



# Building Communities of Trust: Community Cohesion in the North

## Event report

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## Introduction

This report reflects on the ippr north conference *Building Communities of Trust: Community Cohesion in the North*. The event was held on 29 June 2009 in Sunderland, supported by Gentoo Group and Sunderland City Council. The conference was attended by 100 delegates from statutory, private, voluntary and community sectors. Delegates were predominantly from the North East but also included representatives from across the North of England and Scotland.

The conference sought to explore the role of local authorities and third sector organisations in building trust and cohesion in all communities across the North, asking what particular challenges the region faces and how positive connections between communities can be fostered. We define ‘third sector organisation’ here as value-driven, non-governmental organisations, encompassing voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives, mutuals and housing associations.

This report is separated into two parts. The first section gives a summary of the presentations made by Bobby Duffy, Managing Director for Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, Dave Smith, Chief Executive for Sunderland City Council, and Graham Burgess, Chief Executive for Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council. The section also includes a summary of the keynote speech by Shahid Malik MP, Minister for Community Cohesion, Department for Communities and Local Government, in his first public speech on becoming Minister. The second section discusses the key themes and questions raised in the discussion groups that closed the morning session. The summary does not attempt to encompass all that was discussed, but rather offers an overview, illustrated with concrete examples.

### **Key messages from the conference:**

- Trust is central to bridging and linking social capital and developing cohesive communities.
- Better communication between the council and communities helps to build trust.
- Councils need to promote visible social justice, increased contact and consistency of information, transparency and accountability.
- Communities need to be more involved in local decision-making and feel ownership. Local people are best placed to understand the problems they face and contribute to the solutions.
- Cohesion should not be confined to issues of race and faith. It is about bringing together all aspects of a community.
- Communities are not receptive to cohesion jargon, which feels intangible.
- People are most interested in local issues and concerns that affect them.
- Meaningful interaction helps people to learn about the commonalities they share, and builds mutual understanding.
- Community cohesion must be a constant issue on a council’s agenda.
- Cohesion strategy must run through the whole council, embedded in the council’s corporate vision and strategy.
- All council staff should be trained and aware of the council’s cohesion strategy. It must be seen to be relevant to everybody’s job.
- The cohesion agenda always needs revising and fine-tuning. Local authorities need to be willing to learn from their mistakes.
- A strong partnership approach is vital for cohesion and tension monitoring.
- The third sector has an important role in building social capital and cohesive communities.
- Local authorities and the third sector need to work together on the cohesion agenda, and there needs to be a stronger dialogue between them.
- To understand communities and tensions, we need to look beyond administrative geographies.

## 1. Building trust and cohesion across Northern neighbourhoods

**Bobby Duffy, Managing Director for Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute** opened with an emphasis on the importance of trust in building positive connections and social networks between people, known as social capital. He explained that relationships between people from different backgrounds ('bridging' social capital), and connections between communities and institutions ('linking' social capital) (Schmuecker 2008b), requires trust and understanding.

He began by arguing that our trust in each other has halved in the last 50 years, with only 30 per cent of people stating that most people could be trusted today. Despite this general decline in trust, politicians have always sat 'in a mire of a lack of trust' at the bottom of opinion polls. He explained that there has been, however, a shift in perceptions of politicians' motivations, with the majority of people today seeing politicians as out for themselves.

He then spoke about the cohesion findings of the Place Survey, a postal survey that asks local people for their perceptions about the area in which they live, conducted by all local authorities. In this survey, the three key community cohesion indicators are:

1. NI1: percentage of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area
2. NI2: percentage of people who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood
3. NI4: percentage of people who feel they can influence decision in their locality.

Comparing overall cohesion (NI1) in 2006 with NI1 in 2008, Bobby Duffy explained that there is a trend of declining cohesion in the UK. This is also the trend in the North East, where the local authorities of Sunderland, Redcar and Cleveland, and Middlesbrough rank lowest in NI1, and Tynedale, Alnwick and Castle Morpeth rank the highest, although it was stressed that there is not a huge variation in NI1 in the region.

If there is a national trend towards declining community cohesion, we have to ask why. Bobby Duffy argued that it is important to look at people's perceptions, and that there has been a national hardening of views, particularly on the issue of immigration. Today people see immigration as one of the main issues facing the UK, the majority of people think that immigration is bad for Britain, and there has been twofold increase (from 12 per cent in 2005 to 25 per cent in 2008) in people who feel that their area does not feel like Britain because of immigration. This reflects a general shift in values away from multiculturalism and support for minority lifestyles, and more belief in a common set of values, increased traditionalism and nostalgia for how the UK used to be.

Ipsos MORI research (Duffy and Lee Chan 2009) has found that the context of an area helps explain people's perceptions, and this can be used to predict levels of cohesion. By comparing cohesion findings with the Index of Multiple Deprivation, Bobby Duffy illustrated that the higher the level of deprivation in an area, the lower the percentage of people that perceive positive relationships between people from different backgrounds (NI1).

