Leading in Challenging Times: Support for those responding to the impact of the conflict in Israel and Gaza on local communities in the UK

The ongoing conflict in Israel and Gaza is presenting significant challenges to social cohesion in the UK. Though these challenges can be different in different places, we know that they are a cause of serious concern and a challenge for leaders and local authorities across the country. This document seeks to support council officers and councillors by capturing some of the key principles and elements of good practice that can best help us respond to these challenges.

The challenges we are seeing

- The most immediately troubling impact has been a dramatic increase in hate crime and reports of anti-Jewish hate/antisemitism and anti-Muslim hate/Islamophobia.
- Relationships, including inter-faith relationships and other relationships across differences, are coming under strain, even where they may previously have been strong.
- Social media often acts to amplify the most polarising voices, heightening tension and feelings of threat.
- False narratives abound, including false assumptions that British Jews and British Muslims hold uniform views on the conflict, or that division around this conflict relates only to these communities, when in fact its impact is often much broader than that.
- Demonstrations and protests are requiring resources and attention to manage logistics, relationships, and any implications for cohesion.
- At a local level, political tensions and pressure on elected representatives, including threats to safety, have been heightened.
- Different voices may for different reasons be feeling unheard and marginalised.
- Managing feelings about the conflict within workplaces, including among council officers, is throwing up significant challenges as well.
- Tensions over the conflict are playing out in many local services, and especially in schools (including primary schools) and youth services. Teachers, and the education and youth sectors more generally, are looking for better guidance and practical support.

A cohesion-focused and community-led response: key principles

There is no easy way to address all these tensions – especially as the conflict continues. But we can respond in ways that protect our community cohesion and our uniting institutions. Positive responses could include:

1. **Proactive leadership which emphasises cohesion.** Remaining quiet about the tensions does not help and allows others to fill the void. Local leadership which provides active reassurance to community members, and which emphasises a shared responsibility for maintaining strong social cohesion can have a significant, positive impact today. It can also lay the basis for

future initiatives to restore connections and rebuild relationships that are currently under pressure.

2. **Ensure strong and united voices against all forms of hate crime.** Not everyone will agree as to what caused the current phase of the conflict in Israel and Gaza, or how it should end – but we can seek to build and emphasise a united cross-community and cross-party voice against all forms of hate – especially antisemitism and anti-Muslim hate / Islamophobia, which are often stoked during times of conflict in Israel and Palestine.

3. **Utilise wellbeing as a frame for our approach.** Placing a primary emphasis on the need to look after the wellbeing and safety of individuals, but also of organisations and communities, can be a helpful frame for discussing the impact of the conflict, in a way that can de-escalate tension and place emphasis on managing the relationships around us. This frame can be particularly helpful in relation to managing and supporting staff and workforces. Guidance which outlines and reaffirms both rights and responsibilities can also be helpful.

4. **Confirm and support the important role of inter-faith networks.** Inter-faith networks can be extremely important in maintaining relationships, understanding and shared sense of community. They can be vital in ensuring a united voice against hate. In some cases, these relationships may currently be under strain and may need support.

5. **Support and maintain relationships across lines of difference.** Dialogue in times of conflict can be difficult, sometimes even counterproductive. What is most important is to support and maintain relationships that can underpin good relations now and in the future. Taking care to maintain relationships now and encouraging others to do the same can be the basis for future dialogue in which we will be able to reflect, consider and work through issues which may be divisive and sensitive now. Consider how you can create shared spaces for connection and learning.

6. **Using language with consideration and care.** Understand that particular phrases and terms can be heard differently by different audiences. Encourage all stakeholders, staff and partners to think carefully about the language they use in times like these. Care over language is crucial in allowing us to sustain relationships between those who have different perspectives. See below for some more detailed guidance on language best practice.

7. **Give communities space to engage in a way that best supports their needs.** Different individuals, organisations and groups will have different needs in relation to engagement. Be respectful of this and willing to allow communities to lead engagement, accommodating needs such as the type of engagement and where it takes place, the need for privacy, and need in relation to specific timings.

Emphasising our role in promoting social cohesion
Many people in leadership positions have felt 'pulled in different directions' during the conflict. One aspect of this is a certain tension that some people have felt between stating their own personal perspectives and 'political' positions on the conflict, and the responsibility that they have to foster good relations between people who hold a range of different views. It can be tricky

to navigate this tension, and to strike the appropriate balance, even more so if you have been directly affected either personally, or through friends, family and wider connections.

