

Building social cohesion Promoting integration

Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network
Annual Review 2024-25



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belong
THE COHESION AND
INTEGRATION NETWORK

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Foreword

We are proud to introduce this Annual Review, which highlights some of the remarkable work we have done in 2024-25 to build stronger, more connected and cohesive communities.

The Belong Network plays a valuable role in bringing together people, places, and organisations from every sector across a broad geographical footprint. By connecting and supporting our members, partners and supporters we create a space to share knowledge, exchange best practices, and inspire innovative approaches to cohesion.

2024/25 saw Belong working with local communities affected by unrest to identify cohesion challenges and offer place-based opportunities to express what would work best to improve cohesion and strengthen communities. This work provides the foundation for a strategic approach to strengthening cohesion in future and we look forward to the implementation of local strategies and monitoring impact. Evaluation of this work will help us shape practice in future years.

These efforts are complemented by Belong being at the heart of two significant research projects, aimed at generating insights to drive further progress and achieve better outcomes. Furthermore, our work has extended to conducting evaluations for impactful organisations such as the Eden Project and Migrateful, while also advancing resources such as the Power of Sport and Events as part of our learning partnerships with Sport England and Spirit of 2012.

Belong provides a much-valued training programme aimed at those delivering cohesion, integration, and intercultural work across the country. Through targeted support, training, resources, and opportunities for growth, we support these champions to lead with confidence and courage, ensuring their vital work thrives.

With our partner organisations and community champions, we continue to raise the profile of this essential work. We are building a shared voice that not only enhances practice but also influences policy. With British Future and the Together Coalition, we produced the After the Riots report which calls on the Government to implement 12 policy proposals to address the underlying factors which contributed to the riots. We continue to work closely with the LGA, local authorities and government to implement our policy recommendations.

This review demonstrates the work of Belong in the last year, but there is still so much more to do. We will continue to work with our partners to build stronger, more resilient communities where we build bridges and create opportunities for everyone to feel that they belong.



Shalni Arora
Co-chair of Trustees, Belong



Miriam Juan-Torres
Co-chair of Trustees, Belong

1. About Belong

The Belong Network is the UK's leading membership organisation on social cohesion. Set up in 2019 in the wake of Brexit and the Manchester Arena bombing, the vision of Belong is a more united, less divided society. Belong offers academic research, consultancy, training, networking, thought leadership and events focused on improving social cohesion and community resilience in the UK.

What is social cohesion?

Belong uses a working definition of social cohesion: Social cohesion happens when people from different backgrounds meet, mix and get along. The work of cohesion is about developing neighbourhoods, workplaces, institutions and social spaces where difference is welcomed and celebrated. It is about creating places where empathy and curiosity about people 'not like me' are encouraged. When this happens, we can move beyond narratives of 'us' and 'them' towards ideas of kindness, trust and social cohesion between groups.

Another way of thinking about cohesion is that it is the 'social glue' in the places where we live, work and socialise. Its presence means that we get on with and trust our neighbours, colleagues and acquaintances. We feel safe and connected to others – a sense of belonging. We often only notice this vital 'social glue' by its absence.

Our members

Our committed and dynamic membership community comprises members from local government, civil society and the business sector. We provide a shared voice to our members built upon a common goal – to bring people together across difference and build stronger, more resilient communities. Belong exists to connect, support and mobilise all those working to achieve this – developing good practice, influencing policy and building the evidence base on what makes a stronger society. We do this by:

- Providing a collective voice to improve practice and influence policy
- Building the evidence base for why social cohesion matters through original research
- Developing strong leadership and disseminating good practice so people and organisations across sectors and localities can foster trust and good relations

Barking & Dagenham

Calderdale Council

City of BRADFORD
Metropolitan District Council

Kirklees COUNCIL

neighbourlylab

People United

The Linking Network

Who is Your Neighbour?