The relationship between education levels and levels of cohesion was also shown to be very strong, whereas there is virtually no relationship between cohesion and levels of ethnic diversity. A case in point is the comparison between the City of London borough, which has one of the highest levels of perceived cohesion and the borough of Barking and Dagenham, which has one of the lowest cohesion scores. These areas in fact have very similar levels of ethnic diversity, but very different education profiles, with only 10 per cent of residents without any qualifications in the City of London, while in Barking and Dagenham 40 per cent of residents have no qualifications. The North East authority areas, with an average 35 per cent of residents without qualifications,<sup>1</sup> fits this trend, ranking between 70 and 80 per cent on the cohesion measure.

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1. Based on 2001 Census. See National Statistics (2003)

Bobby Duffy reflected that 72 per cent of an area's cohesion score can be predicted by knowing six background characteristics:

1. Proportion of people in routine manual occupations
2. Education deprivation measure
3. Under-occupancy of homes
4. Proportion of population under 10 years old
5. Region
6. Proportion of population from Pakistan.

Predicting cohesion means that we can then see who is out-performing their local conditions and increasing cohesion, which is the case for Leicester, Harlow, Corby and Luton, as well as who is under-performing. In the North East there is little variation between predicted cohesion and actual cohesion.

Bobby Duffy went on to introduce the Ipsos MORI/Geofutures National Indicator Mapping Application (NIMA) which allows a geographical visualisation of Place Survey data. The tool looks beyond administrative geographies, illustrating cross-border effects and patterns that traditional mapping would not pick up, for example how dissatisfaction in an area spreads across ward boundaries. He concluded that although research indicates that there is a strong relationship between population structure and cohesion, the outcome is not inevitable, and steps can be taken to build community cohesion. With the help of applications such as NIMA, there needs to be a focus on real local neighbourhoods, to unpick what is happening locally, and target responses accordingly.

### **Regional responses: how can we foster positive connections to bridge our changing communities?**

Dave Smith, Chief Executive, Sunderland City Council highlighted the importance of community cohesion for Sunderland's journey of regeneration and renewal. He gave an overview of the Institute of Community Cohesion (iCoCo) Sunderland review,<sup>2</sup> identifying four key themes that the council will be focusing on: (1) strength of belonging, (2) impact of deprivation, (3) intergenerational issues and (4) valuing diversity.

He described the strong sense of local place and neighbourhood belonging and pride in Sunderland, but acknowledged that Sunderland is like a 'collection of villages' because the idea of belonging to the *city* is very low. Thus the challenge for Sunderland is to relearn what community can be. He explained that some communities in Sunderland are insular and unwelcoming, and many people are not in the position to make the most of opportunities and reap the benefits of the regeneration that Sunderland is undergoing.

The second challenge that Sunderland faces is the impact of deprivation. Dave Smith argued that there are deprived communities with generations of unemployment. Intergenerational issues were also identified as problematic. Different generations do not feel that they have any connection and instead they have a relationship of distrust and dislike. He gave the example of a community philosophy group in Sunderland where he spoke to a group of young people who felt misunderstood, were disaffected, and did not feel that they had any opportunities for the future.

Dave Smith also recognised the importance of Sunderland City Council valuing diversity. He explained the need to understand the different contributions that people with different life experiences can make. However he emphasised that valuing diversity should not be confined to the black and minority ethnic (BME) population, but also those with learning difficulties, different class backgrounds, different values and different experiences. In order to value diversity in society, we must also be confident of the value of our own contribution and not feel threatened by the contributions of others.

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2. For more information on the review see iCoCo (2008)

Sunderland City Council has a five-pronged approach running through the whole council which aims to enhance the opportunities for all. This involves:

1. Community Leadership Programme: Strengthening the role of elected members as frontline community leaders promoting quality of life improvements and acting as the ‘lynch pin’ for the council’s day-to-day engagement with the community.
2. Area Arrangements: Forging stronger links between city-wide strategies and local priorities, ensuring people are involved in local decision-making.
3. Business Improvement Programme: Centring services on local residents’ priorities and requirements.
4. Commissioning: Ensuring that people’s needs are understood through effective engagement and placing meeting those needs at the heart of planning and arranging delivery of those services.
5. Customer Services Strategy: Placing customers at the centre of what the council does, improving interaction, understanding customers’ needs through consultation and strengthening communication.

Sunderland City Council’s role is to give resources and support to its communities to reach out and welcome others. Its work with the think tank Demos has found that different people want different kinds of relationships with their council, and this must be factored into the council’s approach. Dave Smith argued that the council is an integral part of communities. Furthering cohesion requires a whole council and partnership approach, building trust through all interactions with communities, giving the communities the confidence in the council to enable it to help them. He concluded that community cohesion is about the actions taken, rather than what we want to become, a way of being rather than a place to get to.

