

TITLE	BME Forum Update
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 27 July 2020
WARD	None Specific
LEAD MEMBER	Parry Batth, Executive Member for Environment & Leisure
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Communities, Insight & Change - Keeley Clements

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The Wokingham Borough Council BME Forum provides a focal point for people with a black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) heritage who live, work and visit the borough to engage with the Council and act as a critical friend about issues that are important to them.

The BME Forum also celebrates diversity within the borough and the contribution our BAME community makes to our quality of life. These celebrations include planning and delivering our annual Black History Month activities.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee note the activities and achievements of the BME Forum and make suggestions on how these could be enhanced to increase its contribution to the quality of life within the borough.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

Wokingham Borough Council BME Forum was established in 2002.

Its primary purpose is to influence the policies, practices and services of the Council to ensure that the aspirations and the needs of the BAME communities in the borough are appropriately met, and to exchange information between Wokingham Borough Council and BAME communities and amongst the BAME communities themselves.

Although the forum is administered by the Council, it is community lead in terms of its priorities and activities.

The BME Forum meets four times a year and is open to everyone. These meetings are an opportunity to provide information and discuss issues about the services of the Council and how they are supporting our BAME residents.

The BME Forum Chair is elected every four years. A Wokingham Borough Council representative is appointed as the deputy chair.

Background

For nearly twenty years the Wokingham BME Forum has been successful in celebrating diversity within the borough and providing a voice for nearly 30,000 residents with a black or minority ethnic heritage.

Wokingham borough has a population of nearly 170,000 people. Within our population approximately 84% of our residents would describe themselves as white British (142,000 people). The last Census figures indicated that 6.6% of our population has a Asian/Asian British heritage, 3.7% have a white other heritage, 2.1% a 'mixed BAME' heritage, 1.4% a 'Black/African' heritage, 0.9% a 'White Irish' heritage, 0.8% a Chinese heritage, 0.2% a traveller heritage, with a further 0.7% describing themselves as having an 'Other' heritage.

Within its meetings, the Forum has routinely had updates on issues such as educational attainment, health services and the ongoing housing development within the borough. The Forum has also been a place to discuss sensitive issues within the BAME community such as racial abuse, radicalisation and the threat from terrorism.

The Forum also been proactive in delivering a Healthy Lifestyles project which aimed to tackle the higher prevalence of circulatory diseases, such as coronary heart disease (angina and heart attack) and stroke, within the BAME community. This can be prevented by simple changes in lifestyle such as physical activity and a healthier diet. This project was delivered through Health Service funding from the Partnership Development Fund and proved very popular with residents, attracting a strong mix of male and female participants of all ages and ethnic heritages. Due to funding running out, the project ended in 2018.

The funding was used to run various classes/practical sessions in the form of physical fitness classes, swimming, healthy cooking & eating, aqua fit, and sporting activities. These classes were primarily run in Earley, Lower Earley, and Woodley.

This project has helped many people in our BAME community in gaining confidence undertaking exercise because of the way it connected with them. This has been definitely due to the knowledge of their culture; language and our commitment to reach and make it easier for them to understand this project. The feedback from its participants indicates that people have benefitted greatly and are continuing to benefit from the service provided to them.

Black History Month

In October each year the Forum celebrates Black History Month with a range of events and activities. There are displays in the Council Offices highlighting a particular element of history or achievement within the BAME community, such as BAME historians and authors and the contribution of soldiers from different ethnic heritages to the First World War. The month always closes with the hugely popular Taster and Performance Evening which showcases different artistic performances and foods.

The Council's first celebration of Black history began in 2004 as part of the work of the borough's Cultural Partnership. A few years later the annual celebration became directly

co-ordinated by the BME Forum and included a range of activities such as a Question Time (on the model of BBC question time), the Calypso Tent and “An evening with a leading personality”, which were held at various venues including at the Crescent Resource Centre in Lower Earley. A Caribbean drama written, produced and acted by local Caribbean community was held at Maiden Erlegh School.

A number of summertime Community Cohesion conferences were also organised including one with Police on Community Safety/terrorism and honour killings. A play called “One Extreme To Another” was organised and held at the Woodley Baptist Church.

The Black History Month Mall Gallery Exhibition is now a firm fixture in the Council calendar. Each year it highlights a particular issue that is of importance to the BME Forum. Below is a list of the theme of each exhibition since 2008:

Year	Mall Gallery Exhibition Theme
2008	Nelson Mandela’s 90th Birthday and the Presidential Candidacy of Barack Obama
2009	Black History Month Festivities in Wokingham Borough
2010	Healthy Lifestyles
2011	Life & Culture
2012	Inspiring the Next Generation
2013	BME Forum Healthy Lifestyle Project
2014	Black & Asian Contribution to First World War
2015	Black Authors & Historians
2016	Stories of Independence
2017	Contribution to Cultural Diversity – Carnivals & Festivals
2018	Remembering the Windrush Generation
2019	Contribution of BME Community Groups to Wokingham Borough

The Taster & Performance Evenings, held at Woodley Baptist Church to mark the end of the Black History Month celebrations, is a wonderful showcase of local talent from our BAME communities. The event has a strong family theme with many performances from local children and young people. The event ends each year with a performance by the ever popular AJ’s Calypso Tent.

Analysis of Issues

Aside from being a critical friend for the Council and a showcase for BAME culture within the borough, the BME Forum has provided an important role in being able to discuss sensitive local issues and events that have occurred.

When arrests were made for terrorism activities within the borough, the Local Police Area Commander came to the Forum to explain the work that they were doing and to understand the concerns of the local BAME community. In this it was particularly helpful to understand the support the police were offering to the families directly affected by these arrests.

The Police also engaged directly with the Forum, when an increase in burglaries targeting gold and jewellery within Asian communities, to provide practical information on how this was happening and what local residents could do to secure their homes.

The Council routinely engages with the Forum whenever it is reviewing its cemetery capacity and burial services within the borough to make sure these are still meeting the needs of our diverse range of faiths.

Local voluntary and community groups have attended the Forum to explain their work in supporting issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, strokes, radicalisation, and forced marriages.

A key aim for the BME Forum as it moves forward is how it can engage more with younger residents across the borough. This is to both ensure the continuation of the important role the Forum plays within the borough and to identify issues that the Council may not be aware of, so that the Forum can maintain its positive influence on the activities of the Council.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	NA	NA	NA
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	NA	NA	NA
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	NA	NA	NA

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
None

Cross-Council Implications
The BME Forum considers issues across all council services in relation to their impact with the BAME community

Public Sector Equality Duty
The BME Forum directly supports the Council’s activities in relation to ethnicity and faith.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
None

List of Background Papers
None

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