

## ***Temperature on the Streets Episode 1***

**Episode Description:** COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting Black people and other minority groups in Leicester and the rest of the UK. Why is that? How is this challenge connected to the parallel struggles of Black Lives Matter and the Windrush Generation? What can we do about it? In this episode, Pawlet Brookes speaks to Ivan Browne, Deputy Director in Public Health at Leicester City Council to discuss these questions and the larger impact of COVID-19 on Leicester.

### **Transcript**

#### **Pawlet Brookes:**

Welcome to *Temperature on the Streets*, a podcast series hosted by myself, Pawlet Brookes, that forms part of Serendipity's creative response to connect people from across Leicester diverse communities and beyond in the wake of COVID-19. Over the next six months, the podcast will explore a range of topics, dispelling myths, and providing practical advice as an informative dialogue with community activists and experts. In this first episode, Ivan Browne, Deputy Director in Public Health at Leicester City Council, discusses the impact of COVID-19 in Leicester, and some of the steps we can all take to keep safe and healthy.

This episode *Temperature on the Streets* includes a summary in Polish and Arabic which you can find at the end of the episode.

COVID-19 has demonstrated a significant disparity in terms of Black people being at greater risk of catching COVID-19. Is this the case and if so, why?

**Ivan Browne:** So this is a really complicated story. There are disparities, but the reasons for those disparities remain unclear. So we know...I know that my mom was a front line nurse. I know lots of people in our communities that are in those high exposure jobs. So there's something past exposure. There is something about opportunity for transmission. So there's lots and lots of reasons as to why rather than this leap to "there is a genetic problem"...the likelihood it's going to be a whole range of different reasons why the virus gets an opportunity in some communities more than it does in others.

**Pawlet Brookes:** And do you think in terms of the virus getting the opportunity in some communities more than others, do you think that racism might have anything to do with that when you look at Black health, in terms of why some people are more vulnerable than others?

**Ivan Browne:** What we know that not just for COVID, but for a whole range of health matters, we've seen that there is a disproportionate impact because access to health services are not equal. We know that the way in which health services can sometimes be delivered, do not recognize that kind of multicultural picture that we have. So there's a whole range of barriers that can be put in place too for us to all get the same health response. So it can be many many things.

**Pawlet Brookes:** Leicester was impacted by local lockdown. How do you think the people of Leicester responded to this?

**Ivan Browne:** Genuinely—and I've said this in every opportunity that I've got,—I think that the people in Leicester have been incredibly stoic. They've really tried to comply. When that second lockdown came, anybody who's walked the streets of Leicester knew that there was nobody around. Everybody tried to comply and do the best they can. So I completely refute any kind of suggestion that the people of the Leicester were somehow complicit in what happened. And we've seen that born out in other parts of the country now. Something fresh happened in relation to the virus. Something fresh happened in the way that it was impacting...we saw it in Leicester. And now we're seeing that same replication in all sorts of other areas, younger age groups, not transmitting into hospitals or into deaths or anything like that. It just had a very, very different pattern from what we saw in March. So I think Leicester and the people of Leicester have done a tremendous job, but they're tired now. It's been a long time,

**Pawlet Brookes:** So it's been a long time and they are tired. So what do you think the longer term impact will be in terms of local lockdown?

**Ivan Browne:** So I think where we've been moving is steadily getting the restrictions lifted. I think we are well down that line and putting ourselves more into line with the national picture, but I worry about the longer term impacts. One of the things that I've argued for and continue to argue for is we are in a sense dealing with two pandemics here: the COVID one that we know and the exacerbation of inequalities that will go on for far longer than we're fighting COVID. So what is going to be the long term impacts on mental health? What's going to be the long term impacts on long-term conditions, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, respiratory illnesses that have not been treated or looked after in the same way over this period? And that's going to take some time. And the people that will suffer from that, the most of course, are those that are right at the front line generally when it comes to poor health outcomes.

**Pawlet Brookes:** So coming out of lockdown and the aftermath of COVID, you're not really painting a rosy picture. What do you think we might do to make it better?

**Ivan Browne:** So I think within adversity is opportunity. I'm a great believer in that. And one thing that COVID has done has shone a really bright light on saying our society is not equal. The opportunities are not the same and that's leading to health outcomes not being the same. So we can't brush this under the carpet anymore. It's like now everybody's got access. Well actually, COVID's shown us that's not the case. People are being affected more and the more vulnerable are being affected more and we have to now work to redress that balance. We now need to realize this is an issue of social justice, not just an issue of providing more services. This is about those that need the most should be receiving the most and not just it all being blanket. So I think that that discussion, that narrative, that push is something now that through COVID we can say, here's the evidence. We're not talking about this in a theoretical way. We're talking about this in a very practical way and I think that that's a catalyst for change.

**Pawlet Brookes:** Because you're talking about societal issues, because you're talking about COVID in a sense there's Windrush, there's Black Lives Matter, there's Brexit and all these things impact on the same communities. So how are we joining up to make things better with all these different issues? How are we tackling all these issues? Because there's an underlying current here that says it's all one and the same thing.

**Ivan Browne:** Yeah. And I think you're right about that. I think the danger comes from trying to fragment the argument. One bit there, one bit and another bit through the other bit. And that's why there needs to be a pulling together and a conversation that talks realistically about social justice. And what about social justice in terms of ethnicity, social justice in relation to health access, social justice in relation to income. There is a theme that's running through now that says, well, if you continue to compartmentalize and chop these things, it's always the same people that end up in a difficult position. It's always the same people that get the worst outcomes. So it's the same people that get the worst end of the stick. We can't continue to do that. It's not right. Morally, it's not right.

