

## **Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion:**

Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion written submission April 2025 from Church Urban Fund's Near Neighbours programme

For almost 15 years Near Neighbours from Church Urban Fund has been at the forefront of community cohesion and community resilience work across England, funded throughout by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and its predecessors, over this time.

Near Neighbours brings people together in communities that are religiously and ethnically diverse so that they can get to know each other better, build relationships of trust, and collaborate together on initiatives that improve the local community they live in. We support communities to come together, talk openly and productively about challenging local issues, and empower people to make a difference in their neighbourhoods.

<https://www.near-neighbours.org.uk>

Near Neighbours is administered by the Church Urban Fund. <https://cuf.org.uk>

Church Urban Fund seeks to equip , churches and networks to respond to relational, material and identity poverty where they live. Church Urban Fund have characterised this as the Web of Poverty, since these poverties of relationships, identity, and resources, are often interlinked.

### [Web Of Poverty - CUF](#)

Most recently, in November of 2024, we hosted a summit for Christian leaders who live and work in areas affected by the riots of 2024; and in the spring of 2025, we hosted a series of Near Neighbours roundtables engaging people of many different faiths and backgrounds from our areas of work about cohesion, community and the 2024 riots. [Communities Leading Change: Reflections from Near Neighbours' Post-Riots Roundtable — Near Neighbours](#)

Near Neighbours has been operating since 2011 in areas that have historically experienced challenges around social cohesion, extremism, and tensions between different ethnic, faith and cultural groups. One of our key strengths is the ability to be responsive to emerging issues in communities, such as tensions due to migration, forced marriage, domestic violence, and mental health issues in young people. The projects and the leaders we support are also well-placed to respond to community need in times of national crisis such as the pandemic. Our local Hub Coordinators have built and sustained strong relationships over time, holding a strong and deep rooted understanding of the communities they work with, especially the faith communities, and are often championing their interests to other local organisations and public leaders. At the same time, new relationships are always being developed and brokered through emerging leaders in faith and community groups, and building links to statutory bodies, and other voluntary sector and community groups, who are empowered to test their ideas and pilot new collaborations.

Near Neighbours, since the Windrush Day grants scheme started in 2019, have administered the Windrush Day grants for the government. The Scheme provides funding to communities looking to commemorate, celebrate and educate about the Windrush generation and their contribution to our society. Funding strives to build greater community cohesion; have a lasting impact; and increase acknowledgement of the contribution of the Windrush generation and

their descendants. It is focused on Windrush day - June 22nd - the date when passengers disembarked from the MV Empire Windrush at the Port of Tilbury in 1948 . The ship carried several hundred Caribbean migrants, many of them veterans of the Second World War. Since then, Windrush has come to symbolise the mass migration of people from the Caribbean to the UK in the post-war era, as well as their descendants.

There are many examples of impactful projects which have been funded, that have promoted cohesion and understanding between Caribbean communities and wider British society. There have been £3.25 million of grants across 6 years of the Windrush Day Grant Scheme so far. This has included football teams, assemblies in schools, museum exhibitions and plays.

### **Call for evidence topics and indicative questions**

#### **What is community, cohesion, community strength and how do we build shared stories?**

We feel that community cohesion is indissolubly linked to community resilience, and that a cohesive community - where people get along well together from different backgrounds – is also a community where people feel that they can influence change, have a say in their community, and are able to seek justice, equity and inclusion. Therefore questions of cohesion are also about economic justice, political power and engagement. When people feel left behind, unheard, or ignored, they are more likely to seek political extremes and to pursue undemocratic ways of seeking change such as violence. Social cohesion thrives when people have equal access to healthcare, education, employment, and safe green spaces, and feel they can influence decision making locally.

The think tank Common Vision reported on the work of Near Neighbours during the pandemic and proposed the concept of “social confidence” : Common Vision defines social confidence as the trust we have in ourselves, our community and institutions to look after our individual and collective wellbeing. These factors are underpinned by strong, trusted relationships with institutions and diversity within community life. [Restoring-Social-Confidence-Common-Vision-report-June-2021.pdf](#)

They say that

“The concept of social confidence, like its sub-components of resilience, self-efficacy, emotional wellbeing and trust, is by nature qualitative and often subjective. But this does not mean it is so esoteric that it has no defined impact or consequences. We assert that **a lack of social confidence** gives rise to unease and distrust in institutions and government, the spread of misinformation and the erosion of community cohesion.”

