

Integrated Communities Strategy Consultation Response

Summary

This paper presents Near Neighbours' response to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper, published in March 2018.

To inform our response, we facilitated community conversations in Bradford and Luton involving more than 40 local people from a range of faith and ethnic groups and nationalities. Our submission also draws on learning gained from delivering the Near Neighbours programme in diverse urban communities across England since 2011.

Key points include:

- Participation in civil society is an important route to integration, because it cultivates a sense of belonging to a community, and responsibility and dignity within it. For example, 93% of participants in Near Neighbours Small Grants projects felt more connected to their local community as a result of taking part in the project.
- Locally tailored responses are vital, and care needs to be taken to connect new plans with existing and ongoing work to support integration, across sectors.
- Integration is not just about relationships and attitudes, it is also about resources: addressing socio-economic inequalities has an important part to play in giving communities the freedom to integrate with one another without fear.
- We strongly support the view that recent migrants need 'early opportunities to mix with people from other backgrounds and to participate in community life.' This relational interaction is important both for new migrants, and existing residents alike.
- We believe an emphasis on a 'British values' discourse runs the risk of accentuating some of the more problematic and intolerant forms of nationalism that have surfaced in recent years. We suggest focusing instead on specifically identified values, enabling abusive and harmful behaviours, relationships and practices to be addressed directly, on the basis of their impact on wellbeing, rather than on the basis of whether they are 'British' or not.
- We agree that protecting the rights of women and girls is a very important priority, and that the creation of safe spaces in which women can share experiences and mix with those from other cultures and backgrounds is important for successful integration.



Introduction

Near Neighbours is actively engaged in building more integrated communities through grassroots civil society activity. We welcome the Government's consultation on their vision for building strong and integrated communities, and in this paper seek to share some of the learning we have derived from our engagement in communities across England.

To ensure our response to this consultation was informed by the perceptions and experiences of ordinary residents, we facilitated community conversations in Bradford and Luton. More than 40 people took part. The groups were mixed gender and included people from a range of faith and ethnic groups and nationalities. Participants included people who had been asylum seekers and refugees, recent migrants, and people who had lived in the local area all their lives, including second or third generation migrants.

We have responded to those questions within the consultation on which we are able to provide most evidence and insight.

About Near Neighbours

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.

The programme works in a number of key locations across England. We are present in the northern towns of Bury, Rochdale, Oldham, in Hyndburn, Rossendale, Blackburn, Burnley and Pendle as well as Leeds, Bradford and Dewsbury. In the Midlands we are working in Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Sandwell, Walsall and Dudley, Leicester and Nottingham. In the South we operate in Luton, Peterborough and across most of London.

Each of these locations is covered by one of our local hubs which act as a focal point for much of the work of the programme. A coordinator is based at each hub connecting with local projects and developing the work of the programme.

Near Neighbours is also linked with a number of national partners who provide expertise through their focussed work. Our partners contribute to the programme with training, expertise and resources. Their work is developing the networks and capacity of local communities and organisations through sustainable initiatives that will continue to impact long into the future.



Building Integrated Communities

Defining integration

The Government's Green Paper defined integrated communities as 'communities where people - whatever their background - live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities'.

There was broad assent to this definition amongst participants, and discussion focused on what it really meant in practice, and what would be needed for it to come about. In this regard, participants highlighted the importance of fostering respect – not just tolerance – for others who are different to us. One person described integration as 'embracing and valuing somebody else's identity', another pointed out that true integration means change for both receiving and arriving groups in communities.

Participants emphasised the importance of opportunities within this definition, and the need for proactive work to ensure that all have equal access to employment, education and other services. Integration is not just about relationships and attitudes, it is also about resources: addressing socio-economic inequalities has an important part to play in giving communities the freedom to integrate with one another without fear.

Local responses

The Green Paper set out the view that the varied nature and scale of integration challenges means that tailored local plans and interventions are needed to tackle the issues specific to particular places.

We know from our Near Neighbours Hubs across England that the challenges and opportunities associated with integration differ significantly from place to place, and even within different neighbourhoods in the same city or region. Patterns of residential and educational segregation, socio-economic conditions, labour market conditions, migration histories, and the particular groups that make up a local population all have an influence on the way in which integration comes about in a given context, and the specific challenges that need to be overcome in the process.

