The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK

A foundational report by British Future and the Belong Network to the Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion

Jake Puddle, Jill Rutter and Heather Rolfe

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THE COHESION AND INTEGRATION NETWORK

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Authors:

Jake Puddle, Senior Researcher, British Future; Jill Rutter, Associate Fellow, the Belong Network; Heather Rolfe, Director of Research, British Future.

Editors: Steve Ballinger, British Future; Andrew Dixon, the Belong Network.

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www.britishfuture.org

www.belongnetwork.co.uk

About British Future:

British Future is an independent, non-partisan think tank engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, identity and race, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

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Twitter: @BritishFuture

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Foreword

Communal life in Britain is under threat. Some of these threats are driven by long term trends that have undermined connection within our communities over many decades: the degradation of community infrastructure and institutions, weaker family units, growing inequality, declining trust in institutions and chronic neglect from policy makers. But there is another set of threats that are more recent and are turning the chronic crisis of social disconnection into an acute threat of social division: the mismanagement of immigration, cost of living pressures and social media driven extremism. These forces are converging into something altogether more dangerous - leaving the UK sitting on a tinderbox of disconnection and division.

The unrest seen last summer, the racially motivated rioting in Northern Ireland in recent weeks, and the findings of the grooming inquiry this month have all laid bare the fragility of social cohesion in the UK. But these are not isolated events - to treat them as momentary crises is to miss the point. Beneath the surface lies a much deeper and longer-standing set of structural pressures that have been building for decades.

The report presents clear evidence that the bonds that hold society together - civic participation, and a shared sense of belonging - are under growing pressure. This is leaving our society more fragmented, fragile, and less resilient to internal and external threats. At the same time, forces driving division are intensifying: political polarisation is deepening and trust in institutions is declining, while mounting economic pressures - particularly the cost of living crisis - are fuelling widespread frustration, intensified by a widespread belief that immigration policy is in chaos. These trends are inextricably entwined - narrowing the space for constructive dialogue and increasing the risk of further unrest and alienation. Unless we address these forces, the very basis of our democracy is at risk. Examples of history and around the world show us that peaceful, diverse democracy is a journey, not just a destination. There can be no room for complacency or timidity.

Yet the UK also has real community strengths which make us better placed than many other countries to weather the storm, including local pride and a widespread commitment to fairness and mutual respect.

The report highlights numerous examples of communities coming together - from grassroots initiatives fostering mutual support to projects bridging divides - that stand as a testament to the resilience and potential still alive across the UK.

But while these local successes are vital, the challenges communities face are not confined to isolated groups or places. They cut across social, economic, and geographic lines nationwide. Local successes alone cannot compensate if the wider national context continues to hold the country back. While successive governments have often responded reactively - as with last year's riots - the scale and

complexity of these challenges demands more than piecemeal action. Real progress requires a collaborative approach that includes not only government leadership but also active engagement from industry, civil society, and local communities. Only through coordinated leadership and collaboration across sectors can we build resilience and connection on a national scale - but it will take boldness, bravery, and a willingness to step outside our comfort zones.

This report seeks to understand the balance of risks and resilience in our communities - marking the first phase of a once-in-a-generation initiative aimed at answering a question that goes to the heart of this challenge: what does it mean to live well together? The Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion has been established to bring together diverse expertise and mass public engagement to identify the root causes of disconnection and division and to develop a clear roadmap for change.

This Foundations Report, compiled for the Commission by British Future and the Belong Network, provides the most comprehensive evidence base we have of the challenges confronting communities across the UK. Drawing on a broad and diverse evidence base - including nationally representative polling, over 100 responses to the open call for evidence, expert roundtables, and community focus groups - the report presents a stark picture of a steady decline in community connection intensified by acute drivers of division.

This report aims to capture a wide range of experiences - from communities that feel connected and supported to those wrestling with isolation and division. The resulting picture reveals both the magnitude and depth of the challenge.

Building on this strong evidence base, the Commission will now take these insights forward by launching a UK-wide National Conversation later this year. We'll be asking: What unites us? What divides us? And what would bring us closer together? This work will engage a wide and diverse range of people from communities across the country, reaching into communities that too often feel unheard. Alongside this, a group of Commissioners will explore the evidence and ideas in depth, helping to shape practical, long-term solutions for stronger, more connected communities.

This commission is a necessary response to a set of pressures that can no longer be ignored. We hope it can mark a crucial turning point - an opportunity to move beyond short-term fixes and fragmented responses, and to build a more connected, resilient, and inclusive Britain. Across the country, there is a strong and growing desire within communities to bridge divides, rebuild trust, and strengthen social bonds. The Commission will harness this collective will and hope to help shape a vision of a future where connection and cohesion are central to how we live together. Disconnection is not inevitable. But ignoring it is a choice.

Sir Sajid Javid and John Cruddas

Co-Chairs, The Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion

Executive Summary

A year on from the riots of 2024, a tinderbox of long-term social pressures and grievances – including polarisation, declining political trust and economic pessimism – remain unaddressed in towns and cities across the UK. Without urgent action, unrest risks being reignited.

We saw what that can look like in the disorder of last summer. Attacks on visible minorities and people seeking asylum marked the UK's worst targeted violence in a generation. High streets, businesses and community spaces were damaged or destroyed and people fought the police in the streets.

We should all be concerned at the prospect of this happening again. And the absence of rioting should not, in any event, be the benchmark by which we measure successful cohesion. It is in everyone's interests for people to live well together.

Successive governments have failed to take sustained, proactive measures to address these challenges. Community and cohesion have been treated as second-order issues, rising briefly to the top of the agenda only in response to crises and flashpoints. Activity has been focused primarily on areas of high diversity, failing to recognise that this is an issue for everyone, everywhere. A 'doom loop' of inaction, crisis and piecemeal response has failed to strengthen the foundations of communities across the country.

It is in this context that the Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion has been formed. Over the coming year, the Commission will examine how we can do more to strengthen connections across our differences, enhance bonds of shared identity both locally and nationally, and help build stronger and more connected communities.

This report by British Future and th Belong Network, with support from the Together Coalition, is a foundational research input to the Commission. It provides a detailed snapshot of cohesion and community strength in the UK on which the Commission may begin its vital work to explore long-term recommendations. Its research comprises:

- A nationally representative survey of 2,243 UK adults and eight focus groups (with a total of 71 participants) held around the UK, including in areas that faced riots, to assess public attitudes.
- Insights from 15 roundtable discussions with people working in organisations that have needed to address issues of social cohesion and community development. This stage included 177 stakeholders across the regions and nations of the UK.
- 113 written submissions of evidence.
- An extensive literature review of existing studies and publications.

Findings

A series of interconnected pressures are creating ongoing vulnerability to polarisation and unrest.

Perceptions of cohesion and community, beyond people's immediate neighbourhoods, are often pessimistic and anxious. Focus group discussions highlighted a weaker sense of community at a town, city or national level than in local neighbourhoods. They also revealed a series of deepening, interconnected threats to community participation and cohesion.

- **Economic pessimism and widespread concerns about public services, inequality and the cost of living** are leading to deep frustrations about the potential of 'politics as usual' to deliver meaningful change. Financial pressures mean many people have neither the money nor time to take part in community life.
- **Our increasingly online society is more anxious and vulnerable.** From engaging with news to keeping track of local community updates, people's engagement with society is increasingly shaped through social media. This has created an environment where misinformation can steer grievances toward minority groups, and where clickbait media headlines perpetuate anxiety through a sense of 'permanent crisis'. It has also increased people's exposure to online hate.
- **Polarised debates divide us, especially on asylum and immigration.** The visible lack of control in the Channel, along with tensions around accommodation sites and a highly polarised political debate, has contributed to more negative views on asylum. This is exacerbated by a heated media and online debate, along with limited opportunities for people to meet and interact with new arrivals.
- **Trust in decision-makers is very low.** Politicians are seen as self-interested and disconnected from public concerns. Across the UK, the public report feeling less aligned to mainstream political parties and sceptical of their likelihood to deliver meaningful change.

Successive governments have failed to take sustained action on cohesion and communities.

For too long, cohesion and community strength have been treated as secondary concerns by policymakers, addressed only when tensions flare. There has been no real effort to develop a sustained, long-term strategy to tackle root causes. In England and Scotland, policymakers lack coordinated, cross-department strategies to resource and empower action on these themes. In Wales and Northern Ireland, there is a need to review and update existing community cohesion and good relations plans in light of fast-changing challenges such as anti-asylum tensions and the growing risks of online misinformation.

Progress has been hindered by failures to recognise that this is an 'everyone, everywhere' issue

Current good work on cohesion and community strength is patchy, fragmented and struggles to secure sustained funding. Such activity is often stronger in areas that have seen recent flashpoints and can be weak or non-existent in other locations. In a context of national division and in an increasingly online society, where tensions can rapidly spread, this work must be treated as an 'everyone, everywhere' issue.

Schools and workplaces are spaces where people regularly meet and interact with others from different backgrounds. They could be more closely involved in enabling good relations and social connection.

Rural areas, with lower social contact and fewer community meeting spaces, feel less positive about national cohesion and are often neglected by decision-makers.

Institutions lack confidence to tell positive stories about social cohesion and also to engage in difficult dialogue about challenges. In a polarised climate, many institutions with reach to wider audiences, particularly online, have ducked out of sharing and amplifying positive stories that promote inclusive local pride or that highlight communities working together. We also found relatively few examples of organisations leading dialogue or community engagement that reached people who were more concerned about themes of immigration and diversity. Combined, this lack of confidence to engage the public creates more space for divisive narratives to spread.

A range of organisations are developing innovative ideas and solutions

We heard from leaders across communities and sectors seeking to strengthen communities and bring people from different backgrounds together.

Wales and Northern Ireland have shown national leadership, with strategies to tackle division and strengthen communities. Northern Ireland has led a sustained 'good relations' programme that has resourced and empowered both local authorities and civil society, albeit largely focused on sectarian conflict. Wales has a long-standing cohesion strategy that has increased national focus and coordination.

Local authorities are driving place-based action in areas facing division and disconnection. Their role convening, funding and delivering localised cohesion and community development programmes have led to more coordinated responses. These are, however, often delivered with inadequate and insecure national funding. Programmes include supporting local engagement on issues and grievances; activities to increase community pride;

and efforts to support integration and strengthen ties between residents and newcomers.

An energetic civil society sector, as well as sports, faith and cultural sectors, are doing impactful work in all parts of the UK. This includes a rich array of efforts to empower communities, build shared identities and strengthen relationships between people from different backgrounds (e.g. through volunteering and sport). There is further potential to fund, scale and connect up this work on cohesion and community strength, especially to enable sharing of good practice between organisations.

There are strong foundations to build on at neighbourhood level, in most places

At the level of a street, neighbourhood or estate the public tend to report warm and friendly relationships with neighbours. Seven in ten (69%) people feel that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together.[1] Nearly half (45%) say they 'frequently get to meet people who live in my local community in places like the park, leisure centres, pubs, cafes and clubs or through volunteering opportunities'. At the same time, a significant proportion – three in ten (30%) – say they do not have these opportunities. For many, collective memories of Covid-19 also continue to shape a feeling of neighbourly pride and resilience in times of disaster.

Yet these attitudes are not held everywhere. Levels of reported social contact with people from different backgrounds substantially shape attitudes. Of those who report 'often' having opportunities to meet people from other backgrounds, eight in ten (80%) agree that people from different backgrounds get along in their local area. This is twenty-six percentage-points higher than respondents who 'rarely' have opportunities for mixing (54%). In the focus groups, people who lived in more deprived neighbourhoods often reported that people in their local area did not get on well together. Population churn, crime, pressures on time and fewer opportunities to mix all seemed to impact on community relations.

It will be vital for the Commission to explore bold solutions and look to the long-term, breaking the pattern of backward-looking, crisis-driven responses.

This report is intended to provide starting points for the Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion to deliver a national conversation about the ideas, institutions and shared identities that can help bring our society closer together. Over the coming year, a large-scale programme will engage the public and experts in exploring the role that every institution can play to navigate these current challenges and foster connectedness and cohesion in the long-term.

The authors suggest the following initial principles and reflections for consideration in this work.

Key underlying principles for future responses:

- **Greater efforts to build community strength and cohesion are needed everywhere, not just in the areas with highest diversity or deprivation.**
- **Unifying narratives can help build shared identity and pride, across our differences.**
- **After the riots, we need to be better prepared to respond to future challenges and threats, avoiding complacency as well as excessive alarmism.**
- **Everyone has a role to play in strengthening communities and cohesion: Governments, councils, other public services, business, faith and civil society and individuals.**

Key reflections for consideration by the Commission:

1. Sustained, long-term national plans for cohesion, updated to reflect new challenges and opportunities and backed by funding, are key to strengthening communities and cohesion.

There is consensus among experts and organisations engaging in these themes that taking this work forward will require long-term national strategies and funding. The Commission should consider how the Westminster and Scottish governments might develop national action plans; and how the Welsh Government and Northern Ireland administrations might review their policies in the context of fast-shifting attitudes and challenges.

2. Getting it right on immigration and asylum, in a way that works for new arrivals and the communities they join, would aid cohesion and community.

Views on these themes are highly contested. Yet it will be crucial for the Commission to explore the right balance for change, recognising this as a priority among both stakeholders and the general public. This must be careful to avoid conflating the actions and words of those with the most strongly held views, on both sides of the debate, with wider public opinion.

It will be important for the Commission to explore how policymakers can constructively engage with questions of how to

make our immigration and asylum systems work for all, in a context of deepening political mistrust and disillusionment. There is a need to create space for discussion of immigration within clear boundaries that exclude racism, misinformation and violence from our national conversation.

3. Online misinformation and hate are undermining cohesion and efforts to address this need to keep pace with its spread.

In a more online society, policymaking will need to catch up with emerging challenges to community cohesion and strength. Misinformation and hatred can spread rapidly, and our research highlights the long-lasting, detrimental effects this can have on relations in local areas, such as those impacted by the riots last summer. The Commission will need to consider how policymakers and institutions can innovate to ensure social media platforms provide spaces for community and constructive debate, not radicalisation or racism.

4. Investment, growth and effective public services all impact on cohesion and community.

Proposals to build stronger, closer communities will need to engage with public concerns over the economy and the perceived decline in quality and availability of services. Agendas for social cohesion should be linked with broader policy plans to help ensure people have good housing, work and services such as health and local policing.

Political trust in mainstream parties to deliver change is dwindling and frustrations in our focus groups were tangible. Engaging these grievances through opportunities to shape local decision-making, such as participatory budgeting, plans for community spaces and strategies for neighbourhood safety, could help restore public trust.

5. Restoring public trust and respect in politics could have wider benefits

It will be important for the Commission to explore the role that people in positions of power and influence can play in setting standards of mutual respect and helping to build inclusive and shared identities. Mainstream and social media platforms amplify the most provocative or attention-grabbing content. However, it is also the responsibility of elected representatives to set clear standards of debate on controversial topics such as race and immigration.

Part One:
Setting the scene

1. Introduction

The riots of summer 2024 were a vivid and shocking illustration of how serious challenges to the fabric of communities across the UK, both long-term and recently emerging, can erupt into social unrest.

Frustration with declining living standards, strained public services and the cost of living are high.[2] This has exacerbated longer-term increases in mistrust and anger at the political system, with growing numbers feeling that mainstream parties do not speak for them.[3] Highly contested debates about asylum resettlement and border control have divided society nationally.[4] Housing asylum seekers in hotels can become a source of local tensions when residents (and councils) are not informed or consulted prior to resettlement.

Amid these difficult and complex debates, social media is also shaping and shifting the tone of our national conversation, with rising concerns about online hate and experts warning about the increasing prevalence of misinformation.[5]

At the same time, our society in the UK has many strengths. We are less divided than the US or many countries of continental Europe: studies show that UK attitudes are comparatively more trusting of neighbours and less divided by values and politics.[6] For many people, the Covid-19 pandemic also prompted greater togetherness, as members of the public helped neighbours in need and applauded frontline workers.

Yet the disorder of last summer showed that social cohesion is fragile and cannot be taken for granted. Without a coordinated set of policy responses to these interconnected pressures, there remains an ongoing risk that the violence and polarisation seen during the riots may return. And the absence of rioting should not, in any event, be the benchmark by which we measure community strength and cohesion.

All of us, and all of our institutions, will have to play a role in ensuring that our changing communities can live together well in the years and decades to come. It is in this context that the Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion was formed. The Commission will combine mass public engagement with structured expert inquiry to understand what is driving connection and division across the UK and what needs to change.

This initial Foundations Report, produced by British Future and the Belong Network, with the support of the Together Coalition, aims to offer some key starting points and a research base upon which the Commission may begin its work.

Drawing on a broad base of research, this report assesses the current context of community strength in the UK, exploring expert insights and public perceptions on what can address disconnection and help to build more connected communities. It looks at the views of the public and experienced stakeholders on how to foster social cohesion, seeking to understand what can help to build

togetherness and common ground between people from different backgrounds, political perspectives and generations.

The report draws on extensive UK-wide consultation, involving detailed public attitudes research, stakeholder roundtable discussions, a call for evidence and desk research, to understand the following:

- Public and expert perceptions of the strengths and challenges to community cohesion and connectedness.
- Examples of existing good practice and ingredients for success, locally and nationally.
- Priorities for change, among the public and stakeholders.

By offering an opening snapshot of the national context, this report seeks to equip the Commission to embark on a wider national conversation and to explore recommendations for long-term change. Its findings present insights for policymakers, local authorities, third sector funders and anchor organisations on the proactive work underway in different local contexts to cultivate community cohesion and strength, and where there is potential to strengthen this.

Methodology

The report draws on a mixed methods approach, involving in-depth research of public attitudes, existing literature and stakeholder insights.

Focus groups

Eight focus groups with members of the public were held between 18 February and 17 March 2025 in community venues around the UK, including a number of locations affected by unrest the previous year. These locations were: Abergavenny (also with participants from Pontypool and Cwmbran), Belfast, Bolton, Croydon, Edinburgh, Gateshead, Rotherham and Stoke-on-Trent. A market research agency, Acumen, was contracted to recruit a total of 71 participants from a representative range of demographic criteria (age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic grade) and with a range of attitudes to immigration (incorporating those who feel positive about immigration to the UK, those who are more anxious and concerned about immigration, and sections of the public who see both pressures and gains from immigration).

Nationally representative polling

A nationally representative survey of 2,243 UK adults was conducted by Focaldata, with fieldwork carried out online from 7 to 9 April 2025.

The survey findings were broken down by social and demographic factors which included gender, age, ethnicity, region or nation of residence, social grade and 2024 general election vote. We also looked at differences in opinion based on reported levels of day-to-day social contact with people from different backgrounds.

The survey was carried out after the focus groups. Themes explored in the survey questions were drawn from those surfaced during our qualitative discussions to test broader national attitudes beyond the locations that we visited.

Stakeholder and expert roundtable discussions

Fifteen roundtable discussions were hosted, online and in-person, to collate insights from individuals and organisations with expertise in cohesion and community strength. These engaged a total of 177 individuals and organisations (listed in Appendix II).

Thirteen roundtables were hosted with stakeholders in each of the regions and nations of the UK, exploring a combination of nationally focused questions and place-based themes. These engaged a mix of organisations, including local and combined authority representatives, third sector organisations, funders, unions, housing associations, football community trusts, faith organisations and academics.

One online roundtable was held with representatives of thinktanks and political thought-leaders across a range of ideological perspectives, to undertake a more detailed discussion on the policy of community strength and cohesion.

One online roundtable was held with representatives and experts in racial equity and anti-racist practice, to explore overlaps between efforts to promote cohesion with agendas for fairness and equity.

Literature review

Alongside the focus groups, stakeholder meetings and polling we also undertook a literature review. It comprised:

- A key word literature search, followed by analysis and interpretation of relevant studies.
- A review of published materials on organisational websites, in the UK and internationally.
- An audit of all local and combined authority policy and practice on community building and cohesion. This identified relevant policy documents and enabled us to understand how local and combined authorities approached community and cohesion policy.

The review mapped and synthesised research from different academic disciplines – anthropology, geography, political science, sociology, social policy and social psychology – to create a holistic framework for understanding community strength and cohesion.

It examines key concepts and trends, and policy and practice responses. The literature review also highlights gaps in knowledge. The full literature review is available to download here and a summary is included in Appendix VI.

Call for evidence

We also issued a call for evidence in February - March 2025. This asked five questions:

1. What is community, cohesion, community strength and how do we build shared stories?
2. What interventions promote building community, community cohesion, community strength and shared stories?
3. How did organisations in your area respond to the 2024 riots?
4. What should be the respective roles of central and local government in promoting community connectedness, cohesion and resilience?
5. Looking to the future: How might national and local bodies and government better respond to barriers to stronger community?

Some 113 responses were received, from 104 organisations and 9 individuals. Submissions were received from all four nations of the UK, from organisations using different approaches in their work, and with different roles and remits. A list of organisations that submitted evidence, and a summary report, is included in Appendix V.

2. What is community strength and cohesion and why does it matter?

The Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion is examining both community strength and community cohesion.

Community refers to a group of people who share common characteristics such as living in the same area or belonging to the same professional, social or ethnic group.

There are some differences in the ways that community strength and community cohesion have been defined and understood, discussed in the Literature Review but there is a broad consensus on the underlying characteristics[7]:

Community strength is the resources that a community has to support its members. These include economic resources, access to services, community assets such as civil society groups, social networks and leadership. This report uses the term **community development** to refer to programmes that aim to strengthen communities. A strong community is one that can support its members, foster well-being and adapt in times of crisis and change.

Community cohesion is the glue that holds society together: trust, a sense of security and belonging, mutual support, shared norms and values, and community and democratic resilience. Economic and infrastructural factors such as employment and housing impact on community cohesion, as do social factors such as population change, civic participation, local leadership and social connectedness[8].

Community strength and cohesion are about people living well together. Social relationships, sometimes described as social capital, is the thread that links community strength and community cohesion. These relationships can take different forms:

- **Bonding relationships** are the close links between people who share similar characteristics, for example between people who live in close-knit communities, in workplaces and between people from similar class or ethnic backgrounds. These links can help prevent loneliness and isolation. The Covid-19 pandemic also showed the crucial role of bonding relationships in times of crisis, with neighbours supporting each other.
- **Bridging relationships**, formed between people from different backgrounds, are the relationships that span divides across society. Bridging relationships reduce inter-group

conflict, stereotyping, perceptions of threat and prejudice and build empathy, trust and shared identities[9,10].

- **Linking social capital** is the relationship between people and institutions, for example between constituents and MPs, or between people and business leaders or council officials. These connections help build political trust and enable people to gain resources or bring about neighbourhood change.

Terms such as community strength and cohesion, in public policy, have been contested, posing challenges for policymakers in terms of definition and measurement.[11] Some critics argue that community cohesion downplays the need to address structural inequalities and racism[12].

Community cohesion is also sometimes used interchangeably with integration, a process whereby newcomers to an area and longer-settled residents live well together. Government policy on community cohesion has largely concentrated on challenges in the most ethnically and religiously diverse urban areas. While this focus may reflect genuine concerns, it has also contributed to framing community cohesion primarily as an issue linked to ethnic and faith diversity, rather than as an issue affecting society as a whole.

Trends in community strength and community cohesion

Below we set out some of the indicators that could be used to measure community strength and cohesion and factors that impact on these conditions.

- **Social isolation:** Some 26% of people reported feeling lonely some of the time or often in 2023-2024[13].
- **Bonding social contact:** Some 69% of people chatted to their neighbours at least once a month, more than to say hello, in 2023-2024[14]. People who live in private rental accommodation (52%) and 16–24-year-olds, were the groups least likely to speak to their neighbours regularly.
- **Bridging social contact:** Some 37% of people reported that all their friends were from the same ethnic group, in the 2021-2022 Community Life Survey. In the same year, 22% had friends who were all from the same religious group, 20% had friends only from the same age group, and 22% only had friends with similar educational backgrounds.
- **Linking social contact:** Only 14% of people have contacted an official such as a councillor or MP in the last 12 months[15].
- **Inter-personal trust:** Only 41% of people feel that many people in their neighbourhood can be trusted. Young people aged 16-24 (25%), gays and lesbians (31%), minority ethnic groups and Muslims (25%) are least likely to say that many people in their neighbourhood can be trusted[16].

- **Belonging:** Some 84% of people feel fairly or strongly that they belong to Britain, including 85% of those of Asian ethnicity and 86% from Black ethnic groups.[17] Some 63% of people feel they belong to their neighbourhood. Neighbourhood belonging is lower among young people and people in private rental accommodation.
- **Civic participation:** There has been a decline in formal volunteering in recent years, with 16% of people offering their time to formally constituted organisations in 2023-24, compared with 35% in 2013-14[18]. Voter turnout is another indicator of civil participation and underpins democratic resilience: general election turnout has declined since 1997 and stood at 59.7% in 2024, falling below 50% in 55 parliamentary constituencies.
- **Political trust:** The 2024 British Social Attitudes Survey showed a record high of 45% of adults now saying they 'almost never' trust governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party, up by 22 percentage points from 2020 during the height of the pandemic. Some 58% of people now say they 'almost never' trust politicians of any party to 'tell the truth when they are in a tight corner', also a record high.
- **Hate crime:** There were 140,561 hate crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2024, a fall of 5% compared with the year ending March 2023. Race-based hate crimes are the most common and accounted for 98,799 offences. Religious-based hate crimes have seen a 25% rise from the previous year, from 8,370 to 10,484 reported offences.[19]
- **Income and poverty:** In 2024, one in five people (21%) lived in relative low income after housing costs were taken into account[20]. The annual Carnegie Life in the UK Survey showed 14% of people can't afford to keep their home warm and 11% can't afford to socialise with friends or family outside of the home once a month if desired[21].
- **Unemployment:** Some 13.4% of young people aged 16 to 24 were not in education, employment, or training (NEET) between October and December 2024, the highest level since 2013.[22] The employment rate of some ethnic minority groups is significantly below average.
- **Skills:** The 2021 Census found that more than one million people in England and Wales could not speak English well or at all. Some 18% of adults in England have low literacy skills[23]. People with poor literacy are more likely to be unemployed and more likely to believe damaging or divisive fake news, and less likely to vote or to volunteer in their communities.
- **Housing:** A snapshot on 30 September 2024 found that 126,040 homeless households in England were in temporary accommodation, an increase of 15.7% from 30 September 2023.[24]

- **Policing:** Despite rising between 2006 and 2016, trust in the police has fallen in recent years. Some 79% of people reported they had overall confidence in the police in the 2016 Crime Survey of England and Wales, falling to 68% in 2023.

Why strong and cohesive communities matter

The 2024 summer riots demonstrated the consequences of allowing tensions to rise and failing to invest in community cohesion. Additional policing costs were estimated to be £28 million, with forces removing officers from their ordinary roles to maintain order.[25]

During the Covid-19 pandemic, places with stronger social networks coped better. Research by the Belong Network showed that areas that invested in community cohesion initiatives exhibited higher levels of neighbourliness, trust in local government and optimism during the pandemic.[26]

Strong and cohesive communities are better equipped to adapt to population changes, such as those resulting from international migration. In cohesive communities, the bonding, bridging and linking relationships between residents also help discourage crime and anti-social behaviour.

