

'Unwanted, like a stranger'

Reflections on the 2024 riots



Photo credit: Simone Rudolph

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SUMMARY

“

I didn't go outside for two weeks. I went out one day with my baby, a teenager screamed at me, 'Go back to your country.'

”

The events of August 2024 affected all our people, especially young people, women and families, and these negative feelings haven't evaporated. We recognise the increased anxiety amongst our colleagues and commend them on their dedication to continuing to support clients.

Fifty eight per cent of people felt personally affected by the riots, protests and attacks, with 70% of those being women.

“

The stress of working in a high-risk environment during civil unrest leads to emotional exhaustion and burnout.

”

“

I had to go to a dentist's appointment and my husband said, 'Don't wear your hijab' so I wore a hat instead.

”

Youths reportedly threw stones at the police and chanted 'Whose streets? Our streets'. (Sunderland Echo report) Cars were set alight.



INTRODUCTION

by Duncan McAuley, CEO

'Unwanted, like a stranger'. These are the words used by one of our clients to describe how they felt about the harrowing events of August 2024.

As an organisation supporting asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, the discourse around race and migration is not unusual territory for us. We frequently hear reports of hate crime or are asked to comment on migration policy.

However, the shocking events of August 2024 have felt like something of a wake-up call. **For a time 'our people' - the clients we support, our staff and our volunteers, weren't safe to engage in public life.**

As a charity, we are committed to our people and our communities, wanting safety and security for everyone across the North East. Therefore, we felt it was important to pause and take stock, to hear from individuals and to reflect. We hope that, like us, you'll find the content of the pages that follow informative and insightful, but most of all we hope that in its small way it will move us towards a better future.

For ourselves the primary objectives of this report are to:

- 1 Assess the impact and understand how the riots have affected the daily lives, mental health and sense of security amongst our clients, volunteers and staff.
- 2 Identify needs, both immediate and long-term, that have arisen due to the riots.
- 3 Review how effective our response was and inform our services to better support and address the specific challenges faced by our communities.
- 4 Enhance our engagement with the refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant community and foster a sense of solidarity and collective action.
- 5 Leverage the data to improve our funding streams as we apply for grants to support new and existing programmes.

We hope that by reading this report you'll be moved to join us on this journey that over time, and with the support of others, will transform communities across the North East, paving the way for national change.



CONTEXT

The events and experiences recounted in this report did not happen in a vacuum. Tensions relating to race and migration are decades in the making and of national importance, as demonstrated through the events in recent months. A brief review of the national picture is helpful to give a sense of context for this report. This in turn informs our organisational and local response over the coming months.

- The riots began in Southport following a tragic stabbing incident and misinformation being reported about the involvement of a refugee.
- The unrest quickly spread to other cities, including those in the North East such as Sunderland, Middlesbrough and Hartlepool. As well as city centre locations, violence was targeted at mosques and hotels housing asylum seekers.
- In Southport, 27 police officers were hospitalised due to injuries sustained during the riots. Nationwide, more than 400 arrests were made in the initial week of the riots, with over 140 people charged.
- As of mid-August 2024, 975 people had been arrested in connection with the riots. Out of these, 546 charges had been brought, with 354 individuals charged by the Crown Prosecution Service for England and Wales. Additionally, the Police Service of Northern Ireland reported 30 people charged in connection with the disorder and race hate crimes.
- Thousands of counter-protesters rallied against the riots, demonstrating solidarity and calling for peace. The violence was widely condemned by political leaders and community figures, emphasising the need for unity and accurate information.



Police in Sunderland City Centre were forced to deploy riot shields to combat violence by far-right protesters.

Methodology

The survey was designed to be inclusive and accessible and covered a range of quantitative and qualitative questions to capture a broad range of experiences and perspectives. We aimed to ensure we collected information from a diverse sample group representing the different demographics within the client group, including age, gender, ethnicity, and length of stay in the country.

Conducting a survey on any sensitive topic requires careful consideration of ethical issues. It was essential to ensure that all participants understood the purpose of the survey and consented to participate, and codesigned the questions with a lived experience volunteer. Protecting the privacy of

respondents is crucial, which involved anonymising data and securely storing survey responses to maintain confidentiality. Additionally, being mindful of the emotional impact of the survey questions was important and we are conscious to provide ongoing support for participants who require it, as we have for all our clients.

