

## A short Report: Black History Month in Leighton Buzzard October 2021

### Background

The murder of George Floyd by US state police in 2020 sparked international outrage and shock. Many spontaneous marches and rallies took place in support of \*Black Lives Matter (BLM).

Here in Leighton Buzzard local residents organised their own peaceful march in June 2020 to show that its townspeople cared about racism and wanted a response from its Council to demonstrate that *it* cared too.

In January 2021 The Council adopted the Local Government Association's (LGA) national statement on racism which contained the following words " *it is vital that we are all part of the much-needed conversation on how we can all confront and end racism. Local government is listening. Racism has no place in our communities or in our lives*"

\*\*Black History Month (BHM) in October is one obvious time for Leighton Buzzard to start having those conversations. The library had two BHM displays.

### Launch

The Mayor launched Black History Month on 2nd October with a talk by local resident Ken Breinburg. Over 30 people braved the torrential rain to hear Ken speak of his experiences as a black man raised in a British colonised country (Guyana) and coming to England as a 12 year old boy. He spoke of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade which provided untold wealth to Britain and financed British Empire colonialism - in short the story of how black people came to be in the UK. The legacy of those times is still affecting young black and white children today who are denied the whole truth of their own people's history as despite calls from historians and others for the history of Colonialism to be a mandatory part of the English school curriculum this has not yet been agreed by the Government. Ken said "if you want to understand black history then learn your own white history".

### Facilitated sessions

A series of four two hour sessions entitled "Understanding White Racism" were held during October led by resident Christine Sheppard. A total of 29 people attended these groups three of which took place at the Trinity Methodist Church; and one at Tactic which, although lovely, proved to be too small a venue for a group larger than 4 people during a pandemic.

The sessions included several "pair listening exchanges" whereby people took turns to talk *without interruption* for an equal amount of time each. There was an agreement to be respectful and to keep what people shared about racism confidential. A summary of some of the issues covered:

- **What is racism?** Common definitions of racism- individual and institutional;
- **When did it start?** Concept of white superiority invented in the 1660s to justify the brutal enslavement of African humans which financed the expansion of the British Empire and the subsequent Colonisation of other countries to the benefit of the colonisers. No one could have escaped the effect of the "superiority" message and misinformation, becoming imbibed into white minds down the generations to us today.
- Racism is one of a number of oppressions in society that separates people;

- The timeline of how the message of “white superiority” was imbibed into white peoples’ minds from the slave trade down the generations to today.
- The three forms of damage by racism 1) to brown & black people directly 2) internalised racism where the targeted group turn on each other 3) the damage and corruption to white people’s humanity and thinking.
- **Racism and Climate Crisis**- addressing racism is central to turning round the climate warming crisis. A world map was available showing the countries least and more likely to survive climate crisis. This shows the countries in the Global South who have created the least emissions are the poorest and hardest hit; and the Global North who created the most emissions and are rich more likely to survive.
- **Resources**: the world map and supporting information; examples of books, a book list.
- Questions and Answers.

### **Attendance:**

A total of 51 people attended the Black History Month events- 35 the launch & 29 the sessions (some overlap). Apart from the Mayor, one Town Councillor and one senior Officer attended the launch; and 4 Town Councillors: (2 Conservative, 1 Labour, 1 Independent) the sessions.

Two Linslade primary school staff attended one of the sessions; and took a photo for their website and reported that they found it very useful.

### **Feedback from attendees:**

Looking at racism is not a comfortable topic, but all the attendees were open and brave and made positive verbal feedback in terms of the information received. People said they liked thinking out loud in the listening exchanges and wished there was more time!

### **Recommendations to the Town Council:**

1. This was an experiment and it was a small but a good start on holding the “*much needed conversations*”. It is **recommended** that the Town Council considers expanding these opportunities as people need spaces like this to explore their own thinking in a structured setting in order to unpack the misinformation and feelings caused by racism.
2. Black History Month 2022 to be expanded.
3. The town Council Mayor and appropriate Officer/s to build on 2020 in the planning of BHM 2022.

Christine Sheppard  
November 2021

\*BLM is now a global network which began as a protest about the murder of an unarmed teenage boy by a white man who was acquitted of that crime; and then grew as the numbers of black people killed by the State police rose year on year in the US, but also black deaths in custody here in the UK too.

\*\* Black History Month has existed for 30 years; and acts to promote and celebrate black people in society. The theme for 2021 is “Proud to Be”.