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has described social cohesion as “broadly speaking [...] the ‘glue’ that binds society together”. UNECE further argues that understanding social cohesion “can help with the understanding of topics such as:

- globalisation
- ethnic and group fragmentation
- inequalities
- barriers to social mobility”

[The importance of social cohesion and communities - House of Lords Library](#)

We agree that these are all closely linked to a cohesive community, where events in Gaza or India can destabilise community relations here; where fragmentation and inequality means it is often towns and estates that feel forgotten and left behind, after years of under-investment and huge rapid demographic change in areas feeling under pressure, that cohesion is tested.

“Gross inequalities” in health, housing and income were highlighted in the 2018 book by former Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby entitled ‘Reimagining Britain: Foundations for Hope’, as he sought to find a new common good for our country.

Although defining the concept is challenging, the UNECE states that societies with higher levels of social cohesion “are documented as generally being healthier, more resilient to external shocks and crises, and experiencing higher economic growth”. The UNECE argues that reduced social cohesion is characterised by a “diminished sense of belonging, increasing inequality of opportunity, declining trust in institutions, weakened social ties and numerous other economic, social, and political phenomena”.

Through a series of roundtables in the areas where Near Neighbours works, we have found that trust, belonging, social inclusion, social connection and engagement with institutions are all important but that austerity is a key driver of tensions as it is often a lack of resources that is fuelling the far-right’s arguments (lack of your work, lack of quality housing, lack of support/translation in schools).

**Liverpool:** “We have communities in Liverpool with exceptionally high levels of deprivation, multi-generational unemployment and very few opportunities. These groups are vulnerable to misinformation and conspiracy theories that lead to their radicalisation and lay the ground work for riots like we saw last summer. There needs to be work done to remove systemic barriers plus support for local people to be able to make the most of those opportunities.”

The Church Urban Fund (CUF) summit in November 2024 provided an opportunity for nine clergy and lay leaders from areas affected by the riots (across five dioceses) to share their stories, reflect and consider ways to move forward. We heard the deep anguish felt by leaders at the summit who, following police advice, had no option but to shut their church doors for safety. The group identified proximity and dialogue as key mechanisms to counter the riots and tools to strengthen community and cohesion. Leaders reflected:

“You cannot other someone you have a relationship with”

“This is a battle for hearts and minds”

“We need to remain in dialogue with those we are afraid of”

“I don’t want to call you out; I want to call you in”

### **What divides the community you live or work in?**

In our Near Neighbours roundtables we found these key points:

1. **Misinformation & Social Media:** The unchecked spread of fake news was identified as a significant concern. “If you leave an information gap, someone will fill it.”
2. **Cost of Living Crisis:** Economic hardship continues to exacerbate tensions and contribute to unrest.

3. Marginalised Communities: Issues specific to groups such as the white working class and Roma communities were discussed.
4. Global Politics: How international conflicts influence local dynamics. (eg. Gaza)
5. Youth Provision: Lack of structured opportunities for young people and years of under investment/austerity in youth services.
6. Lack of Cultural Understanding & Interpreters: Barriers exist for those needing translation services who are isolated from the rest of society.
7. Fear & Racism: Many communities report increased feelings of fear and discrimination.
8. Lack of Investment in Community Spaces: Struggles in securing and maintaining spaces for social and cultural engagement and difficulty in securing funding for arts, culture, and social projects.
9. A recognition that many of these issues existed before the riots and were simply exacerbated by them.

**East London:** “A recent report from the Civic Power Fund shows clearly that areas with the least funding for grassroots community organising initiatives are the same areas where the riots happened and the anti-migration rhetoric is the strongest.”

<https://medium.com/civic-power-fund/funding-justice-3-an-analysis-of-social-justice-grantmaking-in-the-uk-in-2022-23-2b96fcbfbb52>

**Birmingham:** “Despite building really effective and broad networks of community builders we consistently fail to engage those who are disenfranchised, lack hope or belief in any existing systems and live by different social rules in order to survive. This requires concerted and long term engagement and a change of narrative rather than being a response to a 'crisis' when for many the crisis is a daily matter.”

**Middlesbrough:** “Day to day, people of Middlesbrough get along well enough in a multicultural society but that some on social media, in the news and elsewhere blame all the things going wrong on those who are different from us. One of the contributing factors was that some of those attending the riots were not even aware of what the gatherings were for, they just 'joined in' and used it as an excuse to vent their anger at all things wrong in their life.