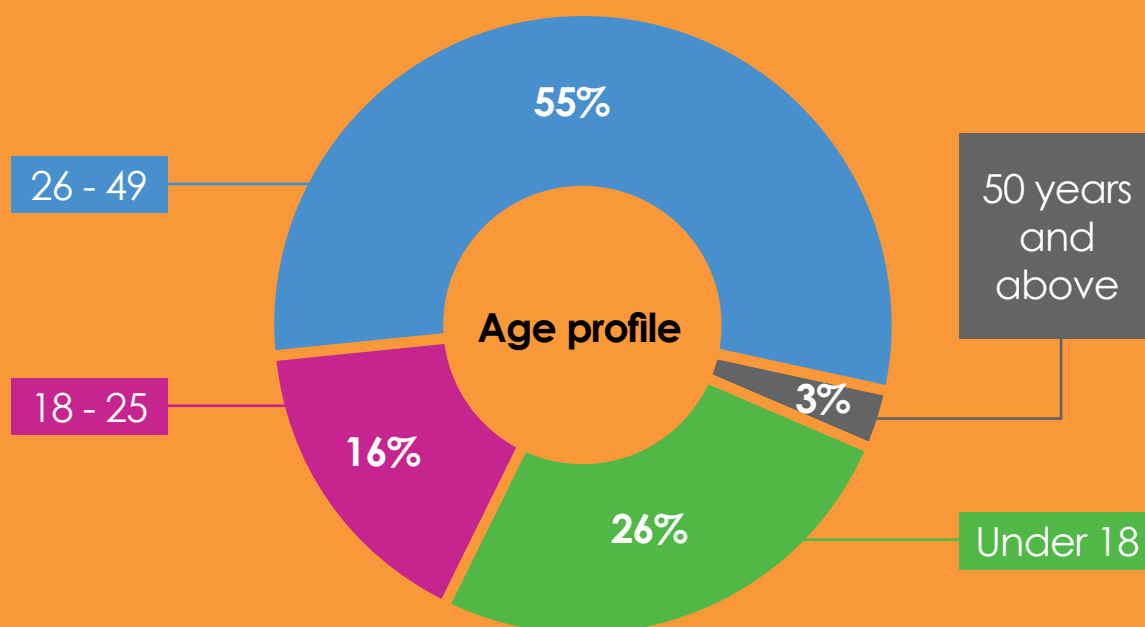
During the first two weeks in October, we surveyed 38 clients and 20 colleagues. While the survey sample is not statistically representative and the report not academic in its nature, we hope it provides valuable insight for our work at Action Foundation and for external partners.



A traffic cone is hurled at police officers outside the Masjid e Anwaar e Madinah mosque in Millfield, Sunderland on August 2.

FEEDBACK FROM CLIENTS

Surveys were completed both online and in person at our premises in Newcastle. We also conducted a small number of in-depth interviews with clients who wanted to further share their experiences of the events. Of the 38 responses to surveys from clients 10 were women, 28 were men; 37% of people were a family household, 58% single and 5% couples. The age profile was as follows:



Sixty four per cent of clients lived in Newcastle, 24% in Gateshead, 8% South Tyneside, 3% from Sunderland and 3% from Northumberland. This represents the type of geographical coverage we expect from our service users attending support in Newcastle. Fifty three per cent of those surveyed were asylum seekers and 47% refugees.

When asked, 89% of people said they were aware of the riots either via the news, social media or in person and 42% of people witnessed violence, riots or attacks. There were more refugees than asylum seekers who witnessed riots, violence or attacks and these were predominately people under the age of 25 years. Fifty eight per cent of people felt personally affected by the riots, protests and attacks, with 70% of those being women.

We asked people how they felt at the time. Thirty two per cent said they felt scared and 25% felt sad, with only 4% feeling supported. They told us:

“

Scared, lonely, sad and angry. The most bad feeling was that there are people who don't like me, who want to hurt me.

