



**Ethnic Minorities  
& Youth Support  
Team Wales**

Tim Cymorth  
Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig  
& Ieuenctid Cymru

## **Cross Party Group for Race Equality Meeting Minutes**

**30 March 2023**

### **Cost of Living Crisis**

#### **Attendees:**

John Griffiths MS (Senedd), Altaf Hussain MS (Senedd), Jane Hutt MS (Welsh Government), Ryland Doyle (Senedd Support), Mark Major (Senedd Support), Niamh Salkeld (Senedd Support), Zephyr Li (Hong Kongers Cymru), Trudy Aspinwall (Travelling Ahead), Professor Robert Moore (Liverpool University), Selima Bahadur (Eyst), Helal Uddin (Eyst), Grainne Connolly (Eyst), Dr Susan Davis (Cardiff Met University), Tamasree Mukhopadhyay (KIRAN Cymru), Mymuna Soleman (ASKA Muslims Wales), Lorna Wiggins (Bawso), Dr Kofi Obuobie, Christina Tanti (Race Equality First), Twahida Akbar (Eyst), Maria Constanza Mesa (Womens Connect First), Emmanuel Ogbonna (Cardiff University/RCC)

#### **Apologies:**

Dr Sibani Roy, Aled Edwards (Cytûn), Jessica Laimann (Wen Wales), Chantelle Haughton (Cardiff Met), Andrea Cleaver (WRC)

#### **Introductions and Welcome**

John Griffiths MS welcomed everyone to the Race & Equality CPG.

#### **Presentation of EYST Wales Cost of Living Survey results**

Selima Bahadur and Grainne Connolly from EYST Wales gave a snapshot presentation of their Cost of Living survey results, which have been gathered from minority ethnic communities in the past few weeks.

6 questions asked (presented at CPG Meeting with comments):

1. Are you worried about the current increase in energy bills and the cost of living?
2. Have you had to reduce your spending on energy bills and other living costs?
3. Have you received financial help from UK and Welsh Government to help with these costs?
4. How well informed do you feel about help that may be available to you?
5. Is there anything happening in your community to help such as warm spaces or food banks?
6. Is there anything else you'd like to say about how the cost of living crisis is affecting you?



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A summary of the responses for Question 6:

- wages are just not high enough
- no help for working people
- people who work really feel like they're there's no support there at all and they're being punished for working
- people just saying we just surviving - they just thinking about how to buy enough food, how to keep the houses warm enough and nothing else at all
- mental health impacts on the young and the old
- children are quite anxious
- deterioration in physical health. They're not being able to keep the houses warm enough or eat decent enough food and people who are working saying childcare costs are too high
- the cost of everything else is going up, but their wage has not gone up
- the government seem to care more about big business and banks than about them

Comment read out: There are food hubs and warm spaces, but not much specifically for the ethnic minority communities, especially the older ethnic minority communities.

SB commented that this is a key point, as even thinking about Cardiff where she is based, there are loads of warm spaces and food hubs, but there's not any that are specifically culturally specific or with much cultural diversity in them. Unless you go to the ones specifically within the mosques, you will find a lack of diversity. But with the ones that are running from places such as the mosques, there is a reluctance for some people in need to access them as there's a stigma of going to places where you might get recognized and one of the other comments actually says they do not access these spaces because they are embarrassed. People need both more diversity and inclusiveness with these warm spaces and the food hubs. To give an example, being from a Muslim background, I wouldn't be able to take a food parcel, if I was in that situation of need, unless it contained halal food. So the food hubs and these warm spaces have got to be culturally diverse and inclusive for everybody.

The CPG Group agreed to share the link for EYST Wales' Cost of Living survey which will be open until the beginning of May.

**Minister for Social Justice, Jane Hutt MS - update on what how Welsh Government is supporting minority ethnic communities with that cost of living crisis**

Jane Hutt MS: Really pleased to be with you all. And I've just managed to pick up on those last few words about the terrible impact of the cost of living crisis on people's lives.

Jane Hutt MS: I don't have to tell you that the Black and Asian minority people are overrepresented in the lowest income groups, who are most often the most vulnerable in terms of being worst affected by



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the current cost of living crisis and all the evidence shows that that inequalities that exist are actually deepening as a result of the cost of living crisis. It's really important that we look at that in terms of what we can do for support.

I think it's just the fact that people's basic essentials in terms of energy and food inflation are at such a high rate. What we're trying to do is make sure that everybody gets the benefits they're entitled to. It's interesting that we fund the single advice fund, which is all the Citizens Advice and their partners around Wales. Actually last year they identified the 83% who do access those single advice services come from the population groups that are the hardest hit by cost of living, including older people, disabled people and people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. This is where anti-racist Wales action plan is so important and it's good to see Professor Ogbonna here, who's sort of steering us through.