- For elected members who need to be considered and strike the appropriate balance, it is useful to remind ourselves of our duty to foster good relations and to be representatives to all those we represent.
- For council officers, when thinking about our positions or feelings on the conflict and how, when and where we express these, it might be helpful to relate this to the ideal of political neutrality we are committed to modelling in our professional life. This can be separated from a more 'activist' position which some of us may wish to take in our personal life.
- We would emphasise the benefits that have come from local political representatives, officers, faith leaders and civil society organisations putting their role in promoting social cohesion at the centre of how they respond to this conflict. Some who have done so believe that being perceived as 'impartial' or 'neutral' makes it more possible to maintain and strengthen relations across differences. Others have felt that being able to express particular positions is both true to their own values and an appropriate way of representing the views of those they represent, but at the same time they have taken great care to express themselves in moderate language and with respect.
- Whilst accepting and recognising differences of perspective on substantial issues, it is important and valuable to focus on what we all can and do agree on, and on what we can control in our local communities. This includes everyone taking a strong line against hate speech and hate crime, including each and every instance of Islamophobia, antisemitism and harassment of elected representatives.

A cohesion-focused response: language which can help
When speaking about the conflict, here are some guidelines that might be helpful to consider. In this context, it is helpful to use language which:
- Promotes values of non-violence, equality, and the rejection of hatred.
- Recognises the sanctity of life on all sides and mourns the loss of innocent life in Israel and Gaza.
- Promotes the need for solutions that seek peace and that can ensure the human rights and security of Palestinians and Israelis, and which recognises the urgency of the situation.
- Doesn't place the burden for ensuring cohesion in the UK at the feet of minority communities: this affects all of us and fostering good relations and pushing back against divisive narratives is the responsibility of everyone.
- Doesn't imply a shared responsibility or shared opinion of any specific group in relation to actions or statements by other people or groups.
- Recognises there may be different perspectives on this conflict – for instance, because of geographical or family ties, faith or cultural ties, or political conviction - and that this is normal and to be expected.

- Recognises that as individuals we may care deeply about this issue and may even be personally connected through family and friends in Israel and Gaza, whilst also recognising the need for a joint commitment to engage respectfully with those who may for various reasons have a different perspective from us.
- Seeks to emphasise shared values rather than focusing on differences.
- Looks forward to the time, in future, when working through the issues will hopefully become possible in ways which explore differences of perspective and understanding in considered ways, as part of confirming strong connections and rebuilding damaged relationships, as part of the contribution we can make towards a peaceful and acceptable resolution of deeply contested issues.

Pointers to good practice: things to consider

Positive initiatives responding to the effects of the conflict in different towns and cities will be to a significant degree, place-specific. Effective work to maintain relationships and to identify shared ground is not about applying a template: it involves particular people making connections and nuancing their approach and what they do to take into account the concerns of local communities.

Nevertheless, some of the steps taken by some local authorities, inter-faith and civil-society organisations could helpfully be taken up by others. These include:

- Political leaders taking time to meet faith leaders and other community leaders and confirming the important role of inter-faith networks. Wherever possible, it is best to work with and build on relationships and networks that were already in existence.
- Proactively promoting the importance of good relations, even where tensions may not appear to be an issue, rather than waiting for challenges and problems to arise.
- Well-judged educational inputs, with appropriate classroom materials.
- Developing and using systems to notice trends in community sentiment, and to monitor and respond to tensions and evidence of disputed issues.
- Responding to the surfacing of 'difficult conversations' in the community, in council offices and school staff rooms as a wellbeing issue, particularly with regard to managing and supporting colleagues and workforces, plus taking a consistent approach to dealing with issues such as complaints.
- Training and skill-sharing programmes to consider the dilemmas, choices and different roles involved in local community leadership – and to develop the skills and confidence on the part of elected representatives, council officers and others to handle situations where there are different views, and work to build community resilience.

About this document

This document has been produced by the Belong Network and Together for Humanity as a free resource for local government, related services and partner organisations who are dealing with challenges to cohesion arising from the ongoing conflict in Israel and Gaza.

About Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network

The Belong Network is the UK's leading membership organisation on social cohesion and integration, offering research, consultancy, training, networking, thought leadership and events for members across the public, private and charitable sector in the UK. Belong works closely with local government partners to capture best practice and to provide support and resources to help meet cohesion challenges.

https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/

About Together for Humanity

Together for Humanity is a campaign hosted by The /Together Coalition that exists to build kinder, closer and more connected communities in the UK. Together for Humanity launched in November 2023 to connect people across divides, and to create a space for the majority of people who want to express mutual solidarity and a shared recognition of humanity.

https://togetherforhumanity.co.uk/