

Commission on Integration and Cohesion: *Your chance to tell us what you think*

Response from: The Network – tackling social exclusion in libraries, museums, archives and galleries

Background

The Network is a network of public libraries, museums, archives, other organisations and individuals committed to tackling social exclusion. We currently have some 130 local authorities and other organisational members across the UK.

Our aim is to assist libraries, museums, archives and galleries and other organisations to tackle social exclusion through the development of policy and practice to enable them better to interact with their local communities and wider audiences (for further background information, please see: www.seapn.org.uk).

We are delighted to have this opportunity to comment on the cohesion and integration policies.

Seven key questions for national bodies

1. What does ‘cohesion’ mean to you? What does ‘integration’ mean to you? What might a community which is both integrated and cohesive look like?

To start with, it is important to emphasise that ‘cohesion’ and ‘integration’ must not be used as euphemisms for race and faith – what we are talking about here is the integration/cohesion of everybody.

For us, ‘cohesion’ means a society where, despite differences in culture, faith, age and so on, nevertheless people come together and share their lives and interact with each other (rather than living ‘parallel lives’). These differences need to be debated and negotiated, but, for example, it should be possible for people from different faith groups and LGBT people to learn to work together and come to a common understanding of what being in a society actually means.

‘Integration’ means the welcoming of different people with different racial/cultural backgrounds – and a common understanding of what ‘society’ means, so that there can be true diversity. We do not see it meaning that everyone learns to be “British” (whatever that means!)

A community that is both integrated and cohesive would enable people from different cultural/racial/faith/sexual groups to live together, learning to understand each other, and respecting their differences. So, for example, a person with a particular faith should be free to pursue that faith, provided that – and this is the key – in doing so, s/he does not harm or disrespect anyone

else. There would be healthy debates about specific issues as freedoms are negotiated – what there must not be is a majority or minority who dictate (through law, threat, or violence) what everyone else does.

2. What do you think are the main tensions between different groups in our communities? What factors do you think contribute to these and what are your thoughts about how to tackle them? What role can local leaders play in tackling them?

There is a considerable number of tensions currently. These include (in no particular order):

- Racism and the ability of the far right to manipulate concerns about employment, housing, etc
- Linked to that, the perception (fuelled by some parts of the media) that “British jobs” are being taken by guest workers, refugees and others
- The media’s misreporting of issues (eg in relation to guest workers, asylum-seekers, LGBTs, faith groups, teenagers)
- The issues that the UK faces in relation to faith and religion – for example, many people operate as though the UK is a secular society, whereas we have seen it change spectacularly since, say, the 1960s
- Issues around class and the fact that the class structure in the UK still remains firmly in place – there is also some evidence that white working class men are being scapegoated – or feel they are – for other people’s problems
- The continuation of discrimination and prejudice, despite laudable attempts to change the law, eg racism, sexism, homophobia
- The labelling of any attempts to redress these as “political correctness” which thereby belittles such work.

It is far easier to list the tensions (and their reasons) than it is to tackle them! However, again in no particular order:

- The role of education and learning (and lifelong learning) is absolutely critical to this. So many of the issues noted above stem from attitudes that are based on lack of information (or half-truths), and there is a huge and urgent need for much more informed discussion around these topics. Educators must be given the tools to tackle racism (and the other issues), and we need to ensure that people are exposed to this wealth of ideas.
- Libraries, museums and archives can play a huge role in this, partly by being ‘free’ spaces where people can go and meet each other, and partly through their timely interventions (putting on exhibitions; running workshops; talking to young people in libraries, schools, youth clubs and other venues; providing books, information and access to that wider world)
- We need a proper, informed debate at national and local level about the nature of society in the UK (not a debate where certain givens load the discussion before we even start)

- There need to be opportunities for people from different communities to come together to share and investigate their cultures.

Local leaders can play a huge part in creating the right conditions for the above to happen, and also for 'modelling' such positive behaviour. However, a national lead is probably even more important.

