UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY COHESION AND SUPPORTING INTEGRATION IN WALSALL

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BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

In 2019 Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council invited the University of Birmingham to work with a group of individuals, who either live or work in Walsall, to develop a research project to explore community cohesion and integration in Walsall. The objective was to inform the work of 'Walsall for All', a project led by the Council in partnership with a range of other local organisations, aimed at developing more inclusive communities in Walsall. Walsall was chosen as one of five areas to work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to develop a bespoke local integration plan in line with the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper published in 2018.

Walsall for All aimed to innovatively equip, support, engage, enable and empower diverse individuals and organisations to work together towards better communities.
The research was conducted as a community research study, led by the University of Birmingham within the Community Practitioner Research Programme (CPRP), which brings together academics, practitioners and local individuals who co-design and co-deliver research in local communities. Local practitioners and residents were trained in community research by academics from the Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRiS) at the University of Birmingham and its established community researchers, and supported to conduct the study in their communities.

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

The researchers would like to thank all the individuals that gave their time and shared their experiences in the research.

THE POLICY CONTEXT

Walsall has an estimated population of 285,000 (ONS 2019 Mid-Year Estimates). The population has seen a 7.8% increase over the past decade with most of this increase in the under 16s and over 65s age groups. This population growth is expected to continue over the next two decades. The age of the population is geographically divided, with the urban, more deprived areas of the borough being generally younger.

The borough is ranked the 25th most deprived English local authority (out of 317) according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation statistics from 2019, placing Walsall within the most deprived 10% of areas in the country. The central and western parts of the borough are typically much more deprived than eastern areas, although there are pockets of deprivation across the borough. Only two-thirds of working age residents are in employment. 29.9% (1 in 3) of children aged under 16 are living in low-income families, higher than the national average of 20.1% (HMRC, 2016). In January 2017 20.8% of primary school pupils were entitled to free school meals compared to 14.5% nationally and 19.1% of secondary school pupils compared to 13.2% nationally (DfE June 2016).

In relation to ethnicity the area is culturally diverse. The 2011 census gave a breakdown of 76.95% White British. Of the remaining 23.05% described as other ethnicity, 66.07% were Asian (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi), with 10.26% Black, with the remainder describing themselves as multiple ethnicity or white other. Just under 20,000 individuals have settled in Walsall under the EU Settlement Scheme which has impacted on the ethnic make-up of the borough. Walsall also provides a home for approximately 400 asylum-seekers and refugees each year as part of the asylum and dispersal system and has welcomed people from across the world including the Middle-East and Central and West Africa. There is an existing settled and itinerant Traveller population and some recently settled Roma communities originating from Central and Eastern Europe. The increase in population is largely the result of internal migration, with an estimated net gain of 1,161 individuals per year between 2008 and 2018.

THE POLICY CONTEXT

In terms of children and young people aged up to 17, the proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups was 37.4%. The lack of ability to speak English can be a significant barrier to integration. According to 2011 census data, 7% of Walsall's population did not speak English as their first language and the 2017 annual School Census showed that 24% of pupils in state-funded primary schools had English as a second language.

The Government published the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper in March 2018 setting out their ambition to build integrated communities where people, whatever their background, live, work, learn and socialise together based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities. Their Integration Areas Programme focused local and national resources on delivering this objective, with each area taking tailored action to address their specific challenges. Walsall was one of five areas chosen to take part in this programme and produced a local integration strategy 'Walsall for All' setting out the steps they would take to break down barriers to integration. The strategy recognised that work needed to be undertaken with both indigenous and minority communities and those with any protected characteristics that may experience barriers and disadvantage. Four priority areas were identified: 1) connecting across communities, 2) young people learning and growing together, 3) working and contributing together, 4) living together.

This research project provided an opportunity to seek the views of local residents in relation to their personal experiences of integration and community cohesion within Walsall and progress towards the vision of the borough as an integrated, empowered and inclusive community where people from all backgrounds come together to celebrate what they have in common, feel safe and valued, and have opportunities to fulfil their potential and contribute to the growth of Walsall.

METHODOLOGY

1. Community Research Training

Participants on the training programme are supported to complete three units of study focused on 1) understanding social research and qualitative research methods, 2) conducting social research and 3) analysing qualitative data and reporting. Within the training programme participants develop and undertake their research supported by mentors. The programme enables participants to acquire a qualification in social research (the training is accredited by the Open College Network), develop their skill sets and enhance their job prospects. A robust co-production methodology is thought to produce high quality insightful research which could enhance the integration work underway in Walsall, leading to more sustainable long-term outcomes as well as the potential to inform policy making at a wider level.

