



**“Co-producing what works
for our communities
in this city”**

An evaluation of the Bristol Race Equality Covid-19 Steering Group

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University of Bristol



We would like to express our gratitude to Dr Amjid Ali, and our sadness at his passing last year. He was a central individual in the lives of many people in the Steering Group, across Bristol and beyond. With his humility, authority, patience and passion, his legacy lives on in this group as it does in so much inspirational work continuing across the city without him. As one member put it:

“In his beautiful, humble way, Amjid taught all of us so much.”

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Foreword

We are delighted to write the foreword for this evaluation of the Bristol Race Equality Covid-19 Steering Group, produced by Professor Saffron Karlsen and Rosa Targett of the University of Bristol. On behalf of the Steering Group we would like to thank both Saffron and Rosa for their dedication and commitment in producing such an important and detailed evaluation in to the work of the group.

In the past two years, we have seen unprecedented events placing impossible demands on every one of Bristol's citizens and organisations. These hugely significant occurrences, including Covid-19 as well as the national and local responses to the Black Lives Matter movement and the murder of George Floyd and others have shone a greater spotlight than ever before on how we as a city tackle inequalities.

This report focuses on one aspect of our response to the disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our marginalized ethnic communities. Our response - unique in the UK - involved people coming together from across the city to share information, insights and expertise to ensure effective and empowering responses to these issues.

The Bristol Race Equality Covid-19 Steering Group was established in response to recommendations of rapid review of evidence commissioned by Bristol City Council and the Mayor's Office and conducted by the ARC-West at the University of Bristol. However, the roots of its success lie in this responsive, inclusive and diverse collaboration, resulting from the joint decision from partners across the city to work together, as equals, to find a solution to these difficulties.

Building on approaches developed through the One City Plan and other Bristol-based initiatives, they took opportunities offered by the pandemic to ensure diverse engagement in ways which could extend this alliance still further. Everyone was welcome to the space, where all perspectives were respected. From local pastors and those in the Voluntary Care Sector (VCS) community – who spent the pandemic working to ensure people remained fed and supported when statutory services were locked down – to the Deputy Mayor, Director of Public Health and everyone in-between.

This report, using data drawn from members of the Steering Group, clearly illustrates the value of this approach: for those in the marginalized groups they supported as well as the members themselves.

The Steering Group (SG) enabled members to share accessible information on the nature of the pandemic and local and national responses to it in a timely way with people who felt excluded from the information they needed to make sense of and respond to the pandemic effectively. People who felt national responses did not consider their own particular needs.

It provided a space for members to digest and interrogate this evidence, identifying and responding to inaccuracies and data gaps - and to develop effective responses to the specific concerns and experiences of people living in Bristol, at precisely the time it was needed.

The group's work in response to the national rollout of the Covid-19 vaccination programme is highlighted here (as it has been elsewhere¹) as a particular example of the group's success. Members co-developed and then practically enabled a range of initiatives, designed both to reduce concern about the vaccine and ensure practical barriers to vaccination uptake among marginalized communities were removed. Over 500 people from across the city attended a transformative webinar which brought together the public and experts to discuss the vaccine. By taking vaccines to the people, their pop-up vaccination centres – held in local community centres, faith spaces, parks and on the streets in partnership with the NHS – made a significant contribution to reducing race disparities in the Covid-19 vaccine uptake.

For some members, the Steering Group offered a sense of empowerment and “a light in a very dark time”, both personally and professionally. It was an opportunity to work together and be part of a solution to the problems of the pandemic rather than be “lost in the chaos” it caused.

This report presents the opportunities offered by this typically-Bristol response to the pandemic. It provides valuable lessons for others, living in other areas, through other crises, but also in more typical times. Its key lessons outline practical ways to support the development of more inclusive approaches to policy-making, regardless of the climate. It is a tangible example of our true multi-agency approach to identifying and tackling race inequality and is reflective of the One City approach that we are now committed to throughout Bristol when tackling our major challenges.

