

SPEAKING OUT,

imix

What we heard from the sector
comms forum

STAYING SAFE

Reflections from the Forum



In the year leading up to this forum, 61% of organisations in our sector reported being targeted by far-right abuse. More than a third had no crisis communications plan in place. Organisations described being doxxed, harassed, subject to hostile FOI requests, and left to navigate a toxic media environment largely alone.

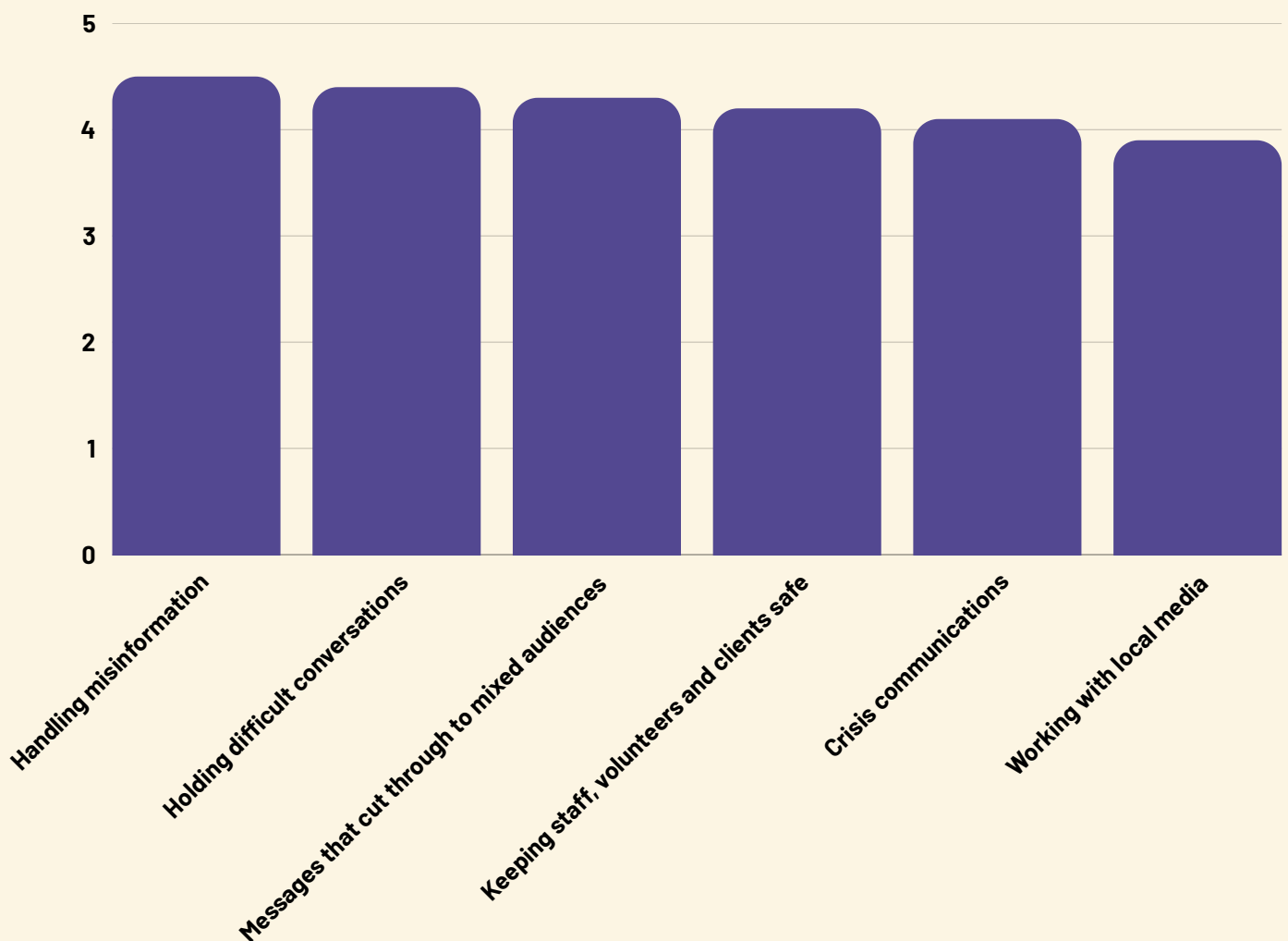
At the same time, the hunger to respond, to connect, and to find a way through together was unmistakable. Within weeks of opening expressions of interest, we had heard from 136 organisations and individuals from across the UK, many sharing, unprompted, the pressures they were carrying.

This is a report on what happened when we brought them into a room together.

LISTENING IN: WHAT PEOPLE TOLD US

Before the forum, 136 people told us what they needed.

We didn't just open a registration form. We opened a conversation. The expressions of interest we received told a story before the day had even begun, one about a sector under real pressure, hungry for practical help, and asking for something more than a lecture.