Bonding and bridging social relationships help people find jobs and progress their careers[27]. The role that social networks play in the economy has been recognised by successive governments, most recently in the 2021 Levelling Up White Paper.

There is also a growing body of evidence highlighting the benefits of social connection on good health and wellbeing.[28] Loneliness is a documented risk factor for depression, and has also been linked to heart disease, stroke and dementia.

Part Two:

Perceptions of commmunity cohesion and strength

3. National perceptions of community

Key points

- Most of the public feel a strong sense of local community, influenced often by experiences of the pandemic, though neighbourhood connectedness was felt to be stronger in past decades.
- However, the cost-of-living crisis is reducing the time and money that people have for activities in their local area and there is a perceived decline in the quality and quantity of community spaces. Shifting social habits, such as spending more time online, and more working from home, have impacted community participation for some.
- Perceptions of community cohesion are broadly positive for most people, in their local area and through a national lens. Yet focus group discussions revealed concerns about segregation and division when probed in more depth.
- Differing levels of confidence in community relations across society also highlight how our sense of cohesion is influenced by opportunities for social contact with people from different backgrounds.

This chapter draws on our research to examine the headline trends in public perceptions of community strength and cohesion.

It reveals a worryingly large minority who are not having regular interactions with other people in their community, including those from different backgrounds. Lacking the money or time to do so, or the shared community spaces in which to do it, were factors that hold people back. Changes in how we work, communicate and connect, brought about by technology and the long tail of the Covid-19 pandemic, also mean people are spending more time alone.[29,30]

Most people are finding opportunities to meet and mix with others, and most feel that people get along reasonably well at neighbourhood level. But some areas are still seen as segregated, with people in less affluent areas feeling they have fewer opportunities for neighbours to come together. Overall, three in ten people say they rarely or never get a chance to interact with people from a different background to their own.

What community means today

Local community is viewed through the lens of a person's immediate neighbourhood

Our public focus groups explored people's perceptions of togetherness and division in their 'local community', and what community meant to people across the UK nations and regions.

Most people in our focus groups understood their local community to mean their immediate neighbourhood, estate or street. A majority across the discussions reported positive relationships with their neighbours, through striking up conversations or reciprocal acts of kindness such as looking after redirected parcels. Most, though not all, felt a sense of neighbourliness in their area.

People living in more deprived areas, particularly those who cited community safety as a local concern, were more likely to share accounts of neighbours withdrawing and spending less time talking with others. In areas with more rental housing, we also heard concerns about population churn – people moving in and out of an area – reducing opportunities for neighbours to build connections.

While most people were positive about their immediate area, focus group participants found it harder to describe 'community' across their city, borough, town or village. Some attributed this to a decline in opportunities for mixing, such as local events that would previously have brought their wider area together.

Many also balanced positive views of local neighbourliness with a longer-term view that society as a whole is becoming more atomised, with people 'sticking to their own' (within families or in some cases within ethnic or nationality groups). Particularly among middle aged and older participants, we found a perception that people spent less time together in communities than in the past.

"I think about [community] as my very local community. So, the houses around where I live [...] My neighbours are very friendly on either side of me and we talk. But there might as well be a Grand Canyon between us and the other side of the road."

– Bolton focus group participant

"I think the real root cause is this erosion of the community. I think there was a sense of community here before, definitely during my parents' era. And I feel like as time has gone by, that really started to wither away. I think we decided to isolate ourselves a lot more – not spending time outside our families."

– Croydon focus group participant

Ideas of community go beyond a person's local area

The focus groups also showed how not all communities are place-based, with people describing how they engaged with others in different contexts:

- **Communities of interest** – based around shared hobbies (such as Park Runs or Choirs), shared experiences (such as parents at school gates) or shared objectives (such as voluntary work or social action campaigns).
- **Communities of identity** – for example based around faith (e.g. places of worship) or sexuality (LGBT+ spaces).
- **Communities of occupation or education** – for example in workplaces, colleges or university campuses.

'Community' in its broader sense can mean different things to different people. While this initial research largely focuses on place-based community, the next phase of the Commission could consider how broader understandings of community life affect peoples' views on how our society gets along.

The Covid-19 legacy and the rise of local WhatsApp groups

The Covid-19 lockdowns were often cited as having strengthened a street-based understanding of community by building more connections between neighbours, although this was less prevalent in deprived areas and among those in rental accommodation.

Many people noted a trend of identifying with their community more through online platforms since the pandemic. Focus group participants referenced local WhatsApp groups, originated during the Covid-19 lockdowns, which remained active as a way to introduce themselves to neighbours and stay in touch, when working and social patterns had reduced instances of 'bumping into people' offline. Larger Facebook pages for villages, towns, boroughs and cities were also cited in a majority of the focus groups as playing an important role in people's perceptions of community and awareness of local activities and opportunities.

Community Participation

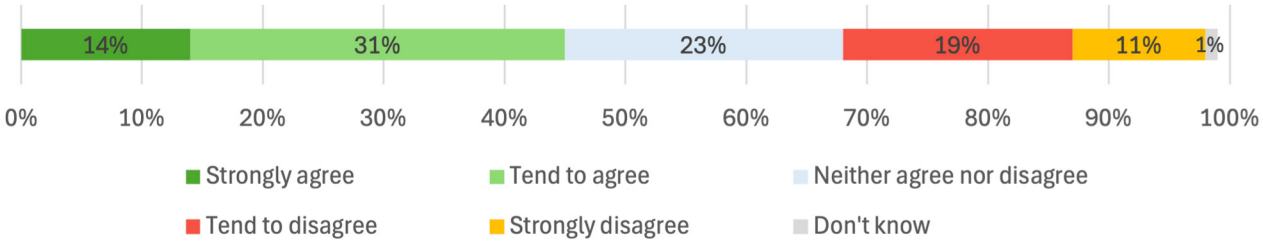
Our research found varied perceptions about levels of local community closeness and participation. Focus group participants reported a strong sense of community spirit, alongside challenges to community participation arising from barriers of costs, confidence and time pressures.

Around half the public are regularly active in their local community

Figure 3.1: Nearly half report frequently meeting others at local community spaces

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

I frequently get to meet people who live in my local community in places like the park, leisure centres, pubs, cafes and clubs or through volunteering opportunities



Focaldata nationally representative survey of 2,243 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025

Our nationally representative survey finds that nearly half the public (45%) say they *'frequently get to meet people who live in my local community in places like the park, leisure centres, pubs, cafes and clubs or through volunteering opportunities'*, while three in ten (30%) say they do not.

Levels of contact in community spaces varied between demographic groups, and are stronger among younger generations, including 52% of 18-24s and 60% of those aged 25-34, compared to just over a third (35%) of over 65s.

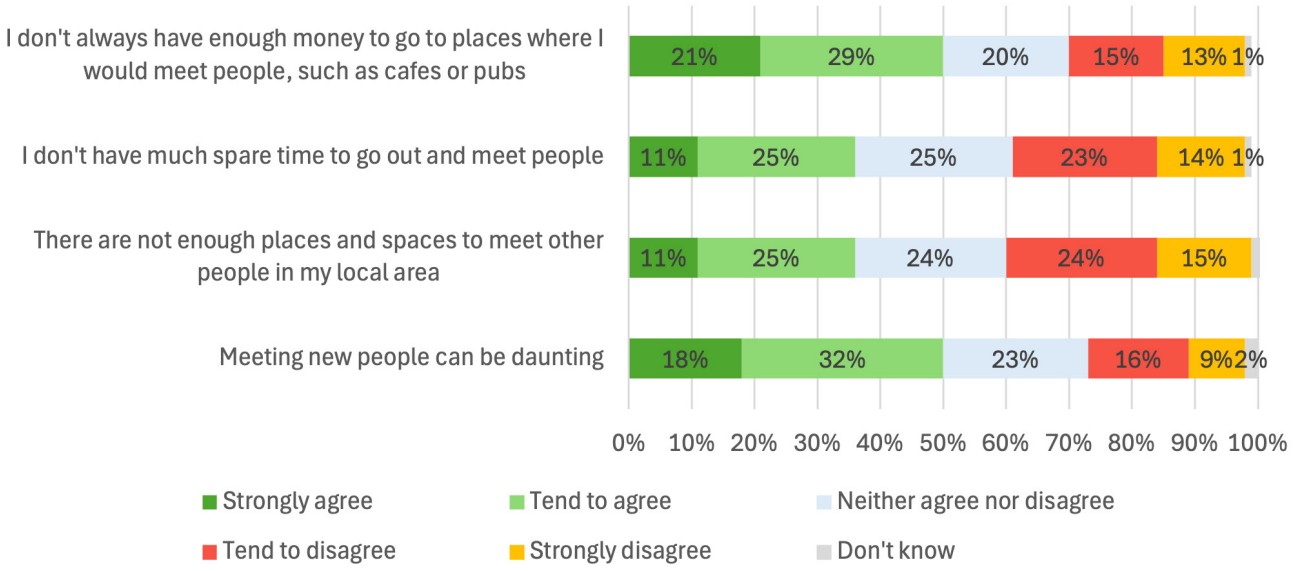
Socioeconomic context plays an important role. Respondents in grades ABC1 were more likely (51%) to report social contact in community spaces than those in groups C2DE (38%). Moreover, urbanisation appears to impact community life: with 60% of respondents from inner city areas agreeing with the statement, compared to 44% in suburban areas, 40% in towns and 39% in villages.

Communities of identity and interest also influence levels of social contact, with 60% of those who consider religion or faith as important to their life saying they meet people in community spaces, compared to 34% of those who do not. Respondents with children under-18 were also more likely to agree with the statement (61%) compared to those without (37%).

Costs, confidence and community infrastructure shape community participation

Figure 3.2: Potential barriers to community participation

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements…



Focaldata nationally representative survey of 2,243 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025.

Our research finds that factors of money, time, social confidence and the availability of community infrastructure (e.g. community centres, youth clubs and pubs) can affect the ability of many to participate in their community.

Income

One in three respondents (33%) report currently 'finding it hard' to get by on their current household income; and half the public (50%) agrees with the statement 'I don't always have enough money to go to places I would meet people, such as cafes or pubs'. The cost-of-living crisis was a recurring theme throughout our focus groups, leaving it harder for some people to justify social expenses. Stakeholders in many of the roundtables also shared experiences of struggling to engage residents on low incomes in the current economic climate, emphasising the importance of free, accessible activities.

"Prices are going up, the salaries aren't there anymore, there's less security. When people are living in poverty and worried about what food they have on the table, that's their priority. They're thinking about, how am I going to be looked after, safe. They're not able to think about community or politics."

– Stakeholder, Belfast roundtable discussion.

Time availability

Time availability is a related factor, with many people in the focus groups reporting that long working hours or family commitments restricted their ability to get to know other local people. Over a third (36%) of respondents agreed with the survey statement 'I don't have much spare time to go out and meet people', rising to 48% of those with children under 18. In focus groups, we also heard how online working reduced people's real-world interaction, reducing time spent on friendly workplace interactions.

"I'd be more active if only I had more spare time and I wasn't busy working on a business, because I now can't work, because my health is really crap, and I've got a two-year-old. If I had a spare day, I would be out there in the community doing anything that I possibly could, but I can't. I'm trying to pay for a roof over my head."

– Stoke-on-Trent focus group participant

Community infrastructure

People told us about the decline and closure of community spaces over the past fifteen years, particularly in areas with higher deprivation and in more rural areas that had fewer existing community spaces and institutions. Focus group participants reflected fondly on libraries or youth spaces that they had previously utilised, but which now lacked funding. Nationally, 36% in the poll agree that 'There are not enough places and spaces to meet local people in my area', while 39% disagree. This is felt most strongly among people aged 18-24 (49% agree/27% disagree), while over-65s hold almost inverse views (23% agree/49% disagree).

"Whenever local authorities want to close something, it's always the libraries or the cinema – the nice things, the social places."

– Abergavenny, Pontypool and Cwmbran focus group participant

Social confidence

Issues of social confidence also shape people's likelihood to interact with others in their local community. Half the public (50%) agree with the statement 'Meeting new people can be daunting'. Younger people felt this more keenly (60% of 18-24s) compared to 47% of 55-64s and 38% of over-65s. In focus groups, older participants were more likely to reflect fondly on strong neighbourhood connections, while some younger members felt their generation had grown less accustomed to meeting and getting to know their neighbours, in an online age.

Community Cohesion

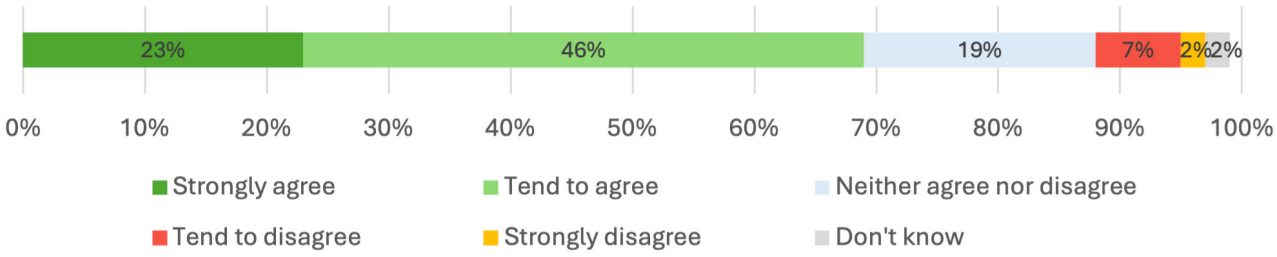
Our research then examined perceptions of community relationships between people from different backgrounds, ages and political perspectives.

Local perceptions of cohesion are largely positive, although some areas are seen as segregated

Our polling finds that a large majority of the public view the state of community cohesion as broadly positive. Similar to the Community Life Survey, we asked respondents the extent to which they agree that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together.[31] Around seven in ten (69%) agree, while just 9% disagree. Majorities across all demographic groups, including across ethnic groups, hold broadly positive views on the state of local cohesion.

Figure 3.3: Most of the public feel that people from different backgrounds get on well in their local area

To what extent do you agree or disagree that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together?



Focaldata nationally representative survey of 2,243 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025.

Levels of social contact with people from different backgrounds affect people's perceptions of cohesion. Strikingly, of those who report 'often' having opportunities to meet people from other backgrounds, eight in ten (80%) agree that people from different backgrounds get along in their local area – twenty-six percentage-points higher than respondents who 'rarely' have opportunities for mixing (54%).

There is some place-based variation in views, with respondents from urban areas, where social contact is typically more common, more likely to agree that people get on well locally (81%) than those in suburban areas (71%), towns (61%) or villages (66%).

Our focus groups heard from people in a variety of locations across the UK, including several areas impacted by riots the previous year such as Bolton, Belfast, Rotherham and Stoke-on-Trent. Here, participants reported stronger concerns about the degree of segregation between ethnic and nationality groups, with people staying in 'bubbles' of friendships with others from similar backgrounds.

Levels of deprivation and concerns about community infrastructure also affected attitudes. Focus group participants living in less affluent areas often shared how they felt that 'well off' areas had fewer tensions over access to services and more local opportunities for neighbours to come together. Stakeholders reported more negative perceptions of local neighbourliness in areas with increased deprivation, higher crime and fewer attractive meeting spaces.

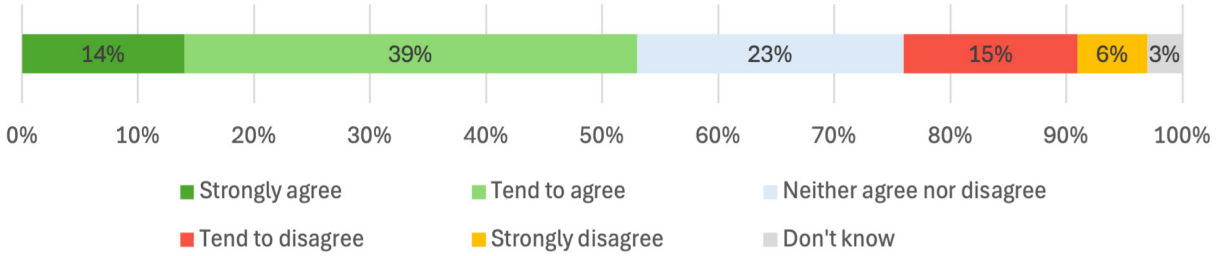
"If you go to Westside Plaza, it's all charity shops, bookie shops and off-licences. There's been a lot of incidents there: a lot of beatings up and everything, because people hang out there, by the off licence, drinking. And there's just nothing for the teenagers to do."

– Edinburgh focus group participant

Perceptions remain broadly positive, but with a smaller majority, when respondents are asked about cohesion on a national basis, rather than in their local area. Just over half (53%) agree that the UK is a place where people from different backgrounds got on well, while one in five (20%) disagree.

Figure 3.4: Half the public feels that people from different backgrounds in the UK get on well

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the UK is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together?



Focaldata nationally representative survey of 2,243 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025.

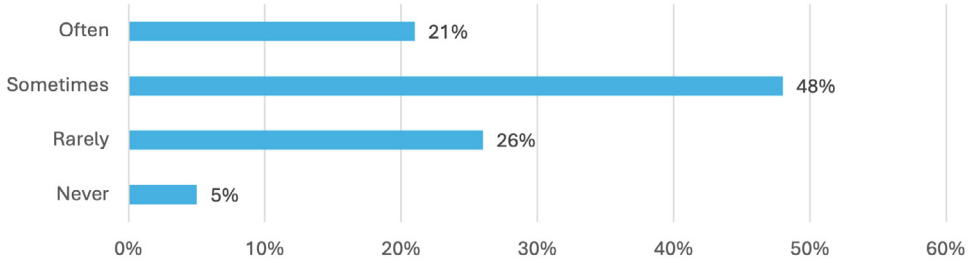
Socioeconomic grade, education, urbanisation and levels of social contact all affect people's responses. Those who self-report often having opportunities to meet people from other backgrounds were nearly twice as likely (67%) to agree that people in the UK get on well, compared with those who 'rarely' (35%) had opportunities for bridging social contact.

Our focus groups explored these local and national perceptions in further detail. Participants felt that people from different walks of life could 'rub along' together locally, and that direct lived experience of tensions was lower. However, as we explore in Chapter 4, more concerned views about polarisation surfaced when questions were framed in terms of how 'united' or 'divided' people were across the country.[32] Further research for the Commission could look to explore the extent to which perceptions vary between lived local experiences and broader national perspectives also shaped by media, political and online discourse.

A majority report having social contact with people from different backgrounds

Figure 3.5: Most of the public feel they have opportunities to meet people from different backgrounds

How often, if at all, would you say you normally have the opportunity to meet and interact with people who are from a different background to you?



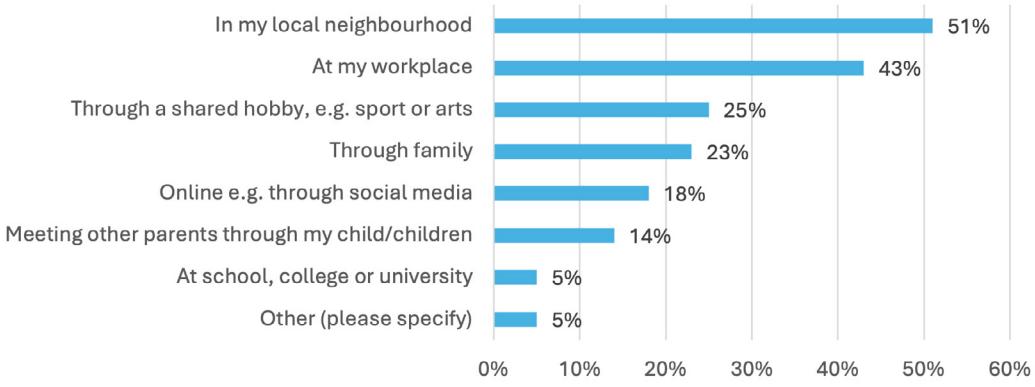
Focaldata nationally representative survey of 2,243 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025.

Half the public (48%) in our survey reported 'sometimes' having opportunities to meet and interact with people who are from a different background, while one in five (21%) had 'regular' opportunities. Yet a quarter (26%) reported 'rarely' having such opportunities and 5% answered 'never'.

Respondents aged 18-24 were more likely to answer 'often' or 'sometimes' (75%) compared with over-65s (55%), likely reflecting the relative diversity of younger generations. Graduates and those in social grade ABC1 were also more likely to report having opportunities to meet people from different backgrounds to their own.

Figure 3.6: Neighbourhoods, workplaces and hobbies create spaces for mixing

Where do you generally meet and interact with people who are from a different background? [Select as many as apply][33]



Focaldata nationally representative survey of 2,140 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025. Based on those who answered 'Often', 'Sometimes' or 'Rarely' having opportunities to meet people from different backgrounds.

People are most likely to meet and interact with others from a different background in their immediate neighbourhood (51%), their workplace (43%) or through hobbies (25%).

Social mixing (between people from different backgrounds) at a neighbourhood level is reported by 61% of older respondents aged 65+, compared with 30% of those aged 18-24, likely reflecting trends in lifestyle and routine. Workplaces were more likely spaces for mixing among younger respondents, who were also more likely to report online social mixing (39%) than over-65s (10%).

The findings reveal substantial differences in reported workplace contact based on educational outcomes and social class, likely a result of different workplace environments and work patterns. Graduate respondents were almost twenty percentage-points more likely to report social mixing through their workplace (56%) than non-graduate respondents (37%); while this was 14 percentage-points higher for people in socioeconomic grades ABC1 than C2DE.

4. What Brings Us Together

Key points

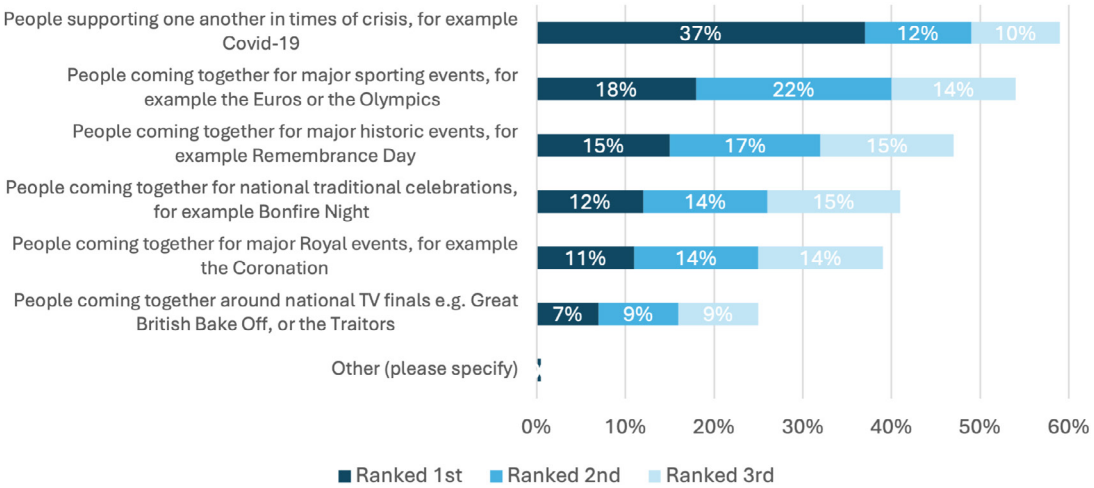
The public identify a variety of assets and strengths that bring communities together and support positive relations between people from different backgrounds.

- Even where neighbourhoods are seen as less close-knit day-to-day, people feel that Covid-19 and other crises show how communities become resilient in times of need.
- Stories and shared traditions within nations and regions can provide common ground, including across ethnic groups, for example through sport and commemorating shared history.
- Social mixing through work and study brings people together across differences, although experiences vary. In some cases, relationships built through education and employment were shallower, for example due to work-from-home lifestyles.
- Outside these institutions, spaces for social contact are more plural, reflecting people's varied lifestyles, with community action and hobbies helping to spark new neighbourly connections.

In a society that can often feel more polarised than anybody would want, sources of common ground and connection take on a new importance. Our research examined where the public perceive sources of commonality, and which institutions they felt had a positive impact on cohesion and community strength.

Figure 4.1: Public perceptions of what brings us together across the UK

Which of the following activities do you think have the most positive impact on how people from different backgrounds get on together in the UK generally? Please rank your top three.



Focaldata nationally representative survey of 1,959 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025. Respondents were initially filtered in a prior multi-select question, in which 13% answered 'none of these'.

Coming together in crises

A consistent strength of UK society identified by the public is the kindness and capacity of people to rally together in disasters or crises.

Our survey asked respondents to select, then rank, what they felt had the most positive impact on how people from different backgrounds get on together in the UK. Six in ten (59%) chose 'People supporting one another in times of crisis, for example Covid-19' within their top three. More than a third (37%) placed this top of the list.

A recurring theme in focus group discussions was how people's collective responses to crises had helped foster a sense of local community spirit and neighbourliness. Even where communities were not necessarily seen as close or even cohesive, we heard that local people tended to pull together in times of trouble.

Memories of the Covid-19 pandemic were the most common examples, continuing to shape people's views of local community. Many participants reflected how neighbours had begun checking in with one another during the lockdowns or had run errands and shopping trips for elderly and isolated people in their area.

We also heard other examples of emergencies that had spurred community togetherness, including in areas that witnessed riots the previous year. Reflecting on the shock of the violence and unrest, multiple participants remarked that the disturbances were followed by hopeful stories of clean-ups and fundraisers. Participants felt more could be done to celebrate and amplify these stories of unity to provide a sense of reassurance for the majority opposed to the violence.

"There was a lady that actually posted an essay [on a Facebook group] that she'd just been housed here as an asylum seeker, and she was asking for help with things. And people were saying 'go back to your own country'. It was really horrible. But then there's quite a lot of people I know within that group, that were saying, 'Right, how can we help?' Someone created a new group, and everyone mucked in and said, like, what can we get: this and that, baby blankets etc."

– Stoke-on-Trent focus group participant

National identities

Narratives of shared identities – both nationally and by region – are also seen as cornerstones for building a collective sense of 'us'.

Sport

Sport plays an important role in national identity, shaping shared experiences of pride and loss. In our representative survey, 54% placed 'People coming together for major sporting events, for example the Euros or the Olympics' in their top three factors that

help people from different backgrounds to get on together. This was consistent across the UK's four nations of England (54%), Scotland (55%), Wales (53%) and Northern Ireland (58%). Sport is also seen as a positive unifier across ethnic groups, ranked in the top three by 60% of ethnic minority and 53% of white respondents.

Football, rugby and cricket were mentioned in our focus groups as being among the most visible moments where people could express a shared and inclusive national pride, often in a diverse team of athletes or players.

"During the Euros everyone comes together, everyone's flying the flags, everyone's supportive."

– Stoke-on-Trent focus group participant

History

'People coming together for major historical events, for example Remembrance Day' was ranked in the top three by almost half (47%) of respondents, though less so in Northern Ireland (34%), likely reflecting the nation's more fractious history. Responses were similar among white respondents (48% ranked top three) and ethnic minority respondents (41%).

