

## COMMUNICATING COHESION

### Evaluating Local Authority Communication Strategies

**Institute of Local Government Studies, University of  
Birmingham**

**Democratic Audit, Human Rights Centre, University of  
Essex**

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This report was researched by:

University of Birmingham: Hilary Kitchin, Jenny Phillimore, Lisa Goodson, Lucy Mayblin, Andrew Jones (consultant), Alan Pickstock (consultant)

Democratic Audit: Stuart Weir, Andrew Blick

For further information contact: Karen Hoare, Institute of Local Government Studies, School of Government and Society, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK Tel: +44 (0)121 414 5030 [k.h.hoare@bham.ac.uk](mailto:k.h.hoare@bham.ac.uk)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	4
Recommendations.....	8
INTRODUCTION .....	12
Local authority communications.....	12
Chapter 1: Research and Guidance .....	17
Guidance on promoting community cohesion .....	17
Working with the media.....	18
Local authority communication during election periods .....	19
Media codes of conduct .....	19
<i>Case study: Giving social cohesion a high profile .....</i>	<i>25</i>
Chapter 2: Local Authority culture and internal communication .....	26
<i>Case study: Responding to misleading election propaganda .....</i>	<i>33</i>
Chapter 3: Creating and sustaining external networks .....	35
<i>Case Study: Building Community Confidence .....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>Case study: Police engagement in tension monitoring.....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>Case study: working 'on the ground' .....</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>Case study: Monitoring and managing tensions .....</i>	<i>45</i>
Chapter 4: Communicating with the public .....	47
<i>Case study: Dealing with the national press .....</i>	<i>51</i>
Chapter 5: Guidance and experience .....	53
Chapter 6: conclusions and recommendations.....	58
<i>Case study: An anatomy of social disintegration .....</i>	<i>67</i>

# **COMMUNICATING COHESION**

## **Evaluating Local Authority Communication Strategies**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report is the result of research into local authority communications in the context of their community cohesion policies. In particular, it looks at their ‘myth busting’ strategies in the light of the landmark report in June 2007 by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC). The CIC report concentrated on practical approaches to building the capacity of local authorities and communities to prevent problems arising between different communities in local authority areas.

We carried out our appraisal by examining the community cohesion policies and strategies for communication in six very different local authorities after conducting a literature and media review. Our primary tasks were to consider:

- the relationship between local authorities’ broad communication strategies and their ability to respond to damaging myths; and
- the nature of success and failure in the experience of local authorities that are working to counter myths and misinformation and promote transparent communication policies.

Our study reinforced the need for effective communications to address perceptions by some groups that they are losing out to others and the need for local authorities to take a strategic approach to communications. Such an approach needs to be supported by good information about the local community and it needs to involve not just the council staff and members, but the community itself.

Local authorities must recognise that communications are not just ‘something done by a press officer’, or even a senior and well qualified team: communications run through everything councils do in all services and at all levels.

All staff have a role in countering myths and misinformation, but they must themselves be well informed, as must the local authorities. We endorse the CIC's call for effective local scrutiny and risk structures, backed up by strong local data and intelligence. It is here that myths and racist propaganda are best countered, by strategies such as our authorities were developing, by word-of-mouth at local level, using networks of trusted partners, from the local police officer and community activist to a shop-keeper or lollypop person; and through small-scale negotiations over tensions and difference.

This type of approach was found to be more effective than myth busting. In general the view was that residents do not trust myth busting statements, which may unintentionally legitimise the view in some people’s eyes rather than challenge it.

The six authorities we visited were aware of the social deprivation, worklessness and economic disadvantage that afflicted some of their communities and divided them from others and all reported that it was necessary to address perceptions among a

range of social groups that other sections of the community had better access to services and resources than were available to them.

The presence of individuals and communities from different ethnic or faith backgrounds contributed to these perceptions of difference, especially in the case of new migrant communities. The CIC called on local authorities to address the substantive issues for both majority and minority communities of deprivation, under-achievement, lack of opportunity and aspiration. This is also a major responsibility for national government, both in terms of the national resources it devotes to social and economic deprivation and in the resources it passes onto local authorities and other local agencies.

Such considerations mean that notions of ‘success’ or ‘failure’ are not helpful in considering the work of local authorities in maintaining or creating a level of community cohesion that can withstand the pressures of deprivation, difference and right wing exploitation. They are obliged to identify and understand the fast-moving changes that are taking place in their areas; to deploy such scarce resources as they have in a fair and transparent manner; to create effective networks with a wide range of partners to monitor risks on the ground and to build the trust essential to resolving tensions. They will make mistakes, as some of our study authorities have done: the point is to learn from them

We found that the six authorities in our study were all responding to the challenges with varying degrees of effectiveness. Above all, some provided inspired leadership in response to tensions and the myths that often set them off, or established or supported major cross-communal enterprises that were designed to foster a spirit of tolerance, understanding and good relations.

#### *Local authority culture and internal communications*

The media and communication practice in our six authorities broadly followed the direction indicated by national guidance. However, we found that the effectiveness of authorities in communicating with residents in all communities depends on the depth of understanding, the culture of the authority and the strategies, practices and processes that follow from it. The culture of the authority is important in making it possible to identify and articulate a broad vision for the area.

Although all our authorities had communications strategies, these took a variety of forms and had different impacts. Some were more practical than others and there were big differences in awareness of them within authorities. We found that some authorities were struggling to link the communications strategy to the authority’s wider objectives, to encourage its adoption by staff and elected members, and to use it to work with external bodies.

It was clear from our examination of the six authorities that councils do need an expert and dedicated team, responsible for internal and external communications. That team needs to be properly resourced. Communications had a greater priority in authorities where the head of communications was a senior officer able to influence strategic discussions and decisions.

We found that informal structures were important alongside the formal structures in promoting community cohesion.

Despite its importance, not all of our authorities appeared to make communication with staff a priority. Where it was a priority, it was valued for conveying and receiving information and transmitting strategic and cultural objectives to staff throughout the organisation.

Elected members have crucial responsibilities that are integral to the cohesion of communities. We found good and bad examples of councillor involvement: at its best parties united to send clear messages of cohesion; at its worst, members were reluctant to 'stand up and be counted'. Although there are a variety of approaches to member involvement, we are not in favour of responsibility for community cohesion being given to a single executive member.

#### *Creating and sustaining external networks*

A council's ability to promote community cohesion externally depends on the inter-relationships of officers and elected members with professional and working counterparts in the wider community.

Local Strategic Partnerships and community forums, for example, have important roles to play in communicating positive messages and in reporting back on myths and misinformation which are circulating in the community. However, most authorities were still at an early stage of looking at how best to communicate on cohesion issues through the LSP.

One authority is convening a group that will bring together council officers with the police, housing associations, private landlords and others to identify likely problems and how to address them. Another authority has based its community cohesion strategy on a range of activities that rely on relationships and connections and community generated campaigns.

Throughout our research, the police emerged as vital actors in the process of combating extremist mythology and in projects aimed at securing better community cohesion. However, we found that there is not always a perfect fit in objectives between the police seeking to identify tensions and to prevent violent behaviour and terrorist activity, and local authorities seeking to promote cohesion.

Four of the six areas covered by the study have experienced differing degrees of civil disturbance on separate occasions during recent years. In some instances the disorder has clearly been generated by perceptions of differential access to services between social groups or simply a sudden surge in demand by a particular group. It is generally recognised that the incidents could be attributed in part to resentment caused by significant failures to communicate with communities about the allocation of resources. Good myth-busting strategies appear to assist authorities while they go through the longer term process of reassessing and changing fundamental policies and practices.

However, as the head of community engagement and cohesion in one authority warned, 'it's easy to hide behind myth-busting'. There are occasions when 'myths'

have a foundation in truth, or where the evidence available to counter the myth may be complex or may not be compelling and can only create more uncertainty. In these circumstances authorities have to make pragmatic decisions about how to handle the issue. Moreover, the more authorities are able to develop and embed a broad approach to communication, the less need they have for myth-busting activity. It seems from our study that more worked up myth-busting strategies are of most value for authorities that have yet to feel the benefit of a broader communication strategy.

#### *Communicating with the public*

It was clear that the relationship with the local press and broadcast media remained important for our study authorities and a cornerstone of all local authority communication practice. However, more emphasis is being placed on communicating directly with the public and local authority staff and making use of all the channels at an authority's disposal, through staff, partnerships, forums and events.

We found that the use of new forms of media is on the whole underdeveloped and under-estimated. They are given little attention and few resources. Newsletters, magazines, periodic information sheets, myth-busting leaflets and accessible reports are the basic tools of communication adopted by authorities, police and LSPs. Yet websites, blogs and inter-active sites are becoming increasingly important means of communication. More attention, too, needs to be given to developing relationships with minority ethnic media.

All local authorities continue to deal with the local press, both to promote a sense of 'place' and community cohesion and to counter inaccurate or misleading reports on all their activities and not merely issues of community cohesion. Yet our conclusion was that councils should put more time and resources into dealings with the local media. There is evidence that refugees and asylum seekers are directly affected by unbalanced and inaccurate newspaper reports and negative reporting can increase the likelihood of racial harassment.

On the whole, we found that local reporting was sensitive to issues of community cohesion, with local papers seeing themselves as part of the local community and in some cases prepared to work with councils to promote cohesion and contradict misleading information. However, it takes effort to build a good relationship with the local media.

#### *Learning from experience: monitoring and managing tensions*

##### *Research and guidance*

An important part of our research was to assess the value of official guidance for councillors and officers. The report summarises the body of existing research and guidance available to authorities.

While we heard from authorities that guidance and standards had been helpful, looking forward they were more interested in learning directly from the practice of other authorities about what works. Every area is different and needs to adapt good practice, good ideas and guidance to help arrive at local solutions.

One of the main lessons from our study is that authorities learn most from their own experience. All reported a process of continuous learning and of adjusting responses as a result of practical experience.

Four of the authorities visited had experienced civil disturbances and described a reassessment of cohesion and communication activities and relationships with communities, partner organisations and the media as a result.

Authorities measure and evaluate their practical experiences in a number of different ways, some less structured than others. In the study two main aspects emerge about learning from experience and monitoring: the monitoring based on customer feedback, matching needs to services and providing the basis of future policy and political decisions that are necessary to address cohesion, and assessment of the impact of communication in the context of cohesion.

Adjusting practice as a result of experience takes place at many levels and is the most effective form of change, taking account of local circumstances and bringing in experience from a wide range of activities to inform communication on cohesion issues.

## Recommendations

### **Local and central government**

1. Authorities need to be alert to the likelihood of conflict and have in place the information gathering networks to inform their judgements and decisions.
2. Authorities should use horizon-scanning techniques, carry out effective equality impact assessments and plan communications on issues that might have an impact on cohesion.
3. Accurate information is also necessary at local level to understand the social and economic factors impacting upon people's lives that are most likely to lead to community conflict.
  - a. Local partners should prioritise joint work in identifying resources for the collection of information.
  - b. As information collection and collation is expensive, and may conflict with central government requirements such as the annual Place Survey, central government should review the requirement for the Place Survey after three years.
4. Local authorities must join with strategic partners to lead the way in constructing a sense of identity and place, but must make the distinction between locality and local authority – the vision should be owned by the locality.
5. For communications strategies to be effective:



- a. A sufficient level of resources must be provided to enable communications teams to be proactive
  - b. The head of communications must have sufficient seniority to influence communications at every level within the authority.
6. Communications should sit at the centre of an authority's community leadership activities and its role within its Local Strategic Partnership. Central government should take steps to encourage statutory agencies to commit more resources to communications at local level.
7. Authorities should demonstrate that they are capable of two-way communications: consultations with the public should be followed up by effective feedback.
8. Support and training should be provided for all councillors and staff who are likely to be in contact with the media, to help them achieve and maintain levels of confidence and proficiency. These systems must include ward councillors who are often in frequent contact with the local press.
9. Local authorities should aim to create structures which integrate internal and external networks and allow informality within a clear policy framework.
10. Care should be taken when establishing informal communication networks and the arrangements reviewed regularly to ensure that minority groups are not excluded.
11. Authorities and strategic partners should empower groups and individuals to work with media to promote positive stories and understanding and challenge myths, inaccurate and negative stories.
12. Local authority employees should be encouraged to see themselves as ambassadors for the authority and to be its eyes and ears, contributing to knowledge about potential sources of conflict. There is an important role for trade unions in improving staff awareness.
13. Local authorities should communicate their commitment to diversity and fairness to the managers, staff and workers in contracted out services and agencies that provide public services on their behalf.

## **The Media**

Our research has illustrated how a good relationship with the press should work: local authorities should acknowledge that it has a legitimate role and encourage honesty, transparency, and mutual understanding. To this end:

1. Local authorities should persist in promoting working relationships with 'bad' local newspapers as editors and circumstances do change over time

2. It is difficult to win coverage for good news stories but authorities should persist and present issues in a newsworthy way: officers need to understand their local media and target the appropriate press with appropriate stories
3. Local authorities should engage more effectively with the ethnic minority press
4. Support in dealing with changes in the media and training in new media should be provided through the Local Government Association or Chartered Institute for Public Relations
5. The Local Government Association should make support and advice available to local authorities on dealing directly with the national press when required.
6. The rules of the Press Complaints Commission should be revised to allow class complaints to be made
7. Guidelines for the press on multi-diversity are needed at regional and local level, preferably provided by the Association of Editors
8. The National Union of Journalists should remind members and editors of its code (and show that it takes the code seriously by taking action where it is breached)

### **Guidance and support**

1. There is no need for further guidance: practitioners want the opportunity to share experiences, exchange practice materials and have opportunities to meet. Possibilities could include:
  - a. Mentoring arrangements – for example provided by a more experienced communications manager for an area experiencing similar new migration.
  - b. Secondments between authorities with different levels of experience or at different stages in dealing with similar issues
  - c. Critical friend site visits: these could be followed up by regular contact or mentoring arrangements. This type of partnering would involve the Improvement and Development Agency in identifying types of learning that would match needs in particular authorities.

### **Code of recommended practice on local authority publicity**

2. The Code needs to be thoroughly revised to take account of the changing nature of local authority communications
3. Any revision should consider the consequences of local authorities being responsible for communications whether through the comments, materials or expressions of spokespeople of funded organisations in order to take account

of the changing and expanding relationship with community and voluntary organisations.

### **A Rebuttal Unit**

4. There is no need for a national rebuttal unit. Reliance is in practice more effectively based upon two-way communication with a range of internal and external networks.

## INTRODUCTION

### Local authority communications

We were commissioned in April 2008 to investigate local authority communication of their community cohesion policies and, in particular, their 'myth busting' strategies in the light of the landmark report in June 2007 by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC). The CIC report concentrated on practical approaches to building the capacity of local authorities and communities to prevent problems arising between different communities in local authority areas.

We carried out our appraisal by examining the community cohesion policies and strategies for communication in six very different local authorities after conducting a literature and media review. Our primary tasks were to consider:

- the relationship between local authorities' broad communication strategies and their ability to respond to damaging myths, and
- the nature of success and failure in the experience of local authorities that are working to counter myths and misinformation and promote transparent communication policies.

The Commission recommended that every local authority should maintain a communication plan to ensure that all communities are kept abreast of changes in the social composition of their areas and their responses, with a focus on the majority and settled communities which are most vulnerable to myth and rumour. The CIC report underlined the need to move away from a single approach towards more sophisticated analysis and tailored local solutions to the frequent feelings of neglect among majority communities and perceptions of preferential treatment for minorities.

We cannot emphasise too strongly the need for a holistic response to the process of communication. Communication is itself a social and communal process and local authorities communicate in everything they do and say at all levels of service. We believe that this is understood at least implicitly within the six authorities we studied, though not fully throughout all their departments and activities or even in the formal communication strategies they have adopted. As the CIC report argues, there is a need for a more analytical and bespoke approach to advancing community cohesion. This approach must be corporate and communal, and not put to great a focus on an authority's media and narrower communication work.

We discuss the CIC recommendations more fully in Chapter 1 and set out our responses in the executive summary and conclusions, and of course, in the body of this report. Our response is based upon detailed investigations into the practice and experience of the six 'case study' authorities - four of which were unitary authorities, and two districts, one urban, the other rural - and a full review of relevant literature. We have been struck by the scale of the challenge which local authorities face in working to achieve community cohesion in the midst of fast-moving demographic

change which is altering the nature of local areas and services, and the arrival of diverse new communities, all with their own distinctive cultures and norms. Mapping such changes is itself a major undertaking.

