Written evidence from University of Central Lancashire, Cumberland Council [CCI0049]

Peripherality and Community Cohesion in Predominantly White, Low-Income Coastal Communities

A Response to Call for Evidence: Community Cohesion January 2025

1. Summary of key points

1.1. The context in which this response is embedded is that of predominantly white, low-income coastal communities, offering a nuanced perspective of a section of the English population. Within this framing, we present these communities as being 'peripherical' in feeling physically and symbolically distant from English institutions. The four dimensions which shape the lived experience of peripherality, which, we argue, serves as a barrier to community cohesion, are persistent structural inequalities, a deep collective history (which includes a strong sense of ethnocentricity), a strong collective identity and perceived political peripherality.

1.2. Our evidence presents the primary barriers and threats to community cohesion in a coastal community context through the lens of community perceptions. Communities feel unheard and marginalised, live in persistent fear of violence and threat, and are hyper-vigilant to stigmatisation by others. These perceptions create conditions that precipitate antipathy towards others, particularly in our context, towards the refugee and migrant community.

1.3. Social media is perceived as an accessible and reliable means of gaining information, as opposed to mainstream news outlets, which many predominantly white, low-income coastal communities do not trust. Our evidence demonstrates how this can impact community cohesion through the legitimisation and perpetuation of false narratives based on anti-immigrant beliefs. Young people we have spoken to describe how they access this narrative via their families and social media and how these result in expressions of prejudice and discrimination towards their peers in school.

1.4. Developing vehicles that enable authentic community power in predominantly white, low-income coastal communities can foster a stronger sense of community cohesion. Local authorities can do this by co-creating accessible and equal spaces that facilitate dialogue and embracing a culture based on the values of respect and equality, accountability and transparency, and commitment to the community.

1.5. Moreover, a new community-led understanding of the concept could help to ensure that consistent and meaningful approaches are developed to improve community cohesion. A new cross governement conceptualisation of community cohesions must view community cohesion through an intersectional lens with an appreciation of marginalisation that diverse groups experience.

2. Background: The Cumberland Context

2.1. Background

Coastal areas are more likely to have higher levels of deprivation than non-coastal towns, attributed to factors including slower levels of growth and declining industries (Telford, 2021; Telford & Lloyd, 2020). This paper focuses on predominately white, low-income coastal communities in post-industrial, ex-mining towns, all located directly on the Cumbrian coastline, which displays characteristics similar to those known as 'left-behind' communities or those that "suffer from significant levels of economic and social deprivation based on existing accepted definitions" (Local Trust, 2019, p.11). The communities face significant social exclusion in terms of education (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019; Richards, 2022), community development (Wenham, 2020) and democratic participation (Rodríguez-Pose, et al., 2023).

This collaborative response is part of a broader scheme of work between HE institution and a local authority in NW England. We present a synthesis from number of evidence sources, using various methods, including data from research projects, academic publications and our lived experiences. The research draws on data from community workshops which took place in four predominately white, low-income coastal communities between 2022 and 2024, a part of a project seeking to understand barriers and enablers to democratic participation. All quotes from the research have been anonymized to protect the anonymity of participants.

We regard the communities as being "imagined communities", in that they are created by individuals, arising from cultural points of reference with shared experience and values. (Anderson, 1983). Traditionally, ideas about imagined communities have been applied to national identities. However, we suggest imagined communities can also be observed on a regional level, providing new ways of thinking about how communities socially construct and respond to their perceptions of community cohesion. The social construction of physical, social, cultural and political peripherality and structural inequalities is shaped by the geo-political-historical context along the Cumbrian coast. In response to nuanced context of the area and the complex dimensions of the communities we worked with, we draw on the concept of peripherality (Bickerstaff, 2022).

2.2. Peripheral Communities

2.2.1. Structural Inequalities: Embodying the characteristics of 'left-behind' as defined by the Local Trust (2019), the communities we write about in this paper fall within the 10% most deprived areas in the county (IMD, 2019). More recent data from the 2021 Census suggests that these levels of deprivation and inequality remain, with all communities indicating high levels of economic inactivity, long-term unemployment and levels of disability compared with local and national rates (Census 2021, n.d.). These suggest structural inequalities within these peripheral communities, an assessment strengthened by data concerning limited access to leisure and culture (Arts Council England, 2024). This deprivation should also be viewed in the context of geographical location: as well as experiencing the wider north-south divide, these West Cumbrian communities also contrast starkly with the neighbouring Lake District, highlighting the deeply unequal distribution of Cumbria's economic development.

