

Proud to be... celebrating Black History Month

Since 1987 the UK has marked Black History Month – an annual celebration of the achievements and contributions of non-white people to the UK and the rest of the world. Thinking back over the past year, from Kamala Harris to Marcus Rashford, there's certainly a lot to celebrate.

It's also an opportunity to continue the fight against racism – a fight that some of us perhaps thought we had no role in until the Black Lives Matter movement galvanised people all over the world in 2020, following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

The movement helped many to grasp for the first time the importance of going beyond tacit support for diversity and multi-culturalism, and taking some sort of personal stand against racism.

In the face of the numerous inequities facing non-white people everywhere, it became clear that it was not enough merely to agree that those inequities were wrong. It was time to stand up and be counted.

GGI is privileged enough to work with numerous NHS and other public, education and third sector boards. Many of these organisations are ethnically and culturally diverse and most make sincere efforts to ensure equality of opportunity for all.

It would be easy to conclude that our little corner of the world is okay – that there's no need for us to speak out about injustice because, within our echo chamber at least, all is well. But let's not pretend for a moment that this is really the case.

In her introduction to this year's Black History Month celebration, Catherine Ross, editor of Black History Month 2021, wrote: "The independent Civil Society report on the state of race and racism in England to the United Nations, curated by the Runnymede Trust, shows that racism is systemic in England with BME groups facing disparities across health, housing, the criminal justice system, education, employment, immigration and political participation. In stark contrast, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, set up by the Government in response to the Black Lives Matter protests, denied the existence of systemic racism, saying 'we no longer see a Britain where the system is deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities.'

"Likewise, businesses were quick to declare their support for the Black Lives Matter protests, but there are still no black CEOs in the boardrooms of FTSE 100 companies in the UK and only 13 currently report any ethnicity pay gap."

Racism in the NHS

For the NHS, the issue was brought starkly to the fore by COVID-19, which has had a massively disproportionate impact on non-white groups. An NHS Confederation report last year highlighted 'long-standing inequalities and institutional racism' as root causes, and accused both the NHS and the government of failing to take sufficient action.

The report said that BME health and care professionals were more likely to take on high-risk roles due to fear that contracts may not be renewed or shifts reduced. Compounding this was a bullying culture that made BME employees less likely to raise concerns or share their experiences. The vast majority of those surveyed for the report said that staff didn't speak out because they feared for their jobs.

This certainly doesn't sound like an organisation in perfect racial harmony.

As a business that does the bulk of its work with the NHS, it is clear to us that silence from GGI on this issue is not an option.

That's why we helped the Seacole Group to establish itself in 2020, by hosting meetings and

webinars to provide a platform for the debate about how to strengthen non-white NED representation and voice on NHS boards.

It's why we spoke out several times through our Illumination and Covid-100 series of bulletins during the pandemic, as well as publishing articles and guest blog posts from prominent people working in diversity. Perhaps the highest profile recent example of this is our two-part interview with Lord Hastings and Emmanuel Oforu-Appiah, in which they discussed the glacial pace of change and what could be done to speed things up.

It's also why we want to add our voice to the chorus of celebration for Black History Month, which starts today (1 October).

And celebration is exactly the right word. In her introductory article, quoted above, Catherine Ross says: "It's been a challenging time for many Black and Brown people, with so much in the media about racism, inequality and injustice. We wanted the theme of Black History Month 2021 to focus on celebrating being Black or Brown, and to inspire and share the pride people have in their heritage and culture – in their own way, in their own words."

We couldn't agree more. And we're pleased to offer our small contribution to Black History Month's Proud to Be campaign, which invites Black and Brown people all over the UK to reflect on what

they are proud to be. We'll be asking some of our friends and colleagues to consider this question, and to reflect on key developments in equality since the UK first started to celebrate Black History Month in 1987. We have other plans for the month too, which we'll keep up our sleeves for the time being.

Get involved

We'd love it if you chose to get involved in the celebrations. Perhaps there's a current campaign that you'd like to highlight. Thinking back to 1987, when the UK started to mark Black History Month, what are the stand-out events and causes for celebration you think we should focus on? Are there any definitions or terms you think it's important to revisit? Please also let us know if you'd like to appear in one of the short videos we'll be producing during the month.

We can all do more to address the inequality and injustices facing non-white people in the UK. Perhaps we sometimes hold back because we don't want to say the wrong thing, or open ourselves up to charges of tokenism, or because we can't see a way to make a meaningful contribution.

But these are inadequate reasons to remain silent. Black History Month offers a straightforward opportunity to demonstrate which side you're on when it comes to race and equality. We're proud to take that opportunity.

BIMM

DIG DEEPER, LOOK CLOSER, THINK BIGGER