

VCS Emergencies Partnership Extraordinary Network Call

12 Aug 2024, 1100-1200

Summary Notes

Below are a longer set of summary notes from our online Extraordinary Network Call on 12 Aug 2024 relating to the racist attacks, violent protests and riots from late July to early August 2024.

Over 120 EP partners joined us on Monday 12 August 2024 for our Extraordinary Network Call. The call recording is [here](#) and below is a longer summary of what was shared.

Robyn Knox, Director of the EP, chaired the call and opened by describing what has been a tragic couple of weeks. All of us have been impacted in some way but we know that for those from the Muslim and refugee and migrant community this has impacted them in very significant, traumatic and damaging ways. Reassuringly, we have also seen wonderful examples of communities coming together and we need to build on that as best we can.

The impacts of these riots are still being felt deeply in many areas, but it is important we identify actions and to help us move forward Robyn drew attention to **six themes that we have heard from across the Partnership:**

1. **Racism and islamophobia** - We need to acknowledge that these were not protests, but racist and Islamophobic attacks. These attitudes drive further division and prevent the building of community resilience. These challenges require a long-term strategy.
2. **Immediate safety** (physically and psychosocially) - Community and religious buildings need to be made safe, whether repairing damage or increasing security measures, and those who use them need to feel emotionally safe in these spaces (in all spaces)
3. **Coordinated, clear and consistent narrative** - Many partners are unsure whether to open their buildings and services and how to challenge misinformation. There have been great examples of messages of solidarity, they should come from businesses and the government too to provide consistency and clarity.
4. **Response and recovery actions** – These should not happen in isolation, as together we share information and take action to learn lessons. Local authorities must work with voluntary, community and faith groups to better understand challenges. Deeper conversations are needed with Muslim groups to build relationships and bridges.
5. **Greater focus on those with the greatest need** - Are we thinking about those who are unable to access key messages of reassurance such as those who are hard-of-hearing?
6. **Resources and flexibility** – We need funding for short term recovery, as well as long-term for implementing strategies to build bridges and cohesion. Flexibility of funding is also vital for the VCS as it allows organisations to support those who are most in need.

We heard from **Fadi Itani** (CEO of the Muslim Charities Forum, MCF), **Pam Gill** (Deputy CEO at the Refugee and Migrant Centre, RMC), **Mark Davis** (CEO of Middlesborough Voluntary Development Agency) and **Shaun Delaney** (Head of Volunteering Strategy at the Department for Culture Media and Sport, DCMS).

- **Fadi** (from 12m39s in the recording) described how shocking these violent scenes have been: *“We thought we would never see this again in the UK - and that this was all behind us in the 70s and 80s.”*

He outlined a view that this has been caused by a failure of political leadership – divisive language has been used as cover for the failure to address deep problems while other actors have used misinformation to turn communities against one another. The last thing that is needed after what we’ve experienced following the pandemic, Ukraine, and Cost of Living crisis, is greater division. But no single organisation can solve this – **we need to act together** and carefully consider how we can rebuild.

The issues and inequalities that exist within communities have been overlooked – so how will we build bridges between communities and address the misconceptions that one community is being prioritised over another, when in fact we are all struggling?

Fadi ended by asking partners to reach out to neighbours, colleagues and friends from the Muslim community to show your support.

- **Pam** (from 20m30s in the recording) outlined in moving terms how she, her staff and service users had coped with being named on a list of ‘targets’ circulated by the far-right.

Pam described how they needed to safeguard clients, staff and volunteers, many of whom are women who wear hijabs and who felt very unsafe. RMC closed their offices, offered no media comments and their teams worked from home wherever possible, however some clients still went to the offices feeling that they would rather be attacked than get their applications in late.

It has been a scary time, but Pam reminded us that those that have threatened, attacked and spread hate across our communities are *“a loud but small minority – and there are more of us than them”*. Witnessing counter-protests where the community came together to stand in front of and defend the centre gave them all some hope. Pam also noted the support of the West Midlands Mayor, local MPs, the local authority, the police and other delivery partners. However, it is important now that we work out what we can put in place to react quicker if this happens again. **“Sometimes it takes situations like this to grow stronger together.”**

- **Mark** (from 30m45s in the recording) described how rioters had left the area feeling *“like a warzone”* and underlined that this is a national crisis for all communities – ***it is not only those who have experienced the riots, these issues are affecting all communities.***

There are major issues in our communities, and this has been a longtime in the making. It will likely take longer to truly rebuild the relationships we’ve lost and the new ones we need, but civil society is the beating heart of communities and can enable this to happen, with Local Infrastructure Organisations playing a unique role

It is vital that the sector is involved in co-designing the response from government with strong national leadership that empowers responses to be local as what works in Middlesbrough may not work elsewhere. Mark ended on questions related to leadership, what leadership do we need in places to respond to this? What does this look like at local level?

- **Shaun** (from 35m25s in the recording) shared how DCMS are trying to make sure that the experiences and stories from communities are heard by those who need to hear them. Shaun acknowledged that having to keep talking about these experiences isn’t nice, but it helps to steer the next steps of recovery.

Later (from 36m45s in the recording), we opened the discussion up with several partners sharing views and asking questions.

- **Lisa Hollins, British Red Cross**, challenged us all to think on what are our next steps? In the short term, what does good look like in terms of local leadership and who is leading, is it local government, LRFs? We need to make sure they are reaching out to communities with a whole society response.
- **Steve Miller, London Boroughs Faith Network**, pointed to the risk/missed opportunity of underinvestment in specialist infrastructure e.g. faith, given that they are made up of those organisations who are vital in building the bridges we need and in a wide variety of circumstances.
- **Mike Wild, MACC**, highlighted that this is not just a community cohesion problem, but a reflection of the inequalities that exist. We must make calls for change that address cohesion and the root causes.
- **Mohamed, Refugee Action**, shared that for many the last few weeks are still raw, but it is fundamental that we come together in spaces like this to create a vision of the communities we want to see.
- **Ruth Abram, Community Futures**, reflected that in their rural communities there has been a lot of work over recent years to ensure people feel safe to return to community buildings since the pandemic. However, people are once again worried about their safety and we need to work together to overcome this (in the chat, Ruth and colleagues from Yorkshire agreed to connect and talk further about rural communities).
- **Thelma Abernethy, Cruse**, talked about the grief that people are dealing with from the 29 July Southport attack and that we must take bereavement care into account when rebuilding communities. Many refugees will also have been through incredible trauma and lost close friends and family, so it is important to consider the emotional impact of recent events and people's mental health.

There was a clear sense that recent events have been a long time in the making, that they are the visible symptoms of much deeper societal problems – and that although the violence appears to have subdued for the time being, the damage done to communities has been profound and requires focused attention and effort from all sectors, including government, to begin to repair.

We cannot forget what's happened and we all need to keep working together to achieve a more positive future which all communities can thrive in and contribute to, safe from fear and discrimination.

The EP team are thinking carefully about the role our partnership will play in leading and directing the change we need to see in this area. We want partners to stay as engaged with us as they can, sharing what they need and want from us, from each other and sharing what they are doing and thinking so that others might learn.

We'll continue to check-in with partners through meetings and catch-ups and we would urge partners to stay connected with each other through things like our Slack channel (you can join that by emailing us at info@vcsep.org.uk), but to use whichever channels work best for you.

We look forward to seeing many partners on our next 'routine' Network Call on Thu 5 September, 1000-1100 (agenda info to follow by 29 August) and from everyone in the EP team, we hope everyone stays safe and takes the time you all need to look after yourselves and each other.