

Summary from stakeholder event as part of Equality and Social Justice Committee's inquiry into social cohesion

17 March 2025

Members heard from stakeholders from third sector organisations to hear what they think of the current issues in relation to social cohesion, their role as third sector organisations, the barriers they face in delivering social cohesion building activities and how they view the Welsh Government's strategy on social cohesion, including their experience of working with the community cohesion teams.

Stakeholders joined in person or via zoom for small group discussions. The stakeholders were:

EYST WCVA Kiran Cymru Bevan Foundation Wales Refugee Council Building Communities Trust Llanelli Unites	Black History Wales Race Council Cymru Oasis Cytun: Churches together Age Cymru Sanctuary Coalition Cymru
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The following are the [main messages](#) from the discussions:

Community Cohesion Strategy and programme

There was a mixed response to the Social Cohesion Strategy and programme delivered across Wales.

- Several of the stakeholders were unaware of the strategy and the Community Cohesion Co-ordinators. Others felt that there is lack of clear objectives, transparency, and information about the programme and its interim review.
- It was noted that the programme feels very disjointed across Wales, with many stakeholders unclear about the Community Cohesion Co-ordinators' role.
- However, some third sector groups had positive experiences of Community Cohesion teams noting that "some are pro-active and pro-actively engage." Mid Wales and the North Wales region were viewed positively.
- Some stakeholders felt that the experience of the community cohesion programme depends on the person on the ground and the direct relationships

with them. The lack of consistency in their approach and how they engage on a local level with the third sector was a concern.

- It was noted that the cohesion teams tend to engage with third sector during refugee week, but that this level of engagement is often very superficial, and often without legacy.
- An example was shared when £1000 funding was allocated to a community organisation by the community Cohesion Team to run small events, but there was little evidence of their work influencing or leading in relation to social cohesion in Llanelli when it was needed. A question raised was why a conference on Healing the Divide should be planned and organised by Llanelli Unites, a group established to address the challenges faced following the disruption when the Home Office planned to accommodate asylum seekers in the local Stradey Park Hotel. Some felt that this should have been led by the Community Cohesion Team. Other third sector organisations had not received funding via the Community Cohesion teams.
- Stakeholders were not clear on how the Community Cohesion Teams work with local authorities and they noted that there is not much evidence of the their work feeding through to the grassroots.
- Stakeholders emphasised the need for a refreshed strategy to provide clarity and strategic direction together with a transparent monitoring framework, possibly monitored by a national body to ensure consistency of approach across Wales.
- Whilst a review was undertaken by Diverse Cymru in 2021, it was noted that this has not been published and it is not clear what lessons were learned or what changes were made to the programme as a result.

Challenges to social cohesion

- Several challenges were highlighted in particular the hate and racism directed towards refugees and asylum seekers. Several examples of racist incidents were shared including a Chinese woman being pushed off her bike, social care workers told to “go home” and black school children on a school trip verbally abused. Overt racists and hostile acts have reached a level of toxicity.
- Concerns about intra-racism such as within the Afghan community, and a lack of guidance regarding this complex issue in the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan was raised. It was noted that guidance and support is needed.
- The barriers to accessing public services and some racism within these services were raised. This can be due to language barriers, where there’s a lack of translators. It was noted children should not be translating to support

parents access services. This can be particularly challenging in more rural areas as part of the wider dispersal across Wales, when services are further away, such as English courses or third sector support organisations. There was concern about there being no provision for education for migrants in some areas of Wales.

- Similarly there are barriers to accessing private rented accommodation and local housing issues, such as the need for an UK guarantor and income checks. These are challenging for many including people leaving prison, care leavers, migrants and refugees.
- High levels of poverty and inequality was considered a significant factor where there are community tension. Disenfranchised and poor communities are often targeted by the far right and their rhetoric of mistrust, racism and hate. There is also a general sense that democracy isn't delivering for ordinary people.
- There are negative perceptions of the gaps between the services and support to the indigenous community and migrants can lead to mistrust and misunderstanding. Addressing such issues through community work, information and building trust is essential to social cohesion. Often people are not aware of the challenges and trauma experienced by migrants such as the challenges faced by those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) including lack of access to benefits or sometimes access to free school meals.
- Asylum seekers and refugees fundamentally want to access justice and require access to legal support. Immigration law is complex and people require advice to avoid breaching Visa conditions for example. The closure of Information and Advice services were also raised as concerning. The loss of legal aid advice officers and lack of provision in North Wales is a real problem for asylum seekers.
- Toxicity on social media is increasing and organisations and individuals working for them have recently been targeted in Wales such as the Welsh Refugee Council. This has a detrimental impact as some people, such as trustees wary of publishing their name. Whilst it has been mainly directed at those who support asylum seekers and refugees, it is increasingly targeting other groups such as the trans community.
- Stakeholders emphasises how important it is to upskill people and encourage and support people to access education and gain qualifications to provide a pathway to work. But we heard of an example of an organisation who receive no funding for this work, and happened to have staff qualified in accountancy to be in a position to offer free education.