We agree that locally tailored responses are vital. Care needs to be taken to connect new plans and interventions with previous and ongoing work to support integration, across sectors, however. Evidence and learning from these local contexts also need to be fed into national level debate and strategy: sometimes discussion around diversity and integration in the public sphere is London-centric and it is important to recognise that other parts of the country face different and more pronounced challenges, often with fewer resources to address them.



It is essential that local plans are developed in consultation with local residents from a range of backgrounds, as well as employers, educators, local media, third sector groups, faith groups, and statutory stakeholders. Beyond this, dialogue and consultation mechanisms need to be built in throughout the implementation of local strategies, perhaps drawing on trusted civil society organisations to access feedback on how different groups within communities are feeling about and responding to actions taken. Nurturing community ownership of integration needs to be a priority, and where possible, local strategies should seek to encourage, educate, and enable change, rather than enforce it.

Successful approaches

As part of the Near Neighbours programme, funded by MHCLG, we have developed a network of Hubs and Partners which have built diverse and resilient relational networks amongst civil society groups across different faiths and ethnic backgrounds. These relationships play a significant part in facilitating integration at a local level, including through events to equip and connect leaders, and by enabling us to deliver our Small Grants programme, catalysing local social action and creating opportunities for meaningful interaction between people from different faith and ethnic groups.

A survey completed as part of an independent evaluation of the **Near Neighbours Small Grants programme** in 2017 found that 93% of participants agreed that because of the project they took part in, they feel they understand people in their local community who are from different religions or ethnic groups better (n=581). 86% of participants agreed that because of the project, they now feel they trust people in their local community more. 47% of participants said that because of the Near Neighbours project, they have got involved with other volunteering opportunities in their community, suggesting that there is a significant ongoing impact in terms of strengthening civil society. We believe that *participation in civil society is a valuable route to integration, because it cultivates a sense of belonging to a community, and responsibility and dignity within it.*

Real People, Honest Talk was developed in 2017 to create spaces in which some of the difficult issues that can arise in communities where there are differences in culture, attitudes, and beliefs, could be discussed openly and in safety, leading to deeper understanding and empathy between groups and individuals. Real People, Honest Talk involves a series of three facilitated small group discussions involving people from a local neighbourhood. The group decide on the topic, and are supported by the facilitator to explore and listen to different perspectives. The neighbourhood conversations are followed up by a larger event, or 'Big Conversation', at the city or regional level. This provides an opportunity for participants in local conversations to share their experiences and plans, and for a wider group including local community and faith leaders, statutory services such as the police, and political representatives, to share in the process.



This year we piloted Real People, Honest Talk in Luton and the Black Country. More than 287 people from different backgrounds took part in the neighbourhood conversations. An independent evaluation by researchers at the University of Leeds found that:

“The safe and honest spaces, which Real People, Honest Talk has been able to facilitate, constitute an appropriate forum for residents to address the issues that affect their neighbourhood. Participants feel comfortable to address these issues referring to their own values and emotions and are free to draw upon their backgrounds and experiences.”

Participants have often wanted to keep working together, and projects arising out of the conversations include a community play, litter picking, and developing a website to address the problem of sexual abuse.

The Big Conversations proved to be an effective way of celebrating diversity, with 80% of participants saying they feel more positive about the diversity of their local community as a result of the event. Academic research suggests that attitudes to diversity have a significant impact on integration of minority groups. One participant wrote:

“No matter how bitter one’s understanding or perception or even experience around a particular area of concern may be, once we sit and talk, we realise it is not as simple as we thought it is... It helps us understand the issue better, which then helps us to ‘respond’ [rather] than to ‘react’. In my experience Real People Honest Talk did that exactly.”

Strengthening leadership

We strongly agree with the Green Paper’s proposal that we need to build the capacity of our leaders to promote and achieve integration outcomes.

We believe that an approach that works with leaders across all sectors, as well as with ‘ordinary’ members of communities, is needed. Near Neighbours is working actively to build the capacity of faith leaders and potential young leaders to promote and build integration.

Our Hubs and Partners deliver events that enable faith leaders to explore some of the challenging aspects of integration, as well as building relationships across faith groups. For example, as part of MHCLG’s Muslim Leaders conversations, Near Neighbours in Birmingham arranged a series of discussions with a range of Muslim practitioners including Shia, Sunni and Ahmadiyya, and male and female participants. These discussions were hosted by Near Neighbours project leads and partners, and participants were able to discuss concerns and issues directly with MHCLG staff.