A bespoke community research programme was developed for Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council, aimed at engaging with individuals and groups considered to be part of 'segregated' communities living in Walsall. The intention was to train a cohort of 12-14 individuals (community members and practitioners) in social research methods, supporting them to identify and address in their research, social policy issues related to community cohesion and segregation. The aim was to generate recommendations based on the research findings which, with the support of the appropriate stakeholders, could improve community integration in Walsall.

A highly successful recruitment programme by Walsall MBC resulted in 20 individuals participating in the first two sessions of the training in 2019. The introductory days focused on understanding the role of qualitative research, creating the tools to undertake the research project and reviewing and learning interviewing skills. Working together the group developed a topic guide, identifying the specific areas to be explored. A third session took place to practice interviewing skills and develop a sampling strategy. Each of the individuals was allocated a mentor (an experienced community researcher) whose role was to support them through the project, providing a mentoring session after each of their interviews, to reflect on their practice and the learning from these. Following the completion of three interviews by each of the participants the plan was to hold a data analysis training session to support the community researchers to understand how to analyse their findings and present them in a consistent format.

Unfortunately, shortly after the third workshop Covid-19 restrictions were introduced. Although the mentors attempted to maintain contact with their mentees, the majority of the participants were unable to continue with the project. As with many other people during this difficult time, individuals experienced illnesses, job losses, being furloughed, bereavements and having to undertake home-schooling. Those individuals who were able to continue with their interviews were asked if they would be willing to undertake additional interviews and a number agreed to do so. However, as a consequence of these difficulties, the number of interviews completed was significantly below the planned figure. This report details their findings and recommendations.

2. Community Researchers

The group of community researchers was diverse in relation to age, gender and ethnicity and included local residents and members of staff from local voluntary organisations as well as the statutory sector. They brought a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment as well as a wide range of expertise and personal experience and knowledge of the different areas within Walsall.

3. The Research Framework and main questions

The research was developed by the participants of the training programme and focused on seeking the views of individuals that live and work in Walsall. Following training, each of the project participants was asked to identify the individuals to interview. The original intention had been that these interviews would be undertaken face-to-face. When it became clear that this would not be possible due to the Covid restrictions individuals were asked to undertake their interviews on Zoom or by phone. These interviews were recorded so that individuals' actual words could be captured. Where desirable and possible they were conducted in the interviewee's original language. Transcriptions were then translated into English. Following each interview community researchers completed a self-reflection form which was then discussed with their mentor at a mentoring session. On completion of the three interviews by the newly trained community researchers they were asked if they would be interested in undertaking more interviews. In total 15 interviews were completed by three community researchers in 2020.

The questions covered in the topic guide included five key areas: experience of living in Walsall; settling in, feeling at home and belonging; community safety and divisions (perceptions and experiences); community initiatives/self-help activities; building a better Walsall together.

In addition, Walsall MBC asked if additional questions could be asked about the impact of Covid-19 on the individual, their family and their communities. The research project received ethics approval from the University of Birmingham.

4. Sampling, data analysis and its limitations

The aim was to interview residents from across the four localities in Walsall that reflected the diversity of the area in relation to gender, age, ethnicity, religion, employment, socio-economic status and length of time spent in the UK. The community researchers shared their contacts and potential interviewees to try to ensure that there was no duplication or absences of specific groups.

The profile of three of the interviewees is not known. Of the remaining twelve,, the interviewees included seven men and five women. The youngest was 29 years old and the oldest 57. In socio-economic terms four were self-employed, three were faith leaders, three were in receipt of benefits and two were students. They resided in different neighbourhoods in Walsall including Caldmore, Pleck, Yew Tree, Butts, Chuckery, Bloxwich and Palfrey. Interviewees 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.

The validity of the findings is inevitably influenced by the profile of the interviewees. The original sampling strategy devised by the team of community researchers included a number of groups that were not reached within the final group of 15 including individuals of retirement age, young people, the LGBTQ+ community, recently arrived asylum seekers and individuals with disabilities. Although there was a cross-section in relation to ethnicity, there were no interviewees from Eastern Europe and no white people who were born and remained in the town.

The individuals that took part in the interviews were all connected in some way to the existing community networks. This raises the question as to whether individuals who are not connected in this way would have had similar views in relation to life in Walsall.

The aim was to ask qualitative (open) rather than quantitative (closed) questions, seeking the views of each individual. 15 interviews were completed, however, the full data, including transcriptions, was only available for 12 of these. The findings from the 12 interviews were analysed using a systematic/thematic approach, identifying the topics which were raised in each interview and their frequency. Although this enabled key recommendations to be identified, these are primarily based on qualitative findings. Whilst the number of interviews was limited it is felt that the cross-section of individuals interviewed gives validity to the findings.

