Report on focus group research into the impact of the recession and barriers to community cohesion in six Bristol wards

Bristol, May 2010

commissioned under Connecting Communities
by the Bristol Partnership Board

COMMUNITY RESOLVE
from conflict to communication

This report briefly outlines potential barriers to building cohesive communities, as suggested by focus groups held with residents in six wards across Bristol. The report covers:

- Background to the work, and approach taken
- Our experience of engagement in each ward
- Potential issues to be addressed, illustrated by direct quotes from participants
- Taking local action - participant reflections and suggestions
- Recommendations
- Actions

From one conversation ...

"So is it our prejudice, is it my fault, if you went up to chat to them they'd be fine, but we don't, so is it our prejudice?"

"That's your job, but you wouldn't walk round Barton Hill at night …"

"Yes but you wouldn't walk round Knowle West either"

"I just don't want people coming over here and getting benefit ..."

"They have to anyway, European government said we got to allow so much so we got this Euro allowance, is it £700 million for Somalis?"

"Yes but they're war torn aren't they ... if you had a chance of dying over there cos there's a war, or coming to Britain you'd come over here"

"There's some nasty things going on"

"Yes but they've brought their shit over here"

"1984 Band Aid, we've all given money to these same people… that's what we're like. We're nice guys... comedy aid, this aid and that aid... you don't get rich people putting their hands in their pocket."

Research / analysis team

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Research led by Community Resolve, a Bristol not-for-profit conflict transformation organisation:

We carry out community research, work with communities and young people around conflict, support residents and families in conflict, and offer training, conflict interventions and conflict facilitation across the city. We are committed to recruiting from local communities, and have a staff group that reflects Bristol's diversity as well as actively training young adults to work with us.

For more information on our work or to watch a short film about our approach, please visit our website:

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This research was funded under the Connecting Communities programme, set up to address the concerns of traditional working class communities that may be suffering during the recession. The research was commissioned by the Bristol Partnership to explore the views of local Bristol people about how to strengthen community cohesion, and how to give them a bigger say in their communities. It was carried out in six wards across the city - Brislington East, Hillfields, St George East and West, Southmead and Whitchurch Park – and targeted the views of residents, not local activists or workers.

Our approach

In order to reach residents who are rarely consulted, we went to locations where different sections of the community gather - pubs, cafes, libraries, youth clubs, hairdressers, school gates and sports/recreation venues. We invited groups of 4-6 participants at a time to take part in short, informal but structured focus groups. Participants were offered cash (£10-15), an equivalent voucher or a free drink (in pubs) as an incentive to take part. Our lead topic was 'How has the recession affected the lives of you and your community?' Each group discussion was structured around specially composed film clips which elicited the views of local residents about community spirit, housing availability, family, jobs, benefits, opportunities for young people & taking local action.

Over two months – mid March-mid May 2010 – we talked to 64 people in 17 groups made up of:
- 90% white British residents
- 62% men
- 57% tenants
- 55% longstanding residents (20+ years/whole life in area)
- 50% aged 16-35

All interviews were recorded with the agreement of participants, who were guaranteed anonymity as well as a copy of the final report if they so wished. 35% - a high proportion - did ask for a copy of the report.

Analysis

Although time was limited, we reached sectors of the population whose individual voices are often hard to find – large numbers of working-class men, long-standing residents, young people and the unemployed. From them, we heard about issues which have been found in other research across the country, but also concerns that rarely figure in local or national policy making: where are the services for single men? what about the working poor, living on low wages and with no job security?

As commissioned, we analysed the data in order to identify potential barriers to cohesion. There were many positives expressed in the discussions, as well as common and shared concerns among residents. We have broadly grouped these concerns into four main strands, and illustrated them with direct quotes.

The six wards

Participants in the groups didn't necessarily represent the wards as a whole, but we observed the following:

Brislington East: Participants were interested and happy to have the opportunity to discuss issues. Some voiced high levels of intolerance with race groups and young people.

Hillfields: It was difficult get people together, due to a lack of social hubs & availability. Those who took part were keen to do so and had plenty to say about their struggles to be part of a community.

St George East: Very few meeting places or social hubs, and a disinterest or unwillingness to talk to us. We saw evidence of far right activity and heard some extremely racist views, in passing.

