



# Research Report



## Community Cohesion

Prepared for: Luton Borough Council

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# Community Cohesion

**Prepared for: Luton Borough Council**

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## 1 Executive Summary

Luton Borough Council is currently conducting reviews on the issues of community cohesion and fear of crime. As part of this review 5 focus groups were undertaken in areas identified in a recent community safety survey, as having higher than the Luton average levels of residents expressing a fear of crime. In that same survey, it was found that in one of those areas, there was a high number of people saying that they get on well with people from different backgrounds, in another an average number and in the other three, a low number of people said that they got on well with people from different backgrounds, therefore it was likely that a diverse range of opinions would be found on Community Cohesion by going to these different areas. The areas selected were Saints/Biscot, Lewsey, Farley, Bramingham and Stopsley.

Overall fifty nine residents took part in the research. Residents represented a wide demographic spread in terms of age and ethnicity.

### 1.1 Community Cohesion

Most respondents do not understand the term 'community cohesion'. Some feel that it refers to 'people getting on together', a 'lack of tension' and 'not feeling uncomfortable'. Generally, residents prefer terms such as 'community spirit'. This tends to reflect better the situations experienced by residents within their locales. Respondents felt that there were no disadvantages to cohesive communities and that the benefits were self evident, the most important being no aggravation allowing residents to feel safe.

The current levels of cohesion are high within individual communities when 'community' is defined by a shared interest/belief. As such, there are strong communities based around religion, sport, gender, ethnicity and age etc. However, cohesion is not as strong if 'community' is defined by geographical location. Whilst, in most cases, there is no conflict between communities and they are able to exist 'side by side', they are not always actively mixing to create cohesive communities. Additionally cohesion issues occur when one community's beliefs/actions are perceived or seen to conflict with another's.

Areas with higher crime levels, such as Farley Hill, were seen to be the least cohesive. However, issues such as crime can cause cohesion across groups that would not normally interact by providing the shared interest in reducing the problem.

### 1.2 Barriers to cohesion

A number of issues and barriers were identified that prohibit community cohesion in Luton, almost all of which, can be attributed to the largest identified barrier: the comfort of seeking 'commonality'. Respondents feel that human nature is to seek the companionship of people most like 'yourself'. Shared interests, namely religion, ethnicity, age, gender etc. all leads to people feeling more comfortable with others as they sense a commonality. Respondents find that they gravitate towards people who are at similar life-stages or who understand their cultural preferences.

It is the desire to seek commonality that has led to the overall lack of cohesion across Luton. Respondents who do not feel 'accepted' in their locales are likely to bond with

other minority groups and as such greater divisions occur between the minority groups and the majority. Indeed, it is the creation of these communities that for some, is the cause of the tensions. White British respondents in particular, can be resentful of other ethnicities, creating communities around their cultures in Britain. They talk about high streets in areas not having any 'English' high street stores but being dominated by Polish and Asian grocery and clothing shops. They acknowledge individual's needs to retain their cultures but feel that 'British' culture is being lost in the process. Issues surrounding ethnicity, religion, language and opportunities are heightened within this context. The most fractious of which is religion and the building of mosques. Some respondents suggested that cohesion can only exist when one 'group' of people are not outnumbered by any other.

The communities which are formed around 'common' interests and are causing barriers are listed below. It is important to note that respondents do not feel that all residents within such groups are causing issues to cohesion but that problems often arise from individuals within such groups:

- **Ethnicity;**
- **Religion:** issues surrounding this generally fall into four main categories:
  - The creation of a religious building in the place of one that was previously used to benefit more than one section of the community;
  - The parking issues created by the attendance at religious buildings disrupting residents in the immediate area;
  - The perceived support of minority religions over White British ones to 'aid cohesion'; and
  - The general distrust because of world tensions over Islamic extremism.
- **Age:** issues expressed here are:
  - Older respondents feel that younger residents no longer know the value of community and so are unlikely to adhere to such a concept;
  - Older respondents fear younger residents seeing them as the perpetrators of ASB and crime; and
  - Many activities are run by generational groups so it is rare that opportunities to interact across ages exist [e.g. 50+, young mums, youth groups].
- **Class/Social deprivation:** There was a common belief that more affluent areas were less likely to experience cohesion issues compared to deprived ones. Respondents felt that residents in affluent areas were more likely to have respect for the area and ensure that it was well maintained. Not all respondents agreed with this view though, some felt that greater cohesion existed in deprived areas. However, many residents in deprived areas did feel that funding to regenerate the areas to a better standard was the only way to help improve cohesion in their locales;
- **Wealth/State of the economy:** The current recession and lack of employment was contributing to issues around deprivation, as well as causing many to search further afield for work limiting the time available in their homes and communities to provide them with the opportunity to contribute. Respondents felt the competition for work has caused strained relationships between ethnic groups when it is felt that one is 'taking' the jobs of the other;

- **Schools:** Whilst some areas have clearly benefited from having a mixture of ethnicities attend, other respondents feel that those that are predominately one ethnicity are not as good. Some respondents who form minority ethnicities in their areas cite racism and bullying of siblings and children in schools. Further, some feel that although cohesion is encouraged by schools that external influences are stronger and many children are discouraged from integrating at school;

Other barriers to cohesion included: “the selfishness of people today”, the busy lifestyles of many, being unable to predict how someone will respond if you offer help/assistance, the sometimes negative media images portrayed of Luton, the social preferences of different cultures [for example the divide alcohol consumption causes in regards to socialising] and perhaps most significantly, difficulties with communication.

All respondents accept that cohesion is facilitated by speaking English and that people who live in England ‘need English to be their first language’. Although English language lessons are freely available and many are aware of them, the fact that communities are still primarily based on ethnicity means that for many there is little need to learn the language. It was suggested by some that residents should accept that older generations of some ethnicities may never learn the language, a point which irritates others. Further, the existence of schools based wholly on a single ethnicity has meant that some children are lacking exposure to the English language.

### 1.3 Achieving community cohesion

Generally respondents feel that it is an important goal and would hope that community cohesion could be achieved but not all are convinced that it can be. This is in terms of both individual areas and Luton as a whole. Even areas that feel that they are already cohesive [Stopsley and Bramingham] admit that they see themselves apart from other areas so are not cohesive across wards.

The importance of improving community cohesion was felt to benefit safety most of all.

In order for community cohesion to be achievable the correct environment would need to be created. Residents would need to remove pre-conceptions and have an open mind and money would be required in order to regenerate areas, create community centres and fund activities and education initiatives. Ultimately though, it was felt that being involved in making a community cohesive was ‘down to the individual’ and there would be people who wanted to and those that did not.

Respondents did make recommendations to achieve cohesion, for example:

1. **Provide young people with role models;**
2. **Integrate activities** by including all communities not holding activities based on individual interest communities;
3. **Carefully consider the locations for cohesion activities**, for example some strongly feel utilising faith groups would help but others would find this off putting, for these respondents, having neutral locations and organisers would be the better way to address cohesive activities in areas;
4. **Local people should be employed to run activities**, the key point being ‘employed’;

5. **Improve current facilities**, particularly parks [clearing graffiti, dog litter etc and providing family activities there];
6. **Enforce the use of the English language;**
7. **Improve the media view and perception of Luton;**
8. **Create more jobs in local areas;**
9. **Regenerate socially deprived areas;**
10. **Utilise schools as the primary conduit to integration;**
11. **Ensure the Council listens to the residents and actively consults them;**
12. **Educate people on the differences between cultures and religions; and**
13. **Illustrate the statistics of 'stop and searches' in local papers.**

## 2 Introduction

### 2.1 Background

Luton Borough Council is currently conducting reviews on the issues of community cohesion and fear of crime. There is a Commission on Community Cohesion and a Scrutiny Task and Finish Group on the Fear of Crime. While the reviews are being carried out separately there is a degree of overlap between the two. Considerable quantitative information exists on both subjects for example the Place Survey 2008 and the Community Safety Survey 2009 which together represent the views of 2,000 residents.

