

Community cohesion: do we know what we're looking for?

This is the second in a short series of issue papers drawing on evidence from a 300-resident survey carried out in the Newtown area of Aston, Birmingham, in Spring 2005. Each paper will focus on one important policy issue that affects the lives of residents in other parts of the city as well as in Newtown

INTRODUCTION

Community cohesion has been defined by the Home Office as a common vision and a sense of belonging, respect for diversity and difference, strong relationships between people of different cultural, religious and racial backgrounds, and similar life opportunities for all, irrespective of their background.

The concept of community cohesion rose rapidly up the Government's agenda following disturbances in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford in the summer of 2001. A Ministerial Group on Public Order and Community Cohesion was established to investigate and report on the disorders – the “Cantle Report” – and in quick succession around thirty initial “Community Cohesion Pathfinder” projects were established. Following on from these, all local authorities are required to have community cohesion strategies in place and new Home Office guidance on community cohesion has been issued (*Community Cohesion: Seven Steps*, March 2005). The London bombings of the 7th July have brought unprecedented political importance to the debate and it is of course significant too that the faiths and community cohesion units in the Home Office have been merged into a single Faiths & Cohesion Unit.

Open to interpretation

And yet even the Government's most recent guidance fails to entirely clarify the slippery concept of community cohesion and *Seven Steps* concedes that “given the nature of community cohesion, it is unlikely that a definitive common or national measurement will ever be developed. It is therefore important to have a local framework to work within”.

But do we yet have such a common “local framework” of community cohesion? Even before the events of the 7th July it was evident that community cohesion was open to a spectrum of interpretation – some not necessarily positive. At one end of the spectrum, community cohesion is seen as primarily an issue of managing community tensions and policing – both literally and figuratively. At the other, ground-breaking work is being done to try and map the positive contributions made by diverse communities to the overall socio-economic development of cities, and in particular to creativity and knowledge-based innovation (www.comedia.org.uk).

Better local intelligence on cohesion is vital

But equally, there is evidence to suggest that poverty, inequality and higher levels of diversity – especially where these are narrowly concentrated in small areas or geographical ‘enclaves’ – do have an adverse effect on community cohesion. In the absence of more local debate and examination, how *do* we know what the most important aspects of community cohesion are? How do we know what we're looking for, what community qualities we are seeking to promote?

We wanted to see the kind of results some of the government's suggested ‘softer’ *qualitative indicators* might yield if translated to a neighbourhood level and earlier this year commissioned a substantial 300-resident

survey in Newtown, Aston. Residents were asked the following questions:

■ Do people feel there is a good sense of togetherness amongst people living in the area?

■ Do you feel that you 'belong' in your area and are accepted as part of it?

■ What support networks are you aware of in your area, and which do you use?

■ How do you feel about the fact that Birmingham is likely to be one of the first UK cities with a majority black and minority ethnic (BME) population?

■ Do you trust local people? What types of local people do you trust?

Here is a brief summary of the survey findings. They indicate a level of complexity in how local cohesion and "togetherness" is perceived that suggests there is still much to learn about cohesion at the very local level.

WHAT WE FOUND

'Togetherness'

Although opinion was fairly evenly divided on whether there is a good sense of 'togetherness' in the area – 44% agreed there was and 40% disagreed – there were more marked divergences within age and ethnic groups. People from a white ethnic majority background were significantly *more* likely to disagree that there was a strong sense of togetherness – 52% said not – as were older people: 54% of those in the 45-64 age group said not.

'Belonging'

While 70% said they feel they do 'belong' in the community and are accepted as part of it, 18% said they didn't. Again, White ethnic majority respondents were most likely to answer no to this question (27%), as were over one-quarter of people in the 25-34 age group (26%). "Not wanting to get involved", "not wanting to mix with anyone in the area", "too much violence and/or crime" and "not knowing anyone" were all frequently cited factors in people feeling that they didn't belong or perhaps did not *wish* to belong.

'Support Networks'

Although the majority of people interviewed knew about the existence of different support networks in the area – such as community

centres, resident associations, neighbour forums, and cultural and religious groups – our survey showed that *most people* were unlikely to draw on or involve themselves in these networks. There were, however, some marked differences in responses by people from different social groups.