¹ <https://hackmd.io/@scibehC19vax/vaxculture>

As a group we have maintained a strategic priority to ‘connect the city’ on race equality and to this end we have now delivered established events to bring together leaders and stakeholders from all sectors to ensure we become far more joined up, inclusive and sharing of our good practice, challenges and initiatives on a scale that can help achieve real lasting impact.

Key to this ambition has been the launch of our exceptionally well attended Race Equality Gatherings, as well as the roll out of this year’s Race & the City 2 programme of themed events.

These initiatives have enabled us to regularly come together in large numbers to learn about and discuss Bristol’s most significant challenges, through input from all our city’s key race equality leaders, groups and stakeholders in new and innovative forums. This shift in focus has given us a very solid city-wide basis to move forward together and to start to make more significant system and Bristol-wide change.

The work of the Steering Group continues, informing responses to the societal structures which produce race disparities in Covid-19 and other experiences. We will move to the future with the aim of utilising our group experiences and expertise in reaching our communities in order to tackle wider race equalities on a range of key health challenges and look forward to continuing on this journey with our many city partners. The next phase of work for the group will now begin, under the title of the Bristol Race & Health Equity group, with continued commitment from many of the previous group members to retain the city-wide partnership responses to tackle other key race and health inequality challenges prevalent across Bristol.

Our future work also extends to new initiatives, such as our support and alignment with the soon-to-be established Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Independent Advisory Group, which will support local public sector partners to understand how they deliver more inclusive policy and practice.

We feel very positive that such a difficult period has provided such valuable lessons, and proud that Bristol is leading the way nationally in our many race-focused initiatives. This is very much reflected in the considerable volume of requests that we are receiving from across the country and further afield to present our story and our responses to tackling race inequality in Bristol.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all members of the Bristol Race Equality Covid-19 Steering Group for their continued commitment, consistency and leadership throughout such a turbulent period. Your work has helped to ensure we provided a response to the pandemic that was truly inclusive, and responded to the particular experiences of some of our most marginalized citizens. Within this, we must emphasise the critical contribution of our partners in the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to the success of this initiative. As one member said, “People [from the VCS] are empowered now, I don’t think you’re going to put the genie back in the bottle”. We couldn’t have done it without you, and the only way forward is with you.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. We hope you find it of use and we very much welcome your thoughts and feedback while we continue to work to address the challenges it presents to make Bristol more equal and inclusive for the good of us all.

With best wishes,



Deputy Mayor Asher Craig

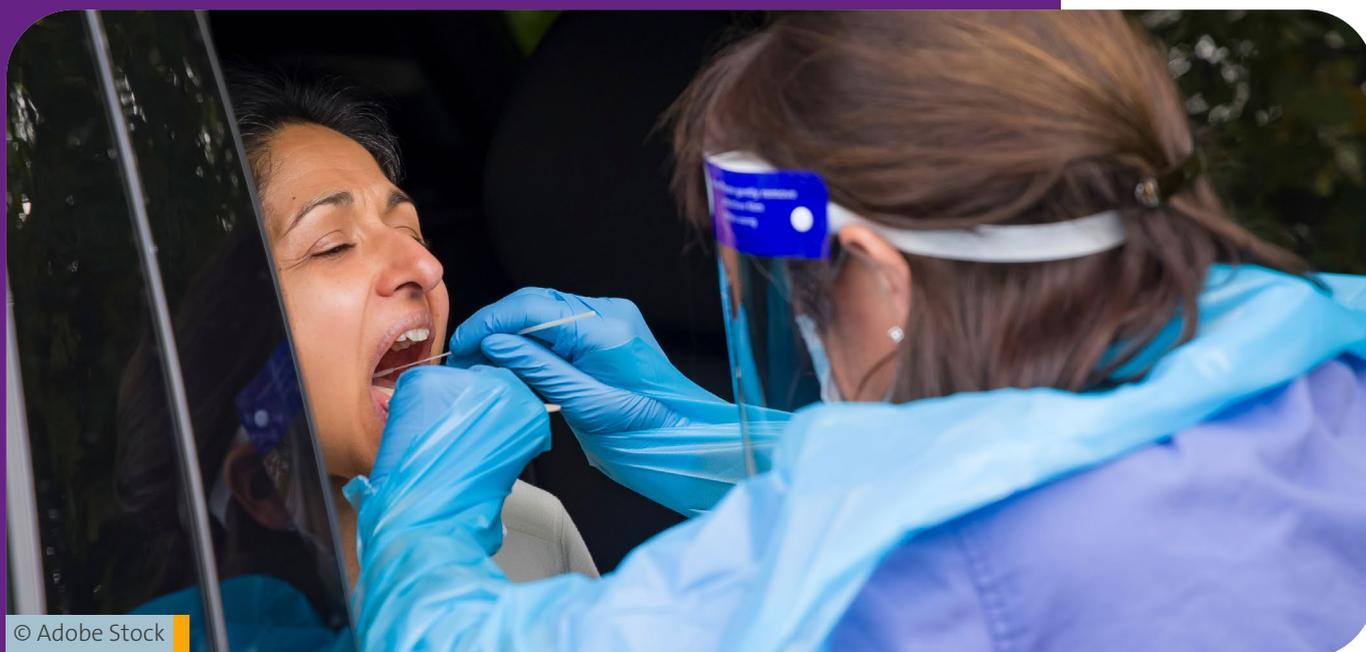
Cabinet Member for Children, Education & Equalities
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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report explores Bristol's response to evidence that emerged in early 2020 regarding the disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on those in minoritized² ethnic groups living in the UK.

