

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY COHESION AND SUPPORTING INTEGRATION IN WALSALL SUMMARY



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INTRODUCTION

In 2019 Walsall Council invited the University of Birmingham to work with a group of individuals who live or work in Walsall to develop a research project to explore community cohesion and integration. The objective was to inform the work of 'Walsall for All', a project led by the Council, aimed at developing more inclusive communities.

The overall aim of the study was to explore residents' experiences of living in Walsall; understand the relationships people have with others in their communities; examine attitudes to community safety and divisions; and explore ways to improve neighbourhoods and community relations in Walsall.

METHODOLOGY

A bespoke community research programme was developed for Walsall, aimed at engaging with individuals considered to be part of 'segregated' communities. The intention was to train a cohort of individuals in social research methods, enabling participants to acquire a qualification in social research. They would then be supported to undertake research leading to recommendations to improve community integration in Walsall.

A recruitment programme by Walsall Council resulted in 20 individuals participating in the training. The group was diverse in relation to age, gender and ethnicity and included residents and staff from local voluntary organisations and the statutory sector, bringing a wide range of expertise, personal experience and knowledge of different areas of Walsall.

Training took place in the autumn of 2019, focusing on the role of qualitative research, creating the tools to undertake the project and developing interviewing skills. Working together the group identified the specific areas to be explored. Each individual was allocated an experienced community researcher as a mentor, to support them through the project and help them to reflect on their practice.

Unfortunately, once the pandemic hit, the participants experienced significant changes in circumstances, leading to the majority being unable to continue. Three community researchers remained involved and undertook 15 interviews; it was only possible to analyse the data collected from 12 of these.

The interviewees included 7 men and 5 women, aged from 29-57. 4 were self-employed, 3 were faith leaders, 3 were in receipt of benefits and 2 were students. They live in different neighbourhoods including Caldmore, Pleck, Yew Tree, Palfrey, Chuckery, Bloxwich and Butts. Individuals originated from the Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Syria, Pakistan, Jamaica, Ireland and the Sudan. Participants had lived in Walsall for between 2 and 56 years.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

EXPERIENCES IN WALSALL

All of the individuals interviewed were positive about their experience of living in Walsall. The town was considered to have all the necessary amenities, attractions and services whilst being small enough to easily get around. Affordable housing was a particular benefit. Walsall's location provides easy access to cities such as Birmingham and Wolverhampton, as well as the rest of the UK. Residents appreciated the green spaces, the parks and the canal network. In addition, individuals enjoyed living in a diverse multi-cultural community.

Some individuals found it difficult to settle in the first couple of years of being in the area. Individuals who arrived during the Brexit referendum discussions and immediately afterwards faced particular challenges, with hostility being shown towards migrants. However, what was clear was that people were very positive about their lives in Walsall now and having settled in the town there was a sense of ownership and pride. Being able to speak English undoubtedly made a difference in relation to individuals' ability to integrate. The provision of ESOL courses was viewed as critical in supporting individuals to develop their language skills. Community leaders felt that some people are more comfortable accessing courses provided at community centres than at educational establishments.

SETTLING IN THE COMMUNITY AND THE SENSE OF BELONGING

The majority of interviewees had developed positive relationships with their neighbours and described supportive relationships in their community. Those individuals who did not have family in the area appeared to be particularly dependent on developing a strong support network of friends. Work, educational establishments, places of worship, leisure centres, volunteering activities, community groups and social clubs provided opportunities for individuals to meet but close relationships take time to develop. Some individuals described being very isolated in the initial stages after moving into the area.

Those individuals that had come from other countries were anxious to maintain a sense of identity with their homeland, connecting with others that had come from the same place, with similar experiences, a shared language, norms, values, religion and culture. However, the majority of interviewees who talked about this were keen to stress that they were also part of the wider community within Walsall. Individuals living within different communities within an area still had shared needs and wishes such as an attractive and safe environment and job opportunities. Their need to remain part of a community linked to their country of origin did not detract from their wish to be accepted and contribute to their local community.

The majority of interviewees spoke very positively about relationships with their neighbours, meeting up at school events and at the local park and helping each other out. Football was seen as a shared interest, along with a range of festivals and celebrations including St Patrick's Day, Eid and Christmas. A range of activities were mentioned which were arranged by local people for local people, particularly for children. However, all of these activities had ceased during lockdown and there was a huge sense of loss and concern about the impact going forward.

Before the pandemic mothers often met others at the school gates and developed close relationships, whilst those who worked away were less able to participate in community activities and develop their networks. With more people now working from home, this might provide more opportunities for individuals to get to know their neighbours.

Relationships between communities were largely described as positive with people being supportive of one another; however, some concerns were raised about communities living beside one another rather than together. People value the fact that Walsall has become a multi-cultural city in recent years. They talked about the work of community centres and community leaders, community events and volunteering activities such as litter picks that bring people from different communities together and support community cohesion. However, there were concerns that the work of connecting people ceased during lockdown. People were anxious to see these opportunities re-established as soon as possible.

