

Southwark Council, its services and the Black dimension

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Here is a paper that, although not claiming to be comprehensive, aims to be a contribution to our long-overdue Southwark Labour parties' left manifesto debate. African, Asian and Caribbean working-class people – Labour's most loyal supporters – feel increasingly taken for granted as mere voting fodder by the party. The "Black wall" will desert Labour if policies and just political representation are not swiftly developed and offered by the party in its strongholds like Southwark. Black people must be valued as equal partners and not clients, worthy of nothing more than tokenism and gesture politics. Front and centre must be a sincere commitment to fight anti-Black racism, Islamophobia and for racial justice and the rights of migrants - not just in words but in practice, as amplified by the Black Lives Matters protests throughout the world, and in the borough, last summer.

According to Southwark Council's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA Fact Sheet 2018): <https://tinyurl.com/3su82pdv> Black working-class people, *African Caribbean, Asian and other people of colour and the young, are significant Camberwell and Peckham demographic covered by Southwark Council. They are important community stakeholders. However, their key societal needs in terms of local provision of services and in the context of poverty, health, housing, education, employment, enterprise, environment and cultural engagement can be greatly improved.

Employment and SMEs

As the biggest local employer, Southwark Council should focus on better outreach into communities with a commitment to positive action in the recruitment of more Black people to positions of responsibility at all levels within its structures, encouraging and supporting advancement to the management team. Employment targets, to redress racial imbalances in the workforce, should be used and be part of the annually reviewed contracts of management staff members. As much as possible, the council should look like and reflect the interests and values of the diverse population it serves. It should robustly use contract compliance to ensure local service providers from African, Asian and Caribbean communities get their fair share of contracts.

Targeted council support for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), which, in Camberwell and Peckham high streets, are sometimes disproportionately run by African Caribbean and Asian people and women in low paid jobs, would help with business sustainability and job creation. The London Living Wage should be a council monitored bare minimum for retail and other local workers. Strategic, joined up town centre policies could increase the development of Enterprise Parks, which are low rental shop units, and the reduction of same-type multiple outlets like meat markets and hair salons, situated right next to each other and competing for the same custom. This would open up opportunities for a variety of other traders, offering good products at affordable prices, and act as an incentive for community members to spend and reinvest locally.

Housing

In social housing, effective anti-racism harassment policy is required that punishes the perpetrator rather than the victim. An emphasis on moving the victim of overt racial bigotry away from their home as resolution should be replaced with a zero-tolerance approach, which would mean the wrongdoer is moved with the possibility of eviction.

In order to increase diversity and democracy in all its sectors of responsibility the council should be popularising the notion that Black people can be on NHS Trusts, parent school governor boards, in tenant associations and take up office.

They can be partners with the council in developing its anti-racism and racial equality policies as both individuals and organisations.

In written evidence submitted by Southwark council to the government [SRF 009] November 2020 <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/16841/pdf/>, it sets out its commitment to pursue “a bold and ambitious agenda that will deliver thousands of new social rent and affordable homes, end rough sleeping in the borough, and promote a green and fair economic renewal from COVID-19 (see Grassroots Black Left’s pamphlets about the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on African, Asian and Caribbean people <https://bit.ly/3qHpJhh>) to drive growth, create jobs and help us to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030”.

There must be open consultations on these objectives and how the council intends to achieve them, with an emphasis on strident public opposition to the government’s ideologically driven cuts.

History and Culture

There must be council-wide acknowledgement of Black achievement and this should not be confined to cultural activities marking the annual October Black History Month. Rather, there should be celebration, commemoration and remembrance of Black achievement in a range of fields like politics and science run by Black people and not overpaid white consultants. Southwark council should start a programme around the decolonisation of local history by working with educational establishments in the borough, like King’s College London and Guy’s Hospital to discover the founding role played by slave trade benefactors and historic monies. Such an initiative would look at how they could best correct this tainted legacy and begin a process of reparative justice for Black people through grants, bursaries, staffing like professorships, fellowships, research and study funding. University College London, Oxford and Cambridge are among other educational establishments tackling the issue.

