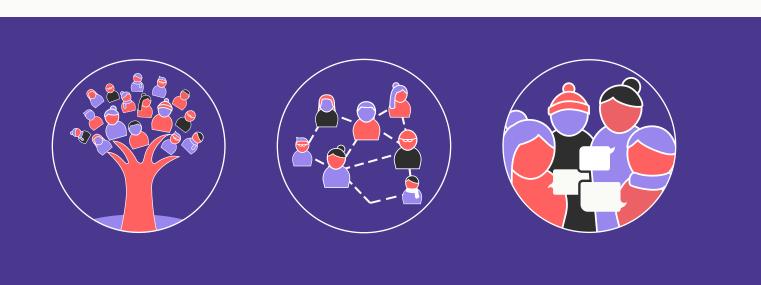# Addressing Community Tensions: Developing Shared Ground

Ideas for building good practice from Belong's Local Government Network

Belong - The Cohesion and Integration Network
April 2023

belong
THE COHESION AND
INTEGRATION NETWORK

2

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

This paper has arisen from discussions with the Belong Local Government Network members and their wider networks. It highlights approaches which members of the Belong Network are currently using, or considering taking, to identify and respond to signs of community tension and to nurture local resilience.

Context

Social cohesion is a dynamic and complex set of relationships that can be profoundly influenced by local, national and international events, both through long-term trends and through the sometimes-sudden impact of 'ripple' effects. We can see particular examples of social and community division in recent years which have led to serious incidents of the type that can have immediate and longer-term impact on places and people.

However, these sit within a wider context affecting many communities across the UK. This context consists of varied interconnected pressures, including: pressures arising from poverty and the 'cost-of-living crisis'; increased pressure on services supporting people; the ongoing impact of the pandemic; pressures on and criticism of policing; the prevalence of 'culture wars' in public dialogue and low levels of trust in politicians and democratic institutions.

Key elements of current good practice

This paper sets out the key elements of current good practice. Some of this draws from and builds on proactive work on tension monitoring and building local community resilience that was developed in northern English towns in the early 2000s, and which was then taken up more widely through partnership working between the police, local councils and government Neighbourhood Renewal Advisors.

Key findings are outlined below and expanded upon in the paper.

Networks are key

- The best placed local authorities have well-developed networks of relationships across the breadth of the community in a way that enables greater awareness of possible tension and faster, more effective responses if tension should emerge.

- Such networks need to be continually refreshed, so that connections and lines of communication are 'live'. They also need to make sure that women and young people are involved and pay particular attention to people from the most marginalised communities.

Social media

- How events are characterised on social media platforms can often serve to escalate tensions, enabling among other things the rapid spread of misinformation and rumours. Yet, what happens in online spaces can be hard to track and difficult to counter.

- Therefore, monitoring social media – tracking trends, debates and emerging issues to assess their possible effect on local communities – has become increasingly important for those who need to anticipate and respond to community tensions. There is a need for this work to be resourced and supported at a national level.

Information and knowledge

- Local authorities and partner organisations need to have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the elements of potential tension – including ideological currents and ideas that might be influencing local communities.

- It is also vital to have an up-to-date awareness of the specific character of local communities, the 'changes and churn' that is going on in communities and the spatial and geographical diversity. All such knowledge develops a more nuanced understanding of the risk of tensions, and enhances the ability to monitor, avert and respond.

Tension monitoring systems

- The best prepared councils have systems in place which can proactively monitor for early warning signs of tension. Some formalisation and development of these structures can be helpful, though there is a need to avoid tension monitoring becoming too process-orientated or bureaucratic.

- Such systems should enable: mapping of incidents and issues; identification of trends; consideration of the characteristics of the incidents and issues; improved understanding of possible tensions and community dynamics; assessment of the intensity of the issues; and understanding of the status of the information being drawn upon.

- These systems need to draw on input from a wide range of professionals and services. There is also a recognised need to enrich and develop these systems by bringing in community voices and perspectives.

Skills and judgement

- The application of good judgement is key to effective responses. Discussion between colleagues, and appropriate leadership from elected politicians, can be crucial to this. Good judgement is particularly critical when it comes to timing.

- Premature action can be unhelpful if it amounts to over-reaction, which risks feeding the situation. On the other hand, there are times when prompt action is crucial, and when an immediate response and confident, well-considered messaging can provide reassurance, and create a shared focus for community identity which centres tolerance and trust.

