

Neighbourhood, community and housing in Bradford: Building understanding between new and settled groups

Findings
Informing change

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This study evaluates the use of community-based forums to engage new and settled populations and explores their potential to build shared understanding between groups with different backgrounds. The project brought together new migrants from Eastern Europe and the Philippines with settled white, Asian and African-Caribbean residents in three areas of Bradford to discuss their views on local housing, neighbourhood and community issues.

The research

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Key points

- Participants valued the opportunity for discussion and felt it was a worthwhile experience. Women in particular wanted more forums and contact with other groups.
- Asian participants in Bradford's diverse inner-city areas felt the forums helped them learn more about new Eastern European migrants settling in their neighbourhood.
- Young men reacted positively to a forum that used photography as a means of engagement.
- Community forums can provide opportunities for contact and communication between new and settled residents, help challenge misunderstandings and negative stereotypes and identify areas of commonality.
- Forums can help to build shared understanding of problems affecting the local community, such as anti-social behaviour, but longer-term work may be needed to develop agreement on causes and solutions.
- Participants recognised the limits of what could be achieved through a single encounter, especially given religious and cultural differences, powerful racial stereotypes, and ongoing racist behaviour in the neighbourhood. It may be unrealistic to expect groups from diverse backgrounds, with differing aspirations and needs, to agree and collaborate fully on local issues.
- Challenges relate to recruiting new migrants, resources, language barriers, building trust and the potential to reinforce divergent views. Trusted individuals from local communities can play an invaluable role in enabling recruitment and facilitating positive exchanges.

Introduction

Migration has brought a 'super-diversity' of migrants to settle in many of Britain's cities, and some rural areas, and is likely to act as a driver of change at the neighbourhood scale for some time to come.

The arrival of migrants is commonly understood to bring tensions in community relations, competition for resources such as housing, and challenges for service delivery. Governments, however, have been slow to assist statutory agencies and local communities to manage these challenges. The Coalition Government's focus on the 'Big Society' suggests that local people should come together to solve neighbourhood problems. This is founded upon an assumption that residents can reach agreement about local problems, needs and solutions, build a shared vision for their neighbourhood and work together for the common good.

This study evaluated the use of community-based forums to engage new and settled populations in Bradford and explored their potential to build shared understanding between groups with different social and cultural heritages. First, poster forums were used to consult with a wide range of residents and identify local concerns, commonalities and tensions. Then, four interactive discussion forums were convened to bring together new and settled groups in three localities; two diverse, mixed-tenure inner-city areas (West Bowling and Manningham/Girlington), where established white, African-Caribbean and Asian residents were brought together with Slovakian and Czech new migrants; and one new zone of ethnic diversity (Allerton/Lower Grange), where established white social tenants participated in a forum with more recent Filipino migrants. Discussions focussed on everyday life, shared concerns and any divergent views on local housing, neighbourhood and community issues.

Community consultation through poster forums

Consultation with residents was facilitated by the use of a mobile poster forum that was taken to a range of community venues. The centre piece was a poster that posed questions on attitudes to housing and neighbourhood in the context of 'changing communities'. The consultation revealed that:

- Poster forums can be an effective means of community consultation. The method was quick, efficient (capturing residents visiting community centres for other purposes), took place in familiar

territory and engaged a wide range of people.

- Many settled residents in the inner areas perceived new migration to be a defining feature of neighbourhood change, bringing benefits and challenges for community relations.
- Drugs, crime, anti-social behaviour, safety and neighbourliness were of mutual concern across new and settled groups.
- Some settled groups living in inner Bradford attributed neighbourhood decline and a rise in anti-social behaviour (especially by young men) to the negative impact of new migration.
- Community tension, which sometimes spilled over into overt conflict between young Asian and Slovakian/Czech men, was an issue of general concern. Recent Eastern European migrant men and women recounted experiences of harassment.

The strength of concern about community relations, safety, anti-social behaviour and neighbourliness was striking across all groups in the three areas. In raising these issues, people living with the everyday challenges of migration set the agenda for discussion in the interactive forums.

Interactive forum design

The forums were designed to provide a convivial, safe space where people could express their opinions and hear others' views on local issues. A flexible, inclusive approach took account of cultural sensitivities (e.g. some Muslim women preferred to attend a women-only forum), language differences and motivations to participate.

Three discussion forums brought together newcomers and settled people in a one-off event. They were attended by 14–23 people and two were just for women. The fourth forum engaged young Asian and Eastern European men (18–25 years), a traditionally 'hard to reach' group, in a photographic project where participants captured their views and experiences through visual images.

The forums were evaluated through entry and exit questionnaires, observations during the forums, and follow-up in-depth interviews with a sample of 19 of the 63 participants. Key findings indicated:

- *a positive experience* – most participants valued the opportunity for discussion and felt it was worthwhile. They liked interacting in small groups and agreed that the forums provided a safe and friendly space that facilitated engagement with, and learning about, other groups. Women in particular wanted more forums and contact with other groups;
- *opportunities to voice an opinion* – most people agreed that they had a chance to have their say,

though with differing levels of confidence. Young men particularly valued the opportunity to express their opinions, and some of the younger Muslim Asian women were appreciative of being consulted;

- *entry and exit questionnaires proved useful instruments* – these were simple to administer and proved useful for monitoring changes in opinions;
- *young men enjoyed communicating through photographs* – reactions to the photography project from the Eastern European and Asian young men were overwhelmingly positive. Communicating with members of other groups was a new experience and the use of photos was regarded as a good ice breaker.