”

The survey results for clients who stated that they were affected by the riots showed that the most common action taken was to stay at home. The two next most common responses were 'move to be with family and friends'

“

[My] wife was crying and wanted to go back to Iran. Scared of being attacked.

”

and 'avoid certain areas and postpone appointments and visits outside of the home'. People said they didn't feel safe and that they adjusted their daily routines.

“

I was at work and felt I had to be careful about what I said, as I couldn't tell whether people around me are supporting the riots or not. I also felt less safe to stay at that job.

”

“

I didn't go outside for two weeks. I went out one day with my baby, a teenager screamed at me, 'Go back to your country.'

”

“

Yes, we stopped going to the park that used to go everyday.

”



This shop was amongst the many homes and businesses targeted by rioters in Middlesbrough on Sunday August 4.

Thirty eight per cent of people surveyed said that there was nothing we could have done to help them at the time, 18% said we could have offered advice and 11% said we could have offered moral support. When asked what we can do differently, people said that we can offer advice and guidance and to carry on with the support we offer.

Of course, we aren't the only organisation that supported people at the time. People said churches and mosques, workplaces (such as the NHS), Northumberland County of Sanctuary, St Vincent's Centre, the Comfrey Project and the Police all supported and responded well.

Learning summary from survey results:



Young people witnessed the unrest more.



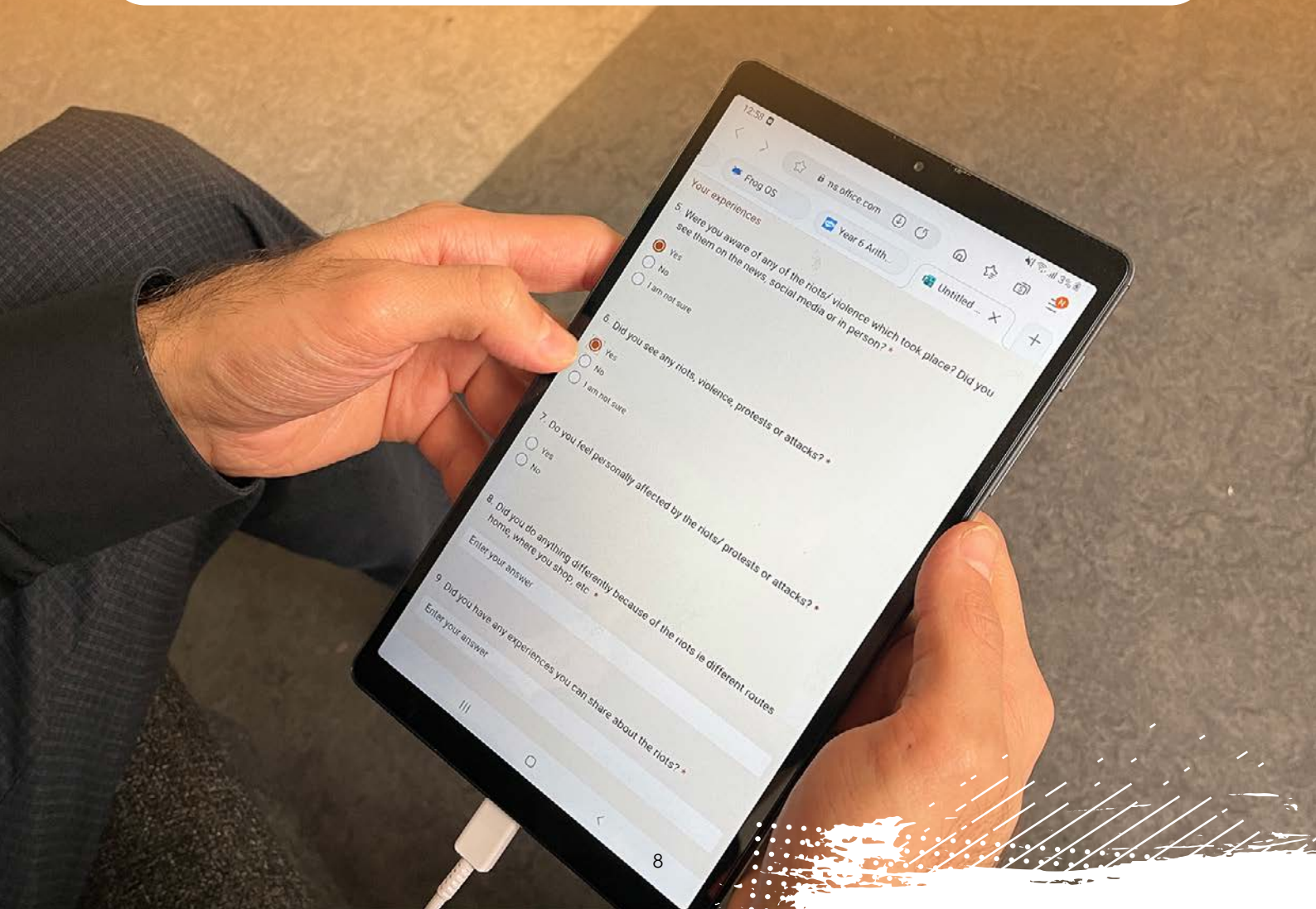
Women felt more personally affected.