Sporting Equals
Promoting ethnic diversity in sport & physical activity

Anne Frank
The Anne Frank Trust UK

Building Bridges
Connecting neighbourhoods

IOP Institute of Physics

IP PR North

ARTS

FACING HISTORY & OURSELVES
UNITED KINGDOM

THE JO COX FOUNDATION

PLAN FOR PEACE

All the Small Things

Decentered Media

Historic England

QUAKERS

WOOLF INSTITUTE

Walsall Council

RELATIONSHIPS PROJECT

The Faith & Belief Forum

IP PR

NORTHERN HOUSING CONSORTIUM
VOICE OF THE NORTH

solutions not sides

TOGETHER AS ONE

THE TUTOR TRUST

SPORTED

Yorkshire Sport Foundation

/together

ANTI-BULLYING ALLIANCE

MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

2. Strategic Influence

Belong brings together our members and broader stakeholders to work together to foster stronger communities that are resilient to extremist narratives. Through research dissemination, showcasing the work of our members and building links across sectors and geographies, we provide a collective voice on the benefits and importance of social cohesion work and highlight the crucial contribution of the people who carry it out. Belong has been developing our policy and advocacy work in recent years and have done so through promoting cross-sector collaboration among its members and close partners, for instance through its convening of the Social Connection Sector Advocacy Group.

2.1 Year in Review: Key events

General Election 2024

Belong responded to the announcement of a snap General Election with our own manifesto, *Belonging In Britain: A Manifesto for Social Cohesion*. The report outlined any overarching cohesion challenges we believed any new government would face and set out 26 recommendations as to how they should respond to these. This publication called for a long-term evidence-based approach and drew on Belong's expertise and broad experience of working across sectors to shape our thinking into a coherent policy platform. The impact of this can be seen in the influence it has on the policy work we have since undertaken with partners, and the extent to which many of the recommendations are likely to be enacted in some form in the months and years ahead.

Produced
6
reports and
research papers



Case study – Calderdale Council

Belong maintains its connections to Calderdale Council's Stronger Communities steering group that oversaw the development of the new *Building Stronger Communities Strategic Framework (2025-30)*. Following a review conducted by Belong on the success of their existing framework and further consultations conducted by the local council, the new strategy highlights and monitors the national context as well focusing on the local level. Calderdale Council has a long established and nationally recognised strategic commitment to prioritising social cohesion. The benefits of this were borne out during the pandemic by how the people of Calderdale showed significantly greater trust (10.6% higher) in their local council than in other areas where social cohesion was not prioritised (*Beyond Us and Them*, 2021). Staff benefitted from Belong's training in tension monitoring and other key skills through the Shared Ground programme.

After the Riots

The widespread disorder and racist riots witnessed in the summer of 2024 represented the most serious attack on cohesion and the worst breakdown in societal relations in recent decades. In the aftermath, Belong worked closely with partner organisations British Future and the Together coalition to develop a constructive response to these events.

Belong, British Future and the Together coalition jointly authored the report *After the Riots: Building the foundations for social cohesion* which set out what we believed a joined-up policy response to these events should look like. Ongoing conversations with civil servants suggest that many of the ideas set out in the report, including a national cohesion strategy, now form some part of the Government's thinking and plans in relation to cohesion.

To build on and follow up this report, Belong worked with British Future and Together on a one-day Social Cohesion Summit in November. This brought together over 160 cohesion experts and practitioners from across the country to discuss how to improve cohesion and foster resilience to hateful extremism in communities across the UK. Speakers included Lord Wajid Khan, Minister for Communities, Faith and Resettlement, John Denham, a former Communities Minister, Professor Ted Cantle and Dame Sara Khan.

There was agreement among speakers on the need for the government to take a long-term approach to building cohesion, the need for a national measurement framework and a national tension monitoring system.

“Social cohesion is not the absence of riots. We should judge it by whether most people believe they have a stake and a voice that is equal with others – and whether this is a nation with the confidence to handle difference through dialogue.”

John Denham, Former Communities Minister

Most of the event was given over to smaller breakout sessions focused on key policy areas, designed to tap into the huge pool of knowledge and understanding of all those present. The insight and ideas captured in these sessions was written up in a policy briefing for all attendees and shared with civil servants and others. This has also been a valuable resource which has continued to help shape the thinking of government and others on some of the key challenges to cohesion we face and appropriate responses to them.