This broad appetite for marking our history could present important opportunities as the UK marks the 80th anniversaries of VE and VJ Day in 2025. Indeed, separate research for British Future finds increasing public awareness and support for teaching how different countries across the Commonwealth supported Britain in the World Wars. Some 81% agree that 'Learning about the diverse armies which fought for Britain and its allies in the Second World War can help children understand the multi-ethnic society we share today.'[34]

Stories of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

We heard different accounts of national identity in our focus groups across the four nations of the UK. Englishness rarely emerged in the discussions as an identity with particular resonance, beyond support for the national football, cricket and rugby teams.

By contrast, several participants in our Welsh focus group shared that national culture and Welsh traditions helped shape a view that people in the country lived together more peacefully than other parts of the UK. This was caveated, however, by mixed views on the language divide in Wales. While the Welsh language is a source of national pride, some in the group (held in Abergavenny, a predominantly English-speaking area), felt excluded in shared events such as sports screenings where Welsh speakers were a majority. One person, for example, remarked this could create divides where 'you're not treated like you're truly Welsh.'

"There's different levels of division, locally, Welsh and UK-wise. I do think I'd say here is a bit better than the rest of the UK. I think that's probably to do with the Welsh – years of culture, tradition, customs. But I do think the situation has declined a lot. I agree about the others' points on politicians keeping us in a constant state of fear, and also the media."

– Abergavenny, Pontypool and Cwmbran focus group participant

Scottish identity was seen by some, particularly in our stakeholder roundtable, as an inclusive identity into which new arrivals in the country could integrate and find belonging. We heard examples, from interfaith and migrant support charities, of ethnic and cultural minority groups feeling a sense of national pride, adopting traditions and symbols such as 'tartan turbans' which embraced Scottish identity.

In Northern Ireland, national identities were not cited as such a unifying theme. However, we heard optimistic views in our focus group and stakeholder roundtable discussion that the sectarian divides that had led to protracted conflict in the country were starting to wane. There was a shared sense that, though tensions still existed in certain areas, younger generations were generally becoming less sectarian and were mixing more across former divides, giving rise to a cautiously hopeful view of Northern Ireland's future.

"I've lived through the Troubles, I've experienced being around bombs and known people who were killed by bombs. So I've obviously experienced a dark side. Things have moved on quite dramatically since then. You know, when I was young, I didn't really mix with someone of the opposite religion. Now, I've got so many friends."

– Belfast focus group participant

Our research found some initial evidence to support the role of certain regional identities in perceptions of community and cohesion. Notably, many in our Gateshead focus group praised a warm and sociable Geordie culture. Newcomers, both from overseas and other parts of the UK, cited this as part of a positive sense of local togetherness.

'People around here in Gateshead and Newcastle are genuinely more friendly. I would say it is to do with a Geordie way of being, if anything, overhelpful! It literally feels like walking into an area with people you've always known.'

– Gateshead focus group participant, describing his experience of moving to Gateshead from Manchester

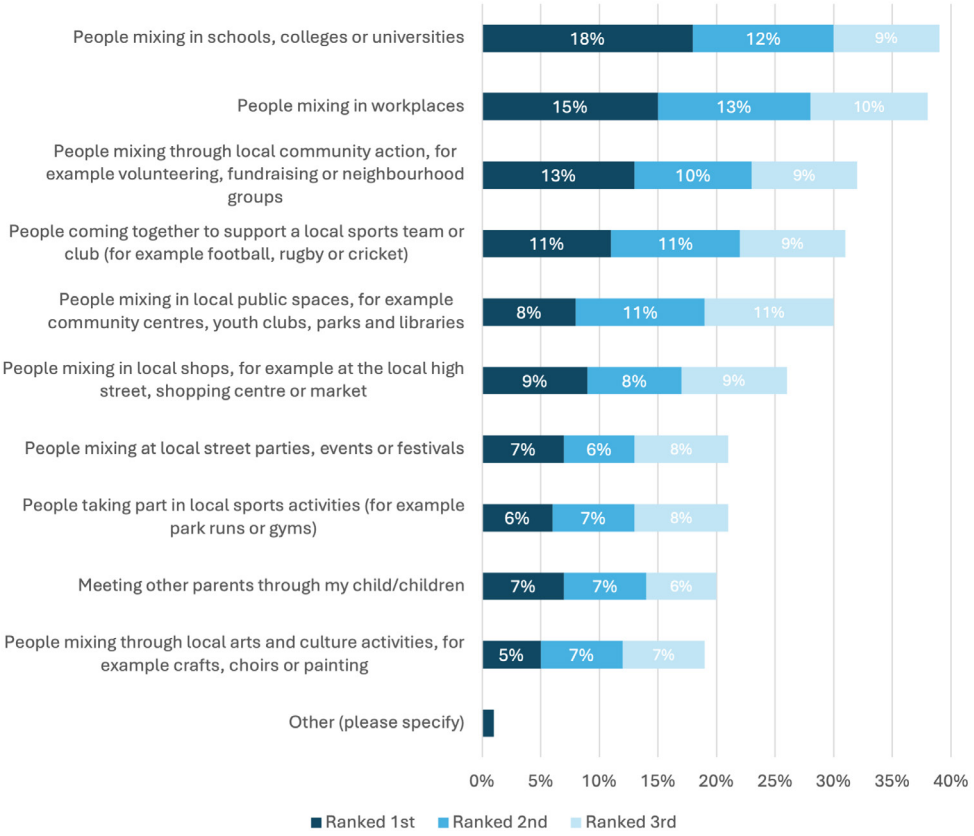
YouGov evidence would similarly suggest that in areas such as the North East and London, regional pride can be stronger than that towards the country as a whole.[35] Ongoing research for the commission may wish to explore the importance and distinctions of other regional narratives, along with more detailed investigation on the role of national stories and values, and how these might be utilised to deepen perceptions of belonging.

Communities in education and the workplace

Our survey asked respondents which activities in their local area had the most positive impact on how people from different backgrounds get along.

Figure 4.2: Which activities help people to meet and get on together?

Which of the following activities do you think have the most positive impact on how people from different backgrounds get on together in the place where you live? Please rank your top three.



Focaldata nationally representative survey of 2,002 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025. Respondents were initially filtered in a prior multi-select question, in which 11% answered 'none of these'.

Education

The most popular choice was 'people mixing in schools, colleges or universities' (39%). In our focus groups, many older participants remarked warmly on how younger generations had grown up in a more diverse society, contributing to greater confidence, for example through multi-ethnic friendship groups. For some this created an optimism that divides by culture, faith and background would decline in the long-term.

Our research with stakeholders working in community and cohesion also identified schools as important sites for social connection. Even in areas that were more segregated by class, faith or ethnicity, we heard successful examples of how programmes such as 'school linking' had helped carefully introduce children to peers from diverse backgrounds in neighbouring areas, successfully sparking new friendships.

"We partnered with twelve schools in three towns in the Northwest of England: Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen and Preston, to assess children's contributions to community cohesion. Our study included surveys of 444 children aged 9-11 and 181 parents/carers, interviews with 109 children, and 230 pieces of creative work by children as a way of understanding experiences of community cohesion.

Children seemed at ease with opportunities to engage in activities that support community cohesion in schools and spoke positively about school as a valued part of their community. In surveys, parents appreciated opportunities to socially mix in the school environment, citing pick-up and drop-off times as important moments for participating in this social mixing.

Knowledge of deeply rooted issues affecting trust relationships can remove some of the barriers to community cohesion work within schools. In this respect, community cohesion work that takes place in schools is vital, as it provides opportunities to invite parents/carers into school and rebuild these trust relationships, as well as provide children with a more positive experience that departs from historical narratives of community division (e.g. racism)."

– Call for evidence submission, Beyond School Gates

Such positive experiences were not shared by everyone in the research, however, with some suggesting that educational institutions need to play a more proactive role in fostering good relations. Some students in our focus groups said universities could be isolating places for newcomers, with limited mixing. Some participants in focus groups and stakeholder roundtables expressed concerns about discrimination towards ethnic minority pupils in schools, and failures of overstretched teaching staff to tackle racist incidents.

"[The grooming scandal] has made a divide in the community, because a lot of white British students now, especially in the younger generation, are looking at the Asian community. And they've got a bad feeling about them. They're sort of getting tarred with the same brush. It's so wrong, because the younger generation are carrying [the racism] on and on with the Asian community."

– Rotherham focus group participant

Workplaces

Workplaces were ranked second as spaces for mixing with a positive impact on community relations, where people are required to come together across different ages, political perspectives and backgrounds to collaborate on shared objectives.

We heard from some participants, working in the NHS for example, how workplace diversity had influenced their attitudes to diversity and immigration, bringing people into contact with the contribution of ethnic minority and migrant colleagues. In riot-affected areas, some participants had been moved by accounts of colleagues from ethnic minority backgrounds who were afraid to commute in to work due to fears of racism.

"[Low-skilled] immigration is the main concern for me. But I work at the hospital here and there's a lot of migrant workers on the ward. We'd struggle if they weren't there."

– Rotherham focus group participant

However, across our research, perspectives were varied on the quality of relationships formed with people from different backgrounds in a working environment. A minority in our focus groups shared that patterns of working from home meant they had weaker workplace relationships and less face-to-face interaction with colleagues. For others, insecure work had also led to them changing jobs more frequently.

Experts working on community development and cohesion also shared that workplaces could exacerbate some trends of segregation, particularly along lines of socioeconomic class and education. Among the stakeholder audience, employers were generally felt to have been less active or aware in considering how workplaces could help foster community and cohesion.

"The workplace, once a melting pot of different backgrounds, has also become more stratified. Firms are increasingly split into those that hire almost exclusively graduates and those that do not. The gig economy and remote work have only exacerbated these trends, further reducing social interaction between different classes. Meanwhile, educational segregation is also deepening: British schools are now more divided by race and income than the neighbourhoods they serve."

– Call for evidence submission by Jon Yates, Director of Youth Endowment Foundation and author of *Fractured: How we learn to live together*[36]

Communities of interest

The research found that people also meet and mix with others through shared activities outside of work and study. Focus group participants reported experiences of meaningful connections built through these communities of interest, with hobbies creating a shared language and a relaxed environment in which to find common talking points. Particularly where these brought the same people together over time, for example through clubs, park runs or football fixtures, such patterns enabled the sustained social contact which academic research has shown creates effective social connections, capable of increasing trust and empathy between 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'.[37]

"I find the activities in the area really helpful. There are lots of things on and some are free. I've attended sessions like crafts workshops at the local library, for four weeks or sometimes eight weeks."

– Gateshead focus group participant, reflecting on activities that had helped her settle in since moving to the UK

"One of my friends works for Bolton Wanderers in the community, and they do a lot of fundraising and community stuff. And they don't really teach any values as such. They don't really teach you about Muslims, Islam, anything like that. But the kids, you just see them playing, and they form bonds. My son, his best friend is a Black girl. You see him and a lot of teenagers around the bus stops afterwards having a kick about, and he's happy to just go off and play football with this girl."

– Bolton focus group participant

One in three respondents in our survey (32%) listed 'Mixing through community action, for example volunteering, fundraising or neighbourhood groups,' among their top three factors having a positive impact on local community relations. In public focus groups and discussions with charities around the UK, we heard accounts of how shared local problems like littering, volunteer efforts such as street parties, or even campaigns against 'shared enemies' such as an unresponsive council, could rally communities together through neighbourhood action.[38]

"There are very different types of people – by age, background, wealth, culture, education, occupation – across the housing block and an ever-increasing transient community. Arranging a 'get together' [local street party] offers us an opportunity to meet and understand each other better."

– Testimony from a Jo Cox Foundation volunteer included in the call for evidence

"Muslim-led charities have had a significant positive impact on meeting the needs of the most vulnerable by running soup kitchens, blood drives and food banks among other initiatives. These have served to increase contact between Muslims and those of other faiths in their local communities and have also played a part in the dispelling of certain prejudices that exist around Islam and Muslims in the UK."

– Call for Evidence submission by the Muslim Council of Britain

Sports clubs are sources of shared and inclusive local pride, ranked in the top three by 31% of respondents. Previous research by British Future has found that six in ten adults in England and Wales (57%) support a football club, while one in three (37%) support a local team, with the sport boasting a diverse audience across different ages, ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes.[39]

"The Communities United Initiative targeted 10 pilot Clubs in areas with high rates of race and faith-related hate crimes, including Rochdale, Blackburn, Oldham and Preston. Each Football Club charity worked with 10 families from diverse faith and ethnic backgrounds, providing positive social mixing opportunities such as: community-based celebrations; cultural awareness activities and local community action projects.

An independent evaluation found that the programme led to a 30% increase in participants feeling more positive about their local community and a 30% increase in social trust, cohesion and capital."

– Call for Evidence submission by EFL in the Community

Other common activities cited in the survey included shopping (ranked in the top three by 25%), participatory sports (21%), and arts (19%).[40]

5. Challenges and threats to cohesion and connection

Key points

Our research uncovers concerns about deepening divides on a number of themes:

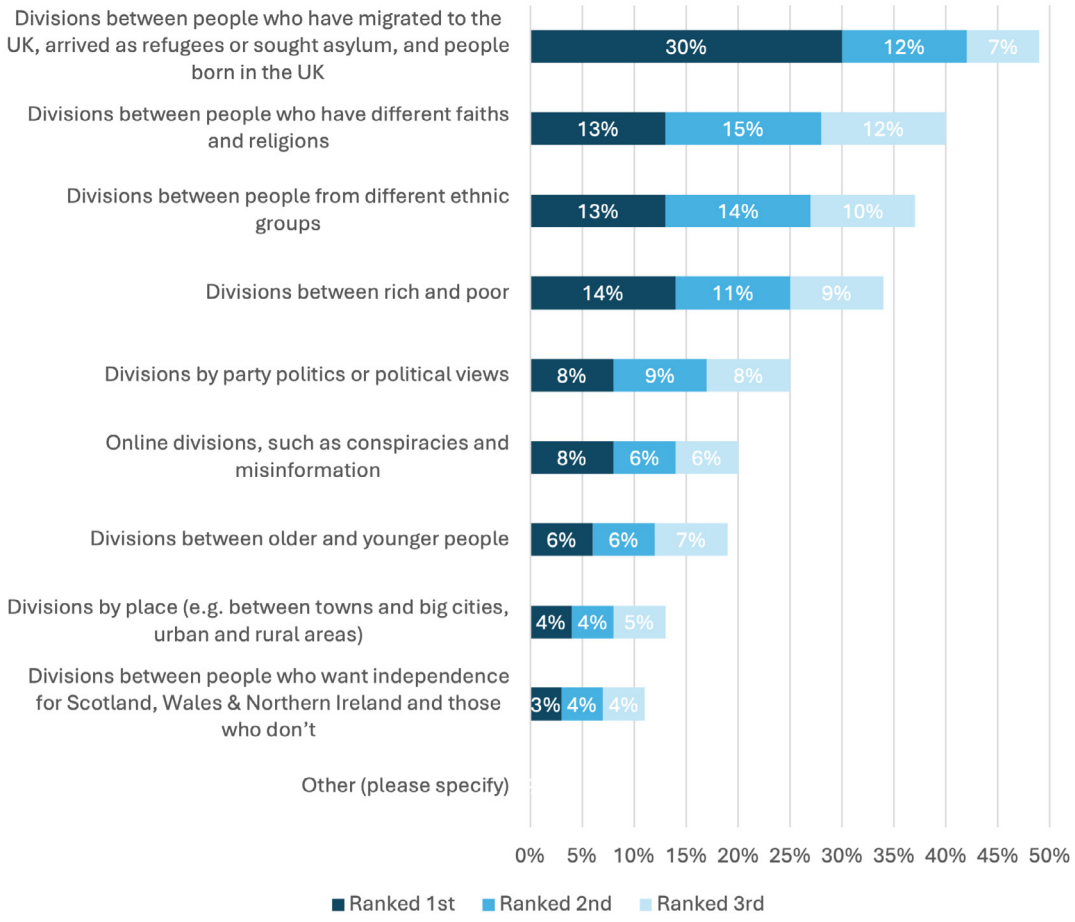
- Nationally, concerns over small boat crossings remain salient. We also heard about tensions in some areas related to asylum accommodation, sometimes resulting from misinformation or local people not feeling heard or listened to by authorities responsible for resettlement.
- Researchers noticed widespread anti-Muslim prejudice and a growing concern about broader racism in society.
- While local lived experiences of diversity were largely positive, there was a pessimistic mood across the majority of our discussions. People felt that their needs were not being met, and their voices not being heard, in the context of the cost-of-living crisis, housing shortages and pressures on the NHS. Social and economic factors were exacerbating grievances towards out-groups, particularly people seeking asylum.
- The public feel social media can skew perceptions of how people get on together, for example by amplifying posts with more polarising opinions.
- Specific factors such as international conflicts, and localised issues such as crime, could also raise tensions where underlying divides went unaddressed.

Our research uncovers strong public concerns about the state of social divides in the UK, including in the wake of the 2024 riots. Economic pressures, declining political trust and demographic change, combined with rapid increases in the use of social media, are stressors contributing to new and existing tensions, locally and nationally.

Most of the public still feel that people from different backgrounds get along well together in Britain overall. But perceptions of the strength and cohesiveness of our communities are uneven, complex and caveated. This chapter explores these challenges and threats in more detail.

Figure 5.1: What factors do people feel undermine community and cohesion locally?

Which of the following issues do you think have the most negative impact on how people from different backgrounds get on together in the place where you live? Please rank them: with number 1 being the most negative.



Focaldata nationally representative survey of 2,031 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025. Respondents were initially filtered in a prior multi-select question, in which 10% answered 'none of these'.

Our survey asked respondents to rank which divides they saw as having the most negative impacts on community relations, 'in the area where you live' and also those 'in the UK generally'.

Concerns about immigration, asylum and perceptions of favourable treatment

The most prevalent concern is '*Divisions between people who have migrated to the UK, arrived as refugees or sought asylum, and people born in the UK*', ranked in the top three issues by half of respondents for negative impact in their local area (49%) and 'in the UK generally' (53%). Concern was lower in Greater London (24% ranked first), compared to less diverse areas such as East England (34%), Wales (36%) and Northern Ireland (44%).[41]

Themes of immigration and asylum policy were salient in all of the focus group discussions. Generally, participants expressed support for what they perceived as 'skilled migration', in sectors such as health, social care and hospitality. However, there was much greater concern about people arriving in the UK on small boats, who were generally described as 'illegal immigrants'.

Concerns around Channel crossings often centred on perceptions of public safety, the validity of people's claims for asylum and frustration with recent governments over the visible lack of control at the border. However, the most frequent issue raised was of perceived competition for resources. Declining public services and standards of living often led to anger towards people seeking asylum, who were felt to receive preferential treatment from the government (with these views often influenced by misunderstandings and mis- and disinformation about newcomers' specific entitlements and access to benefits).[42]

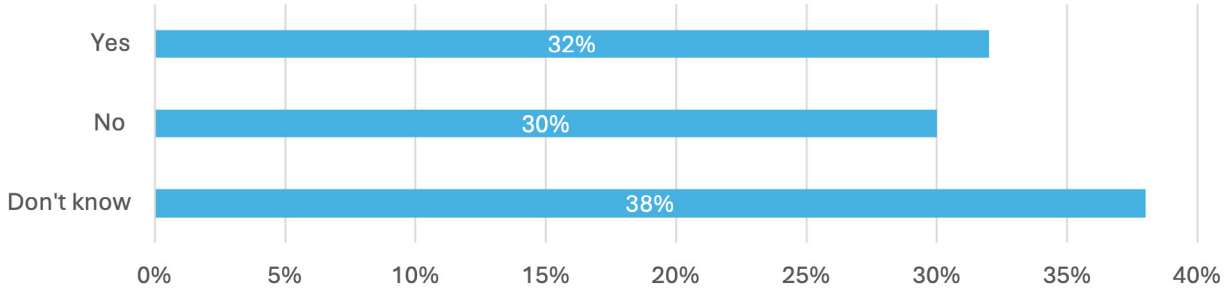
"My mother-in-law has just gone into a care home, and we have to pay thousands of pounds a month. She's worked all her life. She doesn't get the heating allowance now. These are all little things that have been taken away. The TV licence too. I think the unskilled workers coming in... the boats... also the media has a role to play – it's all so negative. You see all these people coming in and they're getting three hot meals a day and a hotel. They're not being charged thousands of pounds a month."

– Rotherham focus group participant

Such concerns were shared by many who otherwise held middle-ground views on migration. Some participants put forward alternative perspectives, including compassion for people seeking asylum. However, a large proportion of the participants in the groups expressed concern over the numbers of people crossing the Channel. There was also concern about the use of asylum hotels, which were felt to be a source of tensions. Many residents reported feeling they had not been consulted or briefed before people were housed in the hotels, and some felt that resettlement was unbalanced, with people seeking asylum being moved in higher numbers to less affluent areas.

Figure 5.2: Awareness of asylum seekers being housed locally in hotels

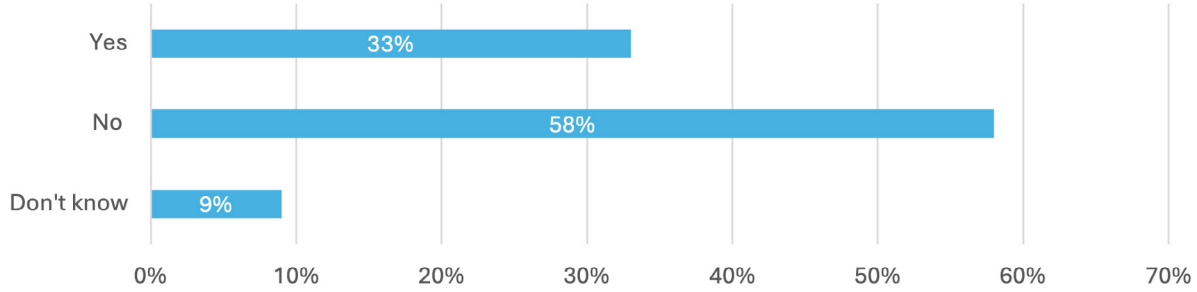
To your knowledge, are hotels in your local area being used to accommodate asylum seekers?



Focaldata nationally representative survey of 2,031 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025. Respondents were initially filtered in a prior multi-select question, in which 10% answered 'none of these'.

Figure 5.3: Most people have not met or interacted with asylum seekers locally

To your knowledge, have you met or interacted with a person in your local area who is currently seeking asylum?



Focaldata nationally representative survey of 2,243 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025.

Our survey finds that nationally, one in three people (32%) report being aware of asylum seekers being housed in hotels in their area. A similar proportion (32%) report having met or interacted with someone seeking asylum.

Some focus group participants, who had first-hand experience of meeting asylum-seeking residents locally, shared more empathetic views about people's reasons for entering the UK and their contribution to communities.

"I work with refugees as part of my job, from various communities, males, females, and I can honestly say that they are the most respectful and hardworking group of young people I have ever met. They are in college part time. They are holding down jobs. They're volunteering in their local communities. We just talked about a sense of community. They're all volunteering in their local community."

–Abergavenny, Pontypool and Cwmbran focus group participant

Participants felt that media and social media debates had raised the temperature of this issue. In areas affected by riots, we consistently heard condemnation of the misinformation that had circulated about the Southport murderer, which fuelled the ensuing violence. We also heard criticism that successive governments had not engaged in an open conversation with the public on their concerns about immigration and asylum.

Frustration about the cost-of-living crisis, failing public services and regional disparities

Across our focus groups we found that a pessimistic outlook on the economy and the cost of living influenced debates about social divides. Participants across the political spectrum reported feeling that their needs were not being met and their voices not heard, regarding failures to deliver public services such as the NHS and policing. The cost of living, housing and regional disparities also contributed to a widely shared sense of frustration and there was often a deep sense of anxiety about the impact this was having on communities and peoples' lives.

"I'm born and bred in Croydon. In the 60s, it was a nice place. You had big department stores [...] and half the shops are empty now. And that makes people resentful, sad, and certainly, in my own view, the powers that be are very self-centred."

"I live in a rented place – a house costs too much. So I have to move from place to place. People like me can't be a part of their community, because I've moved so many times. My neighbour actually died a few months ago. I only realised the other day. I feel very excluded from my community."

– Croydon focus group participants

In our survey, 34% of respondents placed '*divisions between the rich and poor*' in their top three divisions impacting community relations locally. Yet while some focus group participants voiced anger towards the wealthy in society, policymakers were seen as primarily at fault.

This appears to have been deepened by recent changes to the benefits system and winter fuel allowance, which were frequently raised as examples where participants felt their dignity and comfort had been impacted by policy choices of successive governments. Older participants particularly felt they took the brunt of these, with some voicing a sense of intergenerational unfairness.

Trust in the Government and politicians is very low

Low trust in politicians to deliver change was a common theme of the focus groups. This correlates with recent research highlighting negative attitudes towards local and national government.[43]

Consistently our discussions found a strong sense of pessimism and reported feelings of being 'unaligned' with mainstream political parties, who were felt to lack empathy or a sense of urgency to address the challenges arising from strained public services and the cost of living.

Many in our focus groups saw politicians as self-interested, citing scandals such as 'partygate'[44] and 'ticketgate'.[45] We heard criticism, from participants with varying political views, about governments failing to deliver on promises, from housing to HS2. This had left many people feeling unheard by mainstream politics.

"I think part of the problem is we don't trust them, because they feel sneaky, like they're supposedly doing stuff for the people with the people, but they're just lining their own pockets with their expenses and their massive salaries. I've contacted MPs before and raised issues about funding for schools. They never get back to me. They're not interested. They just pay lip service."

– Bolton focus group participant

Standards of political discourse are felt to have declined, and we heard a range of concerns about the tone and tenor of debate among policymakers. Some in the focus groups felt that the use of more aggressive, embittered language by politicians had heightened a sense of national division along party lines.

There was also frequent condemnation of political and media discourse for creating a sense of anxiety and 'perma-crisis'. Issues from Covid to global conflict shaped a pessimistic view of mainstream politics and a sense of gloom looking ahead to the future. One participant shared a view, echoed across discussions, that: *"If something happens now, it's always the worst in history, the worst since records began."*[46]

In some places mistrust extended to councils, who were felt to have been unresponsive in tackling issues such as spikes in local crime, poverty or declining regional investment.

Declining trust was also a trend with regard to the governments of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We asked participants in focus groups outside England about perceived divisions relating to debates on devolution and independence. Many voiced anger at Westminster for investing too little outside of London and the South East. Yet this was often combined with a pessimistic view of politicians of all parties and a sense of national decline.

Stereotyping of Muslims

'Divisions between people of different faiths and religions' is seen as the second highest issue of concern for community relations in our survey. Four in ten respondents (40%) place it in their top three issues affecting relations 'in the area where I live' and 44% 'in the UK generally'.

Our focus groups surfaced widespread anti-Muslim prejudice, with stereotypes and comments expressed in most of the discussions, particularly in places where Muslim populations were more residentially segregated and there was less social contact across cultures. This often took a coded form, with participants referring to 'certain demographics' before citing areas with higher Muslim populations. Among some participants there was a tendency to see Muslims as a homogenous group whose lifestyle and priorities were different from the rest of UK society. Muslim participants reflected that this impacted their confidence in and relationship to their local community, for example in Rotherham where the grooming scandal was seen to have created lasting, ongoing mistrust and stereotyping.

