

Community cohesion

Headlines

Most local people felt as though they get on well with people from different backgrounds and ages. However, a significant proportion believed people from different backgrounds do not get on well with each other in their areas. Patterns of immigration and perceptions of how immigrants were treated were felt to reduce people's feelings of a sense of local cohesion.

Why is this issue important?

The makeup of Kirklees communities is complex and each local area has a distinct character and balance of communities - some defined by geographical or social identities and some by faith and ethnicity.

This complexity and diversity is important to Kirklees as it brings a vitality that underpins economic, social and cultural strength. The Kirklees Partnership has recognised these strengths in the community strategy: "Communities are proud of their past, but enjoy diversity, are outward looking and face the future with optimism"¹. The sense of belonging that people have to their immediate area is recognised as important locally.

What significant factors are affecting this issue?

A wide range of influences, including international events and incidents, extremist political activities and media stories, shapes community cohesion. A complex combination of ethnic, cultural, faith, socio-economic and political factors impact on how people get on with each other.

Overall, 2 in 3 (66%) adults in Kirklees felt that people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area, increasing from 64% in 2007 and half (51%) of 14 year olds felt the same^{2,3}. There was a clear north/south divide. 75% of adults in south Kirklees felt that people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area, compared to half in north Kirklees. A similar pattern was seen with 14 year olds. This is different for people of different ages getting on well together, the rates across Kirklees are 3 in 4 (77%) adults and 8 in 10 (84%) 14 year olds^{2,3}. 78% felt people in their local area should mix more (13% more than nationally).

Where is this causing greatest concern?

In 2009, each area had a distinct pattern of issues⁴:

Batley, Birstall & Birkenshaw

Residents felt there was a poor level of cohesion locally - respect, "getting on" and a sense of belonging were all lacking.

Denby Dale & Kirkburton

Communities in this area felt unified. There was a sense of belonging and people felt involved in the decisions made about their area, especially local services and young people's services.

Dewsbury and Mirfield

Communities in this area felt fractured and there were problems with respect and interaction between groups. There was a sense of belonging to the area and a willingness to become more involved in decision making but residents felt excluded.

Huddersfield North

Residents felt there was a good level of cohesion locally but a sense of belonging to their immediate neighbourhood was lacking. The feeling that they can be involved to influence decision making was reasonably high and there was active involvement in groups relating to specific issues.

Huddersfield South

Residents felt there was a good level of cohesion locally and a good sense of belonging to their immediate neighbourhood but respect was lacking.

Spen Valley

Residents felt there was a poor level of cohesion in this area and a sense of belonging to their immediate neighbourhood was lacking.

The Valleys

Residents felt there was a good level of cohesion locally and there was a sense of belonging to their immediate neighbourhood.

Views of local people

To gain more insight into the reasons behind the statistics generated by the place survey, focus group discussions were undertaken with local residents. In total, eight group discussions took place in November 2009. Eight wards were chosen as they included both areas of high cohesion and low cohesion as measured by the Place Survey indicators. A number of other factors were also considered when selecting these areas such as geography and demography to ensure diversity of participants, to provide useful insight into the nature of community cohesion.

This research revealed⁵:

- Initially, respondents discussed their areas in negative terms. However, for areas such as Mirfield, they talked about them as 'close knit' and in Greenhead, 'quiet and friendly'.
- Perceptions of local areas largely mirrored the findings from the Place Survey by ward for both. People believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in the local area and were satisfied with the local area as a place to live.
- Mirfield, Greenhead and Newsome were perceived to have positive reputations as areas with good schools, large numbers of families, green spaces, thriving town centres and shopping areas.
- All Dewsbury and Heckmondwike groups felt their local areas had a negative reputation, both on a local and national level, due to the press coverage of the Shannon Matthews kidnap case in 2008 and because one of the '7/7 bombers' (who targeted London in July 2005) lived in the area.
- Negative perceptions of the Dewsbury and Heckmondwike areas had an effect on how respondents discuss where they are from with strangers, due to embarrassment to be associated with such bad press.

Barriers/drivers to community cohesion

- Ethnicity is the main barrier/driver to community cohesion as defined by respondents across all eight groups. Cultural and religious elements associated with ethnicity were also discussed.
- Those in the Greenhead group felt that their community was changing, with a perceived large number of new eastern European residents and asylum seekers seen as a barrier to community cohesion.
- Housing was seen to be a barrier/driver to cohesion as unequal treatment was felt in allocation of social housing and, in areas such as Dewsbury, that there is a transient population in this type of tenure.
- Areas with long term residents showed greater levels of cohesion; however, those in Greenhead and Heckmondwike perceive that new communities and asylum seekers are receiving preferential treatment for housing, which is seen as a barrier to community cohesion.

- Inter-generational issues involving the perceived troublesome youth was felt a barrier to cohesion across all eight groups especially in relation to anti-social behaviour.

What could commissioners and service planners consider?⁶

- Embed cohesion in planning and reviewing services, especially services or projects that have a high impact on cohesion.
- Work with local people to develop tailored interventions in priority neighbourhoods that reflect the specific issues in the area.
- Enable local communities to respond effectively to threats to community cohesion values.
- Respond proactively to challenge myths and change public perceptions.
- Strengthen the bonds across partner organisations to deliver on community cohesion activities.

References

1. Kirklees community cohesion strategy
<http://www.kirkleespartnership.org/publications/communitycohesion/CommunityCohesionStrategy.pdf>
2. NHS Kirklees and Kirklees Council. Current Living in Kirklees (CLIK) survey. 2008.
3. NHS Kirklees, Kirklees Council and West Yorkshire Police. Young People's Survey (YPS). 2009.
4. CLG (2009) Place Survey: England - Headline Results 2008.
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/placesurvey2008>
5. Qa Research. Place survey follow up research: Community Cohesion. Kirklees Council. January 2010.
6. ICoCo (2007) A Review of Community Cohesion in Kirklees.