And you could pick it off when it was one then two people. We've seen this locally, regionally, nationally, internationally, where people are asking really serious questions. And I think you're right, how do we stitch that together is going to be the key. How do we stitch together, Black lives matters and health inequalities? How do we stitch together access to employment and education with health outcomes? And they are there is a common thread that runs through all of them and we now need to be talking in that way and pressing, whether it's government or through united lobbying, through our own local governments where we now have a narrative that it's more inclusive around all of those issues and saying actually we need to tackle this in a far more holistic way.

**Pawlet Brookes:** So how do we help or how do we change the narrative for communities where you've got intergenerational families living together, you've got multiple languages? And actually, what is a positive thing has now been seen as a negative thing? Because you're saying, this is why there's a problem because these communities are living in this way. How do we change the language like that? And how do we help people to navigate that difficulty?

**Ivan Browne:** I think that's, for me, that's incredibly frustrating because when we look at what the challenges we face in society, and what are the mechanisms that we have that mitigate those issues such as community, family, cohesion, actually, those have been the things that have been protective, they've not been the things that have been the problem that have been massively protected for vulnerable communities. And I think there is something that we need to be able to not be vilified for that and actually there's something about celebrating that. I think some time ago I did something with Serendipity that spoke about resilience and where does that resilience come through? Well, actually it comes through having wise people that live around you in your house. It comes through having your sense of community. It comes through being able to have open conversations about where you are and what you're doing and how you're feeling, and those things are massively important.

So I think what as people, again, try to take a small thing and what to label some blame on it, actually, we've got to push back against that because if we were to argue, well, this is the reason why, well, actually the reason might be if you've got poor quality housing, that's the only housing that seems to be available to the community. Maybe we should have a question about why is poor quality housing open to particular communities as opposed to just trying to label the individuals who have to manage that and work with it.

**Pawlet Brookes:** Yeah. Resilience seems to be the theme across all Black communities, both locally and nationally and internationally. I've been talking to people in the States and we've got an exhibition in Leicester coming up called "Resilience" and that's the name of most of the exhibitions in the States at the moment. So can you just talk to me a little bit more about resilience in terms of what you feel that, specifically for Leicester, people need to do and how we change the discourse because the discourse is negative?

**Ivan Browne:** Yeah. So for me, resilience is about a sense of place. It's about a sense of purpose. It's about identity. It's about having your voice. All of those things are the things, and I'm thinking of that in a very personal way, what are the things that I saw growing up in my father's generation or even those that are in my generation have battled through and it has been that idea that certainly for me, I felt like I miss some of Leicester, and Leicester is my home. Doesn't matter what everybody else tries to say to me, that's how I judge it. I definitely feel like I have a sense of purpose that has come through my upbringing and it comes through my faith, has come through my community and that grounds me in difficult circumstances. But this idea of opportunity that the things could be better, that things could be different has been an ongoing narrative for me.

But what I do realise that particular area around opportunity and belief that the world can be different and can be better, it's the thing that's being eroded the fastest. It's the thing that in my mind, when I'm speaking to young men, that there's a sense of sometimes hopelessness...belief that those things can change. And that's what we need to bring back. Everybody remember that catch phrase around, keep hope alive and when Jesse Jackson was running, it's still pertinent today. It's still important today. It's that that sense of things can change and belief and not being beaten down by the circumstance to believe that this is a fixed point.

**Pawlet Brookes:** So on a final point, so what message would you give to young people going into education or not, given what happened with that? Elders who for the first time have to think about how do they survive, are they in a home? Are they with family? What message would you give to the community given that we are riding through this pandemic? And as I said, there's a range of other things that we have to weave on top of that, back to my Windrush, Black Lives Matter, Brexit, COVID. What message would you give to the communities of Leicester?

**Ivan Browne:** So what I would remind us all is that we are all resilient people. I think it's interesting, even when you think about the motto of Leicester is "Always the Same." The subtext is it's about resilience. We have traditionally been a city that has been open to communities. I mean, I have studied

elsewhere. I've worked elsewhere, but I've always thought of Leicester as the place that I feel like Ivan, and it's because of things like that. And so I would say continue to hold onto what you've got. Try to make sure that we don't lose that degree of hope, but also trust in those things that brought us to where we've got to. It doesn't matter what other people may say, "Oh, that's not relevant for now. That was back in the day."

My sons always keep telling me "That's the olden days." And I was like, "Well, you know sometimes some of the stuff that's olden days is for today too" And that idea of knowing who you are, understanding that there will be adversity and some of the best bits about resilience that I've come across have been from people who who've been through it, seen it, got the t-shirts and are willing to tell you about it. Use those sources. All of our education doesn't need to come through the internet. A lot of the greatest bits of our education sit with people that are right next door to you, people that are within your family or your influence group. They will tell you how to get through. I've got a family that are constantly telling me how to get through and thank god for them. So I think we've just got to really own our resources and capitalise on our resources to take us through this because you know what, we've been through this before. It might not have had COVID written on it, but adversity, actually we're pretty much experts in that area.

**Pawlet Brookes:** Thank you for listening. You can find out more about *Temperature on the Streets* and sign up to the bi-weekly bulletin by going to [serendipity-uk.com/temperatureonthestreets](http://serendipity-uk.com/temperatureonthestreets).

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