**Graham Burgess, Chief Executive, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council** gave examples of good practice for building community cohesion from another Northern region. He began by describing the demographics of Blackburn with Darwen, a borough with over 20 per cent Muslim residents, a high percentage of Indian and Pakistani communities, a dual-faith community, and the second youngest population in the UK. The borough has faced the challenges of far right activity, terrorism charges against its citizens, and community segregation.

Graham Burgess talked about Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council’s strategy for fostering cohesion, stating that community cohesion must be a constant issue on the agenda and that the agenda always needs revising and fine-tuning. He explained how a sub-group of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), the People and Communities Forum (and its sub-group the LSP Workforce Representation Group) has functioned as a driver for strengthening cohesion, promoting equal opportunities and valuing diversity. He argued for a partnership approach which allows partners to intervene strongly in neighbourhoods when intelligence of tensions emerge, citing this approach as centrally important in preventing the disturbances that neighbouring towns Burnley and Oldham suffered in 2001, and which Blackburn avoided.

He talked about some of the council initiatives to promote cohesion and celebrate diversity. The Belonging Campaign and Charter 2003 outlined a set of common values around cohesion and equality, hoping to tackle alienation by bringing people together from different backgrounds and fostering mutual respect. The Charter was signed by Blackburn Rovers Football Club, LSP partners, schools, community organisations and citizens.

In 2007 the 100 Voices project was launched, bringing together 100 randomly selected citizens from Blackburn with Darwen, with the aim of facilitating discussion and teasing out key issues for local people. Graham Burgess explained how the project revealed that people did not want to talk about cohesion – they wanted to talk about issues that affected them. Despite their different backgrounds, it was found that people shared common concerns about graffiti, bad lighting, off-licences selling alcohol to young children, even someone’s daughter-in-law not being good enough for their son!

This project has grown into Neighbourhood Voices, involving 1,000 citizens, and it developed Neighbourhood Boards, which the council has devolved power and resources to. Citizens participate in the Boards, providing input into strategic planning on a borough-wide and neighbourhood level.

Graham Burgess explained how the council plans to build on the recent iCoCo review of Blackburn with Darwen.<sup>3</sup> The council's refreshed approach will include:

- Addressing the symptoms of cohesion issues, by tackling spatial, social and economic separation
- Moving engagement further to the neighbourhoods by investing £60,000 in short-term projects
- Focusing on cultural exchange (including with schools), enhanced understanding and 'quick wins'
- Strengthening an independent steering group to oversee activity, ensure feasibility, and push the council harder on a three-month basis
- Integrating a new cohesion and equality strategy, developing a medium-term action plan (three years) and a '2030 Vision' for Blackburn with Darwen.

He also emphasised using the iCoCo report to open up discussion of community cohesion with local people. He concluded that we should be visionary and think on the strategic level, but that community cohesion must be fostered at the neighbourhood level as well. It is important to be ambitious and to keep working on it, and keep doing it.

**In the debate that followed the three speakers' presentations**, one delegate argued that communities are made up of human beings and there needs to be more of a connection between what is happening on the streets, and what is being propagated in the media. It was stated that too often communities are being put into boxes and not being properly understood.

Another asked whether Sunderland's project to create a city-wide community was short-sighted given the iCoCo findings that Sunderland is made up of 'village communities.' Dave Smith acknowledged that the natural communities that exist in Sunderland must be recognised and trust must be built within and between them, however he argued that it is important to deal with other levels of community too. Graham Burgess explained that translating Sunderland's strong sense of village-level belonging to the city scale requires finding an issue that really engages people. With a word of warning, Bobby Duffy pointed out that in order to understand local communities we must look at meaningful communities and not push boundaries onto people. Delegates also questioned the extent to which public agencies are willing to devolve power to people on the community level.

### **Keynote address**

**Shahid Malik MP, Minister for Community Cohesion, Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG)** opened the afternoon session with a keynote address that set out the Government's approach to community cohesion, in light of what has been learned from the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) report. He outlined the need for a positive approach to cohesion which draws on people's common desires for a strong community where there is a shared sense of belonging, where people feel safe and comfortable, and feel that they have equal access to succeed in life. He argued that community cohesion is not 'rocket science'; it is quite straightforward: people need to sit down together and discuss their hopes and concerns.

Shahid Malik stated that there is a clear role for national leadership, setting the parameters of debate and giving a clear policy direction. But he also explained that there is no magic formula for cohesion and national guidelines need to be adapted to meet local needs. It is important to understand that national leadership can only go so far, because it is local action that builds cohesion. Local people are best placed to understand the problems they face and contribute to the solutions, and the CLG aims to put citizens at the heart of everything it does because of this.

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3. For more information on the review, see Institute of Community Cohesion (2009a)

Malik went on to explain that cohesion is about an agenda that engages citizens in governance and embraces the reality that constituents are not homogeneous, but are a wonderful mixture of cultures, passions and experiences. He argued that diversity is not a new phenomenon in Great Britain; this country has always been diverse and benefited from diversity, and this should be celebrated.