This undertaking is made harder by the background of social deprivation and requirements on public services against which inward migration has taken place. We found that social deprivation and competition for scarce resources, and their allocation, were common to all the difficulties that our six local authorities experienced. Allegations or rumours of preferential treatment for this group or that neighbourhood arise almost inevitably in such circumstances. It hardly requires the deliberate intervention of far right extremist groups to spawn ugly myths that can, in the words of the CIC report, 'gloss over the injustice experienced by particular groups, and develop instead a narrative of wider injustice for the settled majority', or a settled minority. But such groups do intervene to make things worse.

The six authorities were aware of the social deprivation, worklessness and economic disadvantage that afflicted some of their communities and divided them from others and all reported that it was necessary to address perceptions among a range of social groups that other sections of the community had better access to services and resources than were available to them. The presence of individuals and communities from different ethnic or faith backgrounds contributed to these perceptions of difference, especially in the case of new migrant communities. The CIC called on local authorities to address the substantive issues for both majority and minority communities of deprivation, under-achievement, lack of opportunity and aspiration. This is also a major responsibility for national government, both in terms of the national resources it devotes to social and economic deprivation and in the resources it passes onto local authorities and other local agencies.

These considerations mean that notions of 'success' or 'failure' are not helpful in considering the work of local authorities in maintaining or creating a level of community cohesion that can withstand the pressures of deprivation, difference and right wing exploitation. They are obliged to identify and understand the fast-moving changes that are taking place in their areas; to deploy such scarce resources as they have in a fair and transparent manner; to create effective networks with a wide range of partners to monitor risks on the ground and to build the trust essential to resolving tensions. They will make mistakes, as some of our study authorities have done: the point is to learn from them.

As we shall illustrate in this report, we found that the six authorities in our study were responding to the challenges we have described above - and not just in the plans and procedures that they adopted- with varying degrees of effectiveness. Above all, some provided inspired leadership in response to tensions and the myths that often set them off, or established or supported major cross-communal enterprises that were designed to foster a spirit of tolerance, understanding and good relations. One of the strengths they could count on was the prevalent idea or a traditional belief that people in this community, or neighbourhood, or city, were 'decent', fair-minded and tolerant.

### **A corporate approach to communication**

We concur with the main thrust of the CIC report and its principal recommendations.

Communication plans must be embedded in a council's corporate strategy, and in the policy and practice of all its departments just as much as in its community cohesion policies and procedures. They are not merely corporate or a press or communication office responsibility, but the need to communicate transparently and honestly must be wired into the thinking of all staff dealing with the public from directors and managers down to front-line staff. All staff should be aware that decisions, for example, over housing allocation, curriculum changes, planning applications or waste disposal have to bear in mind the potential consequences for community cohesion.

Most important of all, we endorse the CIC's call for effective local scrutiny and risk structures, backed up by strong local data and intelligence. It is here that myths and racist propaganda are best countered, by strategies such as our authorities were developing, by word-of-mouth at local level, using networks of trusted partners, from the local police officer and community activist to shop-keepers or other local figures; and through small-scale negotiations over tensions and difference.

In this perspective, much of the emphasis on myth-busting in the local media is a 'fire fighting' resort, although is clearly sometimes necessary in order to provide leadership and avoid the escalation of controversy. It is of course important to try and impress their wider responsibilities upon local newspapers, radio stations and other media. The more generalised use of high-level official statements or well-meant pamphlets and leaflets may do no harm, but only questionable good. In general, as research by ippr, the social policy think-tank, has found, people find 'myth busting' in the form of providing factual information to counter strongly held beliefs patronising. Also by making statements (that they then clarify by refuting) along the lines of 'many people believe asylum seekers are given priority for social housing', authorities may unintentionally legitimise the view in the eyes of residents rather than challenge it. The experience of our study authorities also suggests that in general residents do not trust myth busting statements from the authorities; and anyway, will often hold tenaciously to a myth or rumour, however absurd, simply because they want to believe it. Simple factual information, by word of mouth if possible, may be the best strategy.

## **Methods**

This was a policy development project with the aims of identifying and examining ways of working, and providing user friendly practical recommendations and suggestions for potential policy instruments. Surveys, such as the Citizenship Survey, have drawn out people's experience of their communities, but have not identified local authorities' ways of working and local actors' perceptions of what is working and what is not. As drawing out these elements requires a more qualitative approach, the research was based on six case studies which it was believed would generate varied descriptions of experience. It was decided that the authorities would not be identified in the study, so that respondents were free to provide a 'warts and all' account of their experiences.

The research programme began with a literature review which examined the issues raised by the research proposal from a number of perspectives. The data obtained was used to:

- assist in the identification of selection criteria for case studies
- assist in the development of interview schedules
- draw out experience and perspectives to inform the research findings and recommendations
- allow comparison and assessment of guidance and other information available to local authorities.

Success or failure cannot be identified without more detailed examination, and it was not possible to set these as selection criteria beforehand – indeed success stories may be subject to considerable qualification on closer examination. The literature review, which included a wide range of policy, research and academic material and a trawl of press databases, was therefore of key importance in informing the selection of case studies. The six authorities included in the study were chosen as far as possible to draw on urban / rural experience; type of authority; political balance; electoral profile; geographical spread. We succeeded in including two metropolitan authorities, a unitary, two districts (one predominately rural), and a London borough with differences in political balance and electoral profile. We took into account differential experiences of: far right activism and electoral presence; migration, refugees and asylum seekers and established BME communities; instances of civil unrest or racist incidents. We also looked for ‘reflective authorities’ where the available material showed that the authority was giving attention to the issues that would be examined by the research.

The research team visited the case study authorities during July – September 2008, conducting interviews with local authority officers and elected members, examining what the authorities have done and their views on whether the measures adopted have been successful or not. Interviews were conducted with chief executives, directors of law and communications, relevant community affairs or equalities officers, and up to two elected members with relevant responsibilities or experience. Additional interviews were conducted with representatives of local media (editor, news editor or chief reporter), police, and where possible with community and race equality organisations. Documentation collected included local authority policy and practice, press reports, and material circulated in the area where available.

Our initial findings were reviewed with a steering group made up of representatives of LGA and IDeA, Equalities and Human Rights Commission, Local Government Information Unit, Cohesion & Faiths Unit at Department of Communities & Local Government, the Standards Board for England, SOLACE (the organisation representing chief executives of local authorities), and a representative of Unison (the public sector trade union) who was also a member of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC). Steven Griggs, a senior lecturer at INLOGOV provided an academic perspective on community cohesion and local government.

### **Structure of this Report**

This report is structured as follows:

Chapter 1: research and guidance

In this chapter we assess the value of official guidance on promoting community cohesion and working with the media; local authority communication during election periods and media codes of conduct; research on public attitudes and on communicating with the public.

#### Chapter 2: Local authority culture and internal communications

In this chapter we discuss the emergence of communication as a social and corporate process; communications strategies; informal and formal communications activities; the communications team and strategic corporate communications; communications with local authority staff; elected members and political leadership.

#### Chapter 3: Creating and sustaining local networks

This chapter draws out the links between internal and external communications and discusses the cooperation of local authorities and the police; integrating communication with partnerships; community forums; monitoring and managing tensions.

#### Chapter 4: Communicating with the public

This chapter discusses the media, in particular new forms of communication; the use of a variety of means to communicate; handling the media.

#### Chapter 5: Guidance and experience

In this chapter we report on perceptions of national guidance, discuss how authorities are learning from their experiences, and gives views on the publicity code.

#### Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter draws out our main findings and makes a number of recommendations for local authorities and central government and other bodies.



## Chapter 1: Research and Guidance

The need to promote community cohesion has in recent years become a central plank of public policy, demanding an increasing amount of attention in the wake of civil disturbances in 2001 and the inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence. Islamophobia rose markedly in the wake of the London bombings of July 2005, further terrorist scares and plots and the 'war on terror'; and tensions rose generally with the dispersal of asylum seekers under the NASS scheme and anxieties about the pressure on public services from the large inward-migration from Eastern Europe since 2004.

An important aspect of our research has been to assess the value of official guidance for local authority officers and members in this context and to draw conclusions about what, if any, further guidance and support is needed. We have also looked at the way in which authorities use and refer to the code of recommended practice on local authority publicity, which covers activity during election periods, with the intention of contributing our findings to the planned governmental review of the code during autumn 2008.

### Guidance on promoting community cohesion

The promotion of cohesion became a priority for most local authorities, and is becoming part of those mainstream activities negotiated with central government, as demonstrated by the recent settlement of many Local Area Agreements that contain targets aimed at demonstrating progress towards community cohesion; the requirement on all authorities to conduct a 'place survey' to test public attitudes; and the expansion of the Preventing Violent Extremism programme. The task of promoting community cohesion has been given additional focus by the introduction of the public duty to promote equality of opportunity and encourage good relations between people of different groups, and to eliminate unlawful discrimination. The duty has an implicit impact upon communication by public bodies, in addition to requiring authorities to undertake an equality assessment of new policies.

A body of guidance has emerged since 2002, building on early materials produced by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and drawing on practical experience and the perceptions of the Local Government Association, Improvement and Development Agency, the then Commission for Racial Equality, and others. A wide variety of material has been produced for councillors, including a 2006 LGA/IDeA guide for local authority leaders and chief executives<sup>1</sup>. This guidance stressed the need to incorporate press and media work by local authorities into much broader communication strategies, to develop pride in their local areas, to dispel myths and rumours and stop them from reverberating and undermining good relations. Stress was placed on the commissioning and implementation of a communication strategy that involved partner organisations, took account of target audiences and communicating continuously and not just in moments of crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> LGA / IDeA (2006) *Leading cohesive communities: a guide for local authority leaders and chief executives*

Considerable effort has been put into reaching a common understanding of what community cohesion actually means and how progress is best made, culminating in the year-long investigation by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC). The CIC focused on majority concerns about the apparently preferential treatment that particular groups, and especially new communities, were receiving and the frequent perception that local authorities favoured particular ethnic groups. It warned that in the resulting climate, the far right and others can gloss over the injustice experienced by minority groups and instead promote a narrative of wider injustice for the settled majority. It made a number of recommendations paying particular attention to the need for authorities to improve their communication with all sections of the public<sup>2</sup>.

The report set out 'five key ways' in which local public agencies can take action by:

1. addressing the substantive issues being experienced by both majority and minority communities - whether levels of deprivation and under-achievement, or a wider lack of opportunity and therefore aspiration
2. rebalancing communication to include all residents, not just particular target groups
3. ensuring that local media understand the importance of their role in building integration and cohesion, and their responsibilities when reporting from within a context of diversity
4. proactively tackling myths and misinformation circulating in local communities and causing division
5. ensuring that all of this is scrutinised effectively by local scrutiny and risk structures, and is backed up by strong local data and intelligence.

## Working with the media

Within this perspective, local authorities have been urged to build relationships with the media, with specific recommendations on how to do so by establishing good working relationships with newspaper editors and journalists and drawing them into a dialogue that encourages them to develop a community-oriented perspective. Further toolkits have emphasised the importance of integrating cohesion programmes with varied means of communication<sup>3</sup>. The most recent government guidance directly links discrimination and prejudice to the erosion of community cohesion and discusses the ways in which the media can be used as a tool in tackling such issues<sup>4</sup>. This guidance presents a more pragmatic and complex picture of the issues involved for local authorities in responding to negative opinion and promoting positive images of minority communities as they seek to communicate with the public and to influence the media. This most recent guidance reflects aspects of the findings of academic research (see below).

Authorities are also being advised to evaluate campaigns, and to take the advice to have a communication strategy a stage further, undertaking a media relations audit

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<sup>2</sup> Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) *Our Shared Future*

<sup>3</sup> For example IDeA(2004) *Building a Relationship with the Media* (2004) and subsequent editions

<sup>4</sup> CLG (2007) *Getting the Message Across: using media to reduce racial prejudice and discrimination*

which feeds into a media relations strategy, and finally an action plan. Authorities are urged to plan ahead and engage interest through creative ongoing campaigns<sup>5</sup>.

Guidance on how to practice 'myth-busting' was seen as particularly important when the government and authorities first became aware of the need to respond to negative media articles and the local circulation of myths and misinformation. Although it is now understood that 'fire-fighting' in itself is not the answer and that more careful solutions are needed, there is still a need for immediate and flexible responses, especially in crises, to the sudden emergence of rumours that can flare up and circulate with surprising speed to create tensions and unrest. The most recent CLG guidance emphasises that myth-busting is essential but encourages authorities to avoid confining their responses to the media, and to do outreach work with communities, encourage the informal expression of views, and use a variety of methods of communication.

## Local authority communication during election periods

There have been widespread fears that the statutory code of recommended practice on local authority communications (the Code)<sup>6</sup> and its rules against activities that could have an impact on local political parties contesting an election may inhibit local authorities from correcting misleading or malign statements that could damage local community relations. The statutory framework prohibits authorities from engaging in activities that appear to influence support for a political party. This provision and elements of the statutory code that recommend that authorities avoid controversial issues and campaigning can lead to a cautious interpretation of the extent to which authorities can engage in myth-busting or can campaign on local issues. The Code is a major source of guidance for election periods, although it has a wider application. Information and commentary produced by the Commission for Racial Equality (now subsumed into the Commission for Equality and Human Rights<sup>7</sup> (EHRC)), and the Local Government Information Unit<sup>8</sup> emphasise the degree to which authorities can exercise discretion while complying with the code, particularly in correcting misinformation promulgated by far right political parties.

## Media codes of conduct

There are media codes that are relevant to the issues covered in the guidance for local authorities, and we included questions about these in our interviews with representatives of the press and other media. The National Union of Journalists has a code of conduct that includes undertakings on fairness and accuracy and a commitment not to produce material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on grounds of all the strands of diversity<sup>9</sup>. The Press Complaints Commission (PCC) has a code that places a duty on all members of the press to maintain the highest

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<sup>5</sup> IDEa (2008) Managing media relations, in *Connecting with communities: a communications toolkit*

<sup>6</sup> CLG (2001) *Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity*

<sup>7</sup> Commission for Racial Equality (2005) *Defeating organised racial hatred*

<sup>8</sup> Local Government Information Unit (2004) *The Right Side of the Law, a guide to local authority publicity*

<sup>9</sup> National Union of Journalists (2008) *Code of Conduct*

professional standards<sup>10</sup>. The Society of Newspaper Editors is responsible for monitoring and reviewing the code. Its requirements include the avoidance of prejudicial or pejorative references to an individual's race, colour, religion, and other characteristics; and a further clause that requires that such details must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story. Despite the operation of codes for the media, inaccurate and discriminatory news stories on immigration and community relations occur frequently. A Channel 4 Dispatches documentary, and an associated pamphlet published by Democratic Audit and Channel 4, describes several damaging and inaccurate news stories in the national media and also demonstrated how hard it is to obtain corrections<sup>11</sup>. Only the most extreme cases are known to have been challenged by the PCC (for example, an 'asylum seekers eat swans' story in 2004). Individual codes have been adopted by individual newspapers and the BBC, and specific guidance is available on reporting asylum and immigration for journalists from Mediawise<sup>12</sup> and on diversity from the Society of Editors and Media Trust<sup>13</sup>.

## Research on public attitudes

Public concerns about immigration and asylum seekers create a difficult environment for the attempts by local authorities to promote community cohesion. A note of caution is necessary when discussing the results of opinion polls and surveys, but research on public attitudes towards immigrants and ethnic minorities has found that concern about immigration and ethnic diversity is widespread. The 2006 State of the Nation poll found that immigration was the most important issue facing Britain at that time<sup>14</sup>. In 2003, an Ipsos MORI analysis of a number of polls reported a major increase over the previous decade in those who saw immigration as the most important issue facing Britain<sup>15</sup>. These data were gathered before the 2004 expansion of the European Union which led to large numbers of economic migrants coming to the UK from Eastern Europe and settling in areas which have not previously experienced large-scale demographic change, placing pressures on local services and being met by unease in host communities. Another survey of polls by Democratic Audit 2004<sup>16</sup> reported that the rise in concerns was accompanied by a sharp increase in the numbers of people who believed that immigrant numbers should be reduced, from two thirds of the population in 1995 to almost three quarters in 2003. There was a strong correlation between attitudes to Muslims and anti-immigration views, focusing around fears that England (or Scotland and Wales) would start to lose its identity if more Muslims came to live in the UK. Focus group and exit poll data in the same report revealed deep concerns about identity and the strain on public services, especially housing, schools and doctors' surgeries. A recent survey undertaken by GfK NOP on behalf of the BBC Television programme, *Inside Out*, found that 53 per cent of people thought that migrant workers are making it harder to

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<sup>10</sup> Press Complaints Commission (2007) *The Code*

<sup>11</sup> Osborne, P and Jones, J (2008) *Muslims under Siege: Alienating Vulnerable Communities*, Democratic Audit in association with Channel 4 Dispatches

<sup>12</sup> Mediawise (2008) *Reporting Asylum and Refugee Issues*

<sup>13</sup> Society of Editors and Media Trust (2005) *Reporting Diversity*, CLG

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2006) *State of the Nation Poll*

<sup>15</sup> Ipsos MORI (2003) *British Views of Immigration Poll*

<sup>16</sup> Margetts, H, John, P, Rowland, D, and Weir, S, (2005) *The BNP: the roots of its appeal*, Democratic Audit

find work and 71 per cent thought that they are putting a strain on hospitals and schools<sup>17</sup>.

