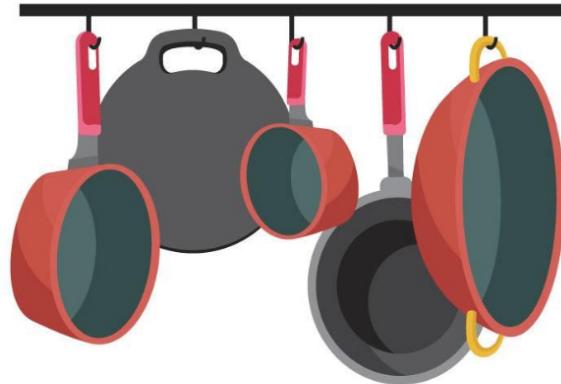


Llanelli Unites

Conference Report

“Healing the Divide”

Llanelli Unites



Llanelli yn Unedig

January 2025

Contents

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Introduction**
- 1.2 Aims of the conference**
- 1.3 Limits of the event**

2. Summary

3. Feedback from Workshops

- 3.1. Workshop 1: The Causes and Impact of the Divide**
- 3.2. Workshop 2: How Do We Work Together to Tackle Hate and Extremism**

4. Calls to Action

1. Introduction

This report is an outcome from the “Healing the Divide” conference held in Llanelli in November 2024. The conference was organised by Llanelli Unites, a voluntary group committed to promoting and celebrating the multicultural and diverse communities of Llanelli.

The conference arose from the divisions and hatred largely promoted by Far Right groups following the Home Office proposals for the Stradey Park Hotel.

1.1. Aims of the Conference

In planning the conference the organisers set out 3 broad aims for the event:

“... to listen to a range of voices and opinions on the causes of the divisions in Llanelli

...to enable community leaders to understand the impact such divisions are having on the people of Llanelli

...to explore ways in which the community can work together to tackle extremism and hate”.

1.2. Attendance

Over 50 individuals attended the event from a range of local and national organisations. A full list of attendees has been recorded. We are not publishing the names or organisations of those attending for security and confidentiality reasons.

1.3. Limits of the event

We recognise that any single event will have limitations and that there is more that needs to be done to truly “heal the divide”. We would like to see more engagement with the community and a wider range of voices contributing to the debate.

2. Summary

The community of Llanelli has been damaged by the divisions following the protests at the Stradey Park Hotel in 2023/24. We have seen an increase in extremist and hateful actions both online and in person. Many people, particularly those from minority communities, are fearful for their safety.

There is recognition that the lack of any organised, co-ordinated, response involving the community and the public bodies serving the community, has left a void which is often filled by Far Right and other groups. On too many occasions a narrative of hate, extremism and misinformation has been left unchallenged.

This report concludes with a call to action for a renewed partnership between Public Bodies and the community to work together to put together a strategy and to take actions to “heal the divide”.

3. Feedback from Workshops

3.1. Workshop 1: The causes and impact of the divide

Workshop participants identified a number of issues which they believed had led to the divisions in the community:

Causes of the divide

Pre - existing social conditions

- austerity
- poverty
- divisions and language post-Brexit
- anti migrant rhetoric from politicians
- impact of social media
- communities feeling excluded from political processes and decisions

Decisions and communication around proposals for Stradey Park Hotel

- lack of consultation with the community before proposals were announced
- the impact of loss of jobs and a community asset at the hotel
- the lack of communication and engagement from the Home Office during the whole process
- some participants criticised the decision by Carmarthenshire County Council not to inform the community prior to the announcement that the hotel was being considered as accommodation for asylum seekers resulting in a lack of trust

Protests at the hotel

- Far Right groups exploited local concerns and used the local campaign against the closure of the hotel to push an anti migrant agenda
- The existence of a permanent camp at the hotel attracted a number of people from outside the community, the spread of disinformation and the radicalisation of a large number of people.
- Counter protests against perceived racism and the Far Right left some members of the community feeling caught between competing groups
- The increasingly hostile atmosphere at the protest camp led many local people to feel intimidated and unable to voice their opinions
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Issues since announcement not to use hotel for asylum seekers

- Far Right groups have become established in Llanelli and have used local and national issues to promote their agenda

Lack of any counter narrative

- The lack of any organised response to the messaging from the Far Right and from individuals expressing anti migrant and other discriminatory views has allowed unwanted views to spread with little or no challenge
- In some cases issues to do with school curriculum or housing policies have been the subject of misinformation but no factual responses have been made by the local authority or other bodies

Impact of the divisions

Hostile atmosphere

- many participants gave examples of a hostile atmosphere in Llanelli since the hotel protests. The hostility was generally aimed at migrants; asylum seekers and refugees; members of the the LGBTQ+ community; local politicians; Police, etc. The hostility was most prevalent on social media but was also apparent in a a number of protests and demonstrations. One impact of this hostile environment was to close down legitimate discussions on issues such as migration.

Racism and extremism becoming normalised

- many participants expressed a view that since the protests at the hotel there had been a change in the “public discourse” in Llanelli and that racist and extremist views had become normalised.

Safety fears

- many community groups had either cancelled events, been forced to pay for security or restricted publicity for events due to a fear of Far Right disruption. Some individuals had been personally targeted and faced harassment online and on the street. Some schools had been subject to threats and intimidation when they were seen as promoting positive messages around refugees and asylum seekers or supporting Pride events.

Attacks on local democracy

- many local politicians at all levels from community councils to members of the Senedd and Parliament have faced threats and have had to change practices such as public surgeries and canvassing.