There is now a need to supplement the quantitative information with qualitative research additional to the Residents and Partners workshops that have already been undertaken for community cohesion issues and information gained from the Fighting Against Crime Together (FACT) meetings and the SoLUTiONs Crime Summit 10<sup>th</sup> November 2009. The qualitative research was commissioned to explore further the issues already raised and also to obtain views from the groups that were under-represented at the workshop: those residing in the most deprived areas of Luton, those from Asian backgrounds and also younger people.

To further supplement this, Councillors will be meeting with residents to talk about the Fear of Crime.

### 2.2 Methodology

In order to undertake the research required the council commissioned five focus groups with the expectation of 50 residents attending. The recommended wards for the focus groups were Saints/Biscot, Lewsey, Farley, Bramingham and Stopsley. Luton Borough Council funded and organised the venues in consultation with BMG.

To ensure that a range of opinions were sought, residents from five areas of Luton were selected to take part in the focus groups. The areas selected were identified in a recent community safety survey, as having higher than the Luton average levels of residents expressing a fear of crime. In that same survey, it was found that in one of those areas, there was a high number of people saying that they get on well with people from different backgrounds, in another an average number and in the other three, a low number of people said that they got on well people from different backgrounds, therefore it was likely that a diverse range of opinions would be found on Community Cohesion by going to these different areas. Areas of high deprivation were also targeted.

As the council wished to hear the genuine views and concerns of residents who would not normally come along to a public meeting the groups were recruited face to face in the street in close proximity to the venues.

All attendees received an incentive of £30 to thank them for their time and to cover out of pocket expenses such as petrol/childcare/parking etc.

The Council will be carrying out consultation with young people aged 10-19 separately.

All the groups were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed the findings of which will be presented in this report.

## 2.3 Demographics

The following table illustrates the demographics of the attendees to the focus groups. The total number of respondents in each group is listed in brackets next to the location. Overall, **fifty nine** residents took part in this phase of qualitative research. Three of the respondents did not participate in focus groups but took part in telephone interviews. Of note, one of the respondents who took part in a telephone interview was a young Bangladeshi woman who lived in Bramingham. Bramingham is inhabited by predominately residents of White British ethnicity. As 11 of the 12 respondents in this group were White British it was agreed for this respondent to conduct her interview separately.

**Table 1: Demographics**

Demographics		Saints/Biscot [7]	Stopsley [13]	Bramingham [12]	Farley Hill [16]	Lewsey Farm [11]
Gender	Male	4	9	5	5	6
	Female	3	4	7	11	5
Age	16-24	1	2	2	5	2
	25-44	4	6	8	8	4
	45-59		2	2	1	1
	60+	2	3	2	2	4
Ethnicity	White	1	9	11	6	7
	Asian	6	1	1	6	0
	Black					4 [3 African Caribbean and 1 white Irish]
	Mixed and Other		3 [1 Black African, 2 Polish <sup>1</sup> ]		4 [3 Polish and one White Turkish]	
Time in area		Majority lived in area all their life. The Asian elder had not but had been in area for 45 years.	The Polish respondents have been here 2 years, the rest 10 years+ - most all their life.	6 less than 10 years; 5 14years+	Half the group have resided in the area less than 10 years with 5 residing under 5 years; the remaining have been there between 12-48 years.	Majority lived here all there life, shortest time lived in area was 15 years.

<sup>1</sup> Please note the Polish respondents actually reside in High Town but this was the nearest focus group being held to their locality.

## 2.4 Reporting

The report has been divided into two separate but complimentary sections: Community Cohesion and Fear of Crime. Where possible, findings are illustrated with direct quotations from respondents. In most instances the gender, ethnicity and location is provided, where it is not it is due to the moderator being unable to recall the ethnicity of the respondent.

Please note that due to the location and presence of 16 very vocal respondents in Farley Hill, the transcribers were unable to provide a transcription for this group. As such, there will be fewer direct quotes from this group.

## 3 Community Cohesion: What it means and the benefits

### 3.1 Introduction

This section examines what community cohesion means to the respondents. It also explores the benefits and disadvantages of a cohesive community.

### 3.2 What does community cohesion mean to you?

Initially all respondents were asked, what does the term 'community cohesion' mean to you. The vast majority did not understand the term and in most cases the question was met with silence until someone spoke first admitting they were unsure what it meant.

*'I don't understand what you're talking about ... it sounds like some kind of spin.'* [Female, Black Caribbean, Lewsey Farm]

*'What is cohesion? Is it living together?'* [Female, White, Bramingham]

*'I don't have much clue what cohesion is...'* [Female, White, Stopsley]

This would then lead to other people admitting they did not understand either and then the groups putting forward suggestions: people getting on with each other; lack of tension; not feeling uncomfortable; supporting each other and helping out; solving problems together; close knit and integrated.

*'A mixed community that knows each other and has a say?'* [Male, Asian, Farley Hill]

Some respondents found the term to be 'forced' and 'too formal', stating that it implied that 'you WILL get together'. Respondents much prefer what they see as more everyday terms like 'community spirit', 'separate communities coming together' and 'showing each other respect':

*'Just use plain English – do you get on with each other... with your neighbours?'* [Male, Black Caribbean, Lewsey Farm]

*'Sometimes they've chosen to use words that people don't understand, like diversity... or cohesion... they use them so they can gloss over the surface.'* [Male, White, Lewsey Farm]

Indeed, respondents in the Saints/Biscot area appeared quite put off by the term community cohesion and the definition – they preferred to think of it as 'co-operation within the community'.

Despite the preference for the term 'community spirit' and for respondents to view this as the same as cohesion, it is apparent that the two are not synonymous. Respondents cite examples of cohesion as being respondents getting together and helping each other out, having community spirit and of feeling safe. For them, they see

this as illustrating the cohesive nature of their area[s]. Indeed, with the exception of Farley Hill and the depth interviews<sup>2</sup>, all groups felt their area was cohesive. However, as discussions unfold, it becomes apparent that areas are not cohesive.

*'I'm not racist but I've found there's a lot more Asians moving to the estate because it's probably a nicer area and I don't think they do integrate in the same way. They're not any trouble in any way but they tend to keep themselves to themselves.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

*'It's just their nature to mix with their own. They're pleasant but you wouldn't see them at your barbeque.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

*'I live on a busy road, so therefore you're not meeting. Years ago I used to know everyone on the street. Now they've moved out and you don't get to know them. I used to know everybody in the street when I was younger, with my mum and dad. There isn't that community.'* [Female, White, Stopsley]

Not only did the groups illustrate that there are cohesion issues but they also determined that cohesion was viewed in quite a narrow manner. Despite the definition provided explaining that cohesion was about recognising the rights to equality across a number of differences such as age, gender, disability, how much money you have etc the discussions predominately revolved around cohesion based on ethnicity and religion. Even if opinions commenced talking about other issues such as deprivation or education, these ultimately led to discussions on ethnic divides.

Occasionally respondents referred to differences in age or opportunity.

*'I have a neighbour across the road who's in her late forties and she sometimes pops over to say hello. I'm the only one with a nine year old so we don't have much in common. I'll say hello but that's it.'* [Female, White, Bramingham]

*'People don't really want to get involved. If you moved to another area where you felt that it was defined by your age or occupation you would feel comfortable.'* [Female, White, Bramingham]

The current levels of cohesion and barriers to cohesion are discussed further in later sections.

### 3.3 The benefits of community cohesion

When asked to describe the benefits of community cohesion and explain who would benefit, the majority felt that this was self-evident, particularly following the definition that the moderators were asked to read [please refer to the topic guide in the appendices]. It would mean that everyone would get along, there would be no aggravation and people would feel safe:

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps due to the ability to be more open and frank during a one to one interview than in a focus group where a respondent might feel the need to 'temper' their responses.

*'There's no aggravation, everyone gets on, everything's calm and quiet.'*  
*[Male, White, Lewsey Farm]*

In Stopsley they were most forthcoming about the benefits and suggested: improved communication leading to stronger relationships; feeling safer, peaceful and happy; the opportunity to learn about different cultures and backgrounds and accepting more about who and what you are:

*'People accept who and what you are more, and know the background behind it.'* *[Male, Asian, Stopsley]*

Farley Hill respondents suggested that cohesion in communities would bring down crime levels and there would be no hatred or racism.

