

## INTERVIEW

# Dr Fiona Bartells-Ellis



As head of equality at the British Council, Dr Fiona Bartells-Ellis OBE has reached the top of her profession. She talks to **Tiffany-Annabelle Davies** about her career, her passion for what's right... and the worst piece of advice she ever received

## Did you grow up wanting a career in the diversity sector or did you have a defining moment?

No, I didn't. When I was growing up the sector as it is did not exist. It has emerged as a result of growing awareness, based on the contributions of various people, of the importance of addressing discrimination and marginalisation in pursuit of social justice. There was not one defining moment but a very early awareness of what it feels like to be powerless and treated unfairly through personal experiences and observations and reflections on those observations.

## What has been the proudest moment of your career?

I am always a little cautious about pride! I think probably it was when I acted as an expert witness and much later received feedback of what was deemed to be my incredibly positive contribution to the life chances of the young black boy at the centre of the situation. Things in that vein give me a sense of making a meaningful contribution which gives me satisfaction and something akin to pride. Being in the Powerlist the first time and getting my OBE were humbling and very pleasing.

## What is a key tip for success you often feel is overlooked?

I think tips for success insufficiently focus on what I see as the foundation elements. This crucially includes keeping healthy - mind, body, spirit and a disciplined approach. Also developing core skills of verbal and written communication, analysis, focus, being able to think and process in the moment, being solution oriented rather than problem focussed and independent minded. Don't make people liking you a goal. If you do

it will turn you into someone who is 'anyone's'. You won't be in the driving seat. Don't be too hard on yourself either. It may well mean you are too hard on others and limit your ability to be compassionate and empathetic which the world needs more, not less of. Identify 'time stealers'. Things that steal your time don't add value, and prevent you from focusing properly on what you should be focusing on.



**This work is demanding emotionally and intellectually**

## What is the best and worst advice you've ever received?

The best advice was "you are a character, always be a good one" and "you don't always have something to say", which means basically "hold your own counsel, don't share everything all of the time". The worst advice was that I should stop challenging and accept that systems can't be easily changed. What's the integrity and satisfaction in that?

## What did you study at university and did it have an impact on your career?

I have done various studies but my first profession was social work which led me into social work education and eventually running a Master's Programme in Advanced Social Work. It impacted profoundly because of the exposure to various elements

of people's lives, their diversity, the extent of challenges and paucity of resources to help with these and the resilience of people. So there was despair and hope and lots of complexity. My M.Phil in Social Policy particularly helped with the meta-analysis. Tertiary level studies gave me deeper insight and understanding and the research, analytic and deconstruction skills to make good decisions and recognise the importance of an applied approach to my area of work.

## Are you on social media, do you follow certain people for inspiration?

No. I am not and am frequently told I should be. There is a lot that bothers me about social media - philosophically and practically - although I know it has an important role to play, especially for some individuals and groups. Instead I listen to Ted Talks, read books and other things and gain inspiration from people alive and dead such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Adam Hochschild, James Baldwin and Paulo Freire and many others.

## Do you believe social media has a positive effect on the diversity sector?

I think it is mixed but on balance certainly more positive than negative. It has opened up possibilities for a more diverse group of people to connect and campaign, share and contribute, support and understand and can act as a powerful agent of change in terms of perceptions, behaviours and systems and leverage positive influence in other ways. I think engagement with it at an individual level has to be very considered and 'intelligent'. Businesses can't ignore it or do so pretty much at their peril. This is very important for the sector.



It highlights the positive diversity out there and provides an important platform for the sector to get its key messages and priorities out and engage and achieve.

**What advice would you give to young people thinking of taking roles in the equality and diversity sector?**

It is an incredibly interesting sector that can develop and utilise a wide range of skills, doing important work that can allow you to make important and meaningful contributions as my organisation and role does. But if you don't have tenacity and the appropriate intrinsic motivation, it will sap you. It is demanding emotionally and intellectually which is great but you need to develop resilience to deal with the cynicism and challenges that are part of working in the sector. I am personally inspired by young people who have a determination to join the sector and

make a meaningful contribution.

**What do you say to critics who feel no real change can take place.**

You are wrong and the evidence that you are wrong is irrefutable. Look back and chart how things have changed. At one time, not many decades ago, when a woman got married organisations required them to resign and they had no choice but to do to. There is no space to highlight a range of changes for different marginalised groups and individuals. However, progress can be tenuous and unravel and the biases and prejudices we all hold can surface, often unexpectedly and quickly – Brexit has shown that, as has the worsening economic inequality. I believe there will always be a need for the diversity sector and for young people who want to join and contribute.

**How did you overcome challenges,**

**helping you get to the top of your profession?**

By committing to continuous self-improvement, I am not derailed by negative criticism, of which there is a lot around for many of us; rather I see it as helpful data. I acknowledge my flaws but I also recognise and acknowledge my strengths and abilities. I have focused on what is wanted of me by organisations I have worked in and respected that they are paying me to deliver this, not to focus on what I would like to do – so a very good work ethic and attitude has helped. I have developed self-confidence and competence and have been proactive, reflected a lot and been driven by what I think is right. I have observed and listened and contributed, often spontaneously and too often not as wisely as I should but always congruently and not based on self-interest.