Written evidence from Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity, University of Oxford [CCI0044]

Introduction

This submission covers evidence gathered through various research and knowledge exchange programmes including:

- A 7 year programme focussed on the integration and inclusion of newcomers, including through community cohesion, called Inclusive Cities, involving 12 UK cities, led by the University of Oxford,
- International learning on welcoming and cohesion through the Welcoming International programme of which Inclusive Cities is a founder member
- Learning from the Churchill Fellowship's 'Living Well Together' programme which supported 29 UK fellows to learn from best practice on community cohesion internationally and bring this learning back to the UK, drawn together by the author
- Learning from the Commission on the Integration of Refugees, of which the author was an independent Commissioner

The Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity (GEM) is the knowledge exchange arm of the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. GEM draws together academic, policy and practitioner insights on integration and inclusion publishing both academic research and policy briefs. Through our Inclusive Cities programme, we have collated significant research evidence and case studies on good practice in community cohesion. This research and evidence base is the basis for our submission to the inquiry.

What are the primary barriers and threats to community cohesion?

Threats to societal cohesion may be considered as external factors, whilst barriers are the structural, financial and institutional limitations on the support of community cohesion in the UK. Whilst acknowledging the importance of understanding threats to cohesion, this submission primarily considers the barriers – which factors currently constrain work on community cohesion at national and local level.

It is difficult to fully define social cohesion and some flexibility can be useful. Rather than setting out a definition, there are a number of key principles which should inform our understanding of cohesion, based on a review of available literature:

    a. Social cohesion covers the development of 'ties that bind' between and within communities, the development of wellbeing and satisfaction and the development of equality (including economic considerations, but not exclusively).

    b. Social cohesion operates at three distinct levels – individual to individual, in places and communities and through institutions.

    c. Social cohesion cannot be divorced from broader economic, political and social trends; these must be factored into policy and practice responses and initiatives.

    d. Social cohesion is both an ongoing process and a policy goal, which can be a good in and of itself as well as a means of reaching other goals. (Broadhead 2021)

Cohesion is then both an ongoing process as well as a set of interventions – it will happen naturally without proactive intervention, but interventions can support or undermine cohesion, therefore it can be understood both as a *process and a destination* (British Academy 2019.) As a consequence, discussion of cohesion is often in response to (perceived or actual) breakdowns in the core factors of cohesion, often ignoring or failing to notice, where and when cohesion is functioning well.

Learning from the evidence on social cohesion we can draw out five core lessons:

> a. **Perception matters** – conventional wisdom says that we are more divided and polarised than ever. But the research on a number of topics, from public opinion to understanding online communities, shows this is not the whole picture. While recognising areas for development, organisations should be careful not to overstate the fracture lines. They should recognise their role in defining narratives which encourage cohesion – promoting areas of shared ground as well as areas of difference.
> b. **Human connection matters** – the strong evidence base on contact theory and examples from policy show how, even in a landscape of increasing digital interaction and AI, human contact is central to ideas of cohesion. Thinking about how this can be promoted and sustained is central to fostering cohesion. This can be online and face to face.
> c. **Place matters** – the spatial element of cohesion is often lost in approaches which focus on either one-to-one connection or institutional-level approaches. However, the evidence shows that much of cohesion and integration happen at the local level.
> d. **Economic conditions** cannot be separated from social cohesion – in particular, the role of poverty in inhibiting cohesion. However, cohesion is much broader than economic conditions and cannot solely be reduced to these factors, it must be considered in its social and political context.
> e. **Representation matters** – institutional capacity to promote cohesion is strengthened when organisations are representative and take collaborative and co-productive approaches to developing whole community responses. (Broadhead 2021)

Alongside these core principles, there are three areas of interventions within cohesion policy making that this submission will cover:

- Initiatives which proactively and directly promote community contact in order to 'bridge' differences between groups
- Initiatives which mitigate community tensions, often reactively
- Initiatives which contribute to overall levels of societal trust and inclusion and which build shared bonds of identity between groups

In relation to barriers to social cohesion, many of these are systemic as well as community based. This submission considers:

- Infrastructure and institutional capacity
- Funding and differential resourcing needs
- Central government leadership and oversight

Infrastructure and institutional capacity

There is presently very little institutional capacity dedicated to community cohesion in England[1]. Community cohesion is notionally a devolved function, albeit one which lacks

resourcing. As a consequence, the situation in each of the devolved administrations is distinctive, with Wales in particular being notable for having a dedicated cohesion strategy and regional coordinators.[2]

This lack of a dedicated duty at local level, the absence of a national strategy (with Wales as an exception[3]) and the lack of dedicated funding flows is a severe barrier to community cohesion in the UK. Notwithstanding, as noted above, that much community cohesion takes place naturally and without proactive intervention, and much of it takes place outside of state support in the voluntary and community sector, the UK has provided very limited resourcing for dedicated cohesion activity, and has not defined the policy aims it wishes to achieve in this area, nor the mechanisms to measure this.

