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Beyond Us and Them:
Policy and Practice for Strengthening Social Cohesion in Local Areas

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Executive Summary

The most recent findings from our Beyond Us and Them research study suggest that in the early days of the pandemic and first lockdown local authorities who previously invested in cohesion reaped the benefits of being more socially cohesive.[1] Many of those benefits have been sustained through a further lockdown and up to December 2020 when we conducted our most recent survey.

Social cohesion can be thought of as both a state and a process. It's a state that describes a place or group of people in society at a particular time, but most crucially it's also a process where a combination of different elements (local trust, social mixing, social connectedness etc.) provide the best conditions for social cohesion to establish and grow. Some of these elements may be depleted by crisis, shock or change but the previous high levels of cohesion mean revival and recovery should be stronger and faster, providing all of the core elements are attended to and developed over time. Despite the challenges of the last year, our surveys show that local areas that invested in cohesion managed to foster higher levels of volunteering and neighbourliness and maintain higher levels of local trust than elsewhere. They also maintained more consistent and sustained positive feelings towards all groups and people from migrant backgrounds in particular.

This paper examines what these local areas had been doing to support local social cohesion and resilience to some of the worst effects of COVID-19. When the crisis struck, these communities were able to remain more socially cohesive during the pandemic, despite some of them experiencing higher infection rates and stricter longer lasting restrictions than other parts of the country. How did they create these conditions for social cohesion in the years immediately preceding the pandemic?

Drawing on the expertise and knowledge of these areas and our wider group of research partners this paper offers best practice examples and recommendations on ways to increase social cohesion at a local level - both during the COVID-19 pandemic and as communities begin to emerge and rebuild.

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1 Dominic Abrams et al. (2021), 'Community, Connection and Cohesion During Covid-19: Beyond Us and Them Report', https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/resources/community-connection-cohesion-report/

What are the factors that impact social cohesion?

Validated models of social cohesion measure the relations between the individual and the state, and the relations between the individual and other individuals, groups and communities. We used these aspects of social cohesion as a way of framing the discussion with our research partners. In addition, we looked at the approaches our research partners were taking to overcoming the barriers to social cohesion.

Inequalities directly affect segregation in housing and education and some workplaces and the resulting lack of intergroup contact can result in a number of cohesion challenges. Inequalities between socio-economic groups and regions and in particular the impact on ethnic minority groups have been revealed, and in most cases, exacerbated by COVID-19. These inequalities will need to be addressed if we are to emerge from this pandemic a fairer and more cohesive society.

Local social cohesion, reflected for example in levels of local trust, intergroup relations, hate crime and prejudice, can be profoundly affected by national and international actors and events. Decisions taken in Westminster, the Senedd and Holyrood can directly impact social cohesion locally and regionally and in particular narratives of 'us and them'. Recent reports (e.g. *Levelling Up Our Communities*[2]) rightly highlight the essential role that communities have played in mobilising to support others during the pandemic, and the need to unleash that power in communities in order that local people can have greater say in local decision-making and can play a key role in shaping and delivering their local area. We note the UK Community Ownership and Community Renewal Funds[3] and argue that principles of social cohesion should be embedded at the heart of national policies and programmes for recovery and renewal.

2 Danny Kruger (2020). 'Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant', https://www.dannykruger. org.uk/sites/www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Kruger%202.0%20Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities.pdf

3 UK Government (2021). 'Community Ownership Fund', https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-ownership-fund/community-ownership-fund; Robert Jenrick (2021). 'UK Community Renewal Fund: prospectus 2021-22', https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-community-renewal-fund-prospectus/uk-community-renewal-fund-prospectus-2021-22

Recommendations

We now know from our findings that investing in social cohesion works in terms of building trust between groups and individuals and between citizens and their local and national institutions. In order to build a kinder, fairer and more cohesive British society, we need to strengthen the ties that bind us and in particular those ties that bridge between different groups, communities, and regions. As others have pointed out, the UK is at a crossroads as we emerge from the pandemic.[4] British society remains vulnerable to the divisions and polarisation that were present in the years preceding the COVID-19 crisis and the last twelve months have brought new fractures to light. However, we also have an opportunity to build on the appetite for compassion, social connectedness and community spirit in society that has been revealed over the last year.

What is needed now is a longer-term strategic programme from government, to create a solid foundation upon which communities can work together in a spirit of neighbourliness, compassion and unity to recover and rebuild from the pandemic.

In particular, government needs to build on the Integrated Communities Strategy and embed principles of social cohesion into relevant national policy agendas working in partnership with local government to support a locally tailored approach.

Central to this approach is the idea of *place* and the understanding that different strategies to address social cohesion will be needed in different places. Each of the six local areas grounded their programmes in crucial *knowledge* from local *people* (communities, groups and cultures) in order to respond to the distinct and unique challenges and opportunities in that *place*.

They developed a shared vision about their locality which says this place is a good place to live, work, raise your family and grow older in. Their approaches included strong and representative leadership; tackling barriers to inclusion of minority communities and underrepresented groups including addressing hate crime and prejudice; embedding principles of social mixing; and promoting trust through bridging work and active social engagement. They also invested in capacity-building and skills training; cross-sector partnerships (engaging statutory, private and public sectors as well as the voluntary sector); and regular information and knowledge exchanges.

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4 More in Common (2020). 'Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain', https://www.britainschoice.uk/#our-common-ground; Talk/together (2021). 'Our chance to reconnect: Final report of the Talk/together project', https://together.org.uk/Our-Chance-to-Reconnect.pdf

In the paper itself you will find a more detailed exploration of how partners addressed key elements of social cohesion in order to develop the conditions for it to remain resilient in a time of great crisis together with practical case studies drawn from the local programmes. Below we list key ways that, in combination, are a basis for building and sustaining local social cohesion.

1. **Strengthen the role of local government as a co-producer, convener and enabler. This means working alongside communities, groups, business, education, housing, health and civil society sectors to develop and implement a shared vision of place**

2. **Develop local infrastructure for a strong, thriving and diverse voluntary and community sector**

3. **Build and strengthen collaboration and partnership across all sectors**

4. **Utilise arts, sports and cultural activities to reach a common goal putting communities in charge**

5. **Support local leaders to actively promote social cohesion in language accessible to all**

6. **Tackle the barriers to inclusion of minority communities and under-represented groups including hate crime and prejudice**

7. **Promote active social engagement and volunteering**

8. **Invest in social mixing of people from different backgrounds**

9. **Establish a shared national framework of local social cohesion measures to help local areas target resources appropriately and effectively for rebuild and recovery efforts**

10. **Understand the equalities and cohesion impact of strategy and programmes**

11. **Build competence, capacity, skills and knowledge in the VCS (Voluntary and Community Sector) and across local partnerships**

12. **Draw on and support the specialist knowledge and skills of national and local civil society organisations**

This paper has been developed in collaboration with the Belong advisory panel for the Beyond Us and Them research project and a number of our research partners. It is a companion paper to our *Community, Connections and Cohesion during Covid 19: Beyond Us and Them* report, which details our interim findings from the research.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a fundamental challenge to our society, economy, and ways of living. The **Beyond Us and Them** research project, funded by the **Nuffield Foundation**, has shown that strong community connections, local community knowledge and good relations have already proved vital in helping to tackle the pandemic and in particular in mobilising support to help the most vulnerable. We believe cohesion and integration will remain a key element of recovery plans and a vital part of building and sustaining longer term resilience to crisis, shock and change.