We produce great content which is well received by those who align with us, and not well received by those who don't. How do we reach and influence those in the middle?" – **Kent Refugee Action Network**

We have a lot of people happy to quietly express support for refugees and migrants, but fewer who are willing to join events and actions, even the nice ones." – **Care4Calais / Stand Up to Racism Coventry & Warwickshire**

Fear limited our publicity and fundraising." – **Refugees Welcome North Somerset**

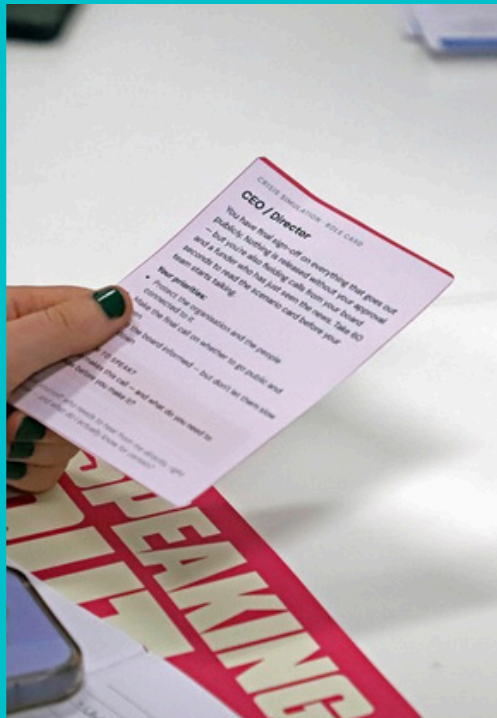
We are responding to anti-immigration riots in Belfast.. We want to challenge harmful narratives, but without exposing individuals to risk or retraumatisation." – **Diverse Youth NI (Northern Ireland)**

As someone with lived experience, my biggest challenge is knowing what information is safe to share and what should not be shared." – **Refugee Futures (North East)**

Communicating complex, sensitive information clearly to people who are already under stress, while navigating safety concerns, limited capacity, and increasingly hostile narratives." – **Companion Hub (Glasgow)**

We don't have a dedicated comms role. We are navigating geopolitical sensitivities in a trauma-informed way for our community, and trying to balance being vocal with strong safeguarding." – **Routes (London)**

Not being able to spotlight the good work organisations are doing to build cohesion, for fear of being targeted by far-right extremists." – **Calderdale Valley of Sanctuary**



13th April, 133 people, One Venue

"So well organised, the best conference I have been to. Every session was hugely helpful." –

SAMAS

CO-PRODUCTION AND LIVED EXPERIENCE LEADERSHIP

Not a one-off. A long-term investment in power

The forum was not designed or delivered by IMIX alone. It was shaped, facilitated and brought to life by people with direct experience of the issues it addressed, and that was a deliberate choice rooted in how IMIX understands its role.

IMIX believes that migration is a racial justice issue, and that the systems of oppression shaping migrants' lives are reproduced not just in policy, but in who gets to tell the story, who is given a platform, and whose expertise is recognised and paid. The forum was an opportunity to act on that belief in concrete terms.

Ten paid facilitators. One CPD-accredited programme. A long-term commitment.

Working in partnership with our Storytellers Network, IMIX recruited ten people to be trained and paid as facilitators for the forum. All ten completed IMIX's CPD-accredited Train the Trainer programme before the day. On 13 April, they worked alongside co-producers Abdulrahman Bdiwi and Douna Haj Ahmed, who came through a previous IMIX cohort and have been part of shaping this work from its earliest stages.

Every facilitator took an active role on the day: opening and closing sessions, holding space in workshops, supporting delegates, and sharing their expertise as practitioners and people with lived experience. They were not volunteers, and they were not just guests, but colleagues.



Reflections from Abdulrahman, Forum Co-Producer

From the very beginning, IMIX created a space where lived experience leadership wasn't just welcomed – it was trusted, respected, and centred. I was involved from the first conversations, not as a token voice but as an equal partner. I had the freedom to shape ideas, challenge things I didn't agree with, design sessions, lead them, and bring my full self into the work. That is what real co-production looks like to me.

Many of us have been so focused on surviving the day-to-day that we've forgotten what it feels like to gather, reflect, and support each other. Seeing the number of people who showed up proved something powerful: we are not alone, and we never were.

Community is not a luxury; it is part of our survival.

Co-leading the Ethical Storytelling & Lived Experience Leadership workshop with Douna and Dr Shamila was the highlight of the day for me the cherry on top of the cake. Hearing their insights, feeling the energy in the room, and witnessing how deeply people engaged reminded me exactly why I do this work.