Such findings confirm the CIC concern about the strong perception that minority groups are receiving preferential treatment to the detriment of the white majority. It has been suggested that the two main justifications for such prejudices are economic and cultural. Incoming groups are perceived as an 'economic threat' and are often accused of taking jobs, housing or benefits<sup>18</sup>. There is also a widespread association of asylum seekers with criminality and illegality<sup>19</sup>.

There are however counter indications that community tensions are less evident in local areas than media reporting and perceptions of the country as a whole might suggest. Opinion polls suggest that people are generally accepting of living with multi-cultural diversity and rarely experience any negative consequences in their daily lives<sup>20</sup>. However, polls undertaken on public attitudes to in-migration and asylum seeking do indicate intolerant attitudes to minorities in some areas<sup>21</sup>. Where this is the case, it is possible that far right parties such as the BNP may exploit fears to win votes. Research on attitudes towards asylum seekers suggests that this may occur particularly in areas where there is a lack of 'meaningful contact' between established and minority communities<sup>22</sup>. It must not be assumed that racial tensions occur only between white and non-white British residents. Conflict between ethnic minority (including non-white British) individuals or communities does occur and can manifest itself as a significant problem in some localities at certain points in time.

Research that breaks down the generalisations obtained from national surveys by examining views on a regional basis or according to basic indicators suggests that while hostility towards immigrant and ethnic minorities is widespread, hostility varies according to a myriad of factors including age, education, ethnicity, employment status and time and place of residence. There is a need for further research on the way in which these factors underpin differences in attitude and opinion if it is to inform the way in which local authorities can more effectively communicate with a diverse range of individuals and opinions.

## Communicating with the public

Local authorities act in a national and local media environment that is usually indifferent and frequently hostile to the varied objectives involved in promoting community cohesion. Research on communicating with the public in order to tackle racist and discriminatory sentiment highlights a number of key messages. These are messages which we had observed in recent national guidance, and which can be found reflected to some degree in the current practice of many authorities.

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<sup>17</sup> BBC (2006) *Inside Out Eastern European Immigration Special*, available at: [www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/yorkslincs/immigration.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/yorkslincs/immigration.shtml)

<sup>18</sup> Valentine and McDonald (2003) *Profiles of Prejudice*, Stonewall, London

<sup>19</sup> MORI Social Research Institute (2002) *Attitudes towards Refugee and Asylum Seekers: A Survey of Public Opinion*, Commissioned by Refugee Action and others

<sup>20</sup> Most recently CLG (2009) *Citizenship Survey April – September 2008, England*

<sup>21</sup> Saggar, S and Drea, J (2001) *Public Attitudes Towards Immigrants, Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Ethnic Minorities*, Cabinet Office: Performance and Innovation Unit

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, M (2005) *Asylum: Understanding Public Attitudes*, IPPR, London

### *1. Actions must be bespoke, working within local contexts*

Messages need to be relevant and deal with issues in a way that relates to people's lives and experience. One research report for the CRE concludes, 'It is vital to recognise that relevance is paramount. Attention is captured when the information communicated is regarded as being pertinent.'<sup>23</sup> The causes of racial tensions in different places will differ: responses should be context-specific<sup>24</sup>.

Messages should reach individuals and communities in different ways with measures complementing awareness-raising and community 'outreach' and 'buy-in' campaigns such as street marketing and stunts; peer education; street teams and referral marketing; active service delivery; community networking and events; community development, participation and active citizenship. All should be tailored to target audiences and integrated within wider campaigns<sup>25</sup>.

### *2. Actions must target multiple levels in countering local tensions, wider discrimination and media misinformation*

One model stresses the interdependence of actions at structural, institutional, cultural and personal levels<sup>26</sup>. No one level is more important than another, as the need is for action through multiple methods and at multiple sites. Myth-busting or awareness-raising to combat hostile beliefs supported by the media may make sense as one component of a communication strategy but by itself, research suggests, such an approach is unlikely to have an impact. Lewis and Newman state that myth-busting (in the form of contradicting of strongly held beliefs with factual information) 'can be at best counter-productive and at worst encourage greater hostility', as it perpetuates social norms and can be construed as patronising<sup>27</sup>. Research also suggests that additional care is needed to take account of the impact of messages on those with ambivalent views<sup>28</sup>.

The multi-dimensional nature of changing attitudes is expressed in the 2006 evaluation of the One Scotland campaign to tackle racism. It was found that the overall effect of marketing campaigns had been a decrease in racism as a perceived problem. The authors noted that this finding 'should be seen in the context of the marketing campaign and Scottish Executive initiatives on immigration which positively promote multi-culturalism and may have softened public perceptions of racism as a problem.' It should also be noted where funding for phases of the programme were lower, it was less effective and its impact was lower.

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<sup>23</sup> Coe et al (2004) *Asylum attitudes: a report for the Commission for Racial Equality on public attitude campaigning*, CRE

<sup>24</sup> Lewis, M and Newman, N (2007) *Challenging attitudes, perceptions and myths*, IPPR report for CIC, CLG publications

<sup>25</sup> Gray, S et al (2006) *Communicating with communities using outreach: a good practice guide*, COI Strategic Consultancy, London

<sup>26</sup> Gaine, C (2000) Anti-racist Education in 'White' Areas: the limits and possibilities of change, in *Race Ethnicity and Education* 3 (1), 65 - 81.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, M and Newman, N (2007) *Ibid*

<sup>28</sup> Maio, Gregory et al (2007) *Effects of Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioural Anti-Racism Advertisements*, ESRC

Locally-based research is vital to identify who is to be targeted and differences in opinion along gender, race, age, occupation and residential lines.

### *3. Communication strategies should target communities at multiple sites.*

Research also suggests that people should be targeted at a variety of sites involved in their everyday lives. Schools, colleges, universities, museums and arts and sports venues have an important role to play in combating everyday racism. ‘Profiles of Prejudice’ research for Stonewall advises local authorities to ‘work with schools and colleges to train people to interpret more critically the information they receive through the media’<sup>29</sup>. In a Eurobarometer survey, British residents indicated a variety of sites and sources that have an important role to play in combating discrimination<sup>30</sup>:

Schools and universities	51%
Parents	50%
The government	37%
The media	35%
Political parties	13%
Religious authorities	13%
Local or regional authorities	11%

The need for local authorities to obtain 'buy-in' from service providers, educators, voluntary sector organisations and the media is clear.

### *4. Actions must involve minority community and voluntary organisations*

Not surprisingly, research indicates that BME voluntary sector groups have the potential to contribute significantly to combating discrimination and racism in service delivery, although they have been found to be widely under-funded and lacking in support<sup>31</sup>. Working with them could also open up access to alternative media, such as BME press, radio or other community media.

### *5. Information must be open, honest and factual.*

Once attitudes are formed they are extremely difficult to alter<sup>32</sup>. Indeed, the more extreme an opinion, the more difficult it will be to alter<sup>33</sup>. Attempts to persuade people or to correct myths may not have the desired effect as individuals feel those doing the persuading are being less than honest in attempting to change their opinions. To be effective, communication requires a perception of honesty and recognition of adverse factors. It is important not to try and paint a persuasive and positive picture at all costs. The need for good, clear, communication through an

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<sup>29</sup> Bhavani,R. et al, (2005) *Tackling the roots of racism: Lessons for success*, JRF, The Policy Press; Valentine and McDonald (2003) Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Eurobarometer (2007) *Discrimination in the European Union*, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_263\\_fiche\\_uk.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_263_fiche_uk.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> Bhavani et al (2005) Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Coe et al (2004) Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Chisnall, P (1975), *Marketing: A behavioural analysis*, McGraw-Hill quoted in Coe et al (2004) Ibid

open and honest approach to confronting racism has been highlighted by a number of researchers<sup>34</sup>. Psychological research on influencing attitudes has found that stressing similarities is more likely to reduce prejudice while negative images that tend to stress difference actually increases prejudice, particularly among people living in all-white areas<sup>35</sup>.

*6. To counter harmful political propaganda it is necessary to identify and address the people who are likely to support far-right parties*

It is possible to identify the groups who are most likely to support a far-right party and the issues that motivate them. The Democratic Audit report on support for the BNP concludes that the BNP draws its support not from the poorest or most deprived people, but from areas with skilled or semi-skilled workers; and that it performs well in predominantly white wards rather than where communities are mixed. Here, 'people probably do not have direct contact with non-white people, but gain their views from the media and from direct campaigns from the BNP supporters themselves.'<sup>36</sup> Local authority level communication are potentially significant, with the authors recommending that authorities should take action to counter 'myths' and misunderstandings about their policies and local conditions at officer as well as councillor level. Emphasis is placed on authorities 'explain[ing] the realities of their policies, correcting misleading interpretations of them and above all by doing more to involve local residents in the formulation and delivery of those policies.' Officers were understandably inhibited about involving themselves in party political issues, but ensuring policies are understood is part of their role. Moreover, local authorities are obliged to promote good community relations.

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<sup>34</sup> Bhavani et al (2005) Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Vrij, A, et al, (2003) Reducing Ethnic Prejudice: An Evaluation of Seven Recommended Principles for Incorporation in Public Campaigns, *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, Vol.13, 284–299

<sup>36</sup> Margetts, H, John, P, Rowland, D, and Weir, S, (2005) Ibid



## Case study: Giving social cohesion a high profile

Social cohesion strategies are best made and sustained in as public and transparent a way as possible. High-profile events involving a wide range of organisations and communities can do a great deal to gather support across a local authority area.

One of our subject authorities understands this very well. It consulted very widely over its community cohesion strategy for a prolonged period. The council received more than 150 submissions and then adopted the strategy in full council, stating that the aim of the strategy was to ensure that the needs of individuals and communities across its area were understood and listened; that the council would give ample opportunity for voices to be heard and liaise properly with relate to all communities and interest groups; and that it would ensure that conflicts were managed sensitively.

This resolution was not simply a statement of corporate responsibility for the council staff, partnerships and public agencies, but was also a declaration for the public's benefit that stressed the need for community safety. There is a strong consensus between the two main political parties on the council and this makes such initiatives possible and is thought to have contributed to the successful management of tensions in the city.

The council has undertaken or supported other initiatives. An outstanding example was a city-wide 'peace' campaign, which was set up and designed by community organisations to give the community cohesion strategy 'life' among the public. The project had full local authority backing and was formally launched at a public event at the city's civic centre. It is an umbrella organisation for a range of projects and events in the public, private and voluntary sectors that focus attention on the excluded and disadvantaged in the city and oppose prejudice and intolerance. The aim is to win the commitment of organisations and individuals to take practical action in building understanding and respect through open days and weekends, lectures, festivals, exhibitions, conferences, literature, training, education initiatives, exchanges, counselling and mediation programmes and fundraising to alleviate hardship.

The press release was posted on the council's website. Organisations throughout the city were asked to sign up to a charter committing them to take positive action to promote better understanding and to challenge and combat exclusion and prejudice. The editor of the evening paper gave his 'personal pledge' to support the initiative and covered the media launch with full-page spreads every day for a week. The paper also publishes a regular blog by the organiser. Although strongly supported by the council, it is nonetheless important that the initiative is, and is seen to be, owned and led by the local community.

The council also sponsors a well-publicised anti-racism charity that campaigns vigorously against racism locally, using high-profile links with the city football club in its educational campaign. The council supported a local Youth Parliament in responding to a negative story about young people (one of the priorities of the Youth Parliament is to challenge negative perceptions).

The local Unison branch is a valuable ally. Its strategy for challenging discrimination

and promoting equalities focuses both on the workplace and the wider community. Over the past five years, it has been in the forefront of work challenging the BNP and myths around immigrants and asylum seekers. Unison has organised club nights, concerts, and cultural events in the city centre, particularly at the time of a march by right-wing extremists on St George's Day. It has worked with Show Racism the Red Card (which Unison sponsors) to arrange festivals around sport, diversity and anti-racism.

Unison delivers a lot of training internally. It became apparent that attitudes needed to be challenged among officials during a recent regional conference where unacceptable attitudes were reported back from workshops on migrant workers. The union is working more with migrant workers to improve conditions and skills and improve prospects for workplace progression. This is consistent with a more general interest in improving workplace learning for its members and in tackling worklessness in the wider community, both of which agendas it shares with the city council.

## Chapter 2: Local Authority culture and internal communication

We have stressed earlier that communication is above all a social and corporate process. The six authorities in our study have in the main absorbed this message, but also demonstrate that communicating with residents in all communities depends on the depth of understanding, the culture of the authority and the strategies, practices and processes that follow from it. The culture of the authority is important in making it possible to identify and articulate a broad vision for the area. The culture of the authority also has a bearing on how communications are organised internally and externally: it is important to be rigorous and clear about what can be achieved through different activities.

In one study authority all interviewees explicitly expressed the corporate approach that diversity should be addressed by taking account of the interests of the whole community and understood what the practical applications of this approach meant in policy and practice. This applied on issues pertinent to cohesion (access to translation services); the way in which the targeted audience is pictured (in photographs promoting services); in how crises are addressed (dealing with safety issues that affect a locality as a whole in response to a BNP leafleting campaign); and being in a position to target services at particular groups. It was notable that there was a cross-party consensus behind this approach, and that the message was consistently conveyed to staff through a range of media.

By contrast, in a second large authority that aspired to address the values and aspirations that all communities had in common, interviewees had different perspectives on what the authority was trying to achieve; not surprisingly, there was

agreement that the day-to-day approach to communication needed to change. Plans to spread positive messages about the authority and the area more generally were still being developed, although without so far having consulted or involved a wider range of people.

The media and communication practice in our study authorities broadly followed in the direction indicated by national guidance, although there is less awareness of the guidance than might have been expected. Local authorities are no longer primarily concerned with the local press and other media outlets, the main focus of communication now being their staff, local communities and partner organisations. A wide range of methods of communication are utilised to communicate the authority's broad objectives, including the promotion of community cohesion.

### Creating a communication strategy

All our authorities had communication strategies, but they took a variety of forms and had very different impacts. The existence of a formal strategy, perhaps adopted as the result of an external review, is no guarantee of it being a practical document which has expression throughout the policies and the activities of council officers and staff and members. In some cases authorities have adopted a separate formal communication strategy, which may be lived and breathed by the communication team, but there may well be less certainty about the strategy and what it contains in the wider circle where communication should be integrated into policy and practice.

In our review of the six authorities, we found one large authority where the existing communication strategy (of which respondents were unaware) is being revised apparently without consultation. In a second case a recently negotiated strategy was having no impact but is currently being revised taking account of a range of views and approaches, including an equalities impact assessment. Another authority has integrated communication into its main strategies as well as having communication as a broad theme in its annual improvement plan, a 'campaign approach'. As cohesion and sustainable community strategies are revised there is continuing cross-reference to communication. This mode of working seems to have a positive impact and we regard it as the best model for authorities in general. The more communication is understood and developed as a social, or corporate, process, the better.

### The balance between formality and informality

Essentially, a communication strategy must possess a 'working' document, linked closely to other strategies and implemented effectively through internal and external structures. This may sound obvious, but is not straightforward to achieve in practice, and we found authorities experiencing differing degrees of difficulty in working out the content of a strategy, putting it in the context of the authority's wider objectives, encouraging its adoption by staff and elected members, and using it to work with external bodies.

In practice, an implicit knowledge of the objectives and expectations generated by the strategy appears more important than direct knowledge, both among central communication team members and those officers and members for whom communication is an integral part of their independent responsibilities. Implicit

knowledge does allow for flexibility and informality. In turn it requires a formal back-up and careful management to avoid pitfalls.

If officers and elected members are to work successfully with an implicit understanding of what is expected from their participation in communication, the parameters of the strategy need to be communicated and reinforced through a variety of means: clarity in the messages to be conveyed, clarity about the authority's policies on diversity and other topics, availability of communication advisers with expertise in a range of services and activities, working internal networks that cross levels of seniority and bring together people with related responsibilities, and a strong political and management grip on structures and events.