The majority of respondents do not feel that anyone would lose out from a cohesive community, in fact a few commented that this was a 'daft question'. However those that thought people would lose out were those that thought:

- 1) That in order to make a community cohesive, one culture/group would lose out to another. For example, respondents spoke of mosques being built in place of other community buildings. They feel this was done to allow Muslims to feel 'more at home' but has meant that others feel less so; OR
- 2) If someone had a discrepancy with someone they would not be able to 'see it through'.

## 4 Community Cohesion: Current levels of cohesion on communities in Luton

### 4.1 Introduction

This section outlines how cohesive respondents find their 'geographical communities' to be.

### 4.2 Saints/Biscot

Ethnicity and religion is THE issue around cohesion in this area, please refer to later sections for further detail. The Asian respondents in the focus group feel the area is cohesive but the White British respondent feels isolated and the Asian respondents who took part in telephone interviews feel that the area is predominately Asian and would benefit from a more mixed environment:

*'If the community was cohesive it would be good for me and my child...he could play with other children they do not come around.'* [Female, Asian, Saints/Biscot]

*'It is just an Asian area.'* [Female, Asian, Saints/Biscot]

One younger Asian woman explains that she sends her children to a school 10 minutes drive away because it gets better results. However, after the discussion she tells the moderator that she did this to escape the strictness of the local school which is almost exclusively Asian. The children attend a very mixed school and she wants them to celebrate Christmas and Divali as well as Eid. However, that individual stated that they never attend any local events or clubs in this area because the Asian community is too "tight and watchful".

One male Asian respondent feels that the police target Asian men and that he is often stopped and asked where he is going and what he is doing. He feels if he was doing something wrong that would be acceptable but feels that the 'random stop and searches' are not random.

*'Sometimes you feel as though you're just being targeted, let's say, by police, because you're Asian. Obviously these records show it, the amount of times I've just been stopped, and I've seen no reason to be stopped. Just, 'Where are you going, why are you driving at this time of night, why is this?' and there's no reason for it. I'm fully insured, fully taxed, fully licensed to be on the road, everything. There are no issues whatsoever, there is nothing that will trigger off to the police why I should be stopped. You know, sometimes I'll say, 'I understand.' They can stop you for a variety of reasons. When you ask them, it's just a standard stop and search.'* [Male, Asian, Saints/Biscot]

The respondents in this group did not cite specific issues around gender or disability. Sexuality is not seen as a problem as respondents stated that it "is not a gay area" apparently. Respondents feel that people from their area had as good opportunities as

anyone else in Luton and it was not seen as a 'bad' area. The job prospects for residents were viewed as being poor all over Luton, not especially so in Saints/Biscot. Respondents were not aware that people from outside Luton earn more than those who live in the town.

### 4.3 Lewsey Farm

Generally respondents in this group felt that residents get on in the area.

*'People on this estate, within reason, they get on. Obviously everyone can have a tiff with someone... We have these people who are names on the estate.'* [Male, Black, Lewsey Farm]

Quite a few people in the group recognised and knew each other and there appears to be a good community feeling. However, there were no Asian respondents in this group and there appears to be serious tension over the perceived growing number of Asian Muslims in the area and in particular the role played by the development of a new mosque [please refer to the later section on religion].

There is an irritation that Lewsey Farm has a stigma that people view it as a 'rough area'. So much so that some respondents admitted they do not put their address on job applications.

The group did not get the idea at all of tensions between people who work in Luton (and are richer) and those who live in Luton. They disagreed with this idea and felt that most people in Luton go to London to make money because there is no work in Luton full stop:

*'There is hardly any work in Luton since Vauxhall's gone, Awn gone, Renault's gone, Chrysler's gone – there's no work here.'* [Male, Black, Lewsey Farm]

In terms of gender issues, there was felt to be none with the group feeling that women had a strong voice on the estate 'don't cross women on this estate!' They also felt there were no issues with disability or sexuality stating that the area is tolerant. However some felt that transgendered people might be targeted though others disagreed.

### 4.4 Bramingham

White British respondents in Bramingham felt that they already have a cohesive community, particularly in comparison to the neighbouring area of Marsh Farm. They felt that there were few problems and that people were respectful.

*'I think we already have it. This part of the town is pretty good. You only have to come in here and you'll see all sorts of races and everybody gets on.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

It was also thought that this area was more tolerant than others, as one respondent suggested, his gay neighbour would probably not be treated so well if he lived in another part of Luton:

*'I think my next door neighbour's gay. He's a drag act. The first time I met him was on a Saturday evening and he was in his car. He disappears off with his make-up bags and kits and everything. That isn't an issue to me. I think there are areas in Luton where he wouldn't feel comfortable in doing that. I think there are areas he'd get hammered for it.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

They feel that the area is quiet, 'nice', has conveniently placed facilities and 'looks new'. For them, these factors make residents feel safer and have peace of mind. They believe this is what draws people to the area. They note that the area is not 'cheap' to live in and that in order to enjoy the area you have to be able to afford to pay the premiums. By paying such premiums, they believe this encourages people to be more respectful of property, the area and others.

*'You have to pay a premium to live in this area and so most people are working and quite respectable.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

The Bangladeshi respondent from Bramingham did not feel the area was cohesive. She felt it was 'ok, about 60%'. Whilst there were no obvious issues she does feel like an outsider.

#### 4.5 Stopsley

Similarly to Bramingham, respondents in Stopsley felt that their area was cohesive. Many commented on the quiet 'nice' area, the high level to which the council maintained 'the village' and the easy access to 'the essentials'. The majority have lived in the area all their life and would not consider moving. They feel the area has a good mix of ethnicities and feel that everyone gets on well:

*'All the kids down the road, all the parents knew each other. If you went away, someone would look after your pet. There was a lot of mix. Asian Muslims. Always had barbecues at someone's house. So I don't see that problem.'* [Male, White, Stopsley]

However, they also mention [like Bramingham] how people tend to 'keep to themselves':

*'I think it's quiet and minds its own business. That goes right the way through the village. Most people like it that way. People don't get involved in community things these days. They do in Europe. I go to villages and towns quite a lot, and the whole town is involved in things. Not here.'* [Male, White, Stopsley]

*'I think different groups get together. I've noticed that you've got to talk to people to get to know them. They tend to stick to their own group.'* [Female, White, Stopsley]

They also mention how the minimal activities that are run are organised by certain groups of people as opposed to having an inclusive nature, so events are run for 'over 50's', 'women only' etc and they feel this obviously defeats the aim of cohesion.

*'The organised stuff is going to be based on a certain group of people. It's hard to get something happening with different ages and sexes.'* [Male, White, Stopsley]

Interestingly, what the whole group did agree on was that no-one was happy about the permanent traveller camp in the village. All could cite examples of burglary and anti-social behaviour originating from the camp and all felt helpless about the situation. On the other hand it was allowing all other community groups and ethnicities to bond together based on the common 'view' of the travellers.

The Polish respondents said that they daily suffer racist abuse around High Town where they live.

*'When they see me in college. Use bad words. A very bad Polish word. The same as 'bitch'. I don't know why.'* [Female, Polish, Stopsley]

They feel isolated and the only people they currently socialise with are also minorities such as the Black residents across the road and the disabled gentleman who they assist with his shopping. They share food and their native celebrations with each other.

#### 4.6 Farley Hill

Respondents in Farley Hill felt cohesion was 50/50. They admitted that it can be quite bad but it is not as bad as it was. Many felt it was a close knit community and that people are often felt to be an outsider, even those who have lived in the area for more than three years. The deprivation in the area is said to contribute to the high level of crime: 'druggies, fights, racist fights, alcoholism and gangs' [further information is detailed in the section 'Fear of Crime'].

