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# Untold Stories of Good Relations

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## BUILDING A COALITION OF VOICE AND INFLUENCE



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Introduction

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At the beginning of 2013 Talk for A Change and International Alert received funding from Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and Oxfam to build a coalition of voice and influence for good relations work, contributing to the creation of more resilient, cohesive and peaceful communities.

Local host organisations ran 11 local and sub-regional networking and fact-finding events around England, which asked the following questions:

- What is the work that you do that contributes to good relations?
- What challenges / issues are you currently facing?
- What methodologies and approaches do you use?
- How do you measure whether or not your work makes a difference to local good relations?
- What kind of support is required? / What might a national network / forum provide for you?

#### **346 PEOPLE** ATTENDED THESE EVENTS

mostly from the community, voluntary and public sectors

#### **235 ORGANISATIONS** WERE REPRESENTED

primarily from community and voluntary sector organisations, youth justice, police and local authorities

Full reports on each event – including local case studies – are available at [www.talkforachange.co.uk](http://www.talkforachange.co.uk)

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## Findings

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### WHAT IS GOOD RELATIONS WORK?

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Participants told many inspiring and positive stories about local projects, activities and initiatives that provided opportunities for people to share in common endeavours and strengthen relationships across difference. They also provided examples of where difficult community conversations had been facilitated with great success and benefit to local areas.

The work which organisations did fell into a number of categories, with some organisations working across several of them. Much of the delivery relates to strengthening relationships across intersections of ethnicity, race and faith, although divides of age, gender, geography, class and wealth also featured. The broad categories identified were:

- 1 Work that strengthens the voice, agency and engagement of marginalised or vulnerable groups
- 2 Work that seeks to build greater understanding of different identity and interest groups and develops skills for positive interaction
- 3 Work that brings people together for a common purpose, or in a common place
- 4 Work that directly tackles tensions between different groups and communities through mediation, dialogue, etc.
- 5 Capacity building work
- 6 Campaigning work, political, rights based work, actively challenging media narratives, and local and national policy

All of these aspects of good relations work are based on a range of ideas around what strengthens community spirit and resilience. In activities 1-3 the 'good relations' element is more implicit in generalist activities, sharing experiences, learning skills or joint ventures where trust and community spirit are strengthened. In activities 4 and 5 practitioners employ more specialist skills to address conflicts and tensions directly but in a way that seeks to build, maintain or strengthen underlying relationships through dialogue.

Many organisations stressed the need to be responsive, flexible and open to building long-term relationships based on trust. Specific approaches included:

- Use of the **arts** and **sport** to develop individual voice and agency, to strengthen a sense of place, and to bring people together from different backgrounds together
- **Advocacy** and **signposting** people towards essential services, as well as teaching **practical skills** to help all people, including new arrivals, meet their basic needs
- **Community development** and **organising** approaches, working alongside communities and groups to understand their issues and co-produce solutions
- The use of **dialogue skills** and **interventions** to facilitate difficult conversations, support neighbour and community mediation, and develop community conversations

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### CURRENT FACTORS INFLUENCING GOOD RELATIONS ACROSS ENGLAND

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**Divisive narratives – local and national stories of 'us' and 'them'** Such narratives, often promoted through community networks and local and national media, are highly divisive. Since this project began in early 2013 dominant divisive narratives around fairness, entitlement, immigration and belonging have all intensified. There is anxiety, backed by anecdotal evidence, that these are impacting on local community relations with individuals and groups becoming targeted.

**Changes to the benefit system and cuts to local services** Many organisations were dealing directly with people who were feeling the effects of the changes to the welfare and benefits system most acutely. There were concerns about how people on benefits, both unemployed and the working poor, are portrayed by the media and politicians, seeing this as just one example of government scapegoating certain groups and so legitimizing local prejudice.

**Segregated communities** While a recent JRF report<sup>1</sup> reported that overall housing segregation is declining, racial and ethnic segregation is still seen as an issue in a number of communities. Participants noted that there are few public places in segregated communities where cross-community interaction could take place, fostering a tendency to ‘other’ people you don’t know.

**Management of immigration** Two aspects of this emerged: common to all events was the challenge of managing perceptions of immigration; whilst in a few areas there was concern about how inward migration is actually managed and supported and the impact on local services and resources.

**Prominent local voices** Local community leaders and local media were both thought to be very influential on good relations, for good and bad. Participants highlighted how strong local community relations can be undermined very quickly by a single incident, sometimes at a national level.

