

Building neighbourhood understanding between new and settled communities

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This paper reports on the use of community-based forums to engage new and settled populations and explores their potential to promote understanding between groups. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) project in Bradford brought together new migrants and settled populations to discuss community and neighbourhood issues. The full study is due to be published in November 2010.

Key points

- Forum participants valued the opportunity for discussion and felt it was a worthwhile experience. Women in particular wanted more forums and contact with other groups.
- Forum participants recognised the limits of what could be achieved through a single encounter, especially given religious and cultural differences and on-going racist behaviour.
- Asian participants in diverse inner-city areas felt the forums helped them learn more about new Eastern European migrants, their housing circumstances and the problems they faced as new arrivals.
- Young men participating in a forum that used photography as a means of communication valued the opportunity to have their voices heard.
- Community forums have the potential to promote learning and understanding between groups, and may open channels of communication.
- Forums can help to build shared understandings of problems affecting the community and neighbourhood, but work may be needed to develop agreement on causes and solutions.
- Forum discussions can help to challenge misunderstanding and negative stereotypes of new and settled groups, and identify areas of commonality on which to build.
- Challenges arise when conducting forums in relation to recruiting new migrants, resources, language barriers, building trust and the potential to reinforce divergent views.

Introduction

The arrival of new migrants is commonly understood to bring tensions in community relations, competition for resources such as housing, and challenges for service delivery in neighbourhoods around the UK. This context creates very real challenges for the current Coalition Government's focus on 'Big Society' and suggests that ground work with communities in many areas would be needed if a common understanding between groups about the needs of an area is to be developed.

A Joseph Rowntree Foundation project brought together new migrants and settled populations living in Bradford in order to explore their experiences of everyday life in the neighbourhood and their views on local housing, neighbourhood and community issues.

The aim has been to identify:

- areas of commonality and divergence in opinion between the groups; and
- the potential for building shared understandings of ways to improve everyday life.

The research used different styles of community-based forums, tailored to particular groups and local concerns, as a key mechanism for engaging new and settled populations. This summary reports on the forum design and an evaluation of the effectiveness of community-based forums as a mechanism for engaging new migrants and settled groups at the neighbourhood scale. It also considers their potential for helping to build shared understanding between groups with different cultural heritages and settlement histories.

Bradford context

New migration over the last decade has brought asylum seekers, refugees and new labour migrants from Eastern European countries joining the EU to Bradford's multi-ethnic inner-city and to areas with a less diverse social mix. Four forums were conducted with new and settled groups living in three localities: two inner-city areas, where established white,

African Caribbean and Asian residents were brought together with Slovakian and Czech new migrants; and one new zone of ethnic diversity and contact, where established white residents engaged in a forum with more recent Filipino migrants to the area.

Community consultations and forum design

The design of the forums was informed by interviews with community development workers, local stakeholders, and residents from new and settled communities in the research localities. Consultation with local residents was facilitated by the use of an eye-catching poster posing questions on attitudes to housing and neighbourhood in the context of 'changing communities'. This provided the researchers with insights into areas of mutual interest and concern for new and settled groups as well as some perceived competition and conflict over housing and neighbourhood resources.

The community consultation took place in 14 community centres with the help of multi-lingual researchers. The findings helped to shape the forum design in terms of:

- *Which groups were brought together*
Two forums brought together groups experiencing overt conflict (i.e. Asian and Slovakian/Czech young men; a range of white and Filipino people) as a test of the forums' capacity for building shared understandings in the face of everyday animosity. The other two forums were designed to bring together new and settled groups where, despite some evidence of tensions, there seemed to be some shared concerns and thus perhaps greater potential for building mutuality, e.g. women with children.
- *Key topics for discussion*
Safety, anti-social behaviour, priorities for housing improvement, and community relations emerged as themes of common concern across groups and neighbourhoods, and were thus selected as a basis for inter-group discussion in the forums.

Three **discussion forums** were held in community venues. Each was attended by 14-23 people recruited through trusted individuals in the new and settled populations. Two of these forums were oriented towards women living in the diverse, mixed-tenure inner areas of Bradford. Most participants were recruited from the established Pakistani population and recent Slovakian and Czech migrants. The third discussion forum involved white and Filipino men and women from mixed age groups living in a predominantly white area of mainly social housing.