2.2.2. Deep collective history: The West Cumbrian coast has a deep history embedded in the historic steel and mining industries; these have not been operated for a number of decades, contributing to economic decline. As seen elsewhere, the end of mining took with it a fundamental basis of the community's collective identity and solidarity (Strangleman, 2001). The nuclear industry in West Cumbria became a dominant part of economic and social life in the 1980s, partly due to this decline of extractive and secondary industries. Relatively elevated salaries within the nuclear industry present a dual economy: those who work within the sector and those who do not, with some of the highest median wages in the UK alongside high rates of disadvantage (Wylie, et al., 2020).

The historical dominance of white British ethnicity continues to characterise West Cumbria, with 98.4% of those living in the research sites identifying as white British compared with the UK average of 81.0% (Census 2021, n.d.). Linked to this, many residents feel a strong sense of ethnocentrism, which can lead to uninformed negative judgments about other cultures. Local research and practice have revealed three dominant anti-immigrant narratives: resentment over a perceived preferential allocation of resources, fear of the unknown and feeling socially obligated to be 'politically correct'. This adds to evidence from other areas, which suggests a process of 'othering' different cultures also takes place in similarly non-diverse communities (Fenton, 2012; Spracklen, 2018). These attitudes towards difference are influenced by an intersection of race, place, class and positionality within the context of local geography, history and politics (Crenshaw, 2013).

2.2.3. Strong collective identity: Many communities along the Cumbrian coast show a profound sense of collective solidarity and belonging (Wilson & Morris, 2020; Wilson, Morris & Williamson, 2020; Wilson & Morris, 2023a; Wilson & Morris, 2023b). This can result in strong bonding social capital, where individuals relate closely to one another and behave altruistically within their imagined community. However, it can also result in rigid ingroup/ outgroup identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1978), reinforcing the tendency to 'other' those that are not seen to belong. Conversations with residents suggest these attitudes arise from contexts where communities feel they are in the process of recovering from a past dominated by large-scale employment in steelworks and coal mining. Collective grief and trauma underpin the shared collective identities of the communities. This is again reflected in existing research concerning community identity in similarly non-diverse post-industrial, working-class communities, particularly in relation to the construction of clear in-group/out-group distinctions (Spracklen, 2018).

2.2.4. Perceived political peripherality: Our collective research and experience show that communities along the Cumbrian coast feel tangibly distant from local politics and other civic instructions (Wilson, 2024a; Wilson, 2024b). The impact of this perceived peripherality can be seen in the most common form of political engagement: voting. Local elections for the new Cumberland Council in May 2022 saw all communities returning fewer votes than the 36.1% county average (UK Parliament, 2023). This has been shown to be common voter behaviour in communities that are considered peripheral or 'left-behind' (Abreu & Jones, 2021; Telford, 2021, 2023; Telford & Lloyd, 2020). Arguably, perceived political peripherality is the product of the other dimensions as seen through our research: structural inequalities and collective history produce a strong collective identity, which reinforces the perception of political peripherality.

3. What assessments have been made of community cohesion in the UK in a local and national context?

3.1. Defining Community Cohesion

There is a lack of consensus regarding the definition of community cohesion, which is often used interchangeably with social cohesion. We present evidence which adopts a community approach (as opposed to an individual). As we will discuss in the final section, this is a complex construct which requires much consideration. For the purpose of our paper, we speak to community cohesion in reference to community perceptions of how people interact, work together, develop positive relationships and make a contribution to their community. It also considers perceptions surrounding shared values based on democracy, equality, tolerance, justice, and creating a sense of belonging.

3.2. Antipathy Towards the 'Other'

A reoccurring theme throughout ten years of research in predominately white, working-class coastal communities has been an antipathy towards the migrant and refugee community. There were three dominant attitudes: a resentment of the perceived preferential allocation of resources, a fear of the unknown and a perceived social obligation concerning political correctness.