As evidence began to emerge regarding these inequalities early in 2020, Bristol City Council commissioned a report from the University of Bristol to document their nature and drivers. This report clearly established the overriding importance of societal factors in their generation, and the critical role of policy-makers and those working to support those in minoritized ethnic groups in alleviating these. In response, Bristol's Deputy Mayor, Cllr Asher Craig convened a meeting of 36 key stakeholders from across the city's public, voluntary and community sectors in July 2020, where delegates established a new Race Equality Covid-19 Steering Group (REC19SG) to work together to respond to the report's recommendations. This group continued to meet monthly until September 2021, when the changing nature of the pandemic situation provided an opportunity to meet only in alternate months.

Such a co-ordinated and collaborative approach to policy-making and practice is rare. This research explores the perceived value and limitations of this approach, as described by those involved in the Steering Group (SG). It serves as an insight into whether, and how, similar approaches might be usefully adopted elsewhere.

² In this report we use the phrase 'minoritized' or 'marginalized' ethnic groups to refer to those who, through a lack of power, are often disadvantaged in society, experiencing social and economic exclusion and racism. We acknowledge that these groups (on their own and combined) are diverse, and include people with a range of experiences, circumstances and identities. We use other identifiers only as direct quotes, including the term 'BAME', which is an acronym referring to people who are considered 'Black, Asian and minority ethnic'.

Methods

This report describes findings from a thematic analysis of the minutes from SG meetings held between July 2020 and December 2021, written responses to a survey conducted among SG members, and in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with several individuals who played key roles in the establishment or organisation of the SG, or Bristol Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and ethnic inequalities. Ethical approval for the study was provided by the Ethics Committee of the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies at the University of Bristol.

Findings

People's motivation to join the SG emerged from their awareness of ethnic inequalities in experiences of the pandemic and the need to proactively respond to these issues in ways which ensured that the voices of those in minoritized ethnic groups were effectively heard and responded to.

There was a strong sense from these data that the SG had been able to provide a service which was "essential in our Bristol response to Covid." Survey respondents described how these activities had brought "together a highly informed group who had been able to [provide] advice, support and act" collaboratively through meetings which provided a "real benefit in enabling a genuine community focus on Covid-19 response". Together, these approaches "ensured joined up responses and projects to reach communities with meaningful interventions [and] events", and offered "an essential reference point" for work responding to ethnic inequalities in experiences of the pandemic.

While people recognised that this activity occurred during an unprecedented period, and was by no means flawless, there were also many ways in which this experience was considered to offer insights into opportunities to develop more inclusive and effective health equality and other policy in Bristol and beyond.

