



Inclusive Cities

INTEGRATION POLICY AND PRACTICE DURING COVID-19

Birmingham City Council briefing

April 2021

About this briefing

Birmingham is a participant in the Inclusive Cities programme – a city-led knowledge exchange programme facilitated by the Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity at the University of Oxford.

The programme aims to support local authorities to create a step change in their approach to the inclusion of newcomers at the local level. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, local authorities and their partners have had to adapt their inclusion programmes, often at speed, to support their newcomer and longer standing communities. These briefings capture the learnings from these adaptations, as well as ongoing work to promote inclusion and integration undertaken between March 2020 and October 2020 (unless otherwise specified), against the five thematic areas set out in the Inclusive Cities Framework.

- Briefings from the other Inclusive Cities are available [here](#)
- The Inclusive Cities Framework is available [here](#)
- A series of policy and research briefings on COVID-19 and inclusion, arising from the programme is available [here](#).

1. Leading in the development of a shared local story of inclusion

On 27th March 2020, the Council declared a Major Incident in response to the emerging COVID-19 crisis, having previously activated its Emergency Planning and Business Continuity arrangements. This was necessary to deal with the unprecedented pressures brought about by COVID-19 and to ensure that Council services were able to continue to support vulnerable residents. This meant that teams across the Council had to reprioritise their existing activities. While some aspects of inclusion work were temporarily paused, new inclusion initiatives also emerged.

In response to the inequalities highlighted by COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement's calls for racial justice, the Council published a statement of intent: [Tackling Inequalities – Everybody's Battle Everybody's Business](#). This statement is a call to action to address structural inequality and bring about sustainable change. The consultation period ended in December 2020 and the Council is reviewing the feedback received. *Tackling Inequalities* touches on work salient to many of the thematic areas of the Inclusive Cities Framework, including citywide narrative change.

Among other things, *Tackling Inequalities* pledges to "celebrate and share the city's stories of diversity and dynamism", outlining the diverse heritage and present multicultural identity of Birmingham. Practical commitments include ensuring that stories of all communities are shared, particularly the "unheard histories" of immigrant communities. The city plans on working with educators to develop new curriculum and resources to frame the "Birmingham Story" as a story of diversity.

The Council is also reviewing the names of streets and public spaces to ensure they accurately reflect and respect the city's history and communities. Likewise, displays of art in civic buildings are also being reviewed to make sure they tell the full story of Birmingham. For instance, a room in the Council House has recently been renamed to properly recognise the contribution of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) civic leaders.

2. Supporting and driving inclusive economic growth

Tackling Inequalities outlines the Council's intention to ensure that public and other types of services are reflective of the communities they serve. The Council, as an employer, has pledged to lead by example by:

- Providing equal opportunities for employment and ensuring that its workforce is diverse and representative of the communities it serves
- Working to attract a diverse range of candidates for vacancies and making sure that there is at least one BAME and one female candidate shortlisted for all advertised roles
- Including at least one BAME and female member on hiring panels
- Reviewing and updating HR policies, procedures and training to reflect these intentions
- Fast-tracking recruitment and upwards-development prospects for BAME staff
- Introducing mandatory equality training
- Establishing a dedicated taskforce to ensure the Council remains on track to meet these objectives
- Publishing data and analysis on progress towards meeting these objectives

Language learning and training play a major role in improving labour market outcomes for migrants. Throughout the

lockdown, the Council has continued to monitor the impact of the pandemic on English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) learner recruitment and attendance, and are pleased to report that Birmingham has the highest number of online courses and enrolments in the adult skills sector in England. Since April 2020, Birmingham has had more than 3,600 learners enrolling in courses, of whom 1,000 are ESOL learners.

3. Connecting communities

In May, [Locality](#) was commissioned by the Neighbourhood Development and Support Unit to undertake research on the community sector's response to COVID-19, as well as to understand the impact of the pandemic, with a focus on how key issues and learnings can be aligned with the White Paper on ["Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods"](#).

The research aims to:

- Understand how community organisations have mobilised during the COVID-19 crisis
- Map changes to the relationships between community organisations and the Council which have been brought about by the pandemic
- Explore how lessons from this crisis can support greater impact of the "Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods" White Paper across the Council's working practices
- Identify the role community anchors can play in citywide recovery with relevant strategies and policies such as inclusive growth.

The recommendations of this report are being considered.

4. Mainstreaming and building inclusive public services

The Council established a communications and engagement plan to ensure that all communities across the city received up to date government issued COVID-19 messages. Key messages were translated into the city's top five languages – Bengali, Polish, Punjabi, Romanian and Urdu – and distributed amongst networks.