3.2.1. A resentment of the perceived preferential allocation of resources: The predominant narrative surrounding migrants and refugees was a fierce resentment concerning the perception that these groups were receiving disproportionate public financial and material resources at the expense of their community. This theme included a strong nationalist attitude:

> *They can all smoke, they've all got new trainers on, they've got modern phones, they can't be that badly off. And it's time we looked after our own, we've got a lot of homeless in this country sleeping on the streets (May)*

Specific examples of where the migrant and refugee communities were assumed to be in the receipt of disproportionate resource allocation include preferential home improvement provided by local housing associations and refugees being prioritised for social housing ahead of 'local' homeless people. Through this process, a perceived differentiation occurred whereby a group is seen as threatening predominately white, low-income coastal communities with limited economic capital, specifically surrounding resource allocation. May attributes this perceived difference in resource allocation directly to the values of migrants, which she assumes is different to her own and her community, "you know your values. You know you've got to pay your bills, you need your food. A lot of these folk just, they want the biggest telly, the smartest phone, the best trainers" (May). This differentiation is internalised and creates distinct in-group and out-group divides.

3.2.2. A fear of the unknown: Young people told us some of their anti-immigrant beliefs came from a fear of the unknown. Young people provided vivid accounts of Somali refugees from a newly opened 'asylum hotel' threatening local young people:

Fletcher: *There was a gold mask. An Asian put it on and he came round and said, if you want your friend's bag back follow me.*
Rosie: *So they followed him but Bailey was on the phone to his dad. They rang the police and apparently, they were going to kill Bailey.*
Jackson: *The Hotel got netted up because there were apparently people going round asking people to get in the van and were putting a needle in them apparently, and then that's why it got netted up.*

This fear of the other was also directed towards some Ukrainian war refugees in this group, shown in the conversation below:

Q: *What was it like having someone from Ukraine coming to your school?*
Rosie   *Scary.*
Freya   *It feels weird.*
Rosie   *We don't know if she's Ukrainian. What if she's a terrorist?*
Fletcher   *We'll never know.*
Q: *Why is someone from a different country that we know nothing about, why is that scary?*
Fletcher   *Because we don't know who she is. We don't know her background, so like she could try and kill us. She could be a terrorist.*

Here, a taken-for-granted attribute of being dangerous is applied to any non-British individuals or groups and is consciously reasoned so due to lack of familiarity or knowledge about these groups of people.

3.2.3. A perceived social obligation concerning political correctness:
Perceived censorship and silencing were expressed by the people we talked to, connected to identify politics and language policing. When discussing issues concerning migrants, many people we spoke to felt unable to openly express their views at risk of being labelled as racist or politically incorrect. This concern, along with a strong nationalist sentiment, can be seen in the conversation below:

May: *We are British through and through.*
Q: *What do you mean by through and through?*
Claire: *We want foreigners to piss off*
Jane: *Do you not find though sometimes you can't actually declare it. It's almost as like you've got to be politically correct in case they say, oh they've discriminated against me. You're kind of on edge all the time.*
May: *You couldn't say what you're thinking out loud.*

Here, Claire and May hostility to any non-native group. Considering the concern over resource allocation and subsequent group categorisation, this can be understood as a reaction to threat, where the overt rejection of and attempted subjugation of other groups is a measure to protect their perceived limited resources. People we spoke to associated political correctness being in conflict with British values concerning freedom of speech, a consequence of the socially constructed narrative surrounding political correctness promoted by the national press.

4. What are the primary barriers and threats to community cohesion?

The threats to community cohesion are both within the communities themselves and the systems in which they exist. We present evidence documenting the latter, presenting a perspective from the lived experience of those from predominately white, working-class communities. These all centre around a perceived peripherality from institutions, those external to their community, and sometimes within.

4.1. Feeling Unheard

Predominately white, low-income coastal communities consistently tell us they feel unheard under the current political system, and this impacts on their motivations to participate, *"We've already decided that we're not being listened to. So, they don't get the uptake because people are like, well what's the point?" (Deborah).* This experience of learned helplessness was understood to be the reason behind poor voting turnout at elections and distrust and disengage with local and national politics.

Communities we have worked with have provided accounts of where they had participated in public consultation events but did not feel their views were adequately accounted for, "*They sort of listened to what people had to say but you knew it wasn't going to make any difference" (May).* May's account suggests that some residents who do actually participate in local consultations do so with the pre-existing assumption that they will not be listened to, which may influence how communities interact with those conducting the consultations.

