

VCSE Sector Forum – 25 September 2024

Welcome and housekeeping

Welcome from Rebecca Mear (CEO) and housekeeping from Ian Hudson-Murt (Policy, Research and Communications Manager) at Voscur.

Rebecca gave an update on the updated VCSE sector's voice and influence network. There are now three voice and influence networks that have been meeting since February with good engagement:

- Communities of Practice
- Communities for Equality
- Communities of Place

These networks have been discussing important issues to VCSE organisations and nominated representatives will be sharing questions with the councillors in the next section.

Councillors shared their perspectives on VCSE sector:

Cllr Tony Dyer – The new committee model and the change of government gives us an opportunity to reassess what we're doing, including how we work with the VCSE sector. It's a vitally important part of the city. The council needs to adapt so that the VCSE sector can work as effectively as it can. The council have committed to the One City plan going forward and expanding it in many ways to interact more with the wider community in Bristol. The council has a dire financial situation, so we have to work together to make the best of strained resources. The commitment to the One City approach recognises that the council alone cannot solve the problems in the city, and has to have humility and work with others. The committee system encourages a more collegiate approach to working, and even now we're seeing change and different parties are working together.

Cllr Andrew Brown – There is a lot of opportunity for cross cutting work between the council committees, and in recognising the role that the VCSE sector plays in the economy and the skills people in the VCSE sector has. The council has a role in supporting the VCSE sector; there's a lot that can be done, and how we tease that out over time will be figured out. We're committed to the One City structure and board, and it is having a refresh of membership in the Economy and Skills Board, the Culture Board, and Children & Young People Board. If VCSE organisations are interested in joining, you can sign up on the One City website, it would be great to have you involved.

Cllr Stephen Williams – I value relationships and have done across my time as a councillor. Many of the VCSE organisations in Bristol are even older than the council, so the complimentary role of the council and the VCSE sector has been important for a long time and is now increasingly important. We face difficult decisions this year so the role of the VCSE sector is more important than ever. It's important we understand each other and our roles to deliver the best outcomes for people in our city. Bristol is a diverse city with lots to be proud of, but does have economic, social and health challenges to tackle. I look forward to working with you over the coming years.

A conversation: Meet Cllr Tony Dyer, Cllr Stephen Williams and Cllr Andrew Brown

Panel:

- Cllr Tony Dyer – chair of the council
- Cllr Stephen Williams – chair of public health and communities committee
- Cllr Andrew Brown – chair of economy and skills committee

Communities of Practice questions

Asked by Ben Judd from Bristol Drugs Project:

1. On social value commitments in funding agreements – we feel as though these are structured with the private or quasi-private sector in mind, who are not working exclusively for their communities by default. Can these be adjusted to ensure that those within the VCSE sector can showcase their social value, and give themselves the best chance to communicate their approach?

Cllr Tony Dyer – Yes, one of the things we want to do is reset our approach to areas including how we address social value, both at system level and creating new elements of social value. We need to recognise that social value is sometimes based on assets in communities. There are some things already taking place including Our City 2030. We're setting up a working group including councillors and hopefully VCSE organisations to look at this.

2. Can we work together to address the short-term nature of funding contracts and the issues this causes for staff recruitment, staff retention and our resilience?

Cllr Stephen Williams – We recognise that people need certainty, and the council also faces this issue. The budget next month will give us a better idea of our position in order to make commitments to the VCSE sector. The finances of the council have been affected by the limitations on council tax. We're pleased to be working on the Bristol Impact Fund for the VCSE sector and we're launching a consultation on this. In this narrow way we're trying to give some certainty, but recognise it's not perfect.

Cllr Tony Dyer – Tony sits on the Core Cities UK and talks with representatives from government. The indication at the moment is that the 30 Oct budget will be a 1 year settlement, which doesn't give us much certainty, and then the government will be conducting a spending review. After that, there hopefully will be a 3 year settlement for local governments, which will give the VCSE sector more certainty, but there is the risk that it will be 3 years of limited funding. However, we hope that in this time we'll be able to grow the council.

3. The last few years have posed many different challenges and crises for people and communities. Can you provide information on how the Committee System will react to change and decision-making processes during different types of emergencies?