Our Catalyst programme empowers young people from a wide range of religious, ethnic, and social backgrounds to become leaders and influencers in their communities, workplaces, and in society more widely. We believe this is vital for growing the diversity of leadership in the future, across all sectors, and the programme has a particular focus on exploring what it means to lead in a religiously and ethnically diverse society.

A key feature of our leadership development work is that it affirms the positive contribution that religious faith can make to society, whilst also enabling faith leaders to tackle difficult issues together. This is an approach that could help inform efforts to develop leadership that supports integration in other sectors beyond civil society, where there is increasing need to ensure that decisions are underpinned by accurate understandings of how religion and culture influence social practices and interactions.



Supporting New Migrant and Resident Communities

The Green Paper proposed measures to support recent migrants so that they have the information they need to integrate into society and understand British values and their rights and responsibilities

Recent migrants

We strongly support the Green Paper's view that recent migrants need 'early opportunities to mix with people from other backgrounds and to participate in community life.' This relational interaction is important both for new migrants, and existing residents alike. For example, a woman who took part in our community conversation in Luton explained that her friends had been surprised by the kindness of taxi-drivers of different ethnicities to themselves who went the extra mile to help them out, and that this was gradually changing their perspectives and challenging their prejudices.

In both Bradford and Luton, we found strong support for some sort of 'induction' package being made available to recent migrants. Suggestions for content included practicalities such as how rubbish collection works, how to access healthcare or English language tuition, and awareness of different sources of support, both statutory and voluntary. It was suggested that asylum seekers whose applications are accepted are a group that typically misses out in terms of this kind of support.

We suggest that this kind of 'induction' would be most effective if it:

- 1) is framed primarily as about welcoming the new migrant, supporting their wellbeing as they settle in, and helping them feel a part of their new community. It is really important that migrants are not problematised from the outset.
- 2) is delivered in a relational setting in a local context, from which further opportunities for social interaction can readily be accessed.
- 3) takes place over more than one session, giving time for questions or difficulties that arise to be addressed, and helping develop a relational connection.
- 4) is delivered by an agency where staff or volunteers come from more than one ethnic group or nationality, and include local residents.

If accompanied by appropriate funding and support, civil society groups could be well positioned to deliver such a package. They are often able to gain trust where statutory agencies find this difficult, and distancing this provision from statutory immigration processes would likely lead to better integration outcomes.

In Bradford, several examples were given of community groups that were already serving these kinds of functions, in an informal way. One man explained how he had joined a group run by Bradford Refugee Action when he arrived as an asylum seeker eight years ago. The group had provided valuable support to him and his family on an ongoing basis, giving them a safe space in which they could get to know people and find support in adjusting to life in the UK. Others described similar groups which offered opportunities for women to cook together, or for migrants to access English lessons or legal advice.



'British values'

There was less agreement amongst participants about the use of the term 'British values'. This was felt by some to imply that values such as tolerance, respect and democracy are unique to Britain, thereby implicitly criticising other countries and cultures. There did not seem to be a clear consensus about what British values are and who should get to decide on them.

In the current context, *an emphasis on a 'British values' discourse in public policy and debate runs the risk of accentuating some of the more problematic and intolerant forms of nationalism that have surfaced in recent years. We suggest instead cultivating values and language that are about protecting and promoting the shared wellbeing* of individuals and communities, and articulating clearly what are held to be the key constituents of this, such as equality, personal agency, access to education and employment, and freedom of religion and belief.

Such an approach enables abusive and harmful behaviours, relationships and practices to be addressed directly, on the basis of their impact on wellbeing, rather than on the basis of whether they are British or not. This is not to suggest that these challenges are always unrelated to religion or culture – indeed, a clear understanding of the influences of these is vital when seeking to address them – but rather that an assessment of their 'Britishness' is not the starting point that is likely to yield the most effective outcomes in terms of changing attitudes and behaviours.

Importantly too, not all of the integration issues we face as a society are related to migration: participants in our conversations emphasised the need to ensure that disabled people, LGBT people, people who are financial excluded, and older people, are fully included in society. Here again a 'shared wellbeing' discourse seems more appropriate than a 'British values' discourse.

The Controlling Migration Fund

The Controlling Migration Fund was constructed by the government to deal with short-term migration pressures and associated costs that local authorities can encounter.