Many feel that other residents in Luton associate Farley Hill with racism but the respondents feel that you have a different perception when you come to the area to live. It is not clear why they think this as whilst one respondent stated:-

*'I am the only white spot amongst all these flags'* [female, White, Farley Hill]

Others talked frequently of gangs formed on ethnic origin and the fighting that occurs. They mention that the area was historically known to be inhabited by 'skinheads' and members of the 'National Front' and believe that this causes tension between older residents and newer ones from other countries. For example, whilst the majority of the group is run with people focusing on crime and anti-social behaviour, the subject of cohesion is often ignored and moved back to crime. As all respondents find the crime levels to be high and unacceptable this common ground clearly made the conversations less tense. However, upon discussing the wishes for cohesion in 10 years time and one Asian respondent wanting a mosque in the area, the group quickly became divisive and a 'heated' debate began. In fact, this area clearly illustrates the majority of barriers listed in future sections.

Similarly to Stopsley, there is one cohesion point that the majority of the group agree upon, that Asian residents integrate but that Turkish people do not. This has caused some groups to bond but ostracised Turkish residents. The one Turkish respondent

replied that this increases their fear to become involved and they worry that they will be deported.

## 5 Community Cohesion: Current issues and barriers prohibiting community cohesion in Luton

### 5.1 Introduction

Generally, whilst respondents initially state that their areas are cohesive, overall discussions identify that this may not be the case; the following section examines the current circumstances in Luton which are prohibiting community cohesion.

### 5.2 The comfort of seeking 'commonality'

Respondents feel that the largest barrier to cohesion and perhaps arguably the most obvious was the view that human nature is to seek the companionship of people most like 'yourself'. Shared interests, religion, ethnicity, age, gender etc. all lends to people feeling more comfortable with others as they sense a commonality. As previously cited in section 3.2 respondents find that they gravitate towards people who are at similar life-stages or who understand their cultural preferences.

*'It's familiarity, isn't it? You know that you might have something in common with them. You want a balance.'* [Female, White, Bramingham]

For example, Asian respondents do not feel uncomfortable or sense that there are any cohesion issues in Saints/Biscot area but the white respondent felt very ostracized:

*'You feel like an outsider, uncomfortable because there's so few of us now... Being the only white one here, it is different for me... People don't talk to you around here like they would if you were a neighbour. You don't get spoken to apart from 'Hello' and 'Goodbye' – they don't make friends.'* [Female, White, Saints/Biscot]

Similarly, the White British respondents in Bramingham did not feel there were cohesion issues but the participating Bangladeshi respondent did:

*'I sometimes feel like an outcast. Am I the only brown face here? It is not a problem, but I do feel left out but maybe they do not feel the same....some people just stare and when I look at them they look the other way so they do not even give me the chance to smile.'* [Female, Bangladeshi, Bramingham].

In summary, the participants believe it is the desire to seek commonality that has led to the overall lack of cohesion across Luton. There is 'community cohesion' if one defines a community by a shared principle/trait or desire such as ethnicity, religion, age, having children of the same age, enjoying the same kind of music etc but there is not cohesion of a community if community is to be defined as a political geographical area such as a ward.

Indeed, it is the creation of these communities that for some, is the cause of the tensions. White British respondents in particular, are resentful of other ethnicities creating communities around their cultures in Britain.

*'You talk about cohesion, they don't want it. They create their own country where they come from. If you're in America you're American, no matter where in the world you come from. In this country they just bring everything with them.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

*'They are making their mark...'* [Female<sup>3</sup>, Lewsey Farm]

*'They are making a statement that they are here.'* [Male<sup>4</sup>, Lewsey Farm]

The participants talked about high streets in areas not having any 'English' high street stores but being dominated by Polish and Asian grocery and clothing shops. The participants acknowledge individual's needs to retain their cultures but feel that 'British' culture is being lost in the process. Issues surrounding ethnicity, religion, language and opportunities are heightened within this context. The most fractious of which – according to some of the participants - is religion and the building of mosques.

However, Asian respondents in Saints/Biscot talk of the division between themselves and the growing Eastern European population which respondents believe to be Polish. This population is said to be creating its 'own community' within itself by speaking in their own language and frequenting Polish owned shops.

*'We speak our language and they speak theirs. They have all the agency jobs, food shops, they speak Polish – it might not be Polish, some Eastern European language.'* [Male, Asian, Saints/Biscot]

So whether it is White British respondents aggrieved over Asian communities or Asian communities over Polish, there is a clear message from the Focus Groups that residents are forming self-contained communities based primarily on ethnicity.

This section continues to examine the key areas that are, on the one hand, drawing people together and on the other, are keeping them apart.

### 5.3 Ethnicity

Ethnicity can be defined in many ways but for the residents involved in the Focus Group process it is established by the colour of someone's skin or by the language they speak. Saints/Biscot and Bramingham residents involved in this process both clearly identify the isolation felt by residents who form the ethnic minority in an area. The Bramingham respondents understood that being a minority in any area would be unsettling. They noted that living in mixed ethnicity areas was not an issue per sé, it was only an issue when one ethnicity was significantly outnumbered by another.

*'A lot of people don't feel comfortable being around people who aren't the same ethnicity or religion.'* [Female, White, Bramingham]

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<sup>3</sup> Ethnicity is not recalled

<sup>4</sup> Ethnicity is not recalled

*'In Bury Park I would be a minority...maybe we'd feel what they feel like here.'*  
[Female, White, Bramingham]

This issue is particularly pronounced in Saints/Biscot where White British respondents feel outnumbered by Asian residents. The group in this area estimated that 95% of Saints/Biscot was inhabited by Asian residents.

Most respondents in Saints/Biscot area said there was no inter-racial tension between the various Asian communities. However, the Asian respondents in this group were keen to state that people should not make broad generalisations about Asians as it depended on family, how children are brought up and the values that are instilled into them that will factor into how a person behaves. They also stated that it can depend on the street you live on, for example Mansfield Road residents were said by respondents to be much more mixed and friendly than others. This is something that is clearly an issue that needs resolving as respondents of other ethnicities are of the perception that Asian residents do not want to mix with others and only want to create Asian-only communities. This in itself is causing tension:

*'The racial extremism thing is because once you get one group who is very extreme and want everything in their favour, then obviously you're going to get another who want it the other way. If that community was a bit more integrated, which is what they don't want to do [Asians] then it wouldn't be a problem.'* [Male, Black, Lewsey Farm]

In fact, some of the Lewsey Farm respondents feel that all other communities except Asian ones integrate. There is a general feeling across most respondents that ethnic communities exist side by side but do not mix.

In order to overcome the fear of something different, some respondents recognised the importance of exposure. One young respondent in Stopsley spoke of how his grandfather was always particularly racist and how this worsened as more Asian residents moved into the area. However, one day he suffered a fall and his lifeline failed to work, his Muslim neighbour noticed and between herself and her son assisted the man and waited for the ambulance and his family to arrive. She sat and talked with him and their friendship began. Since then, the grandson speaks of how his once fearful grandfather can now walk past the local mosque and talk to his neighbours without reservation or fear:

*'My granddad used to be quite racist. He's from Blackpool. He moved down here in the sixties. Both his neighbours, either side, were Muslim. He was racist because he wasn't used to it. His views of them changed though, so views can change.'* [Male, White, Stopsley]

## 5.4 Religion

The focus groups highlighted that religious differences are clearly an area for tension between White British and Asian residents, particularly in Saints/Biscot, Lewsey Farm and Farley Hill. In Saints/Biscot the White British respondent felt that the tensions were getting worse because of 'world tensions' around terrorism but the majority of Asian respondents in the group would not respond to this comment. Although the Asian elder

in the group did state that matters have got worse in the last decade with the rise in Islamic extremism which has – in his view - made the white population more distrustful of Asians in general. They spoke of Muslim families ‘keeping eyes on their sons’ to keep them from extremism.