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

The key findings that emerged from the research are detailed below.

Experience in Walsall

Experience in the Community

All of the interviewees were largely positive about living in Walsall. Those that had moved from larger cities seemed to particularly enjoy being in a smaller, quieter and less populated town. An individual who had moved from Birmingham said: "I have found it to be much more pleasant and peaceful". A man who came from the Yemen pointed out:

"Now my wife, my children and my parents are all here; we all together enjoying living in Walsall. The diversity and different community make me happy. Most of the residents are very kind and welcoming people. I have friends in London. I recommended them to move from busy town (London) to quiet and clean town (Walsall). I am proud being here and I wouldn't swap anywhere else".

However, four individuals talked about the difficulties they faced when they first arrived. A man from Somalia, who came to the UK in 2016, described it as "A difficult time for me personally and also for the British people. The election debate was focusing on the issue of immigration and taking back the border. The Brexit referendum had taken place in June of that year and people of a migrant background were scared". However, his neighbours were kind and very helpful and he went on to say that "Walsall is my home now; I love it". A woman from Syria stressed an increase in welcoming attitudes in Walsall over recent years: "I was struggling to adopt the new environment for three years, for that time the Walsall people were not welcoming people as they are now, and diversity was not strong and considerable as its now…….After long journey finally I learned, adopted and mixed with people in Walsall, I understand the language, I got friends".

Aspects enjoyed about the community

Walsall was described as an area that provided good opportunities for its residents. The majority of interviewees talked about enjoying the peace and quiet of the small-town lifestyle, perhaps reflecting the areas where they had previously lived. The affordable housing was particularly welcomed. The benefits of living in the area included good public transport and road networks, with easy access to Birmingham and other parts of the UK. Many of the attractions and services that were mentioned such as restaurants/take-aways, shopping centres, retail parks, leisure centres, places of worship, libraries and easy access to schools, job centres, banks and public services can be found in any town. However, as one interviewee pointed out, "Physical proximity of all services and infrastructure makes Walsall a particularly convenient place to live: You can complete and serve all your needs with an hour, for example, I spent only 40 minutes to visit council to pay council tax and visit Barclays and come to Tesco for shopping which is amazing, I think this is the only city you can do all your services in that small time".

There were a number of attractions that were specific to Walsall including the Museum, the Art Gallery and Walsall College. The town was described as having a large number of green spaces, including Walsall Arboretum, the Four Seasons Garden, the canal network and a number of parks, creating a "beautiful environment". A number of individuals that had moved to the town described their pride in the place.

Networks in the community

Most interviewees appreciated a good level of social capital in their communities. Those that did not have close family in the UK had succeeded in building strong relationships with neighbours, colleagues and friends as one individual mentioned: "I have friends but not family but I consider my friends as family as they were always there for me in my time of need". However, building these relationships had taken time. One of the participants had moved to Walsall to be closer to her elderly mother. When both her mother and her brother died within the year, she struggled to cope without a network of friends. She reached out on social media, asking if someone would have a coffee with her just to have a chat, to no avail. Two years later she still describes the people in her area as acquaintances rather than friends, hoping that at some point she will be able to develop deeper relationships.

Interviewees talked about a wide range of contacts within their local community. In addition to relationships with professionals such as GPs, dentists, opticians, Council workers and teachers, individuals had developed connections and friendships at places of worship, community organisations, colleges, the local shops, fitness clubs, the leisure centre and through volunteering activities.

Settling in the community and the sense of belonging

Ideas abut community

The interviewees had clear ideas about their concept of a community. As one individual defined it: "A community is a social unit with a common commonality such as norms, religion, values, customs, or identity. Communities may share a sense of place situated in a given geographical area, nationality, language, culture or ethnicity shared with a country, village, town, or neighbourhood" They also highlighted the significance for individuals of belonging to a local community: "It's important for every person to have a sense of community".

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 common language, shared norms and values, religion and culture. A woman who had come to the UK from Somalia talked about people understanding each other more since they speak the same language and share the same culture. She revealed: "I feel happiness when I am with my community".

.A number of people talked about feeling more comfortable with people from their own backgrounds. It was recognised that this would result in 'divisions' within communities, but this was not seen as a problem as long as the whole society is inclusive. Specific community groups helped to give a clear sense of identity, however, the majority of interviewees who talked about this were keen to stress that they were also part of the wider community in Walsall. One individual who had become a British citizen saw this act as marking a clear change in his thinking in relation to this: "I don't feel any particular group or any particular community in Walsall; all the communities are same to me. Since I became British citizen, I am representing everyone in Britain and all the people are my community, no difference between Sudanese, Somali, Polish and British. I am here to promote unity and cohesion but before I get the citizenship, I was Sudanese".