St George West: The Library and a pub here proved very successful as venues for discussions and a wide range of views and attitudes were heard.

Southmead: Participants here were the most socially excluded & marginalised, and unsurprisingly, appeared the most dependent on others ('they/the Council') for leadership.

Whitchurch Park: The ward was clearly viewed by participants as two different and separate neighbourhoods - Hartcliffe and Whitchurch - with little connection with the rest of the city.

Potential barriers to cohesion

Us/them – and there's lots of 'them's'…

In many of the discussions participants tended to single out particular groups who they felt received favourable treatment. This wasn't simply racial – it related to those who are perceived as receiving support and those who don't, who work or don't, pay taxes or don't, get council houses or don't. Underlying the 'us / them' stories was a powerful sense of 'fairness / unfairness':

'Council support ethnic football clubs but not clubs like Loughton that have been helping kids for years'

'You get more access to services and help coming out of jail than if you were a normal person'

'Young unmarried mothers they gets council flats 16 and 17 year olds… you say to them why did you get pregnant and they say I got a council flat, I have two more and I'll have a house'

[Man with first baby] *'struggling, living with mum and dad… council say are you disabled? No? can't help you… you hear of people coming over here and people get things paid for them'*

'You get people who've lived here, their parents lived here, their grandparents, but when they tried to get a council place in this area and they said 'no' ….an instance where a girl, exactly that, 23 places she looked for and everyone one of them went to an ethnic minority person and that is building up the hatred, well no it's resentment'

'Being a middle-aged white single male I'm not high priority for any council services'

In some groups, initial anxiety about sounding racist disappeared when others backed up their views. In others, participants challenged and debated. Rumour and misinformation were frequently mixed in with personal experience, fuelling resentments and in some areas giving rise to a sense of being hemmed in, under pressure:

'That's alright don't be ashamed to say it, we were here first & I don't want to get into a political thing over that …'

'The foreign community is getting bigger and bigger … they're opening shops left right and centre and what I find like is that white people don't go in these shops … there's nothing in there that I'd buy either … It's like shopping abroad…'

'St George is becoming like Easton, foreigners everywhere, hundreds of them round about'

'The money's running out… all of these Somalis coming over here , 4 or 5 littl'uns hanging off them, they aint cheap when they're in hospital'

Lack and loss … of civility, security & community spirit

People came back again and again to how things had changed in their local area, with a number of theories about what had gone wrong and confusion about how to put things right. At times new arrivals were scapegoated as change was put down to increasing racial diversity, but not always. People talked about a lack of neighbourliness, of not greeting each other on the street, of not socialising together.

Men were increasingly feeling as if they were objects of suspicion (CRB checks were often mentioned) and this made them reluctant to engage – older men told wistful stories of how they can no longer say hello to a neighbour's daughters, or joke with a small girl in the butchers. But participants also talked about the lack of opportunities to come together (especially with the decline in pubs), to take part in communal activities - street parties were brought up across the wards. People commented that they enjoyed the discussions in the focus groups, with a couple suggesting that this was what was lacking – a place to talk about things that matter.

Lack and loss of civility

'More and more people speak to you less and less'

'I live in a block of flats, no-one really speaks to you at all'

'People who get on around here tend to be people who have known each other for a long time… it's those that come in that don't want to socialize that feel isolated … people have come and gone, they don't get that involved with neighbours cos they feel they're not going to be there that long anyway'

'I've lived here all my life and I have seen a big change on this estate, before it was quite friendly living in each other's houses but now you walk past and you don't say hello even though they've known you since you were 3 or 4'

'It's changed a lot… there were a lot more shops round here, I've been here since I was 16, used to be a lot more friendly, now everyone's more closed off, the only chat is when you're in the pub'

Lack and loss of security – emotional and physical

'Cos we lead an insular life if you say hello to someone they think…why is he saying hello?'