- It was noted that it is difficult to develop community cohesion without a physical space – which can be costly to hire. All agreed of the importance of social capital and social infrastructure. Some stakeholders called for community Right to Buy old, unused or derelict building, and such ventures to be supported by strong community organisations.
- The importance of sustainable funding for lasting change was emphasised. The current short term or project specific funding doesn't support longer term development or provide the stability for organisations to grow. *“Until there is sustainable resourcing – it's never going to change.”*
- It was acknowledged that there are communities in Wales where there are many challenges and tensions, some of which have led to confrontations and disruption. The negative impact on the community in Llanelli following the Home Office's decision to place asylum seekers in a local hotel was raised. Concerns were raised about the lack of consultation with the local authority or engagement with the community. The far right used the opportunity to influence and escalate tensions. This is long lasting, with recent messages targeting NHS workers from India and hatred spread beyond migrants towards the trans community, women and net zero. However, a positive response was seen in Llantwit Major where resilient community groups, including the local football club and local church, challenged the far right rhetoric. The counter protest overwhelmed the far right group protest as a result of good local leadership.

What should happen next?

Strong leadership

- There is a need for strong leadership from Welsh Government with a refreshed strategy, with clear aims and objectives which responds to the challenges highlighted by third sector organisations. This needs to acknowledge and include grassroots community groups and third sector organisations who work with communities across Wales.
- Welsh Government should also demonstrate how the Community Cohesion strategy links to other frameworks such as the Anti-racist Welsh Action Plan and other equality frameworks.
- The strategy should also address the need for positive and swift responses by Government and Local Government when misinformation, disinformation and hate is shared on social media. Politicians need to lead difficult conversations with communities, articulating a clear, democratic vision. This cannot be left to third sector or grass roots organisations who we heard have

faced racism and threats of violence. One group mentioned that Welsh Government set a positive example following the Southport riots, when there were concerns about potential violence in Newport. The First Minister convened the Faith Forum to discuss and share concerns, which was important at that point.

- Leadership is also needed from local authorities and local councillors. It was highlighted that this did not happen in Llanelli when it was needed. Politicians need to lead difficult conversations with communities and articulate a clear, democratic vision.
- A process for monitoring tension within communities is essential in order to effectively target resources and enable the public and third sector to respond swiftly to avoid escalation.
- One discussion group called for a national resilience strategy which is cross sectoral.

Responsive to community needs

- Action needs to be flexible and based on the needs of the community, such as the establishment of Llanelli Unites. A clear theme is that work with communities is best placed by grass root organisations, working closely with local authorities, which can be flexible and responsive. However, this needs to be within a clear framework for developing and supporting community cohesion across Wales.
- Providing appropriate and accessible public environments are important for older people such as providing more benches in communities and parks, ensuring public toilets are available and improving the maintenance of pavements would ensure more older people are socially confident to leave their homes.

Sustainable resourcing, social capital and infrastructure

- A different approach to funding third sector and community organisations is needed to provide stability and develop longer term services, support and trust within communities. The current short term or project specific funding doesn't support longer term development to provide stability for organisations to grow. According to one stakeholder "until there is sustainable resourcing - it's never going to change." The importance of sustainable funding for lasting change was emphasised.

- There is also a need to acknowledge the importance of physical spaces for community cohesion and overcoming challenges to acquire them, including the need to address purchasing community assets.
- Developing and supporting community cohesion requires investment of time and resources in order to build trust and relationships, networks and knowledge and understanding of the community. This is essential to develop relationships and pro-actively engage the community.

Learning the lessons

- Stakeholders felt there are important lessons for the future from examples like Llanelli, Llantwit Major, Northop Hall, Caerau and Ely in Cardiff for example. It is important to understand why tensions escalated in one community where the tensions were contained in others and how have these communities overcome these issues.
- For example we heard how the community protests against the accommodation of asylum seekers in Llanelli were influenced by the far right and the negative and long-lasting impact it has had on the community. Understanding the community and their needs is important. Llanelli was described as having poor housing, poor services and pockets of poverty with some anti-establishment prior to the flare up of tensions, and far-right further incited hatred, racism and violence.
- Several stakeholders highlighted the importance role of the community organisation Action in Caerau and Ely (ACE) played in responding to the Ely riots.

Education

- Anti racism education in schools and through trusted community organisations is important to address inaccurate perceptions and to foster mutual respect and positive relationships. It is also essential to improve education provision across Wales for refugees and asylum seekers and their families, enabling individuals to overcome the language barriers.
- There is a need to address the challenges faced by qualified refugees in terms of course conversion or acknowledgements of their qualifications, which impacts on their ability to gain employment.

Support for migrants

- There is a need for refugee and asylum seekers to have access to interpreters which would enable access to information, advice and public services in general which proves extremely difficult at present. As already mentioned, access to education, especially English lessons, is key to helping them integrate within the wider community.

“Doing nothing is not an option anymore – it has to be active – cohesion has to become a verb not something that just is a nice to have. Llanelli is a microcosm in Wales – if that can happen in Llanelli then it can happen anywhere in Wales.”