

# Employment Learning & Skills PPB

*Executive Summary of the Community  
Cohesion Topic Group Final Report*

September 2007

## **Introduction**

The council and its partners published Halton's sustainable community strategy in April 2006. That is based on sustainable community principles and implicitly recognises the importance of community cohesion. Halton developed a new approach to community engagement in parallel to the development of the community strategy and partner discussions of cohesion took place through that process. The community engagement strategy focuses on civil renewal and ever-greater levels engagement as a mechanism for brokering more cohesive communities.

Halton Borough Council initiated an overview and scrutiny topic on cohesion in Halton in the spring of 2006. Its starting point was some of the difficulties identified that whilst "fashionable", cohesion is a relatively new and abstract concept that is poorly understood in the public sector. Therefore, the scrutiny investigation was primed to generate a debate on cohesion and what it means to Halton. Key to this was not to rely on standard Government definitions but to define it for Halton. The Working Party has thoroughly examined the issue over a 12 month period and come to some well-founded recommendations on the way forward.

## **Recommendations**

In completing its work the Topic Group has identified a number of key recommendations for note and action:

1. It is recommended that the "Vision story" developed during the scrutiny process be adopted as the community cohesion statement for Halton, and form part of the overall corporate equalities statement used in service planning
2. It is recommended that Equality Impact Assessments be extended in scope, in line with LGA guidance, to cover the potential community cohesion impacts of all council policies and programmes. This should be carried out as part of the established service planning process.
3. It is recommended that an Officer Working Group be established, as a sub-group of the Corporate Equalities Group, to specifically look at the needs of new migrants in the borough and to monitor the joint delivery of services to them.
4. It is recommended that the cohesion implications of council activities are monitored and reported to the various Policy and Performance Boards as part of the normal service planning monitoring process. In addition, a data set of cohesion indicators should be set up and populated. These should form an annual progress report on cohesion, which will be monitored by the Employment Learning and Skills PPB
5. It is recommended that the Corporate Services PPB be alerted to emerging concerns about perceived barriers to accessing services. These include opening hours, disabled access, transport, difficult locations, information and communication, bureaucracy, quality of response and perceived attitudes to certain client group. Corporate Services PPB may wish to consider whether it is worthy of further investigation or scrutiny.

6. It is recommended that the council and its partners be informed of the results of this scrutiny topic and recognise that anti-social behaviour has profound implications for cohesion in Halton. It is one of its defining issues. The anti-social behaviour scrutiny topic team and Haltons Community safety Team should take note of the impact of their work on community cohesion and be aware that this will form part of the cohesion monitoring system in Halton.
7. Inter-generational myths and conflicts were identified as a key defining feature of cohesion in Halton. It is recommended that the appropriate teams within the Children's Services and Health and Communities Directorates collaborate on joining up activity to specifically address inter-generational issues within Halton.

### **Definition of Cohesion**

The Government's Commission on Integration and Cohesion recently recommended a new definition of an integrated and cohesive community, which Halton are content with as a national definition. However, the local view clearly expressed in the scrutiny review is that cohesion in Halton needs a clear visionary statement as its backbone. What is needed is a compelling vision story that paints a picture of the cohesive Halton we wish to create. From this debate has arisen a vision story, which includes the following components:

- Everyone should feel they have a sense of belonging and pride in Halton
- Every person feels valued equally, and can play their own part in shaping Halton;
- Everyone understands that there are standards and expectations of behaviour, and will work together to enforce these collectively.
- Everyone has a right to enjoy a good quality of life;
- Everyone can play an active part in the community; it is safe and its sound, and their actions do not inconvenience others.
- Everyone should be able to participate fully in the social, economic and cultural life of the Borough, and be able to contribute their views as part of democratic decision-making processes;
- All agencies recognise they have a collective duty of care for the area
- Making the Borough a safe and pleasant place to live is vitally important, and this environment also needs to be protected and preserved for future generations;
- We should work towards a just society, in which there is understanding and tolerance between and within communities, so that people feel they have a voice and a stake in their community;
- The Borough can be a multi-faith, multi-cultural and multi-racial society, where this diversity is an asset not a problem;
- We will oppose prejudice and discrimination.
- There should be a sense of identity based on acceptance, not stereotypes; and, shaped less by how people see themselves as individuals with rights and expectations, but rather as part of groups and as part of communities.
- Everyone has a right to do things for themselves, to maximise their independence, while agencies ensure they have the necessary levels of support.
- Everyone has fair and easy access to services they need and barriers to participation are removed; and,
- No one is stigmatised because of who they are, or perceived to be, or because of their circumstances or poor choices in their lives.”

## **What Are the Key Cohesion Issues in Halton?**

The Council and its partners want to build a sustainable community that balances and integrates social, economic and environmental progress; that meets current expectations and prepares for future needs; and that respects the diversity of the place and people. The vision and priorities are set out in the community strategy and corporate plan.

The Halton view is that these encompass everything that is needed to build a more cohesive community, and that these things define the issues that enable people to feel a sense of belonging to their community. In sum, the strategic objectives in relation to cohesion are embodied in these strategic components of the community strategy. Halton will probably not develop a bespoke community cohesion strategy. Our view is that cohesion should underpin everything the council and its partners do.