I left the event feeling grounded, energised, and hopeful. Not because the challenges have disappeared – they haven't – but because spaces like this show what is possible when we come together with honesty, courage, and care.

THE DAY IN NUMBERS

133 delegates on the day

11 regions of the UK represented (from Belfast to Bristol, Glasgow to Gosport)

4 parallel workshops, each running twice

29 post-event survey responses

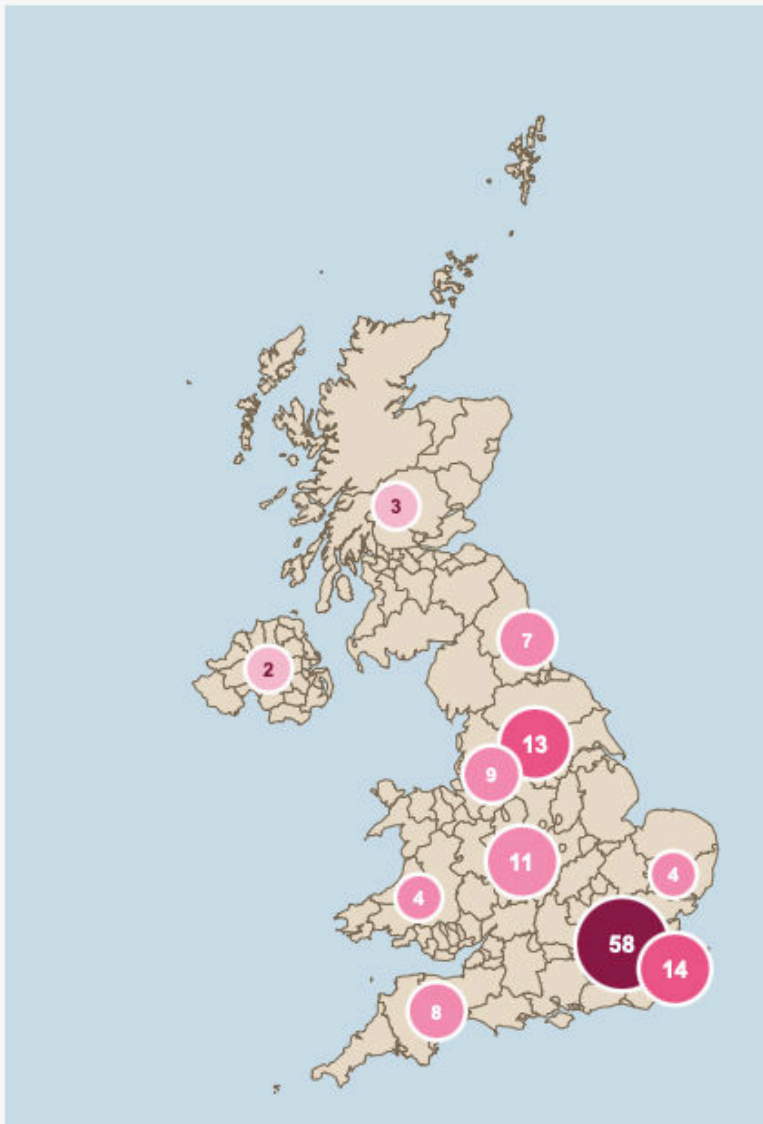
100% of respondents would recommend a future IMIX event to a colleague

4.9 / 5 average satisfaction rating

Top-rated workshop: Crisis comms in practice (simulation)

Most-cited takeaway: The IMIX communications guide

"So succinct and genuinely easy to use that, unlike most toolkits, I feel I could actually share it"



Where delegates came from

133 delegates · 11 UK regions

DELEGATES BY REGION

● London	58
● South East	14
● Yorkshire	13
● West Midlands	11
● North West	9
● South West	8
● North East	7
● East of England	4
● Wales	4
● Scotland	3
● Northern Ireland	2

imix.org.uk
Speaking Out, Staying Safe
April 2026

"This forum is about communications, but it is also about power. About who gets heard. About whose stories are believed. About who gets framed by others, and who gets to speak for themselves." – **Awssan Kamal, IMIX Trustee**



IMIX Trustee Awssan Kamal opened the forum with a keynote that moved from the global to the deeply personal. A humanitarian diplomacy and strategic communications specialist with over a decade of leadership at Oxfam, he spoke about his own journey with the word 'refugee', describing how for years he had distanced himself from it, before finding pride in it through the Refugee Week Ambassadors programme.

Being a refugee is not something that sits neatly in a passport or legal status. It sits in your senses. It sits in the memories you carry. It lives in how you read a room, understand power, and recognise vulnerability in systems and in people. It becomes part of how you move through the world.

For years, I hesitated to say the words plainly: I am a refugee.

Something shifted for me last year through the Refugee Week Ambassadors programme. In that space, surrounded by people with lived experience of displacement, conflict and loss people who were also artists, organisers, thinkers and leaders I felt something I had not expected: pride.