Concerns were raised amongst our conversation participants about the name of the Controlling Migration Fund. It was felt that this reflected an approach that problematised migrants, rather than seeing them as potential contributors with something valuable to bring to our society and to local communities. Several participants observed that the use of language such as this in local media reporting was unhelpful and tended to shape people's attitudes in a more negative way than befitted their actual experiences of interacting with migrant groups in their communities, which were often positive, friendly encounters and relationships.



Education and Young People

The Green Paper proposed measures to ensure that all children and young people are prepared for life in modern Britain and have the opportunity for meaningful social mixing with those from different backgrounds.

We agree that steps need to be taken to ensure that all children and young people have experience of mixing meaningfully with those from different backgrounds. Schools play a very important part in this, and in many cases such mixing needs to be carefully supported, to ensure that positive integration outcomes – rather than entrenchment of existing prejudices or negative perceptions – result.

Our Catalyst programme intentionally brings together young people from different faith and ethnic groups, enabling them to learn from one another as they explore questions of identity, belief, leadership and influence as they relate to their own lives, communities and contemporary society. The young people also take part in a social action project together, further strengthening the relationships built by making a difference together towards a common goal.

Boosting English Language

The Green Paper proposed a number of measures to improve the offer for people to learn English. The consultation sought views on these.

Participants in our community conversations said that more funding was needed for English language training, so we welcome the proposals for further resources to support this.

As the Green Paper notes, we recognise that language training in community-based settings has strong benefits for integration, particularly for recent migrants and those who may not be planning to enter the labour market, because of the relationships formed in the process.



Places and Community

The Green Paper proposed measures to ensure that people, particularly those living in residentially segregated communities, have opportunities to come together with people from different backgrounds and play a part in civic life.

We agree that civil society is a really important context for social integration. Our Near Neighbours Small Grants programme saw an estimated 53,890 people taking part in community-based projects in 2017. A survey conducted as part of an independent evaluation, found that 93% of participants felt more connected to their local community as a result of taking part in the project (n=581).



Research suggests that people's sense of interdependence on one another is an important predictor of whether they perceive themselves as part of a common group. Cultivating such a perception – at community, city and society levels – is surely a key goal of integration policy. *Social action projects such as those supported by Near Neighbours help nurture this sense of interdependence across ethnic and social groups,* giving people opportunities to work towards shared goals with others they would not otherwise have met.

We believe that an integrated civil society – and particularly one in which there is diversity within as well as between voluntary and community groups – is a vital building block in relation to wider integration goals. In particular, it helps put in place the trusting relationships across differences that give communities the resilience to respond in creative and constructive ways when shocks and tensions do occur, as they inevitably will from time to time.



Increasing Economic Opportunity

The Green Paper proposed measures to provide tailored support to people, especially those who may not currently be active in the labour market, to build their confidence and skills to take up employment.

We believe that accessing employment is very important, not only for households' financial security but also for social inclusion and wider wellbeing outcomes, such as mental health and self-esteem.

Participants in our community conversations identified mentoring and work experience as important ways of opening up employment opportunities, particularly for women who would like to work but have few female role models in employment amongst their families and social groups. Provision of young people's services was also seen as important in supporting them through the journey from education into further training or employment, and in helping raise aspirations and improving access to opportunities.

Given the importance of work to wellbeing, as well as the contribution it makes to our economy, we would urge Government to consider granting asylum seekers the right to work within a reasonable period of their arrival in the country. Of course, not all would be in a position to do so, with some suffering the consequences of traumatic circumstances and journeys too greatly to participate in this way straightaway. However, for those who are able to work, participation in the labour market can provide a much-needed sense of self-worth and efficacy, as well as material provision, at a time when prolonged unemployment can be costly in terms of mental health, family life and indeed community cohesion. A number of participants reported that asylum seekers who were hanging around residential streets during the day were sometimes experienced as threatening, or became the subject of criticism about scrounging and not working, when in fact they are not allowed to work. Allowing asylum seekers to work legally could also help prevent exploitation.



Rights and Freedoms

Challenging divisive views

The Green Paper proposed measures to encourage integration and resist divisive views or actions. The consultation sought views on these.

We agree that encouraging integration is essential. Participants in our conversations felt that integration had to be intentional – it does not ‘just happen’. Celebrating diversity is an important way of building integration but challenging behaviours and attitudes that cause harm to others – either directly or indirectly – is also vital. How this is done, and who is the most appropriate person or authority to do it, will vary depending on the context, any risks involved, and the nature and extent of potential harm.