Stakeholders specialising in countering prejudice and supporting victims of hatred concurred that faith-based incidents of hate crime had spiked in recent years, not only during the riots but also relating to wider geopolitical issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict and India-Pakistan tensions.[47]

Tensions emerging from the conflict in Gaza were seldom raised in our focus groups, even in areas such as Gateshead, which has large neighbouring Muslim and Jewish populations. Stakeholder roundtable discussions indicated that this is a deeply polarising issue but in specific, localised parts of the UK and with a narrower audience who hold strong views on either side, for example in universities.

Concerns about levels of racism

Some 37% of respondents to our survey place '*divisions between people of different ethnic groups'* in their top three issues impacting community relations locally, while 44% rank it in their top three issues 'in the UK generally'. The strength of concern is similar between white and ethnic minority respondents.

We heard a range of views about the levels of racism and racial division in the UK. Some 94% of ethnic minority respondents to our poll said they feel safe when walking or taking public transport in the place where they live, and just one in four of those who felt unsafe cited *'Concerns about prejudice based on my identity (e.g. race, faith, sexuality, disability etc)'.*

Yet the focus groups surfaced broader concerns about racism, centred less on safety but still impacting some participants' sense of belonging and wellbeing. Particularly in areas of lower ethnic diversity, or that were more residentially segregated, ethnic

minority participants described experiences of racist stereotyping, which could lead to those targeted not taking part in their community.

"You're now hearing this term indigenous people, and there's now a rhetoric against anyone that's of an ethnic minority background that says 'you shouldn't be here'. And I kind of sit there and I'm like, 'I was born and bred here. I'm probably the most British person you'll ever meet.' Like, I love nothing more than a Sunday roast dinner and going down the pub. I was wearing an England shirt the other week at the rugby game, and, yeah, I now get people looking at me, going 'you're not British' – just because of the colour of my skin."

– Stoke-on-Trent focus group participant

In areas impacted by riots, we heard first- and second-hand accounts of people feeling scared to go out in their communities in the wake of the disorder. Race equity organisations also reported an increase in hate incidents since the riots took place.[48]

"In Scotland, there's been a sort of complacency, which says that all the racism happens in England and everything [in Scotland] is rosy. Everybody's nice to each other. When Southport happened, we have maybe 40 groups in Edinburgh representing different faiths and minorities. My phone was ringing all the time. And we're seeing alarming rises in Islamophobia and antisemitism."

–Stakeholder, Edinburgh roundtable discussion

Online racism also affected perceptions of racial division. A high number of focus group participants had witnessed racist hate through social media.

Further work of the Commission may look to explore in more detail the differences within and between ethnic and faith groups in their experiences of prejudice, discrimination and exclusion, to understand the types of action minority communities would like to see to tackle hate and foster good relations.

Social media polarisation

'Online divisions, such as conspiracies and misinformation' rank lower in our survey findings. One in five (20%) place it in their top three issues impacting local community relations, with 23% ranking it within their top three issues nationally. Yet social media polarisation was cited frequently in our discussions as a contextual issue shaping other tensions.

Participants with varying political views cited the tendency for social media algorithms to amplify misinformation and 'clickbait' headlines that raised public anxiety about issues such as immigration. Stakeholders shared similar views that online debates and misinformation were often the source of heightened tensions in communities.

"We've seen a massive movement of society into an online world, and an online world whereby algorithms and social media are directing people into a siloed sense of belonging, a belonging which is not within the parameters of local communities. And it's a more toxic belonging, which says 'my tribe is better than your tribe'."

– Stakeholder, south-east England roundtable discussion.

In focus groups, participants often said they formed their views through online interactions, for example the Facebook page of their village, town, city or borough. Where the administration of these pages was more relaxed, we heard that people with extreme and prejudiced views had circulated misinformation and hateful content unchallenged. Stakeholders working in community development and cohesion echoed these points, sharing examples of hateful online content including antisemitism, anti-migrant narratives and anti-Muslim prejudice that had rapidly gone viral, creating longer-term fears across communities.

"In the town where I live there's lots of HMOs [Houses of Multiple Occupation] going up at the moment. And people on the local Facebook groups are commenting 'do you want illegal immigrants walking the streets in your area? Look after your children; they'll be assaulting your wife.' Things like that."

– Bolton focus group participant

Local shock events

While our survey examined national attitudes, we also heard how shock events in a particular place could significantly impact perceptions of community cohesion.

Grooming

We asked about the impact of the grooming gangs scandal in Rotherham. The focus group included British Pakistani participants and was a respectful, open discussion. We heard that this issue was still the subject of conversation in Rotherham, and some believed that it was "still going on". The issue had divided the town, including young people, and several felt that the British Pakistani community had faced racist stereotypes since. We heard concerns among many participants that the authorities and the justice system had been too lenient on the perpetrators.

As this report was being finalised, a report by Baroness Casey identified a "*collective failure to address questions about the ethnicity of grooming gangs*"[49]. Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced that there would be a full national statutory inquiry into grooming gangs.

Gendered concerns about cohesion and community relations have been seen outside of debates about grooming gangs. Recent violent disorder in Balymena, Northern Ireland, in which migrants'

homes have been firebombed following an alleged sexual assault on a teenage girl, highlight the potential of such incidents to act as flashpoints, particularly when tensions are stoked by far-right actors.

Groups of young men 'hanging around' with little to do, denied permission to work while waiting for asylum decisions, can lead to women reporting feeling less safe on the streets. At the same time, some focus group participants reported seeing far-right influencers use misinformation to amplify concerns about women's safety and stereotype migrants and ethnic or faith minority groups. This complex issue would benefit from further exploration by the Commission in its next phase of evidence-gathering.

Community safety

Views on public safety, overlapping with broader concerns about the impact of economic decline, were themes in our discussions in Stoke-on-Trent, Croydon, Edinburgh and Belfast, with participants concerned about instances of stabbings, drugs/alcoholism and antisocial behaviour. The visibility of these crimes had eroded pride in place and neighbourly belonging. Some felt less comfortable using local community spaces or letting their children socialise unattended.

The impact of international conflicts on communities in the UK

Tensions overseas could spark flashpoints of unrest and division in areas with larger populations of particular faith, ethnic or nationality groups. Stakeholders discussed how the violence in Gaza and Israel had raised tensions, particularly but not exclusively among Muslim and Jewish communities, with interfaith groups often struggling to facilitate constructive dialogue among those with polarised views. Other conflicts overseas were also cited as examples that could rapidly ignite localised divides. These included divides between Hindu and Muslim residents, which were felt to have remained tense in Leicester following the unrest of 2022. We also heard how areas with larger migrant populations had experienced friction between Hong Kongers and Chinese residents, and between Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking communities.

6. The changes that people want

Key points

As well as highlighting challenges for social cohesion, our research asked what action people felt would help address difficulties and increase the strength of communities.

- Focus group participants frequently mentioned the need to address gaps between rich and poor. Beyond issues of living standards, specific measures in deprived areas included improving community infrastructure, for example libraries and community centres.
- Research participants reported a decline in political trust. It was felt that politicians should be more engaged with communities and local people to better understand their concerns. People would also like more of a say, and more community involvement, in decision-making that affects their lives.
- Immigration and asylum were seen as priority areas for improving social cohesion, though attitudes varied. Some suggestions include more opportunities for people to meet and mix with new arrivals and more open discussions about immigration.
- Volunteering was seen as one way to promote more in-person interaction between people from different backgrounds.
- It was felt that schools could do more to support cohesion. They were also seen as having an important role to play in educating young people about the dangers of hateful content and misinformation on social media.

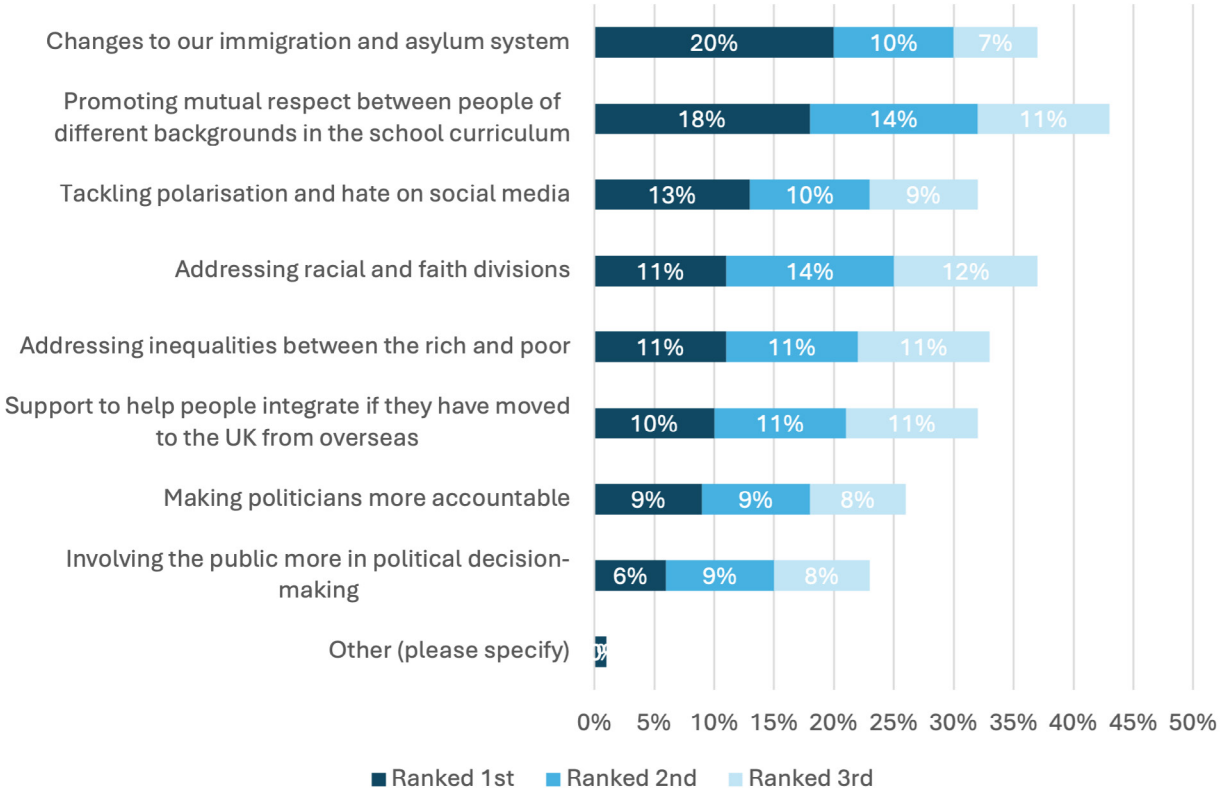
The survey and focus groups set out to establish public priorities for improving social cohesion and community strength. Options included changes to the immigration and asylum system, tackling online hate, addressing racial and faith divisions, addressing inequalities between rich and poor, support to help integrate new migrants and doing democracy better.

When given a range of options, survey respondents said their top two priorities are to make changes to our immigration and asylum system and to promote mutual respect between people of different backgrounds in the school curriculum. 'Changes to the immigration and asylum system' was ranked first by 20% of all respondents. It was more likely to be supported by older people (28%), non-graduates vs graduates (24% vs 13%) and Reform and Conservative supporters (40% and 24%) more than Labour supporters (12%).

Ethnic minority respondents were also less likely than white respondents to rank this as a top priority (9% vs 22%). There were also national and regional differences, with only 14% ranking it first in London, compared with 19% in England overall, 24% in Wales, 21% in Scotland and 36% in Northern Ireland.[50]

Table 6.1: What action is most important for addressing social divides?

Which of the following options do you feel are most important for addressing social divides and helping people from different backgrounds to live well together?



Focaldata nationally representative survey of 2,074 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025. Respondents were initially filtered in a prior multi-select question, in which 10% answered 'none of these'.

Promoting mutual respect between people of different backgrounds in the school curriculum was more of a priority among younger than older people, and among ethnic minority than white respondents (25% vs 17%). Ethnic minority respondents were also more likely than white respondents to prioritise addressing racial and faith divisions (16% vs 11%) and supporting new arrivals to integrate (17% vs 9%).

To help understand and explain public priorities on action for social cohesion, focus group participants were asked what policy areas the government should prioritise. This was defined as action both by the Westminster government and by the devolved governments of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. To assist the discussion, participants were shown a list of the following policy areas but also encouraged to input additional ideas.

A. Addressing racial and faith divisions.

B. Addressing the gap between the rich and poor.

C. Doing democracy and politics better, to involve people in decision-making.

D. Changes to our immigration system, or support to help people integrate who move to the UK.

E. Addressing divides on social media.

F. Getting more people involved in making their communities better (for example through volunteering or helping neighbours).

G. Developing more places where people can come together for community activities (like parks, community centres and community-owned buildings).

Many found it hard to select one or even two priority areas, as they felt that most items on the list were essential to achieve greater social cohesion. It was also commonly felt that the challenges listed are interrelated and that addressing one would have a positive impact on another.

Addressing concerns about inequality and communities in decline

As discussed in Chapter 5, there was widespread agreement among focus group participants that socio-economic inequality, including divisions between rich and poor, undermines social cohesion. Participants often mentioned wealth and income inequality as important, not necessarily in itself but because it presents a barrier to addressing social divisions.

Social connections in poorer areas of towns and cities were seen as weaker than in areas with better-off residents. Some focus group participants explained this with reference to higher levels of investment in services and infrastructure in more affluent districts, which enhanced local pride and social connection, or in terms of high-street decline. It was also argued that when people feel their own needs are being met, they are more likely to be willing to help others in their local communities.

In Belfast, it was suggested that gaps in life opportunities and income had made its long-standing political divisions harder to address. Some participants felt that generational ties within communities were being broken by rising house prices and gentrification. One participant described how *"People are moving away because they can't afford to actually live where they were born"*. There was also a discussion in the stakeholder roundtable on the impacts of gentrification. Here, some participants felt younger

people were being pushed out of the communities where they grew up. Others felt that new housing developments had helped to break down some of the marked sectarian divides in housing.

Addressing the gap between rich and poor was seen as a priority because it would impact on other divisions. Faith and race divisions in particular were sometimes thought to stem from gaps between rich and poor:

"I genuinely think that a lot of racial and faith divisions are exacerbated because of the gap between the rich and poor, and I think if we can nail that, at least, I genuinely think that the burden needs to be distributed evenly."

– Stoke-on-Trent focus group participant

Improving politics with stronger public engagement

Many focus group participants saw a key role for politicians to improve social cohesion, both in national government and in local communities. However, participants expressed a lack of confidence in the motivation of politicians to take issues of social cohesion seriously and to bring about change. This was for three main reasons:

- The nature of political debate, which was commonly considered to be disrespectful and unconstructive, setting a low standard for the general public.
- A tendency among politicians to make false promises and fail to deliver.
- Lack of engagement with local people, with contact mostly concentrated during election time.

Some participants therefore saw stronger engagement as a first step. They felt that listening to people's concerns about their communities would provide politicians with a stronger sense of purpose and direction. However, some participants also felt that politicians are not accountable to the public and are more likely to pursue their own agenda than the priorities of the electorate.

"I think that people up there are making decisions for us that don't have their feet on the ground or whatever else, and they make decisions for themselves, not for us."

– Rotherham focus group participant

Some participants questioned whether politicians have sufficient understanding of their communities' needs, because it was felt that their social class background meant they were out of touch with people on lower incomes.

To address the shortcomings of the current political system, some focus group participants argued for greater public involvement in local decision-making. For some this was through closer involvement of MPs, while for others (especially in the Bolton and Croydon groups) it meant opportunities for engagement in local decision-making. However, there were also concerns that local councils did not necessarily listen to public concerns. The closure of libraries in Croydon, in the face of public opposition, was cited as an example.

Immigration and integration

As discussed in Chapter 5, for some participants immigration was seen as a priority for improving social cohesion, though attitudes varied between focus groups as well as among participants. Some talked about migrants using up resources which could be spent on improving communities and cohesion. It was also said that the presence of migrants who do not speak English, or were not working, presents challenges for communities. Others felt that misinformation about migrants is widespread and damaging for cohesion. This included, for example, the misconception that asylum seekers are being housed in five-star hotels.

Participants had a number of suggestions for how to address divisions between local people and new migrants. These principally involved opportunities to mix, so as to promote more mutual understanding. As one participant explained:

"They come from very different places to where we are. So maybe some things for them are right that aren't right for us, but if they are taught these things, like helped, then we might all actually come together as one, because we are the ones helping them."

– Stoke-on-Trent focus group participant

Some participants said that social mixing around shared interests would be most effective, rather than activities aimed specifically at breaking down barriers:

"I very much believe in ensuring that regardless of people's base, there should be avenues where people can come together, forget about all of that, and just thrive, do things together."

– Edinburgh focus group participant

It also involved more opportunities to talk about immigration. As one participant stated:

"Talk about immigration. If you get that correct, that could lead to better things and then help address racial divisions as well."

– Belfast focus group participant

This was also seen as a way to address racism and prejudice, where more connection between ethnic and faith groups, in particular Muslims and non-Muslims, was seen as key to breaking down barriers and mistrust. In Rotherham, where this was a focus of the discussion, a participant stated:

> *"I think we need to discuss more about different religions. You know, even the schools, I'm saying that we need to talk more about different faiths, different religions, and educate people about every faith."*
>
> **– Rotherham focus group participant**

Similar views were expressed in the Stoke-on-Trent group, where a participant shared the view that *"people are too afraid of people who look or sound different to them or have different faith systems,"* and that a more open discussion about diversity in the UK, alongside better opportunities to mix, is needed.

A healthier online environment

Tackling online hate and misinformation, seen as contributing to anger and hatred in communities, was also raised in focus groups. It was not often seen as a top government priority, in practical terms, since many participants said that legislation would be hard to enforce and they did not favour censorship. Rather, there was a view that people need to take responsibility for changing their own behaviour. Education, including of young people in schools, was seen to play an important role in reducing the divisive effects of social media. It was also argued that the public should be better equipped to deal with misrepresentation of news from mainstream sources, including newspapers.

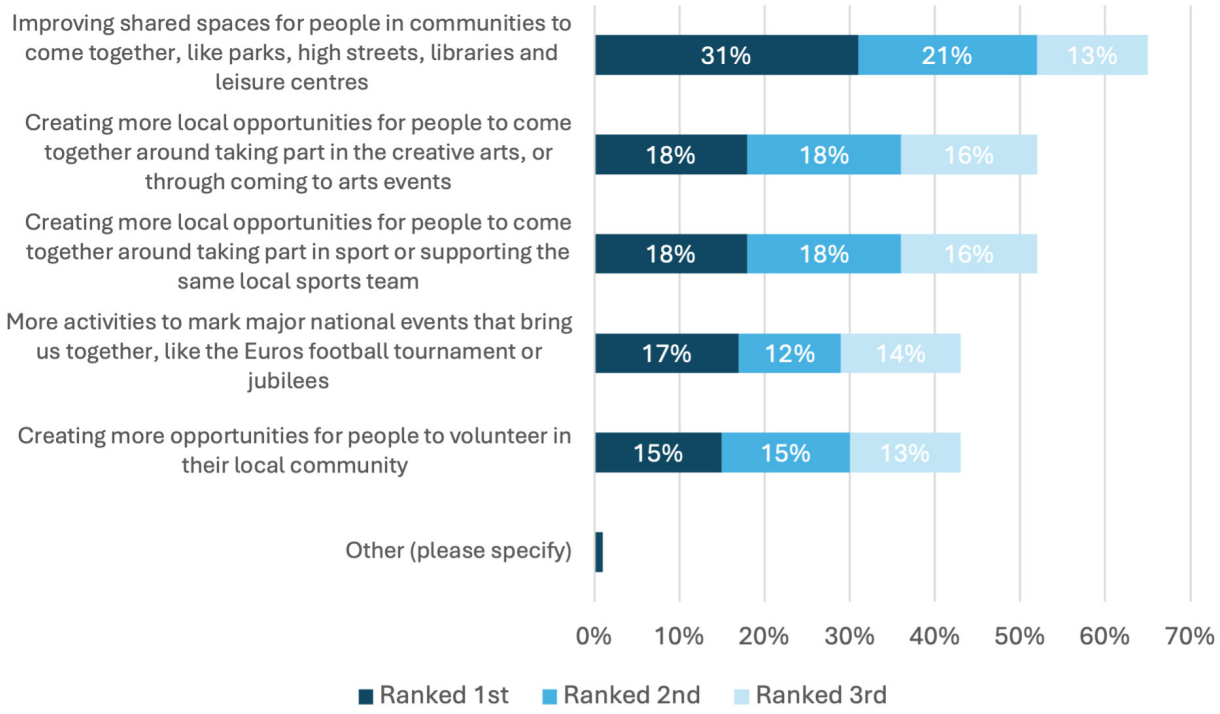
Accessible opportunities and places to connect with others

The survey asked what kinds of changes people would like to see in their local area to improve social mixing and community strength.

As Table 6.2 shows, the most popular option was to improve shared spaces, such as parks, high streets and libraries. A third of respondents (31%) ranked this first. Women were more likely than men to rank this as a top priority (35% vs 26%), possibly reflecting greater use through parenting. Participants in Wales were also more likely than in other nations to rank this as a top priority. Other options, including opportunities around creative arts, sports, marking national events and volunteering, were considered as similar in importance.

Table 6.2: What could be done to create closer communities?

Which of the following options do you feel are most important for developing closer communities, where people can connect and interact with each other more often? Please select your top three.



Focaldata nationally representative survey of 1,942 UK adults, 7th to 9th April 2025. Respondents were initially filtered in a prior multi-select question, in which 14% answered 'none of these'.

In the focus groups, participants across the UK talked about the need for more face-to-face contact between people living in divided and disconnected communities. Reflecting the survey findings, provision of infrastructure and physical spaces for people to mix were seen as most important to bring this about. A woman in the Stoke-on-Trent group talked of the isolation she was experiencing as a new mother; while in Belfast people highlighted the importance of parks and community spaces for those experiencing problems with their mental health as a result of living through the Troubles. Belfast participants felt that, while the city was not short on spaces for mixing, local and national politicians were too risk-averse to encourage social mixing across sectarian divides.

Face-to-face contact was seen as especially beneficial when people are brought together in pursuit of improving their communities. As one participant explained:

"If you start with [places that bring people together] it actually then addresses differences in faith and race, and gaps between rich and poor become less obvious because people are all actually working together for common good."

– Gateshead focus group participant

The same participant also argued that real-life social contact could also reduce divisions expressed through social media:

"You could even say, if it works, that you would have less division on things like social media [...] because people wouldn't actually listen to social media [if they] listen to each other in these places. You start by bringing people together in a place where they're actually physically in the same room with a common purpose and actually talking to each other, and then that starts to address the other issues."

– Gateshead focus group participant

Volunteering was seen as having an important role to play in making communities stronger and more inclusive. It was thought that those who become most involved as volunteers can then encourage people in their own circles and neighbourhoods to join in with social activities:

"By encouraging more people to volunteer and to feel more a part of the community, you'll create a more cohesive community in itself. You can't force anyone, so it's how do you put things in place in order to encourage that change in behaviour? But I think naturally, by people being proactive and taking a more active role in their communities."

– Gateshead focus group participant

Volunteers were therefore seen as role models and catalysts for improving social mixing and for reducing isolation and divisions.

The role of schools, parents and young people

As noted earlier, promoting respect between people of different backgrounds in the school curriculum was ranked highly by the public as a means of addressing social divides and improving cohesion.

Focus group participants talked about the need for more attention to the needs of young people. Improving the quality of their lives was seen as important to social cohesion and better communities. Improving facilities and spaces for children and young people was raised as a priority in several focus groups: in Edinburgh participants saw this as assisting the goal of reducing crime, while those in Stoke-on-Trent and Gateshead talked of a gap in funding for children and young people's services more widely.

In Bolton, participants talked about the need for spaces where young people from different backgrounds could mix. Participants across groups said that local authorities could do more to support such opportunities. In Northern Ireland a lack of investment and support for young people was described as having serious consequences for their recruitment by paramilitaries for criminal activity.

There was also general agreement that schools could do more to improve cohesion. This included through programmes of work inside and outside of the classroom to raise awareness of diversity, shared histories and common values. Some participants mentioned the role that schools sometimes play in their localities, in enabling families from diverse backgrounds to mix.

Part Three:

Action to build strong and cohesive communities

7. Ingredients for Success

Key points

- Local authorities have an important convening, strategic and delivery role in relation to community development and cohesion. Supportive and strong local leadership from councils can strengthen faith and civil society initiatives in the local area.
- Previous investment in community cohesion had helped to prevent disorder in some local authorities in 2024. However, councils warned that without sustained action in this area, there was a risk of future riots.
- There are many energetic faith and civil society organisations doing effective work to build strong and cohesive communities. Approaches that are more likely to be successful are those that are co-designed with local communities or using partnerships to increase the reach of community projects.
- Despite the prevalence of online mis- and disinformation and falling electoral turnout and political trust, there are relatively few local civil society organisations working to increase democratic resilience.

Many different organisations form part of the UK's community development and community cohesion ecosystem. Central government's role is to provide leadership and a policy framework, as well as resources. Local authorities play a key convening and strategic role in creating strong communities. The remit of other public sector organisations – schools, colleges and the police – has a direct bearing on community strength and cohesion. All public bodies and public organisations in Britain also have Equality Act 2010 duties to promote good relations.

Local government, other public bodies, faith and civil society organisations are also directly involved in delivering community development and community cohesion programmes. This section of the report draws from our stakeholder discussions, call for evidence and literature review and looks at how local government, other institutions, faith and civil society are taking action to build strong and cohesive communities.

Background

In England, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) is the lead department for community cohesion. MHCLG also has a UK-wide role, through its administration of funding streams such as the Community Recovery Fund, targeted at 35 local authorities affected by the

summer riots. In addition to the Secretary of State, ministerial leadership is provided by a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Faith, Communities and Resettlement.

Responsibilities for 'community' policy is shared between MHCLG, which leads on regeneration and local economic development, and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) which leads on civil society, youth policy, volunteering and tackling loneliness. The work of other government departments and non-departmental bodies also impacts on community and cohesion policy, including Number 10, Cabinet Office, Department for Education, Home Office, Treasury and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, which has responsibility for online safety.

At Westminster and in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, community and cohesion policy is delivered through:

1. Initiatives that specifically relate to community development or community cohesion, for example, the Community Recovery Fund.

2. Through related policy areas, namely:

    - Economic development and regeneration policy.
    - Civil contingencies strategy to increase resilience to shock events.
    - Devolution policy, in relation to public engagement in decision-making.
    - Social justice policy to reduce inequality and discrimination.
    - Immigration policy.
    - Integration policy to support the economic, social and civic integration of new migrants who come to the UK.
    - Counter-extremism policy.

3. Core policy areas of the Government, for example local government finance, devolution, policing or skills policy.

A timeline summary of key national policy decisions on community and cohesion is given in Appendix IV. Over the last 25 years, the Government has also published four independent reviews on cohesion: the Cantle Review (2001)[51], the Commission on Integration and Social Cohesion (2007)[52], the Louise Casey Review (2016)[53] and the Sara Khan Review into Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience (2024).[54] Each of these reports was commissioned in the aftermath of a shock event or amid heightened concerns about extremism.

