

# Tension monitoring and community cohesion – a guide

## What community tension?

Community tension is a state of community dynamics which may lead to disorder, threaten the peace and stability of communities, or raise the levels of fear and anxiety in the whole, or a part of, the local community.

## What is tension monitoring?

Tension monitoring is the collation and dissemination of intelligence relating to any issues threatening community cohesion with the aim of preventing escalation.

Consistently monitoring levels of community tensions, not just following major international and national incidents, allows agencies to work in more proactive ways, increasing the potential for successful early intervention.

## What do you mean by ‘community cohesion’? How is this different from ‘integration’?

A vision of an integrated and cohesive community is based on three foundations:

- People with different personal characteristics having similar life opportunities
- People knowing their rights and responsibilities
- People trusting one another and trusting local institutions to act fairly

...and three key ways of living together:

- A shared future vision and sense of belonging
- A focus on what new and existing communities have in common, alongside a recognition of the value of inclusion
- Strong and positive relationships between people with different personal characteristics

Community Cohesion is what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together. Integration is what must happen to enable new residents and existing residents to adjust to one another. Integration is a key contributor to successful Community Cohesion.

## **Why is it important?**

Community Cohesion enables a sense of belonging – to a place, to a group, to a community. It helps people get on together in their local area, which in turn helps people feel safer and more secure in their neighbourhoods. This makes people feel better about the circumstances in which they live, increases their positive feelings towards other people and the statutory services which serve them, and, above all, their general feelings of happiness and well-being.

Building community cohesion is about building better relationships between people with different personal characteristics including those from new and settled communities. Experience has shown that violent extremism can emerge from even the most cohesive communities, but that extremist messages are less likely to find support in this environment. So work to build cohesion can help prevent violent extremism but will not be enough on its own.

## **Does community tension always relate to hate crime?**

No, but they are linked. *Action Against Hate: The UK Government's plan for tackling hate crime 2016* makes clear that "hate crime not only has an impact on individual victims, but can also lead to increased feelings of tension, isolation or fear within communities". However, community tension does not just relate to hate crime or incidents of prejudice-motivated behaviour. It is any state of community dynamics which may lead to disorder, or threaten the peace, stability and cohesion of communities.

## **How much is South Gloucestershire affected by community tensions?**

South Gloucestershire is a good place to live and is generally a safe place to be. There are established neighbourhoods living alongside communities in new developments, and we are experiencing a growth in the number of people from different backgrounds and faiths who call the area their home. While the communities of South Gloucestershire are generally well connected with strong relationships between voluntary and community groups, statutory services and South Gloucestershire Council, we acknowledge the challenges that we face. We are experiencing pockets of increased community tension, hate incidents and hate crimes.

We believe that by working together in partnership we will help to create cohesive communities who are resilient in the face of challenges. South Gloucestershire has a recently formed a Community Cohesion steering group to drive this work forward.

## **Examples of things that can indicate community tensions**

The definition of community tensions is wide-ranging, and it is impossible to list all the possible forms this may take. The following examples are based on previous tensions reported locally, and those from other areas of the country:

- Comments and complaints relating to unauthorised encampments on public/private land (e.g. Gypsy Traveller) especially those near to settled communities
- Prolonged neighbourhood disputes or wide-scale antisocial behaviour, or that which has the potential to escalate to involve different families or groups within the community. An example could be 'feuding' groups, or residents talking about 'taking action into their own hands' (vigilantism)
- Negative activity regarding a new tenant or resident, particularly where that person or family is from a 'different' community, race or nation. For example, during discussions around housing with a tenant or community member, a comment is made that "refugees" have been moved into their local area, and that everyone is annoyed because they got a house quicker than local people who they feel should have been given preference
- Incidents of racist or extremist graffiti or stickers in public places – this can be a way for certain groups to 'claim' territory and intimidate others
- A number of similar comments left on official surveys or social media channels, particularly those declaring dissatisfaction, exasperation or impatience with current interventions or services as they relate to another group
- A high-profile or serious incident (rape, murder, assault) attracting media attention
- Reported and unreported (anecdotal) hate crime or prejudice-motivated incidents
- Protests
- Use of flags, posters or other symbols in individual houses or groups of houses, indicating particular allegiances, views or identities e.g. confederate flags being flown
- Organised events involving controversial political groups or figures, especially those taking place in local buildings or community premises
- Rumours and gossip relating to particular individuals in a community, for example labelling individuals as 'paedophiles'. Rumours circulating in a community are as relevant as facts – they can increase tensions and have frequently been the cause of 'sparking off' incidents
- Damage to properties, particularly places of worship or pubs associated with a specific clientele, or minority businesses, which may indicate some form of attack but which may not have been reported

Many incidents may appear to be a 'one-off' and, though damaging, may not cause wider repercussions, tensions or lead to disorder. It can be a matter of judgement about what to report but it is better to err on the side of caution and report such issues rather than not to do so. Sometimes a piece of information may, in itself,

seem to have limited relevance, but when put together with other pieces of information from other sources it may assume much greater significance.

### **Why should I report tensions? What will you do about it?**

We operate in partnership with a range of organisations and agencies, and together we work to keep the area safer and stronger for residents and visitors. But we can't try to address issues unless we know about them. Reporting a tension is the first step. Separate process guidance with the details around how to do this is available. Please contact us for this (details below)

The type of action and level of intervention will always vary depending on the nature of the problem. The aim is to reduce tension and/or deal with its manifestations. Any action taken will always be proportionate to the situation, and all interventions, but particularly those involving the use of specific powers must be proportionate, legal, accountable and necessary. We may not always be able to report back in detail what has been done, but this doesn't mean the information hasn't been valuable, and we will always endeavour to update you directly where this is the case.

No intervention is risk free and could have the effect of raising the 'temperature' so needs to be carefully considered even though timescales might be very short. This is where good community networks, good relationships between agencies and contingency planning comes into play. Knowing about the issue sooner rather than later is vital to supporting this process to work effectively.

### **Sources**

Cohesion Guidance (Dept for Communities and Local Government & National Policing Improvement Agency)

Understanding and monitoring tension and conflict in local communities - A practical guide for local authorities, police service and partner agencies (2nd Edition, ICoCo)

### **Further questions?**

You can contact the Community Safety Team for more information about tension monitoring in South Gloucestershire:

Email: [communitysafetyteam@southglos.gov.uk](mailto:communitysafetyteam@southglos.gov.uk)

Tel: 01454 86 8751