

We need to talk about.....



Can discussing
controversial issues
strengthen
community
relations?

Executive Summary

Talk for a Change

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Our experience of working in 65 Local Authorities on good relations, integration and community cohesion¹ indicates that in every area there are controversial issues that people find it difficult to talk about. In some areas these conversations are handled well, in others they are poorly handled or avoided leaving residents frustrated, and creating the conditions for community tensions to escalate.

With a small grant from Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust we have examined the state of good community relations work in the UK, with particular reference to the following questions:

- Who is having these difficult conversations, whether intentionally or not?
- How do these conversations relate to strengthening good relations between different groups and communities?
- What kinds of talking work best and when is it best not to talk?
- How can we measure the impact of talking or not talking?
- What is needed to strengthen our skills to have these difficult conversations in a way that allows us to disagree with each other but doesn't harm community relations?

This executive summary presents our key findings. The full report discusses those findings in detail. Our methodology included a literature review, 34 interviews with a range of organisations involved in this work, two focus groups, and many informal conversations at events and conferences addressing community relations issues.

We have also drawn on our experience over the past ten years working as specialist cohesion advisors in a wide range of very different local areas.

Introduction

In this section we outline our research – our approach, and methodology, and our key questions.

¹ From 2001 - 2010

Chapter 1: Setting the context

This chapter outlines the context for community relations work in England, with a brief summary of the history of good relations work, particularly over the last ten years. It also discusses the political and economic pressures currently impacting on community relations.

Chapter 2: What are the controversial issues and why are they difficult to talk about?

Key Findings:

- The following are identified as reasons for controversial issues not being tackled: fear that talking might make things worse; not having the skills and confidence to talk, in particular dealing with strong feelings; not having the time or resource to deal with issues properly; a lack of support from community leaders.
- There are a number of narratives which are problematic for good community relations. Some of these narratives are directly divisive, others more subtly erode individual and community resilience and hope. Our research identified the following narrative themes: unfairness and entitlement, prejudice, belonging and identity, distrust and powerlessness and resentment.
- Local, national and international triggers can cause an escalation in tensions locally, where one or more of these problematic narratives are present.
- Different narratives predominate in different localities dependant on local socio-economic, demographic, and geographical factors. Therefore what is a controversial topic in one local area may not be in another.
- Structural inequality and the impact of the current economic crisis are key drivers of these narratives². The pressure on individuals and communities is likely to intensify as the recession deepens, and the specialist skills of community relations workers may become increasingly relevant.

Chapter 3: Who is having the difficult conversations, intentionally or not?

Key Findings:

- There are a range of organisations and agencies addressing these narratives, and they fall into two broad categories.

² Garner, S. White working class neighbourhood: Common themes and policy suggestions 2011 Joseph Rowntree Foundation <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/white-working-class-neighbourhoods>

- The first we have called specialist organisations. Their specific purpose is to work with communities to build better community relations, whether they do this through bonding work – work within a particular identity group; or through bridging work – work which brings different identity groups together.
- The second we have called generalists – this is a much wider group of individuals, organisations and agencies who are delivering services in local areas, or undertaking social action. In this group are public service agencies, charities and voluntary organisations. Community relations work is not their main area of concern, but their work will impact on community relations in both positive and negative ways. Some generalists understand their local area well, and have developed skills for facilitating controversial issues, and taking community relations concerns into account in their plans and projects. There are also examples where controversial issues are ignored, avoided or poorly handled.
- There are different models of specialist organisations. These include those which are locally rooted, within a particular local area; those which operate on a project by project basis across England; and local networks which serve a local area such as a whole town or a city. There are advantages and disadvantages to each. Whilst it is clear that local solutions and approaches are not directly transferable to other areas, there is much that could be learnt from sharing models across regions and nationally.
- All of the specialists we spoke to and some of the generalists, share belief in the power of dialogue, the importance of building community voice and agency, and the benefits of increasing understanding between communities and groups of different backgrounds. Although there are subtle differences in how they define and describe their work they have broadly similar approaches, methodologies, and values, and would benefit from collaboration and the development of a collective voice for good relations work.

Chapter 4: Can talking about controversial issues improve community relations?