Cllr Andrew Brown – We're still getting to grips with the committee system and haven't been tested yet in this way. We'll have to do more thinking about this. The council does have its strengths and has been working with communities in response to the recent riots, so there are processes in place.

Cllr Tony Dyer – If you look back at challenges in the past such as COVID, One City played a massive part in the response to that, and in the response to the recent riots. The government has made some funding available to those cities that were most affected by the recent riots, including Bristol, so this will be available to support communities. We'll be looking at this as a key thing at the One City gathering in November.

Communities for Equalities questions

Asked by Temba Mahari from SARI (Stand Against Racism & Inequality):

1. We all care about and understand the importance of lived experience and intersectionality within policy-shaping, and working with groups or organisations that are equalities-led to do this. What is Bristol City Council's approach to bringing this into policy-shaping in a way that brings in new faces, and is equitable in approach?

Cllr Stephen Williams – The committee system itself will help in that regard. An advantage of this system is that there will be 9 pairs of eyes making each decision which should allow for better decisions, and there is a role for all members of the committee to champion causes as one leader can't take an interest in everything. There are 72 committee members and some sit on more than one committee, so you can influence them. There are 4 women, 2 Muslim members, and one gay man who is the chair of Stephen's committee of 9 people. With good diversity and representation on committees, we'll be more mindful of our responsibilities for equality and the details of the Equality Act 2010. We want to make sure there's no hierarchy amongst marginalised communities to encourage diverse representation, and will work with Voscur to ensure this such as LGBTQ+ representation.

Cllr Tony Dyer – 70 councillors can never be representative of the whole city, but do have a duty and responsibility to represent their communities regardless of identity and background. Tony comes from a working class background; being working class isn't a protected characteristic but we know there are many parts of the city that are weaponised as working class, so we want to use our diversity constructively to make change. We will make mistakes and have to admit this, such as an announcement due later this week about transport in city centre and the views of disabled people.

2. Can changes be made to competitive commissioning structures to encourage – and invest in – collaboration and partnership?

Cllr Andrew Brown – In tune with what we've said about the One City approach, we're keen to make sure that this is as collaborative as possible so that we're taking people and organisations along with us and embedding a partnership approach as much as possible.

3. We would like to request a holistic commitment to accessibility – physically, mentally, digitally – and openness to radical and innovative approaches to allow this. Importantly, we would like to see this invested in within services commissioned or supported by Bristol City Council, in addition to the council's own services.

Cllr Tony Dyer – We need to that for several reasons. There is a social model of inequality where inequality is built into many of our systems. We need to combat that so everyone in the city has opportunities. This is a wonderful city but we still have a long way to go. In order to address those inequalities we need to take a wider approach including how we present information. This will require innovation from outside of the council and we have to be open and receptive to this. The council has seen a lot of changes including funding cuts for over a decade, and often you are so busy trying to cope with change that you're not open to different ways to problem solve. Sometimes it feels like I'm plugging a lot of gaps below the water line in the council, but I'm aware I also need to be still checking the ship is going in the right direction, and being open to innovation is a way to do this.

Rebecca Mear – If you need ideas and community led solutions, the people in the room are the people to talk to!

Communities of Place questions

Asked by Kate Swain from Redcatch Community Garden:

1. Are there any thoughts you can share on the Community Asset Transfer Manifesto and the asks for Bristol City Council within it?

Cllr Tony Dyer – we met with some VCSE representatives and had conversations about what we can do to improve Community Asset Transfers. We could set up a task and finish group but that's probably not the most effective way forward as there are restrictions on how these groups can work. Instead we want to work with VCSE organisations on a Strategy and Resources committee looking at both Community Asset Transfers and how we create social value. There are a number of properties in the city that are costing the council a lot and aren't making the best use of them. The committee will look at properties we can sell to the private sector or where we can transfer to the VCSE sector.

2. Can we have information on the new Area Committees, and whether there are opportunities for hyper-local administration of micro-projects?

Cllr Stephen Williams – Adding to what Tony said above, there have been multiple transfers to the VCSE sector in recent years, including the building we're in today which used to be a fire station and the Courts that opened a few months ago. With support from the council and funding from Government, council owned buildings have been repurposed for community use. The council hasn't been the best custodian of its assets such as St Nicholas Market and Ashton Court, which both aren't used to their full extent. Area Committees nearly disappeared under the last administration but this administration is committed to them. The city is being carved up into collections of council wards. Budgets are going to be devolved to those new collections, including some of the clean air money. There will be a new fund called the Bristol Equity Fund that organisations can bid for. The budgets aren't as big as we'd like them to be, but we hope to grow this. We don't have more grassroots levels of democracy in the city like town and parish councils outside the city, so I'd like to see urban councils in future if people want it.