Promoting key messages

- Effective responses to tension involve getting key messages out. This can be done by council representatives engaging directly, or by channelling messages through community leaders with standing and influence and supporting them to take de-escalating actions.

- Choosing the messages to promote and how to pitch them is crucial. This will require pro-actively countering myths, rumours and misinformation, and setting out facts. It will also mean not shying away from difficult conversations, which, though difficult, are preferable to avoiding the conversation until it's too late. For messages to be effective, the messenger needs to be trusted and the tone well-judged.

What is needed from central government

The Belong Network, alongside others, is calling for the government to empower councils to build social cohesion, local trust and resilience. Among other things, this should involve:

- Providing meaningful resources for local efforts to promote contact across communities, with high-quality activities and programmes to encourage social mixing and to tackle the barriers to inclusion of underrepresented groups and minority communities.

- A measurement framework brought in at national level which helps local authorities assess levels of social cohesion and community resilience.

- A national tension monitoring programme to help build resilience in local areas that is co-produced locally and nationally networked. It should be initially piloted in towns and cities which may be vulnerable or may have fragilities for various reasons around community tensions, and then rolled out more widely.

Introduction

This short paper results from discussion at the Belong Local Government Network meeting in December 2022, and from a follow-on expanded meeting of the Network in February 2023.[1]

It highlights approaches which members of the Belong Network are currently using – and steps which they are considering – to identify and respond to signs of community tension and to nurture local resilience. Everyone in the discussions stressed the critical role of other agencies – and the absolute need to engage and involve communities. For this reason, whilst recognising that the paper originates in discussions between local government officers, Belong feels that the issues covered here will be of general interest, and that the pointers for good practice can be used widely.

Even with local councils taking the lead, the initiatives described here depend on developing partnership and collaborative approaches which involve a range of agencies including voluntary sector organisations, faith groups and bodies, and local residents. The crucial role of the police in monitoring and responding to emergent tensions is highlighted a number of times – and the important contribution of workers at all levels of other agencies is also underlined, from housing officers to youth workers.

Though it is not intended as a comprehensive guide to good practice in addressing community tensions, Belong hopes that the paper presents information which will be of interest to colleagues working in a wide range of organisations and settings. Themes in the paper will be developed through the new Shared Ground community of practice which Belong is launching in spring 2023.

The current context: signs of the times

Social cohesion is a dynamic and complex set of relationships that can be profoundly influenced by local, national and international events and politics, both through long-term trends and through the sometimes-sudden impact of 'ripple' effects.

In towns and cities across the UK – and in many rural areas – signals and indicators about the health of community relations, cohesion and relations between people point in different and contradictory directions.

There are many positive indicators of social integration – and research by Belong provides evidence that where integration is stronger, our communities and the organisations within them are better able to deal with a range of challenges, such as the impact of pandemic.[2]

People in places which had invested in social cohesion in the years before the Covid-19 pandemic 'showed consistently higher levels of social connection, neighbourliness, trust in others and more positive attitudes to other groups than elsewhere. As a result, these areas were able to mobilise more quickly during the pandemic and bring local leaders on board to support engagement, for example, with the vaccine programme'.[3]

On the other hand, in different places and in different ways, there is evidence of varied forms of social and community division, leading to incidents which have immediate and longer-term negative impacts on places and people. Examples include the disturbances involving young people in Mayhill, Swansea, in May 2021; the demonstrations and counter-protests involving people from Hindu and from Muslim communities which took place in Leicester in September 2022; and small-scale but serious actions all too frequently taken by right-wing activists in reaction to the provision of accommodation for asylum seekers and refugees in local areas. These sometimes involve the protestors directly confronting the people living in officially-provided accommodation. Some such protests have resulted in violence, as in Knowsley in February 2023, which was an example of how extreme groups operating online and on the ground are sometimes managing to stir up divisions and hatred faster than local services can mobilise to quash rumours and disinformation.

There is a wider context affecting many communities across England, Scotland and Wales, made up of varied interconnected pressures. These generate the risk of divisive social dynamics which could have an increasing impact on individual people and on community relations, including by exacerbating the tendency to turn inwards towards our 'own' groups and blame others or 'out groups'. The pressures include, in no particular order:

- Financial pressures on individuals and families: poverty and the more general 'cost-of-living crisis', reflected in part in rising household fuel bills.