The implementation of that plan is critically important and accountability as Minister for Social Justice is clear. We do have a longer-term national milestone to reduce the poverty gap between people in Wales with certain key and protected characteristics, and that includes pay gaps by gender, disability and ethnicity. But we also have to put money into people's pockets and that's where the money over the last year, I hope, has reached the pockets. The £150 cost of living payment also we've given local authorities 25 million for their discretion, in terms of reaching vulnerable households, we were able to and implement a Welsh Government fuel support scheme this year. It reached a much wider eligibility. Over 350,000 payments were made during this year and we've updated our discretionary assistance fund. We've raised the amount people can get from emergency payments by 11% and we simplified the schemes in terms of eligibility.

One of the most important things that has come in the last few weeks is that is the real vulnerability for people on prepayment meters. I've been working very hard to address this with OFGEM and UK Government because of the fact that we've had these forced installations of prepayment meters.

It'd be really helpful to know if there's any feedback from Members here on what that has meant for people that they're representing and serving. But we have got a partnership with the Fuel Bank Foundation and now getting fuel vouchers out to people across Wales. Over 11,000 fuel vouchers have been issued and this will continue on into the next financial year. And there's money there for people to purchase fuel off grid.

I think the important thing that we've been trying to do as well of the year is to help people meet together in warm spaces. We put £1,000,000 into this for local authorities and lots of third sector organisations. Mosques, community centres, chapels, churches have come together. Not just providing more spaces, access to food, access to information about benefits, but also to make sure that they have a place where they can break down isolation and loneliness, with the funding that we've put into food banks and wider food initiatives.

The Minister mentioned a meeting in which all ministers, including the First Minister, come together with social Partners, Councils, members of that wider partnership as well as the Church of Wales to



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discuss the impact of the cost of living and learn. From those meetings, some of the things being done in education are crucially important, including the rollout of universal primary free school meals, including free school breakfast and also the school essentials grant in terms of purchasing school uniform. There's also the childcare offer, which is extending to more children, but also, importantly, flying start being expanded. So there's a great deal of things that we're trying to do to tackle the cost of living crisis. And we just must make sure that this is now implemented to reach those who are most vulnerable and disproportionately affected and of course, that does include black and minority ethnic communities.

John Griffiths MS thanks the Minister for setting up some of the current Welsh Government policies.

### **Ministerial Question and Answer Session**

Shun Yiu and Zephyr from the HongKongers Yng Nghymru Group: We are coming from Hong Kong and when we apply for the BNO visas and we have to pay nearly £3000 for our five years visas, but it is like it's just like a double pay because when we have a job we still need to deduct our monthly salary to contribute to the NI.

Second thing we get told we have rights, that we can apply for the children benefit but seems that after sending all the right documents to the governments departments, we got a reply that we have no any access to that public fund and also no we can't apply for any children benefits. So it's a bit like the policy is not clear and then it's a waste of money because we have to send the documents.

We wanted to ask, is there any chance if we are working, we can get refund or we can get some of the childrens benefits?

Explained that being given conflicting information, for example, told at hospital can apply for child benefit for newborn because child is born in Wales. We tell them (hospital staff) about our visa and not having access to public funds, but all the professionals say that we should be able to do so. So just apply for it and finally the Home Office tell us that due to no access to public funds we are not able to receive the benefit. This information is quite confusing for us because someone told us that we could do so. But on the other hand, the government told us that we can't. So we don't know who to trust. Especially about documents, because we need to send our original documents, so to protect the documents from being lost we spent almost £20.00 for all the mail.

The result is quite a disappointing. We are not trying to ask for and access the public funds directly because that's not our nature or stated for visa, but we didn't expect, and no one was expecting the war to start in Ukraine and also the living crisis. Seems like I'm Hong Kong people is now being left out in the living crisis.



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Of course, there's we are really thankful for the emergency fund, but for the others we work hard, we pay the taxes but seems that the government didn't consider us as a part of people who really need to be considered.

People who come from the other places, they are being considered in the cost of living crisis so they get some benefit or some help, but Hong Kong people we didn't see much of it. Or if there is funding we didn't have the correct or accurate information to access it. This is something that we are experiencing.

### **Response**

Jane Hutt MS: As John said, this is mostly rules lay down by the UK Government. But I'll be meeting with the UK Immigration Minister today in fact and so I can raise these issues. I've got an official here, Stuart Evans, who will take a note of all the points that have been made and then we will raise them directly with the UK Government Minister.

The key thing for you is what can we do for you in here in Wales because we are wanting to support you. We are a Nation of Sanctuary and we want to do everything we can to support you, even though unfortunately it's UK law that you are not eligible for the funds, it's the no recourse to public funds conditions preventing you getting that benefit.

In Wales we are saying to local authorities and to local services to please ensure that you can do as much as you can within your powers. Back in June 2022 last year, we published guidance to help local services to support those who have no request to public funds, and perhaps I could ask Stuart to put them up in the chat or we can get them to you because it shows you what we're saying. It's what the duties are of local authorities, the sort of support they can provide which recognises the person before seeing their immigration status and that's really important to us! That it's the person 1st and then immigration! So we do want local authorities to provide as much support as they can and the NHS rather than what they can't do so can we take that back. I think, John, that would be most helpful.