Findings from our research suggest that in the early days of the pandemic and first lockdown local authorities who previously invested in cohesion reaped the benefits of being more socially cohesive. Our most recent findings, *Community, Connection and Cohesion during Covid-19: Beyond Us and Them Report*, shows that compared to people living in other parts of the UK, residents of local authorities investing in social cohesion schemes were:

- twice as likely to volunteer compared to people living elsewhere

- had a higher sense of neighbourliness (9.9 per cent higher)

- had a higher level of trust in local government's response to Covid-19 (8.2% higher)

They also maintained positive attitudes toward migrants to the UK and were more likely to donate money to charity and engage in positive social actions, among other indicators of social cohesion.

As well as informing understanding of how COVID-19 is impacting locally and in neighbourhoods, our research is feeding into a wider conversation about recovery efforts. For example our work is referenced in the Government Office Science recent paper on Vulnerable Communities *Resilient Britain: Vulnerable Communities*, and has been included as part of a British Academy paper on communities responding to the pandemic. The research project team has also been invited to contribute to relevant APPGs and to government departments.

This paper has been developed in collaboration with the Belong advisory panel for the Beyond Us and Them project and a number of our research partners. These include representatives from the six local authorities and a range of civil society organisations and networks whose purpose is to strengthen communities, whether that is via volunteering, social action, interfaith and intergroup programmes. Together, they bring important expertise and knowledge in how to strengthen social cohesion in local areas via place-based approaches. We are aware that during the pandemic local businesses played a vital role in supporting local communities and we acknowledge that the contribution of the business sector is under explored in this paper. We hope to be able to address this in subsequent policy and practice papers. In addition our **Radical Kindness project**, which is profiling the very many stories of acts of kindness across difference, will be looking at the role business can play in strengthening social cohesion.

This paper acts as a companion piece to our research paper *Community, Cohesion and Connection during COVID-19: Beyond Us and Them Report*. It offers examples of best practice and recommendations to those interested in developing social integration and cohesion programmes. It draws on work carried out pre-pandemic as well as on examples from responses during the pandemic.

The scope of this paper – what it does and does not cover

We have tried to limit ourselves to those factors that most directly impact on social cohesion whilst being aware that social cohesion can be a vital element in the implementation of any major local improvement programme. For example social cohesion relates to and underpins a number of other policy agendas including tackling loneliness, individual and community well-being; health outcomes; community engagement and participation; volunteering; tackling hate crime and prejudice; and integration of migrant communities. It has also been an important factor in supporting local government response to the pandemic, ensuring key messages are conveyed to diverse communities and supporting local test, track and trace efforts to enhance national programmes.[5] Social cohesion will play a vital role in ensuring a vaccination programme that overcomes low levels of trust by some groups and communities.

Social cohesion can be thought of as both a state and a process. It's a state that describes a place or group of people in society at a particular time, but most crucially it's also a process where a combination of different elements (local trust, social mixing, social connectedness etc.) provide the best conditions for social cohesion to establish and grow. Some of these elements may be depleted by crisis, shock or change but the previous high levels of cohesion mean revival and recovery should be stronger and faster, providing all of the core elements are attended to and developed over time.

Local social cohesion, reflected for example in levels of local trust, intergroup relations, hate crime and prejudice, can be profoundly affected by national and international actors and events. Decisions taken in Westminster, the Senedd and Holyrood can directly impact social cohesion locally and regionally and in particular narratives of 'us and them'. Recent reports (e.g. *Levelling Up Our Communities*) rightly highlight the essential role that communities have played in mobilising to support others during the pandemic, and the need to unleash that power in communities in order that local people can have greater say in local decision-making and can play a key role in shaping and delivering their local area. We note the roll out of the UK Community Ownership and Community Renewal Funds and argue that principles of social cohesion should be embedded at the heart of national policies and programmes for recovery and renewal.

Despite the challenges of the last year the local areas we surveyed managed to foster higher levels of volunteering and neighbourliness and maintain higher levels of local trust than elsewhere. Locally based trust and connection are consistently stronger than levels of trust at a national level and in particular political trust (i.e. trust in your local MP or national governments). As such it represents a vital resource.[6] Trust is fundamental to the functioning of democracy and is a key contributor to the creation of stronger social connections both between and within different groups and communities. It may also play an important role in developing economic productivity.

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5 Danny Kruger (2020), 'Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant', https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/sites/www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Kruger%202.0%20Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities.pdf

6 Fanny Lalot et al (2020) 'Trust and cohesion in Britain during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic across place, scale and time', Centre for the Study of Group Processes, University of Kent

Attention needs to be paid to all of the elements of social cohesion in a particular place as they are interdependent on each other - it is about creating a system or a set of conditions that encourages social cohesion and integration to thrive rather than just focusing on one or two elements.

Common to each of the six local areas was the idea of *place* and the importance of grounding the development of social cohesion programmes in crucial knowledge from local people (communities, groups and cultures) in order to respond to the distinct and unique challenges and opportunities in that place.

Within this overarching theme, attention was paid to developing *people* and in particular representative and multi-level leadership that spoke for the values of inclusion and diversity, and the development of strong intergroup relations including tackling barriers to inclusion.

Finally, there was a focus on *knowledge*, both in terms of data (drawing on local intelligence; moving beyond datasets to ensure underrepresented voices and groups are engaged; considering how strategies and policies might impact inequality between groups and communities) and evidence (what works and doesn't work; sharing knowledge and learning; building competency and capacity across all sectors).

The initial areas for discussion and recommendation are drawn from models of social cohesion including understanding of the barriers to social cohesion. We asked our research partners about:

1. **Relations between the individual and local government and institutions.**

    The Beyond Us and Them research project measures the differences between local levels of trust and trust in national government including political leaders. Findings indicate that trust in local government and institutions has remained higher than trust in UK-wide government. Levels of active social engagement or participation (e.g. engaging in a local campaign online, signing a petition, volunteering, donating to a cause) is also an indicator of higher levels of social cohesion and this was evident when comparing the six local areas with other places that are being surveyed as a part of our research. **Therefore we asked our research partners to focus on what they had done to develop trust, particularly local trust and engagement of groups and communities with local government and institutions.**

2. **Relations between the individual and other individuals, groups and communities**

    The research studied attitudes towards immigration, trust and intergroup relations across all groups, and the quantity and quality of social connections with friends, family and neighbours. After taking into account demographic differences between all areas surveyed, in the six local areas that have previously invested in social cohesion there have been more consistently sustained positive feelings towards all groups and towards migrants to the UK in particular than elsewhere. **We therefore asked research partners to focus on what they had done to foster intergroup relations, social mixing and trust between groups.**

3. **Addressing systemic barriers to integration and cohesion**

    The 2019 British Integration Survey shows levels of social mixing in the UK were low prior to the pandemic.[7] And people with less diverse social networks were significantly less likely to think positively or sympathetically about different groups in society. Many people do not live in diverse neighbourhoods and are most likely to encounter people from different groups and communities in education or the workplace. Infection control measures implemented in order to tackle the pandemic have severely limited opportunities for social mixing and therefore new approaches are required to overcome existing barriers to integration and cohesion. In addition inequality can play a role in driving segregation of different groups and communities in residential areas, schools and colleges and in some workplaces. **We therefore also asked our research partners to focus on how they had overcome barriers to integration and cohesion.**

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7 E.g. 44% of Brits have no contact with people from a different ethnicity to them and one in five has no contact with people from a different class; 72% of people who reported having no close contacts from a different socio-economic background also had no ethnic diversity in their friendship circle.