2.2 Strengthening our work through collaboration

The Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion

Belong partnered with British Future and the Together Coalition on the evidence gathering phase of *The Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion*, an independent body looking at how we can rebuild social connection and cohesion across Britain. Launched in 2025, the Commission has been welcomed by both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, in a show of cross-party support which highlights the importance of this work. The goal of the Commission is to ensure that everyone has a voice and stake in our shared future.

To inform the Commission Report, Belong organised 8 in-person roundtables in Belfast, Edinburgh, Newcastle, London, Cardiff, Manchester, Yorkshire, Swansea with a further 5 online roundtables held in West Midlands, East Midlands, South and South East England, South West, East England, plus one for think-tanks/policy organisations and another for race equality organisations. These involved 177 stakeholders across all the regions and four nations of the UK. A total of 2243 UK adults responded to the survey, and we also organised eight focus groups (71 participants in total). A call for evidence received over 100 responses.

The report by Belong and British Future will present to the Commission a comprehensive view of the current context, public opinion and the challenges, threats and opportunities that they will need to consider. Through this work, Belong will have played a foundational role in an important and timely piece of work that will continue to influence thinking around cohesion for years to come.

After the Riots
conference

4.4



average rating

2.3 Strategic influence through evaluation of funding programmes

Power of Events

In September 2024 Belong launched a report as part of the Power of Events research project exploring findings from the Spirit of 2012 archive on the impact of events on social cohesion and connection on communities.

The [Power of Events](#) report synthesises learning from Spirit of 2012's archive and other relevant literature and encourages government, both national and local, to think of events through the lens of social cohesion. The events in the archive cut across arts and culture, sport and physical activity. They are an important source of data about how many of these events have created a lasting impact for people and places across the UK. [The report](#) emphasises the need for event organisers to take an intentional approach to planning and delivering events that promote social cohesion and connection asking them to 'consider how to actively promote social connection throughout the event.'

Twenty-eight projects were selected for analysis from Spirit's extensive archive for the learning they provide on 'what makes an event that results in people feeling more connected to their communities and that builds social cohesion.' Based on these learnings the research makes recommendations, including that:

- co-design approaches are used to ensure buy-in from local communities and groups, linking to existing social infrastructure in each location
- all events are evaluated using measurement techniques that are fully accessible e.g. for disabled people or people with English as a second language and monitoring is designed to capture the wider community benefits and partnerships that contribute to social cohesion
- exploring barriers to participation and how they can be overcome is carried out at both design and delivery stages and that this involves both economic and physical barriers
- that other funding bodies open their archives to share learning
- local events are a great way for people to commit a limited amount of time to volunteer, allowing them to engage in their local community. Volunteering encourages social responsibility and the values associated with social cohesion

"Events are a powerful way of bringing people together and helping to form more cohesive communities. Spirit of 2012, with our funded partners, have been working for the last 10 years to show how events can bring people together and bridge divides, and to understand how this happens. We were delighted to open our evidence bank to Belong to improve our understanding of the link between events and social cohesion. This first output from our learning partnership explores the evidence base and will be developed into tools for event organisers and commissioners to achieve cohesion outcomes with their events. We hope this learning will be useful for a wide range of organisations through Spirit's closure and beyond. We are grateful and excited to continue working with Belong."

Ruth Hollis, CEO of Spirit of 2012

A Power of Events Launch Webinar discussed the report's findings. The report synthesised learning from Spirit of 2012's archive and other relevant literature to encourage and support event organisers to maximise their benefits to social cohesion and connection. Speakers included Belong's Dr Jeni Vine, Ruth Hollis, CEO, Spirit of 2012 and Professor Dominic Abrams OBE. The next phase is to bring out a learning resource for event organisers.

Belong Network hosted recipients of Spirit of 2012's 'Moments to Connect' grants, including Jack Drum Arts and Neighbourly Lab, who shared insights into what it takes to create a successful event which contributes to social cohesion. This online learning event looked at how they planned their events; what advice they would give to others looking to increase community involvement; and how they ensured their event produced long-term change. A free online resource was also developed from the learnings from this strand of Spirit 2012's work.