COMMUNITY SAFETY AND DIVISIONS

Whilst the majority of interviewees had not witnessed any tensions or problems between different groups in the community and did not feel unsafe, three described having personally experienced discrimination and they also described incidents concerning their neighbours and children. The one interviewee that had lived in Walsall for the whole of his life felt that there used to be a lot of tension between black and Asian youths 10-15 years ago but he was no longer aware of this. Facilities where community groups come together such as community centres and gyms were considered to have helped but many have closed down.

A number of people described anti-social behaviour in their area, including individuals being abusive, drug paraphernalia left lying around and drinking on the street. A faith leader described how the older people in her community often felt unsafe, though this was often a perception rather than based on actual incidents. However, some homeless individuals in the area had been directly threatened. There were concerns about young people carrying knives, with black mothers having particular concerns about their sons feeling the need to protect themselves in this way.

Two individuals talked about institutional racism and felt that things would only change when organisations are more representative of local communities, particularly in senior positions. A black interviewee detailed the discrimination he had faced from the police when he was younger, being stopped and searched on a number of occasions. He described hostility between young people and the police but felt that the setting up of local meetings had helped to improve communication. He felt that the Black Lives Matter demonstrations had encouraged people to reflect on their own experiences and made people realise that things need to change.

Nearly all of the interviewees were keen to be part of community initiatives and events. Community meetings and festivals were seen as important in bringing people together. Funfairs and food events were particularly popular, along with cultural events and celebrations that enable people to share food, music and dancing from their country of origin. Individuals were interested in finding out about each other people's cultures. The local mosques and churches were described as being integral in local communities, providing the chance to connect with others and working together to meet the needs of the local community. Celebratory events such as Christmas and Eid can be enjoyed by all of the local community, particularly if free food and entertainment are provided. Schools were also described as having a role in community initiatives. Sporting events, particularly football games, were seen as an opportunity for individuals to connect with each other, along with volunteering opportunities.

IMPROVING NEIGHBOURHOODS AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN WALSALL

Community centres, associations and leaders were identified as playing a key role in trying to develop community cohesion. Joint initiatives and activities such as litter picks and open days at places of worship help to break down misconceptions about particular faiths and community groups. Walsall appears to have held a number of community events in recent years which have been very well received. Their impact on community cohesion should not be underestimated.

BUILDING A BETTER WALSALL

Interviewees talked about wanting a cleaner environment with more bins, more green spaces, the grass verges left unmown to encourage wildflowers and tree-planting. Specific suggestions included E-bikes in the city centre and more cycle paths. Concerns were raised about single-use plastics, with shopkeepers and business owners needing to be mobilised to take more responsibility in addressing this. It was felt that the libraries served a valuable role and should not have been closed. In addition to providing much needed access to books and computers, helping to address digital poverty, they also provided a central point for communities to come together. Without a specific location, as a focal point, it was difficult for local residents to feel any sense of identity with their local area.

Interviewees wanted more community-related activities and meetings to strengthen community cohesion. The need for more youth centres was raised. It was suggested that action needs to be taken to improve the health of the community in relation to tackling obesity and encouraging people to exercise. Concerns were raised about the availability of junk food and levels of illiteracy in the town, with free adult education needed to address this.

The interviewees identified a range of things that would make their community a better place to live, many of which would require Government action rather than a local response. These included banning zero-hour contracts, introducing free healthcare for all, banning single-use plastics and a clear strategy to help homeless people. The suggestions that could be taken forward locally included promoting volunteering programmes, providing youth community support workers and interpreters and monitoring of food hygiene in local restaurants,

COVID-19

The impact of Covid on the lives of individuals and their communities has been immense. Individuals have been isolated from their friends and families; they have been bereaved; they have lost their businesses and employment and have not had access to their community networks. There has been suspicion about the information being published by the Government, increasing the levels of mistrust of statutory bodies. Individuals and communities will need a great deal of support to re-build their confidence in connecting within their communities, having spent so long with restricted social contact. However, the pandemic also showed what can be achieved when communities come together. Individuals that had talked about divisions also shared examples of community groups and organisations coming together to co-ordinate the provision of support to everyone in their areas. Community associations and groups had the trust of local people and were able to quickly mobilise local businesses and volunteers to deliver a wide range of support. It was felt that these resources could continue to be harnessed on an ongoing basis to address other challenges faced within Walsall.





CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest that whilst individuals may choose to identify with a particular group of people based on ethnicity, culture, religion and values, they are not choosing to live a segregated existence. They enjoy being part of a multi-cultural society and have positive relationships with their neighbours. The interviewees in our research saw the value of joining in local community events and welcomed opportunities to come together for local festivals and celebrations.

Prior to the pandemic, Walsall had implemented programmes locally to strengthen social cohesion and integration. Our research suggested that whilst some individuals found their first few years in Walsall challenging, people's experiences had significantly improved over time, though it was not always clear whether this was because of changes for the individual (for example, learning to speak the language) or changes within the community (for example, an increase in individuals from a wider range of ethnic backgrounds). The majority felt a sense of belonging and a sense of responsibility to try to improve their neighbourhood. They were proud to be citizens of Walsall.