Further, young male Asian respondents said that while they had not experienced anyone actually saying anything there was a feeling of distrust/unrest/uneasiness:

*‘I’ve never had a race issue. I’ve never felt that, but since all this 9/11 stuff and that, you just really feel out of place. You think, ‘Well, hold on, should I be doing this, should I be doing that?’ Am I just going to get picked on? Are people going to say things? I was actually at university at the time when that happened, and I remember there were a lot of American students with me at the time. The whole thing just changes. One minute they’re okay with you, you’re friends, and the next minute it’s like, ‘Hold on a minute, you’re a Muslim, aren’t you?’ [Asian, Male, Saints/Biscot]*

*‘It’s got to a stage where people look at me. I’m Hindu, not Muslim, but people give me a look like, ‘You’re one of them.’ They just assume straightaway.’ [Male, Asian, Stopsley]*

Being of a different religion was not limited to only Asian residents feeling ostracised. The White British respondent from Saints/Biscot felt that not sharing the same religion as the Asian residents in the area marked her as an obvious outsider and had led to her feeling isolated:

*‘Religion is another think that’s against you – if you’re not a Muslim they don’t really like you. It makes it very difficult in this area. The young people are worse than the older ones – they have more of a chip on their shoulder... Teenagers will come up to you and say ‘What are you doing in this area? I’ve had that said to me...It’s quite intimidating. My grandchildren, if they go over the park, someone will spit on the slide before they can go down it... they’re probably 9 or 10.’ [Female, White, Saints/Biscot]*

Respondents commented that in Lewsey Farm there is growing tension and irritation by both White British and Black Caribbean respondents over the new building of a mosque in the area, particularly as it was built on the site of the old health centre.

*‘The council sold the building – they took that building away which served all of the community and they gave it to one part of that community, one religion and no one else gets to use that building. Now there is an issue because the building is too small for what they need – the parking is ridiculous. When they come to pray, it’s not people from the estate, there’s people from Luton, Dunstable coming up here because it’s easier to get to this mosque. I’ve found people parking on my own driveway! ... Everyone could go to the health centre – it was wrong of them to take it away and give it to one lot of people.’ [Female, Black, Lewsey Farm]*

Prior to the above incident, respondents did not feel that race and religion had been a major issue, now they felt it was 'getting there', with the greatest irritation being felt by those who live near the mosque:

*'It is a mixed area but there are more Asian people moving up this end because of the Mosque... You get people knocking along the road asking if you want to sell your house because they want to move near the Mosque...'*  
[Female,<sup>5</sup> Lewsey Farm]

*'...I think it's true because when I was a kid [he is 18], there wasn't lots of Asian people but now there are gangs of youths, in groups of 5 or 10... They pick up on me being an EMO and they pick up on that. They intimidate you – like a statement – if we can pick on that one, maybe there'll be no more.'*  
[Male, White, Lewsey Farm]

*'...I don't think it is just clothes. It's the way they are within their groups – it's not gangs or stuff like that, but it's border line...'* [Male, White, Lewsey Farm]

In fact, the group felt that issues were beginning to occur between Asian and White British teenage boys. Similarly, in the Farley Hill group, when an Asian respondent feels that community cohesion would be assisted in the area if a mosque was built, other respondents become highly agitated. They feel that any development in the area should be for the benefit of the whole community and not just one group – for them, building a mosque in the area would create even greater tension.

There is also irritation about the parking at the Hindu Centre on Hereford Road, particularly when there are weddings held there. The group again notes that the building used to be a community venue for all when it was the Friendship House and now it is for Hindu's only:

*'A place where we all used to go for Brownies and Girl Guides and everything else used to be there.'* [Female, White, Lewsey Farm]

Others are aggravated by the lack of parking at the Catholic Church on Clydesdale Road which is said to cause issues on Sundays. Respondents were annoyed that the Council built flats for older people on the land around the church instead of leaving it as a car park.

Conversely, one Asian respondent spoke out about the parking issues at mosques, particularly the one on Selbourne Road. He felt that for cohesion to occur people needed to understand that Friday prayers were important and that for two hours on a Friday lunchtime there would be parking issues on the industrial estate. For him, the complaints from businesses and users of the estate about the parking was hindering cohesion:

*'If you understand why someone is doing something, a bit like you said, if there's cohesion and there's understanding, you're not going to get issues....'*

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<sup>5</sup> Ethnicity not recalled

*They're only going to be here for a short time, they're not causing a problem. They just want to pray and go, that's it.'* [Male, Asian, Saints/Biscot]

One major cause of irritation by respondents, particularly in the Stopsley group, was that, whatever someone's culture or ethnicity, they should embrace English traditions and festivals. It was not felt that everyone should compulsorily celebrate festivals, but there was a general feeling that Christian festivals in particular, were being 'pushed aside' so as not to 'offend' other religions and this was causing resentment.

*'Like when my dad sends Christmas cards, a lot of Muslims don't because it says 'Christmas' on it. It's England. It should be the English season. Non-Christian people should celebrate Christmas the way English do. It's the way it is. I think you should celebrate every festival and not say it should be changed.'* [Asian, Male, Stopsley]

*'It stops people being cohesive by trying to change Christmas into winter this and that. It angers people.'* [Female, White, Stopsley]

The general feelings of irritation around religion appear to fall into four main categories:

- The creation of a religious building in the place of one that was previously used to benefit more than one section of the community:

*'It seems that they are quite happy to do things for people who are religious, but what about the young people, what about their community...'* [Female, Lewsey Farm<sup>6</sup>]

- The parking issues created by the attendance at religious buildings disrupting residents in the immediate area;
- The perceived support of minority religions over White British ones to 'aid cohesion'; and
- The general distrust because of world tensions over Islamic extremism.

## 5.5 Age

Asian respondents across the groups generally feel that younger Asian residents who were born in Luton mix better than their parents' generation as they speak fluent English and have grown up in a more mixed community. Indeed, the older Asian man in Saints/Biscot says he is unaware of cohesion as he only sees his family and goes to the mosque:

*'He just gets involved with the mosque, with other men, with prayer, he never goes out.'* [Younger Asian Male translating for older Asian Male, Saints/Biscot]

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<sup>6</sup> Ethnicity not recalled

However, some White British respondents - particularly older residents - think that Asian teenagers are the most aggressive and disrespectful and the least interested in getting on.

Some respondents feel that there are generational issues over community; they believe that older residents are more likely to know the value and create one compared to younger respondents. This opinion was discussed most prevalently at Lewsey Farm.

*'We came down from London and we formed the community, so we've always had a community. We were young when we came, but that community changes over the years. But there's still lots of people in our neck of the woods who still live together in quite a good community – good neighbours, though you can still get the bad apple in it.'* [Female, White, Lewsey Farm]

*'It seems the gap between people of my age [60] and people of your age [teens] is widening and it's a terrible shame that there isn't a place where you could come and be comfortable and we could all chat and be doing the same things and enjoying the same things together.'* [Male, White, Lewsey Farm]

They feel that this situation is not helped by the lack of a community venue that would allow residents to meet new people and socialise:

*'There are less and less places on Lewsey Farm for people to get together... We need more places like that on this estate.'* [Male, Black, Lewsey Farm]

## 5.6 Social deprivation

Providing investment to an area to remove the deprivation was seen by many respondents as key in helping community cohesion. Respondents generally cited the more socially deprived areas as being least cohesive: Hockwell Ring, Marsh Farm, Farley Hill and Bury Park, whereas respondents residing in Stopsley and Bramingham felt their areas were affluent and cohesive:

*'There was a party on Saturday, my next door neighbour's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday and she'd invited everyone in the cul-de-sac. There were people who had been there since the houses were built and it was really good. When people have an interest in their property then you have people like us.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

A few respondents disagreed that socially deprived areas were less cohesive:

*'I came from a council estate when I was a kid. One thing people didn't do is sh\*t on your own doorstep. I think there's more community spirit on council estates. If I broke down with my car I'd have five or six people helping me. If I had the same thing here I'd find it hard to get anyone to help me.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

*'You're more community minded when you have less money. The more money you have, that's where the one up-man-ship starts.'* [Male, White, Lewsey Farm]

In fact, it was the 'one up-man –ship' that was seen to be causing cohesion issues in the more affluent areas like Bramingham. Bramingham respondents spoke of how some residents prefer to call the area 'Barton Hills' because it is more likely to be associated with an affluent area than Marsh Farm, the neighbouring estate. In reality, only Bramingham Wood divides the two areas but it was felt that some people formed a 'snobbery' of the area making it difficult for the two places to be cohesive. This is particularly the case due to the stigma and negative image associated with Marsh Farm.