In addition, the Council is working with grassroots community organisations to help disseminate information to marginalised communities who do not typically use mainstream forms of communication, such as email or post. This ongoing engagement with community organisations and activists has helped the Council adapt its channels of communication to meet a diverse set of needs. As lockdown measures have been impacting different communities in different ways, the Council is working with community organisations to gather feedback to help shape its response.

Throughout March and April 2020, Public Health and Adult Social Care colleagues worked with the Home Office and Public Health England to develop guidelines on COVID-19 for asylum hostels and hotels, ensuring that those in temporary accommodation in Birmingham remain safe and well. The acting chief executive wrote to the Home Office to seek confirmation that they would implement the necessary measures.

The Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, Community Safety and Equalities also wrote to the Home Office to express concern over the digital isolation of asylum seekers in initial and dispersed accommodation in the city, as well as to recommend that the Home Office increase support payments, which were significantly lower than the level of Universal Credit.

The Council has mobilised partners in the [Preventing Crisis Enabling Integration](#) project to engage with individuals in temporary accommodation who have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) status. This project aims to support them in seeking a more secure legal status and allow them to access Public Funds coming out of the crisis. The work is funded through the city's Controlling Migration Fund grant.

The Leader of the Council wrote to Ministers requesting that the government suspend NRPF conditions during the pandemic. It is estimated that there are currently 1,000 families in the city with NRPF status who are supporting 3,000 children. These children and families are at high risk of falling through gaps in the social security system into poverty, as they are unable to access vital benefits.

Up to 88 single residents assessed as having NRPF status have been provided accommodation and subsistence. Work is ongoing to determine the longer-term legal status of these individuals, and to plan for future accommodation, work and support.

Meanwhile, translation provision has continued. In April 2020, translation of key COVID-19 messages into Bengali, Polish, Punjabi, Romanian and Urdu was completed. Other translations have included an information leaflet on staying safe online, social worker documents and court bundles. Languages for which translation services are provided include French, German, Polish, Somali, Vietnamese and Pushto.

5. Encouraging civic participation and representation

As outlined in *Tackling Inequalities*, the Council will explore the idea of establishing a Citizens Assembly or similar body to steer its work on tackling inequalities in every community. The aim of this body would be to ensure that “the city’s diverse communities are fully represented and all voices, especially those that often struggle to get a hearing, are part of this crucial project.”

The Council will sponsor the [Birmingham Poverty Truth Commission](#)’s second phase. This body brings the voices of people who have experienced poverty into decision-making and service design.

Birmingham City Council have also launched a [Civic Leadership Programme](#) in partnership with Operation Black Vote, the aim of which is to enable and encourage a new generation of BAME civic leaders.

Case Study:

Supporting Birmingham’s faith groups through the pandemic

The impact of COVID-19 on faith groups in Birmingham has been considerable. As a result of social distancing during the pandemic, faith buildings closed to congregations; prayers and other acts of collective worship were suspended; and public-facing faith events were cancelled.

This has meant communities taking difficult decisions around religious events including Easter, Passover, Vaisakhi, Rama Navami and Eid during the period of the lockdown. It is highly likely that faith communities will continue to be affected as social-distancing measures remain in place for some time.



The Council has been engaging with all of the city’s faith communities about how to help them to mark important religious festivals while restrictions remain in place.

Birmingham initiated weekly virtual meetings with various faith groups and circulated guidance and key messages throughout the pandemic. The city’s faith communities continue to support the wider community, while also providing spiritual and pastoral care virtually to their congregations. However, digital exclusion continues to pose challenges, especially for some older worshippers.

The loss of income that places of worship have faced due to closure during lockdown is an issue in the community, as donors are local and usually contribute during in-person congregational worship. The Council is consequently considering using its discretionary funds to support places of worship.

INCLUSIVE CITIES

Inclusive Cities is a knowledge exchange initiative supporting UK cities and their local partners to achieve a step-change in their approach towards the inclusion of newcomers.

Drawing on innovative ideas and practices from Europe and the United States, Inclusive Cities aims to support the development of an approach to inclusion which is strategic across the city administration. This approach consistently uses positive messaging to develop an inclusive narrative for the city which informs and drives practice and is local authority led, working in close partnership with business, public and voluntary sector organisations to achieve shared goals.

Inclusive Cities is supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk/project/inclusive-cities

THE GLOBAL EXCHANGE ON MIGRATION AND DIVERSITY

The Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity is an ambitious initiative at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) opening up opportunities for knowledge exchange and longer term collaboration between those working in the migration field.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk/global-exchange

ABOUT

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