"Yet if we are bold, love strikes away the chains of fear from our souls. We are weaned from our timidity. In the flush of love's light we dare be brave. And suddenly we see that love costs all we are and will ever be. Yet it is only love which sets us free." – **Maya Angelou, Touched By An Angel (read by Jimmy Zachariah)**

Jimmy Zachariah, CEO of The Baca Charity and IMIX Board Member, followed with a reflection on why the story of migration needs to change, anchoring it in his own experience of having been born in India, raised in Kuwait, and settled in the UK. He opened with a reading of Touched By An Angel by Maya Angelou, whose closing lines set the tone for everything that followed:





Opening Keynotes: The State of Now

Misbah Malik traced the far right from the fringes to the mainstream and named, plainly, what the sector is up against. Dr Shamila Ahmed connected it to safeguarding, policing and the structural systems that sit beneath the headlines. Zoe Gardner closed with a question that hung in the air all day: instead of reacting to everyone else's narrative, what story does this sector actually want to tell?

"The opening keynotes were really powerful." – Diverse Youth NI



Hope Under Fire: When the Sector is Targeted

Chaired by Minnie Rahman of Praxis, this was a raw and honest conversation with people who had been directly in the firing line. Abhinov spoke about the aftermath of the 2024 Belfast riots and the fear that settled into communities who had seen what organised hatred could do. Andy described building a grassroots network of over a thousand local members in a town where that work wasn't always welcomed. Leyla shared what it took to keep West London Welcome running and publicly visible after misinformation was published about the organisation in the media, including one story that ultimately ran as a positive piece in the Daily Mail. Hannah spoke about City of Sanctuary's experience of a sustained campaign by an online 'citizen journalist' that escalated into a formal Charity Commission investigation which was ruled misleading and unsubstantiated – but the process took months, consumed significant resource, and left the organisation navigating real reputational risk throughout. Helen brought three decades of experience to the question of how you sustain an organisation and its people through all of this without losing the mission.



Behind the Headlines: Journalists on Getting the Story Right

Journalists and migration organisations don't always trust each other. This session was a deliberate attempt to change that. Three journalists who have spent years covering migration – from the Guardian, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and the Daily Mirror – sat down with a room full of people who work alongside those the coverage is about, and had the frank conversation both sides needed to have.



Courageous Conversations on the Ground

Late afternoon, when conferences usually run out of steam, this one caught fire. Community organiser Tahira Kulsoom and Tariq Bashir, who has spent twenty years holding difficult conversations about immigration in communities where they're most charged, showed the room what it actually looks like to stay present, stay honest and keep moving toward understanding even when it's hard.

"I want to hear all of them speak more." – EFA London

WORKSHOPS

Under Fire: Crisis Comms in Practice Led by IMIX CEO Jenni Regan and IMIX Trustee Laura Padoan, a former UNHCR spokesperson. Delegates practised making rapid decisions under pressure, drafting holding statements, and navigating the competing demands of protecting their organisation, their people and the truth. People left with a framework and a draft they could actually use.

"A roleplay situation that left me with a clear plan and instructions for what to do in those situations." – Maryhill Integration Network

Beyond the Echo Chamber Led by Esther Raffell and Innah Gaspar of the Global Strategic Communications Council, asked a deceptively simple question: are we actually reaching anyone who doesn't already agree with us? People worked through a practical framework for audience segmentation, identifying the messengers, platforms and language that might carry their work further than their existing networks.

"I have already discussed the Beyond the Echo Chamber approach with my team to consider our campaigning." – Bristol City of Sanctuary

Ethical Storytelling and Lived Experience Leadership, led by Douna Haj Ahmed, Abdulrahman Bdiwi and Dr Shamila Ahmed, asked the questions that usually go unasked: who carries the risk when we ask someone to share their story, and what do we actually give back? It gave delegates a concrete framework for trauma-informed, consent-led practice.

"The honesty from the speakers about how organisations have treated them in the past felt really needed." – Refugee Support Devon

How to Win on Social Media brought serious digital strategy into a room that needed it. Hannah O'Rourke of Campaign Lab and Annie Johnson of 411, who helped deliver Labour's social organising programme in the 2024 general election, cut through the noise on algorithms, hostile online spaces and what grassroots organisations can realistically do with limited time, no budget and a lot to say.

"The social media speakers opened a new, meaningful conversation. It was so helpful to hear on the day." – Forum CIO, Hull

What we heard from the day

Racism was in the room. And it needed to be.

