

Position Statement - BMENational and the COVID-19 Pandemic

1. Introduction

Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities are at the forefront of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the pandemic emerged the mantra 'we're all in this together' was played out again reminiscent of the austerity response to the 2008 financial crisis.

However, in terms of BME communities, nothing could be further than the truth. The workforce in both the NHS and other frontline services is disproportionately from BME backgrounds, and early studies have shown that about a third of seriously ill patients are from a similar background.

As evidence emerges on the social and economic patterning of the virus and the economic aftermath, it is clear that our most disadvantaged people and communities are taking the brunt of the COVID shock. It is also clear that a decade of austerity has left public services at breaking point, and our communities are now at more risk of harm, both directly from the virus – and from its social and economic fallout.

The NHS Confederation has stated that:

- There is an overrepresentation of BME health and care professionals among coronavirus fatalities.
- Some BME groups have an increased likelihood of developing COVID-19 because they are more prone to certain diseases and conditions.

The government has said that it will launch an official inquiry into the differential impact of coronavirus on BME communities. It will be led by NHS England and Public Health England.

As BMENational we welcome the government's announcement of an inquiry but we think that the response of the government should go further and address the many inequalities faced by our communities, which have contributed to this position.

We know that things will never be the same and there will be a new normal, however we believe that immediate action is needed to mitigate risks to BME communities both in the short- and medium-term.

2. Our Response as Landlords

Our members have responded quickly and effectively to mitigate the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have prioritised health and safety requirements in our properties, ensuring that essential repairs continue to be carried out, worked through options with tenants who are unable to pay their rent, carried out reassurance calls with tenants and dealt with any allegations of anti-social behaviour.

Where we manage properties for older people we have prioritised welfare calls as well as advising on unnecessary contact. We are also connecting our tenants to voluntary organisations so that they can access food.

We have however seen an increase in anxiety and concern amongst our communities and are keen to work with partners to address issues arising out of the crisis.

3. Our Priorities

It is instructive at this time to revisit our priorities as BMENational. These were developed in late 2019 and are even more relevant at this particular time. As housing associations working in very diverse areas we prioritise activity in the following areas;

- Ageing well: creating an environment where older BME people can live healthy and fulfilled lives.
- BME homelessness: enabling people from diverse backgrounds to access and sustain housing
- Equality of opportunity: facilitating access to good quality education, training and jobs for BME people
- Diverse and thriving cities: investing in inner city areas to facilitate social cohesion and vibrant places to live and prosper for all

4. Our Response to the Pandemic

First and foremost, we believe that the provision of truly affordable housing is a fundamental building block to a healthy, inclusive and prosperous society.

People from BME backgrounds are over-represented on waiting lists and in official homelessness statistics. This includes women fleeing domestic abuse.

We believe that more affordable housing will prevent homelessness and assist in an economic recovery. In the short term we ask the government to tackle homelessness through initiatives to revitalise our currently broken housing market.

We would welcome the opportunity to begin a dialogue with government and other stakeholders on how we can work together on this shared priority.

In the medium term we urge the government to enable the provision of rented housing let at social rents so that our communities can begin the road to economic prosperity. As housing providers working in some of the most diverse communities in the country, we believe we have the right insight and expertise to support the government in the delivery of its housing commitments.

We support calls for rent control in the private rented sector, particularly at this financially difficult time for tenants and residents.

This will prevent homelessness and ensure that many of our communities (and current homeless households) are able to access accommodation in our cities and towns.

We also recognise the role that good-quality, safe and affordable housing plays in promoting health and well-being. Our members provide supported and sheltered housing and are well aware of the health inequalities in our communities.

Our Ageing Well initiative will research, prioritise and map out a way forward for providing suitable and sufficient accommodation for older BME residents in this decade.

We ask partners to help and support this initiative.

In addition to this, we also urge that the government review the current immigration system which we know from our work in communities across the country, has compounded the effects of the coronavirus on people of BME backgrounds.. In particular, we are concerned about the poor quality of accommodation provided to refugees and asylum seekers and believe that it contributes to ill health.

One of our foremost priorities is to enable thriving cities and towns. We are close to our communities. For our tenants we are a trusted first port of call and we act as the voice of our community.

We recognise that many people with BME backgrounds have for far too long have been disproportionately affected by declining public sector investment both in terms of infrastructure and regeneration programmes. Decisions taken now will have consequences over the next decade.

We are committed to playing our part at the forefront of planning new and sustained investment which will bring economic renewal to our communities.

5. Summary

The pandemic has shed a light on existing inequalities in society.

Housing is an important social determinant of health, and the current lockdown arrangements have highlighted the central role of the home in people's lives. Inequalities in housing provision have major repercussions for the health of our communities.

As BMENational we make a commitment to work with partners to address these inequalities. Our partners include mainstream housing associations, central, regional and local government, health authorities and the voluntary and community sector. We reaffirm our commitment to our communities both today and as we emerge from the pandemic.

Position statement as of May 6 2020

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