*'Some people think they are above everyone else, that their poo doesn't stink....they used to call it Spam City because the houses were so big but they couldn't afford to put anything in the cupboards.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

Indeed, the Bramingham respondents spoke of people's desire to better and improve themselves. They discussed how individuals strive to upgrade and provide better quality of lives for each other.

*'We mix with our own, we draw to people who are like us. I came from a council estate but you decide you want better. You tend to mix with people who think the same way as you do. If you're paying three quarters of your income on a mortgage the last thing you want is the council to build a load of houses around you.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

Consequently, such respondents were most likely to be irritated by those who did not seek to improve, but merely were seen to be 'sponging off the state':

*'When you have half the population working and paying taxes and then you have people who are just freeloading it's going to lead to resentment, it's as simple as that. There are children who are twenty-five and twenty-six and they don't work and why should they when they can get however much in benefits.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

Some felt that assisting people was not a cohesion issue but more to do with society nowadays. A few respondents felt that generally people are more selfish and unlikely to assist others which has led to a decline in community spirit. Others felt it was due to the unpredictable response that people might give if you did help them:

*'If you try to help someone you don't know if they're going to turn you over because you're helping them or will you get arrested. Someone could see it the wrong way. It happens.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

Whether respondents agreed or disagreed that socially deprived areas were less cohesive, they all agreed that regenerating areas and improving them could only be beneficial. Indeed, in order to illustrate their point, respondents in Bramingham spoke

of the bad reputation and stigma attached to Marsh Farm. There have historically been negative issues associated with the area. However, the recent influx of investment in the area has led to improvements that have made residents feel the area is safer and beneficial to the community [inside and outside of the area]. In particular, respondents noted the improvements made to the local school:

*'I had reservations about sending my son there but when I saw the school for myself I thought the facilities are second to none.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

*'That's good to hear. My son's probably going to go there and it worried me.'* [Female, White, Bramingham]

In Lewsey Farm it was felt by one respondent [active in the Neighbourhood Watch scene] that the Council would not help regenerate the area until the community itself banded together and did things for itself such as agree a plan, form groups etc. However, the rest of the group strongly disagreed and felt they would only get financial assistance if they caused a riot:

*'I think it's completely the opposite. For what I've seen in this town, it's the communities that look that they're just literally going to implode that get the money spent...'* [Male<sup>7</sup>, Lewsey Farm]

*'...Start a riot and we'll get the money spent on us – that's how it seems.'* [Male<sup>8</sup>, Lewsey Farm]

## 5.7 State of the economy

Similarly to points raised in the residents' workshop, respondents agreed that the loss of major employers in the town had led to a deterioration in community cohesion. The large scale employers provided a platform to bring people of all walks of life together over the fact they worked for the same company. The relative lack of employment now means that residents have to look further afield for work and communities based on people growing up together are lost as individuals go in search for work outside of Luton.

*'This town was like a mining town – you left school and you went to Vauxhall or the airport or Electrolux – everyone knew where they were going and when you went to that job, your school friends or other people that you knew from doing things around here would be at that job. You'd know where you were going and now you leave school and you might get a job anywhere. The only jobs in Luton now are in the Arndale – that's about it.'* [Male, Black, Lewsey Farm]

Additionally, there was debate in both the Stopsley and Farley Hill focus groups about the resentment between White British and Polish people. The heart of the resentment

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<sup>7</sup> Ethnicity not recalled

<sup>8</sup> Ethnicity not recalled

discussed appeared to be that Polish workers are perceived to be working for lower wages than White British residents. In the view of some respondents, this has led to them being hired more often and reducing the opportunities of the White British residents.

*'My husband is a lorry driver. He got his wages cut by a lot because Polish drivers were doing it for cheaper. So he could feel quite put out. It wasn't that he didn't want to work. He had a wage deduction. So, that's where it could be sorted out fairly. I've worked in an Asian cash and carry for fifteen years. I don't even look at someone and think they're Asian or whatever, but I think that's how views are if you feel you've been hard done by and think you have something to moan about. I don't particularly feel that it's Polish people's fault. It's just the way the world is, but my husband did feel put out because he had a wage reduction....'* [Female 1, White, Stopsley]

*'Everyone would do that though if they needed a job.'* [Female 2, White, Stopsley]

*'I know, but I'm just saying that that's how bad feeling starts. I understand. You feel that you're losing your standard of living.'* [Female 1, White, Stopsley]

However, following a heated debate in the Farley Hill focus group, the group agreed that it was the employers that had led to the cohesion issues by taking advantage of the Polish workers. They felt that had businesses paid everyone a fair and similar wage that this particular cohesion issue could have been avoided.

## 5.8 Schools

Whilst some areas have clearly benefited from having a mixture of ethnicities attend, others feel that those that are predominately one ethnicity are not as good. One respondent from Saints/Biscot is not happy with the school education provided in her catchment area. She actively sought to have her children attend another school [where her child is now only one of 2 Asian children], only to be subjected to bullying and racism.

For example, one parent explained that her child was being pushed over one day, she told another child to apologise and stated it was not a nice thing to do. At this point, a group of mothers verbally attacked her and pushed her, another parent had to intervene. Since the incident she takes and collects her children from the back entrance of the school to avoid contact with the other parents.

She wonders if the other parents are stereotyping her and perhaps think that she can not speak English. Currently this has meant that her child has no-one to play with as she is intimidated to approach other parents to invite their children around.

*'It makes me feel quite sad that not everyone is polite and friendly....it makes me more reserved and more focused on my family. I have a small circle of friends.'* [Female, Asian, Saints/Biscot]

The White Turkish respondent in Farley Hill also provided examples of his younger siblings being bullied at school, primarily because of their lack of English language skills. The situation for them is that the children no longer wish to go to school but they are hesitant to move them as they feel a mixed school is the best chance of them integrating overall.

Indeed, the importance of mixing ethnicities at school is illustrated by the comments of young White British respondents in Stopsley:

*'My mum grew up in Stevenage, and she's really racist. So, through my childhood, she said to stay away from other children. When I got to high school, there were loads of different people there. I saw that my mum was wrong. They're just normal human beings.'* [Female, White, Stopsley]

*'I never saw a coloured person until I was about seven.'* [Male, White, Stopsley]

They recognised the importance of exposure to other ethnicities in order to remove tensions. They felt that older residents would be harder to educate because they were not used to such diversity:

*'I think if you're set in your ways, it's quite hard to change what you think. It's so much easier for us because we were brought up in diverse communities.'* [Male, White, Stopsley]

However, in Farley Hill, where the schools are integrated and mixed, respondents spoke of how children still only play with other children of the same ethnicity. When asked why they do this, respondents are told:

*'Our parents say we cannot play together.'* [Female, White, Farley Hill]

### 5.9 Social preferences of different cultures and alcohol

Of particular note, is that many participating White British residents feel that alcohol is a key issue to achieving cohesion. Respondents note that many social activities for White British respondents revolve around drinking in pubs or at home. They assume that because Muslim residents do not drink, that they would not 'feel comfortable' socialising in the same manner and that therefore this excludes them from forming social bonds with each other.

*'Because of their religion, a lot of them don't drink anyway.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

*'It's not that they don't want to, they probably do want to but don't have the social skills.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

*'Some people are very shy. I've spoken to some of the Asian women and some of them are very shy.'* [Female, White, Bramingham]

*'It's just a different culture. If you did throw a massive barbeque and invite them they wouldn't feel comfortable.'* [Female, White, Bramingham]

Interestingly, the Bangladeshi interviewee from Bramingham is Muslim and she spoke of her attempts to make friends with the neighbours and to be outgoing. She explained how she has invited people to family barbeques and taken home cooked food to neighbours' homes but that the friendship gestures were not returned.