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## CHALLENGES TO GOOD RELATIONS WORK

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**Work on good relations is complex and takes time and resource** It requires time and resource to tease out issues, and to understand the complex dynamics at work underlying community tensions. Funding streams, when they are there, are often short-term and on a project-by-project basis, which does not always allow for conversations and relationships to develop over time.

**Cuts** Many of the organisations who are working directly with vulnerable groups and communities felt themselves to be under threat. Since this study began, two of the local host organisations who ran events as part of this project have closed.

**Measuring impact** Long-term under-the-radar work in communities poses particular challenges with regard to impact measurement. There was wide variation among organisations of both the resources available to measure impact and in understanding how to go about it. Most measured the impact of their delivery for individual service users but struggled to demonstrate impact of a specific intervention in complex community situations or on the overall ‘temperature’ of community relations.

**Practitioner skills and confidence** Many participants talked about feeling unsure or uncertain what to do when difficult or controversial issues arose in their work and their neighbourhoods. This may be when they are directly involved themselves, or when watching others deal with situations with little understanding or skill. As a result, they are less likely to talk with those with prejudiced or extremist views.

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## SUPPORT REQUIRED

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**Skills development** People particularly want to develop their skills in facilitation, dialogue, conflict resolution, how to hold productive community conversations, and how to engage with particular groups and communities.

**Opportunities to network and share practice** People welcomed the chance to connect with others locally, both established colleagues and new. They wanted more opportunities to link in order to develop their skills and understanding of local issues; connect with, and learn from others, and extend their local knowledge about other projects and services.

**Peer-to-peer support** There was interest in creating regional and national peer support structures that could affirm, and at times challenge practitioners, providing them with ‘critical friends’ and sounding boards in the face of challenges.

**Practice/theory links** There is potential for much stronger contact between practitioners and local academics, bringing depth and strength to the outputs of both. Possible collaborations include local research and action research projects to collect baseline information; working on long-term evaluations; and underpinning practice with models drawn from a range of disciplines.

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1. [http://www.ethnicity.ac.uk/census/885\\_CCSR\\_Neighbourhood\\_Bulletin\\_v7.pdf](http://www.ethnicity.ac.uk/census/885_CCSR_Neighbourhood_Bulletin_v7.pdf)

**Impact measurement** Many people said they would welcome guidance and would like access to easy-to-use accessible tools with clear indicators to help develop a greater understanding of the effects their work is having at a neighbourhood level.

**Raising the profile of the work** Many were concerned to address divisive material online while others wanted help to work with the media in developing more nuanced stories both locally and nationally. The voices of grassroots organisations and the communities and groups they work with are not well represented in national and local media.

**Influencing local and national policy** Participants want their practice and lived experience working on the ground to influence policy more directly both at a local and national level.

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## Conclusions

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The terminology ‘good relations’ is a term that many people can relate to as describing their work towards cohesive, resilient, and peaceful communities. Inevitably, this small project did not reach all areas of England or all organisations and practitioners strengthening community relations and resilience, but would hope to do so in the future as plans for an alliance develop. In particular, it would be useful to draw on the experience of the few remaining areas in England with good local and sub-regional networks in place, as they offer a strong model of supportive work that could benefit others.

The multiplicity and range of approaches is itself a strength. From work that supports the integration of new, vulnerable and marginalised groups to that which brings diverse groups together to celebrate and strengthen common bonds and trust, to that which calms community tensions and fosters intergroup contact and dialogue, to that which directly addresses extremism and radicalisation within specific groups. Together they form a spectrum of interventions from preventative work to direct intervention work that supports cohesive, resilient and peaceful communities.

Much of this work is quiet and close to the ground, as such it provides essential local community structure, relying on trust and long-term relationships established over years to act as ‘social glue’. It is more likely to be noticed by its absence than its presence – and as a result is under-recognised, under-resourced and badly in need of a raise in profile.

This report suggests that there is a place for an alliance and light-touch network, specifically focused on good relations and which can amplify the voices of the many local organisations and practitioners working alongside groups and communities. Promoting stories of good practice, skill development and peer to peer support would foster encouragement and hope, and would complement the range of national organisations also working on good relations and resilient, cohesive communities.

There is an urgent need to tell the positive stories of good relations work at a local level, initiated and facilitated by local organisations, agencies and committed volunteers. These stories rarely come to public attention but reflect more complex nuanced narratives around hot topics such as welfare, immigration and integration. They are stories about people coming together out of curiosity, interest, need and shared concerns to forge common bonds, local alliances and even friendships, and of diverse groups being encouraged to deal with their differences and talk about the things that matter to them in a way that allows for disagreement without harming underlying social bonds.

These are important stories, and need to be told.