Central government leadership and oversight
Cohesion does not have a dedicated departmental home at central government level, though responsibility (in England) now sits with MHCLG. The policy area spans a number of departments, notably DfE in relation to cohesion in schools and the Home Office in relation to potential breakdowns in social cohesion and managing tensions.

Many central government and Parliamentary led reviews have noted the lack of joined up response and prioritisation of cohesion (and integration issues.) The 2017 APPG on Social Integration noted a "tangled web of responsibilities," (APPG on Social Integration 2017) between departments and local government whilst the Casey Review highlighted that, the Government has "commissioned many reviews of community cohesion and developed strategies to improve it. But these cohesion or integration plans have not been implemented with enough force or consistency, they have been allowed to be diluted and muddled, they have not been sufficiently linked to socio-economic inclusion, and communities have not been engaged adequately" (Casey 2018.) Most recently, the Khan review highlighted that "there is no adequate national strategic approach to cohesion and democratic resilience within Whitehall…[and] many local authorities lack the capability, expertise and resources necessary to deal with evolving cohesion threats" (Khan 2024.)

Funding and differential resourcing needs
One significant factor in the lack of capacity for work on cohesion is the lack of dedicated funding to support this work. Local government receives little dedicated funding to support cohesion, and where this work has been supported, it has often been through bid-in pots of time limited funding for specific project work. "Bid in" models of funding often privilege those with existing resources to bid rather than based on need and inhibit long term planning (House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee 2023.) Additionally, some of these dedicated funding pots have ended and not been replaced (such as the European Union's AMIF funding which provided £500million between 2014-2022.)

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[1] Notwithstanding MHCLG's current work to develop a cohesion strategy and the appointment of regional cohesion advisors in 2024

[2] Other devolved administrations have dedicated integration strategies rather than cohesion and there is often overlap between the two policy areas. There is no overall UK wide Integration or Community Cohesion Strategy.

[3] The Welsh Government has had a cohesion strategy since 2009 with action plans covering 2014-16 and 2016-17. The Welsh government also supports community cohesion coordinators in local authorities in Wales. Following a review of the programme in 2021, further review of the programme is happening in 2025.

As a consequence of this and the overall retrenchment in local government resources, research has noted that integration and cohesion efforts have become an 'additional', rather than core function for local government and that as a consequence, areas with longer histories of migration and greater economic and institutional resources facilitated more cohesion activity (Mort and Morris 2020.) Research during the pandemic highlighted that 'these positive experiences of social cohesion tend to be concentrated at the very local level and are unevenly distributed…the pandemic is also increasing fragmentation and exacerbating inequalities, exposing how we are not actually 'all in it together'(Morgan Jones et al 2020.) In other words, at present cohesion activity is not resourced according to need and does not recognise that some areas may have a higher level of need (for example more deprived communities, or communities which have seen rapid demographic shifts) and therefore need greater investment and there is no mechanism with which to facilitate this.

What can be done at a local and national level to improve community cohesion?
There is a long-standing research base on the importance of face-to-face contact in reducing inter-group hostility, though its efficacy is dependent on certain pre-conditions, including equal status among participants, shared goals and institutional support (Allport 1954, Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, Hewstone and Swart 2011). Evidence suggests that direct contact reduces inter-group anxiety and encourages positive processes such as greater empathy and perspective taking. There is also evidence that indirect contact can reduce inter-group bias.

The challenge comes in translating this theory into approaches for societal change, given the difficulty of meeting the pre-conditions for success – in particular that of equal status between groups, in an unequal society.

The Greater London Authority's 'All of Us' (2018) social integration strategy set out the importance of quality contact, stating that traditional approaches 'can overlook the nature of social contact between people, emphasising the quantity rather than the quality of interactions. A truly socially integrated society is not just about interactions. It is about people building meaningful relationships, whether as friends, colleagues or fellow citizens … The level of equality and the nature of the relationships people experience make a difference to their interactions'.

Approaches to develop this 'meaningful social contact,' include befriending and mentoring programmes which provide a 1-1 relationship to build mutual trust and intercultural encounters which aim to 'bring people who do not normally interact together in meaningful contact across ethnic/ cultural/religious difference.' (Salway et al 2020.) Alongside these attempts to create meaningful social contact there are other approaches which aim to create greater opportunities for fleeting encounters – the type of everyday interaction which can build overall trust between communities. Finally, there is work which aims to identify and mitigate community tensions, using monitoring and local evidence to understand what is happening at an early stage and address concerns and challenges.