The Government drew on the Casey Review recommendations in its 2018 Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper and the

2019 Integrated Communities Action Plan, covering England. It also provided £50 million in funding to five Integration Action Areas – Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall and Waltham Forest – to carry out programmes to boost integration and cohesion.[55] The Covid-19 pandemic and ministerial changes disrupted these initiatives, with plans to extend the five integration action areas put on hold and some of the recommendations of the Action Plan not implemented. The pandemic also drew attention to new challenges to community cohesion posed by online hatred, conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation.

Following the 2024 riots, the Government's Community Recovery Fund provided £15 million to local authorities affected by the riots. Although it has not yet responded to the 2024 Khan Review, the Government is in the process of developing its communities policy, which will cover cohesion.

Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales

The nature of community development and cohesion means that the administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have responsibility for many policy areas rather than MHCLG. Scotland does not currently have a community cohesion strategy, although it is the only nation that has a refugee integration strategy. The Scottish Government has published strategies to address hate crime and social isolation and loneliness.[56] It has also funded community-led projects to tackle hate crime and sectarianism.

The Welsh Government published its first community cohesion strategy in 2009,[57] described below. In Northern Ireland 'good relations' is used to describe initiatives that might be described as community cohesion elsewhere in the UK. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 places responsibility on public authorities to promote good relations between people with different religious beliefs, political opinions or from different racial groups. Councils employ good relations officers and there are a number of funded government programmes focused on good relations, such as PEACE PLUS and Safer Communities.

Central government action

The role and performance of central and local government in community development and cohesion was discussed in our stakeholder roundtables and examined in the call for evidence. In both, stakeholders were asked what they would like to see included in national community and cohesion strategy, and what were the respective roles of central and local government.

Stakeholders and others who submitted evidence wanted to see greater leadership and long-term, cross-departmental strategy from central government on community cohesion strategy, while also recognising that local government and other local actors are often

best placed to formulate successful local strategies and activities. National action was also seen as necessary to address online mis- and disinformation; to promote inclusive national narratives; and to support the specific needs of rural areas. We examine these in more detail in Chapter 8, 'What's missing: gaps and priorities for change'.

Case Study – Community and Cohesion in Wales

The Welsh Government put in place a community and cohesion strategy in 2009[58] and in the stakeholder roundtable discussions in Wales we discussed what could be learned from this approach. Eight regional community cohesion coordinators are based in councils, working across groups of local authorities to deliver the strategy. The Welsh Government has also made funds available to faith and civil society organisations through a Community Cohesion Fund. The community and cohesion plan sits alongside other areas of work, in particular the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan and the Nation of Sanctuary commitment to welcome asylum-seekers and refugees.

The national cohesion strategy means that every Welsh council has discussed community cohesion and has put in place local plans. The convening power of the eight community cohesion coordinators has enabled programmes to be developed and stronger partnerships between councils, other public services, faith and civil society. One example of this work is the More in Common Cardiff Partnership, set up in 2022 with the support of the council's community cohesion coordinator, the Jo Cox Foundation and 12 local organisations. In 2023, the More in Common Cardiff Partnership merged with the long-standing police-led Community Cohesion Hub, a move that improved relations between residents and the police. The partnership has continued to hold Great Get Together events and has delivered educational and heritage projects.

The publication of a government strategy means that it can be held to account on what has been delivered – the Senedd's Equalities and Social Justice Committee is currently holding an inquiry on community cohesion. But evidence submitted to this inquiry points to some shortcomings in the Welsh Government's approach. Civil society groups have only been able to secure short-term funding for their work. There was little public involvement in developing the strategy and action plans, and little public-facing communication about the work that it has supported. Some stakeholders reported that the emphasis of the national cohesion strategy focused on minority groups, rather than positioning community cohesion as an 'everybody' issue.

Local government

Councils have strategy and convening roles in relation to community development and cohesion. They also fund or deliver work in these areas. Our stakeholder discussions, call for evidence and literature review looked at the work of local authorities, including their responses to the summer 2024 riots.

In the early 2000s the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme meant that many local authority wards had to have a community or neighbourhood plan. Local authorities employed community development workers and put in place Local Area Partnerships to produce the plan. A complex process meant that the aims of these plans were never realised. In England, 75 Neighbourhood Boards are currently being reconvened, in preparation for receiving Plan for Neighbourhoods funding.

The period 2008-2012 also saw almost all English local authorities publish community cohesion strategies, driven by concerns about violent extremism, the Government's Prevent Strategy, increased EU migration and Equality Act 2010 duties[59]. While most councils still have a cabinet member for 'communities', a relatively small number of English and Scottish councils have community cohesion strategies. Our research suggests that 33 councils in England have published a community cohesion strategy. Another 10 councils are in the process of developing such strategies, including a number affected by the summer 2024 riots.

English councils that have published strategies are more likely to be northern, urban and ethnically diverse. This suggests that in England, many council officials and elected members do not feel that community cohesion is an 'everywhere' issue, relevant to all parts of the UK. This contrasts with Northern Ireland and Wales, where all councils have such strategies.

Local councils that had published cohesion strategies told us that their development had proved useful in enabling more proactive horizon scanning, partnership building and public engagement. Where council strategies do exist, some participants felt cohesion can still be seen as an 'add-on' intervention, rather than something that is mainstreamed into all relevant areas of work. Noting this caveat, most faith and civil society groups and many council officials believed it would be beneficial for all combined and local authorities to have community and cohesion strategies. Such polices would provide clear aims for work, encourage partnerships and enable resources to be allocated effectively.

"Policy makers need to provide the appropriate framework within which communities can operate, and the resources to make change possible. The government should have in place a long-term, cross departmental national cohesion strategy, the combined authorities should then implement regional strategies, including local government, and should have the responsibility to deliver local cohesion strategies and projects, with the support of civil society."

– Evidence submission, Cllr Usman Ali and Chris Hollins.

Council programmes of work

In stakeholder meetings and through the call for evidence we were told about the varied work of councils in relation to community strength and cohesion. Outside of policy development, specific council interventions on community and cohesion largely fell into the following thematic areas:

1. Work to tackle poverty and inequality, often through the direct provision of employment support, youth services and funding for advice, mentoring, anti-poverty and community development programmes.

2. Community safety and counter-extremism focused work, including action to address hate crime. The latter has included third party reporting initiatives and victim support. A small number of councils have conducted communications-focused hate crime prevention work with partner organisations, such as youth projects and social landlords, including norm-setting and counter-stereotyping activity. In July and August 2024, councils' community safety work focused on tension-monitoring and measures to ensure the safety of minority ethnic staff and residents.

   We also received evidence about council-led work to address extremism. This included dialogue projects and support for faith and civil society organisations working to strengthen shared values and pro-social behaviour. We were also told about work to help people recognise and reject hateful or extremist narratives. Much of this work remains low profile.

3. Funding and sometimes organising community, cultural and commemorative events that bring people together. These include street parties, county shows, cultural festivals, Black History Month and Refugee Week events, religious events, citizenship ceremonies and Remembrance.

4. Social care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and the coordination of integration support for asylum-seekers and refugees.

5. Citizenship ceremonies for adults who have been granted British citizenship. Some councils incorporate voter registration into ceremonies or provide information about volunteering in local communities. A small number of councils have involved local residents in ceremonies as a bridging activity, but this is not a common practice.

6. Support for volunteering and for local civil society organisations. Many local authorities fund civil society organisations to deliver specific programmes that relate to community development or cohesion. A smaller number of local authorities have put in place strategies and programmes to build civil society capacity in relation to cohesion. For example, Bradford Council has a long-standing partnership with civil society through its Stronger Communities initiative, supporting

local organisations in addressing issues such as hate crime, misinformation and social isolation.

7. Emergency planning and civic resilience.

8. Responsibilities for running elections and supporting democratic resilience. Councils have statutory responsibilities to administer elections and maintain the electoral register. They are required to protect the integrity of democratic processes from threats such as misinformation, abuse or intimidation, and provide training and support for councillors to enable them to uphold standards in public life. While not a statutory duty, we heard from a small number of councils that were doing work to encourage voter registration and participation, or encourage civic engagement through young mayor schemes, participatory budgeting and deliberative democracy. However, non-statutory work to increase democratic resilience seems to be the exception rather than usual practice in local authorities.

9. Adult and community education services and employability support. Many councils run or commission English language courses for migrants and refugees.

Council responses to the summer riots

Councils, as well as faith and civil society organisations, described their responses to the summer 2024 riots. Initially, local authorities focused on public safety, coordinating closely with police and emergency services to monitor tensions, manage disruptions and protect vulnerable communities. A few councils set up temporary community hubs and helplines to support affected residents and businesses. In the aftermath, some councils in affected areas convened emergency meetings with local stakeholders – youth workers, faith leaders and community organisations – to understand the grievances driving the unrest. Some councils in affected areas launched listening exercises, while others committed to developing new community cohesion strategies and programmes of work.

We visited or heard from people working in many of the areas where riots took place, including Belfast, Bolton, Hartlepool, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham, Rotherham, Rushmoor (Aldershot), Stoke-on-Trent and Sunderland. We also heard from councils and civil society organisations in areas that had not been affected by the riots, despite underlying tensions or the presence of asylum hotels. We were told that in these areas, previous investment in community cohesion, for example, effective tension monitoring and communications, had stopped tensions from escalating. It is notable that there were no riots in Bradford, Peterborough and Walsall – all Integration Action Areas – despite asylum-seekers being housed in hotels in these local authority areas. Hotels were also being used in Calderdale and Oldham to house asylum seekers in 2024. We were told how previous investment in partnership working, tension monitoring, communications and youth work had helped the police, council and community leaders to de-escalate rising tensions in summer 2024. Despite the positive

examples of this work, there was a consensus among councils that unless there was significant government investment in community cohesion, there was a high risk of future disorder as seen in 2024.

Understandings of community development and cohesion

From the stakeholder meetings and evidence that we received, it was clear that councils understand, frame and deliver community development and cohesion in different ways and through different programmes of work.

Within combined and local authorities, community development is often framed in terms of economic or place-based regeneration. Associated programmes are typically designed and implemented through top-down approaches, with limited input or participation from local residents, even where public realm improvements are involved. Funding for grassroots community development initiatives, such as those focused on community organising, has been significantly reduced. However, greater consideration given to civic contingencies in the last 20 years has meant that some councils see community development as contributing to community resilience. The community ownership movement, boosted by a 'Community Right to Buy' policy, the £150 million Community Ownership Fund and the work of the organisation Power to Change, has meant that in some areas community development is framed through the lens of community ownership.

Similarly, councils frame community cohesion in different ways. In many local authorities, community cohesion is seen as an aspect of equalities and inclusion, community safety or counter extremism policy. But in other areas community cohesion is seen through a lens of community engagement. Some councils that have published cohesion strategies have developed 'official' definitions of cohesion which underpin their work and define community cohesion broadly. It is both a strength and a weakness of community development and cohesion that it can be seen through many lenses. Both community development and cohesion can sometimes seem 'orphaned' areas of public policy, relevant to the many policy areas listed above, but owned by no lead team and staff.

Case Study – Sunderland Council

Sunderland was one of the towns and cities which experienced riots in 2024, with unrest taking place in the context of strained public services and poverty. This has contributed to resentment towards out-groups, specifically asylum-seekers housed in dispersal accommodation heavily concentrated in one area of the city. Regulations prevent most asylum-seekers from studying and working, leaving a predominantly young and male population with little to do with their time. Tensions have been amplified by misinformation and disinformation on social media and low trust in democratic institutions. The 2024 riots have also left a legacy of fear among Sunderland's minority ethnic residents.[60]

Some of the least well-off residents feel that their views are not being heard or valued by authorities and that they do not benefit from regeneration plans.[61] The council is taking a proactive and collaborative approach to cohesion. Money from the Government's Community Recovery Fund is being used to support online communications, an inter-faith youth network and training a group of civic mediators to de-escalate tensions. The council is working with the Belong Network to co-create a city-wide cohesion strategy, built on engagement with residents, businesses, faith groups and civil society.

Practical initiatives include Breaking Bread, a community meal and storytelling project, and youth sport projects aimed at building bridges across different communities. Community development projects such as SARA (Southwick Altogether Raising Aspirations) and HALO (Hetton Aspirations Linking Opportunities) bring service providers and residents together in community hubs to tackle issues such as anti-social behaviour, housing and health. SAIL (Sunderland Altogether Improving Lives) has recorded substantial reductions in youth crime and anti-social behaviour.

"Many of the projects that we are implementing are focused on creating opportunities for communities across cultures to come together through food, music, sport or love of the outdoors – opportunities to meet in a supportive, non-threatening environment."

– Evidence submission, Sunderland City Council

Programmes to build strong and cohesive communities

There were an estimated 205,000 registered charities in the UK in 2024. It is not known how many of them are working on community development and cohesion, but it is likely to be many hundreds. Faith organisations, social landlords, educational institutions, local authorities and the police are also involved in the delivery of community and cohesion initiatives. We heard from a large range of organisations in the stakeholder meetings and call for evidence and were provided with descriptions of their work and factors that contributed to successful outcomes.

Some focus group participants, as well as those who attended the stakeholder meetings or provided evidence, were active in informally run associations which also have a bearing on community strength and cohesion by increasing bonding, bridging and linking relationships. These groups include informal sports clubs, reading groups or the mutual aid and neighbourhood groups that organised themselves during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic[62].

In reviewing the evidence, it is clear that grassroots practice uses a range of approaches to build strong and cohesive communities, which we have categorised and summarised in Table 7.1. These approaches are not mutually exclusive - few organisations base their work solely on one approach.

Table 7.1: Practice approaches used in community development and cohesion projects

Overarching approach	**Activities**
Community development	Anti-poverty and equalities initiatives targeted at individuals Asset-based community development Community ownership Community resilience programmes Community organising
Social contact programmes	Befriending Bridging Welcoming
Inclusive identity programmes	Decentring projects Inclusive identity programmes Inclusive place-making[63]

Conflict resolution	Dialogue De-escalation Mediation Narrative change Conflict resolution Post-conflict peacebuilding Post conflict reconciliation and restorative justice
Civic participation	Community ownership Community organising Participative and deliberative policy making Volunteer promotion Voter registration and turnout promotion
Democratic resilience	Knowledge- and skills-based citizenship education Critical thinking Community organising Participative decision-making Deliberation and deliberative democracy Depolarisation Voter registration and turnout promotion
Community safety, violence reduction and counter-extremism	Reporting and victim support Event and venue security Addressing anti-social behaviour Community-focused crime prevention through norm-setting, counter-stereotyping and perspective-taking Behavioural change Restorative justice Counter-narratives Community resilience
Migrant integration	Integration orientation and citizenship education programmes aimed at individuals Welcoming

Community development

Community development programmes aim to empower local people to address issues that matter to them, building stronger, more resilient communities. It comprises different types of work:

- Anti-poverty, equalities and wellbeing initiatives targeted at individuals, for example employment support.
- Asset-based community development to build on the identified strengths of communities in relation to economic assets, social capital and the organisations that bring people together.
- Community ownership, which gives people control over local assets such as buildings, land or services so they can manage them in ways that meet community needs. Community ownership has been boosted by a 'Community Right to Buy' policy, the Government's £150 million Community Ownership Fund and the work of the organisation Power to Change.
- Community resilience programmes to increase the ability of communities to withstand shock events or change.
- Community organising, which brings people together to decide on solutions to common problems and to take collective action for change.

We found that some community development projects do not always communicate their successes and struggle for sustained funding. In some parts of the UK, community development projects operate in isolation rather than collaborating, for example with organisations working on community cohesion. Successful community development projects often rely on a core group of skilled and committed individuals to drive them forward in the early stages. However, not all communities have this capacity readily available.

"There is a challenge around capacity in some communities, much of which has been driven by successive decades of underinvestment and hollowing out. There are places in the country that lack the human, organisational and social capital to tackle problems in their community."

– Evidence submission, Power to Change

Case Study – Sporting Communities CIC

Sporting Communities are youth and community workers, with projects in the East Midlands, West Midlands and Cheshire. The organisation began its work in Derby in 2021 when a group of youth workers were offered a derelict sports pavilion in Normanton Community Park. Through a collaborative consultation process, local residents and young people endorsed a plan to take over the site through asset transfer and develop it into a community hub and sporting facility. It is now a well-used venue serving a diverse, multi-ethnic population, bringing people of different ages and backgrounds together.

With the Normanton pavilion now financially self-sustaining, the organisation has acquired ten community libraries through asset transfer. Rather than relying on external intervention, evaluation evidence shows that the community now feels it has taken ownership of its future, and through this had a sustained impact on community strength and cohesion.

"The process [of taking over the pavilion] revealed a fundamental truth: communities often wait in silence, hoping for change, but lacking the means or collective agency to instigate it. However, once a movement gains momentum – when people see tangible results and feel genuinely included in the decision-making process – endorsement and support naturally follow."

– Evidence submission, Sporting Communities CIC

Social contact programmes

Social contact programmes aim to strengthen bonding and bridging networks. Bonding programmes aim to address loneliness and isolation or increase mutual support and community resilience. Over the last ten years there has been an increase in the number of initiatives that address social isolation. Following the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness report, the Government published a strategy to end loneliness in 2018, committing to a cross-departmental approach and National Lottery Community Fund funding for befriending and social prescribing projects[64]. There has also been greater NHS recognition of the role that social connection plays in boosting physical and mental health, with more than 3,500 social prescribing link workers based in GPs surgeries in 2023, with other social prescribing practitioners based in civil society organisations.

We received evidence from a number of organisations running befriending or social prescribing programmes. This evidence highlighted the extent of social fragmentation in society. It also suggested that information about opportunities for social connection failed to reach a significant section of society.

"There is so much that people can get involved in but often people don't know about it....If people don't know about the support, it basically doesn't exist for them."

– Evidence submission, Frome Connects

'Bridging' programmes aim to increase contact across social divides, with research showing this can reduce inter-group conflict, stereotyping, prejudice and threat perceptions. This inter-group social contact can be direct, indirect (having friends who have friends from the out-group); or contextual (knowing that other people have mixed friendship groups). Social media now plays an important role in contextual social contact, as we may see other people from different parts of the UK having mixed friendship groups, for example on platforms such as Facebook.

Such programmes are widely used in the UK to address inter-generational divides or inter-group conflict in situations of social segregation. They include:

- Inter-faith initiatives, such as Near Neighbours and local inter-faith networks.
- Bridging through leisure activities, such as sport.
- Community events such as the Big Lunch and the Great Get Together.
- Programmes that target children and young people in education and youth work settings. An example of this is the Linking Network, a schools-based bridging programme which began its work in Bradford but now works in 25 local authorities.

"Intergenerational heritage projects play a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion by bridging generational divides through shared cultural experiences."

– Evidence submission, Historic England

Bridging activities have also been incorporated into peace-building initiatives in Northern Ireland and welcoming projects for refugees.

This approach is most effective where social contact is meaningful, positive and sustained, and where the two groups have broadly equal status[65]. Institutional support for social contact, for example in schools or sports clubs, also increases the impact of bridging social contact on inter-group relations, as do the shared goals and practical engagement of activities such as sports and craft. We also heard about the role that food and green space can play in facilitating social contact between people from different backgrounds.

"Research led by Teesside University explored the use of nature – such as parks, rivers, beaches and woodlands – to facilitate social integration between different communities, including migrants. They found that the natural environment helped to enhance social interactions, build new bonds, and foster community cohesion."

– Evidence submission, Nuffield Foundation

Some migrant integration programmes have included bridging activities, alongside support for individual migrants and refugees. We were told about several such projects. Some involved food, others used sport to bring newcomers and local residents together. We were told that one of the challenges in delivering these programmes is that asylum-seekers can often be moved by their accommodation provider, meaning that relationships are not sustained. Bridging activities had also been incorporated into pilot 'welcoming hubs' in different parts of the UK, bringing together refugees, their sponsors, other community members and service providers in one building.

"A large asylum hotel opened suddenly and was greeted with concern by the local population. Keen to integrate and contribute, some of the asylum seekers formed an Environment Society. They began litter-picking and other environmental activities...The Environment Society membership blossomed, local residents joined the group, and the asylum seekers quickly became viewed as valued members of the community, even winning awards for their work."

– Evidence submission, Care4Calais, Reading and Wokingham Group

Evaluations show that many cohesion programmes focused on 'bridging' social contact have had positive impacts by reducing stereotypes, increasing empathy and making people more confident to mix with out-groups[66]. Another ingredient for success is communicating this work to a wider audience, so achieving impact through 'contextual social contact'.

However, linking projects are not always a priority in schools, particularly at a time when budgets are tight and schools struggle to fit school linking into a busy timetable.

We were told that the Israel-Gaza conflict has strained almost all local inter-faith networks. In some areas, inter-faith forums have broken down. In other places, inter-faith initiatives have faced tensions, but stronger foundations have prevented a breakdown of relationships. Political events in India and Pakistan have also strained inter-faith relations in some locations. Some (but not all) inter-faith programmes struggle to engage younger people, or people with more polarised views.

"There are people different to us, but we don't engage with them. I see very few people are actually at events where things are mixed. I tend to see the same 25 people. A real challenge of how we broaden that. And I think if we're not careful, we can get quite lazy at thinking it was a really good event."

– Stakeholder, West Midlands roundtable discussion

Inclusive identity programmes

Identity-based programmes aim to break down strongly held 'in-group' identities – a process known as decentring – and to work with groups of people to build more inclusive, shared identities that can accommodate differences[67].

We heard many examples of inclusive identity projects, for example through football clubs, including Charlton Athletic's 'Red, White and Black Day' and Huddersfield Town AFC's video campaigns to promote inclusive fan-based identities. Through an online museum and an annual festival, the Modern Cockney project also aims to bring people together to challenge stereotypes and debate more inclusive Cockney identities.

"Being a 'Modern Cockney' is not about being exclusively 'Cockney' but whether you're Bengali Cockney, Black Cockney, British Cockney, Chinese Cockney..... Our society faces major challenges of growing social division and polarisation, destroying the very glue that binds us together. But connecting with and respecting our shared identities builds community cohesion, fosters a greater sense of togetherness, binding us closer together, to create a better world for future generations".

– Evidence submission, Modern Cockney

Heritage projects can also be used to foster inclusive national and local identities. The Shire Hall in Dorchester was Dorset's courthouse from 1797 until 1955. The Tolpuddle Martyrs were sentenced there, and it saw the domestic abuse case that inspired Thomas Hardy to write Tess of the D'Urbervilles. The courthouse has now been developed as an interactive museum and community space. Events and exhibitions have been organised that have fostered discussions on history, justice and shared local and national values and identities.

Evaluation evidence from these projects suggests that some of this work has been successful in broadening strongly held in-group identities to make them more inclusive. A key ingredient for their success is involving target communities in the co-design of projects. Where there is little or no co-production, there is a risk that such projects are perceived as externally imposed or patronising.

Conflict resolution

Conflict resolution covers a range of activities, from initial dialogue, tension monitoring and de-escalation, through to mediation, conflict resolution, post-conflict peacebuilding, reconciliation and restorative justice.

A legacy of the Troubles is a strong faith and civil society led peacebuilding sector in Northern Ireland. Some of these organisations and individual activists took part in the stakeholder meeting in Belfast.

"Our Lives, Our Legacy [which was funded by Spirit of 2012] brought together 15 young people from across the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland to participate in a series of events to mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. The young people were drawn equally from across the religious and cultural divides in Northern Ireland. They grew up in segregated communities and went to segregated education, so for many this was their first opportunity to get involved in cross-community work and explore the impact of the conflict on their lives. Key to the success of the project was the active involvement of young people at every stage. This approach created a sense of ownership and responsibility but also ensured that the entire project was authentic and had young people at its core."

– Evidence submission, Spirit of 2012

Conflict resolution initiatives in Northern Ireland have been developed in the specific context of its sectarian conflict. Overall, we found that civil society organisations in Northern Ireland tended to demonstrate greater confidence and experience in facilitating dialogue and engaging with contentious or emotionally charged issues than in the rest of the UK. This reflects a legacy of conflict resolution practice that has normalised dialogue as a means of addressing division. Although conditions differ in Northern Ireland, there is potentially a role for its peace practitioners in the training and mentoring of those working in community cohesion projects elsewhere in the UK, helping to build capacity and develop skills.

Outside of Northern Ireland, there are fewer sustained community cohesion initiatives that have used dialogue, community mediation, conflict resolution or restorative justice in the UK. However, conflict resolution approaches are being used in some places, although these initiatives are not always well-communicated. We heard from organisations engaged in dialogue and community mediation in the stakeholder meetings and call for evidence. The Centre for Good Relations in Scotland and Who Is Your Neighbour? are examples of organisations undertaking capacity building on conflict resolution. As noted above, Sunderland Council has funded the training of a group of community mediators who can be deployed to diffuse tensions. There is scope for extending community mediation to more areas as it is not an expensive intervention.

We heard of restorative justice approaches in Belfast after the summer 2024 riots but are unaware of similar work with those who had participated in the riots in England. There is scope for using restorative justice approaches more widely in the UK, particularly with perpetrators of hate crime.

"The day straight after it, we have a restorative justice project funded by the housing executive. So our staff were on the ground, doing a physical cleanup with some of the shopkeepers, as well as the young people on the project. A few days later, we were working with some of the young people who've been arrested, and trying to think about, 'How did you get caught up in this? And how do we start to think about the impact on you, the family, the community?'"

– Stakeholder, Belfast roundtable discussion

Case Study – Who is Your Neighbour?

Who is Your Neighbour? is a South Yorkshire-based charity that facilitates dialogue in communities experiencing conflict and change. It creates spaces where residents can discuss sensitive topics such as race, immigration and identity, usually over a period of time. The organisation's work is underpinned by principles that emphasise open discussion and the good intentions of most people.

Who is Your Neighbour? does not aim to persuade or change minds. Instead it provides a platform for voices that often go unheard, especially in economically disadvantaged or predominantly white communities. Through these conversations, participants can confront discomfort, explore differences, and discover shared experiences.

Beyond local dialogues, Who is Your Neighbour? offers training and advice to organisations across the UK, helping them navigate complex community tensions. Evaluations show its work contributes to building resilient and inclusive communities.

Democratic resilience

Democratic resilience is the ability of democratic society to withstand and respond to threats while protecting the integrity of democratic institutions, the rule of law, a free press and upholding shared values. In the stakeholder meetings, call for evidence and in the focus groups we heard much about threats to democracy. These include extremism, the intimidation of those who stand for public office, online mis/disinformation, hostile state activity, polarisation, and falling political trust and voter engagement.

Democratic resilience programmes aim to address these threats, for example by building people's ability to identify misinformation, or by strengthening the capacity of people to take part in and engage critically and constructively in democratic processes. Such work encompasses citizenship education, critical thinking programmes, voter registration and participation, dialogue, participative decision-making and deliberative democracy.

As already noted, councils have some statutory responsibilities to safeguard democracy. Schools also have a major role in building democratic resilience, through citizenship education, or modern studies in Scotland. Although there are criticisms about the quality of teaching, citizenship education is mandatory for children in years seven to eleven in England, although academy schools can currently opt out of this requirement.

We were told about a small number of civil society initiatives to increase democratic resilience. These included the Migrant Democracy Project, which works to expand the electoral franchise and increase participation among migrants and refugees who are able to vote in the UK. The 'Talking Shop' tours vacant retail units and uses creative methods to increase people's civic knowledge and participation. Involve is an organisation that helps local partners run pop-up democracy events and citizens' assemblies. And CitizensUK has involved thousands of people in community organising by working with schools, colleges, trade unions, faith groups and other organisations.