Finally we asked our research partners to provide examples of good practice to illustrate their approach.

Responses and discussions were focused on the following key areas of strengthening social cohesion:

- *Developing a positive story of place and pride in a local area (for example 'this place is a "good" place to live, work, raise your family, grow older in')*

- *Strengthening trust in local government and institutions*

- *Highlighting the role of the local community and voluntary sector*

- *Strengthening trust and connections between communities, groups and individuals who might be described as 'disengaged', 'disaffected', 'vulnerable' and 'left behind' **and** local government and institutions*

- *Strengthening active social engagement and participation particularly engaging groups and communities that have previously not engaged*

- *Highlighting the role of arts, culture, sports programmes and activities in promoting a sense of place and pride in a neighbourhood and/or local area*

- *Bringing different groups together, including engaging groups that are reluctant to mix*

- *Developing positive understanding about difference and reducing prejudice and blame towards other groups*

- *Addressing structural and systemic barriers to integration and cohesion in an area*

- *Developing successful social mixing programmes within current restrictions on social interaction*

- *Sharing recommendations with other areas keen to improve social cohesion and integration. Where to start and what to focus on?*

Key Themes

Developing a positive story of place and pride in a local area

Shared across all of the six areas is an overarching theme of place and in particular the development of a narrative about place which says that this place is a 'good place' to live, work, raise your family, grow up and grow older. Local authorities in our six areas played a key leadership role as a convener, collaborator, and co-producer of this shared vision of place. They brought communities, public, private and civil society sectors together to develop a vision, plan and infrastructure to promote and celebrate what is positive about a locality and the people, groups and communities that live there and to address some of the challenges that arise.

This place making and place shaping role is recognised as an ongoing task. Nearly everything that follows feeds into the development of this 'story of place'. Underpinned by strengthening trust and engagement this also meant developing the infrastructure of local partnerships and in particular engaging important civic institutions like places of worship, sports clubs, community arts and youth centres, universities, colleges, places of worship and museums to support and enable communities.

Local areas also paid close attention to their communications. They framed programmes and initiatives in a way that was cross-cutting across different groups and communities and focused on an inclusive vision for all. For example in Calderdale 'kindness' and 'resilience' are key parts of their local strategy; Bradford's programme is titled 'Bradford for Everyone'. Social media and communications campaigns, positive stories, the use of positive language, challenging existing or negative narratives were then all utilised to further develop, celebrate and communicate a positive story of place.

This existing sense of a shared pride in a place was utilised by areas as a way of coordinating responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed local authority research partners all credited the strength of their existing relationships with the voluntary and community sector, gained through their investment in integration and cohesion, as being crucial in enabling them to respond quickly to the pandemic. These relationships also helped them to enhance and support national programmes – for example partnering with trusted community leaders to share accurate information around government guidelines and to complement the national test and trace system with local tracking and tracing approaches. Much can be learnt from how the six local areas helped tailor these national programmes to the unique context of their different localities. They brought the capability to seamlessly link data and analysis of need and relationships with specific communities and groups in order to quickly and effectively respond locally to national priorities.

The role of national civil society organisations: Our research partners include a range of civil society organisations and networks whose purpose is to strengthen communities whether that is via volunteering, social action, interfaith and intergroup programmes. National organisations such as these can play a vital role in place based approaches and can bring previously unengaged groups to the table. Using their convening and coordinating power and trusted status as a neutral third party and honest broker, they can strengthen social connections and relationships and deliver change. They also were able to pivot early on in the pandemic to offer specialist knowledge and support to local areas.

We therefore include examples from both local areas and our CSOs in the case studies under this theme.

Case Studies – Local Areas

Blackburn with Darwen

The Council quickly set up a community help hub at the beginning of the first lockdown. Our Engagement & Integration Officers and Community Connectors were an integral part of the success of the hub, using their established contacts and networks and partnership working to mobilise help and support those in desperate need.

Walsall

Our work through Walsall Creative Factory in The Butts area has been truly transformative. We have developed a sense of community where all groups congregate at a central place to celebrate each other's festivals. The group was at the frontline of the COVID-19 volunteer response, galvanising and harnessing its membership to ensure people looked out for one another. It is perhaps one of our most impactful place-based projects and the organisation has maintained those initial connections made with people in the first lockdown as restrictions have been tightened and eased.

Calderdale

We've established our own local test and trace. That's not the Government one, but a local area one where our local community activists - community champions - are actually engaging with people who have COVID-19 to provide that local support. It seems to be working for us; you've got local people speaking to communities, and translating central government guidance so that it is easy to understand. Education and engagement have been our central themes, working with people so that they understand. What do we mean by PPE? How do you wear a face covering or a face mask in the correct manner? How do you keep yourself and others safe? By engaging with our communities, we've got people on our side, we've utilized our local media to provide that information. To summarize it's about ensuring that we can have that engagement with our communities, so hand in hand we take our communities through this difficult time.

Case Studies – Civil Society Organisations

Near Neighbours

Early on in the pandemic in Rochdale, Near Neighbours set up a virtual community platform supported by Rochdale Council and the CVS, enabling a joined-up approach to identifying and responding to local needs. Near Neighbours drew on its own networks to facilitate this platform, engaging members of diverse local groups including Eastern Europeans, Nigerians, refugees and asylum seekers, churches, and mosques. This platform has given the Council and CVS greater insight into the needs and activities on the ground, while enabling community groups to access funding and partnerships.

StreetGames

StreetGames works particularly in low income neighbourhoods where the lived experience of the crisis is recognised as being harsher than in more affluent places - this is true both economically and in terms of physical and mental wellbeing. In March 2020 StreetGames developed a Covid Response Framework to guide their work and provide tailored support to the Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs) in their network and the young people they work with. The Response Framework spans five core aspects: to listen, inform & support; to assist with sourcing funding & fundraising; to provide training & support to staff and volunteers; to share ideas and approaches; and to undertake advocacy and promote connections on behalf of the network.

Sporting Equals

The 'Making Equals' project works to engage and attract diverse young people through sport. The project helps build empathy between different communities, particularly focusing on breaking down barriers across race, faith and disability. The project works to identify local commonalities, educate and empower young people to make a difference locally.