Cllr Andrew Brown – There are very obvious financial constraints and we're aware that people who are volunteering have constraints on their time. We need to think about how we can engage more people and look at learning from programmes like the Community Resilience Fund going forward.

Cllr Tony Dyer – I work in Southville ward which is very active and engages residents well. We need to ensure that all areas in the new Area Committees have equal involvement, as it can vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. There will be two meetings a year, and a lot of work that will need to happen behind the scenes.

3. What happens when a community-owned project – that has been through a Community Asset Transfer – goes wrong? How are communities protected?

Cllr Tony Dyer – We have to have a degree of honesty here. Owning and maintaining an asset is difficult and we need to recognise that some VCSE organisations are much more experienced than others in this. One of the opportunities we have is to share experience and provide learning about what has worked and what hasn't, including the council as well. We need to learn from past mistakes, but also recognise successes such as Trinity and Windmill Hill City Farm. How we can support communities depending on what the community asset is. In the worst case scenario, the asset will be brought back to the council, but we need to discuss how we protect communities. Sometimes we'll have to be honest with communities about whether a community asset transfer is the best option and what other options there are if it isn't.

Workshop – Impact of Racial Riots on the local VCSE Sector

Impact

Organisations reported that staff and service users, particularly those from targeted communities, felt unsafe and experienced violence and harassment. For some people, the riots caused fear and reawakened past trauma.

Some organisations saw significant spikes in demand as a result of the riots; others saw a drop-off in attendance due to people feeling unsafe. Some organisations had to increase security measures to operate, run a limited service, or suspend services entirely.

There was an awareness that rioters included young people who had been swept up in radicalisation, and people who had struggled to find community elsewhere – for some organisations, these people are amongst their service users.

In responding to the riots, people felt uplifted by the counter-protests, dedicated time and energy to reflection and supporting staff wellbeing, and reported challenges in navigating the situation while remaining politically neutral.

Mitigations and what can be done together

Organisations felt that more work could be done on community cohesion – working with people to ensure that they feel part of a community at a grassroots level, tackling the isolation that can lead to radicalisation, and creating safe spaces for conversation and reflection around these issues.

The VCSE sector, and Voscur as the local infrastructure body for the sector, could collaborate to create collective statements of allyship, produce a toolkit of helpful information, and know where to signpost people who need help in the wake of events like this – as well as to support the emergency response and work with disadvantaged communities. The sector could work in partnership with other sectors to understand the root causes of the unrest, and to work on preventative action – rather than reactive.

Organisations felt that education and training would be valuable – particularly education that includes the wider context to discrimination, as well as looking at inclusive practices and unconscious bias. People also need to be educated about information literacy – understanding critical analysis, varied information sources, and the impact of social media. Relatedly, participants felt that official sources could have been clearer in counteracting misinformation to ensure people feel confident sharing news and updates.

Finally, business continuity planning within the sector should look to ensure that there is minimal disruption to service delivery during times like this, without putting staff safety at risk.

Notes in full from each table:

Table 1

Impact

- Young, black people being targeted for police searches
- Increase of knife crime
- Feeling of safety on the streets
- People choosing to not attend summer activities
- Children traumatised
- Colleagues from communities being targeted experiencing increased fear
 - Including people who have lived here for a long time & those who experience racism on a regular basis (micro-aggressions)
- Poor role model behaviour & press coverage – we need to keep driving the message ‘this is not the norm’

Mitigation

- Keep driving message, as above
- Check our own biases
- Think before you speak – recognise our impact on others
- Challenge discrimination
- Create safe spaces for conversation about how to be an ally & avoid being part of the problem
- Recognise the value in people who are new to our communities

What can be done?