Key Findings:

- There is anecdotal evidence from our interviews, our focus groups and our own experience that talking about controversial issues can strengthen community relations. There is research that underpins this approach, however there is, to date, little actual evidence of the impact of dialogue around controversial issues and its benefit on community relations.
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- Research into contact theory has consistently demonstrated that intergroup contact can, in certain circumstances, reduce anxiety and hostility between different groups, and increase empathy and understanding, with friendships between people from different groups being a particularly powerful change factor³.
- Recent research has also demonstrated that intergroup contact can have further benefits, such as reducing prejudice in family, friends and peers of those involved; and reducing prejudice towards other groups, for those involved⁴.
- There are benefits to informal contact, such as conversations between neighbours, or parents at the school gates, these interactions, though not controversial, can help form the social glue that binds communities together⁵.
- The literature suggests that there are benefits to being ‘pro-disagreement’ and ‘pro-conversation’, and that these outweigh the risks of dialogue⁶.
- Poor past experiences of being involved in dialogue can influence people’s engagement. In particular where dialogue has been used poorly, or cynically, for example, to demonstrate that communities have been engaged.
- Local community leaders are highly influential in whether or not controversial issues are tackled well.
- Poorly managed intergroup contact and dialogue can be harmful. The conditions of dialogue, including the skill of facilitators, and what happens post-dialogue are crucial in determining success.

Chapter 5: How to address controversial issues – learning to sit in the fire

Key Findings:

- Practitioners, participants and academics report that overall the benefits of dialogue outweigh the dangers, provided that issues are surfaced in a timely and skilful way. In particular dialogue that is skilfully facilitated can build trust between communities, and between communities and local providers and institutions.
- There is a set of specific skills and processes for facilitating dialogue and building community relations. These skills and processes can be learnt, and there are examples of

³ M. Hewstone, 2009 . Living apart, Living together? The Role of Intergroup Contact in Social Integration. Proceedings of the British Academy, 2009, 162, 243-300.

⁴ K Schmid, M Hewstone, B Kuppe, A Zick, U Wagner, Secondary Transfer effects of intergroup contact: a cross national comparison in Europe. Social Psychology Quarterly 2012/75:28

⁵ H. Beider (2011) Community cohesion: the views of white working-class communities, neighbourhood, cohesion and change. JRF. p8 <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/working-class-views-neighbourhood>

⁶ P.T. Neisser (2006) Political Polarization as disagreement failure. Journal of Public Deliberation, 2.(1) 2006

local areas who have built their capacity and resource for addressing controversial issues, and increasing individual and community voice and agency.

- Knowing and understanding your local area is vital. There are a range of ways of staying informed. Hate crime and tension monitoring information, local intelligence, and local community activists all play a part.
- Engaging people in a process of change, using tools to help analysis, being clear about purpose, whilst accepting that the purpose may evolve as the process does, are all crucial in terms of preparing for dialogue.
- Preparation of participants should include a focus on listening, and the likelihood of disagreement and strong feelings being expressed. Facilitators need to consider their role, the appropriateness of challenging controversial views, and what happens afterwards
- A neutral location for dialogue is important, where individuals feel comfortable and safe
- The importance of timing – how to assess when the situation is ripe for talking.
- Participants need to feel that they are in safe hands, so facilitators need to be skilled and competent, in particular in creating a safe space for controversial issues to be expressed and explored, in working with deeply held feelings and opinions, and in supporting participants to keep talking even though it is difficult.
- There are a range of activities, groupwork exercises, questioning techniques used by practitioners to help air the controversial issues and to aid productive exploration and expression.

Chapter 6: Key challenges for good relations work

Key Findings:

- Our research highlights four main challenges facing good relations work at present:
- The promotion of divisive narratives and in particular the role of the media in this process. An emerging challenge for good relations practitioners is how to engage in online dialogue and debate around controversial issues. It is much easier to express prejudice and hatred from behind the safety of the keyboard.
- Research participants told us about a pervading sense of hopelessness in many communities and its consequent impact on community relations. This is echoed by our own experience of working in diverse communities across England, and more recently by the final report of the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel⁷ whose description of the lack of hope experienced by many young people in our most deprived areas makes

⁷ Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2012) After the Riots.

chilling reading. Although there are many stories of individuals who are energetic and passionate in the service of their communities the challenge of building resilient, hopeful communities will become increasingly urgent as the impact of the economic situation continues to unfold.

- Measuring the impact of good relations work is problematic for a number of reasons:
 - change can be gradual and may be cumulative over time
 - there is a need for both individual and community level indicators and approaches
 - it is hard to disaggregate the factors that make a difference
 - it is often about measuring intangibles
 - time and resource issues for small organisations,

There are organisations and agencies who have made good efforts to address some of these challenges and further progress needs to be made.

- Many of the specialist organisations we spoke to are under threat and facing reductions to their budgets. In addition public sector agencies are also reducing services and making cuts. We would not wish to argue a special case for community relations work when so many services are being reduced. However, there is a real concern that some of the specialist knowledge, expertise and skills that have been developed over the last ten years in particular may get lost. This at a time when pressure on individuals and communities is at its highest for decades, with the consequent risk of community tension and conflict.

Chapter 7: Looking Forward

We explore potential areas for development including:

- The development of a national voice for good relations work
- Improving the way we measure impact
- Linking practice to research more closely
- Dissemination of skills and expertise

We conclude with a discussion about building hope and resilience.