---

2 Dominic Abrams, Jo Broadwood, Fanny Lalot, Kaya Davies Hayon, Andrew Dixon, Beyond Us and Them: societal cohesion in the context of Covid-19, Belong: The Cohesion and Integration Network, 2021: Beyond Us and Them: Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of COVID-19 - Belong-The Cohesion and Integration Network (belongnetwork.co.uk)

3 Jo Broadwood, 'How do we build community resilience to divisions and extremism?', Belong Network, 19 October 2022: How do we build community resilience to divisions and extremism? - Belong-The Cohesion and Integration Network (belongnetwork.co.uk)

- Increased pressure on services supporting individuals, including local authorities, voluntary organisations, food banks, mental health support services both statutory and voluntary, clinically-based and informal (for much of the pressure which people experience will not result in immediately visible actions, but will be internalised).

- The ongoing and divisive political discussion about Brexit.

- The ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the likelihood of further rounds of Covid and other health challenges, including and exacerbating pressures on the NHS.

- Ongoing 'culture wars', and other forms of divisive political rhetoric fostering fear, suspicion, resentment and blame, both 'top-down' from some politicians and 'mainstream media' outlets, and on the part of some activists at local level, and on social media.

- Indications of lack of trust in politicians, 'politics', and democratic process.[4]

- Impact of international developments, political issues and conflicts, including those which impact on diaspora communities in the UK, and those which generate movements of refugees and immigrants to Britain.

- Expectations of and pressures on policing, and linked criticism of policing, reflecting issues of trust.

- Members of some local communities feeling resentment because of a lack of investment in local infrastructure, which results in a perceived sense of being overlooked, 'left behind' and forgotten.

Many (if not all) of the trends listed above are refracted through, shaped by, and further shape existing patterns of inequalities, including those resulting from racism, which generates forms of resistance to racism and racialisation, and 'backlash' counter-reactions. These create recurrent opportunities for far-right and other extremist political actors to exploit. This problem is exacerbated by a more general political and social culture within which differences between people are often amplified – whereas shared ground or that which we have in common is under-emphasised.

All of these 'signs of the times' suggest that, at a time of economic crisis and global instability, a number of things need to happen, at various levels. Belong believes that is important that politicians take extra care not to provide fuel for extremists seeking to inflame discontent and discord. Instead, they should be ensuring a humane and evidence-based debate about such issues as asylum, which in turn can support local efforts to preserve social peace.

4 Several sections of a recent Belong report directly address this issue. See Dominic Abrams, Jo Broadwood, Fanny Lalot, Kaya Davies Hayon, Andrew Dixon, Beyond Us and Them: societal cohesion in the context of Covid-19, Belong: The Cohesion and Integration Network, 2021, especially sections 4.2; 4.4; 11.1 and 12.3: Beyond Us and Them: Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of COVID-19 - Belong-The Cohesion and Integration Network (belongnetwork.co.uk)

In towns, cities and neighbourhoods, we need more than ever to invest in strengthening our social capital particularly that which exists in relationships across difference. Proportionate work to provide some protection against the risk of divisions and tensions is crucial. Unfortunately, though, successive cuts to budgets mean that local authorities now struggle to fund work which both addresses the risks that can result from problems in intergroup relations, and which positively develops the 'social glue' which is vital to a range of local and national outcomes, in health, education, employment, the local economy and other policy areas. This means that 'when conflict and community tensions arise, they no longer have the eyes and ears on the ground which could have alerted them to the spread of misinformation and prejudice. Authorities are then on the back foot, rushing to try and defuse tensions when rumours have already taken hold with the risk of long-term damage to community relations'.[5]

---

5 Jo Broadwood, 'How do we build community resilience to divisions and extremism?', Belong Network, 19 October 2022: How do we build community resilience to divisions and extremism? - Belong-The Cohesion and Integration Network (belongnetwork.co.uk)

Current good practice

Networking is key

The good news is that, nevertheless, there is much that local places are already doing to promote good relations and reduce tensions and conflict between different groups and communities.

Local agencies involved with Belong have shared information about how they are working with communities to get 'upstream' of problems and manage tensions through a **measured partnership response**. They have identified that a well-networked local infrastructure, one which involves the voice and agency of underrepresented and minority groups, is essential. They highlight the value of developing strong 'bridging' relationships between different groups and communities, providing the foundation for dialogue when conflicts arise, and building a strong level of community resilience.

