

West Cheshire Together

Draft for comments

Thematic Partnership Leads meeting

Report title	Community Cohesion Strategy
Description	A partnership plan for addressing community cohesion issues in West Cheshire.
Document purpose	This document sets out how we aim to achieve a place where everybody feels comfortable and positive about living and working alongside one another. It has been developed in close consultation with local people and organisations and will be implemented over the next five years.
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Report narrative

Draft Community Cohesion Strategy attached,

Foreword

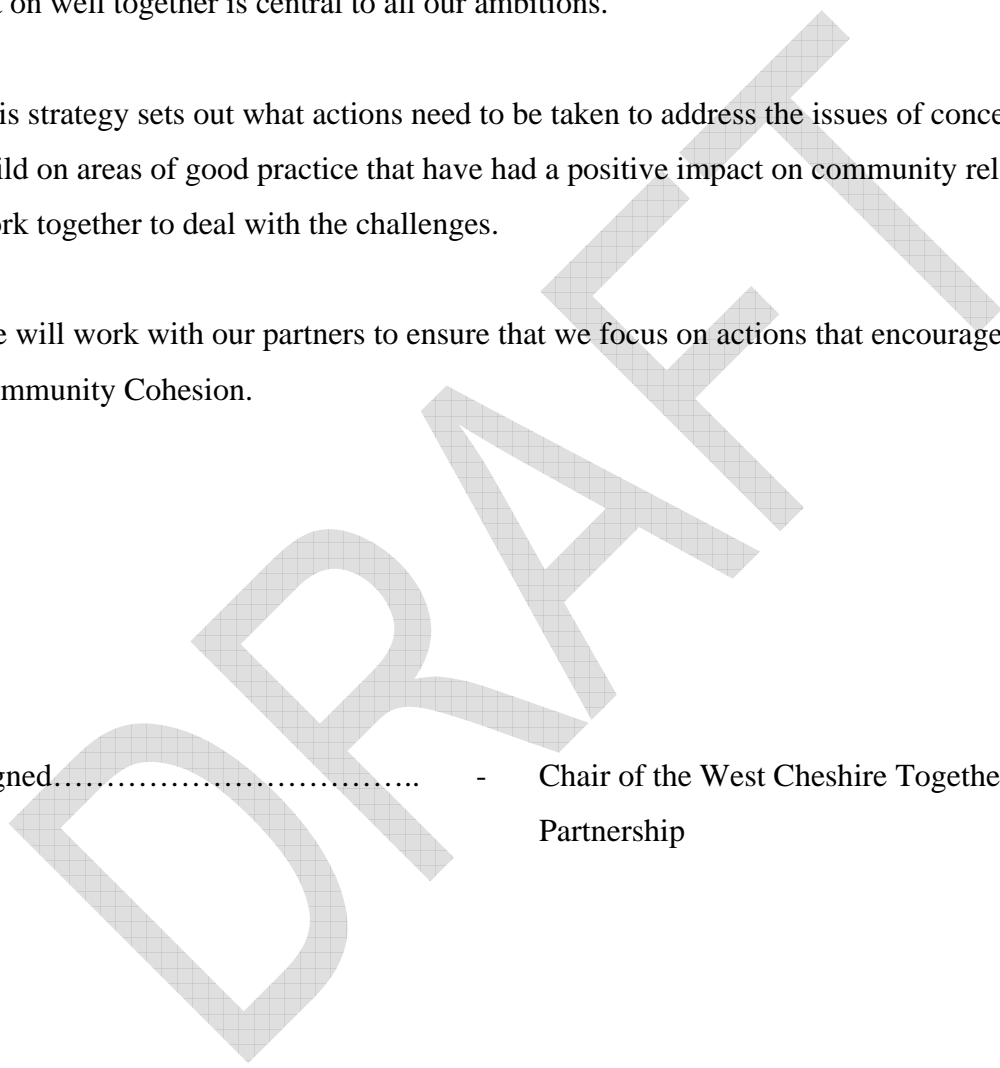
We have a tradition of proud and diverse communities and we all need to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate, contribute and be part of a shared future.

We know, however, that the high quality of life enjoyed by the majority of residents is not enjoyed by all. Inequalities, tensions and disadvantage need to be addressed. We cannot and should not avoid this challenge. Indeed, making West Cheshire a place where people get on well together is central to all our ambitions.