Community was considered to be a group living within the same area, with common/shared interests. As one individual described, "There can be one wider community even if there are different ethnic groups with different languages. There will be a common interest such as the environment, being able to afford to live or people having jobs". Individuals talked about how your community can give you a sense of belonging and a feeling of safety and security. This might come from a community based around your country of origin but it might also be from the neighbourhood and community that the individual has moved into. There was a sense of co-operation and helping each other within communities in Walsall: "Before the lockdown every Saturday we had community gathering at Soora centre for only ladies. For that meeting we use to share information and to help each other; sometimes we collect small contribution money to support those recently arrived in Walsall and very poor families in our community". It was suggested that even by being a good neighbour one contributes to the local community: "I believe it means to contribute to the community in any capacity, whether that may be through working in the community or simply being a good neighbour to someone who lives in the community with you".

Relationships with neighbours

The majority of interviewees spoke very positively about relationships with their neighbours, meeting up at school events and the local park, helping each other out, looking after pets, picking up mail, collecting children from school, lending tools, and giving gifts at festivals, Christmas and New Year. The following example was given: "I have very nice and welcoming neighbours, every time they contact me, they ask me, are you alright? They bring me food, they invite me to their parties, they love me and I love them. Similarly sometimes I bring shopping or gifts for them". Football was seen as a shared interest, along with a range of festivals and celebrations including Saint Patrick's Day, Eid ul Adha, Eid ul Fitr, Easter and Christmas.

Only one person said that he did not have a relationship with his neighbours, because they all have dogs and he is scared of them and would not go near one. One woman described how she had arranged a coffee morning in her street but only one person came along. Some interviewees described fairly casual rather than established relationships, just saying 'hello' and having a brief chat in the street, rather than visiting each other's homes. It was mentioned that people often work away, making it difficult to form relationships and connections locally.

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: "The pandemic impact....currently there is no relationship and contacts among neighbours, everybody is worried and feel loneliness in his house. Even we cannot visit each other if someone ill, because of the spread of the virus".

During the pandemic people's ability to connect with their neighbours was inevitably affected by their personal circumstances. Before the pandemic mothers often met others at the school gates and developed close relationships, whilst those who worked away spent less time in their locality and were less able to participate in community events and activities and develop their networks. Going forward it will be interesting to see what impact Covid will have had on people's connections in their local communities. With more people working from home this might provide more opportunities for individuals to get to know their neighbours. In addition, many streets have created WhatsApp groups during the pandemic which have helped to connect people.

Relationships amongst communities

Relationships between communities were largely described as positive with people being supportive of one another; however, some concerns were raised about divisions between some communities. One of the faith leaders said: "It looks as though communities live beside one another rather than together. There is a clear separation between who engages with each other". Another noted: "Some community groups get on well, some don't" but he was unwilling to go into detail in relation to this. One person talked about the hostility that a group of travellers faced when they moved into the area.

It was recognised that language played a key part in people's ability to relate to each other. A number of organisations such as the SOORA (Social Orientation and Relief Association), the Afghan Community and Welfare Centre, the Palfrey Community Association and the Nash Dom Centre were described as leading on community cohesion. People value the fact that Walsall has become a multi-cultural city in recent years. They talked about the work of community centres, community leaders, community events and volunteering activities, such as litter picks in the parks that bring people from different communities together. However, there were significant concerns about the fact that the work of connecting people ceased during lockdown. People were anxious to see these opportunities re-established as soon as possible.

Barriers for socialisation

The majority of people reported that they never felt lonely. One person went so far as to say: "I don't feel any barriers...I feel like home sweet home". However, as stated above, it was recognised that the ability to speak English makes a big difference in developing relationships and therefore opportunities to learn the language are critical. One community leader said: "The free English sessions in Soora community centre help us a lot because the adult people afraid or shy to attend the Walsall college classes with other people who may be better at English but Soora provides individual sessions to help the adult people, especially the refugee and those arrived recently".