Participants in the Belong Network's recent discussions recognised that investing in social cohesion before troubles arise is relatively less costly than dealing with the impact and consequences of community conflict – and is anyway a key element of building resilience. The shared feeling was that taking positive and proactive initiatives to promote social cohesion has multiple social and economic benefits, and should be a foundational policy area which informs much wider strategic thinking and action.

It is crucial for resilience to be in place when local issues become controversial and the focus of possible division – or when events in other towns, cities or regions (or even in other countries) have a 'knock-on' effect which generates anxiety, agitation, and concern amongst some community members. Sometimes the local issues can be 'ultra-local': controversy around a planning proposal, a new housing development, parking issues or a spate of fly-tipping can escalate or be exploited and develop into wider conflicts which are patterned on racial or religious lines. Stickering and graffiti by activist groups may be intended to escalate tensions along these lines. Certain issues can become the focus of concern for residents in several towns and cities at the same time, such as the protests over Relationships and Sex Education which took place in 2019.

Where elected politicians and council officers are aware of and alert to the possible signs of community tension, and able to quickly identify and understand such sentiments, **they are well-placed to respond to the situation in ways which positively manage and reduce community tensions.**

But they cannot simply work from the 'top down'. **Relationships have to work in both directions**, both to identify the drivers and triggers creating conflict and then to work to heal them. Networking depends on 'a kind of **community telegraph**', made up of 'eyes and ears on the ground': trusted people who are 'actually in the community', and who are 'ready to work with others if and when things are going wrong'. Such networks of valuable relationships need to be pre-existing and already in place at the point that they are needed: they cannot be suddenly conjured up when there is a problem. Furthermore, the **networks need to be continually refreshed**, so that connections and lines of communication are 'live' and so that women and young people are involved – not just those young people who would readily volunteer to be involved, but those who are 'continually disengaged'. Particular attention needs to be given to involving people from communities which can be marginalised or more at risk of hate crime: 'if you don't have those people at all levels you will not get the intelligence around potential triggers for conflict and the insight about why it might be happening'. These

can help increase the likelihood that tension monitoring systems ensure that agencies are truly 'in touch' and allow the possibility of solutions 'coming from the community itself'.

Within existing networks, **inter-faith organisations play a particularly important and valued role**. Positive responses to recent social tensions discussed by Belong Network members included examples of Muslim, Hindu and Christian organisations working together closely, promoting messages to worshippers, and sometimes putting out joint public statements.

Social Media

One of the most challenging dynamics in situations where community tensions are developing is the role of social media: how events are characterised on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram and other platforms can often escalate matters and lead to greater tensions. Misinformation and rumours can spread rapidly, inflaming tensions and spilling out onto the streets - and some community members, some of the time, can be particularly vulnerable to misinformation.

Resulting issues can have a devastating and long-lasting impact on trust and relations between local communities and can require significant resources to be contained by police, local government and local services: 'social media is so quick and rampant. "Keyboard warriors" can raise the temperature very quickly'. Belong Network members recognise that the way dynamics of division are promoted online can be hard to monitor and difficult to counter.

At the same time, **monitoring social media** can be helpful for those who want to anticipate and respond to issues positively. Belong Network members recognised that most local authorities do not monitor social media in proactive, systematic and meaningful ways – but the need to develop this approach is evidenced by the valuable information that can be accessed. For example, when issues in another place led to some young people in one district feeling that communities they identified with elsewhere were being victimised and needed support, council officers found that 'social media platforms very quickly picked up what was happening'. More generally, **tracking trends on social media** can help council officers and partner organisations **identify emerging issues** in other places – in the UK and more widely - which could come to have an effect on their communities. It would be good practice for this necessary work to be underpinned through the work of a national centre which would monitor and support agencies regarding social media, which could connect closely with local areas.[6]

Information and knowledge

Specific issues can arisein conflicted and disputed matters which need to be understood so as to be well-handled. **It is helpful if councils and partner organisations have sufficient knowledge and an appropriate understanding of the elements of a situation to be able to anticipate the likely effects on their area.**

---

6 This proposal will be developed more fully in a forthcoming joint paper from British Future and Belong.

In some council areas, new developments can take at least some colleagues by surprise, and this leads to initial uncertainty about how to respond: in relation to one set of challenges in 2022, a council officer recognised that 'we did find that there was a lack of understanding around the particular extremist ideology that had been emerging' and so some agencies were not aware of the way in which people who were expressing particular ideologies might impact on other communities.