For example, between 50% and 58% of people in all age groups and from all ethnic origins said that they knew of the existence of residents associations and neighbourhood forums in the area but didn't have any involvement with them. Non-use of these established networks was highest amongst those from a White ethnic background (59%), slightly lower amongst those of an Asian background (54%) and lower again amongst those from a Black ethnic background (47%).

This same pattern was repeated but at even higher levels when we looked at the use of community centres. 60% of White, 55% of Asian, 54% of Other backgrounds and 53% of Black respondents said they knew of the existence of various community centres but did not use them. Non-use is higher still amongst older people, running at over two-thirds in the 65+ age group.

Religious and cultural networks fared somewhat better with between 35% and 49% of all age groups reporting that they had some connection with these. Use of such networks is higher amongst younger age groups (the 25-34s and 35-44s both 43%) and declines with age (65+ age group: 27%).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, usage of religious and cultural networks is lowest amongst those of a white ethnic background (17%) and highest amongst those from Asian (57%), Black (45%) and Other backgrounds (35%). The difference between White use of such networks (17%) and Asian use (57%) was one of the largest divergences the survey recorded in any category.

'Perceptions of Diversity'

Residents were split 50:50 in their awareness that Birmingham is likely to be one of the first UK cities with a majority BME population. 'Black' and 'Asian' respondents were least concerned: 57% and 46% respectively said the prospect "didn't bother them", but this fell to 38% amongst 'White' respondents.

Although some respondents said they definitely "didn't like the idea" of a BME

majority, these numbers were relatively low: 15% of those from a White background said this (as opposed to 1% and 3% respectively from Black and Asian backgrounds) and the proportion again was noticeably higher amongst older people – 15% in the 65+ age group.

But this did not turn out to be the definingly divisive question it might have been anticipated to be.

‘Trust of local people’

We asked residents whether they trust people who live in their neighbourhood. Most people answered that they trust some but not others (61%). However, 36% of white ethnic majority respondents and almost one-quarter of the overall sample said they “don’t trust anyone who lives around here” (24%). BME respondents were consistently less likely to give this response (‘Black’ 14%, ‘Asian’ 21%, ‘Other’ 19%).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

So, what are the implications of this kind of data?

One of the key lessons of this survey is that many different factors come into play when trying to assess community cohesion at a grassroots level and people's real perceptions of cohesion can be complex, even sometimes contradictory. But equally, while there are some marked divergences depending on age and ethnicity, the survey also illustrates that in fact there are also many commonalities which can be built on. People sometimes have far more in common than might be expected. This has also been borne out by national MORI research, which found, for example, that 77% of White and 76% of BME respondents felt it important that *all people* in the UK should learn English.

We must be careful about making assumptions based on what we *think* we understand about community cohesion.

If we were to replicate similar surveys in other neighbourhoods in the city, would this help to make our responses to furthering community cohesion more effective?

While an information base of this kind could offer an important insight into relationships between local people, it seems more important – especially in the present climate – that there is a **local dialogue** in order to develop a more consensual and shared understanding of community cohesion. Birmingham, both as a city and as a local authority, needs to be confident that its people – all of its people – share a common sense of the values that underpin and foster community cohesion.

The key challenge for Birmingham is that of developing more coherent *leadership* of the community cohesion agenda. Interpretations of community cohesion that do not speak to the lives of Birmingham's citizens or which exclude or disenfranchise some must be challenged. We also need the political will and commitment to identify, promote and *teach* and *transfer* a core set of values, principles and activities. We may find that people from different communities actually agree on many more issues than we expect them to.

WHAT NEXT?

b:RAP proposes to re-invigorate the community cohesion dialogue in the city by offering a forum on our website where cohesion issues can be explored, views exchanged and concerns examined – without fear of saying “the wrong thing”.

Please feel welcome to contribute to this debate. We would only ask that comments are limited to what you think the values, principles and activities to promote and underpin community cohesion in Birmingham should be.

To post a comment email to brap@brap.org.uk

To see the community cohesion comments page, go to:
<http://www.brap.org.uk/live/pages/Defining-Community-Cohesion-in-Birmingham>

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