He observed that while the UK has been quite good at celebrating diversity, it has not made such an effort to recognise commonality; doing the latter is key. Society is strong when communities are united by common positive values of fairness, respect, justice and tolerance, but these shared values cannot be imposed from above. It is through meaningful interaction that people learn about commonalities.<sup>4</sup> He explained that the more that people mix and engage with different people, the more they begin to identify that diverse people care about many of the same issues, and people do have common values. He furthered that when people reach this understanding, their differences are not really such a big deal.

He reflected that cohesion should not be confined to issues of race and faith. Cohesion is about bringing together all aspects of a community, young and old, affluent and less affluent, black and white. Shahid Malik acknowledged that engaging and involving such diverse communities is a challenge that is resource and time intensive, and it requires a willingness to consider new ideas and methods.

The Minister also addressed how building cohesion is a vital means of counteracting extremism in our communities. He argued that spatial and social segregation of different groups breeds prejudice and leaves communities ripe to the exploitation of extremists who endeavour to deepen divisions. In many communities there are tensions under the surface that need to be brought out into the open, people need to be able to ask questions, find out about each other, and address their concerns. Without tackling these issues Britain will continue to face the threat of extremism.

In his concluding remarks Shahid Malik stated that it is everybody's responsibility to push the cohesion agenda. We should not just be looking to the Government, to local authorities, or to third sector organisations to lead. Everyone is a leader in some part of their lives and with this leadership role comes a responsibility to promote cohesion and challenge lack of understanding and ignorance in their daily lives. More and more people need to be brought on-board and engage with the discussions and debates surrounding community cohesion because it is only with the engagement of the majority that cohesion can be achieved.

In the debate that followed one delegate asked Shahid Malik how he will negotiate with immigration policy, which directly conflicts with progress in the cohesion agenda. It was argued that government policy segregates asylum seekers by preventing them from working and accessing further education, to the detriment of cohesive and engaged communities. The Minister acknowledged that there is a real need for a dialogue between the Home Office and his department and he will be seeking to forge this as soon as possible. Graham Burgess furthered that while asylum seekers do not have access to the workplace, engagement can be achieved through a strong neighbourhood agenda, sport and leisure work, and volunteer work. He clarified that asylum seekers need to be engaged not because they are a problem, but because the reaction to them has been problematic and barriers need to be broken down.

Another delegate questioned what resources the Government will be putting into the cohesion agenda. Shahid Malik replied that £34 million over three years has been invested in areas with the biggest challenges to cohesion, as well as Migration Impact Funds of £70 million, and £4-5 million a year going directly to community groups. He explained that the majority of money has gone to local authorities to allow them to build on what they think works, but it is also important to take some risks and also put money into community groups. Graham Burgess explained that local authorities need to build cohesion work into all work, be it neighbourhood planning, housing or school policies, and then even if funding is cut, cohesion is embedded in the council's practice.

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4. For more information on the review, see Institute of Community Cohesion (2009a)



How to counter media sensationalism was also raised. Shahid Malik argued that the local media is a stakeholder in their area and generally has a stronger sense of responsibility than national press. He also explained that LSPs have a big role to play in engaging with local media and preventing inflammatory press. Graham Burgess furthered that social networking websites have a very high readership and Blackburn with Darwen is putting resources into engaging with this medium in order to reach people.

## 2. Key issues

Following the speakers' presentations and a question and answer session with the panel, delegates formed small discussion groups led by facilitators. The hour-long session explored four overarching questions:

1. How can we foster positive connections to bridge our changing communities?
2. What challenges exist in our communities and regions which may serve as barriers to positive interactions? What strengths are there?
3. How do we move from being gatekeepers to gateways for communities to strengthen, engage and empower?
4. Are there ways we can anticipate any tensions in order to take action early enough to prevent problems arising between our communities?

The key issues, questions and examples presented by delegates are outlined below.

### **Challenges and barriers to cohesion**

As Bobby Duffy's presentation illustrated, looking at the local context of an area helps us to understand local barriers to cohesion. Delegates considered the effects of the local context, the ways in which lifestyles have changed, and how local demographics are changing and presenting new challenges.

Sunderland, like Blackburn with Darwen, has high levels of deprivation and relative poverty with large disparities in wealth and opportunity. It has a small BME population living in relatively localised areas, and a large white working-class population. Many of its citizens face deep-seated problems of generational unemployment and disadvantage, public health issues and low levels of education, and these problems are often concentrated in areas of poor housing due to housing allocations. Sunderland as a 'collection of villages' was explained by its industrial past, when communities grew up around different pockets of industry. With the decline of industry, some of these areas now experience high unemployment and deprivation.

Problems of tribalism and territoriality were cited as major barriers to be overcome. In Newcastle, community workers have found that some people will not go a quarter of a mile up the road because they feel distrust for strangers and do not feel safe. Some young people feel they face hostility if they leave the street they live on. Poor sub-regional transport connections were also identified as a major impediment to interaction beyond one's local area.

