

Cohesion, counter-terrorism and community in West Yorkshire

Findings
Informing change

March 2011

This study covers two research projects carried out with the five metropolitan authorities of the Association of West Yorkshire Authorities (AWYA). The first, led by Charles Husband, examines how the simultaneous implementation of community cohesion and counter-terrorism policies affected those who were involved in their delivery at local level, and the potential contradictions between these policies. The second, led by Yunis Alam, explores important issues chosen by people from a diverse sample across West Yorkshire.

Key points

- There were a range of common concerns across different communities such as:
 - crime and policing;
 - access to and quality of services (especially education, healthcare and services geared toward younger people);
 - the effects of economic recession; and
 - issues linked with leadership at local and national levels.
- Throughout the community element of the research, ample evidence demonstrated everyday cohesion between residents, regardless of background. This goes against prevailing notions of 'parallel lives'.
- The introduction of the 'Prevent' counter-terrorism policies in 2006 (with the launch of CONTEST I) was met with considerable resistance from many in local authorities and local Muslim communities. In some cases, this reduced over time.
- The implementation of Prevent at the local level had direct and negative effects on the parallel attempt to pursue community cohesion programmes.
- Implementing community cohesion and Prevent simultaneously at the local level placed significant strains upon local authority personnel, particularly Muslim staff.
- Community cohesion as a policy cannot be isolated from the impact of other government policies.

The research

By Charles Husband and
Yunis Alam

Background

This research took place between 2008 and 2010, mostly under the previous Labour Government. However, the research echoes recommendations and conclusions to be found in both the Communities and Local Government Committee's Sixth Report (Preventing Violent Extremism) and the underpinnings of the Coalition Government's review into the effectiveness and future of the Prevent strategy. In particular, local expertise and local contexts remain significant and need to become integral aspects of policy design and delivery. Furthermore, the research pinpoints the capacity of counter-terrorism to undermine local trust and effective working relationships with Muslim communities; a finding also firmly acknowledged in wider policy and academic discourse.

Small world, invisible village

The towns and cities of West Yorkshire have a centuries-old history of in-migration, resulting in a population that continues to grow in diversity. As a result of its social and cultural evolution, the region has a relatively comfortable relationship with its communities, regardless of their heritage. For newcomers and established former migrant communities especially, access to relevant services and infrastructure enhanced the region's appeal. This aspect of regional identity, played out in everyday interactions between residents, points to forms of social and community cohesion that are taken for granted but often overlooked.

It's difficult to talk about Bradford without talking about the mix of different ethnic cultures ... I don't feel particularly threatened if I walk through an Asian area. Me and X have walked from Heaton to the Fighting Cock for a drink through Asian areas. There's been no trouble: absolutely fine. You can almost get quite a really positive uplifting experience ... Bradford, Asian or Muslim, non-Muslim, Hindu – whatever – are peaceful people. (40-year-old indigenous man, Bradford)

At the neighbourhood level, the development and sustainability of services such as education, crime and policing, healthcare, youth and community work was a key means of fostering positive cross-community attitudes and understanding.

If you want your child to go to a better school then you have to ... move out of the area. If you're living in the area then you're in a Catch 22: your children ... don't have the right opportunities and then they can't get the jobs. (40-year-old Pakistani man, Calderdale)

The research suggests that common local interests and services already provide a platform on which further cross-community participation and engagement could be built. Without appropriate investment in infrastructure, however, relations between and within communities are liable to stagnate and become fraught.

Conflicting agendas: cohesion and counter-terrorism

As local authorities following government policy developed highly integrated multi-agency structures to manage the delivery of Community Cohesion and Prevent, a significant degree of overlap and tension arose in their implementation. Often, Prevent was intended to reduce the threat from terrorism by deterring those who might encourage it, and to enable Muslims to resist being drawn into radicalisation. In pursuing this aim, Prevent introduced intensive patterns of surveillance and interventions within Muslim communities that created a very strong negative response.

Interviewees felt that activities funded under Prevent looked very much like community cohesion initiatives. This was widely felt to have jeopardised the credibility of council personnel.

I could imagine that that there is nothing that you can do in social cohesion that can't be perceived as a front for Prevent. (Local government departmental manager)

Additionally the perception of local authority staff that they would be part of Prevent's intelligence-gathering operation meant that in reality their ability to detach themselves from Prevent was limited. In effect, the reach of Prevent permeated community cohesion at the point of local practice.

So of course it's a difficult situation: information gathering/collecting – then are we a reporting centre? Are we then working outside our own remit, you know. And what's somebody going to do with the information? So how much control and confidentiality? (Member of local authority staff, speaking about the encroachment of Prevent upon community work)

The impact of counter-terrorism policies, then, including Prevent, significantly undermined the trust that members of the local authorities had built up with local Muslim communities.

Local expertise and commitment

Local managerial and fieldwork staff demonstrated considerable and impressive local knowledge, including sensitivity to local community histories and their implications when dealing with current difficult issues. The research confirms the crucial role of local authority personnel in mediating the interpretation of central government policy at the local level.

Working in a heavily politicised area of practice which attracted strong resistance from certain quarters placed particular stresses on local authority staff. For some, hard-won trust with local communities, built up over years, came into question. One distinctive form of pressure came from the possibility that local authority officers might have unintentionally and indirectly supported a suspected or subsequently proven terrorist. Restricted access to information about potential terrorist risks meant the majority of staff were kept in ignorance of security information and were anxious about how this might impact upon their performance and appraisal.