'Chat to someone at the bus stop like younger people and that…' 'he's right and they look at you like you're a weirdo'

'What would make you get involved in running a football club etc? …Not being labelled as a paedophile… you can't do anything with kids without being police checked'

'When the door bell rang when I was young you'd go straight to the door, now you'd look out the window before you'd answer the door'

'White youngsters have a trouble having an identity… immigrants can be proud to be Turkish or Polish but it's not fashionable to be proud to be English… you're categorized as a racist…'

'If I saw someone across the road with 6 guys on him I wouldn't do nothing because I'd probably get stabbed. I'm out for myself now…'

Lack and loss of community spirit

'I think it's gone too far… there's no community… 1977 street parties, we couldn't do that now… if you knock on someone's door they'd ring the police they'd think you were going to mug them'

'I'm quite a pessimist about community, I don't think it's going to get any better, it's going to get worse'

'I've noticed that [immigrants] *have kept their own community, because we're almost ignorant to them, they think that we're against them and a lot of people are like that because they blame them cos they haven't got a job, but it's not because of them that they haven't got a job, they haven't got the brass to get out of the bed in the morning'*

'Computers have ruined it, a lot of people sit next door to each other and rather than going around to each other and having a cup of tea they talk to each other on social network things'

'I used to play 22-a-side football and every single person I knew, no fights no nothing'

'Single men have it even worse, if you're a single mum under 25 there's loads of groups… that's why young girls tend to have children, they get help, they get benefits, there's more to fit in with'

'The Good Samaritan is dead…'

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Shifting values – the work ethic, consumption and consideration

Mixed in with the feelings of loss and bewilderment were observations about how our collective values had changed. These surfaced in particular when talking about family and young people, but also in discussions around global shifts – a world dominated by technology and high levels of consumption. People mourned the passing of a work ethic in younger people while seeing it in other ethnic groups – often with some jealousy. In particular, participants singled out the destructiveness of an 'everything now' culture among young people (seen as a product of 'boom' years of economic growth), linked to a lack of discipline and respect at home and in school. Parents were seen by some as a root cause of the problem, as was easy credit, throwaway consumerism, a computer culture, a decline in decent employment opportunities, and a lack of intergenerational activities. There was some sympathy for young people who had nothing to do that was safe, sociable and accessible.

'I see 20 year olds moving into a house and they want the place decorated, they want carpets, they want the plasma tv… the parents have said you get the place and we'll do it up… those should be the people out earning but they've no incentive to do it'

[on Turkish migrants] *'They've got more sense of a community than the indigenous population, like that helps them get away to work for less money like… they live more communally and to live on less'*

'Such a disposable society, so easy to get a loan… most teenagers wouldn't dream of going in a secondhand shop…'

'Parents are becoming more selfish, use the TV to babysit their kids'

'Everyone's on their computers… families have got no time for them, they're left on their own ...'

'There used to be lots of street parties and that, there tends to be lots more distrust of youngsters nowadays especially with the explosion of class A drugs, you see 9, 10 yr olds smoking weed… it has been seen, yes'

'None of the kids know how to cook anymore'

'No-one knows how to sew, or like to put on a button'

Poverty traps … physical, financial, emotional, aspirational

Most groups had quite a bit to say about the way poverty traps people. Many had experienced the impact of the recession firsthand, or had close family or friends who were affected. We heard many stories of being in personal competition with Polish workers, of the financial climate driving down men's wages and putting pressure on working conditions. Several mentioned the impact of being better off on benefits - including those receiving them. Expensive and inadequate public transport is a recurring topic of conversation, with many people reporting a huge impact on social and family life, as well as opportunities for employment, when bus fares are so high. There were clear feelings of being unable to compete in the labour market, of being left behind, and of being targeted by loan sharks.

'It's hard for them…they know they're going to have to live with their parents…if they get a job they're worried about keeping it… if they do get a job then none of their friends have got jobs and they're isolated…so what they know is what they stay with so people deliberately hold themselves back...'