The Sara Khan Review was commissioned to examine the impact of extremism in local communities and explore what more could be done to strengthen community resilience. Despite the recommendations of this review, and the prevalence of online mis- and disinformation and falling political trust, our research suggests there are relatively few local civil society organisations working to increase democratic resilience. As noted above, pressures on council budgets have severely reduced non-statutory work to increase democratic participation. Those initiatives that do exist tend to work in isolation from others in the community cohesion sector. There is a clear need for capacity building, partnership work and strategic funding to strengthen the democratic resilience sector.

Volunteering

Volunteering helps to build bridging and linking social capital, which drives cohesion. In turn, cohesive societies encourage further volunteering[68]. A number of organisations that champion volunteering attended the stakeholder meetings or submitted evidence. There was a strong articulation of the value of volunteering as a factor in driving strong and cohesive communities. Concerns were raised, however, that rates of formal volunteering – giving unpaid time to a formally constituted organisation – were declining. In the 15 years between 2001 and 2016, the Community Life Survey showed an average of 27% of the population offering their time as formal volunteers at least once a month. This figure had fallen to 16% in the most recent Community Life Survey.[69]

People's propensity to volunteer is strongly associated with age, education and social grade. In stakeholder meetings there were calls for improvements to the way that volunteers are recruited, supported and recognised, including through inter-generational

programmes that pair younger and older volunteers. We were told that one-off volunteering opportunities, for example at a community or sporting event, were an effective method of encouraging further volunteering in local communities. Evidence from their evaluations show that annual volunteering actions such as the Big Help Out or the Great British Spring Clean are also a successful route into future volunteering.

"Organising events such as The Big Lunch provides an opportunity for people to participate in a voluntary activity, and support their community, without a long-term commitment. Supporting people to hold one-off community events or activities, like The Big Lunch, can help to build confidence, as well as encourage further community engagement. Since organising a Big Lunch, almost half of organisers (47%) have worked with neighbours to improve their local community, and 31% have taken up a new volunteering opportunity."

– Evidence submission, Eden Project

What works in practice

Drawing together what we heard and the evaluation evidence that stakeholders provided, the following factors can contribute to the success of community development and cohesion projects:

Co-design: Programmes are more likely to be successful if they are co-designed with local people.

Food, green space and events are facilitators of strong and cohesive communities: Access to safe and attractive spaces, and food-based activities, can facilitate bridging. Community events can provide a route into more sustained volunteering

The key role of communications: Good communications help projects reach more people by making them aware of activities, encouraging participation, and helping connect with new sections of society. Clear, effective messaging can also make the project feel more welcoming and relevant to a wider audience. Communicating cohesion projects also helps make the case for funding to sustain and grow the work.

Partnerships: Working with others can help community projects reach and involve a wider cross-section of society, for example teaming up with a football club or a housing association. Partnerships can also increase practitioners' skills and capacity, and their confidence to try different approaches.

Local leadership: Supportive and strong local leadership from councils can strengthen faith and civil society initiatives in the local area.

Training and mentoring: These opportunities can increase practitioners' skills and help build the confidence to try different approaches.

Evaluation and reflective practice: This can help community development and cohesion projects understand approaches that work. By learning from experience, projects can make a bigger impact over time.

Strategic role of funders: We heard from a number of community development foundations that provided funding for small, local community development and cohesion projects. These foundations had community development or cohesion as strategic aims and had helped to drive change in their local area. The strategic role that trusts and foundations, and the National Lottery family of funders, can play could be increased. While there are networks for funders of environmental or refugee-focused projects, there is no national network for community cohesion funders.

8. What's missing: gaps and priorities for change

Key points

- Just as the public wanted more national leadership on social cohesion, so did stakeholders. A cross-departmental approach with secure funding was regarded as a priority, from which local approaches could be developed.
- Stakeholders also shared public concerns about the impact of social media. It was felt that local authorities need better resources and skills to monitor and challenge online hate, which undermines social cohesion.
- Stakeholders would welcome a more confident public-facing narrative from national politicians about community and cohesion. This was particularly to counteract negative portrayals of migrants in national and social media.
- Each community of the UK was seen as having its own challenges and opportunities. Shared challenges were identified for rural areas, including lack of infrastructure, poor transport and social isolation.
- Cohesion is a 'live' issue for many local authorities, particularly after the 2024 riots. But the effectiveness of this work is often limited by a lack of clear goals and inadequate resources. There is a need for better coordination of efforts across all departments whose remit includes communities and cohesion.
- As raised by the public, stakeholders agree that asylum-seeker and refugee accommodation and integration are urgent priorities for social cohesion. This was seen to require both additional funding and greater local authority powers.
- The research found considerable scope for increased collaboration of organisations across the third sector, as well as schools, employers, sports and arts organisations, youth and employment projects.

Our research highlights ongoing gaps in action to improve community cohesion which urgently need to be addressed, particularly in light of the threats and challenges outlined in Chapter 5.

This section of the report draws from our stakeholder discussions on priorities for change and also the call for evidence and literature review. It examines where existing practice across institutions can be strengthened.

Governments

Developing long-term, joined up national responses

The majority of stakeholders based in England wanted the Government to show greater leadership and develop a long-term, cross-departmental community cohesion strategy. It was suggested that such a strategy would provide clear aims and a framework within which local approaches could be developed. A national community cohesion strategy should also recognise that change takes time and will require long-term funding streams.

"Community cohesion interventions of two to three years are ineffective. Building networks, projects, and connections take time and, with two- or three-year interventions, just as the impact becomes evident, the funding ends, halting progress at its peak. Community cohesion work cannot be reactive. It must be continuous and preventative."

– Evidence submission, Blackburn with Darwen Council

There was frustration that four independent reviews on cohesion had been published over the last 25 years, alongside policy papers and consultations, yet successive governments, notably in England and Scotland, have struggled to make sustained funding and policy commitments to cohesion.

"I think listening is important, but I think action is also important. I've seen a lot of talk, and I think a lot of people get frustrated with that consultation again and again. And I think people want action against the things that will make a difference in their community. They want to see things happening."

– Stakeholder, Yorkshire and the Humber roundtable discussion

Many of those who gave evidence or took part in the stakeholder meetings also stressed that a national community and cohesion strategy needed to be cross-departmental, aligning different areas of central government policy. One participant suggested that all new government policy should be submitted to a 'cohesion test', mirroring the Family Test (also known as the Family Impact Audit) introduced in 2014 by the Coalition Government. Participants were often concerned that asylum policy undermined community cohesion. Stakeholders were particularly concerned that Home Office immigration and asylum policy increased local cohesion challenges. Participants in all the stakeholder groups and many of those who sent in evidence argued for speedier asylum determination, ending the use of hotels. They also saw a need for community engagement prior to dispersal and projects to help asylum-seekers and refugees integrate into their new communities.

"The lack of Home Office engagement with local authorities, and the lack of community engagement or preparedness prior to asylum accommodation, impacts on social cohesion. There needs to be community cohesion/ preparedness work in advance of full dispersal and hotels."

– Evidence submission, City of Sanctuary

Stakeholder participants echoed views expressed in focus groups on the link between community cohesion and divisions in income and wealth in national and local strategies. For many stakeholders, addressing declining living standards was a priority both in itself and because of the impact it has on cohesion. This includes its role in undermining feelings of togetherness. As one participant explained:

"The government really needs to be hell bent on trying to raise living standards [...] I think that will help stem some of those underlying issues felt in quite a lot of communities where this comes down to people who don't feel better off in their pockets. It's easy, then, for social media to target scapegoats, in terms of, 'That's why you're feeling poorer personally."

– Stakeholder, north-west England roundtable discussion

The short length of the political cycle was also raised as a concern. In Belfast the case was made for multi-year budgets committed to social cohesion interventions, to ensure stability of delivery and succession planning where key individuals move on.

Finding the balance between national action and place-based plans

Cohesion and community development stakeholders stressed the need for national resource and action from policymakers. This was caveated, however, by a resistance to implementing a 'one size fits all' approach. This view was expressed by groups in the three nations outside of England and across the regions.

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of devolved approaches at a local authority level to design cohesion strategies, rather than one which is 'top-down' or 'imposed from above'. This was partly seen as necessary to acknowledge the unique challenges, assets and opportunities of a place, based on factors such as its demographic profile, community infrastructure and degree of deprivation. Councils were also seen as 'closer to the ground', with stronger local relationships to implement strategies with local partners, and with more potential to consult residents on what cohesion and community work should consist of in their area.

"We do feel like we get left behind. We feel that decisions are made with a London-centric view that sometimes are not appropriate for us. So everyone's very excited about devolution and we need to accelerate that here [on these issues]."

– Stakeholder roundtable discussion, north-east England

Academics and some civil society organisations in our roundtable discussions caveated these perspectives with a view that some degree of uniformity, in progress indicators and measurement, would help enable accountability across local authorities and insight into effective practice. Participants discussed the importance of a balance, between national oversight and monitoring frameworks and local insight, with flexibility afforded to local authority funding and partner engagement.

National action to address online misinformation and hate

Across the stakeholder roundtable discussions in the regions and nations of the UK, we found that many local authorities are struggling to respond to the challenges posed by online misinformation, disinformation and hatred. Despite a recognition that this is important, council officials often shared candidly that they did not always have the skills or resources to monitor social media and challenge damaging narratives with sufficient speed. This placed extreme and hateful online influencers at an advantage. We were also told about counter-rumours projects led by local authorities that were addressing damaging narratives, including those on social media. Some counter-narrative work, however, involved 'myth- busting' initiatives, which risk reinforcing harmful narratives, and 'open letter' statements which were seen to be reactive, slow to implement and had limited reach with vulnerable audiences.

There is an appetite for national government support and guidance here to strengthen effective interventions.

"I think we are floundering, let's be honest. So I think a lot of us have ideas of what might work. We have experiences and things that work well. But I honestly think that at this point in time, we actually don't know what will work in our new [social media] landscape."

– Stakeholder, Scotland roundtable discussion

Inclusive national narratives and respectful discourse

Participants in some of the stakeholder roundtables raised concerns that the narratives used by some politicians were raising tensions and increasing hostility to asylum-seekers. In addition to a national cohesion strategy, people felt there was a need for a confident and public-facing government narrative about community and cohesion that clearly communicates an 'everybody' message and a shared vision for the kind of society we want to build together. It was felt that a confident national narrative on cohesion would help councils, faith organisations and civil society to communicate the work that they were doing to bridge divides and build stronger and more cohesive communities.

"Consistent language and definitions are needed to help government departments, local authorities, schools and elected members to talk about social cohesion in a consistent way, adopting a strength-based approach ensuring that social cohesion does not become another term or strategy to talk about counter extremism – this needs to be about all our communities."

– Evidence submission, Manchester City Council.

Other participants felt the absence of a welcoming government narrative around new migrants amid frequent statements about deterring and removing irregular migrants. Distortion and misinformation from social media were seen as exacerbating this problem, where anti-migrant statements from politicians were amplified. We heard about the role government could play in telling more inclusive, positive stories of migration:

"There is a beautiful story to tell about who we are as a country, about our diversity, the strength of our communities. Even though I don't like the word resilience, but yeah, just the strength and resilience of our communities. I think that this government hasn't recognised what it needs to do to create a different story. And so finding an alternative story about who we are and what we can be, I think, is critical to the leadership of all of the activity that would follow from that."

– Stakeholder, roundtable discussion with anti-racism and race equity organisations

Rural areas

Our research shows the need to include rural areas in cohesion strategies, since they have distinct issues which are often ignored. These include rural poverty, poor local services and infrastructure, isolation and, in some places, temporary migration to agricultural and social care jobs. The call for evidence highlighted concerns that those who lived in urban areas sometimes did not understand the rural way of life and the challenges faced by people in rural areas.

We heard about the importance of digital and transport infrastructure to ensure social mixing in rural areas, for example the South West and East of England. Improving public and private investment in these services was seen as crucial in reducing isolation among people in rural areas.

Where more sparsely populated areas have fewer community spaces, such as a café or a library, these also carry more local importance. We heard how community right to buy schemes had helped local people protect and regenerate important centres of social infrastructure, for example pubs and shops.

"We have lots of villages, and youth provision tends to be more in the towns, and so there's no kind of way to get to the town. That's why we've been funding more kind of detached youth work, sending youth workers to a village to talk to young people."

– Participant, east of England roundtable discussion

Local authorities

We spoke to council members and officers around the UK about the role of local authorities. Our research finds patchy existing practice in the approach of councils to work on cohesion and community strength.

As noted in Chapter 7, understandings of community development and cohesion vary across councils. This may not matter, if community and cohesion challenges are being addressed. Our evidence suggests that the summer 2024 riots have prompted more councils to review their work on community cohesion, and not only in the towns and cities that were affected by disorder. Some councils have established local cohesion and community development strategies, which bring conceptual clarity and focus to work on these issues. In many local authorities, however, a lack of staff resource and cross-departmental coordination can mean that cohesion and community strengthening is insufficiently mainstreamed into the work of a local authority, for example into the work of asylum resettlement departments, housing teams or communications leads.

Funding was widely seen as a crucial barrier, particularly in view of budget cuts. In the words of one stakeholder:

> *"I think ultimately, if this strategy doesn't feed into the kind of long-term funding settlement for local government and have some kind of carve-out for that, then it's very unlikely that this work will be prioritised beyond the great examples of pockets of practice that we see currently, but it's very hard for it to move beyond that."*
>
> **– Stakeholder, London roundtable discussion**

Our research identifies four key challenges where councils' work could be strengthened.

Proactive strategies for integration

Local authorities were seen to be in need of more support to address issues of immigration and integration. The challenging issue of asylum-seeker accommodation and integration was raised across our stakeholder groups. It was seen as particularly important given the focus of anti-migrant feeling on asylum hotels. Some participants in our stakeholder roundtables argued for greater local authority controls to hold private accommodation providers accountable and to assess the cohesion impact of Home Office resettlement plans.

The provision of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) was also raised as an issue. Combined authorities are able to be more flexible and give access to English classes for asylum seekers on arrival.

"I think we need to see that asylum accommodation has shifted in terms of its management, away from private contractors and towards local and regional authorities. Local authorities are much more incentivised to avoid the use of large, isolated sites and hotels that really lead people to be a target for the far right. I think that is something very tangible that could happen and could improve cohesion."

– Stakeholder, London roundtable discussion

Fear of difficult conversations

There was evidence that councillors and officials are sometimes reluctant to initiate contentious conversations around community cohesion. This is sometimes because of a lack of skills and experience in handling such conversations but also due to fears of a backlash, media scrutiny, or being seen as politically divisive. Some local authority staff said they found it difficult to acknowledge and talk about grievances, or to consider how they should respond where local politicians were felt to be stoking tensions. We also found that local authorities have given insufficient attention to the role that their communications teams could play in delivering cohesion strategies, for example by helping to communicate and embed an inclusive sense of local identity and pride.

Councils could also be underequipped to engage in public conversations about polarised issues such as asylum accommodation. This included difficulties communicating on these issues in ways that could challenge hateful prejudice while also constructively engaging concerns around issues such as pressures on resources and public services.

Mainstreaming community development and cohesion across policy areas

As with central government, it was seen as important that community development and social cohesion are embedded in all relevant areas of council work, as well as through specific community development and cohesion initiatives. This could be summarised as mainstreaming plus targeted activities.

Tackling crime and anti-social behaviour, addressing poverty and improving opportunities for young people were cited as particularly relevant. More generally, we heard issues of how housing and built environment policies impacted cohesion, yet these were rarely aligned with social cohesion and community development objectives. There tend to be fewer bonding, bridging and linking social connections between people in high churn neighbourhoods where residents move in and out each year. Yet housing and planning departments are rarely included in council conversations on community development and cohesion. The issue of housing supply was seen as urgent, given simmering tensions about inequality and perceived establishment biases among the public.

Community infrastructure

Finally, provision of community spaces was raised as a key issue in local areas. Such spaces provide opportunities for people from different backgrounds to meet and mix and include green space, parks, sports facilities, libraries, museums and heritage assets and community centres. Stakeholders highlighted that there are generally more of these community assets in wealthy areas, a trend supported by Local Trust research[70]. Furthermore, we were told that not all community assets are well-used, particularly if they were neglected or vandalised. Some participants in our roundtable discussions felt that local authorities had reduced their capacity to provide community spaces by selling-off community assets such as libraries and green space, although this was understood to be a consequence of national cuts to local government.

Some stakeholders said that local authorities could conduct more community consultation to understand how local community infrastructure might be better utilised and/or regenerated by local residents. Local authorities could also help support and raise awareness of community right-to-buy initiatives where important spaces are under threat.

"We need support and collaboration with community associations on the ground and other community groups who can help increase peoples' voice and push decision-makers to listen better."

– Stakeholder, north-west England roundtable discussion

Civil society and faith organisations

As discussed in chapter 7, civil society and faith organisations are conducting impactful and reflective work on community strength and social cohesion in all parts of the UK. At the same time, however, a common theme across our roundtable discussions was that many such organisations, particularly those working on the frontline of community relationship building, were underfunded and fragmented.

Funding challenges

Funding was raised as a significant issue for community-based organisations' ability to carry out cohesion work systematically and over time. Where funding was scarce, organisations operating in communities had become overstretched. Some community development organisations and integration initiatives were becoming more focused on responding to the immediate needs of local residents in areas of deprivation. This allowed less time to engage in nurturing relationships with residents or providing opportunities for social mixing. It also left them poorly equipped to respond to community tensions.

The small size of available budgets, matched by demanding reporting requirements, was seen to divert efforts away from delivery. Organisations also often referred to difficulties in achieving impact over a short period of time. As one participant explained:

"You've got to deliver the entire project within one year. It's not really enough time to provide any kind of sustainable impact."

– Stakeholder, Cardiff roundtable discussion

Lack of long-term funding meant that many community organisations had found it difficult to recruit and retain staff. This was felt especially strongly in Belfast, given the personal toll that such work can have. As one participant explained:

"And staff, how do I keep them in that area? How do I keep them doing that work? Rather than losing them to someone else, and I understand that's part of the job as well, but [...] I need young people who are coming through, as we call it, ambassadors for peace, as good relations workers, people who are going to facilitate and then work going forward."

– Stakeholder, Belfast roundtable discussion

Lack of joined-up working

Organisations across the third sector and faith sectors tend to be isolated and work in silos: community development, migrant integration, interfaith bridging and conflict resolution, for example. This means there is limited capacity to share skills and learn from each other. Our findings suggest there would be value in increasing opportunities for networking and capacity building, extending existing initiatives. Our discussions with stakeholders in Belfast also highlighted the potential for policymakers and practitioners in other areas of the UK to learn from approaches to community building, youth work and conflict resolution in Northern Ireland (described in Chapter 7).

Preaching beyond the converted

Organisations in the third sector and faith sector shared concerns about community tensions that have surfaced over issues such as asylum or international conflicts. Most were struggling to engage sections of the public with more strongly held views in order to build opportunities for dialogue and sharing alternative perspectives.

We heard examples of positive, proactive efforts from organisations to facilitate events, exhibitions and activities which attracted participation from people of different ages and cultures. Yet some stakeholders acknowledged struggling to 'preach beyond the converted' and that their efforts often mobilised those who already felt positive about cohesion. Few civil society or faith groups reported having reached and engaged people with more negative

views on issues of immigration and asylum. Interfaith efforts to address residents with strongly held views on the Gaza-Israel crisis tended to be weak; where efforts were taking place, many of these were often at a community leader level and did not reach broader audiences of community residents.[71]

Councils, faith and civil society organisations often recognised the need for spaces for dialogue to enable those with polarised views to constructively air concerns and learn of others' experiences or perspectives. Indeed, as noted in Chapter 7, conflict resolution, dialogue and community development have a role to play in addressing community grievances and anxieties. Yet these interventions also require skills, training and sustained funding. Even in Northern Ireland, where there has been investment in peacebuilding, long-term funding is increasingly hard to secure.

"What we really need is the facilitation and training for those kinds of exercises. They're really, really difficult, because people don't have the skillset to be able to host dialogue type conversations in an effective, balanced way, and that's what we're really lacking. Even if it's in schools, in a citizenship lesson, a teacher may have no idea about the history of the Middle East, or about cohesion, or about ISIS. So what we really need is that assistance within communities to say, 'Yes we're going to talk about this.'"

– Stakeholder, north-west England roundtable discussion

Lack of confidence in communicating positive stories

Stakeholders who were bridging across ethnic, faith or political divides were often cautious about publicly communicating their efforts or telling positive stories in the media, for fear of backlash and threats to public safety from extremists. Our research uncovered various positive efforts underway to bring communities together and build contact between polarised groups, but these were often taking place with little to no public communication. Where some post-riot efforts had been successful, these had involved local institutions such as police, councils and civil society organisations. These had worked together on activities such as showcasing and sharing good news stories with the aim of building inclusive local pride.

Other community institutions

Stakeholders talked of the important contribution that state and private sector institutions can make to social cohesion. Those mentioned as priorities for change were schools, colleges and employers. Others included social landlords and cultural organisations, including the sports, arts and heritage sectors.

Employers

Employers were seen as having an important role to play both in creating diverse and socially cohesive workforces and in engaging

with their local communities. The think tank roundtable discussed the importance of workplace culture and the role of employers in tackling racism and exclusion. In relation to wider community engagement, stakeholders gave few examples of such activity. Employers are also often absent from local authority consultations and strategies for cohesion and community development. It was apparent that there is scope for more links to be built and for joint working with community organisations. Here, the government was seen to have a role to play by providing funding, while local authorities could broaden their strategic partnerships to consider the workplace as a location for community relations and mixing.

Schools

Schools were frequently mentioned as having a crucial role to play in social cohesion. This included curriculum content and wider aspects of school life, from ethos to community links. It was widely felt that schools should do more to improve understanding of social cohesion among children and young people. There was a view that primary schools are ahead of secondary schools in their focus on social cohesion, by being more open to their local communities. It was also felt that there is too much variation generally among schools: as one participant put it, social cohesion is 'currently too much of an opt-in'.[72]

Some participants mentioned that cohesion is no longer a specific Ofsted requirement, and it was felt that this should be re-introduced. As one participant argued:

> *"We have got to give schools a really clear signal that it [cohesion] really matters for everybody's wellbeing, right from the get-go. There's so much that can be done, from nursery to the age of 18, and the profession's up for it, but it needs to be signalled through Ofsted, specifically, that that's really valued."*
>
> **– Stakeholder, north-west roundtable discussion**

More generally, it was felt that schools could share good practice. This included sharing curriculum materials on race and diversity to raise awareness of shared histories. Involving older generations in schools was also seen as potentially valuable in this context.

Other sectors and organisations were also seen as playing a valuable role in cohesion efforts, which could be further expanded.

Sports organisations were cited as having effective reach within sections of communities that were more sceptical about immigration and diversity.[73] We received evidence from projects that had used sport, particularly football, to increase meaningful inter-group contact.

Arts organisations were seen as uniquely placed to support positive, inclusive storytelling – locally and nationally – of thriving communities and positive identities that could bolster pride in our shared society.

Social landlords, youth projects and employability support organisations were also often regarded as well-placed to reach sections of the community that others struggled to engage. They were felt to have more relationships of trust with people at risk of providing support to extremism, including in several areas that were impacted by riots. We heard about organisations delivering listening exercises, dialogue, restorative justice and small community improvement projects that increased pride, and neighbourhood-based events. As one stakeholder in our north-east discussion reflected, these organisations had unique potential:

"With regards to employment and opportunity, so much of our social tensions stem from people feeling left behind and feeling like a failure. It's sometimes about a lack of pride in yourself, as well as a lack of pride in your community [...] so helping people see that they can aspire to do something much better than where they are now can be incredibly successful."

– Stakeholder, north-east roundtable discussion

However, across all these organisations, current engagement in work on cohesion and community development is nascent and patchy. Further work is needed to build stronger collaboration between organisations, both nationally and locally.

Conclusions

9. What next? Reflections for the Commission

This report offers a snapshot of the state of community strength and cohesion in the UK. One year on from the violent disorder of last summer, it suggests that the UK remains vulnerable to further unrest if a range of underlying tensions and interconnected challenges are left unaddressed.

These include social polarisation, lack of political voice and economic pessimism. Strains on public services, inequality and the cost of living have increased frustrations and created a growing sense of national and community decline. The money and spare time needed for community-based activities, as well as decent spaces for social mixing, are becoming scarce for some. The visible lack of control in the Channel, along with tensions around accommodation sites and a highly polarised political debate, has contributed to more negative views on asylum in recent years. In a fast-changing society, beset by one crisis after another, there is a growing scepticism and mistrust in 'politics as usual' to engage the concerns of the public and deliver meaningful change.

The public now increasingly sources local and national news and information online. The unrest of summer 2024 showed how social media can provide fertile ground for misinformation and polarising discourse to channel grievances in harmful directions. Policymakers are struggling to keep up and provide responses that can navigate the pressures and threats of online harms. Other institutions have yet to produce strategies to counter hate or provide hopeful stories with the same virality as hateful voices. This is contributing to growing concerns about the normalisation of racism and faith-based prejudice.

The research also, however, identifies strong foundations on which to build. At a hyper-local level, attitudes towards community are generally positive. The public largely report warm views on relationships within their street or estate, often as an ongoing legacy of connections forged through the Covid-19 pandemic. A majority of the public also feel that people from different backgrounds get along well, although focus groups highlighted that this varies from place to place.

Our research also finds a wide array of innovative work being conducted to build more confident, close and proud communities. From grassroots organisers to football clubs, evidence contributed to this report highlights that institutions can all play a role in knitting a more connected society, including across our different cultures, ages and political perspectives.

Yet much of this work remains fragmented, overstretched and underfunded. While local efforts provide vital infrastructure on which community connectedness can develop, this requires national resource, as well as leadership and expertise, to address

emerging challenges. This is particularly the case with regard to social media polarisation, inequalities and a fair plan for resettling people seeking asylum that balances control and compassion. Building the foundations for community strength and cohesion will require a more strategic, long-term approach from national policymakers, if it is to utilise and support existing actors to drive change.

The authors hope that this report provides a useful evidence base and set of starting points for the Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion to begin its broader research and work on recommendations over the coming months. To conclude, we offer a series of underlying principles and initial reflections from our research, which the Commissioners may find useful in thinking about approaches to policy change.

Underlying Principles

Action is needed everywhere to address community strength and cohesion, not just in the areas with highest diversity or deprivation.

Areas with heightened tensions and/or weaker foundations of community infrastructure will need urgent action to mitigate potential unrest or public concerns about local decline. However, concerns about social division and community strength span across the UK. Addressing these challenges will require an 'everybody, everywhere' response that supports all communities and engages public anxieties about inequality, immigration and services.

Unifying narratives are important

In a more diverse society, sources of inclusive identity and pride across our differences become more important, to break down 'them and us' boundaries and strengthen a shared sense of 'we'. This will require proactive work to tell positive stories – nationally, regionally and locally – of the common ground that we share. From councils to sports clubs and our culture sector, institutions can use their audience power to build unifying narratives of community and cohesion.