Covid-19 has had a huge impact, particularly for those who live alone, those who had recently moved into the area and those who have been furloughed or lost their jobs as reflected in this account: "I never feel lonely living in Walsall before. I had good friends in Walsall; we play together, eat together and exercise together. Unfortunately with the Covid-19 impact we lose all that good relationships. Now I feeling lonely for everything, eating alone, exercising alone, nowhere to chill out, just stay home and far away from others, very boring life". Another participant also underlined the feeling of loneliness and boredom: "Yes, I feel lonely now because no work, no play, nowhere to go, just me and my children stay home. Sometimes I go to the park for doing exercise, but the lonely exercise I feel boring and come back home suddenly". One interviewee pointed to barriers in socialising remotely or having access to different types of services and infrastructure: "Now I feel lonely because of the lockdown, I just cook, eat and sleep. I tried to study online but I don't like and I don't understand the online education system. Sometimes internet connection on and off, sometimes battery died. I am feeling bored; staying at home 24 hours is boring".

Community Safety and Divisions

Problems and tensions in the community

Whilst the majority of interviewees said that they had not witnessed any tensions or problems between different groups in the community and did not feel unsafe, three described having personally experienced a hate crime and discrimination. An Arab man was struck on the shoulder and verbally abused when entering a supermarket. He sought the assistance of the security guard but did not report the matter to the police.

A Pakistani woman returning home from the Mosque accidentally cut someone up in traffic and was then followed home. The four men got out of their car and surrounded her car, verbally abusing her. The individual concerned also described the experiences of her neighbour whose home was burgled by someone who appeared to know her routines. Having been disturbed when she arrived back home early, they returned the following day and ripped up the family's passports and took various items of no value. The family believed that it was a revenge attack rather than theft and thought that one of their neighbours was responsible. The family left the area immediately.

The Pakistani woman also experienced negative attitudes towards her children. A child in one of her son's classes had been told by his parents that he should not be friends with him because of his race. She felt that the school had been supportive and handled the situation well.

Another individual said that he had not experienced discrimination personally but he had witnessed this in public transport areas.

One interviewee that had lived in Walsall for his entire 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, though he recognised that this might be because he no longer falls within that age group. He felt that young people need to be taught to get on with each other. Facilities where community groups come together such as community centres and gyms had helped but many of these had closed down.

A number of people described anti-social behaviour in their area; street gangs related to drug dealing and individuals being abusive; drug paraphernalia left lying around and people drinking alcohol on the street which can feel threatening. One faith leader described how the older people in her community felt unsafe, though this was often a perception rather than being based on actual incidents. However, some homeless individuals in the area had been directly threatened. It was recognised that there are concerns about knife crime amongst young people, with individuals carrying knives. It was said that "Young residents carry knives: to protect themselves or to gain respect from peers. Others decide to arm themselves only because they believe that other people in the school or local neighbourhood carry guns or knives, but we provide the community awareness raising and advices to prevent knife crimes and support the police to tackle". Another faith leader talked about black mothers having particular concerns about their sons feeling the need to protect themselves in this way.

Although interviewees were not specifically asked about the response of the police, a number commented on this. Their speed of response and their actions in dispersing individuals were commended by one community leader. However, one of the faith leaders had contacted the police on a number of occasions because of an individual shooting at their windows with an airgun. This was treated as a nuisance rather than a threat or a risk to individuals' safety. A black interviewee talked about how he had faced discrimination 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 between the two groups by faith communities had helped to improve communication. The same individual talked about how discrimination is constant but "You learn to blend in with it". He felt that the Black Lives Matter demonstrations had encouraged people to reflect on their own experiences and had made people realise that things need to change: "It is there, for the Government to address". However, he was not sure what would get institutions to address racism and discrimination: "Some say that you cannot change things unless you are part of it, but it is not easy to get into decision-making positions. You need to open the door". Another participant shared the same view, saying: "There is so much discrimination going on in institutions. It is the reality for us".

Community initiatives/self-help activities

Nearly all of the interviewees were keen to be part of community initiatives and events, though some that were self-employed said that work commitments often made attendance difficult. Some individuals were interested in attending community cohesion events, training sessions and workshops. Community meetings, events 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 expressed an interest in finding out about other people's cultures. The local mosques and churches were described as being integral in local communities, providing opportunities for worship but also the chance to connect with others and work together to meet the needs of the local community. A number of the faith leaders talked about the importance of their inter-faith work in breaking down misconceptions. Eid celebrations were valued across communities with the provision of free food being particularly appreciated. Schools were also described as having a role in community initiatives.

Sport and fitness events, groups and competitions, particularly football games, were seen as an opportunity for individuals to connect with each other but also to improve people's health and well-being. Weddings and family parties were popular in some community groups. The benefits of volunteering opportunities were mentioned by a couple of participants as in the following quote: "I like volunteering activities, volunteering increases self-confidence, provides healthy boost to your self-confidence, self-esteem, life satisfaction and combats depression".

A number of people suggested that more events and activities for children would be welcome, though it was also mentioned by one person that didn't have children that most activities are targeted at families. Schools provide opportunities for individuals to come together. Individuals that are on their own can find it more difficult to become part of local networks.