*'Most do not acknowledge me...I have lived here for 8-9 years and I do not speak to 90% of the people here...I have four neighbours and only the father waves hello...I took samosas over two years ago, invited them to barbeques but they do not come over...I do not feel that they want to get involved...sometimes I think is it my ethnicity or am I unapproachable? ... I think it is my area, there are not that many Asians in this area. My mum lives in Biscot and she does not have any issues. She would not move here because she said she would not fit in.'* [Female, Bangladeshi, Bramingham]

Upon discussion about social activities revolving around alcohol, she stated that although she does not drink she still socialises with her friends who do consume alcohol, she does not feel it is a reason to not be involved socially with others. However, an Asian Female respondent in the Saints/Biscot group concurred that alcohol was a problem that kept them from mixing socially with others. The following is an excerpt from the group when they discussed the need for a community hub/venue:

*'It would be nice to have places where everyone mixes together. You make friends, you talk, you get to know each other.'* [Female, White, Saints/Biscot]

*'But a lot of Asian people wouldn't go there if they're serving alcohol, which is forbidden – that's how they would look at it.'* [Female, Asian, Saints/Biscot]

## 5.10 Media image

Like the residents in the workshop held earlier this year, respondents are keenly aware that Luton is sometimes portrayed poorly in the media and many cite the examples of it being rated in the top ten worst places to live and that 'we have the most extreme Muslims in the country'.

*'Whenever terrorism comes on the news it mentions Luton because of the large Muslim population. It always mentions it. I think people think of that.'* [Female, White, Stopsley]

*'Luton's got a very bad name. People think it's full of terrorists. I think the communities rub along really well in Luton, the Asian communities.'* [female, White, Stopsley]

Respondents are conscious of the reputation of Luton, especially locally in Lewsey Farm. For some, the portrayal angers and upsets them but for most they do not appear

to be bothered. They do not feel that it is as bad as the media portrays it and believe it simply needs more positive press.

Asian respondents feel the press on their ethnicity is stereotypical and that 99% is not the truth:

*'I do not blame them....it is a lack of knowledge about our religion...they are frightened if someone has a beard and that is sad for people to fear like that.'*  
[Female, Asian, Saints/Biscot]

Some Asian respondents spoke of 'non-Muslims' assuming that Muslims isolate themselves [a comment made by many non-Muslims during the research and somewhat confirmed by older Muslim respondents]. However, one respondent commented on the positive media that could be utilised and gave the example of the Muslim family in 'EastEnders' who portray their culture as well as a more westernised way of life that is 'not so extreme'.

Another highlighted media issue hindering cohesion are the banners put up by political parties such as BNP and UKIP. Some respondents find the immigration and asylum comments to be detrimental to cohesion:

*'You know, like, for example, with the political parties and whatnot. There is one there. I'm not sure if it's the BNP or if it's the UK Independence Party, and it was something about immigration and asylum. I don't know, 5000 asylum seekers come every week, and stuff like that.'* [Male, Asian, Saints/Biscot]

This particular respondent feels that people should understand that not everyone who is not White British is detrimental to the country and that they can positively contribute without being made to feel uncomfortable:

*'So, you know, if anything, myself personally, we've only bettered the country, in a sense that we're fully educated with degrees. My sister is a barrister, my brother is in the CID. We've only bettered the country so, you know, if people can see that. Even asylum itself can be of benefit to the country. You're taking experiences from other places, bringing them here and making it better. Someone like myself particularly, I feel I'm British, okay? I feel I'm part of this country, and I contribute to the country. However, we are made to feel uncomfortable here.'* [Asian, Male, Saints/Biscot]

## 5.11 Communication

All respondents accept that cohesion is facilitated by speaking English and that people who live in England 'need English to be their first language'. However, some Asian respondents in Saints/Biscot accept that their parents, despite living in Luton for 40+ years, still have very poor English language skills even though they know that classes are available locally. They feel that it should be accepted that the older Asian generation who were not educated here do not and will never speak English. This is something that other respondents are very irritated by:

*'If you're going to come over here, fine, but you have to come in and try and give something. You can't come here and expect us to do things for you. If you go abroad you have to learn the language. They won't help us so why should we help anyone else.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

*'They come over here and they're given a translator and everybody has to pay for it. I'm a firm believer that if you want to live in a different country you learn their language.'* [Female, White, Bramingham]

Indeed, respondents whose children have attended [or do attend] predominately Asian schools speak of the poor English language skills obtained by the children:

*'It is a barrier to learning English...they are not very fluent...the kids lack exposure to other children.'* [Female, Asian, Saints/Biscot]

Whilst language is clearly the number one issue for communication, many people also rely on body language and facial expressions. One respondent felt that this was impossible to do with the very orthodox Muslim's as their traditional dress reveals only their eyes: 'you only see the letterbox'. Indeed, Muslim respondents who wear traditional dress or even just the headscarf feel that people look at them differently.

## 6 Community Cohesion: Achieving community cohesion

### 6.1 Introduction

Respondents were asked whether they felt community cohesion was achievable in Luton and what needed to happen over the next 10 years in order for that to occur. This section evaluates the results.

### 6.2 Is community cohesion achievable?

Generally respondents feel that it is an important goal and would hope that community cohesion could be achieved but not all are convinced that it can be. This is in terms of both individual areas and Luton as a whole. Even areas that feel that they are already cohesive [Stopsley and Bramingham] admit that they see themselves apart from other areas so are not cohesive across wards.

Older respondents felt that it would be a very hard task to get society to think less selfishly and more cohesively:

*'It's going to be hard work to get people to think about others as they would do themselves,' [Female, White, Saints/Biscot]*

Others fear that people are so busy with their own lives that they 'do not have the time' to put in the effort required or are disinterested.

Further, the strength of seeking commonality is so strong that for some, this is the only option. For example, the only way the Asian lady in Bramingham said she would feel like the area was cohesive in 10 years time is if more Asian people moved to the area. This would be better for her as they would stop, smile and speak to her. She did not feel that this was an achievable aim with the current demographic mix.

The importance of improving community cohesion was felt to benefit safety most of all but also, because respondents generally felt that the town was so run down that it had to be 'all about the people and NOT about the buildings or facilities':

*'You've got to like the people because that's all there is – Lewsey Farm as an estate is run down so far.' [Male, Black, Lewsey Farm]*

In order for community cohesion to be achievable many respondents returned to the point that money would be required in order to regenerate areas, create community centres and fund activities and education initiatives. This is primarily because residents do not feel that there is currently any impetus to draw people together.

A key factor in achieving cohesion was that residents have no pre-conceptions and an open mind. Ultimately, it was felt that being involved in making a community cohesive was 'down to the individual' and there would be people who wanted to and those that did not. Currently, they did not feel that there was a good enough incentive for people to be drawn in and help and so residents would simply carry on with their lives.

*'It's all down to people's tolerance. You're going to get people that are and people that are not. I don't think there's a lot that can change that apart from passing of the years.'* [female, White, Stopsley]

### 6.3 Measures to help achieve community cohesion

There were some clear recommendations **made by respondents** to help community cohesion, the following is a list provided across all groups [they are not listed in any particular order].<sup>9</sup>

14. **Role models:** Asian respondents felt that communities required more 'elder figures' to act as role models to young people to guide them and teach them that the Koran is peaceful and pull them away from extremism;

15. **Integrate activities:** This was seen as the key way to improve cohesion across Luton. All respondents felt that providing community hubs that were not restricted to one community [religious/age/interest group] would allow people to mix more cohesively. Indeed, Farley Hill residents felt that authorities currently rely on individual community groups to 'look after their own' rather than encouraging community groups to work together. However, there were seen to be clear barriers to this being completely successful:

- a. Any sporting activities would preclude Asian female residents who would require separate 'women only' sessions; and
- b. Providing activities where alcohol is not provided would strongly encourage Asian respondents to attend.

