

# Written evidence from the Nuffield Foundation [CCI0047]

## Introduction

The Nuffield Foundation is a charitable trust which funds research to improve social policy. In 2022, we collaborated with the British Academy to award £1.1m to six research teams for projects aimed at exploring how local communities function and can improve people's lives. [Understanding Communities](#) includes the use of innovative methods, such as art-based approaches and social network mapping, and focuses on producing evidence-based policy and practice recommendations, and capturing lived experience. We have encouraged the research teams to share their emerging insights directly with the committee. We have also summarised the most relevant projects to the social cohesion inquiry in this submission, drawing both on *Understanding Communities* projects and on our wider research portfolio. In addition to the findings included in this submission, there are further projects underway which are relevant, but have not yet reported their findings. These include:

- [Research led by University College London](#) about the use of administrative data to gain insight into community wellbeing.
- [Research led by the University of Birmingham](#) about how schools can more effectively integrate pupils who need to change schools.
- [Research from the UCL Institute of Education](#) into the consequences of the Department for Education's Fundamental British Values initiative.
- [Research led by Helen Lomax](#) about the role of place for the well-being of children growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.
- [Research led by Meta and the Behavioural Insights Team](#) about how social capital can affect people's life outcomes.

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

We funded [research from the University of Kent and the Belong Network](#) into how social cohesion was affected by the Covid pandemic. The research was based on surveys which examine levels of unity and division between different groups, and the attitudes which groups hold towards one another. The research found that there was a period soon after the first national lockdown, when a strong sense of cross-national unity was shared across all social groups, but that divisions had re-emerged by the early summer of 2020. Regarding division across age groups, ethnic groups, religion or nationality, well over 30% of respondents (and up to 45% in some cases) perceived groups to be opposed or strongly opposed to others. While perceptions of the seriousness of discrimination increased for all groups in the summer of 2020 (possibly due to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement at that time), groups who experience a certain type of discrimination were more likely to consider it as serious than those who don't. The level of discrimination reported by Black and Muslim respondents in this research was very high, with four fifths of Black respondents and three quarters of Muslim respondents reporting that they had experienced some form of discrimination in the last month. In June 2021, 64% of respondents thought the UK was growing more divided, and only 16% thought it was growing more united. These findings demonstrate a significant challenge for ensuring social cohesion in the UK.

## What are the primary barriers and threats to community cohesion?

Nuffield-funded research has highlighted some specific barriers to the integration of migrants, which may represent a threat to community cohesion. These are grouped below into two themes:

## 1) Attitudes of the non-migrant population

We have funded two projects which examine the effects of migration on the wellbeing of the non-migrant population. The first – a [research project led by the University of Leeds](#) - looks at the effect of immigration on subjective measures of well-being in the UK-born population. The research found that higher immigration seems to have a small negative impact on mental wellbeing for the wider population, but that this was particularly notable for certain sub-groups. These groups include older respondents (those aged 60+), and those with lower incomes, no formal educational qualifications or without a job. The researchers point out a correlation between these groups, and those who voted 'Leave' in the Brexit referendum. The research suggest that some UK-born residents may be distressed by inflows of migrants based on the belief that it will lower their economic opportunities, even though the evidence suggests that this is misguided. It also draws on social identity theory to suggest that, for certain people, migrants are an “outgroup” who they consider untrustworthy, and that more immigration therefore impacts their subjective wellbeing. The researchers suggest that these findings highlight the importance of tackling misleading stereotypes (such as “job-stealing immigrants”) and appealing to ‘national self-interest’ motives by drawing people’s attention to the economic and social contribution of migrants (e.g. to an ageing society). They argue that this may be an effective strategy for lessening the negative impact of immigration for some people’s sense of overall well-being.

Further [research led by the University of Birmingham](#) looked at the impact of ethnic diversity on well-being and health. It found that, in the short-term, individuals react negatively on average to changes in religious diversity, but that this fades over time. They examined the psychological mechanisms involved in these processes using questions in the analysed surveys about trust in others in society and frequency of contact with ‘outgroups’. They found that the initial negative effects were being driven by a reduction in trust of neighbours from countries with increased religious diversity. However, after a period of four to eight years, individuals started to report mixing with people from a different background, which improved their trust in others around them, promoting a positive impact on their quality of life. Importantly, the initial negative effect, whereby diversity was associated with reduced trust, was fully cancelled out by the positive effect of mixing with members of different groups.

