

Position paper: Why the 'Uniting Our Streets and Communities' conference is so significant for FURD

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The nations that make up the UK have become increasingly diverse, there have been so many gains in progressing diversity in British life through visibility of culture, leadership and, for some, opportunity.

Yet we remain deeply divided and so it was this summer that England, a country that is often celebrated for its multiculturalism, confronted profound challenges as rising tensions escalated into unrest and riots. The riots were an indication of how far divisions have gone, revealing surface-level resentments and deeply ingrained issues of systemic racism, economic marginalisation and the fragmentation of long held assumptions and policy frameworks.

The events were sparked by a horrific tragedy that had layers of misinformation and moral scare stories loaded onto it. The national disaster of three children being murdered came together with a potent mix of racism, Islamophobia and the public utterances of a generation of political leaders for whom issues of immigration, religion and race have become political postures rather than policy dilemmas.

FURD, an organisation working on issues of racism, equality, cohesion and community relations for 30 years in the South Yorkshire region, is hosting this conference to support debates and action on the urgent issues around this summer's events. The conference is being convened at what we think is a crucial time and we hope can promote meaningful dialogue and seek solutions for rebuilding trust, unity, and understanding between communities.

For FURD this summer's events were close to home.

We saw people within our communities and those we work with as clients, people from different communities of colour in our region, come to see their presence in this country as a threat. We could only watch as some of the most vulnerable among us suffered physical attacks.

Much of the community dialogue at FURD after the riots has been one of shock – shock that the lives of people long established within our communities could be so violently challenged and upended, and their place in our country challenged so fundamentally. We personally know of asylum seekers caught up in the Holiday Inn hotel attack in Rotherham, we have worked with young people who were preparing to mobilise to see off attacks on their communities - attacks that thankfully did not come in the numbers expected - and we talk daily to people who are struggling to understand why their very presence elicits hatred.

In our experience structural and attitudinal challenges have become more acute in the post-austerity period. Services in communities, and it feels like especially communities in the North, are in short supply and at a low ebb. These shortages are actively exacerbating issues of division. It is critical that we talk about these challenges as we seek to engage with the policy-level changes that that are needed.

Without a reflection on intentional and systematic approaches to rebuilding and a discussion on community delivery and good practice we will not be able to address many of the issues that face us.

We want to initiate dialogue and explore solutions that can be effective.

A community cohesion approach is clearly a large part of what needs to be implemented but what role do community delivery organisations and regional groups contribute? For FURD our delivery mechanisms have been to work with regional and national authorities and deliver through youth-centred approaches and community services. Over the past few years, youth work in the UK has experienced a significant decline in resourcing, driven by a combination of political, economic, and social factors. The reduction in funding, coupled with a lack of national coordination and strategic investment, has diminished the role of youth work in supporting young people's development. As a result, many communities have seen a reduction in opportunities for young people to engage in positive social, educational, and recreational activities. It is a cliché but young people really are the future of our country. What are their perspectives and ways of approaching these issues, from school to adulthood, from youth groups to football teams, from shared streets to shared activities? If we do not explore these themes we risk failure to develop collectively as a nation.

Sport has been part of our delivery and community development mechanism for young people; it is viewed as a powerful tool for social cohesion but successive Governments have provided confused and inconsistent policy, moving between a focus on social outcomes to 'sport for sport's sake' and back again. Despite all the money associated with sport, a very small percentage is channelled from the professional game to support community cohesion.

FURD has been proud to have developed a generation of youth and community workers and to provide resources to work with women in our communities. This work has had tremendous impact, the value for our community is undoubted and we see the need to do more of these types of activities because of the way in which women continue to have their voices marginalised in the active development of our future. There are also questions for anti-racism work. The spread of misinformation online contributes to societal divisions and unrest. Digital media algorithms more easily amplify extremist views and sane voices calling for unity get lost. Not every tweet that causes damage breaks the law so how do we adjust our practice to deal with online hate, misinformation and the appeal of influencers who undermine cohesion? How do we reach those people who are being left out of inclusive messaging within our wider communities, do we need a bigger focus on young working class white people?

We want to reframe the vision of a common future from the point that it has become challenged and disrupted.

We need a common vision that is optimistic and accepted by everyone, we need a basis on which the whole country can all move together towards a common future. "Tomorrow belongs to those who can hear it coming," said David Bowie. Today's event is one of a series of actions that we at FURD want to take. We are delighted that you want to help us shape what we do and be a part of it.