision of financial literacy and support for Black residents delivered by organisations with good community relationships (services funded by local council)
- Provision of resources and materials on financial literacy to schools and colleges

Support services

- Any support initiatives should consider the historical relationships between the black community and public institutions such as Banks, Schools, and local and central government to inform approaches
- Introduce key performance indicators that measure community relations with the aim to improve outcomes for black residents and relationships with key institutions.
- During times of emergencies BAME led organisations should receive funding, resources to ensure BAME residents receive the provision of advice, support and care which is culturally appropriate

Mental health

- Support and encourage people from BAME backgrounds working at the frontline to access mental health support whether personally or provided by the organization.
- Statutory mental health provision should co-ordinate with religious institutions and cultural organisations (including signposting)
- Recruit more therapists, counsellors, and other mental health support workers from BAME backgrounds (including at schools) and collaborate with BAME-led organisations and BAME individuals with this mission
- Address the socio-economic factors that contribute to worsening mental health of Black residents
- Run a borough wide mental health campaign in collaboration with BAME groups

Accessing financial support (organisation specific)

- Rigorous unconscious bias, diversity, inclusion, and communication training for organisations providing financial support and advice services
- User-friendly websites including translated text for people with English as a second language