## 2) Integration into the Labour market

Two more Nuffield-funded projects look at how migrants integrate into the Labour market, particularly focusing on refugees. [Research led by the Queen Mary University of London](#) in 2019 looked at the impact of different asylum and refugee policies on the socio-economic integration of host countries. Using data from across Europe, they found that refugees show a considerable gap in employment and other labour market outcomes, relative to immigrants with similar individual characteristics, and that this “refugee gap” only closes after 10-15 years of residence. The research suggested that being exposed to an employment ban on arrival reduces refugees’ employment probability in the medium-term by 15%, and delays economic integration of refugees by four years on average. Moreover, the existence of a ban itself, rather than its duration, was the main driver of this (i.e. short term bans still had long-term effects). The findings suggest that economic integration of refugees is not easy, but that Government policy can make a real difference. As well as the negative effect of work bans, the researchers highlight that restricting residential mobility of asylum seekers also damages their employment prospects. They conclude that asylum policies are often managed with an excessive attention to short-run effects, and underestimate the importance of long-run benefits.

Further [Nuffield-funded research from COMPAS at the University of Oxford](#) looks at the economic integration of refugees in the UK. The analysis suggests that the employment gap between the UK-born population and asylum migrants starts at over 30 percentage points for

those who have been in the country less than 5 years, but decreases to below 3 percentage points after 10-15 years, only fully converging after asylum migrants have been in the UK for over 25 years. COMPAS's research particularly highlights the high level of long-lasting health problems in the asylum population – both physical and mental - and the negative impact this has on their ability to work. They suggest that policy makers who are interested in the economic integration of asylum migrants may benefit from first considering how to address these health issues to remove this barrier to work. They also highlight the negative effects of employment bans upon arrival, suggesting that this could particularly amplify mental health problems among the asylum migrant population. The case for this may be even more important in 2025, when the waiting time for asylum decisions has increased significantly compared to when this research was published in 2019.

These findings about the impact of health issues on the asylum migrant population is reinforced by [Nuffield-funded research from the University of Birmingham, in conjunction with Doctors of the World UK](#) into the wellbeing of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers. More than half of the people included in their analysis had an immediate mental or physical health concern, with many reporting challenges with accessing affordable healthcare. The report made various recommendations to improve this, including all residents of the UK being registered with a GP, regardless of their migration status.

### **How can social media impact community cohesion?**

We funded a [project led by Bangor University](#) into the role of Communities and Connections in Social Welfare Legal Advice. It found that some people used social media to find out what was going on in their communities and to connect with local activities, community centres and hubs, as well as to seek informal advice. Facebook was by far the most mentioned platform, especially the local community pages. Facebook was popular with interviewees because it acts as a virtual space for communities that also exist in real physical spaces, usually linked by geography but also by people's characteristics, attributes and affiliations. These findings demonstrate one context in which social media can benefit community cohesion.

### **What can be done at local and national level to improve community cohesion?**

The research from [the University of Kent and the Belong Network](#) into social cohesion (which was discussed above) found that the six local areas that had prioritised social cohesion were more resilient when the Covid crisis struck and maintained higher levels of trust, neighbourliness, social connection and volunteering. The researchers recommended a long-term strategic plan to improve social cohesion, identifying five key levers for doing this:

1. **Leadership and narratives that stress interdependence at national, regional and local levels.** This means acknowledging real differences and disagreements, regional and national autonomy and pride of place, but within the broader context of a strong mutual interdependence.
2. **Actively build trust within every community and between communities.** Every local authority should establish and sustain a local cohesion strategy appropriate to their local needs and means. Local government requires the resources to work together with communities, business and public services to develop, implement and realise a shared vision of place. This should include strengthening local social infrastructure and promoting high quality bridging opportunities between local groups.
3. **Empower local government to build cohesion, trust and resilience.** A small investment of £50 million would enable the success of the Integration Areas programme and learning generated by it, to be shared and put into practice much

more widely. Local authorities should use the funding to employ a full-time 'cohesion coordinator'.

4. **Support a sustained uplift in volunteering.** Policies and practices are needed to support a permanent increase in the number and breadth of people volunteering in their local communities. National government should work more closely with local government and the volunteering sector to bring forward a comprehensive system of support for a sustained uplift in volunteering that is able to respond to local purpose and develop cross-locality cooperation.
5. **Tackle deprivation and discrimination.** Establish cooperative relationships across society where people can trust that it is in their and everyone else's interests to tackle and remove fundamental inequalities and deep-rooted discrimination and prejudice of all forms.

### **What examples are there of best practice which has positively impacted community cohesion?**

The Understanding Communities projects highlight the importance of community places and spaces to help people form connections. This includes [research led by London South Bank University](#) about whether Transformative Justice can effectively promote social cohesion. Transformative Justice seeks to develop community accountability and engagement as an alternative to top-down approaches to criminal justice. This research used an arts-based approach to Transformative Justice, and found that this can help communities examine their experiences with justice, look beyond the binary of victims and offenders, and have an increased understanding of 'grey areas'. The researchers argue that this shows the potential to promote social cohesion and equality in local communities. They also find that community building and collective problem solving cannot be rushed, as people need time to develop bonds and create the sense of community required for meaningful change.