Whilst there are significant areas for proactive intervention on community cohesion, it is also an area in which government (at both central and local level) also needs to tread lightly. Many interventions which could theoretically promote intergroup contact, also impede individual choice. For example, where there is concern about segregation on schools admissions, lotteries could be a strategy to promote greater societal mixing (both in terms of socio economic status as well as between other groups.) However, this runs counter to principles of parental choice and therefore needs to be considered as a trade-off. This trade

off applies to many areas of cohesion policy. Therefore, this may be an area where government is best placed to take a *facilitating and enabling* role - in particular partnering with a wide range of local community and voluntary sector groups, rather than trying to directly deliver and ensuring robust community consultation and participation in decision making, in order to avoid potential backlash.

Finally, all contact interventions rely on the equality of participants as a prerequisite, therefore tackling pre-existing inequalities is crucial to successful cohesion policy Morgan Jones et al 2020.)

In order to improve community cohesion:

UK central government and devolved administration level should
- Define clear policy aims for work on community cohesion (to be predominantly led by local government and partners) through a statement of policy goals and the development of a measurement framework to go alongside this. This could build on the Home Office's existing Indicators of Integration, which utilises DCMS's Community Life Survey as a key way of measuring community cohesion (Home Office 2019.)
- Align work on cohesion with tackling inequalities, including through using the socio-economic duty of the Equality Act (2010)
- Formally include cohesion and integration within its areas for devolution as part of the devolution white paper (in England)
- Understand and simplify existing cohesion funding through the local government funding settlement, in order to develop longer term strategy and to target resource to areas with the highest levels of defined need and pre-existing inequalities (perhaps using the model of the Local Area Agreements first introduced in 2004))
- Develop data and monitoring capacity to understand where potential stressors on cohesion may be likely to happen (for example based on areas with swift demographic change) and align funding to mitigate tensions, perhaps using the model of the migration impacts fund (which ran from 2008-10)
- Develop better governance arrangements on cohesion, recognising that this is a cross departmental responsibility through:
  - o Convening a cross departmental cohesion and integration group modelled on the Syrian VPRS 'gold command' structure – led by HO and MHCLG, with other departments such as DfE
  - o Expanding the remit of, or creating an equivalent institution to, the Migration Advisory Committee, to advise government on cohesion and integration issues, in particular in relation to data and monitoring

Local government should:
- Take on an enabling and facilitating role to support and develop voluntary and community led work on local social cohesion, building relationships with a wide range of community partners
- Prioritise community engagement to ensure that local voices from all communities are involved in developing cohesion activity
- Embed cohesion approaches within the wider work of the local authority – in particular considering opportunities for community contact in planning and the development of community and third spaces

- Work with central government to develop data and monitoring capacity in particular in relation to potential threats to community cohesion
- Work with devolved regional authorities to share best practice within a region

What examples are there of best practice which has positively impacted community cohesion?

These examples are taken from best practice in the UK and internationally. International examples are drawn from Churchill Fellows – 29 UK based leaders who travelled internationally to learn from examples of best practice to bring them back to the UK. These examples are summarised in greater detail here. Each example can only provide a snapshot of the individual intervention, and are not intended to suggest that these are the only available models, but aims to showcase the breadth of approaches available and the types of approaches, which prove effective in promoting community cohesion.

Proactively Promoting Community Contact
- Many responses to promoting cohesion look for creative ways to promote contact between diverse groups. In **Ireland**, the Failte Isteach programme recruits older volunteers as English Language teachers for newcomers. Evaluation of the programme found community cohesion benefits for both students and teachers – beyond the benefits of simply providing ESOL provision, the classes also provided opportunities for wider community contact.
- Schools and workplaces are generally identified as sites where natural, everyday community cohesion works well. In 2023, the DfE analysed various schools based impacts which promote social integration and noted the lack of evidence and information on how successful interventions might be incorporated into already busy curricula. One identified initiative was the *Linking Network,* a **Bradford** based charity which aims to provide sustained, classroom based contact between two classes from demographically diverse schools (Hewstone 2023.) A 2011 evaluation of the programme found it had positive impacts on building up students'; self confidence in mixing with other groups, though more patchy evidence of the development of knowledge and understanding between groups. From a more international perspective, the *Global Minds* programme in **Pittsburgh** is a youth led initiative which aims to bridge the gaps between different groups of students and tackle cultural intolerance between groups by building intercultural friendship.

