

White working-class views of neighbourhood, cohesion and change

Findings
Informing change

November 2011

This research explores white working-class views of community cohesion and changes in their neighbourhood, in three different local areas across England.

Key points

- Most stakeholders were critical of community cohesion, viewing it as a 'top-down', government-imposed model. They emphasised the sense of being a forgotten group disconnected from policy and politics.
- Addressing these concerns means changing community cohesion so that grassroots issues are discussed, making a concerted case for difference and diversity at a grassroots level and changing Government's role to being a facilitator rather than the driver in cohesion efforts.
- **White working-class residents not being heard:** Many residents felt they were a forgotten community and had been ignored by policy-makers at local or national level. The sense of disconnection was due to neighbourhood change but also the impact of immigration.
- **Perceptions of community cohesion:** Most residents had not come across the term 'community cohesion'; it was seen as being driven by central and local government and not connecting with the concerns of local communities.
- **A need for fairness and equity:** Many residents felt they had been unfairly treated by government, especially in terms of allocation to social housing. They felt that housing organisations rewarded groups who did not appear to add anything positive to neighbourhoods.
- **Complexity of whiteness:** The terms 'white' and 'working class' are complex. Residents emphasised the importance of values based on hard work, reciprocity and support. This was very different from the popular stereotype of being stupid and benefit dependent, which residents resented.

The research

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Background

This project aimed to critically analyse the concept of community cohesion by considering the views of white working-class communities in three different neighbourhoods in England: Aston (Birmingham), Canley (Coventry) and Somers Town (London).

The study areas, key questions and policy focus

Specifically, the study wanted to find out:

- how white working-class people perceive community cohesion;
- how challenges, issues and opportunities overlapped between people living in Aston, Canley and Somers Town;
- the policy implications of community views of community cohesion and how far this concept needs to be reconfigured; and
- how a greater understanding of how these communities may positively contribute to community cohesion and the 'Big Society'.

White working-class residents not being heard

The research showed residents felt they were being treated unfairly and did not have a voice. They saw themselves as a forgotten group, and felt that government had not listened to them in the past, nor showed any signs of doing so in future.

The language used in their discussions appeared to be racist. Yet many residents would be upset by this suggestion. Racialised opinions should be seen in the context of people feeling the effects of neighbourhood loss, political disconnection and competition for scarce resources.

They've been moving them in around here, but not coming round and helping with it, or asking us what we think about it. (Canley resident, woman)

We wanted to be treated equally rather than feeling that we are last in line ... we want to feel valued and be listened to. (Somers Town resident, woman)

There were concerns about the pace of neighbourhood change. Many residents stated that cultural identity – as evidenced in social clubs, public-sector housing and pubs – had largely disappeared, replaced by communities (minority groups and newly arrived immigrants) who had no allegiance to the neighbourhood, identity-based organisations and services.

Across the study areas, the residents interviewed emphasised the importance for new groups to 'integrate' into British culture and identity. This was not only about language but also routine areas such as dress and personal manners. Finally, there was a clear sense that neighbourhood change was not driven by residents but foisted on them by government.

One resident spoke of no one advocating on behalf of white working-class people, who either had their voice muted, or were left to make sense of neighbourhoods where they had become the visible minority:

We are the forgot-about people. You plonked us here and forgot about us. Dumped in the tribal site. (Aston resident, man)

Political representatives from minority backgrounds were not seen as speaking on behalf of white working-class communities. A strongly held view was that local government officers were supporting minority interests in policy areas such as housing, over and above the needs of white working-class communities. In this way a toxic mix of neighbourhood loss, uninvited population change and disconnection from local politics developed. The perceived loss of power and control was palpable.

They are all Asian at the council – it's like no one can understand us. It's hard, a joke around here, I hate it. (Aston resident, woman)

People in local government aren't interested in our views. Yeah, most of the local councillors are Bengali now. (Somers Town resident, woman)

Perceptions of community cohesion

Community cohesion has been a key driver of government policy since the 2001 disturbances in Burnley, Oldham and Bradford. The focus on shared values, common spaces and promoting interaction between different groups remains an important part of it. Community cohesion has been influential in shaping the direction of government policy since 2001 and this study aimed to understand the views of people who had experienced the impact of it.

Discussions with both stakeholders and residents demonstrated a number of challenges with community cohesion as a concept, its perception and its usefulness.

Many stakeholders found community cohesion a problematic concept. Some associated the term with a top-down approach to community development. Both community and cohesion can have different meanings dependent on locality, ideology and composition of communities. The following stakeholder comment is typical:

People just glaze over. It's an expression of forced mixing of communities on people, from a height. Not mixing from the bottom up. It's only sociologists and council staff that use the term. It's not an experience, community cohesion; you don't hear people asking about cohesion. You hear them asking if so-and-so went to the village fete. (Canley stakeholder, man)

Most stakeholders believed that whilst local government has a role, this should be facilitative. Residents need to be empowered and be driving the agenda.