- The key issue remains poverty and deprivation. We need to radically improve the socio-economic well-being of Halton people.
- Differences in wealth remain the defining characteristic in segregating communities and limiting choices in how people take part in society.
- There are concerns about perceived barriers to accessing services. These include opening hours, disabled access, transport, difficult locations, information and communication, bureaucracy, quality of response and perceived attitudes to certain client groups.
- Anti-social behaviour has profound implications for cohesion in Halton. It is one of its defining issues for all residents. This will have to form part of the cohesion monitoring system in Halton.
- Inter-generational myths and conflicts were identified as a key defining feature of cohesion in Halton.
- The pace of demographic change in Halton is accelerating, some of which government statistics are not adequately capturing. Of particular note is the influx of migrant workers from Eastern Europe. Service delivery needs to be sharpened up to cope with the pressures this can bring and adequately support new arrivals.

## **Potential Risks**

Our risks are around the potential failure to:

- Develop an understanding of what community cohesion means in Halton, all its various facets, and how the work of the Partnership can make a difference.
- Develop positive relationships and trust between partners to work collaboratively to improve cohesion in Halton.
- Embed cohesion into the warp-and-weft of how services are designed and delivered, so it is part of core, mainstream activity and not seen as an add-on.

- Develop a communication strategy to explain clearly what we mean, what we are doing, and how we can make a difference.
- Build bridges and understanding between our communities and the generations to get to the root of the myth building about others.
- Develop a set of measures/indicators so that we can baseline the Halton position; compare ourselves to others in an objective way, and track progress over time.
- Develop early interventions – especially in schools and through the youth service – to inculcate a sense of belonging and social responsibility.
- Target interventions properly so people get what they need, when they need, whilst maintaining equity in how services are delivered.
- Develop bespoke (and compulsory) training for all stakeholders on diversity and cohesion issues and approaches in Halton.

Halton uses a risk management model to assess and manage all aspects of its strategic activity. When Executive Board endorses the outcome of the scrutiny review in the autumn, the strategic risk register will be reviewed and amended to incorporate the cohesion risks identified, and to look at using them in the process to develop the new LAA for Halton from 2008-11.

### **Measuring Success**

Measuring community cohesion is not easy. However, a detailed understanding of the communities of Halton is essential to planning service delivery and monitoring progress towards more cohesive communities. There are 54 indicators in the community strategy and 87 in the Local Area Agreement. All of these are in some way relevant to the measurement of cohesion. There is no single measure of community cohesion and we must think carefully about developing key indicators that give a clear understand of the challenges and progress that we make. Therefore, the scrutiny review specifically recommends the adoption of a community cohesion dataset - a basket of indicators, which reflect different aspects of cohesion. In building up this profile of community cohesion in Halton we have tried to look at performance across a whole range of policy areas. These have been baselined and can be monitored over future years.

Halton has put in place a data observatory to collect intelligence on all aspects of life in Halton, both quantitative and qualitative. It is proposed that the Observatory will hold and report on the cohesion indicators. These will form part of the ongoing performance management of the partnership and be included in the annual review process.

### **Cohesion Strategy**

What is important is that it is firmly rooted in the particular circumstances and characteristics of an area. It is clear that in Halton the definition of community cohesion is not based around issues of race, ethnicity and faith. The key issues appear to be around inter-generational conflict, perceived inequalities between areas and estates, and

worries about unequal access to services, transport, jobs, retail and leisure facilities. It is possible to draw out the following most common issues which have been mentioned through this consultation process. These include the need to:

- tackle broad social problems such as anti-social behaviour, crime and the fear of crime, poverty, and the differences and tensions between generations;
- strengthen social networks such as families, friends, neighbours and also ensure that activities are based within defined neighbourhoods;
- get people together to tackle local issues and problems and share experiences;
- address the decline in the quality of life due to the impact of wider decisions around schools, housing and the unreliability of funding to many local projects; and
- encourage and foster the role of the voluntary and community sector in Halton.

Whilst government does not yet demand explicit community cohesion strategies, there is a clear feeling within those circles that some mechanism is needed to exemplify issues and make transparent the expected responses of local partners. On balance, the Group believe the current business-planning framework of the Council in pursuit of the Corporate Plan is sufficient.

## **Conclusions**

We can conclude that in Halton cohesion is about feeling comfortable and positive about living and working alongside your neighbours and taking a sense of pride in Halton and the belief that the future is positive. Therefore, it is about:

- building community links and bringing communities together;
- countering prejudice, misperceptions and discrimination;
- promoting opportunities for all creating a sense of shared futures;
- listening to all voices in the community, especially young people;
- addressing community concerns and tensions;
- an emphasis on a new model of rights and responsibilities ;
- an emphasis on mutual respect and civility;
- celebrating life in Halton in all its aspects;
- understanding, valuing and sharing community differences.

So, it is about relationships and because of this we need to think about policies, actions and services in slightly different ways. Therefore, we should make efforts on:

- Understanding the Local Context and focus on 'local distinctiveness' and local approaches, including brokering debate in Local Communities
- 'Shared futures' – focusing on what we have in common while valuing our diverse histories – and celebrating success
- Providing Community Leadership and support for individuals and groups
- Focusing on Young People and Learning
- Intelligence Gathering
- Re-engineering Services to Deliver Accessibility for All
- Mainstreaming Cohesion in All That We Do
- A focus on migration, both in terms of integration and in the context of 'settled communities'