Being able to access support from colleagues who do have the relevant information is important: the same council officer explained that 'we were able to talk about what that ideology was, and where some of it came from, how it impacted on communities and why it was important for different communities'.

As well as **knowing about the specificities of the issues and ideologies which are at play in events which can add to community tension**, it is vital to have an **up-to-date awareness of the specific character of local communities**. This involves keeping an eye on the 'changes and churn' that's going on in communities, because that has a big impact on social relationships.

Understanding the spatial and geographical diversity in the areas we work in can mean that approaches to tension monitoring and the way we make predictions **take proper account of variations in local demographics and community make-up**. This informs accuracy in our assessments, as we need to be 'nuanced' in understanding the risk of tensions.

Tension monitoring systems

Some council areas have systems in place which mean that the **early warning signs of escalating intergroup tensions can be considered in a structured setting**. A Belong Network member explained how this worked in their area: 'we got different partners together, councillors, the leader of the council, with the police, to monitor tensions and media and track what was going on … tuning into local feelings and sentiment was part of it'.

In some cases, agencies are brought together in one network: council officers from different services including cohesion, Prevent, anti-social behaviour, children's services, youth services, teachers and schools contacts; the police; housing association officers; and voluntary sector organisations and community groups.

Other places take the approach of relating already-existing 'layers' and bodies to each other. In one council area, an officer talked of having a Prevent Advisory Group, 'and other groups as well … a Faith and Communities Forum'. They had formed the ambition to 'create a sort of incident response protocol, so when we do have any kind of tensions or attacks, we as a group can respond to that … we are trying to link all these different elements and parts of the community together in what we are looking to do'.

Another district had a 'CIAG – the Community Impact Assessment Group'. This is made up of many agencies who link into local communities. The groups focus is to impact assess at a local level on tensions, monitor hate crimes and work with partner agencies to provide key and timely information to partners and stakeholders. The members of the CIAG see it as key part of their work to continually engage with people from the statutory, voluntary and faith sector who have an interest in promoting social cohesion and minimising tensions in their local areas and diverse communities. Partners and key individuals are able to feed back any intelligence of importance as 'they are connected locally and have a feel of the tension in the area'.

There was a recognition that information which is offered by such groups needs to be treated appropriately: there is an issue of transparency and trust which local authorities can handle by ensuring that the **members of community groups are aware of and consent to their information being pooled with and considered by statutory organisations for the purposes of tension monitoring and the development of resilience to build stronger communities**.

The need for agencies to operate with transparency and sensitivity is one part of addressing a wider issue. This is that the responsibilities of people 'in the middle' can be particularly difficult to manage. For example, community leaders may be caught in conflict and dynamics of mistrust between their own local community and the authorities. Understanding the challenges of their position is an important basis for effective working.

Where Belong members talked about tension monitoring systems which are currently established in their areas, there was a recognition of the need to further enrich and develop their work. **The importance of bringing in community voices and perspectives** was a key part of this: 'predominantly, it is the statutory organisations that input into the tension monitoring report. But there is a community resilience and engagement group [which is] more widely based, with the voluntary sector, community organisations, faith representatives'. Furthermore, 'the regular communications we have with our communities and young people can be added to the tension monitoring for awareness and action'. The issue in this district was 'linking the different networks'. In some council areas, there was recognition of the need to work on this issue: 'we have a strong monitoring system between the local authority and the police – but we are lacking the community dimension of tension monitoring at the moment'.

So as to **share the understanding and co-ordinate the responses of different organisations**, there was a feeling that some formalisation and development of structures might be helpful: 'we would like to have tension monitoring as a standing system of working'. In that context, partner organisations could consider a range of questions: 'do we have an appropriate incident reporting system? Do we want to develop one? How do we go about doing this more rigorously?' At the same time, it was recognised that we need to avoid tension monitoring becoming a 'heavy lift' that is too process-orientated or bureaucratic.

Colleagues from some places stated that they already do have formal systems, in which local authorities have taken the lead to set up partnership groups and structures to collect and share information and intelligence: 'we have monitoring meetings, we get attendance from the police, housing, the fire services, the council and external statutory bodies, and they feed in every week to monitoring tensions'. This monitoring work informs the work of the Community Safety Partnership, in which agencies recognise that 'we have to do it hand in hand'.

