

# Community cohesion: meet your neighbours



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## **What is ‘ Community’?**

The concept of community is multi-faceted and complex, ‘ community’ means different things to different people, it is no longer about people within spatial areas. Below are three broad notions or competing definitions of community:-

Community as a locality or geographical area

Community as an area of common life or interest

Community as identity, that is distinguishable from other groups

‘ The key thing to keep in mind is that a community always consists of a number of other communities, be they based on ethnicity, gender, age, disability, location etc. In essence, all communities are linked and intertwined in a myriad of different ways. No individual community is so

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different from the rest of society that its particular needs should not be understood'. (Icoco, 2009)

Society has changed over time, Talcott Parsons, describes the structural functions of a traditional society, 'closed' community, as people having a notion of caring or strong bonds, affectionate, ascription, exclusive commitment to a particular group and collective orientation. Whereas, modern society, 'open' community, describes affection disappearing in a universal, impersonal, more individualistic, target driven, 'dog eat dog' or self-orientated society.

## **Community Cohesion**

The Cohesion Institute (2009) states that, 'the term 'community cohesion' has been around for centuries in the writings of political theorists. It is widely used to describe a state of harmony or tolerance between people from different backgrounds living within a community. It is linked to the concept of social capital and the idea that if we know our neighbours and contribute to community activity then we are more likely to look out for each other, increase cohesion and minimise the cost of dependency and institutional care'.

The concept of community cohesion emerged in the UK in 2001, following riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham. The independent Community Cohesion Review Team, chaired by Ted Cattle, produced a report in 2001, six months after the riots. The 'Cattle Report', provided 'a national overview of the state of race and community relations'.

Polarised and segregated communities were highlighted in the report, in which people led 'parallel lives'. Sixty seven recommendations were made whilst these still highlighted the need to tackle inequalities, the recommendations were much more wide ranging and directed a new approach to race and diversity.

As Holden, points out, at a time when tensions are high and towns are becoming more and more segregated, damaging images of British towns, the need for cohesion has never been greater. More recent challenges for community cohesion have also come from international and national terrorist activities. (ICOCO, 2009)

The definition of Community Cohesion has evolved since 2000, it has always been based on a common vision and respect for diversity, however, the most recent definition has an increased emphasis on the importance of integration and shared citizenship: –

### **Definition – Communities and Local Government (2008)**

“ Community cohesion is what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together. A key contributor to community cohesion is integration which is what must happen to enable new residents and existing residents to adjust to one another.

Our vision of an integrated and cohesive community is based on three foundations:

People from different backgrounds having similar life opportunities

People knowing their rights and responsibilities

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People trusting one another and trusting local institutions to act fairly

And three ways of living together:

A shared future vision and sense of belonging

A focus on what new and existing communities have in common, alongside a recognition of the value of diversity

Strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds.”

Source: The Government’s Response to the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CLG, Feb 2008).

Communities will always be diverse, ‘ the key is a ‘ common bond’ between the individuals who collectively make up an identifiable community.’

The Cattle Report identified the role of schools as being central to breaking barriers between young people and helping to create cohesive communities.

In a recent article Cattle (2010), explains how ‘ racial segregation can be bridged if we engage with youth... young people do not necessarily find it easy to build bridges with those from other backgrounds’. ‘ Young people do want integration. They want mixed schools and communities. They see it as an enriching experience and they want the opportunity to learn about others and understand different cultures and faiths’. (Cattle, 2010, Guardian – [www. Guardian. co. uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk))

The purpose of the initiative evaluated in this report, aimed to do just this, by involving eighteen teenage girls from three schools in the North West.

## **Background – ‘Meet Your Neighbours’**

‘Meet Your Neighbours’ was a project which brought together eighteen girls from a Christian, Muslim and a non-faith school in the North West for a two day residential in February 2007. A subsequent meeting was then arranged to review the impacts of the programme with parents, teachers and governors.