Something important happened at this forum that doesn't always happen in sector spaces: racism was named directly, not as a backdrop to the work but as a lived reality for many of the people in the room. Awssan and Jimmy both spoke from their own experience of navigating British society as people with lived experience of migration. Misbah was direct about the racialised nature of far-right targeting and the way anti-Muslim hatred and anti-migrant sentiment reinforce each other. The Ethical Storytelling workshop asked hard questions about who charities ask to carry the burden of personal disclosure, and who those people most often are.

The Wellbeing Walls caught it plainly. **"IT'S THE SYSTEM THAT MAKES PEOPLE VULNERABLE."** And alongside it, two words that said everything: **"Being an Iranian."** A reminder that for many of the people this sector exists to support, the hostile environment is not an abstract policy problem. It is something they carry in their body, their name, their passport.

The forum didn't resolve these conversations. But it held them, openly and without rushing to solutions. For many people, that was itself significant.

"The current situation was discussed frankly, but there was also an effort to present an optimistic vision of the future."





Hope — and the surprise of it

The strongest recurring theme across the evaluation was that the event generated genuine hope and restored energy for the work. This was not a polished conference afterglow. It was specific and grounded. Delegates named the moment when Zoe Gardner insisted that hateful people are not the majority, and that the sector needs to act as if it knows this. They named the panel speakers who had been through the worst and come out the other side. They named the conversations over lunch that reminded them they were not alone.

Several delegates noted they had arrived feeling uncertain, isolated or anxious about the current environment — particularly those working in regions where far-right activity has been most intense, or in small organisations with no one else to think through these challenges with.

"It was more than heartening to hear how people and organisations have responded to intimidation, threats and false reporting and built really constructive things from that. The IMIX involvement in the stories people told shows what a tremendous resource you are." — Tariq Bashir, Who Is Your Neighbour?

"A feeling of hope — we don't have to be silenced by the far right, and can be proactive in taking up space online." — Bristol Refugee Rights

"Not so much an action but a feeling — that there is more to hope for and less to fear than I thought."

"Continue to be brave — we are in unprecedented times, but this has never been a popular sector. So if it is right, keep on!" — Bristol City of Sanctuary

Practical tools that actually work

Multiple respondents specifically praised the IMIX communications guide, describing it as unusually usable compared to typical sector resources. The crisis comms simulation workshop was cited as a model for how practical learning should work: not a slide deck, but a lived experience of making decisions under pressure.

The requests for resources that followed were consistent: templates that could be opened on a Monday morning, guides that could be shared across a small team, frameworks for holding statements and social media responses that didn't require a dedicated comms budget to implement.



"The comms guide – so succinct and genuinely easy to use that, unlike most toolkits, I feel I could actually share it with people in my grassroots migrant support network."

"The crisis comms workshop – a roleplay situation that left me with a clear plan and instructions for what to do in those situations." – Maryhill Integration Network

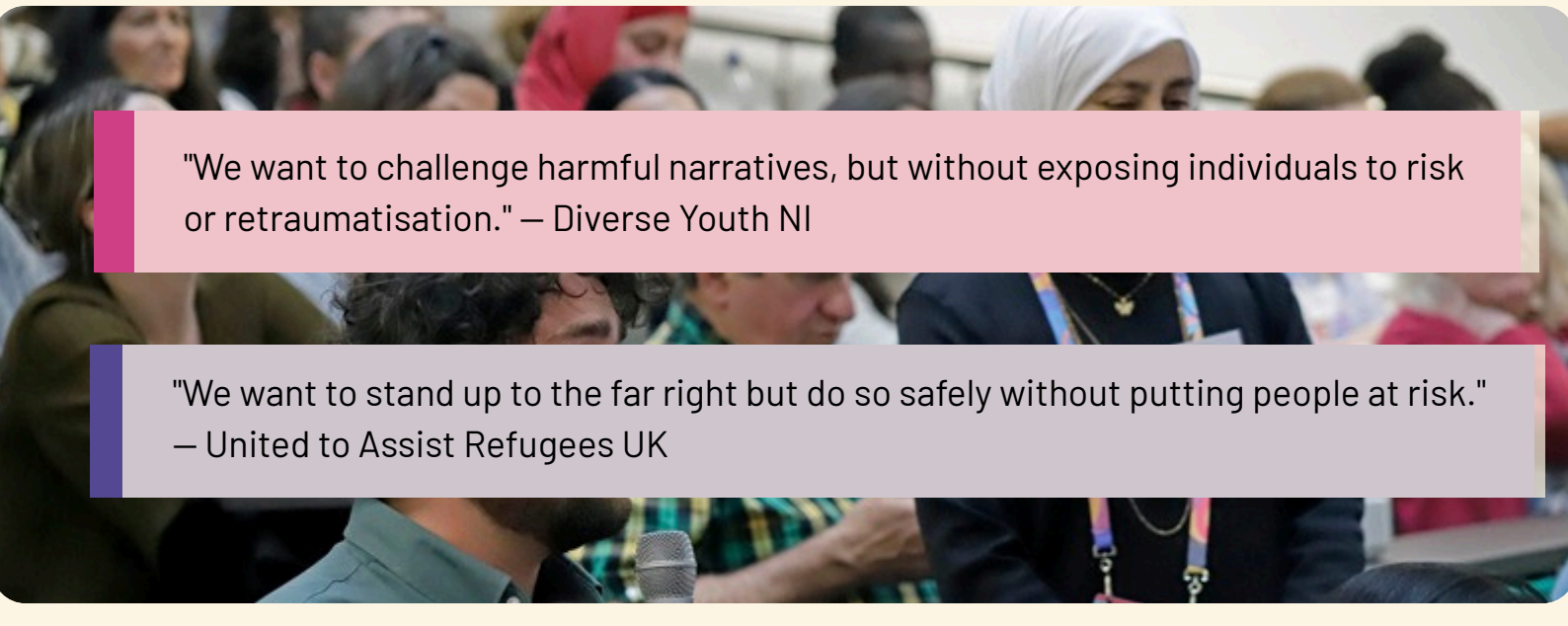
"The preparation is key. The confidence in knowing that others who have been through our biggest fears have come out the other side." – SDCAS