A change in society and lifestyle on a national level was also addressed. One discussion group talked about the implications of society becoming more individualised and consumerist. It was argued that the pace of life is faster, with people working longer hours, commuting, and shopping in the supermarket rather than their local shops. One delegate asserted that today it is difficult to be civic because there is no time to get involved and engaged. There was a general consensus that there is a lack of understanding of what community can be and, because there is a lack of community spirit, people do not see what the benefits of community are. Shahid Malik highlighted that it is important that people feel that they have both a right and a responsibility to community.

And as Bobby Duffy highlighted, people's values are changing. People are feeling increasingly nostalgic for the good old days and their views towards minorities and immigration are hardening,

while prejudice, discrimination and ignorance threaten to break down understanding within and between communities. Many delegates identified attitudes as a deep-seated challenge to cohesive communities.

One participant argued that while in some ways our communities are changing, in other ways communities in the North East are highly resistant to change and unwelcoming to outsiders. The reception of newcomers, including migrant workers and asylum seekers, has been mixed, but racist attitudes are still too commonly found. For example, one participant spoke about a Sunday School in the East End of Newcastle which some white families stopped sending their children to because a high proportion of BME children attended.

A common thread running through all group discussions was the challenge that both local and national media poses. Negative media representation of Sunderland was cited as detrimental to civic pride, as well as the media's significant role in promulgating stereotypes and prejudice, particularly surrounding issues of immigration and asylum seekers. The media was said to pick out groups and isolate them. It was argued that counteracting media hype and myth-busting is hugely important for breaking down negative perceptions and opening up opportunities for understanding between different groups. It was suggested that positive media initiatives such as the media awards held during Refugee Week should be strongly encouraged for these reasons.

### **Confronting challenges and fostering positive connections between communities**

Meaningful interaction has been shown to break down stereotypes and prejudices, build social capital, and foster more cohesive communities. It was widely understood that cohesion requires encouraging positive relationships between different groups, and that it is important that this is quality interaction. But for interaction to be meaningful it needs to go beyond a superficial level and it needs to be sustained. Delegates offered many ideas and examples.

It was agreed that local communities need to be interested in opportunities to interact, and people cannot be forced to engage with other groups. As Blackburn with Darwen's 100 Voices project revealed, bringing people together to discuss real life issues helps to build a sense of commonality. People may not be interested in cohesion *per se*, but they are often interested in local issues which affect them, be it transport problems, bad lighting, or anti-social behaviour. One delegate spoke about the huge success of a community-led initiative to open a shop in an area which lacked amenities. Another cited the 'Spaceshaper workshops' in Gateshead that brought people together to talk about how best to redevelop Swalwell Park. These projects gave community focus and a common purpose, the community engaged in local decision-making, and it benefited the area concretely through redevelopment.

Events such as the 2012 London Olympics were highlighted as good opportunities for communities to realise shared aspirations and promote a feeling of shared futures and belonging. Another good practice example was thought to be the digital stories Culture Shock project in which people created mini-movies about their lives in workshops which facilitated discussion and mixing between disparate groups, including young prisoners and police. Particularly positive was the involvement of community and voluntary organisations in the consultation process, and the sense of ownership participants felt that they gained.

Delegates considered issues of community connectivity, and there was a general consensus that there is a need for more places for people to meet and mix. Community centres and other community facilities were seen as important hubs. One participant talked about the key role of one community centre in facilitating the integration of asylum seekers into one area, arguing that people from the community centre managed this far better than the local council. However, it was argued that often it is only a select group in the community who use community centres.

There was also concern raised over how current community facilities often separate people into groups (young, old, families) rather than provide opportunities for different people to mix in a meaningful way. There was a feeling that community facilities need to reach out to the wider community more

through better communication of events and workshops. The example of a popular local village magazine was given as a good way of disseminating this information and building a common sense of belonging in a community. Local amenities were also identified as key in facilitating getting to know your neighbours. A delegate explained how shopping in her local high street on a daily basis had boosted her sense of community spirit and completely changed the way she felt about her area.

Discussion groups perceived the central role of schools in fostering positive connections between young people of different backgrounds. Since the Education and Inspections Act 2006, schools now have a duty to promote community cohesion by giving pupils opportunities to mix and learn with those from different backgrounds, promoting discussion of a common sense of identity, and supporting diversity and equality. It is argued that helping to establish these values in young people is a step towards reducing prejudices and stereotypes in our communities of the future. Thornhill School in Sunderland was praised for its anti-racism rap group 'The Word'. The project was considered an inspiring example of good practice by encouraging understanding of other cultures and raising awareness of the problems caused by racism. Twinning schools, championed by councils such as Kirklees and recommended by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF 2007), was suggested as a positive way of breaking down social barriers among young people in the North East.