The fourth forum sought to engage young Asian and Eastern European men (18-25 years) in discussion. In order to stimulate the interest of this 'hard to reach' group, an interactive **photographic project** was designed. Participants were invited to capture their views and neighbourhood experiences through photographs, using disposable cameras. Fourteen young men were recruited and ten completed the project by participating in an interactive forum to discuss emerging community and neighbourhood issues.

Evaluation of forums

The forums were evaluated for their effectiveness in:

- bringing new and established groups together to discuss community concerns and learn about each other;
- building shared understandings of ways to improve everyday life in their neighbourhood.

Evaluation was undertaken through entry and exit questionnaires designed to capture participants' opinions before and after the forum, observations recorded during the forum, and follow-up in-depth interviews with a sample of 19 of the forum participants.

The learning experience

Most participants agreed that both the discussion and photographic forums provided a positive experience in a safe and convivial space that facilitated engagement with, and learning about, other groups living in their neighbourhood.

Key outcomes from the evaluation process were:

- Forum participants valued the opportunity for discussion and felt that it was a worthwhile experience. Women in particular wanted more forums and contact with other groups.
- Asian participants in the diverse inner-city areas felt that the forums had helped them to learn more about new Eastern European migrants, their housing circumstances and the problems faced by them as new arrivals (especially poverty, racism and racist harassment).
- Forum discussion helped to challenge some misunderstandings and negative stereotypes, particularly in relation to new migrants' access to welfare.
- Young men participating in the photographic forum valued the opportunity to have their voices heard. All participants enjoyed the project and communicating through images.
- There appeared to be an openness to discussion in the forums, despite strong initial animosity in one women's forum and the young men's forum. Some settled residents appeared to moderate their behaviour as they learned more about new migrants' difficult circumstances and as misunderstandings were overturned.

Building shared understandings

Although most forum participants felt that engaging in discussion with other groups was a worthwhile experience, they recognised the limits of what could be achieved through a single encounter, especially given religious and cultural differences and ongoing racist behaviour.

Key messages from this stage of the evaluation are mixed:

- There was some shared understanding of the nature of problems affecting the community and neighbourhood, but less agreement on causes and solutions. For example, anti-social behaviour, harassment and safety problems were widely recognised as undermining the quality of life in the neighbourhood, but there were some

divergent views between new and settled groups on parenting, parental responsibilities and acceptable behaviour.

- Opportunities for learning about other groups through forum encounters brought some empathy from settled groups for new migrants' circumstances. Asians, in particular, acknowledged a shared migrant experience. There was also some appreciation by migrants of settled groups' views on neighbourliness. For example, there was some convergence of understanding about why new migrant women felt the need to search for clothes in recycling bins and how other residents felt about the mess that was often left, and a search for solutions.
- Settled groups saw greater potential for improving relations and a stronger sense of commonalities between groups than the new arrivals. Eastern European migrants were likely to feel vulnerable and that there was no common ground between them and other groups.
- Forums can sometimes reinforce a sense of difference. Participants in one forum felt that the new and settled groups remained far apart after a discussion about parenting and parental responsibility. Participants thought that different groups were 'fighting their own corners'.

Key lessons

The lessons from this project have implications for developing better group relations at the neighbourhood scale. The forums conducted in Bradford provided an opportunity for inter-cultural contact and learning that could be built upon through community development work. There were some immediate positive outcomes

noted during the forums that served to open up the potential for community building and neighbourliness. Asian and Eastern European women in one area, for example, favoured further joint events and suggested clothing exchanges. The young men responded positively to the suggestion of a game of football. Positive encounters also increase the potential for everyday civility. Some participants, for example, reported that they had greeted each other on the street since the forum.

There are challenges when conducting forums. The recruitment of new migrants can be difficult and time-consuming, although trusted individuals from local communities (acting as 'project champions') can play an invaluable role in carrying these types of enterprise forward. Interpreters are needed where there are language barriers, which can moderate the nature of the exchange between groups. Forums are resource intensive to convene, and different types of forum are likely to be needed for differing contexts and groups of people. Exploring areas of potential conflict brings a risk of reinforcing tensions and inter-group differences, although this can be minimised through the use of professional mediators or trusted people from the local community. Even when tensions are evident, there are usually areas of commonality on which to build.

For more information

A full report on the project *Building shared visions of neighbourhood, community and housing futures in Bradford* is due to be published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in November 2010. For further details about the project, please contact Dr Deborah Phillips (d.a.phillips@leeds.ac.uk).