The Minister offered a meeting with the Hong Kong representative group to further understand what their issues are to help inform discussions with UK and local government.

Jane Hutt MS: I meet with the local government leaders regularly about how we're supporting Ukrainian refugees, guests and other refugees coming to Wales. I'll take that back, John, if that's helpful.

John Griffiths MS: Thank you very much, Jane. And I think that that would be a very useful starting point to perhaps look at how these issues might be addressed.

Trudy Aspinwall, Travelling Ahead project advocacy service working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities: I wanted to raise the issues in terms of the cost of living crisis and its impact on Gypsy and Traveller communities, particularly people who don't live in conventional bricks and mortar housing as I know you're aware. There have been and there are still significant barriers for people living on sites and in nomadic travelling situations to accessing the energy relief that is available from the UK Government. People who haven't had a direct supplier because the Council supply the energy on their sites have not



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had until February, any of the £400 that other households will have been able to have. The new alternative grant is open now, but has still not been straightforward for everybody. And people often require significant support to actually make that application. There's also the alternative fuel payment of £200, which many people receive automatically if they're entitled, but there are significant groups of gypsies and travellers who are locked out of that completely because they don't have a fixed address, and even for those who do, there are significant barriers in terms of providing evidence of receipts and things like that which if you received it automatically, you didn't have to do so. So we're finding that the UK government's promise of energy really, just doesn't stand up when it comes to comes to some groups.

My question for Welsh Government is are you representing those issues to the UK Government and are you able to do that because we're really concerned that there are families who are completely missing out on even on the universal support that's meant to be available.

I just also wanted to check in on the cost of living fund of 25 million that you talked about that went to local authorities. I know of 1 local authority that's specifically used some of that money to support their Gypsy and Traveller residents during the winter but they're the only local authority I'm aware of that did that and I'm really concerned that there remains a real a gap where Gypsy and Travellers needs are not necessarily being recognized by local authorities and then not getting some of these resources.

The price cap for commercial rates is going to be is going to be dropped in April and councils are very concerned those who provide their local authority residents with direct energy supply, they are looking at their passing on double costs to people who live on sites after April. We would really like to talk with Welsh Government about both to make sure that the UK issues are being fed through, but also what we can do within Wales to really mitigate this disproportionate impact.

### **Response**

Jane Hutt MS: I'm really pleased that you've raised these issues about access to energy relief, it was an entitlement that our Gypsy, Roma Travelling communities and people should have been able to access. So, I will raise those, particularly with the UK Government and energy providers. I would particularly want to look at what our local authorities are doing.

The Minister suggested discussing this further with Trudy at a pre-arranged meeting.

Jane Hutt MS: I'm looking at all of these issues relating to a very important report that John, in your role as chair of the local government and Housing committee did on Gypsy Traveller, Roma and needs. Housing needs, particularly relating to the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan. Stuart Evans is here in this meeting and is very engaged in this, as deputy Director responsible in this policy area and I will raise this with local authorities. They have got discretion but they've also got duties. It's not just discretion in terms of the 25 million that we made available for cost of living.

The Minister asks officials to put the written statement she made about the Discretionary Assistance Fund, a couple of weeks ago, into the chat to make sure people see it.



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Jane Hutt MS: We've raised the value of the payments by 11% in line with inflation and simplified the scheme but also the Fuel Bank Foundation which is working with partners including local authorities and food banks to issue not only fuel vouchers for prepayment meters, but also payments off grid. Discretionary Assistance Fund can provide those grants and payments as well

John Griffiths thanks the Minister for attending. The Minister leaves the Meeting.

John Griffiths MS commented that events have been held, which have included translators, to let people know what help is available for them. JG reminded attendees that all of us can play a part in trying to make sure that people are informed as to what help is available and how to apply, we just all need to keep working at it really as it's very frustrating that very often people do not get the help that that they're entitled to.

Trudy Aspinwall mentions there's no tangible sense of when the Actions within the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan might happen, who will be doing them and no communication more broadly with communities about that, about plans for those. A future session for the CPG specifically on the progress on the Anti racist Wales Action Plan? The plan is lengthy so could be more beneficial choosing a section, such as Homes and Places, or Employment, or the Health Section.

John Griffiths, MS: We are looking for topics for future meetings as part of today's agenda. Agrees that the Action Plan's progress could be discussed at the next CPG Meeting. Opens to the attendees who agree. John and EYST will get together to discuss the practicalities and sections to be discussed as it will be too much to cover all areas of the Action Plan.

Robert Moore: We've talked a lot about providing help with energy costs and warm places and so on, but in the medium to longer term, we have a different problem. If you look at the statistics for last Summer, there was a striking number of excess deaths due to heat. In the not very distant future, there is going to be a need, particularly for people in less than adequate housing conditions for cool places for people to keep cool in the Summer. And if not, then we're going to see an increasing number of deaths due to heat in the summer. I don't think that's on anybody's agenda just at the moment.

### **Closing**

John Griffiths, MS thanks all for attending, saying it has been a useful meeting, good to get people together and networking to make progress. John closes the Meeting.