Many delegates also argued for the importance of quality youth engagement work. It was suggested that rotating youth workers between different groups could be a way of getting young people to mix and help break down tribalism. One participant explained the dangers of negative stereotyping of young people, asserting that the 'problems' of tribalism, territory and testosterone could be turned into a positive creative force given good youth engagement. Youth engagement work in East Durham had been shown to bring down the crime rate in the area, but there were concerns that funding was too limited for such projects, and the recession may further limit financial support.

Bad practice as well as good practice was discussed. Concern was raised over previous cohesion events which had failed to facilitate any meaningful interaction. One delegate described an Asian food event in which an isolated Asian group cooked traditional food for participants who proceeded to eat the food with little interaction, and then went home. Such examples highlight that badly designed events can be damaging and make groups feel even more isolated. It was also argued that events and activities may bring people together for a day, but often these relations are not sustained afterwards.

To achieve more positive outcomes from cohesion events, delegates recommended a number of key factors. Projects that facilitate meaningful interaction are known to help build trust and commonality, but this is often limited to the participants. Sustaining and building on connections requires follow-up sessions which bring people back together, and connections should be spread outwards, creating opportunities for participants' families and friends to also participate and feel the benefit of a project. Good events need to be thought about. There is a real need for attention to detail when organising community activities. For example, it must be considered whether an event should be women only, whether transport is sufficient and practical, and how different cultures will receive an activity. It is important to learn from experiences and find out what keeps people coming back to events, or not. Finally, the focus should be on what people are interested in or concerned about, and the use of cohesion jargon should be avoided because it often feels intangible and can block community engagement.

### **Local authorities and cohesion strategy**

Following presentations by two council chief executives, discussions explored how local authorities can help to build community cohesion. The challenge for local authorities is to develop a local vision for community cohesion which is meaningful to every part of its community.

Delegates recognised that community cohesion is a multi-faceted concept which requires a cross-cutting, multi-pronged approach. As both Graham Burgess and Dave Smith highlighted, a cohesion strategy must run through the whole council and LSP, but there are different ways in which this can be realised. For some participants, mainstreaming cohesion strategy within the council was championed, arguing that the cross-cutting nature of cohesion means that it cannot just be an add-

on. Rather than having a special programme for cohesion in isolation, the mainstreaming approach intends to embed cohesion in the council's corporate vision and strategy, cohesion-proofing all council decisions, policy, and practice. However, it was felt by many that when there is no group pushing for improvement, the mainstreaming approach results in community cohesion too quickly falling down the list of priorities. For this reason, visible groups such as Blackburn with Darwen's People and Communities Forum within the LSP was praised for its role in encouraging and maintaining impetus, although it is not for this group alone to encourage cohesion.<sup>5</sup>

Building trust and linking social capital between local authorities and citizens was seen as centrally important in facilitating the development of more cohesive communities. For this to happen, it was felt that improved communication from the council to communities is vital, and this should include effective communication to foreign-speaking communities. Lack of communication and information creates situations of confusion and tension, such as when asylum seekers were dispersed *en masse* into areas without the recipient community being properly prepared.

Conversely, increased contact and consistency of information between local authorities and local people gives more transparency and accountability, which helps to build citizens' trust. Visible social justice is important, meaning councils promote a perception of fairness in delivery of services and resources. If trust is to be achieved, councils need to deliver the services they offer effectively, they must give feedback, and they must be seen to be delivering.

But community participation with their council should be deeper than this. People's participation and engagement has been found to be an indicator and a lever for cohesion. When people feel empowered to contribute in their community they feel they have a stake. For many delegates this means that there is a real need for communities to be much more involved in local decision-making and thus feel they have ownership of the local agenda. Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council has done this by devolving decision-making down to Neighbourhood Boards.

Part of Sunderland's cohesion strategy, participatory budgeting was central to the CLG (2008a) White Paper *Communities in Control, Real People, Real Power*. It aims to involve local people in making decisions on spending priorities for activities such as local environmental issues, community facilities, road safety measures or local crime initiatives. If there is sufficient fund allocation and support, Participatory Budgeting was seen as a positive step forward, helping to develop community capacity-building, bringing people together, and achieving decisions tailored to local needs.

A number of delegates also championed the introduction of Community Leadership Programmes. Dave Smith argued that elected members have a unique legitimacy and position in communities that should be utilised. Elected members as such should assume the role of frontline community leaders, proactively engaging with the community and promoting local issues to the council. However, traditional methods of engaging citizens such as ward councillor's surgeries are evidently insufficient, and new methods for engagement must be forged.

Quality training was recognised as imperative in preparing councillors sufficiently for this role. The West London Community Cohesion Pathfinder did this by commissioning the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) to train elected members through workshops. There is also an urgent need for more diverse councillors who are more representative of their community.<sup>6</sup>

One participant argued that frontline council staff need to be heavily involved in the cohesion agenda, constantly thinking of ways to spread and support views of the community. It was also suggested that a voluntary scheme for all council workers would help to build linking social capital. A delegate pointed out that it is important for a consistent message to come from councils, and that all council staff should be trained and aware of the council's vision and cohesion strategy. It must be seen to be relevant to everybody's job.