Such positive informality can allow individual officers to work flexibly but also ensures consistency and provides for internal and external contacts to be maintained at a number of levels. Allowing informality without the underpinning of a consistent approach can result in inconsistency in messages, the risk of certain external groups being privileged or neglected and a failure to communicate with all relevant sections of the community. It can also make it difficult to judge the effectiveness of communication activities.

A balance is needed between adopting a complex document that remains on the shelf, and operating on the basis that 'We all know' the common approach to handling communication and how this is expressed in collective and individual action. The size of an authority is relevant to some extent when considering how far informality can prevail and support successful communication, with smaller authorities able to rely on informal direct contact to a greater extent. Much will depend on how its content is translated into practice within the authority, where a communication strategy may exert a positive influence without the need for most people to refer to it.

How the strategy is drawn up and revised will have some bearing on how influential it is. The revision of a strategy that does not involve those likely to be directly involved in its implementation will be problematic. On the other hand, it may be wiser to sort out the authority's own approach to communication first, where it has not previously had a strategy, before trying to develop an over-arching programme for communication with the Local Strategic Partnership.

## Communication team

We have stressed the social and corporate nature of communication, but there is a need for an expert dedicated team, responsible for internal and external communication. It was clear from our inquiries among the six authorities that a higher level of resources was needed for a team to be proactive, and do more than react to events. The status accorded to communication and to the head of communication varied between authorities, and in general communication had an apparently greater priority where the head of communication was highly regarded and involved in advisory and decision-making forums at a number of levels.

One authority reported having two separate teams responsible for communication; one focusing on mainstream and media communication, the other stepping in when required by a crisis situation. The other authorities in the study coordinate

communication through one team, and this would be our recommended approach as it makes it possible for the authority to take an overall strategic approach to communication.

A variety of internal arrangements are adopted for maintaining relationships between the communication team and service directorates. Alternative working illustrations of relationships with directorates were found in two authorities: a member of the communication team placed in a directorate under a service level agreement; a lead person for each directorate based in the central team. Such close contact can be critical, for example in service areas such as housing, where perceptions can arise over allocation of resources that require careful handling and transparent communication.

## Planning corporate communications

Formal and informal structures are needed to integrate the media and public information work of the communication team into the wider strategy of promoting community cohesion. At times the relationship will require day-to-day cooperation. The head of communication needs a good working relationship with the chief executive, the leader of the council, the corporate management team and head of a specialist communication cohesion or equality team where one exists. The corporate management team will include communication as an integral part of its agenda, with members of the team being able to say what is coming up and agreeing what is needed in terms of proactive communication, so avoiding the pitfall of major decisions being made without consideration being given to their potential impact on cohesion. These meetings can include future scanning, over a period of up to six months ahead.

Informal contacts are also essential for two-way communication, with equalities and cohesion officers being consulted and briefing the communication team as well as being able to contact the head of communication with alerts of possible media interest or the emergence of a potentially critical issue. Equalities and cohesion officers will be available to brief the leader and elected members as needed, and will keep in touch with and cooperate where the need arises with community safety officers.

A commonly understood approach to communications is however essential: in one authority we came across tensions between the communication department and specialised community cohesion team over their respective professionalisms. Communications staff were perhaps too ready to accept the standard news values of the mainstream press rather than take a proactive stance in pressing for positive news stories.

Internally, tension monitoring occurs at more than one level and appears to cover a wider range of issues in some authorities, although all six of our study authorities report engaging in forward thinking. Internal meetings may include the head of communication on a weekly basis, with tension monitoring covering 'anything likely to lead to local breakdown'. Responses can be planned at a variety of levels, from the delivery of letters to all houses in a street explaining the council's plans to handle a particular local problem, or direct intervention from a service department or the police.

## Communication with local authority staff

A local authority's own workforce is potentially a major communication resource. As in several of our authorities, councils are often the largest employer in the area and their officers and staff are by definition constantly engaged in inter-action with local residents at, from and in a variety of levels, services and sites. Local authority employees also of course constitute a significant proportion of the local population and are members of diverse communities.

In consequence the way in which the authority communicates with its staff has important implications for its overall approach in communicating its commitment to treating all its communities fairly and equally and preventing and pre-empting the emergence of myths and misinformation. As we have said above, communication is a social process.

Most of the study authorities have included the aim of communicating with staff within their communication strategy, utilising a range of methods in doing so and engaging with staff at different levels. Not all appear to make communication with staff a priority, but some useful insights emerged from the study. Wider communication with staff was valued for conveying (and receiving) information and transmitting strategic and cultural objectives to staff throughout the organisation. One authority had adopted a variety of arrangements to make clear to staff not only what was a clear corporate policy on communication and cohesion and its promotion of diversity, but also how it should be communicated. Communication is an integral part of corporate management team meetings, and topics filtered through to monthly staff meetings and then throughout the organisation. Other measures included daily activity on an internal intranet; an audio version of the intranet; a regular house journal; conveying messages in posters and other visual media, and periodic staff conferences.

There is a need for careful management of information to avoid overload and fatigue while ensuring that it is effectively conveyed. One chief executive, whose authority relies for its strategic decision-making both on a documented strategy for internal communication and informal communication between staff, told the study that communication were not 'rocket science', but that it was 'easy to forget that you need to talk to each other'. Informality appears to work best where flexible ways of communicating are provided for in a strategic overview and a clear corporate approach allows staff discretion in how they communicate between levels of seniority within the organisation and with external organisations.

It is important to involve the staff from the start. One authority has found it necessary to go through a further review of its initial communication strategy which had so far failed to have an impact on external communication. Staff reported attending regular meetings and forums aimed at improving internal communication. Managers have been encouraged to convey information about key strategies, and to discuss cohesion issues informally with their teams. Internal channels of communication included a weekly bulletin from the chief executive which may be turned into an interactive blog and lead to informal drop-in sessions, and core briefs to be used in team meetings.

Staff surveys can be used to benchmark levels of awareness and understanding of key messages. One case study authority carried out an initial survey in December 2006, which allowed comparison against a survey carried out in December 2007. Staff were also asked key questions at staff roadshows to further gauge levels of penetration of key messages.

The size of the local authority workforce means that trade unions have a role to play in challenging discrimination and promoting equalities in the workplace and the wider community. In addition to supporting and promoting local events, trade union training schemes can promote workplace learning and inform and challenge attitudes among workers playing advisory roles within the workforce. Trade unions are also in a strong position to work towards improving the skills and conditions of migrant workers and support their integration into the wider working community in a constructive way.

We recognised as a result of the research that there is the additional challenge for local authorities to communicate their commitment to diversity and fairness to the managers, staff and workers in contracted out services and agencies that provide public services on their behalf. This is an issue that deserves fuller examination.

## Elected members and political leadership

Elected members have crucial responsibilities that are integral to the cohesion and communication strategies of their local authorities. At best, they should play their part in identifying emerging issues; be willing and able to respond in situations that require a rapid response; to work across party to emphasise a commitment to fair treatment across all communities; to support networks, chair forums, make speeches as well as policy; and to demonstrate a political commitment to community cohesion. Whether acting as ward councillors, council leaders or cabinet members with relevant portfolios, elected members playing these roles require support and attention from within the authority.

It is difficult to prescribe how this should be done. All councils, including those we looked at, will take a different approach, and every authority will have its own way of managing the relationship between what will be widely varying systems of political leadership and the full-time chief executive and his or her staff. We found very different approaches to the allocation of responsibilities in the case study authorities: this suggests that flexibility is required in judging how councillors can step up to this role.

### *Ward councillors*

Some people do not believe what they read in the press or what the council tells them. Yet while they may not trust the council, they often hold the ward councillor in higher regard: 'You can talk to him. He's from that area, he's worked there for years.' A good ward councillor comes across myths and misinformation at first hand, can pass information on into the tension-monitoring process and can contribute to discussions as to how incidents or myths can be managed or answered and pre-empted in the future. Councillors are often involved in neighbourhood structures. We encountered many reports of them chairing local forums, providing an interface with communities

and neighbourhoods, receiving feedback through councillor events and informal contact with constituents.

Some councils plan for media relationships to be sustained through cabinet members or mediated by the communication team. Those authorities that recognise that news reporters will contact councillors at ward level perhaps have a more realistic appreciation of what is needed in the form of training and access to advice from communication staff. For them media training needs to be aimed at the type of contact that they are likely to experience. 'In practice, it's not about being interviewed on Radio 4, but being telephoned by reporters from local newspapers looking for a story'. They need to be given the skills and confidence to persuade a reporter to take up a positive 'story' or to avoid being drawn into a negative theme by a reporter who is trying to provoke controversy.

New councillors need to be introduced to the cohesion issues that matter in their wards. It is particularly important to demonstrate to those who have been elected on a single or limited number of issues how they fit into the community cohesion strategy and the mainstream work of the council. Communication and cohesion staff reported that they often need to contact ward councillors when a critical situation arises and they expect them to play a role in monitoring and communicating at local level rather than engaging in higher level contact with the media or community representatives. The relationship needs to be reciprocal, with ward councillors provided with contacts in the communication team from whom they can obtain advice and support when needed.

### *Leading councillors*

The arrangements for political governance of the social cohesion agenda and its communication will inevitably vary between local authorities, depending on the political complexion of authorities and other circumstances. However, the council leader and cabinet members with portfolios that incorporate community cohesion are the main political drivers of the community cohesion strategy and have key responsibilities in dealings with the media and local public and in taking public action to reduce the risk of heightened tensions. They speak on behalf of the council and determine not only the overall approach to cohesion, but how the council's policies are communicated. Two of the authorities in the study place emphasis on the success of politicians in having obtained a cross-party consensus on the approach to cohesion and communication. In one authority elected members from different parties act as council advocates for particular interest groups, such as older people. Party leaders have taken a joint approach in critical situations, for example, in writing a joint column in the local press in order to undermine a misleading letter campaign generated by the activities of far right political parties. In both authorities the consensus is thought to have contributed to the successful management of tensions.

The consensus approach has advantages over the appointment of one cabinet member as a champion for cohesion issues for it necessarily involves cooperation and agreement on a fully worked out strategy which is equally well-understood and followed by officers at all levels of responsibility. We are further of the view that the direction and communication of the agenda should be bipartisan and inclusive, and shared so far as is possible between all parties represented on the council. We would



warn against the responsibility for community cohesion to a single executive member, given the sensitive demands which the issues raise. A bipartisan approach will, as we saw in various authorities, give balance to judgements made, remove potentially damaging issues from party political manoeuvring and can give moral and political authority to the decisions made and activities undertaken. In particular, it makes room for important initiatives, often of a symbolic nature, and can enhance the power of the appeal to a town or area's reputation for neighbourliness and tolerance. In one authority, the political leaders invited inviting well-known community representatives and key figures in public life to join them walking down the high street to provide a public statement (and also of course a photo-opportunity for the local press and council magazine) on the evening of the 2005 London bombings.

The study authorities all reported improved communication with the press, and this is partly attributable to the degree to which elected members and heads of communication are prepared to respond to requests for information and comment, however tricky the issues involved might be. Council leaders report meeting newspaper editors on a regular basis, some quarterly and others monthly to cover future plans and emerging issues. Direct contact is made should the need arise. The leader and deputy leader of the authority can expect to be briefed immediately in critical situations, and to be advised by equalities and cohesion staff as well as communication team before dealing with the media. Particular media contacts can be established for such occasions. In these situations contact with the press is of course only one element of a communication response: leading councillors will meet local representatives and take part in joint activities. Should the situation warrant it, the council's leaders will want to set up an Gold Group, bringing in representatives of the police and other organisations. While the press will not be represented on such groups, they will have to be briefed and the group can agree how best to present any incident.

## Ethics and standards issues

In unusual circumstances Standards issues may arise, in part because the Code of Recommended Practice of Local Authority Publicity is now referred to in the Model Code of Conduct for elected members. One authority in our study reported such an instance, described in one of our illustrative case studies. Political leaders, and chief officers, are in a position to influence organisational culture by supporting an ethical environment. Training for officers and members in dealing with contentious and sensitive issues can also contribute to creating such an environment.

### Case study: Responding to misleading election propaganda

One of the most unsettling tasks that can confront local authorities during elections is dealing with party political propaganda that seeks to create, inflame or exploit racial feelings and tensions. One authority for example had had to deal with misinformation about its target for raising BME employment in its workforce. The BNP circulated an election leaflet, stating: 'if two qualified people, one of the white British majority

and the other of an ethnic minority group were to apply for the same post [with the council] the ethnic minority applicant would have the advantage because of New Labour pressure to fill the quota.'

If they could be linked directly to the leaflet, BNP council members could be open to a complaint of bringing their office and authority into disrepute under the local government Code of Conduct. The council's legal officer wrote to all councillors warning them about the need to comply with the Code. No complaint was actually made under the Code, due no doubt to difficulties in proving elected members had been involved with the leaflet (though there was strong circumstantial evidence).

The council's legal officer could in theory have initiated a complaint himself but did not. He felt 'exposed' at the time and intimidated by the BNP who threatened legal action against him. He even had concerns about his personal security, parking his car near the entrance to the town hall every day.

Eventually the chief executive took action, issuing a full rebuttal of the 'wildly inaccurate information' in the BNP leaflet. He stated, 'There can be no excuse for this material being published in an election leaflet and the BNP should withdraw the leaflet and correct it.' The local press reported both his statement and the BNP council leader's response that the existence of the target amounted to discrimination. The paper also reported the chief executive's explanation that 'this policy is aimed to ensure that the council's workforce better represents the borough's population, but is not an active target.'

It was valuable that an authoritative and politically neutral figure was willing to rebut the leaflet. The council was clear it had the right to intervene in this way and had not contravened any rules, but there was some scope for doubt about whether the chief executive, who was also the returning officer, was the appropriate person for the task. Official guidance on public relations activity during an election is clear that while 'a local authority shall not publish any material which, in whole or in part, appears to be designed to affect support for a political party', it is also 'acceptable for the authority to respond in appropriate circumstances to events and legitimate service enquiries provided that their answers are factual and not political'; and further states, 'Members holding key political or civic positions should be able to comment in an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the authority's control.'

## Chapter 3: Creating and sustaining external networks

No local authority works in isolation. Creating and communicating a community cohesion strategy and dealing effectively with tensions between different communities involves establishing and strengthening a wide range of partnerships and relationships with a diverse range of bodies in an authority's area and sub-region, from statutory partnerships, the police and ad-hoc monitoring arrangements to community associations and civil society organisations, many of which the council funds. Even within a broad strategy local authorities must create the ability with the police and partner organisations to make a rapid response to disturbing or violent incidents, emerging tensions or the circulation of false or misleading news stories, leaflets, myths or rumours, using horizon-scanning and tension monitoring techniques.

### Links between internal and external communications

When discussing a council's ability to promote community cohesion externally, it is important to recognise that the inter-relationships of officers and elected members within the authority with professional and working counterparts in the wider community, their political and community links and the everyday work of many individual employees interlace with networks of external organisations and individuals. A 'bonding' process occurs, both formally and informally. Paying attention to and making use of less formal relationships and more importantly planning and creating new focused cooperative arrangements, often through sub-groups or forums, greatly improves the authority's inter-relationship with other sectors and will make a positive difference in communication and cooperation.

Connections exist in parallel with and across levels of seniority. Community cohesion and equalities staff, whose responsibilities include making and supporting connections with community organisations and forums, work directly with senior police officers, and can make it possible for the police to make direct contact with community leaders. In turn, we found that the police reported being able to give information to communication staff and chief officers when issues arose that needed attention. As one equalities officer reported, 'If someone is shot, I am the first to hear about it from the police. I tell the chief exec, the leader and deputy leader immediately. I then contact the communication people and decide if we need to make a statement. Then I contact elected members from the areas so they are aware of what is going on.'

There is potential for equalities and cohesion staff and communication teams to join representatives of partner organisations and a range of community organisations and forums on an LSP sub-group. Not all the study authorities have set up sub-groups and those that have are at an early stage. Over time it can be expected that these sub-groups will have greater importance, but at present more reliance is placed on community forums which are coordinated by local authority officers. We have found that these often receive support from communication teams through measures such as media training. When necessary, the chairs of these forums can be brought together with the council leader or chief executive, as has occurred in one authority where joint public actions have been taken to reassure the public.