Communities have to lead on integration and cohesion work. The Council can't do it because it is detached. Having local people from the area doing community work gives it a head start and lends it immediate credibility. People aren't going to trust someone who turns up with a suit and a briefcase. (Somers Town stakeholder, man)

A need for fairness and equity

Residents believed they had not been treated fairly by government. In employment, social services, community development and most notably housing, there was a strong and consistent view that residents lost out to minorities and new migrants. This study suggests that white working-class communities believe they have been marginalised and ignored.

Being treated unfairly was seen most vividly in the debates on social housing. Many residents were proud to be social housing tenants, and resented the portrayal of these neighbourhoods as council estates beset by social problems. They viewed social housing as a right that was being denied to them by the local authority or housing association.

If you've got five kids then you get a big house and the only people that have five kids nowadays are the Bengalis and the Somalis and so they get all the big places. (Somers Town resident, woman)

I was told I didn't have enough points – they haven't been here two minutes and they get a house, we have to wait years. Why should we have to? (Canley resident, woman)

My cousin is black. She was here for two years and now has a beautiful house. I have been here for eight years ... I don't. I'm still here. It's about skin colour. (Aston resident, woman)

Despite the vehemence of the discussion, many accepted that neighbourhoods were multicultural and understood the benefits this brought. In this way, unfairness could be separated from racism. Equality of opportunity was welcomed. In practice, though, the legal framework was seen as leading to adverse outcomes for white working-class communities. Key issues were not addressed, and unlike new arrivals, they did not seem to have anyone advocating on their behalf.

Equal opportunities are anything but. We are bottom of the pile now. (Somers Town resident, man)

It's not a problem them being here, just the rights they have over us. (Canley resident, woman)

Complexity of 'whiteness'

The stereotype presented by some of the literature on white working-class communities is unflattering. They are presented as a feckless group: resistant to change, problematic in terms of social norms and behaviours, and living in annexed council estates that are mired in unemployment, high teenage pregnancy rates and poor educational performance. However, this study demonstrated another type of social construction being developed. Residents identified 'white working class' in association with a strong work ethic, respect, collective values and reciprocal support. People resented the negative stereotype:

They think that we are all on the giro. They think we are all the same. (Aston resident, man)

I may be from the nineteenth floor of a tower block, thirty and have a child but I am not stupid! I see the news. My father's got O- and A-levels and all that. I get fed up with being seen as thick. (Somers Town resident, woman)

Residents acknowledged cultural diversity. Some said they were of Irish, Scottish or Welsh backgrounds and this continued to be part of their identity. A small proportion had family members who were drawn from minority backgrounds. This was not a blunt one dimensional group. Rather it was multi-faceted and many expressed that difference could be beneficial. Some raised and celebrated the concept of 'a melting pot' as something that should be embraced.

I grew up around Birmingham; I have coloured black friends and I've got a bit of Indian in me but I don't know much about that culture. (Aston resident, man)

I can't be racist as I have seven half-Bengali step children ... there is no division because this is their home. (Somers Town resident, man)

Problems associated with white minorities, such as Poles and students, were raised in all three study areas. This was not about ethnicity, as Poles were deemed to be white, but nevertheless it presented challenges in terms of integration, housing and employment. In addition, students are also seen negatively in terms of cohesion and restricting access to housing. Both groups were seen as a distinct 'others' – separate from working-class values and culture.

Policy recommendations

- **The need to reconfigure community cohesion:** After nearly ten years of being a key policy, the evidence from this study was that community cohesion had not succeeded in creating shared values or reducing intolerance. The main priority is ensuring that grassroots issues are debated and discussed.
- **Making the case for diversity:** Government has not been effective in championing diversity and change. Residents, rightly or wrongly, felt that their views were not being acknowledged. There was no space for discussions about change, immigration and access to public resources. In this context, local conversations could be mediated and based on the principles of conflict resolution. This type of initiative could provide a means to bring people together on common issues.
- **The importance of informal and routine interactions:** It is vital to recognise and value the informal and routine interactions that take place between different groups. In shops, schools and on the street, conversations begin to help break down barriers and build cohesion. Informal community engagement presents challenges in terms of measurement, but residents suggested this is where most of the work in community building happens in practice.
- **The state as facilitator:** Government needs to act as a facilitator rather than driver. This does not mean a withdrawal, but rather recognition that residents and community organisations will be taking on a much more important role in cohesion and community building. For example, government could commission local events for conversation, support community festivals and monitor routine interactions, while also continuing to enforce the law on equality.

About the project

This study used a qualitative approach, in three stages. The first stage was *scoping*, which began by establishing links with community organisations and agencies. Principally this was achieved by meeting with lead officers from local authorities in Birmingham, Camden and Coventry. Second was the *active* stage, underpinned by different types of qualitative intervention. Researchers worked with community organisations to recruit residents. Three community study days were organised to allow for reflective discussion. This was followed by interviews and three focus groups. In total, 100 residents and nearly 50 stakeholders participated in interviews, study days and focus groups. Fieldwork began in October 2009 and ended in October 2010. The third and final stage was *reflection*. A policy workshop was organised to enable residents to hear report findings and debate the results. Fieldwork notes were written using common headings and were then cross-referenced.

For further information

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The full report, **Community cohesion: the views of white working-class communities** by Harris Beider, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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