Local challenges are; how to keep local people more informed about the full reasons behind council decisions? How do we improve people’s lives and increase their awareness that others in their community are not to blame?”

In addition, at the Church Urban Fund (CUF) summit, Christian leaders brought the theme of values/faith/belief/discipleship to the forefront of the discussion around causes. Some reflected on the actions of individuals known to them personally who had physically participated in the riots. One leader from a UKME background noted the family of an individual whom he personally employs had participated in rioting. He shared the hurt and frustration this had caused. Others noted the sympathies of their own congregation members to the perceived cause of the rioters, such as feeling “forgotten / ignored” and “left behind”.

The distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ was noted as complex and challenging for church leaders when justification for some of those involved in the riots drew from a defence of perceived ‘Christian values’. Reflections from those leaders acknowledged that the riots were

not a far off threat that came into town but the result of persistent grooming and weaponising of ideas in the locality which fostered and prepared conditions for violence. The total opposition to the violence and hatred observed over the summer was coupled with their own reflection around their responsibility for fostering a positive ethos and the “teaching /discipleship” of those in their parish.

In the Near Neighbours discussions it was noted that whilst protesters who hold the Muslim faith are often labelled as “Muslim rioters” or “Muslim protestors “ in the media, “the media have a ‘two tier’ system of reporting on issues, so that riots and terrorism that happens from someone of another faith other than Muslim, never mentions what faith the person/s follow. This means that the “Christian” label adopted by some of the rioters was not referenced. “

### **When we talk about building thriving community and places, what do we mean by this?**

Near Neighbours is a partnership between Church Urban Fund – CUF - and the Archbishops’ Council. At the heart of Near Neighbours is a Christian ethos of human flourishing; we wish to see neighbourhoods, towns and cities prosper, and all people to have life in all its fullness, so that people of all backgrounds can **connect, belong and contribute**. We also wish to value the contributions to civil society of the diverse faiths and traditions in the UK, and to work with people of different faiths and beliefs drawing on their resources and networks, and have a good track record of doing this.

Human flourishing means strength in relationships (Including across difference); identity (including a sense of belonging); and resources (food, clothing, housing, finances). As has been said above, Church Urban Fund have characterised this as the Web of Poverty, since these poverties of relationships, identity, and resources, are often interlinked.

#### [Web Of Poverty - CUF](#)

Therefore a flourishing community is one of mutual support, opportunity, creativity, pride in a locality, and there is access to services and support which are available to everyone, and everyone can contribute and participate. Shared values lie at the heart of this.

### **What are the factors that promote community connectedness, cohesion and resilience, in your local area and across the UK?**

Contact theory is an important underpinning in our work – that when people meet one another in a framework of safe and trusted partners, especially in the context of doing social action together, like running a project to improve their community, relationships of trust can be built and barriers broken down. However as King’s College have pointed out in their work for the Sara Khan review, **how** the work is developed and delivered is of crucial importance, and done badly, can wreck relationships and reinforce stereotypes. [What works in social cohesion and overcoming tensions](#)

The report suggests four major contributing factors for “what works in social cohesion and overcoming tension”. These are:

- Local impact into the design of any intervention (co-production).
- Leadership is crucial at a local level.
- Networks and relationships that surround this work matter
- At the local and national level, skills and capacity need to be nurtured.

We have found in our round tables that these are key points:

- Years of persistence in building trust and cohesion involving multi agency working - council police, faith groups, voluntary and community groups.
- Emphasis on rapid communication and building a network of designated communicators in key organisations.
- Investment of time and funds by different groups so that faith and community leaders work alongside police and council to bridge trust gaps. Relationship brokers—such as project coordinators, faith leaders, and respected community members—play a crucial role in strengthening connections across society. These community connectors bridge divides, foster engagement, and enhance resilience. Through mentoring, leadership development, and capacity-building initiatives (such as training organisations to apply for funding), they help shape the future of their communities.
- Engaging faith networks is important so that existing communication networks can be leveraged.
- Misinformation needs constant awareness so that it can be quickly addressed and truth shared.
- Engaging with grassroots community groups on the ground in a positive way - “We know the solutions to our problems we can even predict them, its just the lack of real resource and investment” A resilient and engaged society requires long-term investment in connections at all levels. When communities have strong formal organisations as well as informal networks, they are better equipped to respond to challenges and shape a sustainable future.
- Creating spaces for encounter: Community spaces and events that bring together people from diverse backgrounds help foster relationships and genuine connections. Protecting community assets—such as local halls, hubs, and faith institutions—from being sold to private developers without benefiting the local community is essential. “Initiatives like PL84U (East London) demonstrate the value of community hubs in building bridges and promoting shared values.”
- Engagement with local businesses and enterprises. Strengthening relationships with local businesses and supporting social enterprises can generate income for community initiatives. Encouraging businesses to invest in social prescribing can also promote the use of community spaces. Providing practical skills training and leadership development for local residents can strengthen communities. Ethical local businesses can play a role in mentoring and offering employment opportunities.
- Amplifying lived experiences. Leaders with lived experience should be involved in shaping local policies and services through co-creation and co-design. Engaging residents in placemaking—such as community gardening, food-growing projects, and safer neighbourhood teams—can foster local pride and collective responsibility.
- Sustainable, long-term funding solutions. Long-term investment in faith institutions, community hubs, and grassroots leadership development will help build strong, resilient communities that can navigate challenges together.
- Challenging stereotypes and promoting positive narratives. Local media should be engaged to highlight positive stories within diverse communities, helping to challenge stereotypes and build mutual understanding.



**Luton:** “a key component to developing trust between groups, and growing relationships between groups is not only to bring people together to meet someone from a different group ... but to build in some intentional and meaningful and well-managed dialogue where people can share lived experience and explain what things look like from their perspective, so we learn to understand each other”.

This may mean having some difficult and honest conversations. It may also mean robust dispelling of myths.

**Luton:** “Proactive work (e.g. faith leader assemblies in schools once funded by Near Neighbours, visiting each other’s places of worship, attending Mosque Open Days, networking and working together) is invaluable in creating a structure whereby communities can continue to work together to disseminate and share information with one another quickly, effectively and efficiently, with a sense of mutual trust in one another, which helps calm people’s anxieties.”

Since 2011 Near Neighbours has been actively involved in building relationships across difference in diverse urban areas across England by facilitating and strengthening civil society, and activity at the local level. Our work focuses on building community and social cohesion, things we believe are foundational for the prevention of extremism, and to promote cohesion and understanding, breaking barriers, myths and stereotypes.

We find ways to challenge prejudice and misconceptions in ways that are safe and supportive enough for people to really change. Further, we create opportunities for people to challenge one another’s attitudes within communities. For example, 81% of our Small Grant project leads agree that ‘involvement with Near Neighbours has made me more confident challenging intolerant or prejudiced views within my community’.

Much of our work focuses on developing leaders in a local area, who are equipped to engage confidently in an ethnically and religiously diverse society. Building a network of resilience, of practitioners/activists/leaders working across ethnic and faith difference with statutory bodies and voluntary sector groups builds a network of cooperation and collaboration.

Our Catalyst programme sees young people engaging with difficult issues like antisemitism, Islamophobia, hate crime, and the role of women in faith and in society, as we give confidence and build capacity in young leaders.

#### [Catalyst-new — Near Neighbours](#)

Real People, Honest Talk was developed by Near Neighbours in 2017 to create safe spaces in which everyday people (not just leaders) could openly discuss some of the difficult issues that can arise amidst differences in culture, attitudes, and beliefs, leading to deeper understanding and empathy between groups and individuals. This programme has seen some really encouraging outcomes, cultivating a sense of belonging and mutual understanding in communities, and people taking action together on issues that matter.

#### [Real People, Honest Talk — Near Neighbours](#)

Our small grants give agency and support to grassroots groups making a difference in their community and intentionally bringing people from different backgrounds/faiths together.

In Leicester following their riots in 2023, we were able to fund a women’s encounter group of Hindu and Muslim women, to build trust, after the recent Muslim / Hindu disturbances. One Hindu lady explained that after her husband (a Hindu faith leader) went to the mosque to show

solidarity he received a torrent of abuse and death threats from India. Another was frightened to look outside her home and see groups of masked men. Afterwards one said: “It was amazing to get together with amazing women from Hindu and Muslim background to share experiences that we’ve had and learnt. The most beautiful aspect was we all want to be part of bigger change in Leicester. We all brought ideas to the table to help create change in the community. It instilled so much hope.”