We need to be better prepared to respond to challenges

The riots of last summer highlight how rapidly tensions and unrest can spread in contemporary Britain, particularly in an online era.

Preparedness for challenges to cohesion require a delicate balance. This must avoid alarmism that could unnecessarily heighten public fears of threats. Yet it should also avoid complacency and reactivity, ensuring that relevant actors monitor tensions, communicate assertively to praise cohesion and denounce hatred, and invest in building spaces and opportunities for people to connect with others across their differences.

Everyone has a role to play: governments, councils, other public services, business, faith and civil society and individuals.

Each institution will have unique strengths and opportunities to build closer communities and common ground. Governments in Westminster, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can provide leadership, resources and guidance. Councils and the third sector also offer distinct expertise on getting approaches right locally and have the 'on the ground' relationships to support new initiatives. Community anchor organisations, from workplaces to universities and faith groups, can help by supporting new initiatives for community connection, including spaces for dialogue and mutual learning across different backgrounds and perspectives.

Key Reflections

1. Sustained, long-term plans, updated to reflect new challenges and opportunities, and backed by funding to enact them, are key to strengthening communities and cohesion

Despite numerous policy papers and action plans over the past 25 years, successive governments have struggled to make sustained commitments to drive lasting change on community strength and cohesion. A lack of conceptual clarity, short-termism and a tendency to shy away from 'difficult conversations' have all hindered progress.

There is consensus among experts and organisations engaging in these themes that taking this work forward will require long-term national strategies and funding. The Commission should consider how the Westminster and Scottish governments might develop national action plans; and how the Welsh Government and Northern Ireland administration might review their policies in the context of fast-shifting attitudes and challenges.

National cohesion strategies need to define clear roles for different government departments, promote effective cross-departmental working and make sure that government policy in all areas supports rather than cuts across social cohesion. It will also be crucial that government policy programmes blend national oversight with local insight into challenges and opportunities. Councils and combined authorities, supported by central government, can play a leading role in shaping the implementation of place-based approaches where they develop local cohesion and community strategies, which identify and mitigate risks while enhancing an area's strengths. While resourcing these will be a challenge given the tight budgetary envelope, funding to underwrite capacity for local strategies will be key. Existing examples highlight how these can include support for schemes that foster social mixing and promote shared and inclusive identities; as well as those that work with local institutions and employers to hold difficult dialogues and counter hatred.

2. Getting it right on immigration and asylum, in a way that works for new arrivals and the communities they join, would aid cohesion and community

Lack of visible control over channel crossings, along with high rates of regular immigration, are a salient concern among the public. Concerns about the use of hotels for contingency accommodation and the dispersal methods for people seeking asylum are prominent in affected areas.

Views on these themes are highly contested. Yet it will be crucial for the Commission to explore the right balance for change, recognising this as a priority among both stakeholders and the general public. This must be careful to avoid conflating the actions and words of those with the most strongly held views, on both sides of this debate, with wider public opinion.

It will be important for the Commission to explore how policymakers can constructively engage with questions of how to make our immigration and asylum systems work for all, in a context of deepening political mistrust and disillusionment.

More commitment to public engagement across the nations and regions of the UK could offer one route to bringing democratic voice into debates on immigration and other relevant policy areas. Such engagement would need to ensure that all voices are heard, not just those voicing the strongest opinions; and that debate takes place within boundaries that exclude racism, prejudice and misinformation.

The commission could consider, as part of its next phase, how participatory democratic mechanisms such as deliberative consultations could foster nuanced, constructive public debate. Community-based organisations could also play a stronger role in rolling out programmes that facilitate dialogue to engage people's concerns or anxieties, and which foster opportunities for social contact to help the public better understand the experiences of settlement and integration for new arrivals.

3. Online misinformation and hate is undermining cohesion and efforts to address it need to keep pace with its spread

In a more online society, policymaking will need to catch up with emerging challenges to community cohesion and strength. Misinformation and hatred can spread rapidly, and our research highlights the long-lasting, detrimental effects this can have on relations in local areas, such as those impacted by the riots last summer. Existing responses from local authorities and the third sector are slow, reactive and lack equivalent online virality to challenge or contain prejudiced and inflammatory content.

The Commission will need to consider how policymakers and institutions can innovate to ensure social media platforms provide spaces for community and constructive debate, not radicalisation or racism. This will need to involve exploring how pressure can

be applied to platforms to remove harmful content quickly, while recognising the contested boundary between free speech and hate.

At the same time, national responses can also strengthen resilience among the public to hatred. Guidance and resources could help utilise schools and other educational institutions, the BBC and local councils to play a proactive role in strengthening critical thinking to identify misinformation, and awareness of what constitutes hate speech.

4. Investment, growth and effective public services all impact on cohesion and community

Poverty and the rising cost of living have limited the time and money for many to take part fully in community life. Deprivation, wealth inequality, disparities in regional investment and failures in public services are also important stressors driving community tensions in many areas, including those we visited impacted by riots.

Proposals to build stronger, closer communities will need to engage with public pessimism over the economy and the perceived decline in quality and availability of services. Agendas for social cohesion should not be siloed from broader policy plans to deliver affordable housing, secure work and decent wages, along with responsive services such as GPs and local policing.

Political trust in mainstream parties to deliver change has declined and frustrations in our focus groups were tangible. Engaging these grievances through opportunities to shape local decision-making, such as participatory budgeting, plans for community spaces and strategies for neighbourhood safety, can help restore public agency.

5. Restoring public trust and respect in politics could have wider benefits

Polarising discourse was cited frequently among people's views on the state of division in the UK and as a reason for their deepening disillusionment with politicians. It will be important for the Commission to explore the role that prominent voices can play in setting standards of mutual respect and telling positive stories of inclusive and shared identities. Where media and social media platforms amplify the most provocative or attention-grabbing content, it will be the responsibility of our democratic structures and governments to set clear norms on how to navigate and debate our differences.

Acknowledgements and Appendices

1. Acknowledgments

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II. Organisations and individuals that took part in stakeholder roundtable discussions

- 3SG BaNES
- Professor Dominic Abrams
- African Community Centre Swansea
- Alternatives Restorative Justice
- Amnesty International
- ANAWIM
- Anne Frank Trust UK
- Anti-bullying Alliance
- Alliance for Cohesion and Racial Equality
- Ashfield Council
- Aspire and Succeed
- Believe Housing Association
- Black Country Innovate CIC
- Black Equity Organisation
- Blackburn with Darwen Council
- Bolton Council
- Boston Borough Council
- brap
- Bright Blue
- Brighton and Hove City Council
- Bristol City FC Robins Foundation
- Calderdale Council
- Cambridgeshire Council
- Cardiff City Council
- Care for Calais
- CARISMA
- Centre for Good Relations
- Centre for Migration Policy and Society, University of Oxford
- Centre for Theology and Community
- Angila Chadha
- Cheltenham Town FC Community Trust
- Chinese in Wales Association
- Church Urban Fund
- City of Sanctuary
- Coalfields Regeneration Trust
- Cohesion Plus
- Colchester United Community Foundation
- Communities Inc
- Coram
- Corrymeela
- Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)
- Decentred Media
- Democracy Box
- East of England Local Government Association
- Eden Project
- Edinburgh Interfaith
- Faith and Belief Forum
- The Feast
- Foundation of Light
- Billy Gamble
- Gentoo Group Housing Association
- Global Humanity for Peace, University of Wales Trinity St Davids
- Gloucester Rural Community Council
- Go Deep Scotland
- Good Faith Partnership
- Govan Community Centre
- Greater London Authority
- Greater Manchester Combined Authority
- The Harbour Project
- Hartlepool Council
- Help and Kindness - Dorset
- Hillingdon Council
- Historic England
- Lester Holloway
- Hope Not Hate
- Humanists UK
- Integrated Education Fund
- Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR)

- Jewish Representative Council of the Greater Manchester Region
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Karbon Homes
- King's Arms Project Bedford
- Kirklees Council
- Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN)
- Labour Together
- Lancashire County Council
- LEAP confronting conflict
- Leeds City Council
- Leicester City Council
- Lingua Franca
- Linking Network
- LHC Procurement Group
- Locality
- London Boroughs Faith Network
- London Councils
- London Plus
- Jahaan Mahmood
- Manchester City Council
- Manchester Sikh Foundation
- Manor Farm Centre
- Kimberly McIntosh
- Migrant Democracy Project
- Migration Policy Scotland
- Migration Work
- Migration Yorkshire
- My Edinburgh
- Near Neighbours
- Newark and Sherwood Council
- Newcastle Council
- Newport City Council
- Norfolk Community Foundation
- North West Community Network (Northern Ireland)
- Northern Housing Consortium
- Northumberland County of Sanctuary
- Nottinghamshire Children's Trust
- Nottinghamshire County Council
- Oasis (Cardiff)
- Oldham Council
- The Phoenix Way (TPW) Midlands
- Policy Exchange
- Power to Change
- Priority Advice
- Project FREE
- Protection Approaches
- Race Council Cymru
- Race Equality First
- Race Equality Foundation
- Race Equality Network
- Race on the Agenda
- RCITY Youth
- ReAct Scotland
- Refugee, Asylum Seeker and Migrant Action (RAMA)
- Refugee Asylum and Migration Policy Project
- Refugee Futures
- The Relationships Project
- Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA)
- The Runnymede Trust
- Rural Community Network
- Rushmoor Council
- Salford Council
- Scottish Mediation
- Scottish Men's Sheds Association
- Scottish Refugee Council
- Canon Andrew Smith
- Solutions Not Sides
- South and East Lincolnshire Council
- Southeast Strategic Migration Partnership
- South Holland District Council
- South Kesteven District Council
- South Yorkshire Development Education Centre
- Springboard Opportunities
- St Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre
- St Philip's Centre, Leicester

- Swansea City of Sanctuary
- Swansea Council for Voluntary Service
- Swansea City of Sanctuary
- Tempo Time Credits
- Thirteen Group Housing Association
- Together as One
- Together for Peace
- Together in Sussex
- Together (Liverpool)
- Trade Union Congress
- Transforming Notts
- Transformation Cornwall
- Transforming Nottingham
- Trafford Council
- Trowbridge Future
- Quakers in Britain
- University of Aberystwyth
- Wakefield Council
- Wales Council for Voluntary Action
- Wales Strategic Migration Partnership
- Walsall Council
- Welsh Islamic Cultural Association
- Welsh Refugee Council
- West Northamptonshire Council
- We Are Right Here
- We Stand Together
- Westmorland and Furness Council
- West Yorkshire Police
- WIILMA
- Who Is Your Neighbour?
- Woolf Institute
- Young Citizens
- The Young Foundation
- Youth Links

III. Organisations and Individuals that submitted written evidence

- ACH (Ashley Community and Housing)
- Cllr Usman Ali
- AHRC Creative Communities
- All the Small Things
- AllChild
- Barnet, London borough of
- Bengali East End Heritage Society
- Beyond School Gates Research Team
- Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council
- Bright Blue
- British Red Cross
- Buckinghamshire Council
- Dr Lindsey Cameron
- Professor Ted Cantle CBE
- Care4Calais Reading and Wokingham Group
- Charities Aid Foundation
- Laura Chilintan
- City of Sanctuary
- City of Sanctuary Sheffield
- Coalfields Regeneration Trust
- Communities Inc
- Community Learning and Development Standards Council Scotland
- Countryside Alliance
- Croeso Teifi
- Cumberland Council
- Decentred Media
- East Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership
- Eden Project
- Edge Hill University – Britishness, Identity and Belonging Project
- Professor Rosalind Edwards
- EFL in the Community
- Ethical Property Foundation
- Evangelical Alliance
- Fairness Foundation
- Faith Action
- Free Churches Group
- Freedom of Religion or Belief and Education Working Group
- The Freshwater Foundation
- Frome Connects
- Frome Medical Practice
- Fun Palaces
- Goldsmiths, University of London, Faiths and Civil Society Unit
- Good Faith Partnership
- Peter Gowland
- Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit
- Grow Social Capital
- Grwp Resilience
- Hastings Voluntary Action
- Heather Kincaid
- Historic England
- Chris Hollins
- Hope not hate
- Humanists UK
- Intergenerational England
- Intergenerational Music Making
- Jo Cox Foundation
- Lancashire County Council
- Leeds City Council
- Libraries Connected
- The Library Campaign
- The Linking Network
- London Plus
- Making Music
- Manchester City Council
- Macc (Manchester Community Central)
- Mayor of London Office for Policing and Crime

- Migrant Democracy Project
- Migration Yorkshire
- Modern Cockney
- George Morran
- Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)
- Dr Alick Munro
- My Pockets
- The National Archives
- The National Housing Federation (NHF)
- National Secular Society
- Near Neighbours
- Stacey Ng
- Norfolk Community Foundation
- Nottingham City Council
- Nuffield Foundation
- Omidaze Productions
- Pathways International
- Power to Change
- Quakers in Britain
- St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP)
- Sisters not Strangers
- Somerset African Caribbean Network
- Southampton City Council
- Southampton and Winchester Visitors Group (SWVG)
- Spirit of 2012
- Sporting Communities CIC
- Springboard Opportunities
- Sport for Development Coalition
- StreetGames
- Sunderland City Council
- Together in Action
- Together as One (Aik Saath)
- University of Central Lancashire
- verd de gris arts
- Volunteer Centre Hackney
- Volunteer Scotland
- Wales Principal Youth Officers' Group, WLGA
- Wales Safer Communities Network
- Walton Charity
- The WEA
- Westmoreland and Furness Council
- WISERD (Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data)
- WONDER Foundation
- Woolf Institute
- Jon Yates – author of Fractured, Chief Executive, Youth Endowment Fund

IV. Timeline of national community and cohesion policy interventions 2000-2025

2001 – The Government publishes its National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, located in the Department for Communities and Local Government overseas the New Deal for Communities Fund, which supports the regeneration of deprived areas.

2001- The Home Office commissions the Cantle Review of community cohesion after civil unrest in northern towns and cities in mid-2001. Further local reports examine unrest in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham. The Home Office also publishes its own inter-departmental review on cohesion, in work chaired by John Denham.

2001 – The Race Relations Amendment Act receives Royal Assent, strengthening equalities and anti-discrimination legislation.

2002 – The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 provided the legal basis for the Life in the UK citizenship test, English language requirements, citizenship ceremonies and the oath of allegiance and pledge taken by new British citizens.

2002 – Citizenship education becomes mandatory for 11–16-year-olds in English schools, although this National Curriculum requirement does not apply to those with academy status.

2004 – The National Lottery Community Fund, then known as the Big Lottery, was launched. This non-departmental government body distributes funds raised by the National Lottery and is the largest funder of civil society community development and cohesion projects in the UK.

2004 – The Civil Contingencies Act receives Royal Assent, providing the legal basis for emergency planning and introducing the term 'resilience' into the UK policy lexicon.

2005 - The 7/7 terrorist attacks prompted the Home Office to publish *Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society*, its cohesion strategy which mostly focused on building resilience to extremism.

2005 – The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister publish A Shared Future, the policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland.

2006 - Central government responsibilities for social cohesion passed from the Home Office to the department which is now MHCLG. Refugee integration, however, remained the responsibility of the Home Office.

2007 – The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) begins its work, merging the responsibilities of the Commission for Racial Equality, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Disability Rights Commission.

2006-2010 – Many urban local authorities developed their own community cohesion strategies in this period. These ran alongside Prevent counter-extremism strategies. A few also focussed on ways to support the integration of newly arrived migrants from the EU. There was an expansion of civil society involvement in promoting social cohesion.

2007 – Publication of the final report of the independent Commission on Integration and Cohesion, chaired by Darra Singh.

2008 – The Government publishes consultations on inter-faith dialogue and on the funding of civil-society organisations, and a review of migrant integration.

2008 – The Government publishes its first Prevent strategy, a programme that works in the non-criminal space by tackling the ideological causes of terrorism and intervening early to support those vulnerable to radicalisation.

2009 – Getting on Together – A Community Cohesion Strategy for Wales was launched by the Welsh Government. The strategy was updated in 2016

2010 – The Equality Act is passed (Equality Act 2010) which places a legal duty on public bodies to 'foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.'

2010 – Launch of the Big Society Initiative in a speech by the newly-elected prime minister David Cameron. This aims to give communities more power through devolution and to encourage volunteering.

2011 – The Localism Act gains Royal Assent and providing the legal basis for devolution deals in England and community rights to buy local assets.

2010 – 2011 – The Migration Impacts Fund, the Refugee Integration and Employment Service and the Connecting Communities Fund (which focused on cohesion) were scrapped, in cross government action to reduce public spending.

2012 – The Government publishes *Creating the Conditions for Integration*, its integration strategy.

2014 – Publication of the first New Scots refugee integration strategy. The third New Scots Strategy runs from 2024-2026.

2014 – The Welsh Government starts to fund regional community cohesion posts, who work across a group of local authorities.

2016 - The Controlling Migration Fund, which ran from 2016-2020, made £140 million available to councils to deal with the local impacts of immigration.

2016 – Publication of the Dame Louise Casey review of integration and opportunity.

2016 – The Government's Office for Civil Society moves from the Cabinet Office to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

2017 – The Government creates the Commission on Countering Extremism. This was initially an agency of the Department for Communities and Local Government but has been accountable to the Home Office since 2021.

2017 – The Government publishes *Every Voice Matters*, its democratic engagement plan. An updated plan is published in 2019.

2017-2019 - Revival of a cross-departmental working group on social cohesion, co-chaired by the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

2018 – The Government publishes A Connected Society, its strategy to tackle loneliness in England.

2019 - Publication of the Government's Integrated Communities Action Plan with £50 million funding also made available to five Integration Action Areas – Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall and Waltham Forest – to carry out programmes of work to boost integration and cohesion.

2020 – The Welsh Government publishes *Connected Communities: A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation and Building Stronger Social Connections*. This covers reducing social isolation, community building and social cohesion.

2021 – The most recent National Security Strategy is published, outlining key security threats to the UK.

2022 – Publication of the UK-wide Levelling Up white paper.

2023 – The Government sets up an independent review into the 2022 Leicester riots.

2024 - Publication of the Dame Sara Khan review of social cohesion and democratic resilience. At the same time the Government updates its definition of extremism.

2024 – The Government announces a £15 million Community Recovery Fund, for the 35 local authorities in England and Northern Ireland that experienced rioting in the summer of 2024.

2025 – The Government announces an inquiry to examine what went wrong in relation to statutory services interactions with the perpetrator, and to look at how children and young people are drawn into extreme violence

2025 – The Government publishes its Plan for Neighbourhoods, which succeeds the levelling up policy of the previous Conservative government. The plan covers devolution, regeneration and economic development, community engagement and community cohesion.

V. Evidence submissions: a summary of key findings

To inform the Commission's foundation report, we put out an open call for evidence through our websites and mailing lists. This was open in February - March 2025 and five broad questions:

1. What is community, cohesion and community strength and how do we build shared stories?
2. What interventions promote building community, cohesion, community strength and shared stories?
3. How did organisations in your area respond to the 2024 riots?
4. What should be the respective roles of central and local government in promoting community connectedness, cohesion and resilience?
5. Looking to the future: How might national and local bodies and government better respond to barriers to stronger community?

Some 113 responses were received, from 104 organisations and 9 individuals. Submissions were received from all four nations of the UK, from organisations using different approaches in their work, and with different roles and remits. Those who replied included research organisations (11), faith-based organisations (10), funders (6), the housing sector (3), local civil society (25), national civil society (30), and local government (16). A list of organisations that submitted evidence is included in this report. The full evidence can be read here.

Findings: cohesion challenges

The call for evidence highlighted many of the same challenges to community strength and cohesion that were raised in the focus group and stakeholder meetings.

- Deprivation, worries about the cost of living and failing public services are leading to grievances against out-groups such as asylum-seekers.
- Immigration, specifically boat arrivals and the housing of asylum-seekers in hotels, is a salient issue of public concern, but public opinion is more nuanced than the media portrays, and social contact can change attitudes.
- Councils and local civil society organisations are ill-equipped to address misinformation, disinformation and divisions and hatred amplified by social media.
- Trust in politicians and democratic institutions is low, leading some people to disengage from civic life and others to turn to populist or extremist actors to find meaning and validation. There is a wide perception that racism, anti-Muslim prejudice and antisemitism has worsened over the last two years, with national political discourse and social media creating a permissive environment for prejudice.

Peripherality or feeling 'left behind', as a cohesion challenge, was more strongly articulated in the call for evidence than in the stakeholder discussions. Peripherality might be defined as being on the margins – geographically, economically, socially or politically – relative to the centre of power, resources or wealth. The term can be applied to many rural areas, some coastal towns, ex-coalfield communities, deindustrialised areas and outer-city estates. Peripherality can impact on cohesion because people may feel they have no voice and that their concerns are not heard or valued, leaving them feeling marginalised or resentful of out-groups. Most peripheral areas in the UK have seen the out-migration

of graduates. They tend to be less ethnically diverse and physical distance and poor transport can limit social contact with people from different backgrounds.

Peripherality needs to be addressed in national and local cohesion strategies, with action also taken on rural-urban divides. Fostering greater understanding among urban communities of the realities of rural life might be achieved by giving all children access to green space and outdoor education.

Findings: action to build strong and cohesive communities

National strategies: Those who sent in evidence looked to central government to provide vision, joined-up strategy and long-term funding. Councils and civil society organisations want central government to play an enabling role, helping local organisations carry out their work to build strong and cohesive communities.

Intergenerational linking: Some of the evidence highlighted age divides and made a case for more opportunities for inter-generational social contact. Successful projects were described, including those that brought younger and older people together through volunteering, heritage and arts projects and linking care homes and schools.

Refugee integration: We received submissions from 14 organisations working with asylum-seekers and refugees. This evidence called for speedier asylum determination, ending the use of hotels, community engagement in areas receiving dispersed asylum-seekers and programmes to help asylum-seekers and refugees integrate into their new communities. These proposals for change were also voiced in the evidence given by some councils.

Volunteering: There was a strong articulation of the value of volunteering in building strong and cohesive communities. This was accompanied by calls for improvements to the way that volunteers are recruited, supported and recognised. Common barriers to volunteering include lack of time, uncertainty about what is involved, and not feeling confident or welcome. We were told that one-off volunteering opportunities at community events can be a pathway into more regular volunteering. However, volunteers still need to be supported, with flexible volunteering opportunities for people with other commitments on their time.

Youth work: We received evidence from organisations representing youth workers or providing services for young people. Youth work can involve addressing tensions, crime and anti-social behaviour and can equip disadvantaged and excluded young people with civic skills and social media literacy. However, youth workers are not always included in local and national conversations about community strength and cohesion. There have been large cuts in funding to youth services in all parts of the UK. A new youth strategy in England is one opportunity to address these shortcomings, but the youth sector also needs to be included in wider policy discussions on community and cohesion.

A more relational society: We received evidence from some faith and civil society organisations and individuals arguing for a more relational society. Some respondents argued for a stronger culture of kindness in mainstream services, for example in employability programmes or support for vulnerable families. We were told that people want to be listened to and treated with kindness and respect, rather than being patronised or having their views dismissed. Submissions from a number of faith groups and refugee organisations called for befriending services and welcome hubs to work alongside professional services.

VI. Literature review: Summary of key findings

Alongside the research and the call for evidence, the Belong Network and British Future conducted a review of academic and policy-focussed literature on community development and cohesion. We drew upon the literature review when designing the research and writing up our findings, and it can also inform the future work of the Commissioners.

We conducted a key word search using Google Scholar and Scopus as search engines. Local authority policy and practice was also audited, and we examined organisational websites. The literature review mapped and synthesised research from different academic disciplines – anthropology, geography, political science, sociology, social policy and social psychology – to create a holistic framework for understanding community strength and cohesion. It examined key concepts and trends, and policy and practice responses. Gaps in knowledge were also highlighted. **The full literature review with references can be found here**, with a summary below.

What is community strength and cohesion?

Community strength and cohesion entered the modern policy lexicon in the 1980s and 1990s, driven by research into urban regeneration in the Global North, but also through concepts that were being set out in development and disaster relief literature in the Global South.

Community strength can be seen as the social and economic assets possessed by communities, enabling them to thrive, support their members, address disparities and increase people's overall quality of life. Asset-based community development (ABCD) aims to build on the identified strengths of communities, including physical and economic assets, but also faith and civil society organisations. Asset-based community development has influenced Government regeneration programmes such as the New Deal for Communities, which ran from 1998-2011, and the 2022 Levelling Up White Paper.

Community cohesion has proved a more elusive condition to define, although there is much writing that attempts to do this. In everyday terms, community cohesion can be seen as the glue that holds society together. The systems model below draws from an extensive literature on the nature of community cohesion, summarising what it comprises and the factors that drive or inhibit it.

Community strength and cohesion is underpinned by a number of economic, structural and democratic **foundations**. Research shows that workplaces, schools and colleges are places where people meet and mix with others, forming bonding and bridging social relationships. The layout of the built environment, and access to parks, cafes and leisure centres, also impact on people's ability to connect with each other. Democratic institutions and systems of governance are another foundation, underpinning civic participation and give people a voice.

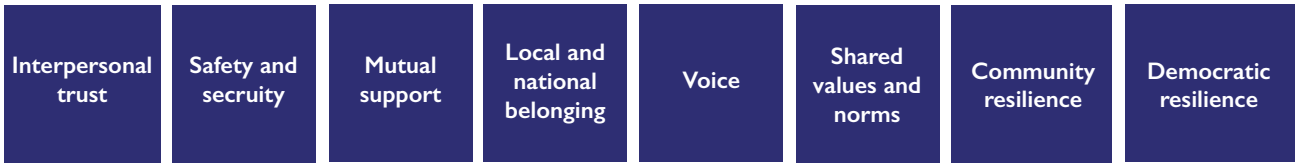
Factors such as local leadership, shock events or demographic change can impact on community cohesion. The literature review suggests that strong and cohesive communities are characterised by high levels of inter-personal trust, mutual support, shared values and norms of behaviour, democratic resilience and a sense of having a voice, safety, security, and national and local belonging.

A systems model of community strength and cohesion

Foundations of community strength and cohesion

Facilitators or inhibitors of community strength and cohesion

Characteristics of community strength and cohesion



How can community strength and cohesion be measured?

The above systems model indicates how community strength and cohesion might be measured. This is an important consideration for policymakers who need to identify tensions and challenges; prioritise communities or places where interventions should be targeted; and understand the impacts of programmes of work.

There is no single community or cohesion survey that covers the UK or its constituent nations. This situation contrasts with Australia, where a biennial Cohesion Index draws on indicators derived from a bespoke attitudinal survey alongside objective indicators from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other sources.

In the UK, the Community Life Survey (covering England) and Understanding Society (the UK Household Longitudinal Survey), provide the most comprehensive assessment of community strength and cohesion. However, neither survey has a sufficiently large sample size to generate ward-level statistics. Other sources of quantitative data on community strength and cohesion include:

- Local surveys undertaken by public bodies, for example local policing and crime surveys, and residents surveys.
- Administrative data, for example, crimes reported to the police or tension monitoring data.

Findings from the above sources of data are summarised in the main report.

Challenges to community cohesion

There is an extensive literature that examines the many economic, structural, demographic, social and political barriers and threats to community strength and cohesion. Factors that have negative impacts on community and cohesion differ in their **prevalence**, their **salience** and their **impact** on community and cohesion.