This strategy sets out what actions need to be taken to address the issues of concern, and to build on areas of good practice that have had a positive impact on community relations and work together to deal with the challenges.

We will work with our partners to ensure that we focus on actions that encourage Community Cohesion.

Signed..... - Chair of the West Cheshire Together Partnership



1.1 Purpose and context

In a recent survey local people were asked about their thoughts about living in West Cheshire. As the following responses suggest, there are many positive features of life in the area but equally there are issues we need to address.

“I love the countryside surrounding Chester, the history, the natural beauty. The people of Cheshire are friendly.”

“I can still feel isolated, culturally.”

“Disparate communities still have no focal or visible centre”

“I feel comfortable and safe here.”

(* - Postal survey commissioned by Cheshire West and Chester Council – Jan 2010)

This document sets out how we aim to achieve a place where everybody feels comfortable and positive about living and working alongside one another. It has been developed in close consultation with local people and organisations and will be implemented over the next five years.

This shared Strategy is the first of its kind for the West Cheshire area. It outlines our local vision for a more cohesive community along with a number of key actions to move us closer to this vision. A detailed action plan is attached in Chapter 5.

1.2 What is Community Cohesion?

Community Cohesion is about supporting different groups in a community to get on well together. It lies at the heart of what makes a safe and strong community and is essential to the quality of life of local people. It aims to build a place where people feel confident that they belong and are comfortable mixing and interacting with others. It is not just about ethnicity and encompasses a wide range of issues including age, disability, sexuality, religion, rural issues and social background. According to the national definition an integrated and cohesive community is based on three foundations:

- People from different backgrounds having similar life opportunities;

- People knowing their rights and responsibilities and;
- People trusting one another and trusting local institutions to act fairly.

These foundations enable us to live together with

- A shared vision for the future and sense of belonging
- A focus on what new and existing communities have in common, alongside a recognition of the value of diversity and;
- Strong and positive relationships between different people from different backgrounds.

It is an issue that cannot be tackled by one organisation, group or individual - we all have a part to play. (Cohesion Delivery Framework, CLG 2010)

1.3 Our Vision for Community Cohesion

We want West Cheshire to be a place where whatever your background and wherever you live you do not feel excluded and you are able to take an active part in your community. Every individual will have the opportunity to belong to a strong and confident community built on shared trust, respect and fairness.

All public services will contribute to this vision and be guided by the following values.

- Everyone should be treated fairly, equally and without prejudice
- Cohesion will covers all aspects of life and be about more than just race and culture
- People will be able to be visibly different and diversity will be valued
- People should feel safe comfortable, and valued
- Communicating the truth and combating misinformation will be integral to our services.

1.4 How we developed this strategy and why it is needed

Before setting out to write this strategy, a comprehensive consultation approach took place. Over a three month period, many local community groups (including examples such as Gypsy and Traveller representatives, English as a Second Language groups, Disability Groups etc.) were jointly consulted alongside all the major public service providers (such as Cheshire Police and Western Cheshire Primary Care Trust etc.). This process was carried out jointly with existing consultation on the new Sustainable Community Strategy to ensure a joined up approach to the common strategies.

Key community issues were raised across a number of areas by the groups. Common themes were established at these meetings and events which were grouped into key aims that each sector is contributing towards. This information was matched against existing and new schemes and actions which have been detailed in the Action Plan.

The strategy has been formed from these consultations and existing evidence that has been gathered across all partner organisations. There are already lots of strategies and plans, locally and nationally, which relate to community cohesion. We believe a new strategy is required for three reasons.

Firstly, there is a need for a shared approach between all the key organisations across the Borough. This will not replace or duplicate the good work that is already going on but it will ensure we make the biggest impact by working together in a more coordinated way.

Secondly, West Cheshire needs to develop its own local approach to Community Cohesion. This is because national guidance - often based on a specific set of factors - does not lend itself fully to the unique characteristics of the area. Local communities have expert knowledge about particular local circumstances; and local actions are what will result in integration and cohesion.

Thirdly, we also need to recognise that community cohesion issues are very real in the area. Before we rush to solutions we need to understand what these issues are and what impact they are having.