One recent project we funded was bringing asylum seekers and refugees together with residents. Heema , a volunteer, has been through the asylum process, coming from Pakistan. She wanted to help others negotiate the process and as she speaks 4 languages she is able to help people to find accommodation and fill in the forms. A gentleman from Afghanistan had come to the UK with nothing – no paperwork or possessions, and at first was terribly distressed at the project but over the period of a year they had helped him get paperwork, find a home and leave to remain. He felt part of a community now and had a support group through the people he’d met there.

Building narratives of hope and developing leaders with skills to challenge intolerance and have an impact on communities is vital work at the hyper local level if narratives of hate are to be overcome.

At the CUF Christian clergy and lay leaders summit, opportunities to challenge mis- and disinformation consistently with truth were noted. While attributing mis- and disinformation as a cause of violence and rioting, leaders were careful *not* to distinguish ‘us’ as the informed and ‘them’ as the misinformed.

It was however noted that the church is well and uniquely positioned to challenge mis- and disinformation, often representing a steadfast presence in ever-evolving communities.

One clergy member reflected on his parish context: “the houses and the shops are still there now, but the shops are weird or seedy or shut, and outside the houses there are as many doorbells as there are rooms inside.” He continued:

“Only the Church is still used for the same purpose.”

These findings align with the Theos report [Disunited Kingdom? Local churches and the riots of summer 2024](#). The report captured calls from church leaders to challenge misinformation “However long it takes” and the opportunity to do so through “commitment to the community for the long-haul .”

A simple way to build relationship, build community, foster a narrative of hope, and facilitate mutual support, is our network of **Places of Welcome** – over 890 community spaces across the country who offer the opportunity for mutual support. Places of Welcome is a growing network of local community groups providing their neighbourhoods with places where all people feel safe to connect, belong and get involved. Free refreshments are provide along with opportunities to build friendships, find and offer support and meet people from different backgrounds.

[Places of Welcome](#)

### **Which of these positive drivers is most important?**

Context is everything here and the history of a community, and recent events which may have fractured relationships will determine to some extent which is most important - do we need to



engage with a recently arrived community? Are there tensions with police and young people? How do people view the local authority? Each area will have different factors.

**What factors impede building community connectedness, community cohesion, community strength and shared stories, in your local area and across the UK? Which of these barriers is most important? What role, if any, do issues such as deprivation, the role of politicians, policing, prejudice, immigration, and the quality of education, health and youth services play in community, cohesion, and community strength?**

**Leicester:** “It remains hard to get everyone in the room; disputes over how to understand the conflict in Israel/Palestine/Lebanon and within India and between India and Pakistan (to name but three) means you cannot have sensible conversations when a lot of these diversities are present. One-to-one and small group conversations are required - time consuming but necessary.”

**Luton:** “The riots that broke out across different parts of the UK in August 2024 tragically underlined the importance of many of the themes we have been working on in recent years in Luton – the scapegoating of migrants, refugees & asylum seekers, and of other vulnerable immigrant communities, including professional economic migrants, overseas students, and the second-third-fourth generations who are born and brought up in the UK in the immigrant families, but are still viewed as immigrants. Often they are presented as ‘the problem’, for all the problems facing the nation today, mainly the declining public services, infrastructure and employment prospects.

People expressed serious concerns about the impact of harmful and divisive rhetoric, hate speech and misinformation, used in the media, social media, and politics and how these led to violence in the summer riots. With the greater societal awareness of this threat, people expressed that much more needs to be done to address tensions in community relations and improve community safety, and wellbeing. With specific reference to the summer riots, in our discussions, people were grateful and proud that nothing happened in Luton, still, people in Luton have been concerned, distressed, and anxious, they said because there were a lot of rumours on social media, not just about the perpetrator and the motive for the attacks, but later also about riots coming to Luton. There was a fear of riots guided by unreal and fake truths and rumours. These rumours were widespread, fuelled by how the media reported (or didn’t report) the incident. Foreign media coverage didn’t help – and our government didn’t respond as adequately and as aggressively as the need of the moment was. If they had declared the culprit’s identity, and if they had challenged and dispelled the myth and the prejudice of people who assumed the culprit was a Muslim, lots of rioting could have been prevented perhaps.”

**Leicester:** “There is a lot of work to be done to maintain and develop the positive inter-cultural and inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony of Leicester. We must not be complacent. Things look calm on the surface, but there is considerable tension which could explode into violence at any moment.”

