

How to restart an inclusive economic recovery in Bristol post COVID-19

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It is a well-publicised fact that COVID-19 has hit the Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities hardest. According to a UK Government report 17% of COVID-19 patients are from BAME communities.

While this is a diverse community, it was already suffering from poor

financial resilience, greater mental health issues and an inability to withstand any shocks given the documented higher proportion of social exclusion and poverty they face in British society. However, what attracted the attention of the country is **the selfless bravery of this community** in leading the battle against COVID-19 in the UK.

Immigrant key workers leading the battle

The recent Windrush scandal and the rise of hate crime following BREXIT have been relegated to the rear-view mirror given the selfless and exemplary role BAME NHS staff played and continue to play alongside their colleagues in the fight against the COVID-19 health pandemic. In some cases, many of these brilliant people paid the ultimate price for serving us on the front line and many more are sick. The first 10 doctors in the UK named as having died from the virus were all BAME. Those doctors have ancestry in regions including Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Even allowing for the overrepresentation of BAME staff in the NHS – they comprise 44%

of medical staff compared with 14% of the population of England and Wales – the fact that they were all from ethnic minorities shows the commitment from this community.

In Bristol, 1 in 6 of our hospital heroes are immigrants, highlighting the contribution migrants have made in the battle against coronavirus and the reliance of the NHS on non-British workers, as quoted in The Bristol Cable newspaper in recent weeks. It is not only in the NHS immigrant key workers are involved in, but majority of the so-called key worker roles are driven by this community to keep the country going during this pandemic. These

jobs include delivering food, keeping us clean, driving buses, taxis and trains, growing our food and delivering our post. In summary, the BAME community do all the vital things that have kept this country running. This is not headline news for many of us who already know the extent of the BAME contribution to Bristol's and the wider British economy and society's success. Yet, it is news we are glad is getting the attention and public appreciation it deserves.

In London, senior government officials are now rightly publicly questioning the wisdom of a tougher Australian style point-based immigration system for migrant workers. It is clear we still need them desperately to fill many vacant positions that are too lowly paid and do not attract British nationals yet are crucial to our daily lives, public and private balance-sheets and the overall national success.

Immigrant entrepreneurs leading economic recovery

Clearly, we are not out of the woods yet with the health pandemic in the UK, but we are improving our knowledge and responses gradually. However, it is clear we have all been too busy focused on fire-fighting the issue to think of the long term implications for creating a resilient post COVID-19 society built on the foundation of inclusive economic recovery with the main lesson we have learnt from the pandemic: **the chain of resilience is only as strong as its weakest link.**

Bristol's economic recovery is a must if we are to remain a vibrant world leading city which we can all be proud of. Indeed, Bristol is a hub for innovation and entrepreneurship as well as an academic powerhouse.

Bristol is also a city with great diversity and untapped potential. Yet, the city's full economic revival will not be fully realised if all Bristolians are not able and supported to participate in the economic activities of their city. The BAME health workers contribution is the tip of the iceberg in what energy and commitment there is in this community in Bristol to drive forward the city's economic recovery.

This is no longer just about rhetorical inclusivity but about inclusivity which drives growth, creates jobs and integrates our city, communities and society better.

So how can immigrant entrepreneurs become the potential heroes to reignite Bristol's economy?

Immigrant entrepreneurs can equally play vital role in the economic recovery as immigrant key workers have done in the emergency stage of the pandemic. The OECD has estimated that a foreign-born entrepreneur in a small firm creates on average between 1.4 to 2.1 additional jobs. In the UK immigrant entrepreneurs — whose rate of entrepreneurship is nearly double that of a UK-born individual — are responsible for 14 per cent of jobs created in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs).

Researchers at the University of Birmingham argue that in Britain new migrant firms 'act as buffers against unemployment and social exclusion in disadvantaged communities, and as vehicles for the social integration of disparate migrant populations both with one another and into the British mainstream'. As employment providers, they offer fellow migrants a haven from an often-hostile job market, while social integration is fostered by the interaction of migrant shopkeepers and their workers with their customers.



Focusing on small businesses recovery

If we want to reignite our economy, we must reignite our small businesses. Small businesses in Bristol are reeling from the inability to do business as usual. To make things worse, many sectors see collapsed demand and economic uncertainty stretching months, if not years. The UK Government is rightly focusing on dealing with the health crisis first, and only then on the recovery of the economy once the immediate danger of the pandemic is over.

In the meantime, small businesses (those with less than 100 employees) are rapidly running out of cash. A survey carried out by Aston University has found that a third of small businesses surveyed say they can last less than another 2 months without government support. A further third of companies will have no liquidity in three months. Many participants said that government loans and financial support schemes are not accessible, are too complicated and, in some cases, not suitable or culturally sensitive as they are interest bearing loans. More importantly, the recovery plans put together at local and national levels lack representation from small business owners generally and more clearly, those from BAME communities with no understanding of their actual

needs. To mitigate the potential economic recession and small business failures post-Covid-19, we need to have targeted support for all small business owners, including, BAME led ones, which face even greater financing and operational challenges.

In an Entrepreneurship Support Project in Bristol led by a partnership between Ashley Community Housing, Engine Shed, the University of Bristol and West of England Growth Hub (part of WECA), we have learnt that there are barriers in the current business support ecosystem that prevent many immigrant entrepreneurs from accessing these support mechanisms or even the markets and business networks that appear easy to access for others.

Some of the targeted support for BAME entrepreneurs, and in many case small businesses too, must be geared towards trust building as long-standing lack of trust in some mainstream support services and business finance lenders have hindered access to vital support and finance. Another one should be access to mainstream finance. The Government has announced a £350 billion loan scheme for businesses, but access to this facility is prohibitive as traditional banking since these loans

are interest bearing or small business owners lack the ability to provide collateral to access them. Furthermore, information is no longer available within the community settings as local Banks in Easton, St. Pauls and Barton Hill and other low-income community were closed a long time ago.

In our Entrepreneurship support Project we found that **a more hands-on approach was required to assist immigrant entrepreneurship**, especially, those from refugee backgrounds. To help steer them on their journey to entrepreneurship the enterprise facilitators found they needed to intervene in almost all aspects of the refugees' lives and be with them through all stages of the process. They acted as counsellors, friends, and sounding boards. They arranged microfinance loans for their clients, found marketplaces for them, engaged students as mentors, organised web pages and logo design through the resources team, arranged for accountancy and marketing advice, found raw materials and supplies, and introduced their clients to potential markets and customers. What we learnt from the project as facilitators was the importance of listening to participants and the need to increase measures to boost social capital and social networks.

BAME businesses already faced the challenge of scaling-up before the virus and now we need them to scale up even more quickly to ensure an inclusive

economic recovery in Bristol. To achieve this, there must be rapid targeted support to these businesses. The current business support ecosystem in Bristol needs to do more to encourage and support BAME businesses in generally opening their products and services beyond their ethnic enclaves. This inclusive economic approach will certainly foster societal cohesion and resilience. The national collective spirit of Covid-19 has been nobody should be left behind and this needs to inform our sustainable recovery.

As regards the wider Bristol economy, there needs to be an even greater commitment to inclusive growth through targeted training, skills and better long-term meaningful employment for all Bristolians, especially, for those more likely to be left behind in the past from the BAME communities. This is how Bristol and many other diverse UK cities can fully recover and remain resilient and prosperous against any future shocks.

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