More than half of people said they felt unsafe and adjusted their day-to-day activities.



People would like us to strengthen our advice and guidance in response to incidents.



THE AFTERMATH

Two months on and emotions were still raw for many of the people surveyed, though some appreciated the solidarity shown towards migrants by local communities and charities like ours.

Comments included:

“

*I feel like I am living in a hidden war.
Or a cold war. I feel I am hunted.*

”

“

*(It) feels calmer but the memories
are still there, and I have difficulties
sleeping.*

”

“

*I feel much better, I don't think
isolating myself was a good idea.*

”

“

*I feel OK now because there are
many people that supported
refugees out there. I appreciate that.*

”

“

I was upset and ashamed.

”

We were interested to reflect on what people thought of our response. Fifty eight per cent of people said we checked in on them at the time and 73% said they were happy with the way we responded.

They said:

“

I got useful information about how to avoid conflicts. I felt supported by the staff as they show empathy.

”

“

[They] gave us bags full of stuff - the photo frame was my favourite. (I was) offered lifts.

”

“

They kept us informed and cancelled Drop-ins so we could stay at home and stay safe.

”



ThroughFilm

Hundreds of volunteers came together on August 5 to clean up Middlesbrough town centre following rioting there.

INTERVIEWS

To complement our survey, we also conducted several in depth interviews with survey respondents. We are very grateful to them for sharing their experiences with us.

Malali*

Malali* fled Afghanistan to find safety in the UK in December 2023 with her husband and two children, aged 10 and six. She has lived on Tyneside since July 2024.

“Coming from a country like Afghanistan, when you come here you say, ‘OK no more war’ and then, when you hear such news, you get upset and worried that even here we will see this.

“In Afghanistan we buy in the groceries a bit more in case we are stuck at home - we used to be stuck at home for weeks. This (the time of the riots) is the first time we did that in the UK. We went to do a big shop

in case we would get stuck at home for a long time. It was a bit scary to be honest.”

Malali’s husband advised her not to go out whilst the civil unrest was ongoing.

“I had to take my six-year-old son to the dentist and my husband said,, ‘Don’t wear your hijab’ so I wore a hat instead.”

**Names have been changed to protect anonymity*

Olivier*

Olivier*, 44, sought asylum in the UK after fleeing Rwanda in 2023. He is training in adult social care.

“I went to visit my friend in Birmingham from Tyneside. I was only going for the weekend but when I was preparing to come back, my friend in Sheffield told me there was going to be a riot there and we would have passed through Sheffield on my bus. I cancelled my bus, so I had to pay again for a new bus ticket and I missed my training in South Shields.

“I watched TV where people were burning asylum hotels and some people tried to attack the police. Black people were targeted and asylum seekers. I was scared. I didn't feel safe to go everywhere until there was no riots.

“I'm still questioning why it happened in the UK We know the UK is a great country and safe with a lot of laws so I am asking, why here and could it happen again?”