**Birmingham:** “There is a lack of support for migrating communities to connect to local communities due to “hostile environment” policies; there is political and media messaging that divides communities; and a housing crisis.”

**In Leeds,** reflecting on the riot in Harehills (Roma community and police): “The treatment from police of young people, putting a young girl aged 14 in handcuffs. This was not something we

had experienced before. The children were treated poorly and taken away aggressively. The Roma community isn't valued or understood by local services such as police, ambulance etc. Due to this incident we feel we are discriminated against, looked down on and our mental health has declined from adults to little children. After this incident we don't feel safe anymore. Miscommunication with a lack of interpreters, lack of cultural understanding, outpouring of anger, mistrust and social media playing a big part in the breakdown of relationships. Lack of knowledge of safeguarding and due process, under educated communities, some people were out of control and disrespectful of surroundings. There is fear and racism and a lot of things could have been done differently."

### **East London:**

#### **"Impact of Global Politics & Social Media Misinformation:**

The spread of misinformation, particularly on social media, has heightened community tensions. The unchecked spread of fake news, inciting religious hate—including instances of antisemitism and Islamophobia—places immense pressure on faith and community leaders, who must work to address fear and frustration within their communities. Additionally, negative media narratives scapegoating migrants and refugees add further strain on the very communities we aim to support.

#### **Hostile Environment & Immigration Challenges:**

Negative rhetoric around migration, alongside complex immigration policies, places immense pressure on individuals and families navigating an already difficult system.

#### **Cost of Living Crisis:**

The financial strain on communities—especially those hit hardest by COVID-19—remains severe. Rising bills, the cap on child benefits, and increasing costs of essentials continue to deepen financial hardship.

#### **Lack of Investment in Community Spaces:**

A strong concern raised in our discussions was the struggle to secure and maintain community spaces. Many organisations that wish to run food banks or community hubs face difficulties in affording rent or finding suitable facilities. There is also growing anxiety over land and community spaces being sold to private developers without guarantees of benefits for local residents. Greater support from local authorities could help address this issue.

#### **Housing Crisis & Affordability:**

A lack of affordable housing is pricing people out of their own communities, creating frustration and instability for many families.

#### **Job Insecurity & Economic Pressures:**

Limited work opportunities, unstable and low-paid jobs, and increasing automation are putting additional strain on families. Parents working long hours struggle to spend time with their children, leaving young people without support or supervision after school.

#### **Lack of Youth Facilities:**

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack safe and engaging spaces to gather. This absence of accessible youth facilities leaves them vulnerable to gang recruitment and exploitation.

#### Challenges of Short-Term Funding:

Both our hub and the organisations we collaborate with face significant barriers due to short-term funding cycles. Small, volunteer-led organisations are particularly affected by rigid reporting requirements and administrative burdens, which often force them into a reactive mode rather than allowing them to engage in strategic, long-term community work.“

- Long-term engagement is essential; there is no quick fix.
- Trust is crucial, particularly in relationships with the police.
- Some riots were driven by violence and destruction, while others were reactions to broader socio-economic issues.
- Far-right narratives are increasingly echoed in mainstream politics.
- Many involved in the riots were not hardcore extremists but individuals on the periphery of these movements, or simply young people expressing their own frustration and feeling of marginalisation and lack of opportunity.
- Austerity has exacerbated feelings of desperation and isolation.
- There is a reluctance to explicitly call out Christianity in far-right discourse, unlike how Muslim identity is often framed as a problem.
- Engaging disenfranchised individuals remains a challenge; crisis response is inadequate without sustained support.
- Safe spaces for difficult conversations are needed.

#### **How do you think these topics relate to wider issues such as regeneration, equality and anti-poverty initiatives, housing and planning policy hate crime, counter-extremism, or the integration of new arrivals to the UK?**

**East London:** People are feeling increasingly fearful due to the impact of global politics and the ongoing cost of living crisis. The rise of the far right is a growing concern, and many feel there is neither enough investment nor expertise within the government to effectively challenge it. As one participant put it, we need to "play from the same tune" and be bold in standing up for safer, more welcoming communities.

The lack of sustainable funding and the pressure to constantly compete with other organisations place a heavy burden on community leaders. Many experience burnout and feel their efforts are taken for granted.