Some individuals were aware of neighbourhood watch groups in their area which gave people the opportunity to come together in relation to a shared issue, community safety. Activities that bring people together to address the needs of their local community, such as litter picks, were particularly valued.

One faith leader made the point that people need community activities that develop their body, soul and spirit particularly as so many people now spend so much time indoors on social media.

Building a better Walsall

Suggestions

When asked what could be done to make their area better, a substantial number of interviewees talked about wanting a cleaner environment with more bins, more green spaces, the grass verges left unmown to encourage wildflowers to grow and tree planting. Specific suggestions included the introduction of E-bikes in the city centre and more cycle paths. Concerns were raised about the need for a reduction in 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 in the community and should not have been closed:

"First, the government closed all the public libraries in Walsall except the main library in Walsall city centre and I don't understand why the council doing that because the community and the population are increasing and public services are decreasing. This is increasing the stress and loneliness of individuals. The libraries provide access to more sources of print and digital materials to support reading and inquiry, learning and offering support for whole families to improve reading and literacy skills, and confidence. I would recommend reopening all the libraries to improve the education and self-studying".

In addition to providing much needed access to computers as well as books helping to address digital poverty, the libraries also provided a central point for communities to come together. Without a specific location, such as a library or a community centre, as a focal point, it was difficult for local residents to feel any sense of identity with their local area.

To strengthen community cohesion, interviewees wanted more community-related activities and meetings. The needs of young people were particularly to the fore with the need for more youth centres being raised, as alternatives to spending time on social media. It was suggested that action needs to be taken to improve the health of the community by reducing obesity and encouraging people to engage in exercise activities. Concerns were raised about the availability of junk food and the lack of food hygiene in local restaurants. There was recognition that illiteracy remains a problem and that free adult education is needed to tackle this. It was felt that more volunteering activities would help to counteract the effects of stress, anger, and anxiety. Following on from the earlier comments about anti-social behaviour, one person suggested there should be a ban on drinking alcohol in parts of the town.

One of the faith leaders felt that there is a lack of a vision for Walsall. He believed that as a result of high business rates high street stores and restaurants have closed taking away the things that people want in their local area. At the time of interview Debenhams was still open and the interviewee was thankful that it had stayed, however this store too has now closed. The same participant felt that there needed to be places in the town centre that people could enjoy, where they could meet with friends then access the amenities, spending money in the process. "If people cannot spend money in Walsall they will spend it elsewhere, particularly with cities like Birmingham in such close proximity". He recognised that part of the town has been developed but he felt the town centre itself is not appealing. He was keen to see

Walsall developed into "A town that people can feel good about, with a clear plan developed by the Council in conjunction with local people, for how it should look in order to prosper going forward". An individual that had moved to Walsall from a London borough described how the Council where she lived previously had given 5,000 people the chance to give their views on what needed to be done to improve their area. Rather than bigger projects, what they wanted could be dealt with relatively easily and at low cost. They asked for better street lighting in certain areas so that they could feel safer at night. The Council responded and local people felt that they had been genuinely listened to. As the interviewee stated: "You need to listen to the people then take action".

Hopes and dreams

The interviewees identified a wide range of things that would make their community a better place to live, a number of which would require Government action rather than a localised response. These included banning zero-hour contracts, introducing free health services 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 training on public speaking, providing youth community support workers and interpreters and monitoring of food hygiene in local restaurants. One suggestion that perhaps could be viewed as more of a dream than a hope was Walsall FC in the Premiership!

One of the faith leaders described a community as "A group of people who really look after each other and want to see each other succeed". Whilst it might be possible to achieve this in a street or a part of the town, the challenge is expanding this to the whole of Walsall.

COVID-19

During the interviews individuals were asked to describe how Covid-19 had affected their lives, their family and their community. The impact on individuals and the whole community was very clear. The participants stressed the economic impact of the pandemic with people losing jobs and closing their businesses: "Many people have lost their jobs or seen their incomes cut due to the Coronavirus crisis. Unemployment rates have increased across the country, particularly in Walsall. Most small businesses in front of or around Saddlers Centre in Walsall have been closed down.

Many people I know, including my relatives, shut down their small business and stay home without job........This pandemic affected the whole community and badly affected the low-income families and large households in Walsall". Another participant stressed the particularly difficult situation of self-employed people, small businesses and ethnic minorities:

"The Covid-19 affected my business. I am self-employed in the city centre, however after Covid-19 affected the community my business closed down; all my stuff is at my home. Not only me, the emergency lockdown affected most of the small businesses in the area. My friends also closed their small business. Now I stay at home waiting to recover from the restrictions or ease off the emergency lockdown. The Covid-19 lockdown has had a disproportionate economic impact on self-employed people and small businesses and the ethnic minority communities are more likely to be self-employed".