**Names have been changed to protect anonymity*



STAFF FEEDBACK

Central to maintaining the wellbeing of colleagues at Action Foundation is listening to their voices and experiences of working in the refugee charity sector and taking action to reduce stress and anxiety. Many colleagues at Action Foundation told us they felt upset, angry, anxious and distressed during the time of the riots.

They told us:

“

The stress of working in a high-risk environment during civil unrest leads to emotional exhaustion and burnout.

”

“

I felt upset and angry. I was also worried about clients and co-workers who may be directly affected.

”

Staff with lived experience of migration and/or are from an ethnic minority background were more affected by the riots including fear for loved ones, avoiding usual routines and staying home.

“

Concern for personal safety and the safety of loved ones. And feel anger towards the situation and the perceived injustices that led to the riots.

”

“

I was personally impacted by the riots due to my cultural background and colour. It caused anxiousness, impacted my mental health and I felt a sense of not belonging.

”

“

I was upset and ashamed.

”

Action Foundation encouraged staff to work at home, followed up with wellbeing calls and encouraged reflective practice. Staff felt well informed on the risk level and appreciated being able to work from home and receiving wellbeing calls.

“

Felt good about the level of honesty, info sharing and option to work from home. Recognition that it affects not-white British staff members more.

”

Feedback for areas of improvement included additional training on how to handle crises. As a charity we were slower to put out a public statement on social media than some other organisations and we could do better following up with clients post-riots.

“

I think it's really good that we're taking time to be reflective about what happened and to compile a report.

”

Only 55% of staff felt safe coming to work, which was more likely for those working in 'front line' roles. General feedback on safety levels included feeling safe until there were planned targeted attacks on refugee support organisations. One colleague said:

“

I was aware of the risks, given the groups we support and the direct threats made to refugee charities in the second week. I did not feel physically at risk but felt personally visible.

”



SERVICE MANAGER FEEDBACK

Our Service Managers were keen to reflect on the time and experiences of staff, volunteers and clients in their specialised areas.

Young Lives

Young Lives offers safe spaces for children and young adults, including separated children, to connect in weekly youth clubs, group activities, holiday activities and residential. We also support family units to access life's essentials, advocate for them with schools and services and build their resilience. Young Lives has supported 175 children and 70 families since January 2024.

The events of the summer have affected young people in numerous ways. As a service, we promptly assessed the immediate needs of the young people through discussions with them, their parents, and the Youth Leadership Programme Steering Group. In response, the summer programme was adapted to ensure the safety of participants and address the emerging needs that arose from the incidents in August. While the active participation in violence, racism, and anti-immigration rioting was thankfully short-lived, the long-term impact on refugee children in the North East could be profound.

Many young people reported a negative effect on their mental health. Refugee and asylum-seeking children

and teenagers, in particular, are already at a higher risk of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other mental health conditions. Therefore, the additional adverse impact on their well-being is especially concerning. Children spoke of feeling more frightened, stressed, and experiencing nightmares. Young people also described feeling overwhelmed, paranoid, unwelcome, and unwanted. Even months after the events, they could vividly articulate how they had been emotionally affected and how this led to heightened anxiety as they returned to school in September.

Some families were directly targeted with abuse and attacks. One family had their house windows smashed, while another presented CCTV footage of neighbours' anti-social behaviour towards them. We supported families in reporting incidents of verbal abuse and property damage to the police, although many were too frightened to pursue the cases further due to fear of retaliation. One child disclosed that they had been physically assaulted because of their background, and multiple children recounted being shouted at in the street with racist remarks or being told to 'go back home'.

“

Mum took me to my friend's house if I wanted to go out. Couldn't go out.

”

In addition to experiencing violence and its detrimental effects on mental health, many children faced disruption to their daily lives. During the summer holidays, when they should have been enjoying time off, trying new activities and visiting new places, many families felt compelled to stay indoors. Children described this period as boring and isolating. We had to suspend some of our programmes, as we could not guarantee the children's safety travelling to and from activities at our main locations. The risk of a targeted attack on the charity's premises made it extremely challenging to safeguard sessions.