Communities felt that language can be a barrier to communication, with the use of jargon impacting on people's confidence to speak to local councillors:

> *I think sometimes that's a barrier because you can have all the feelings and wanting change in your community, but if you've got, let's say an arrogant man in front of you that's reading all these policies and spouting all this, you're just going to think, well what's the point. I'm not going to get my point across, I can't compete with that (Jane)*

Here, Jane suggests that there is a motivation to improve the community but feels that institutional tools, such as policies and jargon are used to prevent communities from engaging in dialogue and debate, adding to the perception of being unheard. Jane's example of an "arrogant man" indicates assumptions surrounding the gender and personality, which relate to traditional patriarchal power structures. Feeling unable to "compete", Jane suggests that she perceives the Council as an opposing body, indicating a fundamental conflict in relation to the needs of the community.

Moreover, communities provided examples of challenging an elected representative (MP or Councillor) on social media and having their accounts blocked. This was felt to compromise any potential relationships by not facilitating interaction, "*He's blocked me on Facebook, so I haven't got a good relationship with him" (Jane).* Communities described their contributions to the online dialogue as challenging a decision they disagreed with.

4.2. Feeling Marginalised

Along with feeling unheard, communities we have spoken to feel margainlised by the current political system. A narrative around assumed superiority *("I'm a councillor, who are you type of thing", Stuart)* dominated our conversations, using encounters to describe a perceived lack of humility. For example, here Joseph described how the behaviour of a newly elected member changed once they were voted into office.

> *As soon as they become a councillor, 'do you know who I am?' Yes, you're still young, you're just a councillor and you're supposed to be the voice of the local people, but clearly not because all of a sudden you think you're special (Joseph)*

Here, Joseph is reflecting on a perceived power inequality, whereby being in office is associated with an assumed superiority on behalf of the elected member. The shift in the status was met with resentment, particularly since the role of the elected is to be the *"voice of the people" (Joseph),* which was not felt to be honoured *("You work for us", Andrea).*

4.3. Distrust in Local Institutions

There was a reoccurring theme of distrust towards local authorities in the predominately white, low-income coastal communities we spoke to, with communities presenting three dominant narratives:

4.3.1. "Nothing gets done": When discussing a new Council Plan, one group of adult residents were reluctant even to open the document:

> *May:*   *Well to be honest even to read that, nobody's going to believe it because they never do what they say they're going to do.*
> *Jane:*   *They promise you the world and say that they're going to, they'll feed that back and they'll feed this back and they'll do this and they'll do that, but it never happens.*

The discussion above outlines a historical feeling of being let down. This collective memory then impacts how future interactions are anticipated, with a reluctance to be receptive to new policies or initiatives. The motivations for these 'false promises' were attributed to elected members seeking to gain votes.

4.3.1. "They'd already made their minds up": There was a significant narrative amongst communities that council decisions are predetermined, with any consultation being tokenistic (to appease the community) and for promotional purposes ("*They just ask us for publicity", Elaine).* In exploring the roots of this narrative (the phrase was used five times throughout the sessions), communities described a lack of awareness of how decisions are made and added that they felt this was a deliberate tactic to exclude citizens in decision-making, as Janet alludes to, "*They're not very inclusive and there's no transparency. It's all, like you say, cloak and dagger, isn't it? And you'll find out what's happening after it's happened" (Janet).* When asked what evidence communities base this assumption on, the dominant response was, "You *always think it anyway" (May),* suggesting this is a socially constructed narrative.

4.3.3. "They don't care about us at all": These experiences inform the attitude that the Council do not care about communities. A number of residents said that the Council don't *"give a shit" (Celia, Joseph)* about their community, and it was widely felt that "t*hey don't care about us at all" (Elaine).* These accounts all relate to a feeling of powerlessness, where decisions are made that impact on their lives without any consideration of the consequences.

4.4. Persistent Fear of Violence and Threat

The local research has also illuminated an undercurrent theme of violence and threat, both physically and symbolically:

4.4.1. Fighting for a service: The most frequent use of the word was in relation to dealing with services, including the NHS, getting appointments, and negotiating the use of public spaces, such as a local bowling green. The symbolic use of the term implies a struggle against an opponent in an attempt to access something that communities felt they had a right to. This also demonstrates the distant relationship that communities perceive with the Council and other statutory bodies, which is defined by unequal power distribution.

4.4.2. Fighting in defense of a physical threat: Many physical references were given in relation to some form of confrontation, either defending their own reputation *("I said, if you're accusing me of pinching your cans, I'd be up for violence, I'd fucking hit the bastard", Charlotte)* or most commonly, defending someone who was being bullied.

