

Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team Wales (EYST Wales)

Response to Inquiry of Wales Select Affairs Committee: Covid-19 and the Welsh Economy

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About EYST Wales

EYST Wales is an award-winning Wales wide charity established since 2005 which aims to support ethnic minority young people, families and individuals living in Wales and help them to contribute, participate and feel a valued part of Wales. It does this through a range of services targeted variously at ethnic minority young people, ethnic minority families, refugees and asylum seekers and also the wider public. EYST Wales coordinates the All Wales BAME (Black Asian Minority Ethnic) Engagement Programme, a project funded by Welsh Government to gather views and experiences of BAME people living in Wales and improve the evidence base from which to positively influence public policies and services to better reflect the needs of BAME communities.

Since 25 March 2020, the All Wales BAME Engagement Programme has been hosting weekly online topical fora on the impact of COVID 19 on BAME people and communities in Wales, a series attended by a collective 260 participants. These forums focussed on the following topics: general impact, impact on Muslim communities, impact on employment & businesses, impact on children and young people, food security, community cohesion/racism/hate crime, and recovery from lockdown and corona pandemic. Following are key points from these fora as well as additional intelligence from EYST project work, which relate to the Welsh Economy and Covid-19.

We submit this evidence because we strongly believe that equalities, with particular attention to racial equality, must be at the heart of efforts and policy directives in responding to impacts of Covid-19 on the Welsh economy and in strategies and investment to rebuild it.

Need for Wales to have its own plan and feasibility of separate plans

There is a need for Wales to dictate the conditions and framework for easing restrictions relating to coronavirus. Such plans must involve extensive engagement with the public – a task more achievable on a Wales-wide level compared to UK level. The First Minister has published a framework for recovery and Welsh Government officials are working with the voluntary sector to engage with multiple communities seeking their opinions on the best ways to ease lockdown. Plans coming from the Welsh Government are more likely to reflect the values of the people of Wales. People in Wales have easier access for redress to officials in Welsh Government and members of the National Assembly compared to those in Westminster. It is feasible to have separate plans for each nation, though leadership in each nation must communicate effectively with each other and with the public.

What additional financial powers and budgetary flexibility should be provided to Welsh Government & additional financial support the Welsh Government requires to survive during the pandemic and recover after

There may be several financial powers and much budgetary flexibility required by Welsh Government, but we will restrict our points to No Recourse for Public Funds. The relaxation of restrictions on people with No Recourse to public funds has been welcome by people subject to NRPF and service providers who struggle to meet their needs. Without this flexibility, many NRPF families would be in dire straits right now facing homelessness and food insecurity. It has been very positive that Welsh Government and local authorities have been able to make housing and free school meals available to these families. Moreover, domestic violence organisations speak of an increase in the number of people seeking refuge from domestic violence and/or trafficking has drastically increased as they finally have recourse for refuge.

However, there are serious concerns about what happens to NRPF families post-Covid. We were presented with some evidence that people subject to NRPF were not seeking assistance with local authorities because they are afraid of being unhoused at short notice. Likewise, what will happen to those women who have finally escaped domestic abuse and their children if they no longer qualify for refuge?

We recommend that Welsh Government work with other organisations in the public and voluntary sector to collect evidence about the impact of relaxing restrictions on NRPF and analyse the social and economic costs of NRPF. UK Government should be open to arguments to alternatives to NRPF based on this evidence.

On a wider note, we would say that in the fields of devolved powers such as housing, Welsh Government must have the flexibility and authority to decide how and on whom to prioritise spending in a manner that strengthens the social fabric and health and wellbeing of society and the nation.

Additional financial support the Welsh Government requires to survive during the pandemic and recover afterwards

The Welsh Government will need significant additional finances to enable Wales to survive and recover from the pandemic. The Welsh Government has published a framework for recovery that aims to ameliorate rather than exacerbate current inequalities. It will need sufficient funds to ensure that progressive policies can be put in place. It is likely that an economic stimulus is needed to create jobs and opportunities for individual people and small businesses directly affected by Covid-19. Moreover, Wales has historically lost out on the Barnett formula; this must be rectified to the positive benefit of Wales.

Additional flexibility needed to support seasonal industries:

We recommend that Welsh Government is financially supported to provide the required support and employment or business relief for workers in these industries. In this time, ensure that migrant workers have access to a social safety net including livelihood and basic living expenses. The UK Government should pause No Recourse to Public Funds and consider visa extensions for those workers waiting for a sector to re-open who may be near the end of their current visa. Particularly considering the high proportion of EU residents working in Wales' seasonal industries, and their importance in maintaining essential food supplies to UK residents, the UK Government should extend the deadline to apply to the EU Settlement Scheme.

What support do key sections of the population need from Government the UK and Welsh Governments during and after the pandemic

Low paid workers in sectors now deemed essential: There is current socio-political debate about work being properly recognised and rewarded in a range of historically low paying and low valued sectors which have large number of BAME and migrant workers. These sectors include health and social care, cleaning, transport, distribution, food processing and agriculture to name a few. Now that we clap for these workers, it is time to make sure they are paid according to the value that society now recognises. As a minimum, UK Government can consider abolishing zero-hours and other precarious contracts and raising the national minimum wage to the real living wage. As a minimum, Welsh Government can continue to work with organisations campaigning for the living wage in multiple sectors, but it also must work with employers to create progression routes from lower to higher paid jobs, and to ensure such progression is equitable across protected characteristic groups.