The strengths of the design appear to lie in a consultative approach to setting the agenda for discussion, knowledge of local issues, flexible design and a participative approach that allowed residents to take ownership of the events. People were encouraged to pose questions that helped overturn damaging misconceptions.

There are challenges when conducting forums. Recruitment of new migrants can be difficult and time-consuming, although trusted individuals from local communities can play an invaluable role in encouraging engagement. Interpreters are needed where there are language barriers, which can moderate the nature of exchanges. Forums are resource-intensive to convene, and different types of forum are likely to be needed for different contexts and groups. Exploring areas of potential conflict can risk reinforcing tensions and inter-group differences, although this can be minimised by involving professional mediators or trusted members of the community.

The learning experience

Forum participants living in Bradford's inner areas said that, prior to the forum, they had felt a sense of social and cultural distance between groups, and sometimes hatred. Asians and Eastern European participants spoke of fear, conflict and harassment between groups, and some young Eastern European men felt 'nervous about sitting at the same table as Asian lads'.

Despite these challenges, all of the inner-city forums were successful in promoting some degree of contact, communication and learning. The learning was a two-way process, but appeared to have the greatest impact on settled populations (particularly in relation to misconceptions about new migrants' access to welfare). Key areas of learning were:

- that some groups (notably Asians and Eastern Europeans) have parallel migration histories and early settlement experiences;

- people from other groups are generally friendly and want to mix;
- fear and harassment underpin many community tensions;
- new migrants can experience severe poverty and deprivation.

The forums presented an important opportunity not only for contact between groups, but for changing perceptions. As one young Asian man acknowledged: 'They're just like us normal people really once you get to know them and not listen to people's [negative] feedback about them'.

Building shared understanding

There are limits to what can be achieved through a single encounter, especially given religious and cultural differences, the power of group stereotypes to foster divisions, and ongoing racist behaviour. It may also be unrealistic to expect groups from diverse backgrounds, with differing housing aspirations and needs, and varying commitments to the neighbourhood, to agree and collaborate fully on local concerns. Messages from this stage of the evaluation are therefore mixed.

Some shared understanding emerged around the nature of problems affecting the community, but there was less agreement on causes and solutions. For example, anti-social behaviour, harassment and safety problems were widely recognised as undermining quality of life, but there were some divergent views between new and settled groups on parenting, parental responsibilities and acceptable behaviour.

Participants from settled populations began to moderate their behaviour towards new migrants as they learned more about their difficult housing circumstances and the problems they faced as new arrivals (especially poverty, racism and racist harassment). There was also some appreciation by migrants of settled groups' views on neighbourliness. For example, there was some convergence of understanding about why new migrant women felt the need to search for clothes in recycling bins and how other residents felt about the mess that was often left, and a search for solutions.

Settled groups saw greater potential for improving community relations than new arrivals. Some Asian women interviewees, for example, felt that the forums had shown that 'we can get on really well' and can 'work together'. However, Eastern European newcomers tended to see themselves as vulnerable and marginal residents in the close-knit communities where they had settled and were more likely to feel that there was no common ground.

Forums can sometimes reinforce a sense of difference. After discussing parenting and parental responsibility, participants in one forum felt that new and settled groups remained as far apart as ever and that different groups were simply 'fighting their own corners'.

Conclusion

The interactive community-based forums provided insights into how local engagement might be approached to develop shared understanding and visions for the future. Some immediate positive outcomes noted during the forums opened up potential for community building and neighbourliness. Asian and Eastern European women in one area favoured further joint events and suggested clothing exchanges. The young men responded positively to the suggestion of a game of football. Positive encounters also increase the potential for everyday civility. Some participants had greeted each other on the street since the forum.

However, the forums also highlighted the risks of abandoning local communities to manage the challenges posed by new immigration alone. There are real challenges for the Government's focus on 'Big Society' – ground work would be needed in many communities if understanding between groups about the needs of an area is to be developed. Also, while bridges can be built between new and settled groups, ongoing racism and discourses of 'otherness' at the local and national scale mean that their foundations may be fragile.

These findings have several policy implications. At the national scale, the entrenched negative discourse on immigration needs to be challenged. At the local level:

- Interactive community forums can offer a form of engagement that moves beyond the 'contact hypothesis' underpinning many community cohesion initiatives. Forums are likely to be most

effective if embedded within a strategic partnership programme to manage neighbourhood change and promote cohesion.

- Support is needed to build on settled residents' perceptions of commonalities between themselves and newcomers, and on inter-cultural initiatives proposed by them.
- Work may be needed to help people living in areas of new migration to build shared understanding about the root causes of local problems and develop mutually acceptable solutions. This requires strong local leadership and capacity building for agencies and community organisations.
- Support is needed for frontline workers, such as neighbourhood wardens and trusted community members, who can act as agents of change.
- Support is also needed for vulnerable groups such as Czech and Slovak Roma.

About the project

The research began with interviews with community development workers, local stakeholders and consultation with residents in the research localities. Fourteen poster forum sessions were conducted across the Bradford research localities, and 171 residents from diverse backgrounds were consulted. Key issues raised were explored further in six focus groups.

Two of the discussion forums were designed to bring together groups experiencing overt conflict (i.e. Asian and Slovak/Czech young men; a range of white and Filipino people) as a test of the forums' capacity for building understanding in the face of everyday animosity. The other two forums were designed to bring together new and settled groups where, despite some evidence of tensions, there seemed to be some shared concerns and potential for building mutuality, e.g. women with children.

Further information

The full report, **Neighbourhood, community and housing in Bradford: Building understanding between new and settled groups** by Deborah Phillips, Bal Athwal, Malcolm Harrison, David Robinson, Nadia Bashir and Judith Atkinson, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk.

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