Refugee youth are familiar with coping in the face of change and disruption. Their perception of danger, threat, and resilience to stress often differs from that of children raised in stable, conflict-free environments. Some young people expressed a keen interest in attending counter-protests and engaging in activism. We channelled this interest

constructively by encouraging their participation in our leadership programme.

Young Lives received crucial support from Newcastle City Council and NE Youth, enabling us to provide wellbeing packs for 250 children. We also arranged special trips out of the area to places like Scarborough and Flamingo Land. The solidarity and support from organisations such as Yonder, Beamish Museum, and Tyne Rowing Club were truly heartening, showcasing the genuine spirit of welcome and community that exists in our region.

action
FOUNDATION

Empowering refugees
overcome exclus

YOUNG
LIVES



LANGUAGE & LEARNING

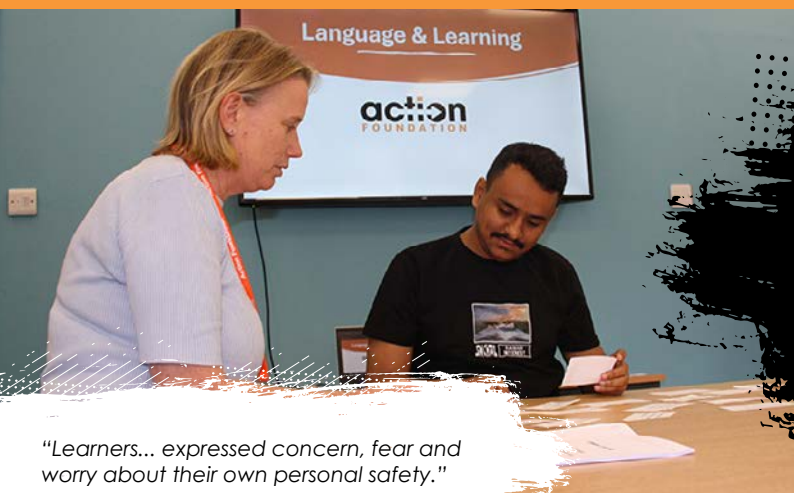
For over fifteen years we have been delivering free ESOL classes to migrants excluded from mainstream education. In 2024, we extended this to a rounded learning service that progresses clients of any ability to access education, training, employment and digital skills; allowing them to realise their ambitions and become independent. Last year we delivered 882 classes to 650 people.

In August our Language & Learning service in Newcastle was focused on employability sessions with a break in ESOL classes in both Newcastle and Sunderland. Immediately after the riots, clients attending sessions were made

aware of possible dangers and advised to avoid certain areas and stay at home in the evenings. All clients were aware and already had plans in place to keep themselves safe.

Learners continued to come to the sessions after the riots, but they expressed concern, fear and worry about their own personal safety.

Nevertheless, there was also a feeling of determination to continue to come to sessions and not be forced to stay home. Sessions ran with reduced numbers with learners attending throughout the period of unrest.



"Learners... expressed concern, fear and worry about their own personal safety."

“

[Action Foundation] they called me to ask how I was and sent me message.

”

The volunteers, who are an essential part of our learning offer, were keen to continue to support our clients and attended in person to deliver the sessions. Likewise, staff were eager

to continue support, though one staff member felt unsafe travelling on public transport to attend work in Newcastle. In September, registration sessions showed demand for English language lessons had remained high.

INTERACTION

InterAction provides support on a range of issues clients face, as well as essentials (food vouchers, clothes) or simply a friendly safe space to get warm and socialise. Last year we saw 3,878 attendances at our Drop-In and supported 1,400 individuals with immigration, homelessness, financial, social and health and wellbeing issues, as well as serving 2,200 hot meals, enabling 32 social activity sessions and 58 volunteering opportunities.