The project was run and funded by a partnership between Blackburn with Darwen council, UNISON North West, Communities and Local Government and Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA).

Blackburn’s community cohesion objective is ‘To promote a united community where people from different backgrounds feel they can get on well together and belong to Blackburn with Darwen’. (Blackburn with Darwen Local Strategic Partnership’s, People and Communities Strategy, 2006/7).

Blackburn with Darwen has a long established record of promoting community cohesion and has received national recognition for its work.

‘Community Cohesion has been a priority for the council and Local Strategic partnership for a number of years with a clear focus on engagement’.

‘Blackburn with Darwen has some of the highest levels of residential and educational segregation in the country and there are signs that this is growing particularly in schools’. (Cantle, 2009)

Bridging ‘parallel lives’, in order to increase the feeling that people from different backgrounds get on well together, supports Blackburn with Darwen’s Community Cohesion strategy. It aims to build on existing school twinning programmes and extend the level of contact and geographic boundaries, by including schools from different parts of the North West.

‘Work, education and leisure provide the potential to be important meeting points for people from different cultural and economic backgrounds. To promote a society where people from different backgrounds can get on well together, it is vital to promote work which helps to bridge parallel lives through these everyday activities.

In Blackburn with Darwen, an innovative and successful school twinning programme has been established to provide opportunities for different communities to come together and collaborate for their mutual advantage and learning, but other opportunities exist to further promote communication, understanding and friendship.’ (CLG, 2007)

Statutory obligations including the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, placed particular duties upon public bodies, including schools to eliminate unlawful discrimination, promote equality and good relations between different racial groups. ‘Duty to promote community cohesion in schools’ was also introduced in 2007 under the 2006 Education Act, which required schools to take more effective action to promote community cohesion, of which school twinning is specifically recommended to promote cross-cultural understanding.

**Key aims and objectives of the project included:**

To provide opportunities for young people from different backgrounds who live and attend school in different environments, where they mix with very few people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, to interact in a meaningful way.

To interact, discuss community cohesion, share experiences and ultimately recognise commonalities instead of differences.

It also aimed to extend the level of contact and the geographical boundaries of the concept of school twinning.

**Evaluation**

As with any one-off project, the impact of cohesion is difficult to measure. However, the initiative has been commended by all stakeholders, who believe that it has had tangible impacts beyond the young girls who took part in the residential. Parents, headteachers and governors were involved in a post project event, with opportunities to interact, allowing experiences and learning from the project to be shared more broadly within the schools allowing learning to be cascaded to the wider community.

‘ Although the initial event was small scale, the participating schools have decided to develop the links that were formed, by organising exchange visits that enable a greater number of students to benefit. The two faith schools are also working together to suggest reading materials to promote greater religious understanding. It is also reported that participating students have remained in contact, suggesting that the project has had long-term effects



on direct participants, together with a strong focus on extending its benefits beyond those directly involved.’ (CLG, 2007)

The project produced a booklet and a DVD (Appendix 1), which provides very positive lessons and could be useful for other schools, local authorities or other groups that need to advance community cohesion, where the focus is promoting a sense of belonging and cultural understanding.

Evaluation forms providing feedback about successes of the project and suggestions for improvements were completed by participants and gave some indication about how attitudes may be changing, allowing the initiative to be critically assessed.

Successes included, developing understanding of other religions, but many also describe being surprised to discover they have so much in common with girls from different backgrounds.

“ I was surprised at the fact that there are so many things common between all of us including ambitions.” Participant

“ How quickly once we became open with each other we found common ground and it was the similarities that stood out rather than the differences.” Participant

Therefore, the project achieved one of its aims, to enable young people from different faith (or no faith) communities to recognise the attitudes, experiences and goals that they share.

Communities and Local Government emphasises the role of participation and engagement as an indicator but also a driver of cohesion.