> *I said, get that little cunt out here because I want him. I'm sorry. He said, why? I said because I'm going to knock seven fucking shits out of him. Why? I said, if he can't fight on his own, he's got to have a gang, and his mum came. I said, you can shut your mouth as well because every time he bullies my granddaughter, I'm going to come, and I'm going to fucking bully you, so look out. (Claire)*

These accounts demonstrate perceived threats coming from both within and beyond the communities, showing the complexity of relationships within physical communities, and the agency communities feel it necessary to act when someone within their close relational realm is threatened. The key themes behind this aggression are anger at injustice and defense of those important to them.

4.5. Stigma Salience

The community research did not actively ask residents about how they felt others perceived their community. However, many were conscious of a deficit view of their community:

> *I don't like the word deprived and it's what gets used a lot for us, 'It's a deprived area'. I that just makes everybody overlook all the positives that are going on (Jane)*

Communities said they resented being labelled negatively, such as being deprived or poor, and that this was a misrepresentation of the area, as is illustrated below:

> *This is a 'deprived' area then? Right, and I can be in the house and I'm watching young ones going past, they've all got the most expensive trainers on, they've all got the most up-to-date phones. Where is there deprivation out there? (May)*

However, they also clearly distanced themselves from other, less socially desirable, members of the community. Narratives such as this imply a stigma surrounding those in their community who receive benefits. Communities were quick to remove any association by treating those who are perceived as abusing the welfare system as separate from them.

5. How can social media impact community cohesion?

5.1. Lack of Trust: Community members of all generations told us that they did not trust mainstream media outlets. Rather, much information accessed through Google and social media is considered legitimate and not fact-checked.

Jane: *Just through Google, and then it will come up. There's a fact checker site because some of it is, and you just think, no, that can't be right.*

Jospeh: *I would say six out of ten it is right, but it's that misinformation that goes further, and it's what people tend to believe.*

Jane: *I don't really use BBC anymore; it's gone down in my estimation. Sky is really good.*

Q: *You've said about BBC News as well.*

Simon: *The British Brainwashing Corporation.*

Q: *Brainwashing for what?*

Simon: *Well, I think, as I said, about Korea, they want to tell you what they want to tell you. The government and the BBC want to tell you their part, but it's not what you want to hear.*

5.2. National anti-immigrant narratives on social media: When exploring their attitudes towards the migrant and refugee community, it emerged that predominately white,low-income coastal communities received a majority of their information about migrants from social media, immediate family and the immediate family of their friends. Below is an example an example of a video from Tic-Tok, shared in a community workshop:

> *"The entire hotel is booked for twelve months, with every single room booked. It's not very often you get a phone call like that, so I actually called the company myself. Yes, so in fact, that is what it was, and it was a company trying to source hotels for the asylum seekers or the refugees that are coming in, you know, on the boats or by various different means. Tintagel is the historic birthplace of King Arthur, this is where, mythologically speaking, he was supposed to have been born"*

The above social media post highlights how narratives surrounding threats to British cultural histories can be perpetuated, adding to the belief that resources are being allocated to migrant and refugee communities.

5.3. Local rumours: Moreover, social media was shown to spread rumours locally concerning migrant and refugee communities, as illustrated in the conversation below between some young people:

Rosie: *So they followed him, but Bailey was on the phone with his Dad. They rang the police, and apparently, they were going to kill Bailey and that.*

Fletcher: *That didn't happen.*

Rosie: *That was B Bailey s Mum, that's what Bailey's Mum said.*

Fletcher: *Bailey couldn't get in touch with his Mum, so Bailey's friends rang his Dad.*

Q: *So, you're hearing this from friends?*

Jackson: *Social media, like Facebook. It's all over Facebook, and then people screenshot it and put it on Snapchat, saying, "Be careful," and that.*

As illustrated above, rumours and false stories circulating within online networks can have a profound influence on communities who may start from a position of being relatively ill-informed or those who have been turned off from politics or mainstream media sources. However, social media has been suggested to potentially have a very different effect on those who already have an interest in and

knowledge of current affairs and who identify with a political ideology. A growing body of academic research into the existence of 'echo chambers' within social media is uncovering evidence that social media users experience high exposure to 'like-minded' content and a corresponding low exposure to content from opposing viewpoints (Nyhan, et al., 2023).

