

What is Community Cohesion?



The Charnwood Mela 2008: A local example of Community Cohesion.¹

The standard definition of community cohesion was first laid down in 2002 and agreed upon by a number of bodies, including the Home Office. It stated that:

“A cohesive community is one where:

- *there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities*
- *the diversity of people’s different backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and positively valued*
- *those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities*
- *strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds and circumstances in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods²*

However, following the report of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (‘Our Shared Future’), published on 14th June 2007, the Government has adopted a new definition of community cohesion, as follows:

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

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

- *People from different backgrounds having similar life opportunities.*
- *People knowing their rights and responsibilities.*
- *People trusting one another and trusting local institutions to act fairly.*

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² <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=5770040>

And three key ways of living together:

- *A shared future vision and sense of belonging.*
- *A focus on what new and existing communities have in common, alongside a recognition of the value of diversity.*
- *Strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds.*³

Alongside the definitions, commonly there are further explanatory comments that are also penned as a guide towards understanding, and in an attempt to further explain and rationalise what is meant by community cohesion.

For example:

- In defining a 'cohesive community' it is therefore important to understand as thoroughly as possible the circumstances, reasons and processes by which some communities may not be deemed to be cohesive, and may, by contrast, be characterised by division and separation, suspicion, inequality, discrimination and perhaps even by hostility and violence or the threat of violence.
- There is therefore a need to understand communities in a processual way. Their history, their development and their ongoing dynamics. This involves consideration of demographic changes particularly as they relate to immigration and social mobility.
- In addition, there is also a need to examine and understand causal factors to community tensions and conflicts, how they have been perceived and addressed by communities and organisations alike, and how lessons from this can be learned for the future.
- The relationship between communities and various agencies (statutory, voluntary, business, criminal justice) is also key to understanding what has been done in relation to community development and cohesion in the past, what has worked and what hasn't and how lessons can be learnt for the future.
- There are likely to be local variations and perhaps considerable variety and difference. There is a need therefore for local solutions within a broad framework and understanding of community cohesion.
- Though predominant, community cohesion is not necessarily just about ethnicity and faith. Other considerations – age, social class, rural/urban issues – may have an impact, perhaps temporarily, on the cohesiveness and relative harmony of a particular location or community.
- Community cohesion is often seen in consensual terms in so much that agreement on core values and principles is considered to be a necessity for sustainable community harmony and togetherness. An important phrase is "Respecting differences, but developing a shared sense of belonging and purpose."⁴
- Related to this is the issue of national and local identities, particularly how these in themselves or key aspects of them can aid shared belongings and therefore enhance community cohesion. To do this will necessitate an exploration of more inclusive forms of identity and belonging.

³ From 'Commission on Integration and Cohesion: The Government Response' (12/02/2008)

⁴ <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=5770040>

Phil Woolas (at the time of writing, Minister of State for Borders and Immigration and Minister of State for the Treasury, but previously Minister for local government) has identified eight 'legs' of community cohesion:

1. Interfaith Forums
2. Private Sector in the form of Chambers of Commerce
3. Race Equality Councils
4. Local Authorities with a community cohesion focus and intelligent policing operation
5. A strong, active, voluntary sector with good organisation
6. Youth participation through councils or forums
7. Health political parties engaging communities
8. Strong and inspiring political leadership⁵

However, what does all this actually mean? Can we explain community cohesion in ways that are understandable, clear and immediately open to practical measures?

The term 'integration' is controversial as it has implications for some of a dominant culture into which people must adjust and conform. Indeed, some people do not like the term 'community cohesion' because of the political connotations that it is argued come with it. Can we therefore take them out and agree on some key principles and methods of action (some features, in effect) that can help deliver 'community cohesion' and the positive intentions behind use of the term 'integration' without perhaps even acknowledging or referring to them as terms?



Muslim Mosque (Masjid Umar) and Christian Church (St Philip's) together in Leicester.⁶

⁵ <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=5770040>

⁶ Photo copyright © Julian Harrison 2008

Features of Community Cohesion

We think that community cohesion includes the following fundamental features:

- Encouraging an increased personal and collective knowledge of people around us, particularly people from different cultures, people of different ethnicities and faiths, people from different countries, people who are or appear to be different from ourselves.
- From this, nurturing a greater knowledge and interest in what makes people different. This may involve developing people's knowledge of different faiths and disabilities, for example.
- Acknowledging and accepting difference are pre-requisites towards more positive feelings towards difference – feelings of respect, value, honour, enjoyment and celebration. A more cohesive community or society would involve greater amounts of the latter.
- We also need to understand false and misleading information and how various myths and stereotypes have helped to create suspicion and division.
- Developing a greater knowledge of people around us will also lead to an appreciation and an understanding of what we share and what we have in common. As a consequence, we can work towards an agreement on shared values and principles, shared belonging, shared ideals and shared desires and wishes.
- Increasing human interaction and people's circles of acquaintances will hopefully lead to new friendships and a desire to share each others living experiences.
- Education is important, but should not be focussed solely on children and young people. Educational processes need to recognise that people are also likely to receive conflicting messages from those inherent in any 'community cohesion' learning process. Education therefore needs to give people the ability to think through these tensions and discrepancies for themselves.
- Community cohesion should not be dictatorial. Rather, it should be seen as giving people the tools and knowledge to enable them to understand, value and enjoy their communities in a collective as well as individual manner.
- It would nevertheless be unrealistic to assume that increased knowledge inevitably will lead to harmony, peaceful co-existence and friendship. An agreed process of conflict resolution will be necessary whereby tensions and grievances can be discussed and hopefully resolved through an accepted process, involving not only all aggrieved parties, but other parts of the community.
- Indeed, community cohesion understanding, awareness, principles and practicalities need to involve the community at large to the extent that they become those features of the community itself, not elements imposed on the community (either in part or as a whole).
- A more cohesive and harmonistic society would benefit considerably from less inequality and greater social justice. Indeed, they could be seen as mutually reinforcing. However, though economic redistribution of wealth at a societal level is a task for a wide variety of organisations and bodies, we should not depend solely on such developments in moving towards greater community cohesion. There are things that we all can do to achieve this.
- The development of interculturalism in our communities, rather than multiculturalism which is an already accepted fact. Interculturalism encourages us to share our cultural norms and habits with others from 'outside' traditional cultural boundaries, so that ultimately those boundaries do not become fixed and may even disappear.

- Ultimately, a cohesive community and society is one in which divisions that once existed become obsolete and in which patterns of segregated and exclusive behaviour become transformed so that eventually a more inclusive way of life is taken rather for granted, perhaps even as second nature.
- Community cohesion involves knowing the community as a whole and all its various parts more thoroughly, widely and deeply. As comprehensive an understanding as possible of the geographical community is a necessary pre-requisite for assessing both the past, the current state and nature of community cohesion, and future action.
- Consideration needs to be given to the possible unintended consequences of actions as well as their intended nature and direction.



Leicester's Caribbean Carnival is an established part of the local festival calendar.⁷

⁷ Photo copyright © Julian Harrison 2008

Things to Think About

- a) Some people think of themselves as 'monocultural', and indeed take pride in this conception. But in everyday life, whether we think of it or not, we have and experience things that are essentially multicultural and international. People who think of themselves in this narrow way might ask themselves various questions. What car do I drive? What food do I eat? What music do I like? What books do I read? What sports and sportspeople do I enjoy watching? What films have I seen recently? It would be extremely unlikely that the answers to these and other similar questions would be monocultural in nature!
- b) English and other languages that we speak are related in many ways to others. Think also of various words in common use in English e.g. *entrepreneur*, *deja vu*, *robot*, *status quo*, *delicatessen*, that are, in actual fact, borrowed from other languages.
- c) Many of us enjoy going abroad for our holidays. When we are there, we – to varying degrees – have new experiences of different cultures and countries, whether that be visiting key historical locations or important venues in the host culture, or simply trying new foods. We presumably see this as an integral part of the holiday experience. In other words, as enjoyment. But we can do similar things at home in the UK as part of our everyday lives.
- d) Immersing ourselves in new experiences, lifestyles and cultural practices are things that make life enjoyable and worthwhile.
- e) Learning and understanding is refreshing and liberating.
- f) When someone is inviting people that they know very little about either to their home or to another venue for a special occasion such as a wedding, that person makes every attempt to find out about their guests – what they eat and don't/can't eat, what other refreshments to provide, what entertainment they may like – and also thinks about things such as conversation, introductions, sensitive topics etc. Why do they do this? To enable people to feel at home. To feel comfortable, at ease, safe and reassured that they can have an enjoyable time. Is this not a lesson in community cohesion?
- g) Community cohesion can involve strong communities, but it is not stronger communities in themselves. Think of a cake, and think of all the ingredients as representing one community, as one part of an overall geographical community. Individually, you may obtain the best and most high quality ingredient available (the best sugar, the best flour etc). Through analogy, you may have individually strong communities. However, the secret of a successful cake is not the individual parts. It's what you do with them collectively and how they interact and complement each other that contributes to a magnificent creation. It is hoped the analogy is self-explanatory.
- h) Imagine yourself suddenly being dropped into a strange environment, surrounded by people talking a different language with their own cultural practices, societal laws, rules and regulations and their own unique customs. What and how would you feel? What would you do? Where would you go? What would be your first step? Also ask yourself what you would need, what you would most appreciate, what would be a godsend? The possible answer to the latter questions maybe a simple one. Someone to take an interest, to be welcoming, to offer to help, to do things for you to help you get accustomed to your new surroundings. Simple, everyday, human interaction can make a massive difference.

Credits and Sources of Further Information

Commission on Integration & Cohesion, *Our Shared Future*, 2007

(<http://www.communities.gov.uk/archived/general-content/communities/commissionintegration/>)

Improvement and Development Agency for local government, IDEA

(<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=1>)



Interfaith Football: Teams from Leicester and Gothenburg in Sweden compete at Spinney Hill Park (June 2009)⁸



⁸ Photos copyright © Julian Harrison 2009