The multiple impacts of the pandemic were reflected in one participant's experiences: "Covid-19 affected me, friends and entire community very bad. I will list how Covid-19 affected me personally and the pandemic destroyed my plans: 1) I lose my job, 2) I lose my marriage and my wedding, 3) I lost my education, 4) I lost my plan to establish business, 5) I disconnected from my friends and relatives".

One of the faith leaders talked about the traumas for families of not being able to be with relatives in hospital, particularly for those whose relatives had died, without them being present. They then had to face the additional trauma of either not being able to attend their funeral or having to do this without the usual ways of celebrating an individual's life, following the usual rituals and comforting one another. This situation also placed faith leaders under a great deal of stress.

Another faith leader questioned the accuracy of information that is being disseminated by the government, particularly in relation to the virulence of the virus. His main concern was the impact on the economy: "There is only so far you can push people. When people are angry they will rise up.....Having an income is what matters most to the majority of people. Companies are making people redundant and it is resulting in broken lives. It has had a massive impact on communities and relationships. People are scared to have a conversation". However, there was recognition that the sense of fear has calmed and even at the height of the pandemic "There was a sense of unity, a spirit of helping others. It was a really positive experience".

This sense of people coming together across communities was also mentioned by other participants. This was particularly evident in the cross-community initiatives that were developed to support all individuals living within a particular area.

""Some people have dropped the divide, not just caring for their own community. They have tried to help others, or have come together with other organisations to support across the community". "i never felt that one community wanted to just support their own people". Faith and community leaders described how organisations came together to co-ordinate the provision of support, sharing donations and volunteers. They also tried to provide personal support to one another.

A number of interviewees said that only time will tell what the long-term impact will be of the pandemic: "We will only know the impact when people come back and we see whether people have dropped out of things and whether people's thoughts and feelings have gone backwards".

Discussion

Segregation

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 experience. They enjoy being part of a multi-cultural society and have positive relationships with their neighbours. However, it has to be acknowledged that the lack of white participants in the research means that there was not an opportunity to explore the views of individuals who had lived in the area prior to individuals from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds moving into Walsall. The one white interviewee had moved into the area from a London borough with a high minority ethnic population so it was not possible to examine whether there was any sense of isolation of the white majority from minorities in urban zones, as suggested by Kaufman and Cantle. Whilst the interviewees described having friends from across ethnic groups they did not state whether this included individuals from the white population.

Integration

Integration in British society has become increasingly to the fore in debates around immigration raising questions about identity, shared values and social cohesion. The Unity out of Diversity research project found that ethnic majority and minority groups in the UK share a wide range of common values, aspirations, attitudes and sense of responsibilities. Perceived barriers to integration included negotiating local customs; lack of English skills; discrimination, racism and prejudice; community segregation; and social class. Schools, sports and community centres were seen as important channels to encourage integration. In relation to policy implications the above-mentioned project suggested that local authorities and national government play a crucial role in creating spaces and opportunities for communities to come together.

Discussion

This could include investing resources in community centres but also recreational activities (e.g. street festivals, neighbourhood activities) involving local communities and organisations. The interviewees in our research also saw the value of joining in local community events and welcomed opportunities to come together for local festivals and celebrations. English language skills were considered to be crucial to integration. It was suggested that funding should be earmarked to ensure local authorities provide language training for migrants. The individuals who participated in our research perceived the acquisition of language skills as essential to successful integration within their neighbourhoods.

Community cohesion

The concept of community cohesion, established in the UK in 2001, has become a key part of understanding diversity and a mainstay of race and community relations policy and practice. Community cohesion programmes attempt to build understanding between different groups and to build mutual trust and respect by breaking down misconceptions and stereotypes about the 'other'. The emphasis is on the commonalities between groups rather than the differences. The faith and community leaders interviewed in our research recognised the importance of coming together and developing a greater understanding of each other's faiths. They had worked in partnership in response to the pandemic, trying to help all members of the community.