A further [Nuffield-funded project led by Glasgow Caledonian University](#) looks at how community asset acquisition impacts the empowerment, resilience, and wellbeing of rural communities across the four nations of the UK. The transfer of public assets into community ownership is promoted at a policy and public authority level as potentially benefiting communities, including by addressing some of the long-standing challenges faced in rural communities, such as isolation and out-migration of young people. But this research found inconsistent, complex, and overly bureaucratic processes for this, particularly in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with a lack of strategic capital funding to support rural communities to purchase, renovate, and maintain assets. The researchers recommend streamlined, and consistent asset acquisition processes across all local governments, and standardised measurement tools for social value which would enable communities and public authorities to quantify community benefit.

Another [project led by Teeside University](#) explored the use of nature - such as parks, rivers, beaches and woodlands—to facilitate social integration between different communities, including migrants. They found that the natural environment helped to enhance social interactions, build new bonds, and foster community cohesion. Some participants also reported that engaging with nature helped them maintain their cultural identities and emotional wellbeing. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating nature-based strategies into integration policies. The research also looked at existing barriers to accessing natural spaces, which included financial constraints, and safety concerns – including experiences of encountering racism in natural settings. The research recommends developing accessible and safe natural spaces that involve the whole of the local community in their planning and management, and developing programs which promote intercultural exchange within these settings.

## How should community cohesion be best approached in schools?

Our funded-research in this area covers two key themes:

### 1) How children can drive community cohesion

A [project led by Middlesex University](#) looks into the contribution children can make to community integration and how this can be encouraged. The project focused on Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen and Preston, and worked with hundreds of children, parents and local stakeholders to develop their findings. They found school is most often the way that children and parents connect across difference, but that children's contribution to community integration depends on how comfortable parents and carers feel about this.

The research recommends that local authorities should support and invest in schools to enable them to act as community hubs, and invest in accessible and safe green spaces for children. They found that sport is a hotspot for connection and shared belonging, particularly football clubs, and that there are opportunities for other services, such as arts groups and libraries, to learn from how local football clubs operate and create spaces in which diverse families feel similarly welcomed.

### 2) How school admissions can impact community cohesion

[Nuffield-funded research from Bristol University](#) suggests that school choice and admissions can lead to social segregation. Their research shows that the vast majority of secondary schools still use geography-based criteria, like catchment areas, distance, or travel time, to prioritise which children are offered places. This results in families with lower incomes being 'priced out' of access to the best schools due to house prices, patterns of segregation within neighbourhoods being reinforced, and schools lacking diversity in terms of children's social and cultural backgrounds.

To overcome these problems, the research suggests schools could allocate some or all their places through other means, such as:

- Ballot – a purely random allocation amongst children who have applied.
- Fair Banding – selection by ability but with places allocated to children with a range of test scores, ensuring a 'spread' of pupils with different capabilities.
- Pupil Premium – prioritising places for disadvantaged children eligible for Pupil Premium funding e.g. from families on low-incomes and/or benefits.

More widespread use of a mixture of these options, perhaps in combination with a quota or some geographical criteria, could help eliminate the problems of the location-based approach. Reduced segregation would also help children learn with and from people with a range of diverse backgrounds and perspectives, providing a broader set of social understandings and experiences and equipping them for a fuller, richer, more successful life.

We also funded [research from University College London](#) into the effects of Free Schools on student outcomes and on neighbouring schools. Free schools were introduced by the coalition government to make it possible for parents, teachers, charities and businesses to set up their own schools. The research finds that free school enrolment was associated with increased social segregation in the primary phase. While the broader trend in England has been toward decreasing segregation over time (with primary school children more likely to encounter children dissimilar to themselves in 2020 compared to 2011), areas in which primary free schools opened saw an opposite trend, with modest increases in segregation for students speaking English as an additional language, Black, Asian and ethnic minority

students, and White British students. In the secondary phase, increases in segregation were not statistically significant on average. There was however a modest increase in segregation for White British secondary students in areas with lower ethnic diversity, and in rural areas. The researchers attribute this increased social segregation to competition between schools and to different ways in which some free schools have created new options for parents to choose schools that are more homogenous than their local area, including both “self-segregation” by minority ethnic parents and perceived “white flight”.

## **Conclusion**

The above is a summary of the relevant findings on social cohesion from research funded by the Nuffield Foundation. We are happy to talk further about these findings, answer any questions, or facilitate introductions if helpful.

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