Youth provision

Black youth have been abandoned by the political class in the UK. They face big challenges and it is unclear what the political offer is from the Labour Party nationally, locally and specifically in this instance from Southwark council. For instance, central government-forced cuts in town hall funding has shut several youth clubs. This should be reversed.

What is the council's policy to reduce school suspensions and exclusions particularly of Black males? It should be working with local school academies to tackle biased and unequal treatment, which further limits young Black people's life chances and negatively impacts on Black families and communities.

Youth and youth violence and knife crime is an escalating social blight on communities in Southwark. What has been the overall impact of the council's Knife Crime and Serious Violence Action Plan:

[file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/Knife%20Crime%20and%20Serious%20Violence%20Plan%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/Knife%20Crime%20and%20Serious%20Violence%20Plan%20(1).pdf)

As Camberwell and Peckham African Caribbean, Asian and People of Colour Officer, the first public event I organised was a Youth on Youth Violence conference that brought together police victims of such crime, their families, residents and community organisations and individuals.

There should be regular publicity and meaningful consultation with youth and community leaders, grassroots groups and schools about the Knife Crime and Serious Violence Action Plan, so that its targets and goals are transparent and available for scrutiny. The council could be guided by the prevention model pioneered with success in Scotland which treats youth and youth violence and knife crime as a major public health issue.

Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers

Black people and migrants are among the most deprived in the borough and should be at the forefront in receiving a package of aid to counter low income levels, bad housing and worsening health conditions that includes mental health. Are migrants welcomed in Southwark and does the borough take in its fair share of migrants? Southwark Council should boldly and proudly state: Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are welcome here. National movement Grassroots Black Left (GBL) has produced a position paper as a resource on Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers, see here:

<https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/9c03b572-f161-4a13-be52-7ab307f15f48/downloads/GBL%20Position%20Statement%20on%20Refugee%20and%20Migrant%20.pdf?ver=1621083120559>

GBL deplores the government's "hostile environment" policy towards refugees and migrants, which has given rise to the demonisation of desperate human beings fleeing war, persecution, torture, and hunger, often as a direct consequence of the UK government's own unethical foreign policy. Most of the world's refugees come from just five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia, with 85% of them fleeing to other so-called developing nations. For example, Bangladesh hosts nearly a million Rohingya refugees who have fled persecution from Myanmar. Contrary to the false narrative of the UK being the most generous country in helping refugees, it takes in significantly fewer refugees than Germany, France, Spain and Greece and provides the least financial support,

despite being the fifth largest economy in the world. Furthermore, the UK is the only European country to indefinitely detain people on arrival.

Voluntary sector

African, Asian and Caribbean voluntary and community organisations have been mobilising to support their communities during the coronavirus crisis. Many of them are doing this against a background of declining funding, rising demand, and challenging commissioning arrangements. The Race Equality Foundation spoke to several long-term sister organisations to find out how they are adapting and continuing to provide vital services amid a global pandemic.

The common issue across all of their interviews was the pressure on staff and volunteers to continue to meet the needs of the communities they serve. Organisations have had to quickly adapt or cut back their services in response to coronavirus, while managing increasing staff absence due to self-isolation and family caring commitments. Many services are concerned about the ongoing impact on their service users.

At the same time, they are worried about their own sustainability both during and after the crisis. On top of this are concerns about the long-term effects of the crisis on Black communities and their health. Southwark Council should do its utmost to reverse cuts to this vital third sector.

Environment

The green policy is a race issue, because Black people live in the poorest, most run-down, environmentally worse neighbourhood. We should remember Ella Kissi-Debrah, aged 11, the Black girl who died of asthma as an officially-recognised result of air pollution where she lived. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/dec/16/girls-death-contributed-to-by-air-pollution-coroner-rules-in-landmark-case>. The trade union-run London Hazard Centre has a long track record doing excellent environmental work that should be learned from and supported <http://www.lhc.org.uk/>

Black representation

Political representation, at parliamentary, London Assembly, town hall and local party down, must properly reflect the communities we serve. This must be based on the hard-won principles of Black self-organisation and Black self-determination, in the past so ably demonstrated by the successes of Peckham and Dulwich Labour Party Black Sections.

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