

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE:

Uncovered

Vital Voices

Supporting marginalised communities in times of crisis

 *Heart of Bucks*
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Introduction

Heart of Bucks' fourth 'Vital Voices' community forum brought together representatives from a selection of Buckinghamshire charity organisations to discuss how we can support our diverse local communities in times of crisis.

We were joined by two guests who shared their knowledge, experience and expertise: **Simon Lewis MBE** (Head of Resilience, National Emergencies Trust) and **Vince Grey** (Head of Resilience Services, Buckinghamshire Council). Heart of Bucks were also joined by representatives from:

Aylesbury Community Pride

Aylesbury Homeless Action Group

Buckinghamshire Council

Bucks Data Exchange

Community Impact Bucks

Connection Support

Daytop Multicultural Centre

In This Together

Southcourt Baptist Church

Women's Cultural Arena

Wycombe Refugee Partnership

We were kindly hosted by the team at Buckinghamshire New University, at their Community Wellbeing Hub in Aylesbury.





Guest speaker

Simon Lewis MBE (National Emergencies Trust):

Simon discussed the formation and operations of the National Emergencies Trust (NET), which was established in 2017 in response to lessons learned from large-scale emergencies like the Grenfell Tower fire. He highlighted the importance of trust and pre-existing relationships in crisis response, noting that grassroots organisations were the first responders during the Grenfell disaster. In contrast, national charities like the British Red Cross were viewed with distrust, and the local authority was notably absent.

There was also a clear need for a simplified, centralised giving process that could minimise fraud (the majority of the 10,000+ giving platforms created in the wake of Grenfell were fraudulent) and share out funds fairly and efficiently.

The NET's model involves launching fundraising appeals within four hours of a national emergency starting and distributing funds to local organisations within four days. In the mean-time, they engage in planning, preparation exercises and relationship-building. The NET provide a wide variety of support during more frequent localised crises to support those affected by physical injury, bereavement, mental health, and financial hardship.

Simon's key recommendation was: "make friends before you need them!"



Guest speaker

Vince Grey (Buckinghamshire Council):

Vince outlined the council's strategy for integrating with the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, emphasizing the role of the Resilience Service in planning and preparing for emergency incidents. He explained the council's responsibilities under civil contingencies legislation and the structure of local resilience forums.

Vince described the Buckinghamshire Resilience Group's efforts to ensure preparedness, including maintaining a risk register, conducting training and exercises, and collaborating with various organisations such as the Women's Institute and British Red Cross.

He highlighted examples of trial runs with the 59 Rest Centres (emergency shelters) throughout Buckinghamshire and wildfire exercises with local emergency services. He mirrored Simon's point about building relationships before they are needed. Vince also mentioned specific initiatives like the Voluntary Resilience Committee and the new Buckinghamshire Interfaith Forum.



Key Insights

Emergency preparedness and response

The forum emphasised the critical importance of emergency preparedness and response at both national and grassroots levels. Participants highlighted the complexity of statutory responses compared to the flexibility of grassroots efforts, stressing the need for local preparedness and established relationships; especially in rural areas.

Charity attendees reflected upon the need for a greater voice at the table, and that top-down strategy can often neglect bottom-up grassroots impact and action. Local authority scenarios, tabletop exercises and horizon-scanning are vital; however it can be too easy not to consider the reality on the ground and assume a rigid, one-way transmission.

Buckinghamshire lacks some higher-risk national infrastructure (such as atomic power sites) and has avoided some of the most extreme localised crises; however it was noted that emergencies do not respect boundaries and we should not be complacent. Incidents such as plane crashes, rapid-spreading avian flu outbreaks, weather events and chemical spills stress the unpredictable nature of potential crises. This confirms the necessity of having plans in place before they occur. Having pre-established plans, resources and partnerships can help avoid the chaos that can ensue during a crisis event.

We must also learn lessons from past crises we have experienced, such as the response to COVID-19 and localised flooding, which highlighted the importance of having established relationships and contact details in place. The discussion emphasised the necessity of being prepared for emergencies at all levels and the critical role of community engagement and trust in effective emergency response.