Connections are also made between elected members and individuals and organisations at neighbourhood level. Councillors interviewed in one authority gave a number of examples of incidents that had led to the creations of myths, including information on local services being available for migrants but not for local people, and ‘foreigners’ taking council housing and getting housing priority. They also are in a position to feed information into the authority.

Sub-groups can operate in parallel or arise from time to time as needed. The relationships established through more general connections can be used to bring together key organisations and individuals to focus on a particular problem. This is illustrated in one authority where critical issues are emerging over housing for new migrant communities. The authority is convening a group that will bring together officers with the police, housing associations, private landlords and others to identify the likely problems and agree how to address them. Settled sub-group arrangements are found in authorities with funding from the Preventing Violent Extremism programme, where connections can be made with members Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs).

### Case Study: Building Community Confidence

At least two of the authorities have worked proactively to develop minority communities themselves as important channels of communication. One has provided media training over a seven-week programme to empower community leaders as spokespeople for Muslim communities. The equalities division combined with the council’s media and communications team to give participants grounding in working with the media so that they could communicate more effectively with the media, particularly in times of crisis. Both print and radio media, local business and a university were represented at the course.

One community leader who took part in the training reported that he had an improved understanding of the media and had developed the confidence to work with them. He and other community members were keen to undertake further training so they could learn to actively engage the media and present a more positive picture of the Muslim communities. But a woman participant complained that the course clashed with school hours, making it easier for men than for women to attend. She also wanted the authority to enrol a more diverse range of Muslim voices male and female, traditional and moderate.

The second authority engaged in community development work among Muslim communities, taking advantage of the focus that a major conference for Muslims afforded. The aim was to build confidence within the communities that they could ‘build bridges’ and find a ‘civic voice’. There were attempts to work with women and young people in particular, and to set up a women’s’ network. Community development staff also worked to bring together the city’s mosques that had hitherto worked in isolation from each other.

Building trust is important to sustaining these relationships, and respondents spoke of being in contact with 'trusted individuals'. Authorities differ in the degree to which they rely on building personal contacts and creating or supporting more rigorous structures. One authority has based its community cohesion strategy on a range of activities that rely on a range of relationships and connections; community-generated projects and campaigns, and sponsorship of 'Show racism the red card' connected to the local football club, as well as an area-wide information gathering network under the umbrella of the CDRP.

## Working with the police

Throughout our research, the police emerged as vital actors in the process of combating extremist mythology; and more generally in projects aimed at securing better community cohesion. For instance, police intelligence reports were regularly cited as valuable to both measuring success and identifying when pre-emptive action or perhaps readiness to respond to a problem was needed. Our researches indicate that the police prefer to work with dedicated local authority officers, such as professional media or development workers, as important anchors for police communication and consultation.

There is not necessarily a perfect fit in objectives between the police seeking to identify tensions, and to prevent violent behaviour and terrorist activity, and local authorities seeking to promote community cohesion and to counteract extremist mythology. While community cohesion is of course a major objective for the police, it is in an instrumental sense: that is, as a means of diminishing the threat of, for instance, civil disturbances, racially or religiously aggravated crime, or terrorist offences. This point was underlined for us when the chief executive of a police authority whom we interviewed referred to the 'Prevent' pillar of the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy when discussing cohesion.

For the Chief Executive concerned, cohesion is not purely a goal in its own right for the police (or indeed for the security and intelligence agencies). In this sense there may be tension (but not necessarily outright conflict) between the objectives of the police and a local authority. For example, as we were told by others working in a local authority area covered by the police authority concerned, if attempts at inter-faith dialogue are presented purely as a means of discouraging terrorism they are unlikely to be successful.

Much depends on creating trust between council officials on the frontline of diversity and communication work and the police: these individuals can be highly regarded. In general the police aim to build and maintain extensive community contacts and to consult, liaising with local authority officers to make additional particular contacts.

The relationship with the council on communication more broadly can be uneasy, and we found a number of areas of sensitivity that appeared to have a bearing on broader cooperation beyond the framework of the CDRP. These can arise from fairly basic gaps in communication: for example we were told of instances where the police role in the success of an initiative was not acknowledged to their satisfaction. There may

be differences in view about the likely impact of instances of crime on community relations and on the necessity of media intervention. In one authority area the police wanted to see a joint community impact assessment done more often to draw out this perspective. This difference in view had led to some despondency on more routine contact with the authority over media, but confidence that there was the basis of working together well if there were a serious incident remained.

In one authority area the police told us that their media strategy must comply with regional police guidelines, but working in partnership exposed the limited flexibility allowed for in this approach. There are inevitably potential sensitivities in joint media activities where a councillor speaks on behalf of the authority, as the police spokesperson will invariably be a senior officer. Liaison in advance of police actions can be crucial to mutual confidence: in one authority the police acted without warning to arrest a terrorist suspect and created tensions that the community cohesion team had to cope with urgently. This incident was then discussed between the authority and the police and a new mode of working was established.

A review of communications has the potential to draw out some of these issues and achieve improvements in communication between local authorities and the police. In one authority area the police reported waiting for the implementation of a recent external review which included improving communication on community safety issues as likely to lead to improved joint working.

### Case study: Police engagement in tension monitoring

Local networks are an important key to effective tension monitoring. In one rural case study area, the police also play an important role in networking that serves to strengthen partnership working between the council, neighbourhood policing teams, housing associations and the voluntary sector. From a police perspective tension monitoring has proven a highly effective way of embedding the local communication and community cohesion strategy into neighbourhood policing.

Growing hostilities in the area prompted local partners to establish a tension monitoring group. This multi-agency partnership has focused on developing early intervention measures and community engagement in order to diffuse potential conflicts. The approach developed involves the use of a key individual network approach to gain local intelligence. Key individual networks comprise of individuals in the community who come into contact with a range of different people - e.g., the lollipop person, the shop keeper, the school teacher, the newspaper man, the local busybody who knows everyone, and so on. These networks play a key role in gauging the general feeling in different communities. As one participant explained: 'Rather than us assuming there is a problem, we activate our key individual networks through the neighbourhood policing teams who will then go and speak to them'. They will then speak to all of the people they know and then tell us for example that people are not concerned about x, the key issues are xyz. We then know where to direct our resources.'

Key individual networks are used particularly to help prepare and respond to major events, such as music festivals and football matches, but are also used to maintain an ongoing flow of information with which to address certain issues or target certain parts of a community at the earliest stage possible. Overall, police involvement in tension monitoring has led to better engagement with local communities and a different approach to neighbourhood policing. The police are very positive about the approach: 'We have become very much more aware that we are not 'stand alone' . . . We realise we need the co-operation of partners and people in the community. Without that we cannot police the area effectively. Before we would smash doors in, now we engage with communities through mobile . . . visible policing and community visits. It is low profile, it is very easy, and it's engagement! You are showing an interest, you are also saying that the police are aware of the issues. It's soft but has a dual purpose - it passes the right messages through the community and diffuses anything before it can escalate. It is positive policing, a different type of policing.'

The use of information sharing protocols also means that any information picked up by the police through their networks can be disseminated among partnership agencies in order to look at joint strategies of dealing with any cause for concern within the community.

## Integrating communication with partnerships

A multi-faceted image of community leadership emerges from the study. Although at significantly different stages in the process, all the authorities we studied are taking steps to develop a sense of place, or vision for their area, and their role within that. However to date, the focus of most of them is upon communicating effectively about their own activities and responsibilities. Local strategic partnerships have yet to have an impact on communication locally, and the implications of Local Area Agreement targets for promoting strong and safe communities are still being resolved. While references are made to the value of the LSP as a forum and source of contacts, for many authorities the LSP partnership, at least on cohesion issues, appears to have been one among many so far.

Formal partnerships, possibly statutory, serve to bring together public bodies and the voluntary and community sector at area level. A partnership that has multiple functions provides the opportunity to promote positive local values and brings key representatives and activists to the table. Other networks have been established with the specific purpose of promoting community safety and supporting tension-monitoring, and in some cases they provide mechanisms for managing and resolving community tensions.

Our case study authorities were at different stages in the process of implementing Local Area Agreements and adopting the Strong and Safe Communities strand and had different perceptions about how to take this forward. Prior to the LAA process and LSP subgroups, community cohesion partnerships and forums, convened or

supported by the local authority, have provided the main networking opportunities. These have linked closely with internal networks in authorities, providing a framework of contacts that other public sector organisations, such as the police, can access through council equalities or community cohesion officers. While coordinated and supported by the local authority, these networks gain from being chaired by community representatives who may take individual responsibilities, speaking to the media and making contact with national politicians. It will be necessary to consider the relationship between subgroups and existing community cohesion forums, but the presence of existing networks provides a foundation for subgroup activity, which is now seen as the way forward in some authorities.

One authority worth emulating is bringing together representatives of public and voluntary sectors into a subgroup of its LSP, with a strong communication element. The subgroup is going through the process of identifying its aims. There is still a 'need to agree what we have in common, then how to communicate what we are about'. This is a council that has already taken a rigorous approach to networking that it is hoped the subgroup will take further by providing a wider information-sharing forum and an opportunity to pull together a broadly accepted narrative for the area.

Most are only now beginning to work out what it will mean to act on and communicate on cohesion issues through the LSP. In one instance an effective local authority-LSP working relationship is already in place, with the partners now facing the challenge of working towards targets in the Local Area Agreement. In two-tier areas there has been a sense that inclusion of relevant indicators was by no means certain: now that these have been agreed, work is needed to overcome perceptions created by the language in which the indicators are formulated. Reservations are prevalent about the Preventing Violent Extremism project generally and its associated LAA target. One LAA manager was firm that the language does not resonate locally, and said the authority would not be drawn into using it.

For many respondents, the LSP currently has a low profile or may even be part of the problem. In one area the LSP was reported as being widely recognised as poorly performing on equalities and diversity and having a lack of openness to change on these issues. In another area the LSP was a recognised local forum, but was seen to be in need of restructuring, 'The LSP creates half the myths and misinformation' that one frustrated equalities officer had to deal with. In another area a district LSP was closely involved in the development of an initial communication strategy and has agreed a community strategy which aligns closely with the principal local area agreement and priorities such as, 'Promoting Community cohesion' and 'Get connected'. The LSP will be working with the authority's communication manager to identify priorities for the future.

One large council has recently adopted a revised community cohesion strategy (CCS) along with the CIC's definition of community cohesion after consultations during the LAA negotiations. The CCS builds a substantial range of activities around cohesion - activities that are integrated into consultation and communication strategies for the area and linked with the sustainable community strategy and other mainstream plans. There are indications, however, that the LSP in this area is not as yet a key player on community cohesion.



## Community forums

Collaboration with and co-ordination of forums, or networks, creates valuable channels of communication and dialogue between a local authority and communities. Participation in a forum makes it possible for local activists with different interests to engage more fully with each other, to link with internal council networks and to adopt responsible roles in communication. This collaboration makes it possible to initiate two-way communication (something which authorities are recognising is failing in their consultation strategies). An active range of forums will include some generated by the authority and others arising from independent local initiatives. A council's funding strategy should take account of the need to create key relationships.

Forums can bring together a diverse range of community and voluntary sector organisations. There is a certain similarity in the profile of organisations representing local interests in the case study areas: for example, faith groups reflecting the diversity of faith in particular local communities; a cultural Islamic society; community organisations representing Afro-Caribbean people; Muslim women's groups; and lesbian and gay organisations. Some organisations may represent more than one community of interest: for example one large authority reported a Muslim steering group with members nominated from political parties, young people, women and Imams that met bi-monthly to pick up on tensions within and about their communities.

Authorities must take care to ensure that particular communities and their representatives are not excluded. An absence of transparency or confidence may lead individual groups to believe that others are more closely consulted, but gaps can occur. Complaints of the lack of forums for ethnic minority women and representatives of the Afro-Caribbean community in one authority area rang true. Male Muslim leaders felt that there were sufficient mechanisms for communication with the authority around cohesion issues and that their voice was heard. By contrast, communication with Afro-Caribbean leaders was not established, and they felt that there was no forum where they could actually influence policy. Muslim women felt that women from ethnic minorities did not have a voice: although they attended policy groups no actions were taken as a result of their being consulted.

Forums can include organisations representing people from different backgrounds but with a common area of interest: youth parliaments, elders' forums, race equality councils. Some demonstrate a common interest but bring together people who might otherwise have distinct differences: one interfaith network includes representatives of Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities, but also believes strongly that the faith leaders also need to be present on a wide range of forums.

Where it was possible to interview members of these groups, they reported having firm agendas and strong perceptions of what was needed by their interest group. Perhaps inevitably as they were introduced to interviewers by the case study authority, group representatives also showed an awareness of and engagement with a range of local forums and networks. They also reported on their links with the local authority (although these were not always seen as fruitful). There was a clear demand and need for media training and support.

### Case study: working ‘on the ground’

Consultation plans draw upon a range of initiatives and activities – from commissioning surveys and organising events and meetings to developing networks, focus groups events. One authority’s involves 250 consultative forums around its area, of which 20 are ethnic or faith-based. But the Equalities Team place a greater emphasis on building trust with community members, business and community leaders through face-to-face meetings. They seek to form close relationships over a period of time and encourage all of their staff ‘on the ground’ to identify people who are prepared to work for their community. Community development workers and youth workers are particularly important in helping to build informal networks with local people. The networks are used to filter information from different neighbourhoods into Equalities Team’s work and in partnership with the police to rapidly spread ‘the facts’ about myths and misinformation to local people at times of crisis. For example, the team were able to cascade information out to local Muslims about the rationale behind arrests in a particular neighbourhood. Local leaders were then able to spread the facts quickly, by word of mouth, reducing tensions in the area. Community leaders felt that the authority’s handling of this incident was very effective and they were confident that they would continue to work with key figures in the Equalities Team to manage local tensions.

An authority achieves most when it has a clear and rigorous view of what it is able to contribute to and learn from a forum, and has set up formal and informal systems for maintaining relationships with individual members. As already explained, more than one authority described a lateral rather than a top-down style of working: one has adopted a protocol to cover this approach. Support from the authority is also important, as our interviews with group members showed, in hosting website information, providing media training and support, and meeting other requests.

Small locally-based networks can also play an important role in providing a platform for various groups to share their views and aspirations during regeneration initiatives. Largely driven and owned by local people, these can be generated as part of large funded projects or spring up as a response to local events. One such project has established itself in a community dealing with high levels of worklessness and deprivation, and a changing social profile. The project has encouraged acceptance of diversity and helped counter destructive myths and rumours. Tensions were arising not only through the movement of asylum seekers into the regeneration area but also through the perception that the developments were being built for yuppies. Another project is reviving a town partnership in an area of deprivation that had recently been targeted by both the BNP and National Front. A local activist has agreed to chair the new group, which includes representatives of public bodies with local responsibilities,

and has started the process of drumming up support with a blog hosted by the online version of the local free press.

Activism can generate and sustain major schemes. The concept of peace has given rise to a range of significant cultural initiatives in one area. The City for Peace forum there acts as the umbrella for a range of projects with cohesion objectives; intended to give the community cohesion strategy life, it has been largely driven by a community representative who brought together a wide partnership of communities and organisations to develop the idea. The events and projects (carried out by the public, private and voluntary sectors) hosted under the initiative focus attention on the excluded and disadvantaged, oppose prejudice and intolerance, and aim to gain support for practical action in building understanding and respect.

### Monitoring and managing tensions

As we state above, even within a broad strategy it must be possible to make a rapid response to the circulation of false or misleading information. In the long term, the goal must be to pre-empt potential negative reactions and tensions by being transparent about policies or issues that may impact on community relations and avoiding the creation of uncertainty. This is an important lesson that has been learnt from hard experience not only nationally, but among the authorities we studied. It is particularly important for authorities when they are dealing with sensitive factors that can prompt conflict over access to housing, employment, schools and other benefits in areas of economic deprivation. Authorities report using horizon-scanning techniques in order to plan communications on issues that might have an impact on cohesion, but authorities also need to be aware of the need to avoid pitfalls.

Four of the six areas covered by the study have experienced differing degrees of civil disturbance on separate occasions during recent years. In some instances the disorder has clearly been generated by perceptions of differential access to services between social groups or simply a sudden surge in demand by a particular group. It is generally recognised that the incidents could be attributed in part to resentment caused by significant failures to communicate with communities about the allocation of resources: 'It is not that the need was wilfully ignored, it was missed,' notes one chief executive. This authority has undertaken fundamental changes to revise its approach to consultation and to link this to transparent communication on matters that are under its control. Officers spoke of the need to gain public understanding and acceptance of decision-making processes, particularly those involving the distribution of resources on a needs-led basis. In addition to building a network of contacts in the community and adopting various communication techniques, a senior official and elected member visit every ward at least once a year to answer questions from the public.