BAME Workers: There is evidence of disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on people with BAME heritage. When employees are asked to return to work, how will that affect BAME workers (already over-represented in keyworkers) who are less likely to work in sectors or jobs where working at home is possible? What are the implications as people return to factories or retail stores or take public transport to get to work? There are concerns that some categories of workers will be sacrificed while decision-makers are at home behind computers. Welsh Government has required two-meter distancing in the workplace by law, but a big concern is if people know the law. Likewise, it has been noted that low-paid or temporary workers may be afraid to question or report their employers for fear of losing their job. Another concern is that people with risk factors will feel pressure to return to work for need of income or that underlying comorbidity is undiagnosed. The people in EYST's forums also noted that BAME people are more likely to live in intergenerational and crowded houses where self-isolation within a house is impossible, and therefore the fear of bringing the virus back to the house from the workplace is heightened.

- Welsh Government can ensure workplaces are monitored for compliance with Covid-19 guidelines, ensure sufficient and appropriate PPE supply, ensure thorough risk assessments for all BAME workers and workers with other risk factors, provide places

(such as hotel rooms or purpose built temporary structures) for people to self-isolate safely without risking family exposure if they develop Covid-19 symptoms or have been exposed to someone who has. Likewise, Welsh Government can institute a comprehensive community testing and contact tracing programme both to suppress the virus and compile equalities related data.

- UK Government can extend furlough option for workers at higher risk of Covid-19 or who live with person who is shielding. Likewise, they can offer this option to self-employed at-risk people.

EU Citizens: There are wide-spread concerns about job loss and unsafe working conditions for EU Citizens. Pre-Covid, many EU nationals in Wales worked in leisure/tourism and hospitality industries. One person at an EYST forum recounted multiple contacts who lost jobs in the leisure/tourism industry and now have “no work in sight and it looks like no work on the horizon.” Their situation is particularly stressful in anticipation of changes that will come with Brexit, including for those with pre-settled status the need for a habitual residency test to collect benefits. Likewise, there are widespread concerns about EU keyworkers being demanded to work in unsafe conditions by their employers, without proper PPE or social distancing. One local authority had a lot of complaints around safeguarding of EU nationals. This prolonged lockdown is also causing concern that EU citizens are unable to complete applications to the EU Settlement scheme for lack of ability to obtain or upload ID documents. The UK Government can extend the deadline to apply for the EU settlement scheme and reconsider the need for a habitual residency test. The Welsh government can ensure a system is in place to monitor employer safety compliance during Covid.

International students: There are many BAME international students currently residing in Wales. Some are having extreme difficulties due to coronavirus, as they depended on part-time jobs which are no longer available. Most of these students are NRPF and do not have access to support. Local communities are trying to support those students, but that can only be a temporary measure. They need more sustainable support at government level until student jobs become available. Many of these students are worried about the interplay between their course of study and visa expiry. The UK Government can allow these students to receive the same support as Home students.

Young People: - The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on young people will be felt for years to come. Many young ethnic minority people, particularly young people of African descent, are extremely concerned about the cancellation of summer exams. For young people who have put everything into preparing for high stakes exams to gain university entrance, the cancellation has a huge mental health impact. Pupils in some groups are concerned about teacher bias and not getting the necessary grades to attend university. There are concerns that some who miss university places will leave the HE pathway rather than repeat a year and risk becoming NEET. Likewise, there are fears for young people, young graduates and others. Welsh Government can ensure sufficient, highly subsidized funding for vocational upskilling and higher education. Any such programme must give robust attention to equality impact assessment and equalities monitoring.

Migrant workers and those with work permits: The NHS for which we all clap now depends on migrant workers. Like all NHS workers, they fear contracting the virus or passing it to their families. In addition, many worry about prohibitive visa renewal fees and some are worried about the new points-based system. Many worry about what will happen to their dependent family members if they do become ill and die. UK Government should revise the work permit fee structure and waive renewal fees during Covid-19 and the recovery period and it should not deport dependent family members of work-permit holders who die from Covid-19.

Refugees and people seeking asylum: The moratorium on NASS evictions and Move-on housing transfers has saved a great deal of suffering and should continue for the foreseeable future – certainly during the pandemic and recovery period. Likewise, the Home Office should consider providing broadband to asylum housing as an essential utility. Particularly in this climate of social isolation. This would be a direct benefit to the mental and physical health of people living in asylum housing, but would also offer a public health benefit as it would reduce the requirements for such tenants to leave their homes in order to gain wifi access.

Newly unemployed workers - There are big concerns that BAME people will be disproportionately affected by unemployment both during the pandemic and in the recovery period. Evidence, including that from the aftermath of the 2008 recession, shows that ethnic minority people experience higher unemployment rates during recessions are more likely to go jobless for a longer period. Efforts to rebuild the economy post-COVID 19 need to account for and take steps to remedy this inequality. 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. In addition, UK and Welsh Governments should work together to devise a stimulus package that will result in job creation for those affected by Covid-19 unemployment, with particular focus on marginalised groups such as BAME and disabled workers and those from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Resilient Economy

A resilient economy, one which can weather a storm or a shock, must provide a humane standard of living to all participants and works to reverse climate change. This pandemic has taught a lesson in value; the workers that used to be invisible and deemed low-skilled are now recognised as essential. To build a resilient economy, UK and Welsh Governments must use this moment as a possibility to reimagine how risk and reward could be more justly distributed amongst classes of people in society. This moment offers possibility to reframe and expand upon human rights, such as expanding worker (and nonworker) right to standard of living, rights to basic utilities such as WiFi, right to just remuneration of work, right to safety at work. Looking forward, UK and Welsh Governments should consider the adoption of a universal basic income as a social floor underpinning a resilient economy along with other measures such as progressive taxation and targeted job creation and micro/small business support, all underpinned by practices aimed to reverse climate change.