*'I don't like pubs – they cause so many problems for taxi drivers and other people in the night when people are out of it, drunk. I think they should shut down all of the pubs.'* [Male, Asian, Saints/Biscot]

Whilst this would encourage young families to attend a group, younger white male respondents did not envisage attending social activities without alcohol;

16. **Careful consideration of locations for cohesion activities needs to be considered:** Some feel that getting churches involved would help, allowing people to be exposed to different religions but seeing the peacefulness of each. However, others feel that working through churches and current community groups is a bad idea as they are already affiliated to certain groups and ideologies, for these respondents, having neutral locations and organisers would be the better way to address cohesive activities in areas;

17. **Local people employed to run activities:** A few respondents felt the best way to run activities would be to have local people run them to get them involved and encourage them to continue. However others feel nobody would give up the amount of free time required to do a successful job and so they believe the Council should run such initiatives as a business. Indeed, respondents in

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<sup>9</sup> In some instances BMG has provided additional suggestions to a point raised by a respondent.

Farley Hill feel that authorities rely too much on voluntary resources and they should not expect people to do it for free;

18. **Improve current facilities:** Respondents felt greater attention should be paid to parks to make them more conducive to family activities: banning bikes; enforcing dog litter control; removal of graffiti and broken bottles and glass in children's play areas etc. Some respondents recall events like community BBQs and would like these reinstated;
19. **Enforce the use of English as a common language:** All respondents accept that cohesion is facilitated by speaking English and that people who live in England 'need English to be their first language'. One respondent felt that more opportunities should be provided to teach English at local schools and community centres and that Asian women in particular should be encouraged to attend [comment was made by an Asian woman];
20. **Improve the media view and perception of Luton:** Many admit Luton needs regeneration and has recently acquired a poor reputation for its race relations but they do not feel it is not as run down as is portrayed. Some suggest having positive press, perhaps around meetings which allow people to be educated on other people's cultures and religions to improve knowledge and understanding;
21. **Creation of more jobs in local areas:** Many feel unemployment fuels cohesion issues. People feel the only work is in local shops, take-aways and taxis;
22. **Regenerate socially deprived areas:** In the more socially deprived areas such as Lewsey Farm and Farley Hill the general consensus was a need to regenerate the area like Marsh Farm had been. There is a lot of anger about the amount of money spent on Marsh Farm compared to other areas. These areas in particular were in favour of community centres/hubs but stressed the importance of providing affordable/free activities for residents.
23. **Utilise schools as the primary conduit to integration:** Have schools hold more family based activities as education is important to all and regardless of ethnicity, parents are said to be keen to be involved :

*'I speak to a lot of the mums at school. I have two Asian friends and they get involved with school activities and stuff. I think it's only through the schools that they do get involved, because of the young children.'* [Female, White, Bramingham]

As schools are in catchment areas surrounded by distinct ethnic groups it would be worthwhile arranging inter-school activities too. Indeed, some parents had noticed the benefit the movement of catchment boundaries had made on cohesion to date:

*'The council moved the catchment areas of the school ten years ago which was very good. You're getting a much better cross-section of people, it brings the school up. You get parents that are interested and go to the meetings, that's what it's all about. It hopefully brings everyone up.'* [Male, White, Bramingham]

**24. Ensure the Council listens to the residents and actively consults them:** In Lewsey Farm in particular they felt their views were ignored on issues such as the Mosque and speed humps. Lack of consultation feedback and provision of reasons for decisions made is leading to resentment that is being deflected onto others;

**25. Educate people on the differences between cultures and religions:**

Illustrating the benefits of a mixed society and showing what it does to help Britain was seen to be a good idea. It was thought that the 'bigger agenda' of why people are allowed to come to the country should be explained, illustrating the long term interest and benefits. It was felt that too many negative attitudes were caused by people focusing on the short term 'I lost my job' instead of focusing on the long term benefits:

*'For example, people can complain as much as they want about the Polish community, but let me tell you something, they bring a lot of work into this place. They bring a lot of experience into this place, and they're still building our economy here. They are doing it. It works both ways. The government wouldn't just let them in. They have top level understanding with the governments out there. Why are they just going to bring the Eastern Bloc into part of Europe? There's a bigger agenda.... It's all down to understanding and, I think, if the council or the government want people to have cohesion between them, they just need to explain. You know, this is the short term loss, these are the long term benefits. These people are coming in, we're not just letting them in, we're letting them in for a reason. They have a valid reason to be here. You know, we assess every application. Like I say, if there is an understanding then people will accept, and it makes things easier then'* [Male, Asian, Saints/Biscot]

**26. Illustrate the figures of 'stop and searches' in local papers:** This was so that any one ethnicity would not feel 'picked on'.

## 7 Appendix 1: Topic guide

### 7.1 Introduction

- Moderator name, independent researcher from BMG
- Project commissioned by Luton Borough Council, to explore views on two separate issues: the first issue being community cohesion, which we will come onto shortly, and the second fear of crime – advise that the two issues are not intended to be linked
- We will spend about half of the meeting on each part of this – about 40-45 minutes on each – so we'll have to be careful on timing!
- Reassure re confidentiality; seek permission to record
- Explain ground-rules, e.g. please only one person speaking at a time. Also note some of the issues which we discuss will be sensitive: please be sensitive to the views of other people when they are expressing themselves, and also be aware that some people may say things that they don't like or agree with.
- Respondents to introduce themselves (first names, where they live, how long they have lived in Luton)

### 7.2 Community Cohesion 40 minutes

#### 7.2.1 Cohesion Section 1 (10 minutes)

- What does the term 'community cohesion' mean to you?
- Definition of community cohesion (poster on flip chart):  
*“Community cohesion is a measure of the ability of communities in society to function and grow in harmony with each other rather than in conflict. Communities may define themselves by neighbourhood, ethnic origin, age group, faith and other characteristics or interests. Cohesion will grow and develop when everyone in society recognises the right to equality and has respect for diversity (the differences between people). In Luton this is not just about ethnicity or religion, though this is part of the town's diversity. It's also, just as importantly, about differences which are to do with issues such as age (both for older and younger people), gender, sexual preference, which part of town you live in, what sort of opportunities you have, how much money you have, whether or not you have a disability, and so on. All of these issues have the potential to cause tension and division, but those differences can also be seen as positive, and something which makes the town a stronger and better place to live in.”*
- What do you think are the benefits of community cohesion?
  - Would you personally benefit? How?
  - Would anyone lose out? Who/how?
- Do you think community cohesion is achievable? Why/why not? Which bits?

#### 7.2.2 Cohesion Section 2 (10 minutes)

- What are the key issues with regards to community cohesion in your local area?
  - Moderator to record all the issues onto a flipchart. For each issue probe:

- Is this issue more pronounced in your local area, as opposed to across Luton in general ? If so, why?
- Does this issue impact upon you personally? If so, how? (Moderator to probe to try to understand whether anyone feels personally that some aspect of their own identity, i.e. age, gender etc., makes them feel that they are part of a separate community)
- What has caused this issue?
- If required, prompt around:
  - Differences in prospects and opportunities;
  - Differences in wages between those that work in Luton, and those that live in the town (those that live in Luton earn much less than those that work there)
  - Younger or older people;
  - Gender;
  - Sexual orientation, transgender;
  - Disability;
  - Ethnicity, religion.

### 7.2.3 Cohesion Section 3 (5 minutes)

- Do these issues affect the way you feel about your neighbourhood? How do you think it might affect the image your neighbourhood amongst people living in other parts of Luton?
- Thinking specifically about your neighbourhood, which issues should be the priorities? Why?

### 7.2.4 Cohesion Section 4 (15 minutes)

- Thinking about community cohesion, describe how you would like your local area to change over the next ten years.
- Prompt if necessary around:
  - What specific issues would need to change? How? How would we know things had changed?
    - (If not already covered) prompt views on the themes emerging from the previous consultation:
      - The role of the English language: is there a need to understand more about the barriers to learning English? Value of the council providing translations?
      - The importance of changing media coverage/perceptions of Luton
      - The idea that regenerating Luton for the benefit of all would have a positive effect on cohesion
      - Ethnic and religious diversity in schools
      -
  - How would you like people from other areas of Luton to perceive your area?
  - How would you like your neighbourhood to look/feel?
  - What difference might it make for you / your children or grandchildren?

- What are the particularly difficult parts? What might be easier or quicker to do?
- What happens in your local area which brings people together, or which could bring people together?

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