Other authorities are at earlier stages of absorbing and applying the lessons from experiences in their areas. One authority where housing allocation policy had been applied without consideration for the consequences for cohesion is now building support for processes that will create a shared vision for the area. The outbreak of tension had brought about a new awareness of the need to monitor tensions and pre-empt further troubles, but also to build new understanding and connections within and between communities. A transparent review of allocation of NRF funding and its re-

allocation to trusted bodies as a consequence had impressed community leaders in another authority.

It has already been noted that myth-busting, if limited to provision of factual information to contradict strongly held beliefs<sup>37</sup>, is unlikely to have an impact. More highly developed myth-busting activities, which may be necessitated as a response to events which require leadership and a response to avoid escalation, do appear to assist authorities while going through the longer term process of reassessing and changing fundamental policies and practices. One authority is currently revising its first communication strategy to take account of a new understanding that it had to monitor tensions and create greater transparency. During this period it has found that it is able to make an impact by rapid responses to emerging myths triggered by the arrival of new migrants, often in simple ways - for example, in reducing negative letters to the press.

An authority that has avoided any disturbances attributes this to having been frank about often highly controversial issues as they arose, over a number of years. In one instance, it believes it prevented certain issues being exploited by far right groups or by opportunist news reporters by placing careful stories in the press and briefing community groups giving the authority's reasoning on how to deal with the needs of asylum seekers. Portfolio holders are regularly briefed with data from mapping and intelligence gathering exercises so that they are able to make the political case about meeting diverse local needs.

However, as the head of community engagement and cohesion in one authority warns, 'it's easy to hide behind myth-busting'. There are occasions when 'myths' have a foundation in truth, or where the evidence available to counter the myth may be complex or may not be compelling and can only create more uncertainty. In these circumstances authorities have to make pragmatic decisions about how to handle the issue. Moreover, the more authorities are able to develop and embed a broad approach to communication, the less need they have for reactive myth-busting activity. It seems from our study that more worked up myth-busting strategies are of most value for authorities that have yet to feel the benefit of a broader communication strategy.

We came across a variety of means for monitoring tensions and countering myths and misinformation at different levels. There are formal arrangements established by police and linked to local authorities through Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, community forums that are committed to reporting concerns, and ad-hoc groupings generally established by community cohesion teams. One authority has obtained an additional layer of information through linking the CDR partnership to a network of agencies for third party reporting of hate crime that is fed into a network of contacts and the safe neighbourhood action partnership.

Ultimately it is important that authorities avoid creating pitfalls: effective equality impact assessments should facilitate good judgements and make it possible to ameliorate or justify policy or service decisions.

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<sup>37</sup> Lewis and Newman

## Case study: Monitoring and managing tensions

Managing tensions and anticipating and rebutting myths can be part and parcel of the same operation. One city has an organised network of agencies that provides monitoring and community intelligence and is able to mobilise instant responses to potentially damaging myths and rumours. The network is part of the city's safety partnership.

The network, for 'third party reporting of hate crime' has about 140 reporting centres in the local authority area and a web-based referral, reporting and case management system. Perceptions are managed at local level. The network's contacts include voluntary/community workers, police officers, housing managers and estate officers, ward co-ordinators, community development staff, religious leaders, and voluntary and statutory youth workers.

If an incident occurs, three key messages are agreed: 'You tell the people that you know are in contact with a lot of people, and they tell everybody,' says one of the organisers. 'So you talk to your housing manager, they talk to all of the estate managers, etc, and then it's about raising the issue and communicating the message.'

The local reporting points feed information into Safer Neighbourhood Action Partnerships, usually consisting of a police officer, a ward councillor, the ward co-ordinator, a housing manager or estate warden, and a community representative. There is one in each ward. Information from these groups feeds into a senior officers' group that meets fortnightly. If a serious crisis appears to be developing, the officers' group moves into the chief executive's department.

The network has adapted a model and a toolkit of managing tensions and conflict promoted by CLG and from a variety of theories of conflict and conflict resolution. It is not thought that the model has been widely applied elsewhere. It provides a method of identifying the progenitors of conflict (groups of identity competing over resources, high levels of deprivation, high levels of population movement) and the stages through which conflict escalates. (The training toolkit is supplied with this report. It was designed by Nicola Sugden who acts a cohesion advisor to CLG.)

The emphasis is on preventive action. The progenitors of conflict are identified, and rumours countered at the early states of conflict escalation. Responses are graded according to the severity and likelihood of any imminent crisis. The neighbourhood action partnerships are the main drivers of these problem-solving actions. A rumour that an asylum seeker sexually assaulted young local women was countered by organising community meetings in the area. The intelligence network was forewarned of organised fights between gangs from different racial groups and diversionary and preventive actions were taken. People said that the police had responded slowly after a racist attack. A tape of the police communications, showing a 12-minute response, was played to community groups and front-line workers.

As well as providing monitoring and community intelligence, the network dispenses education, prevention and training. It works in schools and trains front-line staff in conflict management - identifying, managing, and resolving community tensions.

Interestingly, there is a view in the council that the media are useful for promoting the council's values and other 'positive' messages, but are not especially useful in crisis management. This does not mean that the media are unimportant. They have an important part to play in not escalating conflict, and the council works with them to ensure that they do not 'fan the flames'. But we are told, 'What is needed is an additional layer of communication in those local areas where conflict happens because you'll never get the media to respond quickly enough and it's not the most effective channel.' Some communities no more believe what they read in the mainstream press than they do in what councillors tell them.

## Chapter 4: Communicating with the public

It was clear that the relationship with the local press and radio stations (in the main run or supported by the BBC) remained important for our study authorities and a cornerstone of all local authority communication practice. However, this relationship was clearly being placed in a wider context. More emphasis is being placed on communicating directly with the public and local authority staff and making use of all the channels at an authority's disposal, through staff, partnerships, forums and events. We believe that this is an important development that should be widely followed and supported.

However, we also found that the use of new forms of media is on the whole underdeveloped and under-estimated, being given little attention and few resources. Newsletters, magazines, periodic information sheets, myth-busting leaflets and accessible reports are the basic tools of communication adopted by authorities, police and LSPs. Yet the realm of the world wide web, websites, blogs and inter-active sites is becoming increasingly important as a medium of communication, especially for younger people; and it will become a greater importance if there is a reduction in the relevance and importance of the local press as public habits change.

### **New forms of communication**

Local authorities cannot afford to be left behind in exploring and using new media. A lack of engagement in this new realm could leave them open to the same self-criticism that they frequently attach to their recent lack of interest in the local press. The old-fashioned head of communications who has not come to terms with the proliferation of community radio and newspapers, and regards them at most as rivals to the council newspaper, must catch up. But there is an additional step to be taken by all, in adapting to new forms of media and being aware of the implications of locally maintained websites and blogs.

Local authority communication staff are of course aware of the potential of alternative forms of communication: using websites to publicise activities, to bring together individuals and organisations aiming to improve community cohesion, to highlight key policies, facts and other evidence; developing local facilities like the sites of the social enterprise organisation, MySociety, that provide simple applications to link people to elected representatives and actively to obtain information; emulating the social media networks like Facebook and Bebo in the local arena. But few have the resources even to monitor other new media active in their area, let alone to establish the authority's own engagement. Creating new media facilities, or monitoring or contributing to existing new media requires resources and strategic planning. At present, staff with specific responsibilities simply report monitoring some local media on a regular basis for issues that are relevant to their areas of work.

Local newspapers now tend to host internet activity and forums which are monitored to different degrees. Editors clearly want their websites to be seen as a respected and reliable source of information, but they do require attention as they are not necessarily

closely regulated. Individuals are required to log on in order to contribute, but offensive and damaging material is generally removed only after it is displayed. (This arm's length approach is adopted because any newspaper that moderates its discussion sites apparently risks being held responsible for content under the current regulatory regime.)

## **Using a variety of means to communicate**

There can be no doubt that authorities are utilising multiple means of communication, targeting a range of audiences with bespoke materials and creating opportunities for two-way dialogue. There are several examples throughout this report which show how a number of steps may be appropriate to address a particular situation. In these instances authorities are often building upon relationships and projects that are part of a broader strategic approach.

Publicity campaigns can focus on promoting a programme of community cohesion activities, or be run at a more general level of promoting the area as a whole. These latter campaigns link the name of the town or area to positive values about place, and emphasise the quality of life and advantages of living and working there. Campaigns can also concentrate on specific opportunities (a residents' card or recruitment of school governors) and are informed by equalities and diversity. These campaigns involve a wide range of media from local news stories and advertisements to word-of-mouth. Authorities sponsor local conferences and community events that bring together members of organisations with members of the public, or organisations and communities together over a period of time. There can be an over-reliance on such activities where few other forms of communication are in operation, but where well-organised and targeted can have impact beyond the event by being reported in the local press.

## **Handling the media**

Dealing with the local press remains the main route of communication for all local authorities, both to promote a sense of 'place' and community cohesion and to counter inaccurate or misleading reports on all their activities and not merely issues of community cohesion. Yet given the power of the media and the frequently negative nature of reports on the impact of immigration, asylum seekers and new migrants in the local press, and the forum local papers provide for letters and other dissemination of views, we had expected to find that the local authorities in our study had a greater focus on their local media than they in fact do.

If they are a broadly representative sample, then we urge local authorities generally to give a higher profile and more resources to their dealings with their local media. Our literature review provided extensive material on the coverage of these issues in the national and local press and its impact on public opinion. We also saw research that had found evidence that refugees and asylum seekers are directly affected by unbalanced and inaccurate newspaper reports, and which suggests that negative



reporting, by legitimising and reinforcing existing prejudices, may increase the likelihood of racial harassment<sup>38</sup>.

We did not find many examples of inaccurate and potentially inflammatory news reporting in the areas covered by the study. We found that editors were on the whole sensitive to the difficulties and complexity of certain stories, several expressing the desire to be seen as running community newspapers. They generally wished to maintain good relationships with local authority spokespeople and councillors, while retaining the ability to run newsworthy stories that were critical of the authority or politicians. On several occasions a local newspaper intervened to provide corrective factual information to contradict misleading information being circulated by a far right party or in national newspaper's story.

We were often informed that this state of affairs represented an improvement in the authorities' relationships with the local press. We therefore conclude that it is important for communication teams to engage with the press where they do not already do so, and to persist in working proactively with what might be characterised as a 'nightmare newspaper'. We found awareness in one authority that the local press had been neglected in the period running up to civil unrest, a period in which local newspapers had seemingly been instrumental in creating myths and ill feeling through irresponsible reporting. The authority's new chief executive focused on improving relationships with current editors, bringing about an improvement in the quality of coverage and a better working relationship.

However building such a relationship is often a continuing task, as changes in editorial staff are frequent and may lead to a breakdown in the relationship. Many local newspapers are now distributed free in the street or to households, with editors responsible for several newspapers in a wider area. This profile does not prevent each paper having a local perspective nor the editor having a close interest in each of the local authorities covered by the group, but does seem to lead to short periods of tenure as ambitious editors move on in their careers, or are moved around by a large regional news group. Continuity and a collective memory are therefore rare, a regrettable absence highlighted on those occasions where an editor, in place for a number of years, is able to give an account of building relationships over a number of years, and playing an emerging personal civic role.

There is often a distinction to be made between newspapers in an area, and especially between a locally-based paper and a paper with a regional base. In one area the regional paper was criticised by the chief executive of a police authority as being prone to run sensationalist stories exaggerating or distorting supposed racial or faith issues in the district authority that was included in the study. On the other hand, the local newspaper was seen as having a stake in the locality, was viewed more positively, and had a positive editorial stance towards the local community. A local newspaper may very well regard itself as a community newspaper, but may take a selective view as to the community it serves. One newspaper that generally turned

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<sup>38</sup> ICAR (2004) *Media Image, Community Impact Assessing the impact of media and political images of refugees and asylum seekers on community relations in London Report of a pilot research study*, International Policy Institute, King's College London

down ideas for positive stories had little interest in serving the diverse communities in the city centre. Its 'community' lived in the city's suburbs.

Local papers can be persuaded to sponsor community campaigns, events and awards, or at least to report them. Editors of local papers or local radio stations will sometimes agree to sit on partnerships and chair local debates. But generally they will prefer not to become involved so as to preserve their editorial independence.

The way to a local editor's heart is through 'human interest' stories. Human interest is the dominant theme to the news values that govern editorial policy from the largest mass circulation newspapers to the smallest local sheets. But even with a 'human interest' tag it is hard to persuade the local press to engage in positive reporting. It certainly takes a great deal more effort than is required in routine press work, 'It takes ages, especially when it is going to be examined under a microscope. If I say something it has to be spot on.' said one portfolio holder. The local newspaper in one area had run a human interest story about new migrants being taken on local visits in a negative light: a similar story in another area was reported in the press as a positive experience. It is important to persevere in promoting positive reporting, although it maybe necessary to work for a balanced coverage of the impact of local migration. Accurate accounts of an increase in crime associated with a new community cannot be avoided, but could be accompanied by information about steps being taken on the part of the community to reduce incidents.

The media also like to feature 'ordinary people' in their reports. Several of the study authorities have begun giving media training to community leaders. Newspaper editors reported difficulties in engaging with community organisations, and it does appear that there is considerable value in local authority communication teams and cohesion staff providing a link between press and community leaders, leaving community leaders to speak their own minds when interviewed. Community leaders need training and support for their dealings with the media and reported positive experiences of media training to us. In one authority it was possible to contact the communication team for advice when contacted by reporters who it was felt were trying to generate a controversial story.

Overall, editorial policy tends to be set pragmatically. Some newspapers may be in groups that have established guidelines on interviews for reporters and on fact-checking. But generally editors have a great deal of freedom within broad guidelines and rely on their experience and judgment. Few have any formal policy on reporting issues involving ethnic minorities or immigration. BBC radio stations do comply with national guidelines on such issues, but newspaper groups have on the whole paid less attention to the need for them. One newspaper editor we interviewed follows the Press Complaints Council code, and several said they observed professional ethics without referring to a particular code. None referred to the relevant NUJ code. All have systems for dealing with complaints.

Editors prefer authorities that are approachable even on contentious issues: one compared the more open stance of one of the authorities in the study with neighbouring authorities that closed ranks around a difficult issue. News management is a mixed experience from the perspective of local authorities. Officers are obliged to accept that the public likes 'bad news' stories as much as the newspapers that serve

them up and that there are times when influence and contact will never bring the result that the council might want to achieve: 'They want to know the reality of what the issues are; the press keep us awake and alert.' They recognise that the press has to sell copies and satisfy their advertisers. However, some of the study authorities did report reaching agreements with editors over the way in which stories are selected and covered, especially in moderating the tone and language employed, and even winning acceptance that a particular story is newsworthy only if treated in an inflammatory way. One local evening paper swings both ways, carrying a negative story on one occasion and on another working closely with the authority to counteract a misleading account promoted by the BNP of an application (one among many from a variety of community groups) to convert a former public building into a mosque.

Negative and highly coloured news stories in the national press cause a great deal of anguish in local communities and ill feeling and tensions between communities. On the whole, it is very hard for the local authority in the area to correct or counter such reports at a national level, and especially difficult, and generally impossible, to obtain a published correction that is meaningful. The only practical response is to react locally, using existing tension monitoring networks and techniques to correct inaccuracies and limit the damage. This does not mean that local authorities should eschew seeking to influence the national media in positive ways. Experienced heads of communication may actively seek and use national media contacts in order to place a story or theme or to give careful briefings on an issue which is expected to attract national attention, or to establish working relationships more generally.

### Case study: Dealing with the national press

The national press, and especially the tabloids, often carry inaccurate and irresponsible stories that tend to inflame community tensions, very often against Muslim communities. On 7 December 2006 the *Sun* ran a story claiming that 'Britain's manic PC brigade were taking 'the fun out of Christmas' in attempts to avoid offending Muslims while 'Muslim Dubai' was demonstrating 'how to celebrate properly.' The decorations in Dubai were contrasted with those in the town centre of one of our subject authorities where the Christmas tree had supposedly been axed because the anti-vandal box in which it sat was too expensive. Shoppers, it was claimed, had to make do with a tree near McDonald's and the crib scene was said to be made from a shed and tucked away.