This agenda, you know, we say people could make a mistake and it could be headline news, and the impact could be on your whole service, the whole city gets burdened with it; and probably the whole council gets burdened with it. (Local authority staff member)

Pressures on Muslim staff

For Muslim members of staff interviewed, there was the additional strain of being associated with a policy that was widely regarded with hostility by members of local Muslim communities. As a result, their standing within their own communities could be put in jeopardy by their association with Prevent.

Pressures on Muslim communities

From non-Muslims, there was a noticeable divergence of views about Muslims: some were sympathetic; others talking about Muslim inability or lack of desire to 'integrate'. Discussions were often couched in political and personal terms and touched on 'radicalisation', segregation, insularity and, indeed, terrorism. For many Muslims, these topics were often loaded with assumptions that ran counter to their own experience of reality; for non-Muslims, there was a similar tendency to evaluate (and often discount) the broader public and media discourses using their own experiences as residents. People grounded global and national debates about the veil or the 7/7 bombings in their own local context and experience.

There is a lot of tension about women wearing the burqa in Dewsbury and people hate that. White people hate it. My step-mum was really liberal, she thinks she is really a liberal person, she hates Asian women wearing a burqa. ... If you speak to women in Dewsbury who wear the burqa ... It's almost a political statement and a lot of younger Asian women as well are using it as a way of asserting their Muslim identity, which is fine. I think it is the least of our problems. (32-year-old indigenous woman, Kirklees)

For many Muslims, however, everyday and seemingly embedded discrimination continued to be felt.

I was serving behind the counter and this old man came in – he was about, I don't know, about sixty I'd say. He came in, bought some stuff from the store and then stood in the queue ... So he gets to the counter and he says to the other girl, 'Will you serve me? I'm not being served by her,' – meaning me. The other girl, she said, 'No, I'm on my break now, but why don't you want to be served by her?' He said, 'I don't want to be served by her because she's wearing a scarf.' I couldn't believe it. Just couldn't believe it. It's like, what planet are you on? (21-year-old Pakistani woman, Bradford)

Despite the very real presence of anti-Muslim discrimination/Islamophobia alongside other forms of racism where faith identity was deemed irrelevant, Muslims in the region – including new migrants – continued to be positive about West Yorkshire and their futures as citizens and residents. Often, this reflected positive neighbourhood experiences and relationships:

She'll come round and knock on the door and just say I've brought you some sweet rice, or sometimes it's rice pudding: her rice pudding is to die for. Or she'll bring me some savoury rice or whatever, and sometimes when her in-laws have been having a party they bring me food from there as well. They're wonderful neighbours. She's had her house altered a little bit since the floods and her kitchen window now faces mine so in the winter we just mouth Are you alright? and put our thumbs up and things like that. (69-year-old indigenous woman, Wakefield)

Implications for future policy

Each element of the fieldwork in this research captured a range of voices and experiences which show that cohesion is not as elusive as some believe. Earlier constructions of community cohesion, most notably defined by reports exploring the 'northern disturbances' of 2001, had a fixation with the extent to which Muslim identity appeared to be at odds with mainstream western culture. This research shows that the concept of community cohesion used by central government was found to be highly problematic. The discourses through which it was sold to the public did much to mask political complacency regarding class inequality, thus reproducing the basis for continued inter-group competition.

However, this research also suggests that the embedded multiculturalism of the region sits comfortably with a desire for community cohesion. Indeed, cohesion, in varied forms, at different sites and for different reasons, existed and contributed toward fostering greater community and individual well-being. Recognising and supporting this cohesion is in the interest of each local authority and the region as a whole – not only for developing more vibrant and capable communities, but also as a way of forging those links undermined by contradictory and conflicting central government policies and funding methods.

About the project

The authors are grateful to the Association of West Yorkshire Authorities (AWYA) for their support during this project. The arguments, conclusions and findings in any of the texts produced as a part of this project are those of the authors and are in no way attributable to either the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, AWYA or to anyone interviewed for this research.

The qualitative study of social cohesion and Prevent involved personal interviews with key people delivering these two policies within the sample area. A steering group from AWYA identified the people responsible for the management of the two policies; both senior staff and councillors. Thus the people interviewed constituted an elite sample of exactly those people responsible for managing these policies (21 people: senior managers and councillors), complemented by a sample of those who implemented these policies at the community level (also 21 people). This provided a privileged access to understanding the impact of these policies at the local level.

The community element of the research relied on the input of and interviews with over 145 participants across the West Yorkshire region. The sample was framed within three categories of ethnic and cultural heritage: indigenous (white British), settled (for example, Indians in Bradford), or 'new' (e.g. Somalis in Leeds). The bulk of this community aspect fieldwork was conducted by Shagufta Bostan, Maria Bottomley, Ian Clayton, Laura Crossley, Shabbir Dastagir, Mark Ellis, Agnieska Gastol, Harjyot Hayer, Conor Ibrahim, Asiya Khan, Hussein Mahamed, Qasim Shafiq, Jo Stanley, Michael Stewart, Mani Thapa, Chris Wall, Lesley Wall, Aisha Yunis and Razia Yunis.

For further information

Two books based on this research are available to purchase:

Social cohesion and counter-terrorism: a policy contradiction? by Charles Husband and Yunis Alam (Policy Press, 2011). ISBN 978 1 84742 8011, paperback priced £17.59, available to buy from www.policypress.co.uk

The invisible village: small world, big society, an anthology of voices and stories by MY Alam (Route, 2011). ISBN 978 1 901927 46 7, paperback priced £8.99, available to buy from www.route-online.com

This summary *Findings* can also be downloaded free of charge from www.jrf.org.uk

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