Trust in local government and institutions

Building trust and engagement with local government and public institutions is a key element of place making. Local authority areas described their role as a convener, collaborator and enabler, with some of the LAs also co-producing programmes, devolving commissioning, procurement and decision-making about programmes to the VCS and local communities. Approaches included:

- Building a thriving and effective VCS and involving them in decision making from participatory budgeting schemes to commissioning and procurement schemes

- Local networks so that different organisations and communities can share ideas, expertise, knowledge and collaborate for improvements

- Facilitating spaces for diverse local people to connect, openly share concerns, support each other, and work together to create solutions

- Using local places and spaces as community assets and a way of bringing people together to engage in shared activities, for example local parks, community centres, places of worship, museums etc

- Making effective use of programmes of arts, culture, sport and shared events in place-making and shaping

- Ensuring social cohesion is embedded across all policy and delivery areas and that community groups are engaged in strategic discussions and decision making. Equally, making sure that local elected members and MPs are informed and engaged with social cohesion issues and initiatives

- Improving the diversity of elected representatives and in the leadership positions of statutory agencies to embrace minority communities and under-represented groups

Case Studies

Bradford Council

For their EU Settlement Scheme, Bradford set up a consortium of local organisations to support the commissioning process, reaching out to local residents and driving up the numbers of applications from across the district. Bradford also used participatory budgeting as a part of their Innovation Fund grants to increase engagement from partners, create space for networking and co-production and involve residents in local decision-making about the types of interventions that would work in their communities.

Blackburn with Darwen

Blackburn with Darwen's Local Integration Partnership includes a wide range of stakeholders from across different sectors, including health, education, housing, business, and VCFS (Voluntary Community and Faith Sector).

On one level this helps community groups and the community as a whole feel listened to and also enhances the level of understanding within communities around practical solutions. It also ensures that any plans and projects have the community in mind from the beginning so that local needs are catered for and that often limited resources can reach the right areas and deliver the most value.

The role of the local voluntary and community sector

Local authorities played a critical role in ensuring the infrastructure was is in place to strengthen trust both within and between different groups and communities. Supporting a diverse, effective and representative VCS to thrive provided a means for councils and local services and institutions to engage with communities and groups who are described as 'hard to reach', though our research partners rightly challenge this term:

> 'It is vital that local government coordinates with local community groups that are plugged into specific sections of the community in order to reach groups who may be described as "disengaged" or "left behind". Often these groups, sometimes referred to as "hard to reach", are overlooked by local government and institutions, but rather than being "hard to reach", it is that the relevant bodies do not have strong enough connections with the community in question. Any programmes are then likely to miss this group.'

The six local areas supported VCS organisations to increase their reach, engagement, skills and capacity in order to support trust and engagement of underrepresented groups and communities. Approaches included:

- Brokering and convening conversations between communities and statutory agencies to build trust and develop longer term relationships with the LA

- Building the effectiveness and governance of VCS groups through programmes of capacity building and training, including the improvement of monitoring and evaluation so that VCS can better demonstrate its impact

- Co-producing commissioning and procurement processes with the VCS to increase transparency and engagement in funding and resource decisions and to strengthen community engagement

- Proactively commissioning organisations who employ those from less engaged communities who can better engage with other community members through shared language, culture and community knowledge. And/or proactively commissioning partners who have a strong track record of successful engagement with those that the LA struggles to reach directly

LAs who had existing strong relationships with local VCS found it easier to mobilise quickly at the start of the pandemic and to respond to national priorities.

Case Studies

Walsall

In Walsall, they partnered with trusted community leaders and organisations to share accurate information on government guidance. For example, community leaders have helped with producing multilingual materials, including the "stay at home" video in different languages to tackle misinformation. In addition, Walsall set up hubs across the four localities across the borough (north, south, east and west). The operation of the hubs gained the support of local community leaders, providing cultural insights such as culturally appropriate food parcels (Halal).

Blackburn with Darwen

The Council commissioned a number of voluntary sector groups to support engagement activity with BAME communities. Using local insights and established networks, combined with local and national data, the partnership approaches helped to inform targeted engagement with communities, groups and individuals on key public health messages during the first lockdown.
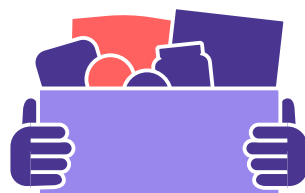
Strengthening trust and connections between those described as 'disengaged', 'disaffected', 'vulnerable' and 'left behind' and local government and institutions

Forging closer links between communities, groups and individuals through engaging with established community and faith leaders has been a traditional approach to strengthening trust and connection with local government and institutions, and can work well as a strategy. However leaders may not always have the broader reach and influence across their whole community. In addition, faith and other groups should not be regarded as homogeneous and because an increasing number of people identify as being of 'no faith' it is therefore important to develop multiple routes to engagement.

All respondents highlighted the need to recognise the impact of digital exclusion and language barriers to engagement of some communities and groups. There is sometimes no substitute for going door-to-door, putting leaflets through letterboxes, ensuring materials are translated into relevant languages and providing interpretation where necessary.
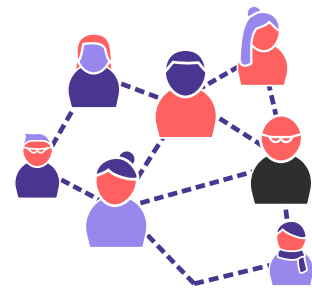
Case Studies

Bradford Council

As part of their integration programme Bradford for Everyone is delivering an ambassadors programme. Ambassadors are representative of local people across area, ethnicity, gender, age and other characteristics. They act as community champions being the voice of local residents and communities actively taking part in various activities such as co-designing, implementing and monitoring projects, leading on conversations that really matter like Black Lives Matters, and identifying local needs and opportunities to making local decisions on how money is being spent. The group is seen as a valuable asset to the district ensuring that local voices are heard.

The Jo Cox Foundation

As part of building the More In Common Network The Jo Cox Foundation also seeks to establish relationships with 'community connectors'; these are people who have links to various groups in the community and are well networked. They may work in education, youth development or be connected to a community centre or group. Importantly these community connectors have regular, meaningful contact with individuals in the community which has enabled them to build trust.

Strengthening active social engagement particularly engaging groups and communities that have previously not engaged

The local areas taking part in the research study demonstrated strikingly higher levels of active social engagement (e.g. engaging in a local campaign online, signing a petition, volunteering,[8] donating to a cause) as compared to elsewhere. The following emerged as shared approaches to encouraging higher levels of these activities with a particular focus on volunteering.

Focus on what matters to people: The issues that bring people together and build social cohesion can vary from place to place, and what works in one area may not work in another; initiatives must take into account the local context. It is about building a volunteering pathway; starting small by engaging in a fairly low level activity, for example a litter pick in a local park, can then lead to greater engagement.

Encourage local leaders and peer-to-peer connections: Community and faith leaders can offer leadership and encouragement to participate, breaking down barriers to engagement. Research partners emphasised the need to actively reach out to engage and support young people, empowering them to take leadership. Informal opportunities to socialise and chat with peers can encourage greater engagement.

Volunteers recruit volunteers: Volunteers themselves are often the best at engaging others in their local neighbourhood; an enthused activist encouraging their neighbours, friends and family to join with them in making change happen is one of the most powerful ways of strengthening active social engagement on the ground.

A platform and an infrastructure: A shared volunteering database that is linked to local opportunities for volunteering can encourage people to move onto and engage with other opportunities. This can be coordinated with national programmes and events, for example Near Neighbours, or the More in Common Network run by The Jo Cox Foundation.

Reward and celebrate volunteers: Rewarding and celebrating volunteers can also encourage it as a social norm, for example Bradford's Citizen COIN scheme.

Linking to national events: Volunteering can become more meaningful when it is linked to national schemes, events, or specific days, for example by becoming engaged with The Great Get Together (The Jo Cox Foundation). And in turn these national events and organisations can offer advice, support and guidance for local individuals and groups wishing to organise in their local area.