In a large northern city, a council officer explained, 'we have three types of crisis management processes: 1. Responding to rapid tensions (external/international influences) national etc. 2. Long term horizon scanning which can be built into our strategies/resilience and engagement approaches i.e., Brexit. 3. emergency planning on issues such as Covid, cost of living which impacts on normal day to day work, causing re-direction [of council activities]'.

To work most effectively, developing partnerships should establish data-sharing protocols. This can be tricky and takes some work, given the varied accountabilities and systems which different agencies need to follow, and the importance of complying with data protection legislation and good practice and respecting

confidentiality. These issue need to be taken into account in setting up such data-sharing protocols, which can then prove a valuable basis for partnership working in the interests of the whole community.

As tension monitoring partnerships develop, more structure and rigour can be introduced into the group, with the crystallisation of the principles on which people are working. Where appropriate, formal processes and means of escalating concerns can be agreed, e.g., so that issues can be addressed at the level of Police 'Gold command' and council leaders and chief executives.

Such approaches build on what has been retained of the pro-active tension scanning systems which were developed in northern English towns in the early 2000s, and then taken up more widely through partnership working between the police, local councils and government Neighbourhood Renewal Advisors. These systems involved **mapping incidents and issues; identifying trends; considering the characteristics** of the incidents and issues (e.g., criminal, economic, political, social, religious); recognising the multiple and inter-connected layers of tensions and community dynamics; **assessing the intensity** of the issues and trends; and **understanding the status of the information** and evidence being considered (e.g., whether something is being directly and immediately experienced; what the forms of evidence are available and their reliability; whether the indicators being considered suggest latent and potential issues or whether dangers are imminent or live).

Discussion of the question of 'who are the right people to be feeding information in?' involved a recognition that public sector funding reductions over the last decade mean that people in roles who were well-placed to be part of the 'community telegraph', such as Police Community Support Officers and more fully staffed youth services, are now 'no longer there'. Even in areas of provision where funding has been broadly maintained, changed management and governance arrangements have created new challenges: 'relationships with schools have become harder as local authorities now have less direct involvement and much less control, given the number of academies and free schools'. In these ways, and others, 'networks have been eroded'.

Nevertheless, councils and their partners continue to employ significant numbers of people: it is important to draw on their alertness to social issues and their good sense. One council had **a communications channel which meant that any employee could contribute information**: 'we've got a dedicated email address which anyone in the council can use to feed in any tensions'. This was seen as valuable because 'refuse collection teams might notice things, front line staff might see things which cohesion team members and "specialists" aren't in a position to see'.

Other people 'on the ground' who could feed into effective monitoring include estate workers, teachers, youth workers – and appropriate contacts in the local media. Such people are the ones who are most likely to first notice such things as the graffiti and stickering, or to pick up on the 'rumours' that might be an early indicator of issues developing.

The value of the contribution of colleagues from all levels of a range of organisations is multiplied where councils, the police and other organisations have been successful in recruiting from the diverse local communities which they serve, so that the demographic make-up of the workforce is increasingly and broadly reflective of the local population. This means that agencies have credible, well-informed and well-connected teams of people who have 'soft intelligence' and also understanding of local issues and sentiments.

When people were discussing how **members of the community, and people involved with voluntary organisations could feed into the tension monitoring work**, it was agreed that 'mechanisms and networks need cultivating and maintaining. If, instead, they deteriorate over time, [it means that] when tensions, problems and risk do occur, people are not as prepared as they could have been, and do not have the connections and relationships locally that could help manage a situation and move on from it positively'.

Skills and judgement in responding to tensions

In discussing how people who are informed by (formal or informal) tension monitoring should respond to situations and act on their knowledge, there was a view that good judgement is key, and that discussion between colleagues, and appropriate leadership from elected politicians, can be crucial to this. One example of issues around judgement is to do with timing: 'premature action can be unhelpful, it can be an over-reaction, it can feed the issue'.

Discussing a particular issue, a council officer explained that 'we kept it as a watching brief: we didn't want to intervene too early and make an issue of something that wasn't a real cause of concern for our residents'.

Others agreed that 'sometimes it's right to step back. It's important to give information at the right time rather than fuelling the fire'.