Activities

The research identified two principle SG activities. The first involved ensuring the provision of comprehensive and accessible information regarding the nature of the pandemic locally, national government pandemic policy, and the ways in which these impacted on those with minoritized ethnicities (and why), for the public and other stakeholders. The second activity involved directly responding to this evidence, either to address persistent evidence gaps or to encourage culturally-informed responses to the information received. This might involve initiatives developed and facilitated from within the SG itself or advising external partners on their plans.

Ensuring the provision of comprehensive and accessible information to the people who need it

The group sought to provide accurate and comprehensive evidence on the nature of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on minoritized ethnic groups to the local Bristol public. Starting in September 2020, each meeting included a report from the Public Health Team in Bristol City Council on the latest evidence regarding the rates of Covid-19 infection, hospitalisation and death in the South West region and how these varied by ethnic group and age. Current national government guidance on managing the pandemic and how this was being implemented locally was also regularly reported. From January 2021, local information on the plans for and uptake of the Covid-19 vaccination programme was also presented.

These updates enabled SG members to inform their wider networks about the pandemic situation in ways which were considered accessible and relevant. The meetings also provided an opportunity for members to discuss this information in detail, to ensure it was understood effectively and to ask specific questions, or raise specific issues, of pertinence to the groups with whom they engaged. Members also appreciated having the opportunity to counter what were considered inaccurate claims. This dialogue was considered a unique contribution of the group and valued by people across all sectors.

Meetings often involved contributions from invited speakers on emerging issues and considered aspects of the pandemic experience felt to be missing from national government guidance. Often, this evidence was generated by research conducted locally, by people working with statutory voluntary organisations which gave additional depth to that produced by more traditional research institutions.

A particular value offered by the SG was its ability to be responsive to identified public needs. The SG developed several bespoke initiatives to respond to public concerns about the pandemic and the Covid-19 vaccination programme. The SG designed and facilitated a series of online public education seminars which enabled them to provide direct public access to relevant experts, as well as several information videos.

In January 2021, the SG organised an online webinar to enable a discussion of the new Covid-19 vaccine, between members of the public, health practitioners and other experts, on its nature and risks. 500 people attended the webinar, including people from across all demographic (including ethnic) groups, with 80% of attendees reporting that the event was 'good', engaging and easy to follow. 20% of attendees said that their understanding of the vaccine had improved as a consequence of attending the event and that many were intending to share the information they had received at the event with others. Most people felt that, following the event, they now had sufficient information about the vaccine and that their perceptions of vaccine safety had improved, although some information gaps remained, particularly about the long-term side effects of the vaccine. There was also a significant increase in the proportion of people stating that they would receive the vaccine, and that they would get it more quickly, as a consequence of attending the webinar.

The SG also aimed to recognise and respond to persistent data gaps. For example, concerns around the lack of evidence regarding responses to occupational risks produced a request for information from all major public sector employers in the city regarding this.

Developing bespoke, culturally-informed responses to the pandemic

Members of the SG worked together to explore practical opportunities to act on the information presented to, or discussed within, the group. The SG worked in collaboration with public sector partners to ensure their pandemic responses reflected the evidence and were culturally informed and effective as possible.

Following acknowledgment of the practical barriers to Covid-19 vaccination uptake among those in minoritized ethnic groups, the SG worked with the NHS and other partners to establish a series of temporary 'pop-up' clinics, in spaces already frequented by people in those communities traditionally underserved by existing approaches. These were argued to reduce pressure on existing services, while enabling the public to receive vaccines in familiar locations in direct communication with people they trusted. By June 2021, there had been over 3300 community clinic vaccinations provided through these pop-up clinics, which had a significant impact on reducing ethnic inequalities in vaccine uptake in the city.



Strengths

Key to the success of the group were the opportunities it offered to share information with a diverse group of people who were all committed to addressing ethnic inequalities in the pandemic. It was a relationship reaching across all sectors and based on honesty, trust and mutual respect. Everyone was considered welcome to the group and to have a significant contribution to make to their activities. Several participants also reflected on the value of the fact that the SG activities had “the backing of good science data”.