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8 Our survey measured both formal and informal volunteering.

Case Studies

Hull UK City of Culture

Hull Volunteers has continued in Hull as a legacy of Hull UK City of Culture 2017 and was able to swiftly and effectively adapt their processes to serve those in need during lockdown. Volunteering opportunities here also provided an effective engagement route for those who had not volunteered for some time, or at all. 2017 was a transformational year for Hull, and being able to re-frame the volunteering spirit of 2017 to inspire community action in a time of crisis shows that the legacy of events offers a strong foundation for volunteer recruitment.

Spirit of 2012's National Breaking Boundaries Scheme

Breaking Boundaries, delivered by the Youth Sport Trust and Sporting Equals, and funded by Spirit of 2012, uses cricket to bring young people, their families and communities together in five different locations in England. In Slough, the project works with Paving the Way, a community organisation that has worked in the area for over 20 years. The group's representative highlighted that, prior to starting the Breaking Boundaries project, Paving the Way had already been running sports-based activities and events but had at points found it difficult to negotiate with the council for support. For example, in one instance they explained that they had tried to get cricket nets put up in the park but had struggled. Breaking Boundaries has helped the group forge stronger links with the council. Their regular cricket sessions have encouraged a lot more people to try out the game and the organisation reports the project "has encouraged a lot more intergenerational dialogue and conversations".

Bradford Council

The Citizen Coin programme, launched during the pandemic, aimed to increase volunteering and participation in communities where active social engagement has been traditionally low. The scheme offers residents an opportunity to exchange their time and skills for doing social good for citizen coins, which can be spent at local Bradford district retailers. This has boosted local footfall and trade. The scheme gives people a sense of pride and dignity in low-income neighbourhoods, where traditionally residents have been reluctant to rely on food banks. The scheme's app currently has over 200 volunteers registered.

The role of arts, culture, sports and events

Arts, culture, sports programmes and one off and annual events can all be effective in developing a positive narrative about a particular place as well as strengthening intergroup relations and encouraging social mixing. Respondents discussed the importance of devolving budgetary and creative responsibilities to communities and groups to encourage greater agency, voice and community ownership. Large scale events, for example whole city of culture programmes, can substantially impact pride in place pulling people together to invest in a shared local or city-wide vision. At the same time smaller, local events and programmes can promote a sense of belonging and pride in a specific neighbourhood, as can the use of a range of social media campaigns and online initiatives.

Events can be an excellent starting point to developing trust and positive social engagement and, delivered annually or as a part of a wider programme, can have a positive impact.

Case Studies

Bradford Council

Funded by Bradford for Everyone, the 'Community Create Celebrate' project brought people from many backgrounds together using cooking and dancing from around the world. Through this project, the residents of Bradford learned about other people's culture, shared common interests and goals, developed skills and promoted more environmentally friendly ways of living. During the pandemic, this project adapted using innovative ways of reaching out to people in their homes. This involved encouraging people to grow plants and vegetables, home cooking with children, learning about different cultures through food, and sharing photos of meals and vegetable-growing in a bespoke Facebook group.

Walsall

Walsall for All has undertaken a range of different arts and cultural programmes as part of its social integration strategy; from commissioning Walsall for All videos which secured a total of 60.4k Facebook hits, to ensuring that VE Day celebrations are more inclusive and pioneering, to an arts programme that connects different school communities.

Blackburn with Darwen

Since 2017 Blackburn town centre has hosted the two-day Festival of Making event. Event activities celebrate the borough's creative and industrial heritage and give all sections of the community a platform to share their skills. Activities appeal to a broad range of people - different ages, genders, cultures, faiths - and the event is thought of as something for everyone in the borough, as well as attracting visitors from further afield. In social integration consultations, residents have repeatedly requested more events like the Festival of Making and praised how it brings people from different backgrounds together.

StreetGames

StreetGames' #SportHelps campaign was launched to help ensure vulnerable young people, who no longer have access to regular sports sessions, maintain contact with positive role models and have access to alternative ways to stay active, safe and well. Through partnerships with sporting organisations, community groups and businesses, the #SportHelps campaign provided resources, supplies, and advice to improve mental and physical wellbeing through the current coronavirus crisis.

Bringing different groups together

Social mixing: The benefits of social mixing for reducing prejudice and encouraging empathy towards minority groups is well understood by all the research partners as a key component in forging stronger intercommunity and group relations. There are a range of different approaches to doing this bridging work including indirect bridging work using stories, social media etc.

Respondents emphasised the value of providing safe spaces and places where people from different groups and identities can get together and talk to each other about difficult topics. Of course with restrictions on movement social mixing activities were severely curtailed, but some respondents described adapting their programmes quickly to an online setting, and some reported that some groups and communities engaged more easily through online activities. Local areas made good use of national programmes that supported interfaith and linking work in education in order to support their social integration programmes. Some LAs also built social mixing into their procurement and commissioning criteria as described earlier.

Engaging young people in social integration: A number of research partners (Spirit of 2012; NCS; the Linking Network; Streetgames; Volunteering Matters) highlighted the role of young people as key players in social integration in that they are often more open to social mixing than adults. Young people are one of the groups hardest hit by the pandemic. The impact on their mental health and wellbeing has been huge[9] and they are in need of targeted support. As part of the recovery efforts the specific impact on young people urgently needs to be addressed. When young people are well supported and provided with leadership opportunities, they are huge assets in building bridging social capital and can have a bi-directional impact, changing attitudes and behaviours of family and community.

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9 Youth Index report 2021 states that young people's mental health and wellbeing is being severely impacted with those from disadvantaged backgrounds being worst affected. See: The Prince's Trust (2021). 'The Prince's Trust Tesco Youth Index 2021', https://mcusercontent.com/65be9ff44567303ae63d84eed/files/3483a2fd-3785-4c62-a66e-e72b21246996/YOUTH_INDEX_2021_Web_Upload.pdf

Case Studies for Social Mixing

Walsall

Walsall for All's Community Dialogue project (in partnership with The Faith and Belief Forum) is one particular example of strengthening good relations to bring different groups together and engaging those that may be reluctant to mix. It aims to engage with people from all across the borough with different identities, experiences and backgrounds. It is founded in the belief that bringing diverse people together helps to build bridges between communities and provides a space where they can learn from each other. Groups that have participated include local gurdwaras, churches, 'BAME'-run organisations (e.g. One Love Community, KIONDO and Sewa Kitchen), community associations, ESOL groups and Midland Mencap. Initially this project was to be delivered face-to-face, but the current circumstances meant it was not possible. It was then repurposed to be delivered online.

Blackburn with Darwen

Through the Our Community, Our Future programme, small-scale grants were awarded to community groups for projects with social integration at their heart. Groups from different areas of the borough that had similar projects, themes or approaches were partnered up to share their experiences and learning, and build links across their communities.