3. Raising skills and knowledge

3.1 Shared Ground

Shared Ground is a Belong training programme that supports those collaborating with residents and within neighbourhoods to promote harmony and effectively manage community tensions – including local authorities, housing associations, statutory authorities including the police and fire services working directly with communities at risk of or experiencing conflict. It is also relevant to charities, voluntary organisations, faith groups, education providers and community groups working on conflict resolution and community building at both local and national levels. Belong ran one training programme open to everyone during the year consisting of 6 sessions over 6 months. Participants were from a combination of local authorities and civil society organisations.

Three quarters of participants in the Shared Ground Programme said that it had confirmed or helped their abilities to notice the signs of community tension when they are first emerging in the communities they work in.

Three quarters of participants also said the programme had helped them to track and understand social tensions and threats to cohesion to a significant extent, with an additional quarter of participants saying that it helped them to a very significant extent.

Two thirds of participants said that the programme significantly helped their abilities to take positive steps to address issues relating to social cohesion, with the further third of people saying that their abilities had been increased to a very significant extent.

“It has helped me realise the opportunity we have to strengthen our focus on social cohesion.”

Dan Green, Managing Director, Bridges for Communities (Bristol)



Case study – A bespoke course for Walsall Council

Belong supported key staff through the Shared Ground training course by enabling a deeper understanding of local community dynamics and providing the tools to assess community tensions through conflict analysis and measurement frameworks. This support has facilitated the establishment of stronger connections with newly arrived and marginalised communities, promoting further integration within the diverse populations of Walsall and fostering an enhanced sense of belonging in the area. An example of this is the Council supporting newly arrived Africans in Walsall. A tribal queen of Cameroon resides in Walsall and plays a significant role in facilitating integration into the community. She organised a Women’s Football Tournament last year to bring together diverse communities through sport. This event provided an opportunity for participants to learn about and experience different cultures.

“It has helped me notice the signs of community tension and plan ahead.”

Harjinder Lal, Community Building and Cohesion Officer,
Walsall Council

3.2 Communities of Practice

Belong's Communities of Practice have had three distinct impacts over the year.

- They built and expanded professional networks, plus access to guest speakers, training materials and new research. Since Autumn 2024, Belong and StreetGames have worked together on *The Power of Sport in Communities* - a Sport England-funded project using sport to build local cohesion. This was a spin-off from the Community of Practice and brought people from different backgrounds together through community sports festivals and trained local coaches to deliver both sport and social connection.
- They also provided a valuable sounding board to discuss challenges and new ideas with people working in a similar role or facing similar challenges around the UK, upskilling those working in the cohesion field. The Local Authority Community of Practice grew to include many of the areas affected by the riots. It proved to be highly valuable to share good practice with colleagues in similar roles around the country. More generally, it has enabled learning, sharing and discussion of best practice in relation to tensions monitoring, cohesion strategy development and inter-faith work and other related themes.
- Finally, the Communities of Practice have been a great way for Belong Network members to develop a collective voice on the steps that we need to take to build and maintain social cohesion, and to advance our case to policy makers. In May 2024, Belong convened a new Community of Practice "*Places and People*" designed specifically for organisations involved in place-based approaches to building cohesion. This network brought together voluntary sector organisations, community groups and faith organisations working at a local level in towns and cities. Members shared information and discussed inputs on relevant issues together. The Tackling Race and Faith Hate Crime Community of Practice convened to focus on preventing prejudice and develop a clearer focus on work involving young people going forward.



3.3 Learning resources

Power of Sport

Following the development of the interactive online Power of Volunteering toolkit in 2023, in March 2025 Belong relaunched our digital sports toolkit, [Power of Sport](#). Initially developed in 2021, with funding from Spirit of 2012 and Sport England, and based on our Power of Sport guidance report, the toolkit has been updated to be more accessible and interactive. The updated resource was created in collaboration with StreetGames and funded by Sport England.

The toolkit helped those designing, delivering and evaluating sports programmes to create inclusive, impactful activities that bring people together, bridge divides, and foster a sense of belonging. Based on user feedback, the new, improved version of Power of Sport is easier to use with a completion time of only 60 minutes. More people completed the toolkit and developed their own action plans for maximising the effectiveness of their programmes in building social cohesion.

The toolkit includes case study videos, links to useful external resources and interactive exercises. It guides the user towards creating their own Theory of Change tailored to their individual organisation/ sports programme. Belong also piloted tailored training packages to organisations, expanding on the learning from the toolkit to provide more in-depth guidance based on their needs.