Positive attitudes and collaborative action

The SG directly undermined traditional hierarchies, bringing together people who would not normally be included in such discussions, but who were instrumental to its success. The group adopted a unified, simple and positive approach where everything felt possible. People used their unique knowledge, resources and networks to consider practical approaches to public needs and ensure responses were effective. Interviewees also described the ways in which this responsiveness was supported by the strong sense of accountability operating in the group.

The SG benefitted from the ways in which the pandemic had also disrupted traditional methods of policy-related decision-making in Bristol City Council and other public sector organisations, which supported particular approaches to engagement, responsiveness and freedom to innovate adopted by the group. These opportunities were further enhanced by activities designed to improve engagement between policy-makers, other professionals and the public, introduced in Bristol prior to the pandemic. However, it was also argued that the SG had directly facilitated the introduction of new approaches to policy-making within the Council, which would be to the benefit of the public long after the pandemic had ended.

Inclusivity

Many participants felt that the operation of the group enabled feelings of inclusion. The democratic and inclusive ways in which the SG operated provided its members with a strong sense of interconnection and value. This gave people the opportunity and confidence to ‘think outside of the box’ and generate unique responses to the issues they identified. That said, it was argued that at times the positive atmosphere in meetings could limit critical reflection and “healthy debate”.

This sense of inclusivity was partly enabled by the conscious strategies, rooted in openness, which had been adopted for the group’s management and facilitation from the outset. While some opportunities for improvement were described, practical approaches to managing the meetings supported the inclusion and long-term engagement of members, through the positive approaches to online meetings and widespread notes-sharing for those unable to attend:

We were all equal in the room so every voice was valued. Despite the size of the group, ...it was carefully coordinated to try and make sure that no one’s question got lost, or didn’t happen.

Empowerment

Related to this sense of collaboration was the opportunity offered by the SG to provide people with a sense of being “valued” and “heard”. Several people also described their involvement in the SG as personally empowering. While this empowerment could be derived from obtaining empirical and other evidence to justify their own concerns and actions, there were also less tangible sources of empowerment which were derived from the support and engagement of the group. The SG offered a way for members to reflect on the impact the pandemic was having on them personally, as well as their colleagues and friends. It allowed some members to develop a sense of hope, by enabling them to feel proactive during a period which otherwise felt paralysing and chaotic. These data suggest that this experience could have a long-term impact on members themselves and their sense of personal efficacy.

Opportunities For Improvement

Members described two specific areas for improvement in the operation of the SG. The first was a need for people's work as part of the SG to be properly remunerated and the second was a need for a clearer sense of the aims of the group and the ways in which these drove decisions about its activities.

While financial resources were available for certain activities, meeting attendance and the other activities of the SG members was not remunerated and instead relied on their pre-existing capacity, personal motivation and goodwill. This situation was particularly problematic for those working in the VCS, where it undermined members' ability to actively engage in the work of the group, particularly in the face of the other pandemic-related activities of their organisation. Despite the strong sense of equality described above, these funding issues could introduce a sense of hierarchy between those whose role could support their regular attendance at meetings and those whose did not. Further, there was a concern that a similar commitment of time and energy might not be relied upon in less difficult circumstances.

It was also argued that more explicit and regular discussion of the aims and achievements of the group would have been useful. This was an issue which had partly arisen due to the need for the group to be responsive to the rapidly changing pandemic situation, and the consequences of this for the pace at which the work was undertaken.

Establishing more explicit strategies and practical approaches from the outset, with greater reflection on how plans were developing over time, or in relation to specific activities, could have offered a more organised approach and that might have enabled a clearer sense of the groups success, and potentially more to be achieved. This included a more explicit strategy regarding those marginalized communities which were within the remit of the group, which was seen to have undermined more effective activity in response to the experiences of such groups, particularly those in Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT) and different faith communities.

The Future

An important consideration for the Steering Group itself at the time of this evaluation was whether and how this work should develop in the future. While some members recognised a range of valuable opportunities for future attention, others were mindful that the group had developed under very specific circumstances and that similar successes might not be guaranteed as the pandemic waned.