One reason for this has been put forward is a tendency towards establishing a pattern of active self-selection of congruent messaging and avoidance of contradictory ideas or beliefs (Eady, et al., 2019). In addition, other authors have shown that recommended systems, software embedded within social media sites whose function is to provide individualised recommendations to users, actively contribute to 'filter bubbles' by prioritising content that supports users' existing worldview (Areeb, et al., 2023). There is some discussion ongoing regarding the existence of political bubbles, as well as the extent of polarisation any confirmation bias in information may cause for individuals. However, it has been shown that individuals may be reluctant to admit the impact of messaging they receive on social media, as studies that have argued against the existence of echo chambers have tended to rely on self-reporting evidence, whereas those that analysed digitally captured data found strong indication of their presence within social media platforms (Terren and Borge-Bravo, 2021).

The entrenchment of political bubbles arguably has the potential to reinforce pre-existing divisions between sections of society that are the most politically engaged. Although this entrenchment originates from online communities and networks, the effects of these bubbles on individual perspectives and attitudes are carried back into their physical communities and contribute to challenges in community cohesion even if they do not always manifest as outright conflict. The wide spectrum of political and social views that could be affected by online echo chambers means that the potential impact is equally varied and is therefore not restricted to commonly highlighted issues such as tensions around ethnicity or sexual orientation, for example.

6.1. Community Power as a means to foster a stronger sense of community cohesion

Appreciating the barriers surrounding political peripherality faced by predominantly white, low-income coastal communities can inform recommendations to improve community cohesion in such areas. Communities have made the following recommendations concerning what conditions they feel need to be created to enable them to feel they have a sense of agency and power over what happens within their community:

6.1.1. A space to be heard: Overwhelmingly all community groups cited that one of their main desires was to have a relationship with the Council where they felt heard. When exploring opportunities for participatory democracy, communities were unsure how this would be embraced and followed through by the Council:

Arthur: *Would it work after you've told them?*
Elaine: *You could always speak, yes.*
Andrea: *It's worth a try, yes.*
Elaine: *Whether they'd listen.*

This was a concurrent theme throughout the research, with the above passage providing an example of both the residents' interest and willingness to work with the Council, but skepticism about how willing the Council would be to listen and adopt new ways of working.

Communities wanted to speak to *"actual people" (Laura)* face to face, in their community where they are comfortable. It was felt that in order to be heard, the person to whom they would be speaking is crucial, that it needs to be someone familiar with the community and *"someone who knows what's going on" (Joseph).* This view is informed by past experiences whereby residents have felt that representatives from the Council have made policy decisions with little understanding of the areas it would impact on.

6.1.2. Accessible language and communication channels: Communities said they wished to interact with someone who would be on their "*level… It's got to take all that jargon out, remove all that waffle" (Janet).* Seeking to be on an equal level demonstrates a desire for equality and describing jargon as "waffle" shows that such language is of little value to residents. Indeed, one community member suggested that the Council should "*Talk normal. Don't sit there and think that you're better than me because you're not" (Jane).* Here Jane shows that much of the language used in policy is not within the frame of reference of her community and does not relate to everyone's daily lives. The passage also reveals a perception of assumed superiority by the Council, again providing an example of how residents perceive the local authorities as exerting power over communities.

6.1.3. Equitable space for dialogue: Communities provided examples of when they approached the Council to voice concerns or participate in decision-making. The example below relates to an incident when a group of older gentlemen challenged the Council on an issue relating to the use of a local council owned allotment:

> *I had an allotment and the council said we'd have a meeting. There was quite a few of us went to the meeting and there was more councillors and they all said, you've got ten minutes to talk. And one of the lads done all the talking for us, then they started talking and they talked for nearly an hour. And what we got off them was no answers of anything. All they wanted to do is just to show that they were in charge (Arthur)*

Within this passage, there is a common use of 'they' when referring to the Council. This implies distinct social identities and a perception of 'us vs them', emphasising a conflicting relationship where the Council are asserting their dominance over community members. There was an unequal allocation of power within the meeting, which left community members feeling dissatisfied and unheard. A consistent message in the accounts above revolves around unequal power distribution relating to dialogical spaces.