Spatial approaches to community cohesion
Community cohesion approaches often focus on contact, but sometimes focus less on spaces and places in which different groups can meet and the ways of developing these spaces as natural, everyday spaces of mixing, usually in areas of shared interest, highlighting what people have in common, rather than points of difference.
- o **Sport** is an important area for promoting community cohesion. For example, **Brighton Table Tennis Club** uses the universal language of sport to build bridges between communities – from young asylum seekers, to older Brightonians, the club is open to all. **Sanctuary Runners** in **Ireland** builds on the success of Park Run and uses running, jogging and walking to bring together asylum seekers, refugees, migrants and all Irish residents, with a focus on community connection and cohesion**.** Research has highlighted the role of football clubs as community anchors with

> **Huddersfield Town** and **Brentford FC** running campaigns focussed on promoting social connection between diverse communities (Puddle 2024.)

- o Other approaches focus on the role of the arts and heritage to promote connections. The **Multaka, museums as meeting point** project in **Berlin** and **Oxford** gives newcomers access to museum artefacts and supports them to develop and deliver tours in their own language, each one curated by the guides themselves – allowing them to share their knowledge and expertise of items from their culture with local people.
  - o Food and hospitality can provide powerful ways of building community connection. The **Invitations Department** in **Stockholm** arranges dinners to bring new and established Swedes together. Invitations are to dinner, always in the home, and free with no strings attached. Mostly established Swedes host the first time, but the opportunity is open to all. The experience can be a one-off or a jumping off point for a longer friendship.
  - o **Warm Welcome Hubs** provide a physical spaces for connection, with over 4,000 registered hubs since 2022. The campaign aims to better use existing community spaces to build sites of social connectedness to enable a more deeply connected society.
- **Housing**
  - o Innovative approaches to newcomer housing show examples of opportunities for co-living and greater social mixing. Refugee community housing initiatives in **Berlin** and **Munich** demonstrate the capacity for more social mixing and enhanced cohesion – often led outside of the state sector. Co-living projects in **Utrecht, Antwerp** and **Bologna** supported through the Urban Action Initiative also demonstrate the power of community led approaches to resettlement which promote greater social mixing (through choice) and which can mitigate potential tensions.
  - o In the UK, the Homes for Ukraine and other voluntary refugee hosting programmes demonstrates the potential power of community led approaches to housing to promote social cohesion. Whilst these models have to be managed carefully due to potential safeguarding risks and are generally unsuitable in meeting longer term housing needs, they do provide a boost in community connections and cohesion for newly arrived communities (More in Common 2023.)

Managing Community Tensions

- Whilst proactively promoting forms of intergroup contact is a vital facet of community cohesion, identifying and responding to threats to cohesion within communities is also vital. "No Place for Hate: Post-Pandemic Actions for **London**'s Chinatown" focusses on the role of Chinatowns in supporting communities in the context of racism and hate crimes. The report highlighted the need to normalise conversations about hate and racism within Chinatown and using creative ways to encourage people to participate in these important conversations and the importance of recognising and accommodating significant cultural, generational and linguistic barriers to discussing racism within Chinatown and raising awareness of community support structures and specialist services within Chinatown's workforce.
- In **Brighton,** The Upstanders Project, is a network bringing diverse grassroots community groups together with public services (including the police, local authorities and CPS to stand together against hate and all forms of extremism. The

network raises awareness of how anyone can be an upstander. Being an upstander can involve:

- reporting incidents
- helping with evidence
- supporting a harmed person
- safely de-escalating situations

Mutual Aid and Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)

- The response to the pandemic also provided useful lessons on approaches to engendering community contact, in particular when this was seen to be under threat due to (necessary) social distancing. Research by New Local (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020) highlighted the role of mutual aid groups as part of the covid response, aiming to build resilience within communities and demonstrated the importance of an asset based approach to community cohesion, rather than often deficit focus of (some) work in this area. For example, over 8,000 **Leeds** residents registered as Community Care Volunteers in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Voluntary Action Leeds and Leeds City Council established the programme, which matches volunteers with vulnerable people in need of help with a range of tasks - from shopping deliveries to dog walking and which had wider impacts in relation to cohesion (Broadhead, Kierans and Mort, 2020.) These asset based approaches highlighted the importance of:
  - o A facilitating role for local government – providing the context for groups to flourish but not getting in the way with overly onerous requirements
  - o The importance of pre-existing social capital – meaning that more deprived areas may need additional support
  - o The capacity to shift mutual aid support from short term emergency mobilisation through to longer term community development approaches which draw on existing community assets.

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