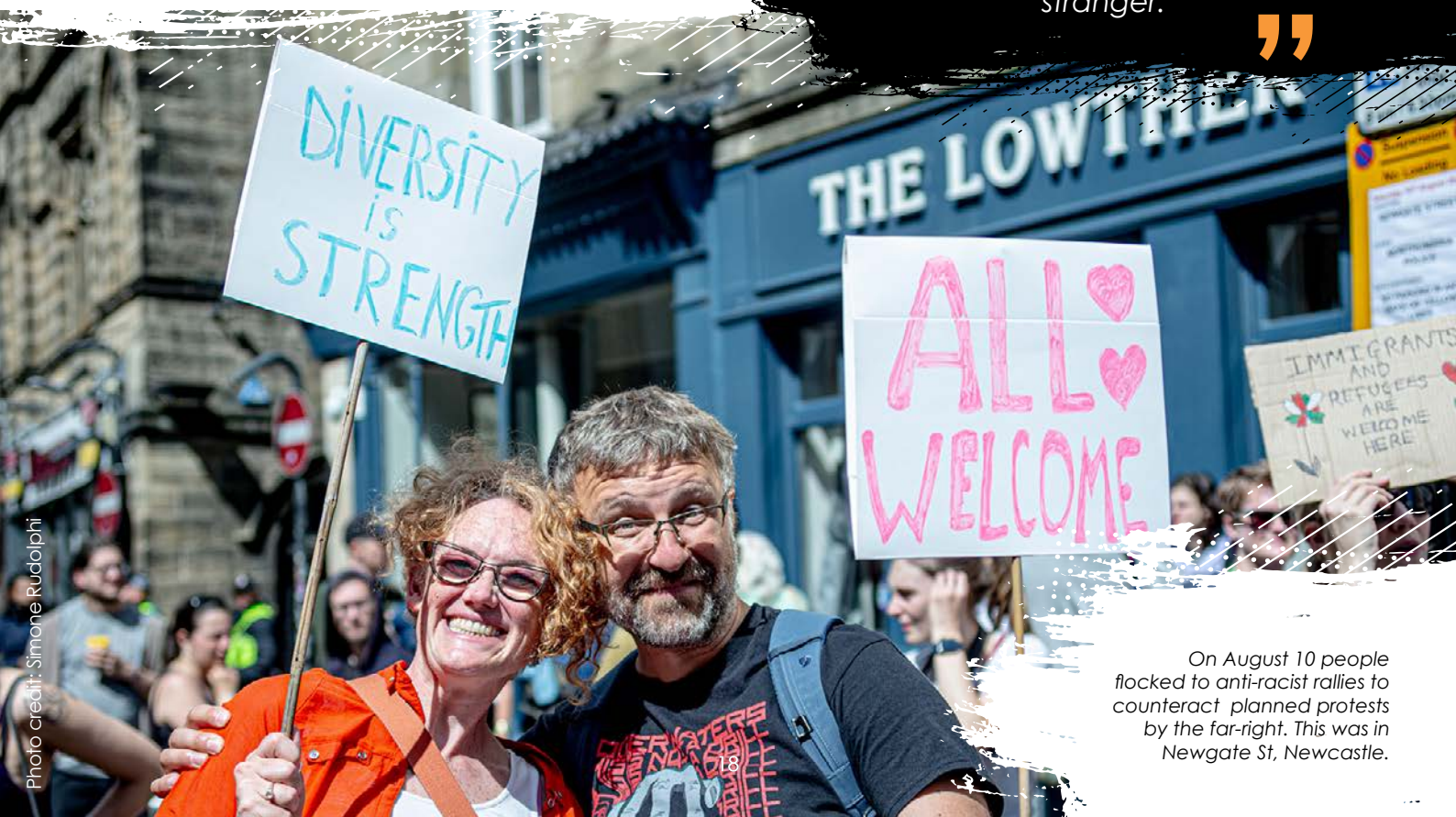
During the summer of 2024, the InterAction project was forced to adapt its weekly Newcastle Drop-In service in response to the threat of violent disorder.

Closing our doors and running a remote service was a stark contrast to the normally busy and welcoming Drop-In environment. Our service couldn't exist without the commitment of our 37-strong volunteering team, 86.5% of whom have lived experience of migration and were directly impacted by the riots. For the InterAction service, the impact of the riots was acutely felt across staff, clients and volunteers.

“

I did not experience or see anything but heard; it makes me feel unwanted and like a stranger.

”



On August 10 people flocked to anti-racist rallies to counteract planned protests by the far-right. This was in Newgate St, Newcastle.