What the Covid-19 pandemic created was an urgency to focus on health inequalities created by wider social and societal factors that can now be extended to other areas of health inequality. One specific concern has been that while service providers and policy-makers have adopted a focus on a range of protected characteristics, there is a need to acknowledge more explicitly the particular effects of racism to avoid diluting that conversation.

Looking beyond the pandemic, the SG identified an opportunity to continue its work recognising and responding to ethnic inequalities in health more generally. Group members shared examples of a range of specific ethnic inequalities in health which need attention, including those related to respiratory and mental illness and access to related services, smoking, maternal health and the over-representation of Black men in the criminal justice system. As such, the group is well placed to influence some of the more structural and institutional factors encouraging the generation and perpetuation of ethnic inequalities in health, including by working specifically with the people providing health and other care services.

In September 2022, the REC19SG finalised partnership discussions to broaden its focus and create a new terms of reference to include other health inequalities, becoming the Race and Health Equity Group (RHEG). Building on the ways of working that proved so effective during the pandemic, the RHEG will continue to act collaboratively to ensure work is taking place to address the issues and challenges of race inequality relating to other key prevalent health issues. This future work will include gathering data where gaps in understanding have been identified and working in collaboration with other city-wide Race Equality groups while remaining accountable to the communities served by members of the RHEG.

This work will take place in collaboration with the Independent Advisory Group which was developed as part of the early work of the SG. This initiative will offer valuable opportunities to ensure that the NHS considers the nature and drivers of ethnic health inequalities more explicitly in its work, informed by the communities they serve and avoids approaches which may perpetuate these, ensuring a regular two way flow of communication with the development of the Independent Advisory Group to create alignment and added value between each of these groups and to avoid duplication of work.

Key Lessons

There was a strong sense of the personal value offered by the SG to its members, and the positive impact it had had on the experiences of those in minoritized ethnic groups during the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic. People expressed a hope that the new ways of working exhibited by the SG could become a more permanent feature of the ways in which organisations operated in Bristol and elsewhere. It was felt that the SG had shown that such inclusive approaches to working were both possible and valuable, and that there was an opportunity for other statutory organisations to learn from this example. The SG showed very clearly the particular value of the contributions made by organisations in the voluntary and community sector, which it was argued should no longer be ignored.

There are several factors which emerge from this evidence as key to the success of the SG:

- The SG adopted a focus recognised as of significant need of attention, including among those traditionally excluded from local policy-making processes. Members' mutual sense of enthusiasm and partnership drove proactive and creative approaches to respond to these challenges.
- This work was enabled by the history of multi-sectoral engagement in the city. Building trusted relationships from scratch cannot be left for times of crisis. Identifying opportunities to financially invest in these relationships will also be key to their long-term success.
- The SG's comprehensive empirical evidence base effectively established the nature of the challenge as well as guidelines for an effective response.
- The SG's multi-sectoral membership enabled the further development of this evidence, through the explicit scrutiny of this information and a clear articulation of the issues relevant to the local context.
- The open dialogue and sense of inclusivity of the group was supported by empowering approaches to its establishment and facilitation, which included every member as an expert with an equal right to have their perspective respected. This approach purposefully disrupted existing mechanisms of policy-making which fail to effectively engage those in marginalized communities.
- This professional diversity and sense of meaningful collaboration and empowerment also enabled the development of a shared understanding and sense of responsibility to ensure effective responses to these issues.
- The representation of different minoritized ethnic groups within this membership, along with the specific expertise of members from the VCS, helped ensure that these responses were considered, appropriate, meaningful and useful to those communities most disadvantaged by the pandemic, further enhancing their chances of success.

For all the horrors of the Covid-19 pandemic, it also appears to have brought opportunity and impetus to change certain things for the better. These have the potential to provide opportunities for long-term, meaningful change to enable the more effective engagement of marginalized groups and their perspectives in policy-making. It also offers a greater hope of addressing the racism endemic in British society and the persistent exclusion they produce: the driving force behind ethnic inequalities in the Covid-19 pandemic and other ethnic inequalities in Britain.