The Linking Network

The Linking Network is a national schools linking programme which works in primary and secondary schools providing a structured programme to foster greater understanding and empathy across difference. At the beginning of the pandemic they redesigned their programme to focus on virtual interaction and exchange and found that schools remained just as committed to the ethos and the philosophy of social integration as children now have so little opportunity to mix with others: "In a normal year we have 30,000 children engaged in the program, from over 1000 classes across 28 areas. Our current figures for this year show that we have had 27,000 children engaged from 974 classes across 29 areas. We've redesigned and rewritten the resources and poets, authors and artists have been incredibly generous with their expertise and time. For example a theatre company M6 based in Rochdale has written and recorded a play which would normally only have been used by the local Linking Network programme, but we have been able to make it available for everyone. We have been really heartened by the commitment to cohesion from teachers who are saying that opportunities for social integration are needed now more than ever".

Case Studies – Engaging Young People

Breaking Boundaries

Breaking Boundaries, funded by Spirit of 2012 and delivered by Youth Sport Trust and Sporting Equals, trains a cohort of young community champions in five local authority areas in England each year to become integration leaders in their communities. The young people are supported by local VCS organisations to design projects and events that purposefully bring people together from different backgrounds to participate as equals in cricket or cricket-inspired activities. Since the pandemic these young champions have proactively forged connections in their communities by delivering food parcels to vulnerable people, running online get togethers and writing to care home residents to combat loneliness.

NCS

National Citizen Service is the largest youth organisation in the UK, working to support 16-17 year olds in creating a country of 'connected, confident and caring citizens where everyone feels at home'.

During COVID-19, NCS has worked to pivot its programme to support young people and the wider recovery. Almost 7,000 young people have engaged in volunteering and social action during a summer of 'Keep Doing Good', including young people from BAME and low income communities. A further almost 70,000 young people have been engaged in programme activities through schools and FE colleges since the autumn. Young people have consistently fed back that their engagement has helped them feel more connected to their communities: 95% of KDG participants said they enjoyed feeling part of a wider team of young people coming together to support their community, and 70% that they felt more connected to their community.

Volunteering Matters

The Grandmentors programme brings together the over 50s with young care leavers. Mentors first engaged in the project to give back to their local community and share their wealth of knowledge and experience. Mentors learn a lot about the struggles faced by care leavers and the systems they are forced to navigate and work with the young people around education, employment, housing, finances, health and wellbeing. As communications moved online, mentoring has had to adapt to online technology and social distanced meetings when it has been allowed. Throughout the programme there is a strong element of bi-directional learning and mutual benefit for both groups who engage in the programme.

Developing positive understanding about difference and reducing prejudice and blame towards other groups

There are a number of different approaches that research partners took to developing positive understanding about difference and reducing prejudice and blame towards other groups.

Tackling disinformation: Respondents agreed the need to quickly and proactively address harmful myths and rumours that might circulate locally about specific communities and groups. Successful tactics included providing accurate, easily accessible, information and correcting misinformation quickly; working closely with local print and media outlets; having a strong presence and network of trusted voices on local social media; making available an anti-rumour toolkit for local groups to use; social media campaigns to proactively challenge misinformation (for example, Bradford Council's #MakeSureItAddsUp campaign); and promoting positive stories and narratives from local people.

Shared safe spaces need to be created in order for people to feel able to be honest and for authentic conversations to take place about difference.

"Participants must feel able to let their guard down, be vulnerable and hear what others have gone through".

There is a need for expert facilitation in order to draw out and manage any tensions that may be expressed and to ensure that conversations are productive and safe. When programmes are carefully planned and well facilitated, they can lead to greater empathy across difference, ultimately reducing prejudice and blame towards those of a different background.

Tackling tensions: Bridging work in situations where there are recent tensions and difficulties needs careful preparation in order to assess whether it is beneficial to bring groups together and this work should be undertaken as part of a wider analysis of what is needed to reduce tensions and conflict. In some cases, local lockdowns have generated rumours about particular minority ethnic groups, stirring up prejudices and tensions. In situations such as these there is a need for expert facilitation and strong and coordinated local partnership working.

The case studies demonstrate the value of working with local community partners and facilitating open dialogue to strengthen relationships and build trust. In situations of heightened tension, being able to draw on expert facilitators to convene and facilitate conversations at both a strategic partnership level and on the ground with communities is invaluable.

Case Studies

Bradford Council

In Bradford, the Anti-Rumour and Critical Thinking Strategy was developed prior to the pandemic to reduce rumours and prejudice by increasing critical thinking across the district. The strategy is focused on three areas of political commitment and policy change, creating a media narrative and developing training resources. This has been used during COVID-19 to tackle rumours and also aims to reduce rumours around migrants, LGBTQ+, faith and working class communities. Different organisations from all sectors across the district are actively developing training and collectively working to reduce rumours and misinformation.

Walsall

Walsall for All highlighted the role of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities making a difference to their local neighbourhoods, through key events such as Black History Month and Interfaith Week and in various case studies on their website featuring contributions from NHS workers to different faith groups.

Calderdale

Early on we established a COVID working group. Some of the challenges that we had were that people were talking about COVID-19 being transmitted by the BAME communities. We were aware the situation was being exploited by certain individuals and groups to divide our communities. So we've been very mindful in Calderdale, we've been engaging with places of worship and actively monitoring social media for disinformation and conspiracy theories. Our local communities have been sharing the rumours that are currently doing the rounds so we can be proactive in tackling them and nipping them in the bud.

Near Neighbours

In Luton the publication of lockdown postcodes on social media generated panic, anger, and expressions of racism and Islamophobia towards Asian and Muslim communities. Tensions were exacerbated when the local media and social media notoriously focussed and sensationalised the blame on two well-known public figures from ethnic minorities for violating lockdown restrictions. Near Neighbours and its close partners locally stepped in to mediate and mitigate threats and risks to the peace and well-being of local communities. They liaised with the local and regional media and also requested the local Bishop for a statement. Together with faith communities they supported the Council in promptly addressing community concerns. As a result, commitment to better serving the community interests was restored by all faith, voluntary and statutory partners coming together; thereby reducing tensions and rebuilding trust.

Overcoming barriers to integration and cohesion

It is often systemic and structural factors in a locality that prevent or deter social cohesion and integration. These barriers exist at local, regional and national levels of governance. Decisions taken in Westminster, Holyrood, the Senedd and Stormont can profoundly affect levels of trust, intergroup relations and narratives of 'us and them' locally. The social integration and cohesion programmes undertaken by the local areas were designed to address local barriers to integration and cohesion and to mitigate the worst impact of those factors that lay outside their direct control, for example school and housing segregation. Infection control measures mean that many people's interactions have become reduced to their immediate locality, which unless they live in a diverse local area, substantially reduces the likelihood of opportunities for bridging across differences.

Programmes such as The Linking Network and NCS have achieved an enormous amount in developing relationships and friendships between children and young people of different backgrounds. However addressing more systemic and structural barriers to cohesion and integration will continue to be an issue as we emerge from the pandemic.

There are some measures for social cohesion included in national surveys. However they do not capture some of the detailed information that is required at a local level. In the absence of a comprehensive set of national integration and cohesion indicators the Integration Areas had developed their own in order to establish a baseline and measure progress for their programmes. They therefore welcomed the common set of measures that was provided via the Beyond Us and Them research project and that has provided them with valuable evidence of where their programmes are having most impact.

Further barriers identified were poor relationships with the media; the spread of misinformation and myths via social media; increased levels of social isolation and the consequent mental health challenges; blame and prejudice towards different groups; and distrust between different communities and the government (for example around Test and Trace).