- Being a caring and compassionate community
- Work together with / ensure funding gets to communities experiencing lack
- Look at where the gaps are
- Avoid ‘othering’
- Consider our use & the impact of social media
- Commitment from ‘the top’ to help tackle issues
- The media to change its focus

Table 2

Impact

- Security measures made obtaining general info difficult – lack of helpfulness from hotels?
- Based on site where the law firm is – safety concerns
- No direct impact to delivery
- Uplifted about counter-protest & celebration of culture across Bristol: Bristol is a resilient city.
- Prime Minister’s response was warming
- Feeling of being unwelcome
- Bristol described as micro-UK environment (diversity)
- Feelings of depression / frustration
- Questions around belonging

Mitigation

- Education of young people
- Allyship
- Voting our leaders from an educated viewpoint
- Awareness about information we consume, don't blindly accept
- Question what we're told
- VCSE sector to take responsibility with bringing people together – bridge between the different sectors
- More good news
- Listen to varying sources of news: people, social media, politicians, traditional media

What can be done?

- Educate ourselves & our youth
- Think critically
- Don't teach things in isolation – look at the wider context
- Cultural events & opening people's minds about other cultures

Table 3

Impact

- Personally away – memory of it hazy
- Lots of children contacted us as personally affected: scary time, violence and threat
- Night shelter, opposite Cabot Circus – had large meeting re: how to keep everyone safe. Branding 'obvious', people staying. Took steps to 'anonymise building', took down stance on inclusivity. Felt like a step back – told people to come early, don't leave, client had been a victim previously so nervous about attending. Traumatic; angry.
- Not located nearby. Some clients of service are prison leavers; still impacted by the murders of two young people. Personal safety, climate of fear – riots on TV added to this.
- On Monday – community hub event on this topic. How can we work together in rapid response to protect people? Reflecting could have done more – access to information, needs to be accurate and timely. Fake news – how can we tackle it? Deaf community use WhatsApp.

Mitigation

- So many thoughts! No presence on Stapleton Road – why wasn't there? Not meeting community needs, some local. Where was the joint statement from... Government and councils have a responsibility, Council should have been quicker.
- People need to feel safe to stand against something, give validation.
- Collective action is more powerful.
- Concerns re: being performative got in the way.
- Voscur could have been quicker – we should have brought people together, sent out guidance? Briefs? Role of Voscur bringing people together as a collective voice.
- Toolkit of options of response.
- Grassroots level of making people all feel a part of a community, so that they don't feel the drive to go and join a community of rioters.
- Hesitation to share things, lots of misinformation – need local authority and police to call out misrepresentations and shut them down.

- Not signposting.

What can be done?

- Signposting: issues with delay in wellaware improvement/replacement – difficult to find services to signpost to for organisations & residents.
- More proactive/preventative work – too often reactive & slow. Community led but BCC funded workshops for best practice: inclusive practice, accessibility, unconscious bias, actions not virtue signalling.
- Signposting resources created/provided by Voscur/VCSE: not all of us as organisations support different communities (i.e. not all orgs specifically provide support for refugees etc) **but** all of our orgs will have members of those communities.
- List of orgs to contact after “instances” already produced – i.e. anti-racist support, LGBTQ+ orgs, homeless charities, signposting. Including organisation’s name, remit, contact, referral details.
- Official sources (i.e. BCC & Voscur) disproving misinformation – quicker, enhancing community leader voices, statements of solidarity & condemning racism/violence much quicker.

Table 4

Impact

- Money to respond (funders)
- Spike of activity
- Shock, horror, expected that Bristol had come further – external agitators
- Community welcome, fear of it rising up again
- Decrease in attendance (defiant to continue life as normal or absent)
- Buy a personal alarm

Mitigations

- Mitigate – iceberg
- Judging the community
- Secondary effects, mental health
- National level of narrative
- Nuanced conversations – long term conversations
- Providing space

What can be done?

- People still worried
- Prosecution of anti-social behaviour
- Solidarity – to establish and fund core cost support (funders)
- “We trust you to make the right decisions” (i.e. COVID response)
- UNBRISTOL
- People have painful views – how do you give “voice”?
- Is it providing a space for different views?
- Myth-busting – social media absence of leadership (statutory/community leaders)

Table 5

Impact

- Unprecedented levels of organised riots, violence not seen since 1940s; unprecedented levels of fear of individuals/communities; put out statements reaching out
- Health sector well supported. Volunteers didn't want to come into Bristol; gave time to staff to come together & discuss & share. Impact on Service Users unknown.
- Outreach staff – black and minority ethnic; remote working staff not so affected.
- We didn't feel impacted.
- Taking time to decide how best to respond – need to make space. How best to be an ally.