Strengthening relationships between diverse groups in local communities is an important, and proven, way in which to reduce the spread of negative rhetoric about particular groups within a community. People are more able to resist and challenge such behaviours themselves if they have pre-existing relationships with people in the group being targeted. Not all interactions with people who are different from us are positive, and those that are negative are known to have a bigger effect on our attitudes towards the group that the other person belongs to. Mindful of this, part of what Near Neighbours does is build up histories of past positive experiences of interaction between diverse communities, meaning that divisive efforts are less likely to take root.

Women’s rights

The Green Paper proposed measures to address practices which can impact on the rights of women. The consultation sought views on these.

We agree that protecting the rights of women and girls is a very important priority, and that the creation of safe spaces in which women can share experiences and mix with those from other cultures and backgrounds is important for successful integration. Addressing this issue in community settings requires careful listening and discernment, and learning from such listening needs to be reflected in policy and public debate too.

Many of our Near Neighbours projects work specifically with women. These have included projects to improve employability, build relationships, share skills, and provide counselling training, for example. We support the development of female leaders from a variety of backgrounds through our Hubs and Partners and, for younger women, through the Catalyst programme.



Participants in our community conversations expressed divergent views and experiences relating to this topic. Some felt that there was no problem with women's rights, and that any issues within Muslim communities in particular were being addressed by Muslim women themselves. Other participants, including a number of Muslim women, however, reported that gaining freedoms such as having a job, or being able to go on trips, had been very difficult and there was discussion about having to get consent from a man to engage in activities that many women would for granted. One Muslim woman outlined her perception that many of the constraints placed on her as a woman were not actually intrinsic to her religion but were actually part of a culture that men tended to interpret as part and parcel of this. Some women felt that this needed challenging, and some were actively engaged in doing so. It was suggested that this needed to be done mainly from within the relevant community, starting where people currently are, and gradually working to effect change.

Clearly, both men and women need to be involved in order for women's' and girls' rights to be properly protected and brought into being. When it comes to domestic violence or abuse it is vital that cultural sensitivities do not prevent those at risk from getting the protection and support they need.

Seeing women's rights as a matter of conservative versus progressive values is not necessarily a helpful way of approaching this issue. This tends to problematise religious adherence per se, making people feel as if an intrinsic part of their identity is not welcome in British society, when in fact the issue may be to do with specific interpretations of particular teachings, or to do with culture, rather than religion. Here again, a 'shared wellbeing' approach may be beneficial, raising awareness of how girls and women – and indeed all people in the UK – can expect to be treated by one another. We need to be careful to distinguish between legitimate differing choices (for example the division of labour within a household may be 'traditional' but freely chosen) and coercive or oppressive treatment.

Appropriate humility may also be beneficial when those from a liberal Western background seek to challenge attitudes to and treatment of women within certain Muslim communities. As the #MeToo campaign has made apparent, the overly-sexualised portrayal of women that is endorsed through much entertainment and advertising consumption in Western cultures has not been without harm either, the prevalence of eating disorders and mental health problems amongst girls and young women being further symptoms of this. It may be that more explicit engagement with the shortcomings of dominant social norms relating to women could open up opportunities for constructive conversations involving men and women amongst whom contrasting cultural norms and values – carrying different risks, limitations, and freedoms – shape women's lives. An inclusive approach to the issue of women's rights might involve starting a national conversation amongst women from a whole variety of backgrounds – across ethnicities, religions, professions, social grades, family statuses, ages, etc. – allowing their voices to be heard through a positive media and social media campaign.



Measuring Success

The Green Paper proposed core integration measures for national and local government to focus on. The consultation sought views on whether these were the right measures.

We believe this depends to an extent on how the some of the indicators identified – for example around strengthening the governance of community-based faith groups – are to be operationalised in order to facilitate measurement.

Systematic research on the content of local and national media coverage relating to migrants, Muslims, refugees and asylum seekers, and other minority groups could also be an important indicator. Analysis of the types of attitudes it encourages towards such groups would help gauge changes in the national mood, as well as increase our understanding of the messages and forces shaping it.

It is important to acknowledge that relationships are at the heart of integration, and its success is dependent on the quality and nature of these. These features of relationships are very difficult to effectively quantify outside of experimental conditions: consequently, the quantitative measures chosen as proxies for integration need to be carefully scrutinised to ensure that they do not inadvertently compromise the less tangible but fundamental relational aspects of integration, such as belonging and trust.



References

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March 2018



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