6.1.4. Respect and Equality: All community groups spoke of how they sought to be treated with respect, based on notions of equality, humility and an open-mindedness that gives views of all community members equal legitimacy. Communities sought a relationship with the Council whereby they could work collaboratively, with an equal status. This sentiment is captured in the passage below:

Simon: *We could liaise with them, work with the councillors as an equal member.*
Joseph: *Yes, if it was an equal member.*
Simon   *If you were treated equal it's a good idea but I don't think they would.*

Here, Joseph and Simon agree that they would like to 'liaise' with the Council, implying a relationship defined by congeniality and equality. However, Simon concludes by sharing his disbelief that this would happen, which is consistent with the narrative around distrust towards local politicians.

Communities felt that being open-minded included *"not taking offence when they get a little bit of criticism" (Brooke),* (evidenced by blocking residents on social media), and providing a space where open and frank discussions could take place. Communities sought to have their views accepted as being equally legitimate as those of the Council. More than anything, residents seek honesty, particularly when things do not work out as planned *("don't sugar coat it, be honest and tell you", May).*

6.1.5. Commitment to the Community: Communities sought to build relationships with people who shared their values, embedded in a deep commitment to the wellbeing of the community. This commitment was seen through enacting a sense of civic duty by providing practical support and responding to the community's needs. Communities provided numerous accounts of elected members who they felt acted in the interests of the community, which included offering practical support at public community events and also responding to individual requests for support. Examples of community support include helping with community dinners, where members worked without wanting anything in return:

Joseph: *The only one who does actually take any time with [the young people with learning difficulties] is [elected member] The rest of them, they like to put their name to the community centre and say, we've helped to do this, oh look what we've achieved.*
Chloe: *[Elected member] gets us donations well.*
Joseph: *Yes, he's the only one.*
Chloe: *But he doesn't shout it from the rooftops.*

Communities provided examples seeking help from a trusted elected member and cited reliability and responsiveness of traits that were of great value. Being approachable and accessible (through attending meetings or being available on the phone) was felt to help facilitate this supportive process, along with listening and being reliable *("If you had a problem and you tell him, he would listen and he would help you sort that problem out", Claire).*

6.2. System Change and A New Understanding of Community Cohesion

6.2.1. There is a need for a universal definition of community cohesion: It is important that we understand the difference between community cohesion and social cohesion. Much of EU policy focuses on social cohesion, and this needs to be taken into account when examining the UK context.

Social Cohesion	Community Cohesion

• Extent of connections and solidarity among groups
• Identified two main dimensions:
    ○ Sense of belonging to a community
    ○ Relationships among members of community
• It is the unity and solidarity of a group, emphasising the characteristics and group dynamics that keep a group functioning as a unit to meet common goals
	Is a broader concept that attempts to measure social relationships within a community based on criteria such as:
	• Shared vision: presence of common purpose/ goal
	• Inclusion: involving individuals with diverse backgrounds
	• Equal opportunities: Ensuring fairness and access of all
	• Supportive relationships: Fostering positive interactions between community members

Social coherence focuses on unity and solidarity of groups, and often this is the focus adopted even when we set out to discuss community cohesion. It is crucial to recognise that community cohesion extends beyond individuals and relationships to consider the overall health and functioning of a community. However, both social and community cohesion are essential for maintaining sustainability.

6.2.2. There is a need to view community cohesion through an intersectional lens: Community cohesion is not just a racial cohesion issue, especially in areas that are largely homogenous, such as the coastal communities in Cumbria; there is a need to appreciate the different social and community groups experiencing division, marginalisation and oppression. The Khan report appears to refer to a community as an essentially harmonious entity, but in practice, communities rarely appear this way. For decades, poverty, inequality, and lack of integration have generated deep and sometimes hidden fragmentations within UK communities. There is a danger in assuming there is existing cohesion when groups and communities may be simply co-existing through lack of choice, education, or integration.

Case study example: Northside, Workington

A community consultation was carried out with the residents of a local housing estate, which was triggered by a sharp increase in crime and being an area of underreporting. This is a ward area with a significantly low ethnic diversity with 99.1% identifying as white (Census 2021). A repetitive theme that emerged was in relation to access to resources, and the creation of a hierarchy of deserving within the community. This had manifested into a culture of blame, exclusion, and a denial of rights. It could be argued that this was presented in the group who chose to participate, with 73% of respondents being long standing residents, having lived on the estate for 15+ years.

