



...And just like that, our fourth flag raising ceremony for International Women's Day 2020 had come to an end. It was another very successful event attended by students, delivery partners, teachers and associates of Neesie. The feeling of happiness, pride and productiveness was immense and being surrounded by crowds of supportive people was a very liberating feeling. Little did I realise that the discussions around the virus in China was about to become a way of life in the UK. Within a matter of weeks, we nosedived into a national lockdown, a situation that most of us had never found ourselves within before. It was around May 2020 when the phone calls commenced from mothers asking what is going on? Good questions, legitimate questions and above all hard questions were being asked, but with limited answers I knew there was a lot of work to be done.

Towards the end of summer, it was apparent that the frustrations of communities had reached boiling point. People were becoming tired of having to navigate in unknown territory without clear direction. The pleas from families for clarity was deafening. As an organisation we tried our utmost best to meet the needs of our users but with limited resources and with only our moral compass to rely upon, we too began to struggle. Closing many arms of our services during this pandemic we too were battling stormy waves. Some late nights burning the midnight oil and zoom discussions with Board members, we developed our Covid Emergency Relief Strategy. It was imperative that we find solutions for our mums as the pressure even on statutory services was evident meaning many of our mums were left to fend for themselves.

As the ask increased from Neesie mothers to help put context to their fears, confusions and anxieties we soon realised there was a higher level of support that was required by some of our inner-city communities. The questions being asked by many households were profound, legitimised and honest. Family structures falling apart, children running away from home, woman fleeing domestic violence; these were just some of the cases we were having to deal with.

By the summer of 2020 we knew that the frustrations had mounted to such a level that something had to be done immediately. We knew we had to take action to ensure that the majority of our communities were well-informed, engaged and safe. Having approached many funders, 'Power to Change' came to our rescue and we were pleasantly surprised to have had our initiative granted in September 2020. Our proposed idea to up skill a phenomenal cohort of leading youth of Bradford, to engage with inner-city communities had now become a reality. The levels of misconceptions and myths surrounding COVID-19 and the debate around the vaccine was spiralling out of control and if something was not done soon enough this was going to cost more lives.





As I began to plan out The Covid Lead Leadership Programme, the scale of the effort required was becoming colossal. Fears of the application process to the execution, including engagement with Parliament and Department of Health and planning a successful Graduation ceremony was deep rooted. This task was going to be bigger than any of the previous Leadership Programmes I had run in the past including internationally.

The funders of the programme had agreed for 12 young people aged 18 to 25 from BAME backgrounds to participate in a leadership course that would enable them to become equipped with the knowledge necessary to engage with inner city communities to dispel myths, misconceptions and misinformation around Covid. It was important that we were there to rebuild a broken trust and support struggling families facing a myriad of anxieties and mental health issues.

As the application window opened, we approached many to help us promote the programme. Initially the lack of support was disheartening but as the saying goes it's never too late and those who wanted to help really did pull it out of the bag.

It was Alison Hartley from the University of Bradford who truly believed in my concept and realised the benefits that could be gained by many of the young people of her department. She soon connected me with Hadar Zaman and it was then I knew I had the professionals who believed in the concept and would provide the impetus for this programme to succeed.

As the applications came flooding in from the young people of Bradford, it was clear that the youth were ready to roll up their sleeves. In October 2020 we were left with a tough decision of sifting through over 100 applications and the tough task of selecting only 12 was daunting. The calibre of applications and the enthusiasm of the students was inspiring hence Neesie as an organisation had made the brave decision to increase the cohort to 20, funding the additional eight students ourselves. As our journey commenced with the selected students, our friends at the University of Bradford continued to support us proving invaluable at a time when support was scarce.

The successful participants were soon notified and the administration element commenced. It was essential that the groundwork was planned to perfection as we were embarking on a face to face first session that required a micromanagement approach. Following an article in The Times newspaper, the Covid Lead Leadership Programme was soon on the map. A media grenade had been set off and within a matter of days we were contacted by BBC Tv and Radio stations, ITV/ITN, German TV and many more. The realisation that now a vaccine was approved and we were the only leadership programme working to ensure communities were supported during this roll out was very clear and we had a responsibility to our families of Bradford. We needed to ensure that the frustrations resonating from years of neglect and health inequalities wasn't going to affect the rollout of the vaccine that will ultimately save lives.



I recall when Hadar approached me to become a panel member for a COVID-19 conversation online feeling nervous as I was to become the only member on the panel not from a medical background but it was important that a voice defending communities was present. It was an opportunity I could not afford to miss. It was obvious by the time we were mid convo that there was a gaping hole in journey from medic to inner city family and this was where our Covid Public Advocates would position themselves.

Wednesday 9th December 2020 witnessed our amazing Covid Public Advocates arrive for their first session and were immediately thrown into the deep end with an opening by Professor John Wright whom we are so honoured to have been supported by and the catalyst behind the national awareness. The cameras were rolling all around and my vision of this moment had exceeded all expectation. The students were enthusiastic, intrigued and engaged taking every challenge in their stride.

There is no doubt that for all the good and great we think we are doing, it really sometimes only can come down to the honesty of the participants evaluations of the session. I had little to worry about...

In a short space of time, we have selected 20 fine young aspiring leaders that would now undergo rigorous training in understanding the virus and the impact of COVID upon Schools, Communities and the Economy. They will soon become the 'go to' voice for checks and balances when working within communities.

We have recruited a Covid Public Advocate as our paid marketing intern who will follow the programme developments and update weekly from a personal and programme perspective and another Covid Public Advocate takes on the paid internship as Research Collector.

Many Advocates have already spoken to the media and many more opportunities await our committed cohort. Do look out for our weekly newsletters produced by Jordan Lee the Marketing intern and CPA and we hope you will continue to support us through this journey of supporting communities during these tough times.

Noreen Khan
Lead Programmes Director
C/o Neesie

(Blog 1 W/c 7.12.20)