"We are delighted to have worked with Belong on the development of the Power of Sport Toolkit. Time is extremely precious for the locally trusted community organisations we support to bring sport and physical activity into their communities. So an accessible, easy to navigate and practical resource like this is just what they need to help them increase their local impact on social cohesion."

Mark Lawrie, CEO, StreetGames

Power of Volunteering

Belong also ran a workshop to introduce people to the Power of Volunteering toolkit that supports organisations that involve volunteers to maximise their impact on social cohesion. We have continued to work with the [Shaping the Future with Volunteering](#) coalition that brings over 30 of the largest UK charities together to develop key resources. The toolkit is used internally for staff training amongst members of the coalition, therefore reaching thousands of volunteers.

4. Strengthening civil society

4.1 Place-based Cohesion Approaches: Our work with councils and partner organisations

Following the rioting and disorder of summer 2024, Belong worked intensively with nine councils over the following months, from the Northwest and Northeast to the Midlands and the South. Through a variety of approaches, local authorities developed recovery plans together with the police, voluntary sector organisations and other agencies. Belong's contribution complemented this work through our conflict-aware community engagement approach, helping local people, elected representatives and officers from statutory bodies identify and consider the difficult and challenging underlying issues that were surfaced by the disorder.

In three of these places, our initial support led to further collaboration, building the basis for long-term social cohesion strategies for each council based on the discovery and assessment phase. Co-production is at the heart of these strategies, which are being created with input from key stakeholders, ensuring community voices remain central to shaping comprehensive authority-wide approaches.

Our inputs focus on developing stronger relations with and between all communities, together with enhanced resilience and increased skills and capacity to monitor and respond effectively to toxic narratives driven by mis/disinformation, hateful extremism, and social tensions exacerbated by local, national or international events. This ongoing work is a key strategic focus going forward.

Worked with 9 local authorities to understand their communities and with systems partners (police, health, education) to ensure a joined-up approach



Our work over the year and from earlier research (Beyond Us and Them, 2021; Bradford for Everyone Evaluation, 2022) shows that the effective cohesion approaches we are fostering:

- increase social trust and engagement
- improve and deepen the engagement between communities and public bodies
- build increased levels of trust, feelings of belonging, neighbourliness and active civic engagement

Amid rising cost of living pressures on communities and the challenges faced by local councils and public sector organisations, it is essential to recognise both the challenges and opportunities generated by demographic changes and increasing diversity in our communities. To navigate these issues effectively and seize opportunities is fundamental to our wider impact.

A time-bound, eight-week discovery and assessment phase has been central to the success of Belong's place-based work in areas such as Tamworth, Rushmoor, and Sunderland. This concentrated approach builds early momentum, secures partner engagement, and rapidly aligns stakeholders around shared priorities. It also enables Belong to ground our community engagement work on robust evidence by incorporating literature reviews, public datasets, and existing local analysis on top of our community listening to ensure each strategy targets the most pressing issues affecting community cohesion.



Case study – Sunderland City Council

Belong was engaged by Sunderland City council in response to the violent disorder in the Summer of 2024. As part of its community recovery efforts, the City Board made up of key strategic partners including the local authority, health, business, education, police and housing came together. They commissioned Belong to support efforts to understand the state of cohesion with the longer term aim of co-designing a strategic framework to strengthen cohesion in the city.

Between November 2024 and February 2025 our team met with over 350 residents and stakeholders, conducting focus groups and interviews as well as public dialogue events bringing together a range of local actors from residents to decision makers. A cohesion summit in February saw the culmination of three months of engagement as the Belong team presented evidence from Phase I of our engagement work to over 90 attendees from a range of sectors. The next phase of delivery will see collaborative workshops and thematic events with lead officers, professionals and community representatives to co-design and inform a cohesion strategy and other initiatives for the city.

Feedback from Sunderland Community Dialogue events:

“The final Q and A panel of the day was brilliant - listening to people who have been at the forefront of this agenda was really inspirational.”

“Thank you for making this happen. Very useful - increasing knowledge, making new friendships, networking and processing the area of hate, and the riots.”