Far Right activity

- there have been a number of protests and demonstrations called by Far Right groups and supported by local people - these have targeted local schools; national campaigns such as farmers protests and campaigns against 20 mph. In some cases groups have travelled to take part in Far Right protests in Telford and London.

Fears from the BAME community

- participants working and supporting minority communities gave specific examples of hostility online and on the streets towards visibly minority community members. In some cases Muslim women and children were afraid to be seen in public because of fears of attack.

Hostility towards economic migrants

- fears were expressed for the number of new migrants who have arrived in Llanelli - usually to work in health and social care. In some cases there has been direct discrimination verbally and online. There is also a fear that “misinformation” from some Far Right groups will lead to attacks on individuals who have been labelled “illegals”.

Fears amongst the LGBTQ+ community

- participants gave a number of examples of discriminatory and threatening behaviour aimed towards the LGBTQ+ community. Far Right groups had targeted events such as Pride and had

given a platform on their social media channels to openly hostile groups and individuals. Some Far Right groups had organised protests at Pride events and filmed examples of harassment.

Damage to the reputation of Llanelli

- many participants expressed a view that Llanelli's reputation had been tarnished by the nature of the protests and the Far Right activity which has continued.
- there are fears that the damage to the reputation of the town could result in less tourism, a lack of inward investment and difficulties in attracting workers in shortage areas.

Positive impacts

- some participants gave examples of positive changes arising from the protests. There was a feeling that more progressive groups and individuals had come together to organise actions and campaigns within the community. In some cases dialogue had opened up with individuals that allowed a more balanced discussion.

3.2. Workshop 2 - How do we work together to tackle hate and extremism?

A number of themes for action to address hate and extremism were identified from workshops. The common thread across these views was the need for a co-ordinated response from public bodies and the voluntary sector.

Action Plan for Recovery

- there was a call from a number of people for an action plan to address the issues raised in the previous workshops and to begin the process of “recovery”. There were also concerns that there is no identifiable public body currently leading this work or accepting responsibility for the work to take place.

Community Healing

- there was a consensus across many participants that there needs to be a “community healing” exercise to allow the community an opportunity to voice concerns around the issues raised by proposals for the hotel. There is a need for individuals and groups with a range of opinions to put forward their views. This should include those who were opposed to the proposals for the hotel; those with anti-migrant views; local people concerned about the impact on services; those who are supportive of asylum seekers and refugees.

There is a recognition that this work is difficult and requires skills and resources which are not currently in place.

Building Resilience

- a number of people put forward the need for greater community resilience in the face of the challenges faced by the community. The “form” of such resilience included more communication and consultation with the community; more information to be provided and a ‘counter narrative’ to be used in face of misinformation from Far Right groups; more education and learning in schools, colleges and the local community around issues of racism, migration, asylum seekers and refugees, etc; more opportunities for local people to interact with migrants.

A Joined Up Approach

- the need for a co-ordinated response across public bodies and community groups was seen as an important starting point for community recovery.

4. Calls to Action

Following the conference and other discussions Llanelli Unites is making the following recommendations and calls to action:

1. Formation of a Llanelli Community Cohesion Partnership

We call on Welsh Government to establish a Llanelli Community Cohesion Partnership to bring together a range of organisations from the public sector and voluntary sector to promote better dialogue and understanding of community need.

The partnership would meet regularly to review community tensions and to plan actions which could lead to better community relations.

The partnership would have an advisory role in determining the allocation of resources to community cohesion in Llanelli.

The partnership would consist of at least the following:

Carmarthenshire County Council
Llanelli Town Council
Llanelli Rural Council
Police and Crime Commissioner
Victim Support
Elected representatives
Voluntary sector / Community groups

We believe this work could start in January 2025.

2. A Community Healing and Recovery Plan for Llanelli

We call on Welsh Government to lead on the formation of a Recovery Plan for Llanelli.

The recovery plan should be based on partnership working involving:

Carmarthenshire County Council
Llanelli Town Council
Llanelli Rural Council
Police and Crime Commissioner for Dyfed Powys
Victim Support
Elected representatives
Voluntary Sector / Community partner organisations

The recovery plan should take into account the impact of the divisions identified above and lead to a series of actions around building community resilience.

Given the delays in starting this work and the need for work to commence before the Senedd elections in 2026 **we call on Welsh Government to start this process by March 2025.**

3. Communication and counter narratives

There is a need for public bodies to be more proactive in communicating factual information to counter misinformation published by extremist and Far Right groups e.g.

We are calling on the following bodies to work with a Llanelli Community Cohesion Partnership to consider the following:

Home Office (through the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership or other nominated partners) - to lead on providing more factual information on migration and asylum.

Welsh Government - to lead on information relating to Nation of Sanctuary; Anti Racism Strategy; aspects of the curriculum such as relationship education.

Carmarthenshire County Council - factual information around housing policy and any other areas of responsibility subject to misinformation campaigns by extremist groups.

Police and Crime Commissioner - to coordinate a campaign to provide reassurance to minority communities and to provide a more proactive approach to tackling hate crime and other threats.

This work should start by February 2025

4. Actions from the community

There is a continuing need for community groups, individuals, political parties and organisations working in the community of Llanelli to challenge hateful language and activities and to promote a positive view of the town and its diverse communities.

We must all accept that we have a responsibility and a role to play.

We are calling on **Carmarthenshire Association of Voluntary Services (CAVS)** to bring together interested parties to map out community services and to promote a positive set of actions to build on the sense of community in Llanelli.

We believe this work can start in January 2025.