‘ Building a commonality around real life issues is regarded as having most value to cohesion, rather than promotion of civic values as has been emphasised in previous literature’. (CLG, 2007)

Whilst researching the project one of the event organisers from Blackburn with Darwen was also contacted to discuss the project. Questioned if anything could or should have been done differently, the responses were all positive, claiming that the project would be undertaken invariably the same way, and that a similar project had been completed with boys from diverse ethnic backgrounds as a result of this initiative. This too was also deemed a success, there were doubts that the boys would not interact as well as the girls. However, this was not so, again barriers were eradicated, stereotypes challenged and it gave the participants appreciation of youths from other backgrounds. For further information on this project please see Appendix 2.

Research in the ‘ What Works’ in Community Cohesion Report, found that many thought that the ‘ sustainability of any initiative is a useful measure of success, given that action over the long term is key for ensuring real impact, and that interest in continuing the work of a service also indicates it is perceived to be valuable’.

Disappointingly, a criticism of this initiative is that more suitable sustainable long term initiatives are required to have the greatest impact, and if this initiative has proven so successful, why are more projects like this not being replicated more often? Many factors will obviously impinge on this, including

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scarce resources, lack of trained professionals required to facilitate the residential's', also lack of co-operation from both schools and parents could pose a problem. A spokesperson from Blackburn Project level states:

“ It's very, very difficult to persuade a school, who is facing huge amounts of pressures ... to come on board ...” (CLG, 2007).

It is extremely important that successful initiatives are ongoing, as Cattle points out,

‘ young peoples positive actions are easily undone by the entrenched views of older people’.

Unfortunately, at present there are not enough events or young people involved to have a significant impact. Research shows that long-term initiatives seem to work best with projects and networks developing in a sustainable way, with young people recruiting others to take part, and youth leaders are emerging as positive role models, all contributing to the ongoing success of projects. (CLG, 2007)

Capacity building also plays a great part in any successful initiative, this example proved to have committed partners and builds on and expands a successful existing four way partnership and potentially provides a strong basis for future collaboration on community cohesion initiatives.

## **Recommendations**

In May 2009, the Institute of Community Cohesion produced a ‘ Baseline Community Cohesion review with a focus on integration’ for Blackburn and

Darwen, some of the recommendations from this report relevant to embedding community cohesion within our youth, are outlined below:-

Undertake proactive campaigns with parents, communities to promote the positive benefits of diverse schools

Further develop school linking projects, extend these to parent groups and the wider community

Ensuring all schools are open to wider use and for different communities, for example for adult learning programmes

Develop joint teaching across different schools

Develop joint arts and sports and other programmes, across schools

Challenging faith schools to reconsider their admissions policies in the light of the impact on cohesion

Seeking to maximise the potential of funding to create more diverse schools

‘ The Council and LSP have also recognised that community cohesion is not just about cohesion between different ethnic groups but is about many things that bind communities together. This includes religious, geographical and inter-generational issues. However, the challenges facing the borough are considerable. We believe that a renewed, even more ambitious programme with the widest possible involvement is needed if these challenges are to be met successfully and the authority is to remain at the forefront of practice in promoting cohesion’.

This document can be found at:

[www.blackburn.gov.uk](http://www.blackburn.gov.uk)

[uk/.../090505\\_Final\\_Blackburn\\_Executive\\_Summary\\_12E.doc](#)

As discussed there were many positive outcomes from the initiative, including, myth busting, friendships created and understanding promoted, barriers eradicated and appreciation of similarities. Although it was small scale, it was nevertheless effective, there were positive impacts beyond the direct participants, whilst there is no quick fix solution, small steps will bring benefits. As Burgess, Chief Executive of Blackburn with Darwen, points out, this initiative ‘ placed young people at the centre of important work’, which is paramount to achieving a more cohesive society, with projects that concentrate on commonalities and similarities instead of focussing on differences could ensure more cohesive communities in the future.

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