'I'm better off on benefits than being employed …to cover my rent and the benefits I get with it I'd have to clear £300 a week minimum I don't know anywhere that would pay me that kind of money'

[about school trip] *'I didn't want her to miss out and I didn't want her friends to think that I couldn't afford it… they're all struggling because they don't want their children's friends to think bad of them'*

'£1.95 just to go into town is disgusting' ; *'Local bus company is out and out profiteers'*

[Southmead resident] *'Fishponds, it's a struggle to get over there without a car…it's £4 or £5 which on a dole cheque…'*

'I'm in the middle of paying back problem loans and their interest is so high'

'Provident... they knock on your doors' ; 'You have letters... £500... '

[speaking of her husband, a mechanic] *'trying to employ somebody is an absolute nightmare, they don't want to work, they come in late "sorry got pissed last night"'*

Taking action

When we asked people for their suggestions about building community spirit in their area, we had a mixed and sometimes contradictory response. For some, it seemed a hopeless task, and apathy and a lack of confidence came through in many discussions. For many others, recognition that taking action locally was important and necessary was tempered with anxiety about how their actions would be received, who would lead the effort and how it could be done. There were a few people who illustrated how they made an effort as individuals to build their own lives, as well as local relationships.

'I came up here [from Barton Hill] *and there was nobody about...down there and it was 'alright my love', people work up here and they're not about in the day… so I got out there and sent Christmas cards to all my neighbours, so I make myself part of my street everything that goes on in the park we try and get involved in'*

'You don't have to have the fancy catalogue clothes, it's amazing what you can get in the charity shops and you don't have to buy expensive food, I always go to the reduced section first and you can make and you can bake'

'You can actually be either open minded or closed minded so if you're willing to work as opposed to moan about "there is no jobs" then you're the one to benefit'

'I've moved on, I wasn't waiting for a council house next to my mum and dad'

'I don't think you can always blame it on the generations, it stops with you... you treat people how you'd like to be treated yourself'

Participant suggestions

People did have ideas about what might improve the situation - but also highlighted the inconsistency of funding for such initiatives. Many people mentioned the importance of having local centres where people could gather, suggesting on several occasions that public buildings such as schools and libraries should be made more available for community activities when they are closed. Other ideas included:

- *Under 16s ought to have free bus journeys…a pass type system; what I pay for my 5 yr old is ridiculous ...*

- *It costs 30p they get a proper card in school for them to travel anywhere in Brighton, why not here?*

- *Help young lads get a CCS card which costs £50 to be able to go on the building sites…*

- *Housing priority given to people with a lot of family in the area... 'cos that builds strength in the community*

- *When there's an occasional street party, then they find out a bit about their neighbours and get on better*

- *Why not start in the schools? The local school is a children's centre running courses but they're not well advertised... maths, English, strengthening families and communities course which was very good…*

- *The IT bus visit was really good ... some really difficult kids got involved ... it stopped coming, I don't know why*

- *Get ex drug takers in the schools to tell them this is what happens*

- *There's no abstinence services for alcohol or drug users in the Southmead area*

- *Music workshops with children... things that can make dreams come true, get out of the conditions they're in*

- *There was a solar cinema and it was free in the park - it was amazing how people didn't know it was going on*

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Recommendations

The research team listed a number of recommendations to address the barriers to cohesion. Below are three broad areas of objectives; overleaf are additional ideas on how these four broad areas might be achieved.

1. Local government support and city-wide policy shifts

> • **Provide accessible, engaging and transparent information on key areas of bad feeling** – eg housing allocations, transport

> • Demonstrate an awareness of the impact of little or no job security on the 'working poor' and unemployed, and provide support

> • Encourage sociability through support for numerous community hubs / places to meet within a ward

> • Work to develop thriving local economies, through encouraging local trade/barter, local jobs etc

2. Building on local strengths and skills

> • Draw on local knowledge and experience in communities so local people feel valued and contribute

> • Encourage the re-learning of basic skills – sewing, cooking, 'make do and mend', budgeting, etc

> • Address the barriers that stop men volunteering/operating in the wider community

3. Encourage sociability, civility and a sense of individual responsibility

> • Counteract the drift towards social isolation and community fragmentation

> • Create moves towards collective civility and interaction

> • Challenge rumours and misinformation that are destructive of social fabric and cohesion.

Implementing the recommendations

There are a number of existing initiatives and projects going on elsewhere that could help to provide inspiration and opportunities for neighbourly and intergenerational activities and greater use of public spaces. In addition, Bristol has a richness of creative organisations and individuals who appear to operate mostly in the centre of the city, but who could be encouraged to spread their reach. Many of these recommendations have implications for practice across local government, and will requirement partnership and multi-agency work between the statutory, voluntary and private sectors.

Reseach project team, July 2010