Speaking Out

The sector wants to be braver – and needs the conditions to do so. Across both the pre-event expressions of interest and the post-event evaluation, a clear desire emerged: to communicate more boldly, to challenge harmful narratives more directly, and to stop self-censoring out of fear. But this desire was consistently paired with a recognition of the real constraints that make boldness difficult: funding insecurity, small teams, no comms support, and the very real risk of becoming a target.

Several respondents from Northern Ireland and other areas that have experienced far-right violence were direct about the difference between theoretical boldness and what is actually safe.

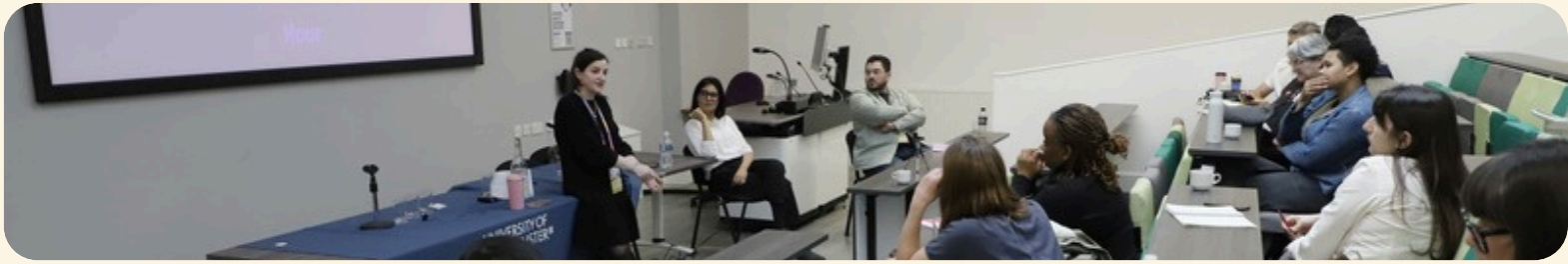
The Wellbeing Wall caught this tension precisely:



"We want to challenge harmful narratives, but without exposing individuals to risk or retraumatisation." – Diverse Youth NI

"We want to stand up to the far right but do so safely without putting people at risk." – United to Assist Refugees UK

Lived Experience



Lived experience as expertise – and the ethics of asking for it

The Ethical Storytelling and Lived Experience Leadership workshop and the Courageous Conversations panel both drew some of the strongest responses of the day. What participants valued was not just hearing from people with lived experience, but the honest, critical discussion about what it means to ask for those stories in the first place.

The workshop, led by Douna Haj Ahmed and Abdulrahman Bdiwi alongside Dr Shamila Ahmed, named what often goes unsaid in sector spaces: that organisations with institutional resources frequently ask individuals with personal experience of trauma, displacement and racism to carry the weight of public storytelling, without adequate support, consent structures, or recognition of the power imbalance involved. For delegates with their own lived experience of migration and racism, this was a session that named something they had experienced themselves. For those in communications roles, it was a direct challenge to review their practice.