The hostile environment and negative media rhetoric, often amplified by political discourse, contribute to a sense of hopelessness. There is deep disappointment in politicians, who are seen as distant from the real needs of communities.

At the same time, people also recognised the visible impact of their work in challenging stereotypes and bringing communities together across differences. Examples such as

communities standing in solidarity with victims of Islamophobia and supporting asylum seekers at risk of eviction were highlighted as powerful demonstrations of strong community bonds.

There was also energy and enthusiasm for more strategic thinking about placemaking, with a focus on empowering local people to take greater ownership of how community assets are used.

Key priorities include:

- Developing skills and leadership within communities
- Building new local partnerships
- Strengthening engagement with local authorities
- Advocating for more affordable housing
- Expanding green spaces
- Revitalising youth and sports facilities to bring diverse young people together

### **How did organisations in your area respond to the 2024 riots?**

**In Luton:** “There was a swift and non-complacent response following this incident, fuelled by the fear that some would want to exploit this situation in Luton too. Police, faith and inter-faith organisational networks of Grassroots, Luton Council of Faiths & Near Neighbours, community leaders, Luton Borough Council, Churches Together in Luton, and Luton Council of Mosques, all stepped in quickly - firstly in identifying rumours and then working together to get the message out to the various communities not to listen to rumours, and to take the cue from Beds Police.

Despite the ongoing disagreements and issues of mistrust, during the volatile and hostile context of the summer riots, people put aside their differences and all communities put their trust in the authorities, and they complied with the advice of the police. In some instances, supermarkets closed early and some shops boarded up their windows, following rumours on social media. These actions stoked fear and gave fuel to rumours. However, it was significant that on the whole the town’s community leaders took their cue from Beds Police, and brought a sense of calm in the town.”

Faith communities were able to allay the fears of their community members e.g. faith leaders were able to reassure frightened parishioners & anxious and distressed members of their respective congregations and faith/community groups.

The Luton Council of Mosques met very quickly. Many Friday sermons were about learning from lessons learnt from 15 years ago and not wanting to repeat mistakes made in the past (which had led to the arrest and imprisonment of various innocent young people who had gotten involved in demonstrations). Largely, people listened to their community leaders and stayed out of any trouble.

Communication was a key part of this – the police and authorities communicated effectively with faith and community leaders, and these leaders communicated efficiently with the members of their communities.

It is perhaps not insignificant, certainly in terms of communication, that Luton has such a high (78%) percentage of the population who profess a faith. Swift communication was possible largely because of communication infrastructure that was already existent in different faith communities or could easily be revived.

Another significant factor was real partnership between the police, the local authority, and faith leaders in the town. The Community Cohesion officers of the police force phoned various community leaders to check on them. This kind of relationship-building and partnership cannot be underestimated. It provided reassurance, particularly in the turbulent times faced during the summer riots.

And perhaps it was also due to the challenges of the past (far-right protest demos) in Luton, and the consistent and persistent ongoing peace and reconciliation work of Luton Council of Faiths, Grassroots & Near Neighbours Programmes that have contributed to the strengthening of community relations and the communication infrastructure we enjoy in Luton today. But most importantly, it was acknowledged by everyone that in Luton we remained on guard and we took actions to restrain misinformation, not let it spread any further, and not let it incite fear or hatred.

There was an effort to inject a different positive narrative – the 1-2 minute short videos, inspired by the Luton Council of Faiths, of neighbours from different backgrounds talking about how they have been living well together for years, as friendly neighbours. A number of these videos were shared on social media and talked about in the local press.”

**Middlesbrough:** “The coming together of many faiths and others to clean up led to some groups forming such as a local 'Stand up to Racism' group. There was also an event organised in the few weeks after the riots that brought together many different people in a celebration of the many cultures. Residents were disgusted that people would think people from Middlesbrough are all like that, so we organised an event within 3 weeks that brought together people from Ukraine, Irish community, and all the faith groups. We had music, food and stalls as well as the Mayor, local councillors and the police there to talk to residents and others who attended.

Greater links with the police has also been formed. Newtown community centre has set up 'circle of friends' groups and have a youth scheme to break down barriers which collaborates with Middlesbrough football club. ”

#### **East London:**

Following the riots, there has been a renewed focus on community cohesion, particularly in Waltham Forest, where local grassroots leaders organised an anti-racism march. People felt proud that they were able to 'stand up to racism' and show unity to protect the values they want their communities to be driven by. They also felt proud to receive the visit from King Charles who wanted to celebrate the work done by grassroots leaders in Waltham Forest. There was a bit of disappointment in the fact that not all 'anti-racism' organisers were invited to the meeting with the King.