Case Studies

Blackburn with Darwen

As part of the Learning English Together ESOL programme, learners are required to take part in social mixing activities designed to give them opportunities to practise their developing English language skills. Although the pandemic has meant that learners cannot mix in person, sessions have continued online. Partners include Heart & Parcel who run cooking workshops over Zoom, and Homestart Blackburn with Darwen who run craft and music activity sessions for parents of pre-schoolers. One recent participant of the Homestart sessions said that she now has more confidence to speak in English, particularly to doctors.

Bradford Council

The COVID-19 pandemic brought structural and systemic inequalities to the forefront. Bradford For Everyone engaged with the local workforce to combat racism and discrimination. We launched the Inclusive Employers toolkit and engaged with over 50 organisations who are commited to reviewing their organisational approach to equality, diversity and inclusion, and who pledged to actively eradicate racism and discrimination. This enabled more people to access opportunities, creating a more representative workforce and leadership, and better serving Bradford communities based on their demographics.

Examples of successful social mixing programmes within current restrictions on social interaction

Respondents commented on the resilience of local community organisations who in a short space of time adapted their programmes and activities to shift to digital and online engagement. Against the broader backdrop of digital exclusion (which has already been well documented by other research) there were some surprising examples of greater engagement with some groups and communities who found the shift to online and digital easier. At the same time there was a general acknowledgement that creating the conditions for meaningful social intergroup contact to happen online is challenging.

Case Studies

Walsall

The pandemic has enabled us to re-purpose many of our programmes to run online or under COVID-secure guidelines. These include our Community Dialogue project with The Faith and Belief Forum, Walsall Youth Ambassadors with The National Youth Agency, DWP Community Connectors' Empowering Women programme, the Pledge and ESOL. Although arrangements have been made for activities to take place online, it has enabled residents, community groups and organisations to get involved in our work more closely and the positive feedback we have received demonstrates this. For example, with the Walsall Youth Ambassadors programme, young people who wouldn't usually get involved face-to-face for various reasons developed their confidence to take part in online activity, with the eventuality of using cameras'.

Jo Cox Foundation

In Yorkshire JCF has been part of a network of nine community organisations that have worked alongside the Council to coordinate COVID-19 community response efforts across the area. They have provided support to vulnerable people who have been affected by the pandemic restrictions, linking requests for support such as help with shopping or befriending to localised mutual aid groups and individual volunteers who offered their support.

Near Neighbours

It has been important to develop innovative ways to reach isolated individuals and to build and maintain relationships. These initiatives do not need to be sophisticated, but simply need to cultivate a regular, trusting, positive space for conversation. For example, in Bury, Near Neighbours set up weekly virtual coffee mornings - 'Chit Chat and Chai' – bringing together a group of 20 diverse women. While the setting was informal, the topics of conversation were substantive, including domestic violence, hate crime, forced marriages, honour based violence, and FGM. This virtual group has been a safe space for isolated women to discuss serious issues and to access information and support. This group has also taken the initiative to organise local food deliveries, and successfully accessed emergency COVID-19 funding. In Leeds, a project, "Cooking with Parveen" bringing together a group of refugee women and a group of local women from West Yorkshire, moved to on-line delivery. Instead of cooking sessions, they send to every participant a recipe and the ingredients, and they share their experiences of cooking via WhatsApp. These are simple but significant ways of tackling isolation and bringing diverse people together to generate solidarity and mutual support.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is still much uncertainty ahead. The vaccine and vaccine roll out are of course good news, but at the same time, it is likely that some form of infection control and restrictions on movement will remain in place for a good while longer. The outpouring of compassion and people organising to help others that was much in evidence in the early days of the pandemic demonstrates a huge capacity in British society for kindness and an ability to forge strong and meaningful social connections - essential capabilities in order to face the enormous task ahead of rebuilding our economy and country.

Inequalities between socio-economic groups and regions have been revealed, and in most cases, exacerbated by COVID-19. Living in more deprived areas, working in high risk occupations or insecure employment, and living in overcrowded conditions has placed some groups and minority ethnic communities at much higher risk of contracting the virus than others. If we are to emerge from this crisis a stronger, fairer and more cohesive society these fundamental inequalities will need to be tackled. Inequalities directly affect segregation in housing and education and some workplaces and the resulting lack of intergroup contact can result in a number of cohesion challenges for local areas including misinformation and rumours spreading about a particular group or community; geographical divides and divisions within areas; and insular hyperlocal groups unwilling to mix.

Social cohesion plays out differently in different places and depends on a combination of factors – geographic location, physical infrastructure and social conditions all play a part. This means that different strategies to address local challenges will be needed in different places and central government will need to work closely in partnership with local government and institutions to develop a locally tailored approach.

Local social cohesion, reflected for example in levels of local trust, intergroup relations, hate crime and prejudice, can be profoundly affected by national and international actors and events. Decisions taken in Westminster, the Senedd and Holyrood can directly impact social cohesion locally and regionally and in particular narratives of 'us and them'. We are in agreement with others who are arguing for greater capacity and scope for local communities so that local people can 'design and deliver the kind of neighbourhood they want to be part of'.[10] The six local areas that have taken part in our research project have already embraced a philosophy and approach that puts local communities at the heart of integration and cohesion programmes and as a result have created kinder, more connected and empowered local places. There is much that we can learn from what they have done.

We would argue that principles of social cohesion should be embedded at the heart of national policies and programmes for recovery and renewal. The majority of the British public want to put aside the divisions and polarisation that has marked British society in recent years. People are weary of being at odds with each other and desire greater unity.[11] We now know from our findings that investing in cohesion works in terms of building trust between groups and individuals and between citizens and their local and national institutions.

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10 Danny Kruger (2020). 'Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant', https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/sites/www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Kruger%202.0%20Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities.pdf

11 More in Common (2020). 'Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain', https://www.britainschoice.uk/#our-common-ground; Talk/together (2021). 'Our chance to reconnect: Final report of the Talk/together project', https://together.org.uk/Our-Chance-to-Reconnect.pdf

In order to build a kinder, fairer and more cohesive British society we need to strengthen the ties that bind us and in particular those ties that bridge between different groups, communities, and regions. As others have pointed out the UK is at a crossroads as we emerge from the pandemic.[12] British society remains vulnerable to the divisions and polarisation that were present in the years preceding the COVID-19 crisis and the last twelve months have brought new fractures to light.

What is needed now is a longer-term strategic programme from government to create a solid foundation upon which communities can work together in a spirit of neighbourliness, compassion and unity to recover and rebuild from the pandemic.

In particular government needs to build on the Integrated Communities Strategy and embed principles of social cohesion into relevant national policy agendas working in partnership with local government to support a locally tailored approach.

As previously discussed social cohesion can be thought of as both a state and a process. It's a state that describes a place or group of people in society at a particular time, but most crucially it's also a process where a combination of different elements (local trust, social mixing, social connectedness etc.) provide the best conditions for social cohesion to establish and grow. We have grouped what we have learnt about those conditions under three main interconnected themes, *Place*, *People* and *Knowledge*, and these themes and conditions are explored further below. They offer a set of principles for developing kinder, more resilient and cohesive local places. We will continue to build on these over the next six months of the project as we learn more from our research about the interplay of belonging, social cohesion and identity at a local, regional, national and UK wide levels.