Belong- The Cohesion and Integration Network, a charity with the vision of a more integrated and less divided society, has produced interim findings from their 'Beyond Us and Them' research project exploring community, connection and cohesion during coronavirus. They focused on six local authority areas, including Walsall, which prior to the outbreak of coronavirus, had implemented programmes locally to strengthen social cohesion and integration. One of the topics included in the research was neighbourliness, asking participants how much they feel they belong in their

Discussion

neighbourhood, how much they trust people in their neighbourhood and how much they feel a personal responsibility to try to improve their neighbourhood. Most of the respondents in the study reported average to high levels of neighbourliness, higher rates than in parts of the country not engaged in the programmes. The research also explored attitudes to migrants. Again, the results were more positive in the six local authority areas than in other parts of the country. Belong suggested that this might be due to less negative media coverage about migrants and the imminence of Brexit. Belong also looked at how much people were participating in actions aimed at improving their local area and society in general. They found that respondents from the six areas were much more likely to engage in such activities than people from other places.

Our research showed similar positive findings, with interviewees describing a sense of responsibility for their neighbourhoods and an interest in engaging in voluntary work. Although some individuals found their first few years in Walsall quite challenging, people's experiences had improved over time; however, it wasn't 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 backgrounds).

CONCLUSIONS

1. Residents' experiences of living 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, valuing the Arboretum, the number of parks and the canal network. In addition, individuals enjoyed living in a diverse, multi-cultural community. In relation to facilities in different parts of Walsall there were concerns about the closure of the local libraries. They had provided a wide range of facilities, not just the loan of books. These libraries were often individuals" and families' only opportunity to access computers and printing facilities so closing them reinforced digital inequalities. The libraries also provided activities for children which were accessed by those from the poorest households.

Some individuals found it difficult to settle in the first couple of years of being in the area. In the absence of interviews with newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees it is impossible to know whether people's experience would be any different now from that of the interviewees. Individuals who arrived during the Brexit referendum discussions and immediately afterwards clearly faced particular challenges, with hostility towards migrants being fuelled by some of the political parties. 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 were more comfortable accessing courses provided at community centres rather than educational establishments. However, the difficulties described by a white Irish woman moving into the area showed that difficulties in settling and developing relationships do not necessarily relate only to BAME individuals.

CONCLUSIONS

2. Relationships within communities

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

The majority of the individuals that had come from other countries continued to look to individuals from their homeland and with the same ethnic background to provide a sense of belonging. They felt comfortable with people with a shared language, values and experiences; however, this did not seem to be at the expense of feeling part of the wider community. 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.

3. Attitudes to community safety and divisions

The majority of interviewees reported that they had not witnessed any tensions or problems between different groups in the community and did not feel unsafe. However, three individuals described their personal experiences of discrimination. It was interesting to note that none of the individuals who had suffered hate crimes had contacted the police. The research did not explore the reasons for this. Two individuals talked about institutional racism. It was concerning that one individual felt that discrimination was something you had to 'just blend in with'. Both individuals felt that things would only be changed when organisations become more representative of local communities, particularly in senior positions. Whilst divisions amongst certain communities were mentioned by a number of interviewees, they appeared to be reluctant to go into details. It is difficult to know whether this was because it is more of a perception than a reality or whether individuals were anxious that they might be perceived as being discriminatory if they identified specific community groups.

CONCLUSIONS

4. 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, open day events at places of worship and the dissemination of key messages all help to break down misconceptions about particular faiths and community groups and help to create unity. They also provide a wide range of much-needed support. Celebratory events such as Christmas and Eid can be enjoyed by all members of the local community, particularly if free food and entertainment are provided. Walsall appears to have held a number of community events in recent years which have been very well received. There is a danger of seeing such events as expendable at a time of budget constraints. However, the impact they have on community cohesion should not be under-estimated.

5. The impact of Covid

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 and faith networks. There has been suspicion about the information being published by the Government increasing the levels of mistrust of statutory bodies and individuals not receiving the vaccinations that should prevent people becoming seriously ill with Coronavirus. Individuals and communities will need a great deal of support to re-build their confidence in connecting within their communities, having spent more than 12 months living in isolation. 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 within 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is suggested that Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council take the following actions:

01 Engage the community associations, organisations and centres in initiatives that require the support and involvement of local people, for example the Covid-19 vaccination programme, consultations and the roll-out of new initiatives.

02 Support ESOL programmes run by local community associations to encourage the development of language skills across communities.

03 Ensure that all parts of Walsall have spaces and opportunities for communities to come together, investing in community centres and recreational events/festivals involving local communities and organisations.

04 Move away from short-termism; identify long-term funding for initiatives that have been successful to ensure sustainability, rather than implementing a series of short-term projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

05 Work with local residents to identify their needs and concerns as well as finding solutions. Recognise that individuals within local areas will share many of the same issues and concerns and want to be part of identifying the solutions.

06 Build on the local initiatives that were established to support communities during the lockdown, harnessing the enthusiasm and passion of volunteers.

07 Explore whether suggestions from residents of ways to build a better Walsall could be taken forward.

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