3. *What things do you think help people from different backgrounds feel like they belong? Do you think there are particular values or 'ground rules' for shared life, which are or should be at the heart of society in the UK? What do you think they are?*

People feel they belong when they feel heard, when they know that other people are not discriminating against them, and when they are treated with respect.

There should be some 'ground rules' – and these need to be debated and agreed in a proper, open fashion. At present, too many people have become cynical about politics (and politicians) and feel that their voices are not being listened to and that commitments on behalf of the UK – and all of us – are being made, which have not been discussed in this fashion.

However, the 'ground rules' should not be about making the UK some kind of club where you have to fit the membership requirements! Instead, they need to focus on a few critical issues, for example:

- People have the right to lead their own lives, provided this does not then impinge on other people
- Only by learning can we fully understand other people's requirements
- Change comes about through political debate – and so on.

4. *Why do you think people from different backgrounds may live parallel or separate lives? Is this negative or positive?*

From all the work that the SEU and the Home Office has done since 2001, it is very clear that people are living parallel lives – and many of the reasons for this are also clear. These include:

- Lack of understanding of (or suspicion of) people who are different ('the other')
- Misperceptions – often fuelled by the media
- There may be some fundamental differences which, to date, have not been resolved (eg between some religious groups and LGBTs).

It can be both positive and negative. For example, two communities may have very different lifestyles, so do want to live together, but in parallel, and, provided this does not lead to community tensions or breakdown, then this seems to be quite a positive move.

However, it becomes negative if there is absolutely no shared community

between these groups, and that can lead to the breakdowns – the fractures – in society that we have seen in 2001 and last year.

5. What role in contributing to community cohesion and integration do you see for organisations and institutions such as: local authorities, the police, the health service, schools, youth organisations, faith groups, inter faith and race equality bodies, housing associations, private sector bodies, voluntary organisations, theatres, art centres, sports associations, and the media? (Please comment on as few or many as you wish).

Local authorities have a major role to play (a role which is emphasised in the recent DCLG White Paper), which includes:

- Providing much of the local infrastructure – including employment – which will assist in making a community cohesive
- Acting as a ‘litmus test’ for the communities in their area to monitor and work to prevent tensions and strife
- Setting a good example, eg in terms of equalities, tackling social exclusion, integration
- Ensuring that people within their area are treated fairly and have opportunities to take part in, for example, local council activities.

Theatres, arts centres, sports associations – and I would add libraries, archives and museums – all have a significant role to play. In many communities, these are the freely-available, open places where people meet, and also share time together, albeit not necessarily in an organised way.

So, for example, libraries, museums and archives provide:

- Access to information about other cultures and communities and in-depth information about our own community
- Space for people to meet, and for exhibitions and events that challenge stereotypes
- Opportunities to take part in activities with people that you might not normally meet (eg a number of libraries has run successful multilingual under-fives’ sessions where children and parents can meet).

6. What help do new people to a community need when they arrive? What help do existing residents need to cope with change in their community?

The major help that people new to a community need includes:

- Practical ‘signposts’ – eg where the shops are, what local leisure and cultural facilities there are
- Cultural ‘signposts’ – “how we do things round here” (eg how to get your child into school; how to have your rubbish taken away)
- Employment
- Means of taking root in the community
- Links with wherever they have come from.

Many of these can also be provided by local authorities' services, especially public libraries.

7. What do you see as effective ways to counteract people's negative perceptions of and attitudes to people from different backgrounds?

A huge amount of work is required to counteract both learned prejudice and the discriminatory stereotypes perpetuated by the media. Whilst some of these are extremely difficult to overcome, nevertheless, emphasis should be placed on:

- Learning/education/training
- First-hand experiences of finding out what other people are really like
- Information to counter the stereotypes (eg some of the myth-busting work that has been developed around asylum issues).

In tandem with this, there also needs to be a clear message that discrimination (and violence) will not be tolerated – and, for this to be successful, then there needs to be a much clearer lead given regarding faith and its place in UK life (otherwise, we are in danger of increasing intolerance towards, for example, theatre, books, music which challenge religious views – think *Jerry Springer!*).

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