While many of these challenges are widespread across the UK, some are rooted in local contexts. Current threats and barriers to community strength and cohesion include:

1. Economic and structural barriers to community strength and cohesion

Poverty and inequality: Financial hardship can prevent people from going out and taking part in the activities that bring people from different backgrounds together. Poverty and inequality can also increase people's views that society is unfair, damaging their trust in democratic institutions. Employment reduces poverty and workplaces can be sites of meaningful inter-group contact, but the impacts of such bridging social contact are not felt when people are not working.

Skills gaps: Communication skills underpin a connected and cohesive society, enabling people from different ethnic groups to speak to each other, resolve conflicts and make informed choices. Census 2021 showed 1.04 million people in England and Wales could not speak English well or at all. The 2023 OECD Survey of Adults Skills suggested that 18% of adults in England had low literacy skills. People with poor literacy are more likely to be unemployed and more likely to believe damaging or divisive fake news, and less likely to vote or to volunteer in their communities.

The built environment: Pressures on social housing and perceptions about preferential treatment can fuel resentment towards out-groups. Research also shows that some features of the built environment can discourage social connection, including high-rise housing and public space that is neglected.

2. Crime and policing

Crime and anti-social behaviour, and fear of crime, can erode inter-personal trust, making people less likely to socialise or help each other. Personal or family experiences of crime can discourage people from taking part in communal activities or visiting specific areas. In turn, this can reinforce patterns of social and residential segregation.

Mutual support tends to be weaker in high-crime areas, as people avoid contact with others. Persistent crime may also weaken pro-social norms of behaviour and trust in institutions such as the police, particularly if policing is seen as ineffective. Conversely, in cohesive communities, with dense bonding, bridging and linking relationships, residents are able to exercise informal social control, which discourages many crimes and anti-social behaviour.

Violent extremism has a deeply corrosive impact on community cohesion, fostering fear, suspicion and mistrust between different groups. The threat or presence of violent extremism can also polarise public discourse, reduce space for dialogue and undermine efforts to build inclusive, resilient communities. Ultimately, it weakens the sense of shared identity and mutual belonging that is essential for cohesive societies.

Despite significant decreases in overall crime rates, many people continue to believe that crime is increasing. The Crime Survey of England and Wales found that older people, women and minority ethnic groups are more likely to fear crime.

Some 79% of people reported that they had overall confidence in the police in the 2016 Crime Survey of England and Wales, falling to 68% in 2023. Perceptions about unfair and discriminatory policing have contributed to community tensions, online polarisation and a decline in trust for the police.

While there have been improvements in the relationships between the police and minority ethnic communities since 1999, there is still evidence of discriminatory treatment, some of which was described in the 2023 Casey Review into the standards of behaviour in the Metropolitan Police. The term 'two-tier policing' is now being increasingly used to suggest that police are more lenient with some groups than others.

Local and national cases where the police fail in their duty to maintain public order and prevent and investigate crimes have the potential to impact on community cohesion. A current high-profile example is the failure to act on child sexual exploitation. Policing failures can also act as trigger events that spark unrest.

3. Social fragmentation and disconnection

The UK has seen a rise in private renting, which can contribute to high levels of population churn, social fragmentation and disconnection in some urban neighbourhoods. Bonding, bridging and linking social connections tend to be less dense in such neighbourhoods, where many people move in and out each year, and which also experience lower levels of mutual support and inter-personal trust. Social fragmentation is taking place alongside increased individualisation of our social lives and time spent by ourselves at home.

4. Social segregation

Bridging social contact has the capacity to reduce prejudice and threat perceptions, but residential, workplace and educational segregation reduces opportunities for such connections. Social segregation was a major theme of the 2001 Cantle Review, the 2007 Commission on Integration and Social Cohesion and the 2016 Casey review into opportunity and integration.

High levels of residential segregation can lead to neighbourhoods being associated with a particular in-group, leading to feelings of exclusion for those who feel they do not belong. The biggest divide in housing is created by differences in income and wealth, but policy debates have tended to give greater emphasis to ethnic and faith-based segregation. Analysis of census data over a 30-year period shows that the residential segregation of all ethnic groups is declining in England, although there are some local differences. Some minority ethnic groups tend to be more clustered than others, particularly those who depend on each other for work or social support. There remain high levels of residential segregation in Northern Ireland, most acutely in social housing.

Nurseries, schools and further and higher education are important sites for inter-group contact. However, there is significant segregation by faith and ethnicity, as well as social class, in the UK's educational institutions, although patterns of segregation are complex and often localised.

5. Peripherality

Peripherality might be defined as being on the margins — either geographically, economically, socially or politically — relative to the centre of power, resources or wealth. 'Left behind' is a term that has recently been used by policymakers in relation to some coastal towns, isolated rural communities, ex-coalfield communities and deindustrialised areas. Peripherality can impact on community and cohesion because people may feel they have no voice and that their concerns are not heard or valued, leaving them feeling marginalised or resentful of out-groups. Most peripheral areas in the UK are less ethnically diverse and physical distance and poor transport can limit social contact with out-groups. More positively, peripheral communities can be close-knit, with high levels of self-help, strong bonding connections and shared identities.

6. Immigration

As described in the main body of this report, immigration can be a challenge to community cohesion, particularly where population change is very rapid or where integration is limited. There are a large number of UK studies that explore the local impacts of international migration on community strength and cohesion. These show that there is no clear and direct relationship between immigration and community cohesion. Rather, the characteristics of migrants themselves and the area to which they move impact on cohesion. Areas that have seen rapid population change are more likely to experience inter-group conflict and cohesion challenges, particularly if the area is deprived or had little previous history of immigration. Cohesion challenges may arise as a result of competition for resources, such as housing and healthcare; threat perceptions about out-groups; and failures to encourage meaningful social and economic integration. Super-diverse neighbourhoods, where people from many different class and ethnic backgrounds live side-by-side, are associated with lower levels of inter-personal trust. Temporary migration is less conducive to community cohesion.

7. Contested views of national identity and the nation

Cohesion is a condition that is felt nationally as well as at local level, with people brought together through their commitment to shared societal values and democratic principles. Collective histories, language, symbols and cultural references also bring people together. There is broad societal consensus about the nature of shared national values. An assessment of evidence for the 2024 Khan review showed the majority of people in the UK have a clear commitment to the value of tolerance, with fairness and equality also seen as core values by a majority of people.

In a pluralistic society, people's views on what comprises national identity differ and have also changed over time. Many people in the UK have overlapping, dual or multiple national identities, with much of this complexity relating to the constitution of the United Kingdom as a union of four nations. But the 2021 Census showed 9.7% of the population of England and Wales had a non-UK identity only, suggesting that nearly one in ten people have limited identification with Britain. Although there were 202,041 grants of British citizenship in 2023, British citizenship is out of reach to some migrants because of high fees. The Home Office's 2025 Immigration White Paper proposes to increase the qualifying period for indefinite leave to remain (ILR), often referred to as settlement, from five to ten years for many visa routes, increasing the qualifying period for citizenship.

Nation and national identity are particularly complex questions in Northern Ireland, where alongside religious and political affiliation, it is a marker of group identity. Violent inter-group conflict cost the lives of 3,500 people during the Troubles of 1968-1998. Legacies of this period that impact on community cohesion include residual terrorist groups, continued residential segregation, 'peace walls', lack of trust in authorities, competing narratives about the past and polarised and sectarian politics.

While devolution has strengthened inclusive and confident Scottish and Welsh identities, some writers suggest that the absences of a confident, positive and inclusive English identity has been a significant driver of the rise in populism in England.

8. Prejudice

Prejudice undermines community cohesion by fostering mistrust between social groups and weakening people's sense of belonging. It can also provide the 'oxygen' of tacit support for hate crime. Prejudice towards ethnic and religious out-groups and LGBT people was once common in British society, but in recent years UK society has become more accepting of ethnic and faith differences. However, more racially prejudiced and misogynistic content is being shared online and there has been a recent rise in anti-Muslim and antisemitic prejudice in the UK.

9. The move to an online world

Social media has the potential to have both positive and negative impacts on community strength and cohesion. During the Covid-19 pandemic, social media enabled people to maintain connection with each other. The use of platforms such as Facebook or WhatsApp can deepen people's connectedness to neighbourhood communities, although not for everyone. But this is balanced by evidence that social media can exacerbate social disconnection, loneliness and isolation. It can also lay claim to people's time and commitment over face-to-face and communal activities.

The 2024 Khan review into social cohesion and democratic resilience set out many of the challenges to community cohesion associated with social media. People behave differently when protected by online anonymity compared to face-to-face interaction. Incivility, harassment or self-censorship have become commonplace. The Khan review used the term 'freedom restricting harassment' to describe intimidation – online and offline – that prevents people from participating in public debate or standing for public office.

In the summer 2024 riots, social media facilitated the rapid spread of misinformation and extremist content, which significantly contributed to the escalation of violence. Social media also spreads conspiracy theories which can foster mistrust between social groups or undermine confidence in democratic institutions.

10. Affective and issue-based polarisation

Society has always been made up of people who have different sets of values and beliefs. Affective polarisation is when individuals begin to see themselves as members of a value-based in-group and begin to dislike and distrust the 'opposite side', irrespective of their views on matters of policy. Issues-based polarisation is where a divide is formed around a particular policy issue, for example, the UK's membership of the European Union or transgender rights. The 'echo chamber' effect can reinforce polarisation, where algorithms filter out alternative views. This process is particularly relevant in relation to identity-based 'culture wars' issues such as free speech, 'woke' versus 'anti-woke', race, immigration and gender identity. However, studies show that the UK has not seen the issues-based and affective polarisation of countries such as the United States.

Polarisation can increase values-based segregation, where people choose to work and spend time with their political 'tribe' and can reduce space for constructive dialogue.

11. Declining democratic resilience

Declining political trust and weakening democratic resilience pose significant threats to community cohesion in the UK. As faith in political institutions and elected representatives erodes, polling suggests that individuals and communities may feel increasingly disconnected from decision-making processes and sceptical of those in power. This disillusionment can fuel apathy, polarisation and susceptibility to misinformation, undermining the shared values and mutual respect that underpin cohesive societies. Marginalised groups may feel especially alienated if they perceive that their voices are ignored, further deepening social divisions.

12. New challenges to community strength and cohesion

New challenges to community cohesion include the impact of overseas conflicts on communities in the UK, most notably the Israel-Gaza and Kashmir conflicts. Religious hate crimes have seen a 25% rise in the year ending March 2024, compared to the previous year.

AI-generated social media content, including deepfakes and disinformation, present another new challenge to community cohesion, increasing mistrust, tensions and divisions.

Community cohesion outside the UK

The main body of this report examines community and cohesion policy and practice across the UK. The literature review also looked at policy and practice outside the UK. While this reflects national contexts, there is scope for learning from approaches in other countries. The full literature review gives more examples, with highlights from three counties summarised below:

The Scanlon Institute in Australia publishes a biennial Social Cohesion Index, which is widely used by policymakers. An annual citizenship day is held every year to reflect on the meaning and importance of Australian citizenship and what unites people. It also celebrates new citizens and the role citizens play in shaping the nation.

The German government has published a National Action Plan on Integration which includes community cohesion targets. It convenes periodic integration summits, which bring government and civil society together to discuss and develop policy. Germany has also pioneered 'planning cells', which bring together a randomly chosen group of citizens who deliberate on policy issues and make recommendations to decision-makers.

Welcoming America is a civil society initiative to welcome migrants and refugees. Its Welcoming Cities programme has successfully involved business groups and chambers of commerce in projects to support the integration of newcomers.

VII. Nationally representative survey: data tables

A nationally representative survey of 2,243 UK adults was conducted by Focaldata, with fieldwork carried out online from 7 to 9 April 2025.

Chapter 3: National Perceptions of Community

Figure 3.1: Nearly half report frequently meeting others at local community spaces

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

I frequently get to meet people who live in my local community in places like the park, leisure centres, pubs, cafes and clubs or through volunteering opportunities

Strongly agree	14%
Tend to agree	31%
Neither agree nor disagree	23%
Tend to disagree	19%
Strongly disagree	11%
Don't know	1%
TOTAL AGREE	**45%**
TOTAL DISAGREE	**30%**

Figure 3.2: Potential barriers to community participation

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements...

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	TOTAL AGREE	TOTAL DISAGREE
'I don't always have enough money to go to places where I would meet people, such as cafes or pubs'	21%	29%	20%	15%	13%	1%	50%	28%
'I don't always have much spare time to go out and meet people'	11%	25%	25%	23%	14%	1%	36%	37%
'There are not enough places and spaces to meet other people in my local area'	11%	25%	24%	24%	15%	1%	36%	39%
'Meeting new people can be daunting'	18%	32%	23%	16%	9%	2%	50%	25%

Figure 3.3: Most of the public feel that people from different backgrounds get on well in their local area

To what extent do you agree or disagree that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together?

Strongly agree	23%
Tend to agree	46%
Neither agree nor disagree	19%
Tend to disagree	7%
Strongly disagree	2%
Don't know	2%
TOTAL AGREE	**69%**
TOTAL DISAGREE	**9%**

Figure 3.4: Half the public feels that people from different backgrounds in the UK get on well

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the UK is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together?

Strongly agree	14%
Tend to agree	39%
Neither agree nor disagree	23%
Tend to disagree	15%
Strongly disagree	6%
Don't know	3%
TOTAL AGREE	**53%**
TOTAL DISAGREE	**21%**

Figure 3.5: Most of the public feel they have opportunities to meet people from different backgrounds

How often, if at all, would you say you normally have the opportunity to meet and interact with people who are from a different background to you?

Often	21%
Sometimes	48%
Rarely	26%
Never	5%

Figure 3.6: Neighbourhoods, workplaces and hobbies create spaces for mixing

Where do you generally meet and interact with people who are from a different background? [Select as many as apply][74]

In my local neighbourhood	51%
At my workplace	43%
Through a shared hobby e.g. sport or arts	25%
Through family	23%
Online e.g. through social media	18%
Meeting other parents through my child/children	14%
At school, college or university	5%
Other (please specify)	5%

Based on those who answered 'Often', 'Sometimes' or 'Rarely' having opportunities to meet people from different backgrounds.

Most frequent 'other' respondents included pubs, places of worship, dog-walking, healthcare appointments and shops or cafés.

Chapter 4: What brings us together

Figure 4.1: Public perceptions of what brings us together across the UK

Which of the following activities do you think have the most positive impact on how people from different backgrounds get on together in the UK generally? Please rank your top three.

	Ranked 1st	Ranked 2nd	Ranked 3rd
People supporting one another in times of crisis, for example Covid-19	37%	12%	10%
People coming together for major sporting events, for example the Euros of the Olympics	18%	22%	14%
People coming together for major historic events, for example Remembrance Day	15%	17%	15%
People coming together for national traditional celebrations, for example Bonfire Night	12%	14%	15%
People coming together for major Royal events, for example the Coronation	11%	14%	14%
People coming together around national TV finals e.g. Great British Bake Off or the Traitors	7%	9%	9%

Figure 4.2: Which activities help people to meet and get on together?

Which of the following activities do you think have the most positive impact on how people from different backgrounds get on together in the place where you live? Please rank your top three.

	Ranked 1st	Ranked 2nd	Ranked 3rd
People mixing in school, colleges or universities	18%	12%	9%
People mixing in workplaces	15%	13%	10%
People mixing through local community action, for example volunteering, fundraising or…	13%	10%	9%
People coming together to support a local sports team or club (for example football, rugby or cricket)	11%	11%	9%
People mixing in local public spaces, for example community centres, youth clubs, parks and libraries	8%	11%	11%
People mixing in local shops, for example at the local high street, shopping centre or market	9%	8%	9%
People at local street parties, events or festivals	7%	6%	8%
People taking part in local sports activities (for example park runs or gyms)	6%	7%	8%
Meeting other parents through my child/ children	7%	7%	6%
People mixing through local arts and culture activities, for example crafts, choirs or painting	5%	7%	7%

Respondents were initially filtered in a prior multi-select question, in which 11% answered 'none of these'

Chapter 5: Challenges and threats to cohesion and connection

Figure 5.1: What factors do people feel undermine community and cohesion locally?

Which of the following issues do you think have the most negative impact on how people from different backgrounds get on together in the place where you live? Please rank them: with number 1 being the most negative.

	Ranked 1st	Ranked 2nd	Ranked 3rd
Divisions between people who have migrated to the UK, arrived as refugees or sought asylum, and people born in the UK	30%	12%	7%
Divisions between people who have different faiths and religions	13%	15%	12%
Divisions between people from different ethnic groups	13%	14%	10%
Divisions between rich and poor	14%	11%	9%
Divisions by party politics or political views	8%	9%	8%
Online divisions, such as conspiracies and misinformation	8%	6%	6%
Divisions between older and younger people	6%	6%	7%
Divisions by place (e.g. between towns and big cities, urban and rural areas)	4%	4%	5%
Divisions between people who want independence for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and those who don't	3%	4%	4%

Respondents were initially filtered in a prior multi-select question, in which 10% answered 'none of these'.

Figure 5.2: Awareness of asylum seekers being housed locally in hotels

To your knowledge, are hotels in your local area being used to accommodate asylum seekers?

Yes	32%
No	30%
Don't know	38%

Figure 5.3: Most people have not met or interacted with asylum seekers locally

To your knowledge, have you met or interacted with a person in your local area who is currently seeking asylum?

Yes	33%
No	58%
Don't know	9%

Chapter 6: The changes that people want

Table 6.1: What action is most important for addressing social divides?

Which of the following options do you feel are most important for addressing social divides and helping people from different backgrounds to live well together?

	Ranked in top 3	Ranked 1st	Ranked 2nd	Ranked 3rd
Changes to our immigration and asylum system	37%	20%	10%	7%
Promoting mutual respect between people of different backgrounds in the school curriculum	43%	18%	14%	11%
Tackling polarisation and hate on social media	32%	13%	10%	9%
Addressing racial and faith divisions	37%	11%	14%	12%
Addressing inequalities between the rich and poor	33%	11%	11%	11%
Support to help people integrate if they have moved to the UK from overseas	32%	10%	11%	11%
Making politicians more accountable	26%	9%	9%	8%
Involving the public more in political decision-making	23%	6%	9%	8%
Other (please specify)	1%	1%	–	–

Respondents were initially filtered in a prior multi-select question, in which 10% answered 'none of these'.

Table 6.2: What could be done to create closer communities?

Which of the following options do you feel are most important for developing closer communities, where people can connect and interact with each other more often? Please select your top three.

	Ranked in top 3	Ranked 1st	Ranked 2nd	Ranked 3rd
Improving shared spaces for people in communities to come together, like parks, high streets, libraries and leisure centres	65%	31%	21%	13%
Creating more local opportunities for people to come together around taking part in the creative arts, or through coming to arts events	52%	18%	18%	16%
Creating more local opportunities for people to come together around taking part in sport or supporting the same local sports team	52%	18%	18%	16%
More activities to mark major national events that bring us together, like the Euros football tournament or jubilees	43%	17%	12%	14%
Creating more opportunities for people to volunteer in their local community	43%	15%	15%	13%
Other (please specify)	1%	1%	–	–

Respondents were initially filtered in a prior multi-select question, in which 14% answered 'none of these'.

Notes and references

1. Focaldata nationally representative survey of 2,243 UK adults, 7 to 9 April 2025
2. The Ipsos Issues Index finds that the public place issues of the economy, prices/inflation and the NHS in their top five most salient concerns. Schools, law and order, and lack of faith in politicians also feature in the top ten. See Ipsos (April 2025) Issues Index. London: Ipsos.
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5. Yougov polling finds that seven in ten Britons feel that social media companies did a bad job tackling misinformation that incited the 2024 riots. https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50288-two-thirds-of-britons-say-social-media-companies-should-be-held-responsible-for-posts-inciting-riots
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9. Allport, G. (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*, Cambridge MA: Addison Wesley.
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20. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2024/households-below-average-income-an-analysis-of-the-uk-income-distribution-fye-1995-to-fye-2024#low-income-indicators
21. https://carnegieuk.org/life-in-the-uk-index/life-in-the-uk-2024/
22. ONS: *Young people not in education, employment or training* (NEET), UK: February 2025
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24. MHCLG: *Statutory homelessness in England: July to September 2024,* February 2025
25. House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2025) Policing Response to the Summer 2024 disorder, London: House of Commons.
26. Abrams, D., Broadwood, J., Lalot, F., Davies Hayon, K. and Dixon, A. (2021) *Beyond Us and Them: Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of COVID-19*, London: Nuffield Foundation, University of Kent, The Belong Network.
27. Putnam, R. with Romney Garrett, S. (2020) *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
28. Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T., and Layton, J. (2010) 'Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review' in *PLoS medicine*, 7(7).
29. Putnam, R and Garrett, SR (2020) *The Upswing*, New York: Simon and Schuster; Yates, J (2021) *Fractured: How we learn to live together*, Manchester: HarperNorth.
30. Time spent in community institutions has declined. From 1910, the proportion of UK adults attending church regularly fell from one in three to one in ten. The number of Women's Institutes and Working Men's Clubs halved between 1972 and 2015. See ibid. Research drawn from: National Centre for Social Research.
31. See the Community Life Survey https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/community-life-survey--2
32. King's Policy Institute for example find that a growing majority of people in the UK feel the country is divided, rising to 79% in 2023. See: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/woke-vs-anti-woke-culture-war-divisions-and-politics.pdf
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35. See 2025 YouGov poll https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/52269-how-strong-are-regional-identities-in-britain?utm_source=website_article&utm_medium=bluesky&utm_campaign=52269
36. See also Kremer, M and Maskin, E (1996) 'Wage Inequality and Segregation by Skill', NBER Working Papers 5718, National Bureau of Economic Research
37. See Rutter, J. (2015) *Moving Up and Getting On: Migration, integration and social cohesion in the UK*, Bristol: Bristol University Press.
38. Quantitative research by Belong similarly highlights the role of volunteering in strengthening perceptions of social cohesion. See Belong (2023) *Causal Connections: Seconday Data Analyses of the Links Between Volunteering and Social Cohesion in the UK*. Manchester: Belong.
39. Focaldata nationally representative survey of 1,260 adults in England and Wales, 20-31 January 2023. See British Future (2023) *Shared Goals: The power of football clubs to connect diverse communities*, London: British Future.
40. Research by British Future and Belong highlights that these activities can 'scale up' their ability to foster social mixing, where proactive strategies seek to build opportunities into their events, activities and community engagement. See British Future (2024), *Creating Connections: The role of arts in bridging divides*, London: British Future. See Belong (2024), The Power of Events: report on the archives of the Spirit of 2012 archive about the impact of events on social cohesion and connection, London: Belong.
41. Ibid
42. Misinformation is false information that is created and spread by mistake. Disinformation is false information created and spread with the deliberate intent to deceive.
43. British Social Attitudes, 41st Study, June 2024. https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low
44. Referring to staff in 10 Downing Street holding parties during the Covid-19 lockdown.
45. Referring to senior members of the Labour government receiving free concert tickets and clothing from donors and corporations.
46. Man, focus group with residents of Abergavenny, Pontypool and Cwmbran
47. Hate crime reporting charity Tell Mama has seen a steep increase in instances of anti-Muslim prejudice. Public attitudes research by Hope Not Hate found an increase in support for prejudiced stereotypes and statements in 2024, for example higher levels of agreement that 'Islam is a threat to the British way of life'.

See Malik, M. (2024), *Doubling Down on Division: Anti-Muslim Hatred in the UK since 7th October*, London: Hope Not Hate.

48. Both rising public and stakeholder concerns reflect studies which show increases in reported hate crime and observed levels of online prejudice. See for example:
Tell Mama reports on anti-Muslim hate, https://tellmamauk.org/tell-mama-records-the-highest-number-of-anti-muslim-hate-cases-in-2024-since-its-founding/
CST reports on increasing anti-Semitism https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2024/12/09/117-increase-in-campus-antisemitic-incidents
While official hate crime statistics in the year since the riots have yet to be released, reporting organisations that contributed to the research shared experiences of a rise in cases relating to race and faith-based prejudice.
Studies by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue quantify a spike in online hate during and after the riots, but that much of even the overt content was not subject to effective moderation. See https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/evidencing-a-rise-in-anti-muslim-and-anti-migrant-online-hate-following-the-southport-attack/
49. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-audit-on-group-based-child-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse
50. The subsample in Northern Ireland is n=65 (reportable but small) and should be treated with caution. We include the findings as this was also a strong theme emerging in our focus group and stakeholder roundtable discussions in Belfast, which identified strong divides on asylum resettlement.
51. Cantle, T. (2001) *Community cohesion: report of the Independent Review Team*, London: Home Office.
52. Commission on Integration and Social Cohesion (2007) *Our Shared Future*, London: Department for Communities and Local Government.
53. Casey, Dame Louise (2016) *The Casey Review: A review into opportunity and integration*, London: Department for Communities and Local Government.
54. Khan , Dame Sarah (2024) *The Khan Review: Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience*, London: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.
55. The impacts on community cohesion of this investment is described in Abrams, D., Broadwood, J., Lalot, F., Davies Hayon, K. and Dixon, A. (2021) *Beyond Us and Them: Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of COVID-19*, London: Nuffield Foundation, University of Kent, The Belong Network.
56. Scottish Government (2018) *A Connected Scotland: our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
57. Welsh Government (2009) *Getting on Together: The Community Cohesion Strategy for Wales*, Cardiff: Welsh Government.
58. Ibid.
59. Rutter, J. (2015) *Moving Up and Getting On: Migration, integration and social cohesion in the UK,* Bristol: Bristol University Press.
60. See response to call for evidence from Sunderland Council.
61. See response to call for evidence from Sunderland Council.
62. Westerling, J., Hien, L. and Plumb, N. (2025) *Closing the Void: Can we reconnect politics with associational life?* London: Power to Change.
63. Evidence submitted by Historic England.
64. HM Government (2018) *A connected society: A strategy for tackling loneliness*, London: Department for Culture, Media and Sport.
65. Hesketh, R., Lawson, G., Haggar, T., Noman, C., and Ventura-Arrieta, M. (2023) *What works in social cohesion and overcoming tensions?* London: Policy Institute, King's College London.
66. Ibid.
67. Tajfel (1978) *Differentiation between social groups: studies in social psychology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
68. Abrams, D., Davies, B. and Horsham, Z. (2023b) *Linking Volunteering and Social Cohesion: Causal Evidence in the UK and Beyond*. Manchester: Belong
69. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-volunteering-and-charitable-giving
70. Local Trust (2019) *Left Behind? Understanding Communities on the Edge*, London: Local Trust.
71. With the exception of some efforts specifically targeting school and university students – for example the work of Solutions Not Sides.
72. Stakeholder roundtable discussion – Yorkshire and the Humber.
73. See Belong's Power of Sport toolkit for ways that sport can maximise its impact on community cohesion https://sport.belongnetwork.co.uk/the-toolkit/
74. Most frequent 'other' respondents included pubs, places of worship, dog-walking, healthcare appointments and shops or cafés.

British Future...

belong
THE COHESION AND INTEGRATION NETWORK

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank and registered charity engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, identity and race, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

British Future
13 Elliott's Place
London N1 8HX
www.britishfuture.org
info@britishfuture.org