"The honesty from the speakers about how organisations have treated them in the past when sharing their stories felt really needed. It made me think hard about how we gather case studies from our clients." – Refugee Support Devon

"The lived experience workshop – very powerful, personal and real criticisms of how charities use storytelling. Moments that gave me chills." – Maryhill Integration Network

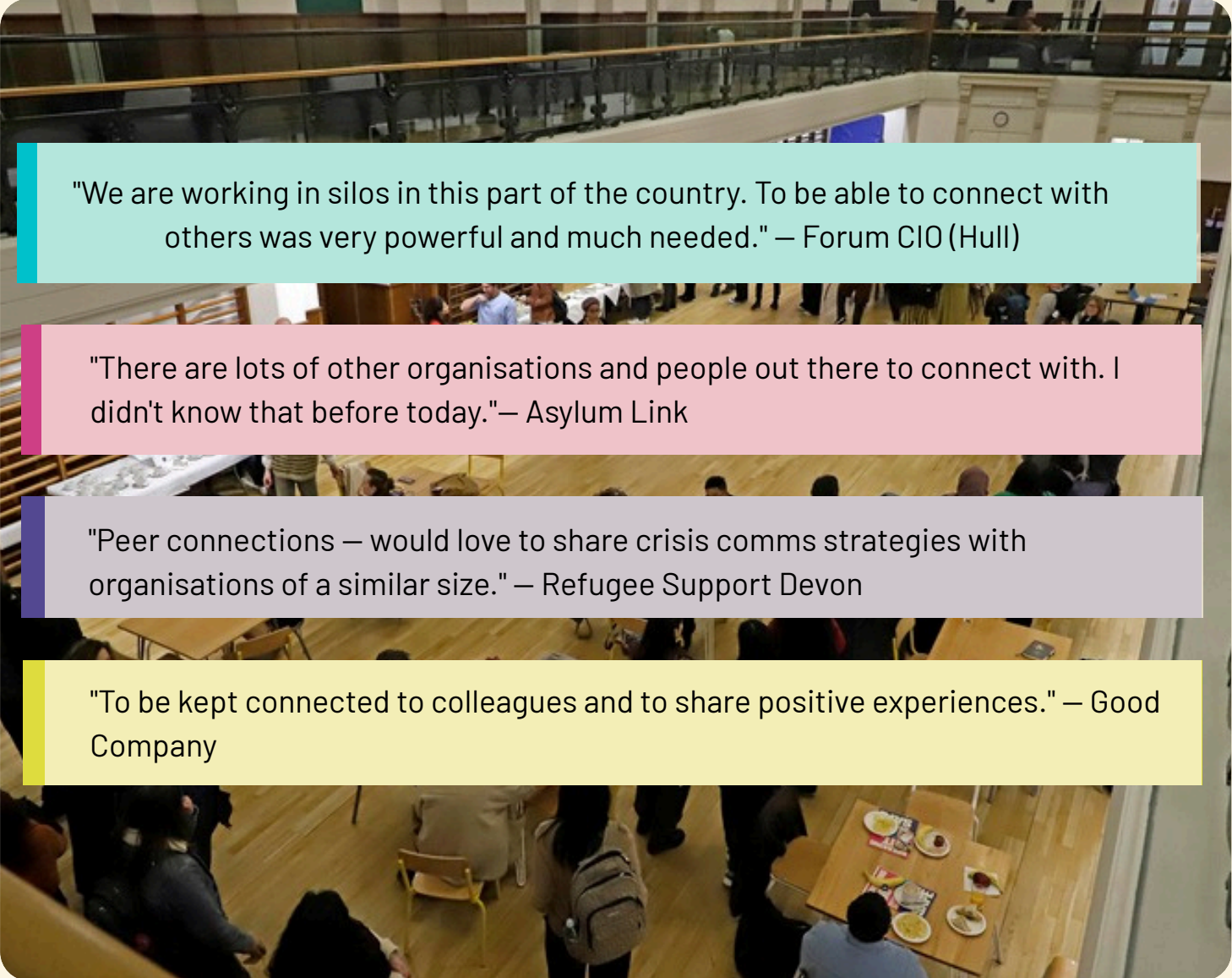
"I plan to go through all the hardships and difficulties in my life and share all the troubles that have happened to me with those around me."

"The storytelling session was deeply moving and definitely made me think about how to tell life stories most ethically and considerately." – SAMAS

Connection was as valuable as content

The most frequently requested follow-up resource was not a guide or a workshop recording. It was each other. Delegates wanted to stay connected, to continue the conversations that had started over lunch, and to know that the organisations they had met across a day in London were still there.

Several delegates noted that facilitated networking, or a matchmaking mechanism to help organisations find relevant peer connections, would have made the day even more valuable. A number specifically mentioned organisations in their region they had not known existed before the forum.



"We are working in silos in this part of the country. To be able to connect with others was very powerful and much needed." – Forum CIO (Hull)

"There are lots of other organisations and people out there to connect with. I didn't know that before today." – Asylum Link

"Peer connections – would love to share crisis comms strategies with organisations of a similar size." – Refugee Support Devon

"To be kept connected to colleagues and to share positive experiences." – Good Company

People were specific about next steps:

Share

Share the IMIX comms guide with their team and networks

Crisis Planning

Prepare or update a crisis communications plan or holding statement

ACTION PLANS

Social Media

Develop a social media approach that centres positive and bridge-building stories

Media Outreach

Reach out to local journalists and build press contacts

Lived Experience

Set up a lived experience plan with proper consent and support structures

THE WELLBEING WALLS

WALL OF RECOGNITION This year felt like... / Something I wish more people understood... / Our sector rarely talks about...