Stronger collaboration between community groups, faith institutions, and local organisations has emerged, fostering long-term relationships. E.g. new relationships between neighbouring organisations or organisations supporting the same group of people.

Strengthening ties with local councils and authorities has been key in ensuring coordinated efforts to support communities. There is a stronger sense that there needs to be stronger working relationship between the council and the local community and their experience needs to be included in shaping responses.

Community-led initiatives have provided solidarity and practical support, such as vigils for mosques targeted by graffiti and art projects spreading messages of hope in areas affected by

the riots. For example, in Stratford (Newham) and Waltham Forest. Diverse leaders in Plaistow organised a community walk in their area to identify some key challenges facing their communities and organised a litter pick in their neighbourhood in partnership with Newham council.

Mosques have opened their doors, inviting neighbours to share in Iftar meals, fostering dialogue, and strengthening interfaith and community relationships. We are involved in supporting leaders to share invitations and bring new people into these events. “

**In Nottingham :** “Building Bridges Breaking Barriers” has access to over 500 young people in Nottingham, tackling anti-social behaviour and contributing towards community cohesion. On the day of the summer protest young people wanted to go and protest peacefully however they engaged with the police and their network to discourage people from attending and deescalate the situation. Since then they have worked with Community inc and other voluntary organisations to deliver workshops to young people to address trauma and how to peacefully protest. They have also been successful with funding from Reaching Communities to address some of this work.

**Are you able to share examples of successful work and/or innovation to promote stronger community?**

Near Neighbours has many examples in our impact reports, see the most recent

[Stories+of+change+from+Near+Neighbours+-+5Oct23-compressed.pdf](#)

In our roundtables last month we heard :

**In Middlesbrough** community events in white working-class areas are being developed to promote inclusivity without overtly branding them as anti-racism initiatives.

**Newham** has established fortnightly community cohesion meetings and youth camps to facilitate dialogue.

**In Burnley** the whole council - chief exec, and leader, included – spend time working with, talking to and engaging with the football club, the police, higher education, faith leaders and voluntary groups to establish interventions which promote cohesion and building community

**In Luton** videos of friends talking together from different backgrounds were produced to change the narrative into a positive, and shared on social media and in the local press

Efforts in Luton to counter far-right narratives include joint Muslim-Christian initiatives to address Child Sexual Exploitation.

**In Tower Hamlets**, the Jesuit Refugee Service, in partnership with St George's-in-the-East Church and members of the local Bengali community, is planning community conversations. These discussions will focus on sharing personal stories about what brought them to East London and exploring ways to improve their neighbourhood together.

**In Hackney**, where Near Neighbours funded a gardening project, a local community facilitator helped bring residents together to address the issue of street rubbish. People from Christian, Muslim, and Orthodox Jewish communities united to meet with Hackney Council, urging them



to clean up the streets and provide more bins, especially for those living in overcrowded housing.

**In Plaistow, Newham,** faith and community leaders have committed to meeting regularly to build relationships and identify local issues they want to address together. So far, they have organised a litter-picking initiative and are now preparing for Iftar community conversations to explore further collective action. They are considering a local campaign to restore a community centre for young people or challenge the rise of betting shops, which pose safety concerns for the area.

**In Nottingham** a recent day conference on community hubs, warm spaces and Places of Welcome brought 150 people from the local community, from health services, the council and faith and voluntary groups together to see how community groups can provide spaces for connection and mutual support.

### **Conclusion**

This report clearly demonstrates the need for intervention work relating to communities of difference and diversity. This work needs to be intentional and long term. The Government has made it clear that religious illiteracy has added to the tensions and mistrust that exist within many communities across the UK. Our work helps to build bridges between communities with our skills in understanding faith communities.

Near Neighbours provides a significant response to these tensions, build upon 15 years of experience. This work, which builds grassroots cohesion and resilience, does so by developing relationships and not transactions, especially amongst the thousands who are motivated by their own faith or belief systems (a significant majority of the population, especially in the more urban communities). These communities have resources, volunteers, buildings, a commitment to place, and a hope and motivation to transform things for the better.

We look forward to working more closely with the Government, national and local, in responding to the issue that have been highlighted.