The council response was swift, marshalling a response from groups beyond the local authority as well as within it. It was recognised that they had little hope of securing a correction from *The Sun*, so the focus was on local rebuttal. The chief executive's office organised rebuttals from traders, the Local Strategic Partnership and 'different people.' The response was presented as defending the good name of the town, and not supporting the council. The council obtained good coverage in the local press. The council leader was quoted as saying, 'This Christmas [the town] has spent more on decorations than ever before. Those who say there is no Christmas tree to avoid upsetting the local Asian community are not aware of the real truth.' The mayor, who

happened to be a Muslim, remarked in the same story, 'Christmas is a brilliant time of year. People should be coming together not moving further apart. Our Christmas decorations look wonderful, they make me and thousands of others smile and are a real credit to [the town].'

The centre manager said that the comparison with Dubai were 'grossly unfair' and noted, 'As for the crib, which was described as being in a "shed under a stairway", I think people have forgotten that Jesus was born in a cattle shed.'

There are mixed views about the value of national press activity and not surprisingly national newspapers are seen as lacking a sense of responsibility to a local audience. One newspaper editor saw his role as being to 'stick two fingers back up at them at times'. According to the portfolio holder in one authority, 'so called freelance reporters for national press decide what they want to write and only want information that supports it; they aren't interested in what really happens.' These feelings are even stronger among community representatives. As one said after a bad experience, 'Local media companies do listen to you and really put a lot of what you say in the press. The national just take what they feel is relevant which sometimes isn't the right way.'

We found little evidence that authorities are engaging closely with the various journals and newspapers that make up the ethnic minority press. In one authority we found a strong reluctance to engage with minority papers and radio stations: 'how many people actually listen?' Lack of contact will generate this type of uncertainty and it was apparent that this is another aspect of the media that local authorities need to become much more familiar with in order to fill what is a glaring gap.

## Chapter 5: Guidance and experience

### **National guidance**

The widespread adoption of communication strategies and integration with cohesion strategies, does suggest that guidance has had an influence on the current position, although few respondents recognised or had referred to the main national guidance considered in our literature review. There is no general appetite for further guidance on communication, and there is a perception that guidance is best when presented in general terms leaving practitioners and politicians to work out local solutions.

Respondents tend to be unaware of guidance outside their own immediate professional responsibilities: this indicates that any future material should be targeted. It should also be accessible: the length and complexity of guidance was mentioned more than once. Police commented on the length and coherence of DCLG guidance on subjects on which they felt they ought to be informed.

The one request for guidance came from within the authority which has struggled to implement an effective communication strategy: it is perhaps significant that having complied with earlier nationally based advice to adopt a strategy, this authority is now working with external advisors to find a locally specific solution.

There is a strong sense of the importance of learning from practice; in some authorities the need for tangible and intelligent examples of good practice was felt to be a priority, and all expressed a strong perception that the route to further improvement was through a variety of means of communicating good practice.

### **Learning from experience**

This is an area in which many in local government feel strongly that they would benefit from learning from the experience of others. While we make specific recommendations about peer learning, and there is a place for general guidance, the main lesson from the study is that authorities learn most from their own experience. All reported a process of continuous learning and of adjusting responses as a result of practical experience. This indicates more subtle findings as a result of the study than drawing conclusions about 'success and failure'. Authorities can be encouraged to find ways of improving their preparation and responses, and to make judgements about what might work best in the future and adjust their practices accordingly. Most is learned where monitoring and assessment of experience are built into the regular activities of community, partnership, and internal forums.

This is a never-ending process: it is felt in one authority that has undergone most change and presents a positive picture of its current activities that there is a need to continually develop new methods of counter-acting myths and pursuing cohesion through communication, 'However you do it, it reaches its sell-by date fairly quickly'.

Four of the authorities visited had experienced civil disturbances and described a reassessment of cohesion and communication activities and relationships with

communities, partner organisations and the media as a result. As already described, the experience of these authorities in revising and implementing change as a result of this reassessment differs: early responses and initial strategies may need to be revised within a short period of time and those further on in implementing change still have much to learn. Authorities undergoing this process might wish to be provided with a set of answers, but the main lesson appears to be that it is necessary to go through the painful process of adapting advice and guidance to find solutions that are most appropriate locally. This will involve finding the resources to support engagement with staff and the local community, and ultimately if necessary to invest in obtaining external tailored advice and support.

Those authorities conscious of the need to avoid further civil disturbance report experiencing 'a period of calm', but this is not seen as indicating that the situation is fully resolved: indeed the period may be temporary. One chief executive reported that the area is 'fertile ground for right wing groups' and disturbances could manifest themselves again if appropriate monitoring and security levels are not in place. All authorities are aware of a need to monitor and to judge how to avoid situations that could give rise to pressures on cohesion in the future. Equally, there is an awareness that it is not possible to predict and avoid all potential conflict, and that measures need to be in place to meet and learn from such situations should they arise.

In all authorities a sense of success is often impressionistic, but we found a generally optimistic tone, with several individuals reporting that their environment seems more positive than in the past, and a sense of positive achievement among many. Interviewees in several authorities reported some improvement in the approach of local media towards the issues associated with minority communities, race, and faith, and a better understanding with community leaders. In one authority redevelopment of the area which will improve economic, educational and other circumstances with beneficial implications for cohesion is a source of optimism.

It is difficult to judge success in more concrete terms when the effectiveness of activities relate partly to the avoidance of events. In one authority, the head of the chief executive's department recognised this difficulty, when in a sense the ultimate measure of success was whether another civil disturbance was avoided. In another, one interviewee suggested that an ultimate test might be whether extremist candidates that sought to undermine cohesion for electoral purposes were elected. The assessment of such outcomes is too uncertain to be useful.

Most can be learned from how authorities measure and evaluate their practical experiences. This happens in a number of different ways, some less structured than others. In the study two main aspects emerge about learning from experience and monitoring: the monitoring based on customer feedback so matching needs to services and providing the basis of future policy and political decisions that are necessary to address cohesion, and assessment of the impact of communication in the context of cohesion.

While the first clearly interacts with the second, this study focused on perceptions about the impact of communication, and the ways in which authorities obtain the feedback that is needed to inform and improve communication. It is important to note the value placed on other ways of gathering information about public opinion in

assessing the levels of public concern about issues, and using all available sources. One council reported complaints monitoring, aiming to deal with all complaints and queries as soon as they are made in order to reduce the risk of tension arising where complaints are reported in the press. It is believed that this helps counter the emergence of myths and misinformation that may occur when people feel they are not being responded to and which aggravates perceptions that new migrants are receiving better services.

The most critical source of valuable information comes from monitoring in real time through interaction with community contacts and forums described earlier in this report. These relationships allow activities to be agreed and adapted as events occur and will depend on building trust. It may be possible to monitor these interchanges to judge a 'trust factor' and assess what is needed to sustain this over time.

### **Measuring achievement through responses from the community**

Many interviewees mentioned having been reassured by the response from community leaders of the value given to particular activities, but there is clearly a need for clarity and honesty on the part of the authority if feedback of this kind is to be reliable. Reassurance might be provided by one group but the same activity may not be seen in the same light by others. Feedback through forums can be carefully canvassed and lessons learned in cooperation with the organisations involved. Where reliance is placed on informal feedback it needs to be more rigorously tested before being relied on by the authority: community sector interviewees on occasion expressed scepticism about activities in contrast to the perception in an authority that a particular intervention had been effective and well-received.

### **Surveys of various kinds**

All authorities refer to utilising opinion surveys and other means of canvassing public opinion. The Place Survey to be conducted during autumn 2008 was mentioned as a source of information, but has also caused concerns in a number of authorities over the limited value of the material which it will provide. In two tier areas the high level of the survey needs additional questions to provide any useful level of information for district councils. Localities with multiple local communities or experiencing rapid change, or 'churn' in population, would clearly benefit from closer information at ward or more focused level. More thorough surveys of population change and migrant communities resourced by PREVENT funds have generated a wealth of attitudinal information and allowed a real appreciation of religious and cultural differences, providing the depth of information that is not otherwise available. While the resources are not available for more comprehensive surveys of this kind, some coordination of resources among LSP partners or within local authorities to provide more focused in depth information is seen as a way forward.

### **Overview and scrutiny reviews**

We received few reports of overview and scrutiny reviews of community cohesion strategies or of communication more widely. The external services scrutiny committee of one authority examined community cohesion activities in the area and

included recommendations that had a direct bearing on the role of councillors and officers in challenging myths and misinformation in forthcoming local elections.

### **Learning from specific incidents or projects**

Care is needed in relying on certain specific measures of success, for example in the reduction in spate of letters to the press, as a number of factors may be in play. Similarly, positive feedback on specific myth-busting activities from community representatives will not be a reliable measure of the impact on individuals locally.

It is often possible to use multiple methods to assess the effectiveness of an essentially reactive programme of activity. In one authority there is immediate interest in the outcome of activities to counter BNP leafleting aimed at contrasting access to services among (asylum seekers) from those received by local residents. Measures to improve environmental and safety factors in the area have been accompanied by activities including positive stories in the local free press, a developer being encouraged to provide information about the occupation of new housing, and support for a renewed local community partnership. The head of communication suggested that resident satisfaction surveys and fear of crime surveys would allow some conclusions to be drawn. The amount of media coverage favourable to the authority's objectives would be another criterion. He expressed reservations about setting up specific action plans capable of being monitored as this would be a reversal to a less productive way of working, away from the corporate 'campaigning' approach which had already produced a sense of achievement.

### **Adjusting practice as a result of experience**

Adjusting practice as a result of experience takes place at many levels and is the most effective form of change, taking account of local circumstances and bringing in experience from a wide range of activities to inform communication on cohesion issues. A good illustration arose in connection with a high profile police raid in one authority's area which had generated significant tensions. Work continued for some weeks after the incident in a bid to calm tensions further. The authority realised that one of the key problems was that the street in which the incident had occurred remained cordoned off for far longer than was necessary. One of the key learning points identified from the incident was the need to scale down activities as soon as possible so that the visible signs of the problem can be reduced.

The way in which the authority dealt with another type of serious incident also carried lessons. The strategic base for responding to the occurrence of serious environmental damage was set up some distance away from the incident, and people directly affected had no way of knowing what plans were being made to address the problem. After this incident the authority realised that senior representatives were needed on site communicating with local people.

It is also important to build on positive experience. Another authority reports building on the success of its street representative scheme for early response to any issue by recruiting an authority wide group of street representatives to act as channels for communication. It is hoped that this will further reduce the risk of tensions arising



over emerging issues by enabling a rapid response at street level, and also providing a source of sound information through regular forums of street representatives.

## **The publicity code**

We received some commentary on the code of recommended practice on local authority publicity from three of the authorities in the study. It is plainly a ubiquitous aspect of local authority practice, with particular relevance at the time of elections. One authority, with a large number of newly elected councillors found it useful in enabling members to clarify their roles and be guided on expected council practice. Few councillors are aware of the code, and few officers are aware of the specifics. It is common practice to circulate a short brief based on the code annually and prior to election periods.

Interviews in one authority took place during an election period: here strategic officers were feeling frustrated at the impact of the code, although none were sufficiently informed about the code to comment on it. The presence of an experienced head of communication appeared to contribute to the lack of incident over the nature of communication during election periods and a lack of uncertainty associated with communication at other times. In the view of the council's legal advisor, 'the fact that I don't need to get in touch speaks volumes for the good job being done by the head of communication.'

In practice, if misinformation appears during an election campaign that can be cleared up on a factual basis, this will be done. If it is an issue that is clearly political, politicians will be left to slog it out. The code is interpreted as allowing for the normal business of the council, and if a spokesperson is required, officers will speak rather than councillors. If an event is being held in a neighbouring ward during a by-election councillors are advised not to attend.

The code tends to be 'owned' by the Election Registration Officer, and to be seen mainly in the context of elections. Where the head of communication has views, these tend to either show confidence on having a reasonable scope of action within the code, or to find it 'open to interpretation and slightly restrictive'. One felt that the code needed to be made more explicit, particularly given the duty to promote equalities, and cohesion, and suggested that these other standards frameworks need to be incorporated into the code. It was felt that the code should be more explicit about engagement 'clauses should refer to listening and engaging with all communities, not just minorities, this balance needs to be redressed...it is not accepted that it is talking about everyone'.

The head of communication in another authority also had a particular interest in revision of the code. Without making particular suggestions, his view is that the key question is practicality. The code was clearly written by people with an electoral background, in a pre-electronic era; it now needs to allow for greater flexibility. How difficult heads of communication find it will depend on the political landscape of an authority and an area: in practice this should not impact on communication, which should in essence be about improving services.

## Chapter 6: conclusions and recommendations

### **(1) An inclusive culture**

It is necessary for local authorities to use communications to address perceptions prevalent among some social groups that other sections of the community are obtaining better access to services and resources than are available to them. The authorities in the study have absorbed the message of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion of the need to address substantive issues being experienced by both majority and minority communities and to rebalance communications to include all residents, or were already taking this approach.

Communicating to all residents with any degree of success is dependent on the culture of the authority and the strategies, practices and processes that stem from it. The culture of the authority is important in making it possible to identify and articulate a broad vision for the area. The culture of the authority also has a bearing on how communications are organised internally and externally: it is important to be rigorous and clear about what can be achieved through different activities.

The research suggests that local strategic partnerships have not yet become the vehicle for a commonly held perspective on community cohesion. There is a potential for equalities and cohesion staff and communication teams to join representatives of partner organisations and a range of community organisations and forums on an LSP sub-group. Not all the study authorities have set up sub-groups and those that have are at an early stage: over time it can be expected that these sub-groups will have greater importance.

### **(2) Being strategic about communications**

Local authorities are no longer primarily concerned with the local press and other media outlets, the main focus of communication now being their staff and the local community.

Those authorities that have taken a systematic overview of what they are trying to communicate, to whom, and have been robust about managing relations with external forums and pragmatic about what methods are utilised are least likely to miss opportunities to communicate and to feel more confident about the success of their activities and to have more positive relationships with the local press.

It appears more important that staff and elected members rely on an implicit knowledge of the objectives and expectations generated by an authority's communications strategy rather than direct knowledge. This approach means that the parameters of the strategy need to be communicated and reinforced through a variety of means, and care taken to avoid pitfalls that might arise, but it encourages more flexible and informal ways of working.

All authorities have a dedicated communications team, experience showing that a higher level of resources is needed for a team to be proactive and do more than

respond to events. Communications will have a higher profile and be more integrated into decision making where the head of communications has a senior status and is involved in advisory and decision-making forums at a number of levels.

### **(3) Linking internal and external networks**

All authorities in the study illustrated how inter-relationships among officers and elected members are interlaced with networks of external organisations and individuals. A positive difference in communication and cooperation is achieved when effort is put into planning how these connections are made and maintained. Connections exist in parallel with and across levels of seniority. Community cohesion and equalities staff make and support connections with community organisations and forums, work directly with senior police officers, and can make it possible for the police to make direct contact with community leaders. In turn, they reported being able to feed back to communications staff and chief officers.

Members and officers are involved in a range of external forums. At present more reliance is placed on community forums which are coordinated by local authority officers, but over time it can be expected that LSP sub-groups will have greater importance. Connections are also made between elected members and individuals and organisations at neighbourhood level. The relationships established through more general connections can be used to bring together key organisations and individuals to focus on a particular problem.

### **(4) Monitoring and managing tensions**

In the long term, the main lesson is of the need to pre-empt possible negative or ill-informed reactions by adopting transparency about any issues that might have an impact on cohesion, and avoiding the creation of uncertainty. This involves careful horizon scanning based on the collection and collation of information from community level, and ensuring that decisions about resources that impact on the services that people receive take into account the potential impact on community cohesion.

Some case study authorities had experienced different levels of civil disturbance in the recent past, and it was recognised in some instances that the incidents could be attributed in part to resentment caused by significant failures to communicate with communities about the allocation of resources. These authorities were at different stages of absorbing and applying the lessons from experiences in their areas. The outbreak of tension had brought about a new awareness of the need to monitor tensions and pre-empt further troubles, but also to build new understanding and connections within and between communities.

It must be possible to make a rapid and perhaps pragmatic response to the circulation of a false or misleading news story, leaflet, or rumour even within a broad strategy. However, it does appear that more highly developed myth-busting strategies are of most assistance to authorities that are going through the more long-term process of reassessing and changing more fundamental policies and practices.

A variety of external forums are being used for tension monitoring, and authorities have committed different levels of resources. In addition to a range of formal arrangements established by police and linked to local authorities through Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, members of community forums can be invited to report concerns, and tension monitoring can be included in the agenda of community cohesion partnerships.

### **(5) Integrating communications with partnerships**

Local strategic partnerships have yet to have an impact on communications locally in the areas studied, and the implications of Local Area Agreement targets for promoting strong and safe communities are still being resolved. The implementation of Local Area Agreements and adoption of the *Strong and Safe Communities* strand finds the case study authorities at different stages, and with different perceptions about how to take this forward.