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12 More in Common (2020). 'Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain', https://www.britainschoice.uk/#our-common-ground; Talk/together (2021). 'Our chance to reconnect: Final report of the Talk/together project', https://together.org.uk/Our-Chance-to-Reconnect.pdf

Place

Place matters. Developing a shared vision about a place which says that this place is a 'good place' to live, work, raise your family and grow older in has been a key characteristic of the six local areas and our research partners more widely. Whilst not shirking from addressing and being transparent about the challenges, they have promoted and celebrated what is unique and positive about their locality, including the people, groups and communities that live there. Local authorities have a key role to play in place-making. However, only about half of the public expenditure in a given local area is funnelled through local councils. Other public funded agencies, for example, housing, educational trusts, universities, health and criminal justice sectors, have a vital role to play in building social cohesion. Arts, cultural and sports programmes can provide new and unexpected ways for communities and groups to come together for shared events, activities, and common goals and can strengthen and enhance a positive story of place.

1. **Local government acting as a co-producer, convener and enabler** – building strong, open and transparent relationships with local groups, communities and the VCS. Engaging them in decision-making processes (such as commissioning and procurement, and participatory budgeting) is vital.

2. **Strengthen the voluntary and community sector -** a strong, connected and diverse local voluntary and community sector provides routes for engagement, voice and empowerment particularly for less engaged groups and communities.

3. **Encourage cross sector collaboration and partnership** across private, public and civil society sectors to share evidence, to learn from each other and to marshal their resources towards the shared vision and plan.

4. **Use arts, sports and cultural activities to reach a common goal putting communities in charge** – arts, sport, cultural activities and events can play a huge role in place-shaping. Areas utilised a mixture of local arts, cultural and sports events layered alongside joining national events (for example city of culture programmes, Black History month, the Great Get Together). The best operated on principles of 'community power' devolving decision-making to communities themselves.

People

People are a place's biggest asset. In the six local areas surveyed people were twice as likely to get involved in positive social engagement than elsewhere. Promoting and encouraging all forms of active social engagement and, in particular volunteering, by starting with the issues that local people want to focus on provides a way into greater civil engagement and participation for many. With the pandemic, people have re-evaluated their relationships with their neighbourhoods and locality and many have deepened their sense of local community. There is much that is positive to build on. Diverse voices, groups and communities need to be engaged and represented, and in particular young people's role as leaders and connectors should be recognised and valued. At the same time, there is a need to be proactive in addressing tensions and difficulties that may arise. In all of this, the role of local leadership is crucial, framing a vision and communications in language that actively values diversity and inclusion.

5. **Support local leaders to speak up about and actively promote social cohesion in language accessible to all -** from elected leaders to local MPs, to community leaders, promoting and embedding principles of inclusion, diversity and cohesion in strategy and programmes further builds a story of a local area as a welcoming open place where everyone is treated with respect and dignity.

6. **Proactively tackle the barriers to inclusion of minority communities and under-represented groups** including in the diversity of elected representatives and in the leadership positions of statutory agencies. The challenge of digital exclusion will need to be tackled in order to make it possible to engage with all communities.

7. **Encourage active social engagement** among residents and ensure volunteers are recognised and rewarded. Many more people have begun volunteering because of the pandemic. The challenge will be continuing to inspire and engage volunteers as restrictions are lifted and individuals' priorities adjust.

8. **Proactively support social mixing of people from different backgrounds** – this includes embedding principles of social mixing in procurement and commissioning as well as delivering programmes. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, research partners have demonstrated that it can still be possible to bring people together for positive benefit in online spaces.

Knowledge

Local areas really valued the quantitative aspect of the research as it provided them with specific data on social cohesion measures and allowed them to compare and benchmark with other areas. Some areas had already developed their own measures to establish baseline data for local change programmes. This quantitative data combined with detailed local intelligence (gained through a competent and thriving VCS and network of trusted local interlocutors) provided them with vital information to help them shape and direct programmes. Underpinning this approach was an analysis of how local groups and communities were differently impacted by inequality. They also drew on specialist knowledge from national and international programmes to address local knowledge and skill gaps and to support place-making programmes and initiatives.

9. **Establish a shared national framework of local social cohesion measures** to help local areas target resources appropriately and effectively for rebuild and recovery efforts. This could help to build knowledge of what works and contribute towards learning nationally.

10. **Understand the equalities and cohesion impact of strategy and policy** and how it profoundly affects residents lived experiences and their perception of the place they live and other groups and communities. Positive action programmes should be established on the basis of cutting across different communities to avoid any perceptions of unfairness or special treatment.

11. **Build competence, capacity, skills and knowledge in the VCS** - this can strengthen social connections and trust within local communities. This can also provide a network of trusted local interlocutors that can bridge barriers to voice and agency for under-represented groups.

12. **Draw on and support the specialist knowledge and skills of national and local civil society organisations** who can join local initiatives to national programmes and events, and offer skills, knowledge and resources to support with specific local challenges.

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Information about the Beyond Us and Them Research Project

Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network and the University of Kent are conducting a longitudinal research study to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on societal cohesion.

The study seeks to understand factors that promote or inhibit social cooperation, that mobilise or discourage action in support of others, and that build or undermine the potential for positive relationships between different groups in society in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Understanding the social and psychological processes in responses to the pandemic will support policy to build resilience and recovery in local areas as the crisis proceeds and recedes. The project has been generously funded by the Nuffield Foundation and has recently been awarded further funds from the Foundation to extend into 2021.

The project has four interconnected components: a longitudinal eight-wave survey in three regions of Britain; longitudinal six-wave surveys in six local authority areas that have prioritised social cohesion, and with community activists in hyperlocal communities; three-wave surveys in four metropolitan areas; and a deep-dive qualitative exploration of cohesion in the regions, local authority areas, metropolitan areas and among community activists. Data collection is taking place between May 2020 and July 2021. The project is supported by an academic advisory panel convened by the University of Kent and a community Advisory Panel convened by the Belong Network. Members of the Belong Advisory Panel include our research partners who are supporting both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the project in local and regional areas and with civil society partners.

Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network is a charity and membership organisation with the vision of a more integrated and less divided society. Belong connects, supports and mobilises people and organisations across sectors and neighbourhoods via its digital platform, events, training programmes and resources to improve the practice and policy of integration and cohesion.

The Centre for the Study of Group Processes (CSGP) is based in the School of Psychology at the University of Kent. Founded by its director, Dominic Abrams in 1990, CSGP is at the heart of the School's excellent international reputation for experimental and applied social psychological research on groups and intergroup relations. Its research includes topics such as prejudice across the lifespan, collective action, social influence, leadership, group decision making, and community and political psychology. The Centre's members include eighteen tenured academic staff, as well as its many research fellows and PhD students. Members are chief and associate editors of several major international journals, chairs or members of executive committees of learned societies and professional associations, and sustain a thriving research community that attracts visits and research collaborations from major international researchers, many of whom have formal affiliations with the Centre.

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Visit **www.nuffieldfoundation.org**

You can find more about the contributing organisations here: **City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council**, **Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council**, **Walsall Council**, **Waltham Forest Council**, **Calderdale Council**, **Spirit of 2012**, **Near Neighbours**, **Volunteering Matters**, **StreetGames**, **The Jo Cox Foundation**, **NCS**, **Sporting Equals** and **The Linking Network**.