The necessity to hold both exhaustion and hope, passion and positivity at the same time. Every day.

Funding: it's so hard to keep going and keep fighting when you are constantly worried about staying open.

Our sector rarely talks about how to engage with people on the other side of the migration discourse.

This year has felt like: public opinion has gotten worse around migration and does not seem to be improving.

Our sector should talk more about how brilliant, passionate and committed everyone is.

Be more angry. Be more radical. Be more sensitive.



THE WELLBEING WALLS

WALL OF HOPE What keeps me going is... / I want to say thank you to... /
Something beautiful I have seen this year...

I hope for a life where people are accepted for who they are, not where they are from.

What keeps me going is the resilience of others, especially those with lived experience. Their kindness, and continued joy is an inspiration.

Something beautiful: the counter protest of the hate march. There were 5,000 of us, singing and dancing in the rain, making friends, hearing about each other's local activism

You are the expert of your own story. Don't let anyone talk over you.

There are more of us than there are of them. We can win

We are here, we have always been here and we will always be here. Love always wins. You can't argue with it.

Knowing that all the right people to make change happen are in this room.

WHAT THIS TELLS FUNDERS

1. Anti-migrant hate and racism are not separate problems. Many of the people in the room were not only working in the migration sector – they had personal experience of the hostile environment and of being the target of the hatred their organisations exist to counter. The forum created space for this to be named directly, in a way that sector conferences rarely do. Communications support for this sector is not separate from anti-racism work. It is part of it.

2. The emotional labour of this sector is invisible, and it has a cost. Participants described holding exhaustion and hope simultaneously, day after day, often alone. This falls disproportionately on people with lived experience of the very hostility they are trying to counter. Forums that create space to name this, rather than simply manage it, are rare and genuinely valuable.

3. Funding precarity silences as well as strains. The fear of closure shapes communications confidence as much as operational capacity. Funders who want the sector to speak out need to fund the conditions that make speaking out possible, including income security, dedicated communications resource, and the safety to take reputational risks.

4. Small organisations need practical tools, not just training. The ask was consistent: a template they could actually use, a guide they could share with a small team, something that worked on a Monday morning with no comms budget. The demand for genuinely usable tools is not being met elsewhere.

5. People with lived experience want to speak – and need to be safer to do so. More than half of those who registered had their own lived experience of migration. Many wanted to tell their stories and were afraid to. Funders can help by supporting the infrastructure – consent frameworks, wellbeing support, lived experience leadership programmes – that makes it possible to speak with dignity rather than at personal cost.

Thanks

This forum was shaped by many hands, and we are deeply grateful to everyone who made it possible.

We begin by thanking our co-producers, **Abdulrahman Bdiwi** and **Douna Haj Ahmed**, who were with us from inception, helping ensure the day truly reflected what the sector needs, with safeguarding and respect at its heart.

The IMIX team worked tirelessly, and in genuinely difficult circumstances, to bring this forum to life. A very special thanks goes to **Katherine Maxwell-Rose**, whose vision and leadership were at the heart of everything. We are also grateful to: **Esther Raffell**, who created and project-managed the Toolkit; **Joana Lirio**, who managed all logistics on the day; **Elahe Ziai**, who recruited and supported our facilitators; **Katie Bryson**, who led on wellbeing and the media panel; and **Pascale Gayford** for invaluable operational support. Thanks also to **Ahmed Ali**, **Gary Pluck**, and **Jeremy Ullmann** for stepping in wherever needed.

We were fortunate to be joined by a remarkable group of facilitators: **Yibrah Tsegay Berhe**, **Olga Shano**, **Loujain Joudieh**, **Hein Aung Htet**, **Loraine Masiya Mponela**, **Mahmoud Al-Masri**, **Carlos Ibarra Rivadeneira**, and **Lubna Al-Zain**. Thank you for your time, care, and commitment. Thanks also to **Luis Lopez**, our photographer on the day.

We are also grateful to all the speakers, panelists, and workshop leaders who gave their time, expertise, and energy to make the day so rich and generative.

We are grateful to the IMIX Trustees for their support and belief in this work, and to the University of Westminster, and **Dr Shamila Ahmed** in particular, for being such a wonderful host and close collaborator on the programme.

And of course, none of it would have meant anything without the people who came. Thank you to everyone who attended, engaged, and brought the day to life. You are the reason we do this work.

Finally, our thanks to our funders, without whom none of this would be possible: AB Charitable Trust, City Bridge Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and Trust for London.

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