It will be necessary for local authorities to consider the relationship between LSP subgroups and existing community cohesion forums, but the presence of existing networks provides a foundation for subgroup activity, which is now seen as the way forward in some authorities. However, most are only now beginning to work out what it will mean to act on and communicate on cohesion issues through the LSP, and experiences differ widely. For many respondents, the LSP currently has a relatively low profile or may even be seen as part of the problem.

Throughout the research, the police emerged as vital actors in the process of combating extremist mythology; and more generally in projects aimed at securing better community cohesion. Much depends on creating trust between council officials on the frontline of diversity and communication work and the police: these individuals can be highly regarded. In general the police aim to build and maintain extensive community contacts and to consult, liaising with local authority officers to make additional particular contacts. A review of communications has the potential to draw out sensitivities and achieve improvements in an approach to local communications between local authorities and the police.

### **(6) Communications with local authority staff**

The way in which the authority communicates with its staff has important implications for its overall approach to pre-empting the emergence of myths and misinformation, and for communicating the overall approach of the authority to promoting community cohesion. Most authorities include the aim of communicating with staff within their communications strategy; the study showed that they utilise a range of methods in doing so and that these involve engaging with staff at different levels. Not all appear to make communications with staff a priority, but some useful insights emerged from the study.

Informality appears to be most successful in providing flexible ways of communicating when it is provided for in a strategic overview, when the corporate approach is clear about the message but allows staff discretion in how they communicate between levels of seniority within the organisation and with external

organisations. It is important to involve the staff from the start when devising a communications strategy. The size of the local authority workforce means that trade unions have a role to play in challenging discrimination and promoting equalities in the workplace and the wider community, outcomes which may have a bearing on effective communications on the part of staff.

### **(7) Elected members**

Elected members have crucial responsibilities that are integral to the cohesion and communication strategies of local authorities. At best, they should play their part in identifying emerging issues; be willing and able to respond in situations that require a rapid response; to work across party to emphasise a commitment to fair treatment across all communities; to support networks, chair forums, make speeches as well as policy; and to demonstrate a political commitment to community cohesion. Whether acting as ward councillors, council leaders or cabinet members with relevant portfolios, elected members playing these roles require support and attention from within the authority.

While the council itself may not be a trusted source of information, the ward councillor can be highly regarded. The ward councillor comes across myths and misinformation at first hand, and is able to feed these into the overview of tension-monitoring, and contribute to discussions as to how instances can be answered or pre-empted in the future. Those authorities that recognise that news reporters will contact councillors at ward level perhaps have a more realistic appreciation of what is needed in the form of training and access to advice from communications staff.

The Leader of the council and cabinet members with portfolios that incorporate community cohesion are the main political drivers of the cohesion strategy, are a focus for the media and have key responsibilities for ensuring effective communications. Contact with the press is only one element of a communications response: leading councillors will meet local representatives and take part in joint activities. Council leaders have a key role to play in taking public action to reduce the risk of heightened tensions.

Two of the authorities in the study place emphasis on the success of politicians in having obtained a cross-party consensus on the approach to cohesion and communications. The consensus approach does appear to have advantages over the appointment of one cabinet member as a champion for cohesion issues.

### **(8) Communicating with the public**

Authorities are adopting a number of methods by which to communicate with the public and showing that these can be utilised and adapted to meet different situations as they arise. The successful utilisation of a range of appropriate methods appears to be as / more important than media contacts in both pre-emptive and reactive situations, although the media do have a role to play. Authorities in the study described utilising publicity campaigns, sponsoring conferences and community events and other community initiatives in order to communicate various messages and to form the vehicle for communications activities.

New forms of media are less in evidence: the basic tools remain newsletters, magazines, and similar information presented in an accessible way. Authorities are using their websites to provide information about local forums: it seems that online discussion forums are mainly the province of local newspapers. The realm of the world wide web, websites, blogs and inter-active sites is becoming increasingly important as a medium of communication, especially for younger people, and the need to consider the resources and skills required to operate with a wider range of media is becoming more pressing.

There does appear to be some correlation between relying on a wide range of ways of communicating with the public and the emergence of damaging myths and rumours. Those authorities that utilise a range of methods to communicate with the public appear to rely less on conventional myth-busting techniques, although such techniques are deployed when needed. The authority in the study that placed most emphasis on myth-busting activities relies mainly on public events to communicate with the public.

### **(9) Community forums**

An authority achieves most when it takes a rigorous view of what it is able to contribute to and learn from a forum, and has set up formal and informal systems for maintaining relationships with individual members. An active range of forums will include some generated by the authority and others arising from independent local initiatives.

Collaboration with and co-ordination of forums appears to reinforce the success of utilising a range of ways of communicating with the public. Participation in a forum makes it possible for local activists with different interests to engage more fully with each other and to link with internal council networks and resources, and to adopt responsible roles in communications. This collaboration makes it possible to initiate two-way communication (something which authorities are recognising is failing in their consultation strategies).

### **(10) Learning from experience**

All reported a process of continuous learning and of adjusting responses as a result of practical experience. This indicates more subtle findings as a result of the study than drawing conclusions about 'success and failure'. Authorities can be encouraged to find ways of improving their preparation and responses, and to make judgements about what might work best in the future and adjust their practices accordingly. Most is learned where monitoring and on-going assessment of experience are built into the regular activities of community, partnership, and internal forums.

The main lesson appears to be that it is necessary to go through the painful process of adapting advice and guidance to find solutions that are most appropriate locally. This will involve finding the resources to support engagement with staff and the local community, and ultimately if necessary to invest in obtaining external tailored advice and support. While some are looking for solutions that have been used elsewhere,

peer support, such as through a 'critical friend' relationship, is likely to be found more valuable.

### **(11) Handling the media**

Given the power of the media, the frequently negative nature of reporting of the impact of immigration, asylum seekers and new migrants in the local press, and the forum local papers provide for letters and other dissemination of views, we had expected to find that the local authorities in our study had a greater focus on their local media than they in fact do. Relationships with the local press do remain important, and a cornerstone of all local authority communications practice, but are now seen in a wider context. This is partly as a result of the greater emphasis placed on communicating directly with the public and local authority staff, and in part because of what may be a reduction in the importance of local newspapers. One aspect of the print media receives less attention than it should: there is a gap in awareness of the need to engage with the ethnic minority press on the part of local authorities.

The utilisation of more recent electronic media is on the whole underdeveloped and underestimated. Significantly, many local newspapers see their future as dependent upon developing and encouraging public interaction with their websites: a pointer to the way in which electronic forms of communication will become more important in the near future. There is an increasing awareness among local authority communications staff of the potential of alternative forms of communication. Social media networks such as Facebook and Bebo are important media contributed to by local people, but few have resources to monitor or include new media in their strategies. Monitoring or contributing to these media requires resources and strategic planning.

Where authorities have experienced the impact of negative national press stories they express a need for support in handling national news media. There are mixed views about the value of national press activity and not surprisingly national newspapers are seen as lacking a sense of responsibility to a local audience.

Newspaper editors report difficulties in engaging with community organisations, and it does appear that there is considerable value in local authority communications teams and cohesion staff providing a link between press and community leaders, leaving community leaders to speak their own minds when interviewed.

### **(12) Guidance and standards**

The widespread adoption of communications strategies and integration with cohesion strategies, does suggest that guidance has had an influence on the current position, although few respondents recognised or had referred to the main national guidance considered in our literature review. There is no general appetite for further guidance on communications, and there is a perception that guidance is best when presented in general terms leaving practitioners and politicians to work out local solutions.

There is a strong sense of the importance of learning from practice; in some authorities the need for tangible and intelligent examples of good practice was felt to

be a priority, and all expressed a strong perception that the route to further improvement was through a variety of means of communicating good practice.

It appears to be common practice to circulate periodic internal guidance on the code of recommended practice: few are aware of the specifics. The code tends to be owned by the Electoral Registration Officer, and to be seen mainly in the context of elections. Different heads of communications showed confidence at having a reasonable scope for action within the code, or found it restrictive. It does appear that some revisions are required to take account of changes in local government roles and responsibilities.

## **Recommendations**

### **Local and central government**

1. Authorities need to be alert to the likelihood of conflict and have in place the information gathering networks to inform their judgements and decisions.
2. Authorities should use horizon-scanning techniques, carry out effective equality impact assessments and plan communications on issues that might have an impact on cohesion.
3. Accurate information is also necessary at local level to understand the social and economic factors impacting upon people's lives that are most likely to lead to community conflict.
  - a. Local partners should prioritise joint work in identifying resources for the collection of information.
  - b. As information collection and collation is expensive, and may conflict with central government requirements such as the annual Place Survey, central government should review the requirement for the Place Survey after three years.
4. Local authorities must join with strategic partners to lead the way in constructing a sense of identity and place, but must make the distinction between locality and local authority – the vision should be owned by the locality.
5. For communications strategies to be effective:
  - a. A sufficient level of resources must be provided to enable communications teams to be proactive
  - b. The head of communications must have sufficient seniority to influence communications at every level within the authority.
6. Communications should sit at the centre of an authority's community leadership activities and its role within its Local Strategic Partnership. Central



government should take steps to encourage statutory agencies to commit more resources to communications at local level.

7. Authorities should demonstrate that they are capable of two-way communications: consultations with the public should be followed up by effective feedback.
8. Support and training should be provided for all councillors and staff who are likely to be in contact with the media, to help them achieve and maintain levels of confidence and proficiency. These systems must include ward councillors who are in often in frequent contact with the local press.
9. Local authorities should aim to create structures which integrate internal and external networks and allow informality within a clear policy framework.
10. Care should be taken when establishing informal communication networks and the arrangements reviewed regularly to ensure that minority groups are not excluded.
11. Authorities and strategic partners should empower groups and individuals to work with media to promote positive stories and understanding and challenge myths, inaccurate and negative stories.
12. Local authority employees should be encouraged to see themselves as ambassadors for the authority and to be its eyes and ears, contributing to knowledge about potential sources of conflict. There is an important role for trade unions in improving staff awareness.
13. Local authorities should communicate their commitment to diversity and fairness to the managers, staff and workers in contracted out services and agencies that provide public services on their behalf.

## **The Media**

Our research has illustrated how a good relationship with the press should work: local authorities should acknowledge that it has a legitimate role and encourage honesty, transparency, and mutual understanding. To this end:

1. Local authorities should persist in promoting working relationships with 'bad' local newspapers as editors and circumstances do change over time
2. It is difficult to win coverage for good news stories but authorities should persist and present issues in a newsworthy way: officers need to understand their local media and target the appropriate press with appropriate stories
3. Local authorities should engage more effectively with the ethnic minority press

4. Support in dealing with changes in the media and training in new media should be provided through the Local Government Association or Chartered Institute for Public Relations
5. The Local Government Association should make support and advice available to local authorities on dealing directly with the national press when required.
6. The rules of the Press Complaints Commission should be revised to allow class complaints to be made
7. Guidelines for the press on multi-diversity are needed at regional and local level, preferably provided by the Association of Editors
8. The National Union of Journalists should remind members and editors of its code (and show that it takes the code seriously by taking action where it is breached)

### **Guidance and support**

1. There is no need for further guidance: practitioners want the opportunity to share experiences, exchange practice materials and have opportunities to meet. Possibilities could include:
  - a. Mentoring arrangements – for example provided by a more experienced communications manager for an area experiencing similar new migration.
  - b. Secondments between authorities with different levels of experience or at different stages in dealing with similar issues
  - c. Critical friend site visits: these could be followed up by regular contact or mentoring arrangements. This type of partnering would involve the Improvement and Development Agency in identifying types of learning that would match needs in particular authorities.

### **Code of recommended practice on local authority publicity**

2. The Code needs to be thoroughly revised to take account of the changing nature of local authority communications
3. Any revision should consider the consequences of local authorities being responsible for communications whether through the comments, materials or expressions of spokespeople of funded organisations in order to take account of the changing and expanding relationship with community and voluntary organisations.

### **A Rebuttal Unit**

4. There is no need for a national rebuttal unit. Reliance is in practice more effectively based upon two-way communication with a range of internal and external networks.

## Case study: An anatomy of social disintegration

Marginbury (obviously not the estate's real name) was once a desirable estate to live in with its green suburban setting: it was the epitome of working class respectability back in the 1920s. It is now a very mixed area, housing an ageing population of long-standing residents, younger professionals who have moved into cheap but good quality homes and growing numbers of poor white and ethnic families in the shrinking council house pool. There is no single 'community' in Marginbury, but many different experiences, cultures and voices.

The estate now exemplifies the social polarisation that is often one of the features of areas experiencing very fast inward migration throughout the UK. It is also an object lesson in how a local authority can get it wrong – an object lesson from which the council involved has learned and is learning.

Longer-term residents share the view that the estate has gone downhill. They date the decline from the 1990s and identify three causes: rising anti-social behaviour and a moral degeneration; a disintegration of good and active relationships between residents; and a feeling of neglect and being overlooked by the council and other authorities in terms of services and facilities, amenities and funding. People new to the area liked its greenery and low crime-rate, despite the problems caused by young people. Minority people, except for the North African families, say that they have encountered little racism. Most newcomers have adapted to the pattern of 'keeping yourself to yourself.'

A local regeneration project in the early 2000s briefly raised communal activity, but once the central government funds came to an end, the enterprise was left with liabilities, forced to rely on volunteers, and many of the new ventures – a nursery for example - were left stranded. People's expectations were dashed – and the council did nothing to raise spirits. Its role emerged as central to the experience of living in Marginbury. Perceptions of neglect, the withdrawal of services and a shift of funding to other areas, the loss of amenities, the general unkempt look of the place, fostered apathy. 'Marginbury has no heart' was a common cry. Local activists found it hard to keep people with them, thanks to tensions with council officials over plans to improve facilities. The police did step up their neighbourhood policing, but couldn't raise local confidence in their role.

The council's rehousing policies contributed to rising tensions. They altered the shape and character of the area significantly in what seems to have been an ad hoc way. First, they located a number of white families with multiple problems on the estate, which led to considerable anti-social behaviour. There does not seem to have been sufficient tenancy support. Secondly, they moved more than a dozen North African families into council homes (and others moved into other properties in the area). In both cases, the housing department adopted a purely departmental approach and did not grasp that their actions would have foreseeable consequences. The department did not even involve other departments and outside agencies in thinking the consequences through.

The first impact was on the local primary school. The head teacher was taken by surprise by a sudden arrival of the ethnic minority children who joined the school roll on a weekly basis. The ethnic composition of the school changed dramatically and soon more than half the pupils had English as a second language. Tensions rose around the school and a large number of white parents moved their children to other schools. This exodus was a great loss, but the school is now performing well as a multi-ethnic school - and is proud of it.

But tensions rose and the local police soon noticed a significant rise in hate crimes, mostly of a racial nature, increasing in number over the next year. The incidents shifted from people's homes to attacks on the streets and the attacks became more serious. Ethnic minority mothers taking their children to the local school became a particular target for attacks. The stabbing of a pregnant woman outside her home brought with it reports of a clutch of new cases – some old incidents – inspired by the interest the authorities were now taking. The perpetrators of this racial harassment were largely young people, mostly aged 15 or under, who were responsible for the anti-social behaviour that was already a feature of the estate before the sudden arrival of ethnic minority families.

The first lesson the local authority has learned is that its social cohesion policies have to be understood and integrated systematically across departments into all their activities and policies. No more silos. Secondly, all its policies impact upon the quality of community life and the sense of belonging that is vital to social cohesion. The lack of amenities in Marginbury and the growing sense of insecurity were linked. With limited opportunities for residents to meet in pleasant and safe places on the estate created and reinforced barrier between different age groups, between those of different background and between long-term and newer residents. As many resident noted, Marginbury had become an area with no heart – and the council has to give it back its heart for the longer-term cohesion the community.

Thirdly, it is now recognised that an initial attempt to 'keep it quiet' was mistaken. Fourthly, hearsay and rumour played an important part in spreading the idea that the estate was being 'swamped' by new arrivals who were unfairly accessing council housing. The actual facts and figures were not made public soon enough. The council's social cohesion team has now developed a new way of working with communities prior to or in the midst of demographic change. Officers now talk to local communities separately about the anxieties they hold about the changes that occur, or are about to occur, And use their findings to start a dialogue between the various groups.

Finally, in areas like Marginbury, community action is fragile and undertaken by only a few activists. Local activists are now recognised as the key to improving social cohesion and the council now seeks to back them up.