Building trust and community engagement

Building trust emerged as a pivotal theme during the forum, spotlighting the essential role of local grassroots organisations in developing strong, reliable relationships within their communities. Trust is not easily earned but is especially crucial during crises when people instinctively turn to those they know and trust for support. Local charities and community groups often have the great advantage of established, personal connections that larger, more distant organisations lack. This trust is built through consistent, proactive engagement and by being a reliable presence in the community. For instance, during emergencies like the Grenfell Tower fire, local organisations were trusted more than external agencies (including national charities), accentuating the importance of these relationships.

Effective community engagement involves understanding and addressing the specific needs and preferences of different community elements. This includes using appropriate communication channels and avoiding making assumptions. It also means being culturally sensitive and aware of the diverse backgrounds within the community. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, local organisations that had already established trust and communication channels were able to effectively support hidden homeless populations and other vulnerable groups that may not have received support from 'official' channels.

The forum emphasised that building and maintaining trust requires ongoing effort and a deep understanding of the community's dynamics. By being a constant and reliable source of support, local organisations can ensure they are the first point of contact during crises, which will enhance the overall resilience and cohesion of the community.

Effective communication strategies

Effective communication strategies were another focal point of the forum, emphasising the need for tailored approaches to ensure messages reach and resonate with diverse community members. Traditional methods like email may not always be the most effective in an emergency situation, particularly in communities with varying levels of digital literacy and access. Attendees shared examples highlighting the success of alternative communication methods, such as door-to-door visits and WhatsApp groups, which can be more personal and immediate. These methods allow for more direct interaction and feedback, increasing that sense of connection and trust and providing access to otherwise isolated or overlooked community members.

Cultural sensitivity and language considerations are also vital in effective communication. The attendees discussed the importance of understanding the community's linguistic diversity and using appropriate languages to convey their messages accurately. This includes having multilingual staff or volunteers who can bridge communication gaps and ensure that no community members are excluded from receiving important information. Faith leaders are also crucial in disseminating information and maintaining community engagement during crisis events.

Attendees noted the value of proactive communication, where organisations actively reach out to the community rather than waiting for individuals to approach them to seek help. This helps in identifying and addressing needs efficiently, especially during emergency situations.

Effective communication, therefore, is not just about the medium used but also about the message's relevance, clarity, and cultural appropriateness.





Resource management and avoiding waste

Resource management and avoiding waste were significant concerns discussed during the forum, particularly in the context of crisis response. Participants highlighted the challenges of managing well-intentioned donations that often lead to waste if not properly coordinated. For example, during the Grenfell Tower fire response, a football pitch-worth of donated items were not immediately useful, illustrating the need for better guidance on the part of the coordinating organisations. The discussion reinforced the importance of understanding the actual needs of the community to ensure that donations are relevant and beneficial, rather than generating even more work for those supporting the community.

Effective resource management involves clear communication with donors about what is needed and what is not. This can prevent the accumulation of unnecessary items and ensure that resources are directed where they are needed most. The forum also discussed the importance of cultural sensitivity in resource distribution, such as understanding dietary restrictions and preferences to avoid waste. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, food donations had to be separated to cater to different cultural needs, ensuring that all community members in need received culturally appropriate food packages. Discussions also highlighted the need for a coordinated approach to resource management, where local charities work together to streamline their efforts and avoid duplication.

One key message came through: charities should not be embarrassed to make it clear when money, gift cards or financial aid would be most beneficial. Do not necessarily just accept any donation, regardless of utility, for fear of looking ungrateful - this can divert from your mission to actually provide crisis support.

Challenges faced by small charities

Small charities face numerous general challenges that can hinder their ability to effectively serve their communities. One of the primary issues is sustainable funding. Many small charities struggle to secure consistent financial support, which is crucial for maintaining operations and expanding services. This lack of funding often forces them to rely heavily on volunteers, who may not always have the necessary skills or availability to meet the organisation's needs. Furthermore, the competitive nature of funding applications - which often favour larger charities with more proportionally significant impacts - further exacerbates this issue. Small charities frequently find themselves at a disadvantage, as they may not have the resources to dedicate to extensive bid writing or the ability to demonstrate large-scale impact. This can make it more difficult to build trust within the community and limit the ability to respond effectively in a crisis situation.

One solution to this is the network of Community Foundations and their partnership with the National Emergencies Trust. Through this network, funding can be raised and distributed efficiently to grassroots organisations, allowing them to focus on supporting their communities and tackling the challenges raised by a crisis situation.