Mitigation & what can be done

- Proactively reaching out to staff, service users, carers – could be quite triggering
- Set up working group to look at learning from response to riots & training
- Give space to respond and build allyship
- Reaching out to organisations on front line e.g. SARI – is very welcome and uplifting
- Step by step approach and check in with staff on a 1-1 basis
- Voscur could produce a statement that organisations could sign up to supporting allyship – faster and more thoughtful tips to help organisations with limited capacity/experience
- Voscur could celebrate when organisations are doing well

Table 6

Impact

- Scary, tense, polarisation, assumptions based on skin colour, “exploded overnight”, misinformation
- Staff – space for reflection
- Historical trauma response triggered from more intense past racism
- Risks: public areas and services – youth clubs closed
- Service users – some involved. Young people vulnerable to radicalisation, swept up in a moment
- Knife crime – deaths of teens
- Social media amplification dangers
- Challenges of political neutrality necessity
- Narratives building up over recent years – divisive politics

Mitigation

- Cultural cooking nights – helping to raise awareness, increase cultural experience
- Look at ingrained systemic racism – how to dismantle that at the roots
- Anti-discriminatory, anti-racism and spaces for expression

What can be done?

- First – why did it happen? Marginalised communities, radicalising individuals who don't feel heard, institutional racism
- Acute response – need multiple perspectives for that to happen effectively
- Community cohesion has to be continually worked on
- Cross-city, cross-community
- Civic pride – daily grind issues becoming channelled into snowballing situation

Table 7

Impact

- Had to close for a whole night, meaning women didn't have access to help.
- Staff felt supported by their organisation.
- Staff anxiety
- From a service user perspective not a lot of awareness.
- Added fear from LGBTQ+ perspective.
- Immediate impact on service user.
- Concerns from staff and service users.
- Manage communications.
- Communicated that staff open and drop ins were set up.
- Added pressure and expectations on staff.
- Need for more challenging spaces.

Mitigation

- Better emergencies protocols.
- Collecting responses.
- More clear info channels.
- Immediate and secondary response.
- Mechanisms to support staff.
- Utilise the learning that groups have done.
- Equip staff around the complexities of challenging clients on their views.
- Training, advice, supportive spaces.

What can be done?

- More collective organised response.
- Celebrate diversity more regularly, not just when negative issues arise.
- Share materials.
- More connections and collaborative within VCSE sector spaces. (sharing spaces)
- Disperse myths through activities.
- Brave conversations.
- Education and preventative.

Table 8

Impact

- Inability to deliver service eg. Food delivery, missed appointments, closed offices, staff safety.
- Verbal and physical assaults on staff/volunteers 'sense of fear'.
- Need for extra risk assessments.
- Impact on referrals.
- Short and long-term impact – mental health and wellbeing.
- Need for internal and external communication – extra/speed.
- VCSE orgs felt let down by policy/BCC (public) – slow response and variable across city, inconsistent.
- Voluntary sector 'stepped up' and provided community response.

- Residents' communications with police could have been better.
- Uncertainty and lack of safety.
- SMT – quick response needed.
- Board – checking contingency/policies were up to date.
- Communication centres – more footfall where people were gathering for information and support.

Mitigation

- Signed up staff for anti-racist training
- Pro-active allies/champions.
- Need to clarify values/cultures and communicate to staff/volunteers. Expected behaviours, use of appropriate language.
- Building knowledge/confidence.
- Encouraging whistleblowing where appropriate.
- Create psychological safe space – non-judgemental.
- Recognise journey to improve – SMT/board.
- Awareness of generational differences – explore and challenge.
- Speed of communication – internally and externally – review process/procedure.
- Reviewing hybrid working options where possible.
- More services online – not always able – prepare for future?
- Planning for business continuity – innovative approach? Greater use of social media.

What can be done?

- Collaborative approach with local VCSE orgs, greater use of social media – staff/org WhatsApp.
- Community and individuals countering social media – everybody's responsibility.
- Accessibility to comms – digital exclusion. VCSE orgs – place based supporting communities.
- Preparedness toolkit – best practice response (for orgs/sector)
- Educate ourselves and our organisations/community.