1.5 Local Issues

In West Cheshire the latest information from the Place Survey shows that 85% of people believe that people from different backgrounds get on well together, this is higher than the regional average for the North West.

West Cheshire also has a number of strengths that need to be recognised as part of a cohesive community:

- High levels of satisfaction with the local area as a place to live;
- Relatively low levels of crime;
- Relatively high levels of satisfaction with public services;
- Access to green open space;
- Opportunities to engage in volunteering.

It is also acknowledged that there are real and pressing cohesion issues that we need to address.

- We have a rapidly **ageing population**. Recent forecasts estimate that the numbers of people aged 65 or above will increase by over 50% by 2027 and those aged 85 or above will more than double. This will have major implications for families, the economy, public services, and intergenerational relations.
- There is evidence of growing issues around **migrant workers** who are sometimes perceived to be taking jobs and housing away from the local community;
- There have been significant cohesion issues in relation to **Gypsies and Travellers**. This has been reflected with disputes over sites and issues around access to key public services. 47% of Gypsy and Travellers in a Cheshire, Halton and Warrington study said that they or their family had been abused, called names or attacked because of their background.
- **Anti Social Behaviour**, often fuelled by **Alcohol** within the more urban areas or exacerbated by the rural isolation of young people, has been experienced across the Borough.

- There are significant **pockets of deprivation** in the area. Thirty communities in the Borough are within the top 20% deprived areas in England. This includes around 14% of the population. These communities suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, low incomes, child poverty, poor housing, health inequalities and higher crime. There is anecdotal evidence that employers discriminate against people seeking work from our most deprived communities such as Lache & Blacon by deselecting them from recruitment processes through their postcodes / address. – known nationally as postcode poverty and leads to perpetuation of inequalities between communities. There are also certain rural communities who suffer from such deprivation.
- There is some concern about **extremist far-right activity** in the more deprived parts of the borough;
- A number of cases of **harassment and discrimination** have been reported to the Cheshire & Warrington Racial Equality Council.
- There is also a high level of incidents in relation to **Hate crime** - (reported and non reported). These have been experienced by the staff and owners of the Bangladeshi and other Asian restaurants in Chester and surrounding areas. They have also been experienced by the lesbian, gay and transgender community. According to Cheshire Police there were 81 homophobic incidents reported in 2007/2008. Homophobic hate crime is higher in Cheshire West and Chester than Cheshire East, Warrington and Halton.
- **Rural isolation and poor access to services** have been experienced by many communities. This may be compounded for certain minority groups particularly women, the lesbian gay and transgender community, and older people.
- Services in the area still need to make more progress to address issues such as access affecting **disabled members of our communities**. Many public buildings in the city centre of Chester have very poor or no access due to historic building fabric and listed buildings constraints preventing physical changes.

Chapter 2 – Building on Best Practice

2.1 Case Studies

There are numerous examples of activities already in place which have enhanced community cohesion in the area. The following are just some examples:

Case Study – West Cheshire Interfaith Forum – Harmony Project

West Cheshire Interfaith Forum is set up to be voice of the faith communities and interfaith groups in West Cheshire. They have been engaging with pupils in a pilot school project with Wharton Heath Primary School to promote shared values and good relations. The Interfaith Forum wish to spread the ‘Harmony Project’ further to schools within the area, to explain different belief, demystify these areas and spread understanding amongst certain age groups. The messages promoted by the group are specifically not trying to convert any pupils to one faith or another but to raise awareness of our communities diversity to spread mutual respect in the local area.

Case Study - Chester University – University Community Liaison Committee

Chester University has a regular University Liaison Committee that is set up to directly address issues that effect community cohesion in the local area surrounding the University and its wider student based communities. This group includes representatives from local community associations, Community Safety Wardens, Housing officers, Local Councillors and other public service partners. They meet to address specific concerns of the local community including House of Multiple Occupancy (HMO’s) which students typically inhabit and can be sources of community concern surrounding vacant periods and anti social behaviour. The total number of student related complaints has dropped by 51.5% over the last 6 academic years, meanwhile the total number of students registered with the University has risen by 33.1% over the same period.

Case Study – Cheshire West and Chester Council - Anti Bullying Group