Another significant challenge raised by the group is the infrastructure required to run a charity effectively. Small organisations often lack the administrative and operational support needed to manage their activities efficiently. This includes everything from having adequate office space and technology to understanding and complying with regulations and policies. The forum highlighted that many well-intentioned individuals set up pop-up groups during crises without fully understanding the legal and logistical requirements, leading to inefficiencies and potential waste. Further, small charities often struggle with volunteer management, as they rely on a limited pool of volunteers who may not have the time or expertise needed for specific tasks, and who may be unavailable to mobilise during a crisis event. This can lead to burnout and high turnover rates, making it difficult to maintain continuity and build long-term relationships with the community. There is a clear need for more support and resources to help small charities overcome these challenges and continue their vital work.





Collaboration and networking

Collaboration and networking were highlighted as essential strategies for enhancing the effectiveness and reach of grassroots charities. Attendees called for regular events and platforms where charities, businesses, and local authorities can connect, share resources, and learn from one another. Such interactions help identify unmet needs, avoid duplication of efforts, and solidify a more resilient community support network that is better equipped to mobilise in an emergency. By working together, charities can pool their resources and expertise, leading to more comprehensive and coordinated responses to community challenges.

The group also discussed the need for better information sharing and communication across the sector. Suggestions included creating communal websites or databases where charities can share success stories, collaboration opportunities, and available resources. Platforms such as this can prevent the “reinventing the wheel” phenomenon, where organisations independently develop solutions that others have already implemented. In addition, networking helps build relationships and trust among different organisations, making it easier to mobilise support and coordinate efforts during crises. Collaboration and networking are not just beneficial but necessary for creating a cohesive, flexible and effective community support system.

Hopes for the future

Looking forward, participants expressed hopes for more integrated and supportive relationships between charities and local authority. One of the key aspirations is to enhance the visibility and recognition of the voluntary sector's contributions, which often feel ignored or undervalued. Attendees emphasised the need for more integrated and supportive relationships, where charities are not only seen as service providers but as essential partners in community resilience and development – to have not just a seat at the table, but a voice that is actively listened to. This includes having regular, larger-scale events to facilitate networking, learning, and collaboration among various organisations. Such events would help charities understand each other's work, share resources, and build stronger networks to prepare for potential crises.

Another significant future goal is to improve funding mechanisms to better support small charities. There was a collective call for more unrestricted core funding, which would allow charities to more effectively adapt their support to their diverse communities and grow sustainably. There was also a desire for funding criteria to be more inclusive of smaller charities, recognising their impact beyond just numbers. Any such improvements in funding support for grassroots charities can only strengthen the resilience of the community to respond to emergencies.

Finally, participants highlighted the need for mental health support for those working in the charity sector. Acknowledging the emotional toll of their work, participants suggested creating mental health hubs where charity workers can receive support and check-ins. This would help ensure that those who support the community so integrally are also supported, stimulating a healthier and more sustainable workforce. This would be especially necessary during a crisis, where the emotional pressure placed upon individuals is heightened.

Overall, the group's future hopes and goals centred on creating a more connected and recognised voluntary sector that can effectively meet the needs of the community they serve and feel supported in rising to the challenge in a crisis.



Voices of the Community

“Amazing networking event that highlighted many different topics and perspectives. [I was struck by] the amount of planning that goes into crisis management.”

– Dina Robinson (Aylesbury Community Pride)

“Thank you for arranging another great session yesterday. The Vital Voices forums are always a fantastic opportunity to connect with charities, discuss key topics and hear about their challenges, and explore opportunities to better support them.”

– Frankie Hockham (Community Impact Bucks)

Voices of the Community

“It is vital to prioritise inclusive support for historically underserved and underrepresented communities. Fostering equity ensures that all individuals, regardless of their background, can access resources and opportunities to thrive.”

– Shanthi Wortmann (Women’s Cultural Arena)

“It’s so good to share with a great team and know you are believed in and supported... People expressing their views and some were very powerful, but so much more discussion to be had”

– Graham Clarke (Southcourt Baptist Church)

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Thank you to all the charities and groups that took part in our Vital Voices community forum:

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Helping grassroot charities be heard

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