This can sometimes mean that work which is done so as to enable particular steps to be taken is not then followed through. This is no failure, but an example of judgement being exercised that something that could be done is better not done. In one council area, a statement which had been prepared by community leaders from different faith communities was not, in the end, actually issued: 'it didn't actually materialise, as the tensions had died down', so that it would have felt artificial to issue the statement. This preparatory work was in no way wasted: think of the problem had people judged that it was in fact urgent to issue a statement which had not even been discussed or prepared. Furthermore, **relationships had been confirmed and developed which lay the basis for future partnership working**.

On the other hand, **there are times when prompt action is crucial**. When there is an immediate response to a conflicted situation from the top of a local authority or police force, and there is **confident, well-considered messaging** and appropriate action, this can filter down and shape culture in an organisation. It can also make people at a community level feel confident that issues are understood and being acted upon, and create a shared focus for community identity, centring around tolerance, trust, and a recognition that we should not be accepting hatred. This can also be true if there is a trusted and well-functioning faith forum or faith leaders' group who have already built up trust over time and are able to quickly respond together to a crisis situation.

Delays or a lack of visible action at all levels can make people feel the issue is being ignored or there is a lack of confidence to tackle it.

Promoting key messages

Council officers described different means of **getting key messages out in situations where tensions were developing**. In some cases, council representatives took on this role themselves: 'we did quite a lot of engagement in local areas', saying to people that 'they shouldn't get involved in activities which would escalate a situation'.

At other times, the necessary messages and signals were already being given by people who had the relevant standing and influence: 'community leaders came together and did some visible messaging at neighbourhood level'.

In another variant, council officers built on their relationship with community leaders to encourage them to take particular steps: 'we went to the temple and spoke with the elders there, and we spoke to the Muslim leaders about how they could have conversations with some younger members of the Muslim community'.

Choosing the messages to promote and determining how to pitch them is part of effectively responding to rising tensions. **Pro-actively countering myths, rumours and misinformation** is part of this. Setting out facts and not shying away from difficult conversations such as around asylum seeker dispersal policy has proved to be a successful way of preventing or reducing conflict in some areas: it is certainly preferable to the approach of 'pretending nobody will notice', waiting and 'avoiding the conversation until it's too late'. There are, however, a number of risks to be managed when working on these issues. Effective approaches are nuanced, and take appropriate account of context and the views and feelings of people who are involved. If the messenger is not trusted, or if the tone is ill-judged, the way that officials 'set out the facts' can risk simply confirming the distance between the agencies and community members who are open to divisive messaging. It is the reasons for any risks of division and polarisation and the underlying issues which need to be addressed.

What's needed now: The wider context for positive responses to community tensions

Community tensions are best handled if work is done between the times that community tensions are apparent. One element of this is 'unpacking' what has happened once a moment of risk has been and gone. Making time to reflect and discuss is part of this – and this is not always easy in the context of busy workloads and multiple pressures.

Nurturing the confidence to open up 'difficult' issues is also important in building good practice. Sometimes there is a tendency for cohesion work to emphasise the many positives which are to be found in the convivial, generous and supportive interactions that people from different backgrounds have with each other. Sometimes, a Belong network member reflected, we tend 'to keep positive stuff about kindness together under the heading of cohesion and emphasise that ... it's become the more prominent side of cohesion work, whereas the "tensions" part is more difficult and perhaps people approach it with a bit of trepidation'. This involves taking risks (and therefore the need to develop skills to take those risks safely): as some people in the Belong Network meetings stated, 'we can't and should not suppress   difficult conversations ... Some people are angry and need to express that and it's important that we listen. We shouldn't suppress   tensions, but instead should engage with people, and allow them to be angry'.

Such statements recognise that **positive work around cohesion needs to be complemented with preparedness to acknowledge the challenges in communities**. This could involve developing peoples' skill sets in facilitating difficult conversations and conflict awareness, including in terms of how conflicts are refracted and developed through social media.

There is also a need to generalise awareness of the importance of cohesion – and awareness of any signs that it is fraying. One council colleague stated that 'there's perhaps a need to do more about making sure that all our staff recognise the signs, not just on integration but on other issues as well, such as safeguarding'.

As previously indicated, research shows that **investment in activities and programmes that foster social cohesion can provide a bulwark of trust, social connections and strong community relations** that can provide community resilience to hatred and extremist narratives, whether imported or homegrown.