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5. For more information on effective mainstreaming see Communities and Local Government (2009a)

6. For more information on community leadership see Urban Forum (2009)

Among participants, however, there were many debates as to the extent to which local authorities have a genuine desire to devolve to communities. One delegate criticised the chief executives' logic that local authorities should raise people's capabilities to solve their own problems, and then devolve power to them when they have this capability. This was seen as a circular argument that fails to recognise that devolution gives people capability. It was furthered that councils fear letting go and allowing people to be empowered. Despite warm words coming from the chief executive, it was suggested that the culture within councils often stifles and prevents the change necessary for councils to involve citizens more. Many argued that local authorities need to be more evaluative of their role and they must be willing to transform. Do councils need a new structure or a whole new role, one participant asked. And how do local authorities adopt a more joined-up approach with their neighbouring councils?

For some, the role of local authorities was unclear. It was argued that local authorities have a conflict of interests between their role as facilitators of community, and as deliverers of services. One delegate asserted that local authorities should support other organisations to provide services and focus their attention on their role as facilitators of community. It was also countered that as a service provider, the council faces pressures of efficiency and treats citizens as customers, which can undermine community engagement aims and have a negative impact on levels of trust. Another participant argued that citizens do not want to be engaged with local authorities; the role of the council is simply service provision, and it is the third sector that is better placed to build social capital and cohesive communities.

### **Building communities of trust with the third sector**

The role of the third sector and its relationship to local authorities was discussed extensively. Community-led, bottom-up community cohesion and bridging social capital were seen as inherently linked with the sector. A case in point is Groundwork, an organisation which aims to encourage greater cohesion within neighbourhoods by helping residents of different ages, cultures and backgrounds to get to know one another and take responsibility for their surroundings in a practical way. In Sunderland this has taken the shape of community allotments. The impact of such projects is impressive; a high proportion of project participants state that they have felt a greater sense of community between people of different backgrounds (NI1) after project involvement (Groundwork 2008).

For many, it was apparent that the third sector was in a much better position than local authorities to build the capacity of communities to participate, engage and work together. It was argued that third sector organisations are more trusted by local people than local authorities and councillors. Findings by Urban Forum (2009) indicate that most people would rather turn to a community representative than to their councillor because they were more approachable and were perceived as more likely to get things done.

One delegate affirmed that another significant strength of the sector is its experience in encouraging dialogue between different groups, a quality that is central to fostering cohesion. It was argued that the third sector should lead community consultation since community organisations know the issues. However, for this to happen, many discussion groups emphasised, there needs to be more support given to community representatives.

There were many suggestions of how councils and the third sector could work together more effectively. People felt that there was a real need for better dialogue between local authorities and the sector. It was argued that too often the public sector involves representatives from community organisations only if it is on their terms. Representatives are not given the opportunity to voice the issues that they feel need addressing and it can be a stifling experience. The importance of community representatives was reiterated many times during discussions. There was a general understanding that local authorities should be continually linked up with community leaders and active members of community, rather than only making these connections when they think they need to.

Concern was also raised about ensuring that community mediators are representing their community, and not out for themselves. Self-appointed community representatives can be problematic and can end up acting as gatekeepers rather than gateways. When power is devolved, it does not always empower more people but empowers those few who are already in positions of power, who often do not act in the communities' interests. To counteract this happening, a strong diversity of involvement is key, breaking down the monopoly of those typically engaged. There is also a need for improving the accountability of community representatives, making clear the mandate of representatives to communities and to the public sector. Community workers should be continually feeding back to the community on what they are doing and why.

There was also talk about how the third sector can work more effectively together to represent communities. Parallel streams of governance need to be minimised by BME networks, for example, linking in with other networks. Instead of only working as single issue-based groups, diverse third sector groups need to work together more through forums under one umbrella, and an effort should be made to prevent larger charities from dominating these forums.

Delegates recognised that there is great deal to be learnt from third sector organisations, and they have done some fantastic things in the field. For example, one participant spoke about how a grassroots community engagement project and myth-busting in Sunderland have counteracted past trends, and resulted in asylum seekers receiving a positive welcome by local communities. And organisations such as the East End Community Development Alliance have facilitated engagement, cohesion and community capacity-building by employing local residents as Linkworkers and involving local people on its governing bodies.

The Government has recognised the importance of building the third sector to become the voice of under-represented groups, but many delegates argued that this requires sustained long-term funding and training in order to build capacity.

### **Anticipating tensions, responding effectively**

Delegates were also asked to think about how we can anticipate tensions early enough to prevent problems arising within our communities. People need to feel safe in their community, and problems of anti-social behaviour and crime put stresses on community spirit. Neighbourhood management and wardens' work, and the increased presence and interaction of police in communities, were seen as positive steps. However, there was concern about neighbourhood management pilots and New Deal for Communities coming to an end.