4.2 Demonstrating impact of National Programmes

By evaluating programmes through the lens of social capital, their wider benefits can be celebrated. Broadly, social capital describes connections between people, categorised as:

- bonding (within-group connections)
- bridging (between-group connections) and
- linking (connections to people of greater power or institutional authority)

Many community projects and their evaluations focus on the benefits of bonding but miss the wider benefits to communities that can be achieved by giving equal attention to opportunities for bridging and linking. Belong's evaluations emphasise these wider gains and highlight the importance of them.

Case study – Eden Project Communities

Belong was commissioned by Eden Project Communities to evaluate the impact of over a decade of co-ordinating *The Big Lunch* and associated programmes nationally. The evaluation provides new information to inform future directions for these important annual events and spaces where people can connect. It also helps support the case for continued investment in such initiatives as a means of improving social cohesion and connection.

“By looking at the benefits of The Big Lunch through the lens of social capital, the wider benefits of: people bridging across different friendship and interest groups; linking with local decision-makers to bring about improvements in their communities; and raising over £100 million for charitable causes since 2015 through Big Lunch events were highlighted. Previous evaluations had not highlighted these wider benefits of the programme.”

Emily Mann, Research Manager, Eden Project

Case study – Migrateful

Belong was commissioned by Migrateful, an award-winning charity supporting asylum seekers, refugees, and vulnerable migrants through cookery classes on their journey to employment, independence, and integration. Belong was asked to provide recommendations to improve in-class messaging so contact is even more effective in helping to increase understanding and dispel misconceptions about both migrants and the challenges they face and those who are hostile to them.

“It was incredibly valuable to work with the Belong Network, whose insight and expertise helped us reflect more deeply on how our cookery classes can reduce prejudice towards migrants living in the UK. Their report encouraged us to be more intentional about how we create the conditions for meaningful contact, particularly through the role of our facilitators. It offered a fresh perspective on how subtle changes to our delivery model could strengthen its impact, especially in contexts where tensions may be more pronounced.”

Jess Thompson, Founder & CEO



5. Future Plans

I am delighted to share this forward look after what has been a challenging year for our communities and for those working tirelessly to support them. This report stands as testament to the way Belong and our network have led and contributed to recovery efforts, helping to build resilience and connection as we move forward. I am immensely proud to have joined such a dedicated and hardworking team driving this important mission.

Building on the foundations of what we have achieved ‘in place’ over the past year, we will:

- **Continue to deliver our work with local authorities**, consolidating Belong’s four-stage model of place-based support to help local authorities and civil society organisations strengthen cohesion policy, strategy, and delivery.
- **Develop national social cohesion guidance** in partnership with the Local Government Association, ensuring that every local authority has access to high-quality, practical resources.
- **Create new tools and resources** to help organisations measure the social value and impact of their work on connection and cohesion.
- **Work with government departments**, including MHCLG and DCMS, to influence future policy and practice on social cohesion.
- **Continue to advocate for a national social cohesion measurement framework**—a single, accessible index that identifies and measures relative levels of risk and resilience across the country.

In a year that has tested the resilience of our communities and the sectors that serve them, it can be easy to feel daunted by the scale of the task ahead. Yet Belong has always understood that it is through laying strong foundations and pursuing deliberate, sustained action that we truly strengthen cohesion and resilience.

The challenges are great - but so too is our determination. With that resolve, I look forward to reporting back in a year’s time on the progress we have made and the difference our work continues to achieve.

Kelly Fowler, CEO

“Being a trustee of Belong has been one of the most meaningful roles I’ve taken on. What sets Belong apart is its belief that cohesive, integrated communities aren’t just possible - they’re essential. It meets complexity with empathy, intelligence, and long-term thinking that challenges the status quo. I’ve seen its work empower communities and foster connection where division once stood. It’s not only deepened my understanding of good governance, but of the kind of society I want to help build.”

Reeya Harish Gadhvana, Belong trustee

Get in touch

Whether you are already carrying out social cohesion and integration work, or keen to find out how Belong could help your organisation to help you bring people together across difference and build resilient communities, we'd love to hear from you.

We are always keen to hear from those who are interested in joining us as a member or collaborating on research and advocacy work.

To find out more, get in touch via hello@belongnetwork.co.uk

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