Examples of this, when asked about
- *'what the best thing was about where they lived'*
- *"Nothing, It is a rough run-down area. It is frowned upon by many in this town. I think it would have the potential to be a nice place to live if it wasn't overrun by drug users and people on benefits"*
- *another respondent stated*
- *"At the moment nothing the council are spoiling it giving houses to anyone and been a resident all your life counts for nothing anymore"*

These concerns were also conveyed within the local community centre. This was not viewed as a friendly and inclusive space with comments stating,

- *"It's never been ran for the benefit of the full community"*
- *"I feel the people running it is for their own ends"*

When conducting a consultation session in the centre, management openly spoke of members of the community in a derogatory and dismissive manner.

There is a real sense of being ignored with multiple comments in relation to the institutions not caring, Police, Council and Housing Association.

There was nothing in the consultation that came as a suprise. The impact of years of austerity, for communities already experiencing the impact of intergenerational poverty, poor health, and educational outcomes, combined with high levels of unemployment and a housing allocation policy that operates on a needs basis has changed the landscape of their community, for some beyond all recognition. This has caused deep divisions and an increasing mistrust both towards each other and the institutions. This toxic combination has caused a breakdown in community cohesion, not of the communities making. Therefore, critical to the debate is to consider community cohesion broadly and not just as issues relating to race, migration, specific communities or social cohesion.

6.2.3. There is a need to understand complex intra-community dynamics: A number of people we scope to in the course of the research were community volunteers. This may mean that the salience and importance of community centres could be over-attributed, but nonetheless the role of these places warrants consideration. In particular, it was observed that not all community members engage with community centres:

Jane: *It's the same people that whine that they didn't know there was something on, even*
          though you've done everything possible.
May: *They just will not come.*
Claire: *It's nearly all the same people that come all the time*

When asked for more detail about who these people were, community members were not able to give an answer, and assumptions were made about choices not to attend the community centre. Fault was attributed to the individual rather than acknowledging the lack of consensus around the preferred setting for the activities. Community volunteers explicitly conceptulaised the community centre building itself the community through which a seemingly socially inclusive space is offered. However, from a social psychological perspective, this arguably only applies to members of the ascribed in-group. This may suggest that these participants are enacting some degree of power and authority in their classification of community; one based on people with whom they have existing relationships. This highlights the complex relationships within communities, with potentially long histories, and also complex power relations, with participants exercising symbolic power.

Community volunteers also claimed that some members of the surrounding neighbourhood who do not use the centre have wrongly assumed that they get paid for their work, and that they receive benefits such as free trips. This shows a level of mistrust for formal organisations between different sections within this community, even when in physical proximity to the community centre. Reflecting on this, the community volunteers acknowledged that people often make assumptions, but this recognition is not extended to include reflection about their own assumptions regarding 'others'. This illustrates that attitudes and

perspectives influence community cohesion that cannot be reduced simply to race, religion or class, for example.

6.2.4. There is a need for a cross governmental commitment to community cohesion: The Khan Review (2024) followed on from several other similar reviews over the last 20 years (The Cantle Report 2001, Our Shared Future review 2020, The Casey Review 2015). The stark difference of the Khan review is that the focus is placed on the increasing urgency and preservation of social cohesion as one of the most important questions of our time.

Whilst the Khan Review was welcome as it shone a spotlight on the increasingly critical issue of cohesion, it was troublesome for a number of reasons;

- It provided no statutory obligation to implement the recommendations, like the reports of the same nature that came before.
- It did not consider the impact of Local Government funding cuts.
- It focused on social cohesion as opposed to community cohesion.
- Whilst there is recognition of the decline in civic engagement, it presents this as a relatively new phenomenon. The historical oppression that de communities have faced must be equally appreciated, as how this has created the conditions for political peripherality to thrive in some predominately white, low-income coastal communities.

In response to this, we recommend that both national and local government must understand community cohesion as being embedded in systemic inequalities, funding cuts and services failing to work with our most vulnerable community members effectively. Thereby, a focus on community resilience and ability to withstand exploitation is a starting point, adopting the framework proposed by Hope not Hate last year, based on social connectedness, resource availability, agency and empowerment (Deo & Malik 2024).

We welcome this considered call for evidence and the relational work taking place in the Community Cohesion Unit. This measured response resonates with recommendations for community development work to be embedded in critical praxis, theory related action (Ledwith, 2007). Such an approach opens opportunities to understanding the complexity of community cohesion and developing nuances and sensitive interventions, which will be more likely to meet the needs of communities who are in need of it the most.

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