The role of community organisations and informal local networks were identified as key in sensing tension in communities. Community organisations were seen as plugged in at the frontline, knowing the hotspots and often being the first to pick up on tensions. Schools also need to be sensitive to tensions among young people. Local councillors and community representatives were regarded as having an important role to play in gathering intelligence, monitoring and reporting change in tensions, and acting as advocates and mediators. However, once these tensions have been picked up, it is imperative that they are well communicated through a local multi-agency network.

All agreed that a strong partnership approach is required to both monitor and respond to tensions, and that quality communication among partners is crucial. One delegate explained how a multi-agency tension-monitoring group could be set up, led by officers from the local authority or police force. Partners should include statutory agencies including the local police, housing, the fire service, community safety, education and health institutions, probation/youth offending team, community workers, neighbourhood wardens and police community support officers, National Asylum Support Service, and representatives from community, voluntary and faith sectors.

It was also recommended by Shahid Malik that the local press and media should be partnered and that councils should have the ability to engage with the press, keep them on side, and prevent sensationalist reporting which may further ignite tensions. The CLG (2008b) also advises that councils make connections with their regional Government Office Cohesion Lead, which acts as a hub for regional information sharing of issues such as rising community tensions, helping to facilitate cross-boundary responses between local authorities.

Strong networks were seen as vital for enabling people to raise issues and nip problems in the bud, but it was also cited that they are resource and capacity-intensive. Effective networks require trust and dialogue and strong community relations because local people need to be willing to put information forward. The Association of Chief Police Officers' National Community Tension Team is an important tension-monitoring programme which works on a national level.

Tension monitoring in Newcastle works through the multi-agency forum Agencies against Racist Crime and Harassment (ARCH). Reported racist incidents are collected from 93 reporting centres across the city, across 26 different agencies. These centres include Newcastle City Council Customer Service Centres, all schools in Newcastle, the university, the North East Refugee Service (NERS), Mesmac (the gay and bisexual men's community support service) and many more. When a resident calls they can choose what happens to their information and which organisation helps them, with access to organisations ranging from Your Homes Newcastle to the police, Victim Support and the Racial Harassment Prevention Team. ARCH is in the process of implementing a software package which will analyse data and identify links between incidents, hotspot areas and trends.

However, the North East still faces a major problem in under-reporting of incidents. One delegate who works in this area said that in some neighbourhoods there is zero per cent reporting of anti-social behaviour. It is very important to get local communities on board, improve communication channels and raise awareness of where and how to report tensions if this is going to change.

Local authorities are advised by the CLG (2008b) to form a local cohesion contingency plan which sets out the role, responsibilities and processes to be activated should local community tensions reach a critical level. The plan should outline the circumstances under which it will be implemented, such as after an extreme racial or religious attack in the area. It should also outline the interventions that will be made, including reassurance and information to vulnerable/affected communities, outreach to local community/faith groups, the Chief Executive meeting with community/faith leaders and making public messages of solidarity, the deployment of mediation resources, and positive youth engagement to prevent greater disturbances.

## Final reflections

Much was discussed over the course of the *Building Communities of Trust* conference. A great deal of valuable information was shared, and many challenges were set. Throughout the conference, talk of spreading and celebrating good practice resounded. The Chair, Canon Stephen Taylor, closed the session on this note, calling everyone to go and tell good news stories and share the good examples, of which there are many. A simple and accessible database was called for, which logs approaches, models and socially innovative ideas which have worked well, as well as honest accounts of what was difficult. And it was asked what we might be able to learn from other countries as well as other parts of the UK. For example, the Canadian city of Toronto was highlighted as a place with high diversity, low crime rates, quality urban planning and high levels of cohesion. As one delegate pointed out, perhaps we also have to find examples of what we are looking to achieve.

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## **Organisations that attended the conference**

ANEC

Assist Social Capital – Scotland

Black and Ethnic Minority Community Organisation Network

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council

Blackburn with Darwen CVS

Centrepoint

Cleveland Police

Climate Change Councils

Compact for Race Equality in South Tyneside

Department for Communities and Local Government

Du Service Design

Durham County Council

Durham University

East End Community Development Alliance

Equality and Human Rights Commission

Gateshead City Council

Gentoo Group

Government Office North East

Groundwork North East

Hartlepool Safer Partnership

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Ipsos Mori

Manchester Metropolitan University

The National Trust

Newcastle City Council

Newcastle Healthy City

North East Refugee Service

North Tyneside Council

Northumberland and Tyne and Wear Council  
Northumberland County Council  
Northumbria Police  
Northumbria University  
Regional Community Cohesion Network  
Regional Refugee Forum North East  
Richard Simpson Associates  
SAFC Foundation  
SCARPA, The Children's Society  
South Tyneside PCT  
Sunderland African Association and Sunderland Integration Project  
Sunderland Area Command Police  
Sunderland BME Network  
Sunderland City Council  
Sunderland CVS  
Sunderland Quakers  
Sustaine  
Tees Valley Regeneration  
Thornhill School, Sunderland  
Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums  
VODA  
Wigan Council