On that basis, the Belong Network, alongside others, is calling for the government to empower councils to build social cohesion, local trust and resilience. This should include providing meaningful resources for local efforts to promote contact across communities, with high-quality activities and programmes to encourage social mixing and to tackle the barriers to inclusion of underrepresented groups and minority communities. Such **programmes would work best if co-produced between local government and local communities, with local people in the driving seat**.

Such **activities should be complemented and informed by a measurement framework brought in at national level which helps local authorities assess levels of social cohesion and community resilience**.[7]

Belong also believes that **a nationally-promoted tension monitoring programme to help build resilience in local areas should be introduced and resourced**, initially piloted in towns and cities which may be vulnerable or may have fragilities for various reasons around community tensions.

This programme could involve a number of phases, beginning with audits to identify problems, issues, and possible flashpoints – and to map social cohesion assets, including potential 'bridgers', as well as 'breakers'. Such audits could be the basis for local partners including the police, community representatives and wider stakeholders to co-design a plan of action that addresses audit findings.[8]

Such plans could include a review of current tension monitoring systems with a view to strengthening and enhancing them, so that as well as ensuring a proactive and rapid response to emerging conflicts it will build longer term community resilience for the future.

---

7 The now discontinued Places survey provided such a framework, meaning that local areas had a way of measuring social cohesion sensitive enough to identify where relationships and networks were beginning to break down. Belong believes that something similar should be reintroduced and has worked with colleagues from the University of Kent to review social cohesion measurement frameworks. Belong understands that a forthcoming report from the government's Independent Adviser for Social Cohesion and Resilience will include a recommended 'basket of indicators', which will be a positive step in promoting the value of measuring and tracking social cohesion.

8 This phased approach to developing community tension monitoring and response plans could reinstate, build on and update previous good practice, such as that set out in Understanding and monitoring tension and conflict in local communities: A practical guide for local authorities, police service and partner agencies, Institute for Community Cohesion, 2010. Updating would need to take account of the changes in funding to public sector organisations since 2010, and the increased significance of social media, as highlighted in this paper.

Developing the Belong Network's communities of practice

As well as calling for these steps to be taken by government, Belong is complementing its Local Government Network by launching a new Shared Ground community of practice for individuals and key stakeholders who play facilitator or tension-monitoring roles, and for others who would like to be part of confirming and developing effective work for social cohesion. This community of practice will be skills-based with elements of training and continued professional development. It will focus on developing skills and information, to help build collaborative approaches and developing the capacity and confidence to work more effectively in situations where there is conflict and tensions. It will promote a positive approach to nurturing and reinforcing community resilience. To find out more go to the **Belong Network website**.

Some key points: A checklist

The following concluding points do not summarise all the suggestions in this paper, but are offered as a summary of some of the best practice themes.

- In places around the country, people are using good practice to promote social cohesion and to reduce community tensions and potential conflicts. These positive initiatives could be generalised through sharing information about what works, and through underpinning support being provided at national level.

- Systems and arrangements to identify, monitor, assess and respond to community tensions are an important part of work to build community resilience.

- Developing partnership working between local authorities, the police and a range of other organisations is key to effective tension monitoring.

- The most crucial and central aspect of this work is the involvement of local community members – through voluntary, community and faith organisations, and as individual residents. Engaging people from all sections of our diverse communities is a continual process.

- Leadership and 'ownership' are also key: where senior elected politicians and officials from key agencies are alert to the possible signs of community tension, and able to quickly understand such sentiments, they are well-placed to respond.

- Users of social media can promote misinformation and fuel divisive attitudes and conflicts: it is increasingly important for councils and other agencies to monitor and respond to this, and this work should be resourced and supported at national level.

- Tension monitoring needs to be informed by a continually refreshed awareness of the specific character of local areas, so that proper account is taken of variations in local demographics and community make-up.

- Responding to emergent tensions involves good judgement in the pitching of key messages and promoting accurate information. This is most effective when timed well, and when facts and positive perspectives are communicated by the best placed people – sometimes this will be senior agency representatives, at other times it will be grass-roots community activists.

- Positive work to promote social cohesion needs to be complemented with preparedness to acknowledge the challenges in communities, and the real difficulties facing many people around the country today. This could involve developing peoples' skill sets in facilitating difficult conversations.

- Investment in activities and programmes that foster social cohesion can provide a bulwark of trust, social connections and strong community relations – and is significantly less costly than dealing with the impact and consequences of conflict if and when trouble arises.