In late July, as the threat increased, the InterAction volunteer and team meetings shifted focus to safety and welfare support. After making the decision to close the Newcastle Drop-In, we then prioritised information sharing around emergency services contacts, remote support options and wellbeing. We distributed this information through a social media campaign, as well as text communications to more than 900 clients.

As well as closing the Drop-In, we also paused lone working in South Tyneside through social prescribing and social inclusion projects. Instead, we delivered remote services, meeting emergency

casework needs via email, phone and providing limited face-to-face appointments.

Re-opening our doors came after a review of safety procedures, introducing new security guidance for InterAction volunteers and staff, as well as an increased volunteer stewarding presence at entrance and exit points to our Drop-In.

However, as well as the lasting impact of fear and threat to our project and its clients, we also all felt the warmth that came from Tyneside in the solidarity and show of support against such violence.

“

The response to the riots from the people of Newcastle was amazing!

InterAction Volunteer

”

ACCOMMODATION

Through our specialised supported accommodation service, we alleviate homelessness and destitution. We provide 62 bedspaces in Newcastle and Gateshead, offering a blend of intensive weekly support work for our accommodation clients to move onto secure independence or re-engage with the immigration system. Last year we supported 118 homeless individuals from 20 different nationalities.

Our supported accommodation of 18 dispersed properties across Newcastle and Gateshead includes areas potentially targeted for far-right activity.

As it was across the organisation, client and staff wellbeing remained the priority. Staff were supported individually and as a team and were involved in decision making around safe ways of working. Client appointments at the office were limited to reduce the need for travel and remote ways of working, including staff working from home were utilised. This prioritised keeping people safe and secure but missed the benefits of meeting a friendly and familiar face in person. Staff provided encouragement and support to one another throughout and were advised to avoid any lone working in the office or at properties.

“

“I had no mood of going out or cooking, and did not feel safe going out.

”

The team checked in with clients daily, offering individually tailored support and safety guidance while reality checking potential misinformation. We shared our property locations with the police as potential targets and advised our repairs contractors, reassuring landlords and partners that clients and properties were prioritised and protected.

Thankfully, this activity and disruption was short lived. Although traumatic, the friendship and support received from partners and the local community was heartening for us all.

INTERNAL LESSONS

- More training for staff in crisis communications would enable us to direct the right messages to the right people at the right time.
- More in-depth training about responding to emergencies would equip our staff team to respond swiftly and effectively to future events.
- We would benefit from increased wellbeing support for clients, volunteers and staff following threats and violence.
- The impact on young people and their needs for support were significant and varied.
- Much like during the Covid-19 lockdowns, being isolated at home had a negative impact on young people's mental health.
- Providing care packs and doing home visits was beneficial. More trips to take young people out during times of crisis would alleviate the negative impact of fear and boredom.
- We have increased the security measures at our Drop-In service, with best practice formulated for volunteers.
- Recognise that our female clients may feel more vulnerable and need more practical support, e.g. assistance with essential shopping.
- Sharing positive messages like messages of solidarity or the well-attended counter protests, with clients as events were taking place will help to encourage and reassure.
- Continue to acknowledge that staff and volunteers from lived experience and/or ethnic minority backgrounds will have similar adverse experiences to the clients they support.



We provided wellbeing packs for 250 children.

CONCLUSIONS

We are incredibly grateful to our colleagues, volunteers and clients at Action Foundation in sharing their lived experience, stories and views. We recognise that the events of August 2024 affected all our people, especially young people, women and families, and that **these negative feelings haven't evaporated**. We recognise the increased anxiety amongst our colleagues and commend them on their dedication to continuing to support clients.

While we have valuable learning and actions to take away and improve our services, **we also hope that this report will help clients and other organisations reflect on the events of summer 2024**. With their permission, we hope to build on the lived experience of our clients, their voices being central to our organisation and perhaps to join with other organisations to listen, learn and grow across our communities in Tyne and Wear.



GEORDIES
AGAINST
RACISM

There was huge support for the migrant community outside the Beacon Centre in Newcastle's West End on August 10.

If you are a client of ours, a partner or a potential partner please contact us at:



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