

Countering the impact of

myths & misinformation

what local authorities can do

Introduction

When a council acts to promote the interests of its communities, its actions may be misunderstood, or even actively distorted, to feed negative myths and misconceptions on race and immigration. This undermines cohesion across communities and erodes trust in the council.

The circulation of negative and potentially disruptive messages on race and immigration, spread with the aim of causing community conflict, may disrupt community relations in an area.

There are two challenges: to clearly and consistently communicate the council's aim of creating thriving communities within the context of diverse needs and limited resources, and to counteract negative myths and rumours with reliable information.

This leaflet sets out some of the actions that can be taken by councils to meet these challenges. The recommendations should improve transparency and accountability for the benefit of all.

Strategic communications

The Home Office has reported that one of the major challenges for the *Community Cohesion Pathfinders* is in finding ways in which they can communicate a positive message about community cohesion to a wider audience. Councils need strategic and informative communications programmes, which support the council's objectives, and promote social cohesion and good race relations.

Of course, councils should be trusted as communicators on all things: all information provided by the council needs to be

Rumours

Rumours spread in one council area alleged that mosques were paid for with public money, when support was in fact through subscription. When one town's traditional owl emblem failed to appear on new street furniture, it was claimed this was because the owl is offensive to Muslims. The missing emblem had in fact been due to an administrative error when the furniture was ordered.

accurate and reliable. Councils need to be professional in their communications activities, and rely on professional staff who can communicate on all aspects of council activity and community interests, and build good relations with the media.

Effective communications strategies involve a number of elements; engagement with local media, activity with young people through schools, proactive websites, newspapers and magazines, leaflets and advertising, and a range of individual events and campaigns that link into community activities and support multi-sector partnerships. These will all come into play in a strategy to counter myths and misinformation.

Councils as reliable sources of information

Research findings demonstrate the need for accurate and fairly presented information from a reliable source to counter misconceptions that racialise issues of local concern. Experiences of strong local variation in community disturbances and other indications of divided communities suggest that these misconceptions should be tackled at the local level.

Research into the impact of policy misconceptions linked to the success of far right political parties in London in 2005 by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust concludes that “a clear and subtle series of locally based public relations / information initiatives could make a difference”. The Trust advises that councils are in the key position to provide reliable and independent information.

Councils’ powers and responsibilities

Research and information powers under the 1972 Local Government Act, and the power of well-being introduced by the 2000 Act, should cover most activities generated by a

Linking misinformation to local concerns

During an election campaign in one London borough where the lack of affordable social housing was an issue of considerable concern, a far right party claimed that African families were receiving £50,000 grants to move into the borough.

communications strategy that supports community cohesion. By promoting better knowledge of the council’s activities, and the reasoning behind decisions such as the allocation of resources, councils will improve transparency and accountability to their communities. The collection of evidence to support policy decisions and improved communications will also impact positively on community cohesion.

A communications strategy will need to take account of the council’s general duty to promote race equality under the Race Relations Act, which requires it to have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination
- promote equality of opportunity
- promote good relations between people of different racial groups.

Statutory guidance on the new duty includes advice on how to meet this duty, and the type of information that may be needed to assess the impact of policies. The guidance should assist councils in working out how to prioritise activities as part of their race equality scheme, and in making the case for gathering the information needed to support their communications strategies.

Tools for communication

Awareness raising programmes

As part of an annual anti-racism education programme in secondary schools, young people designed four different anti-racist slogans that appeared on the sides of local buses and on posters during the run-up to local elections. An independent survey showed that one-third of people remembered seeing the slogans. During the campaign, there was a 50 per cent reduction in the number of racist incidents recorded compared with the same period in previous years. *CRE*

Celebrating St George: A metropolitan borough is organising St George's day activities emphasising shared values for the whole community, so sidelining an annual parade with negative racist and nationalist connotations organised by a far right party. *CRE*

Websites

Council websites can carry well signposted myth busting information, and questions and answers on asylum seekers and other controversial issues. Information for these sites can be gathered locally or obtained and adapted from national sources such as the Refugee Council.

Leaflets, signs and posters

Urgent or high profile single issues can be the subject of leaflets and signs for distribution or display in public venues. Poster campaigns that display local people in a wide range of occupations and circumstances, and that illustrate ethnic diversity, also play a positive part in promoting awareness.

Schools

Children and young people, seen as citizens of the future, and as a gateway and influence on family culture, are the focus of imaginative initiatives. A 'culture matters' project, carried out in primary and secondary schools whose pupils came from varied backgrounds, can emphasise commonalities. The production of a video by a group of young people and distributed around local schools and agencies, can record individual and collective perceptions about living in an area. *Pathfinders*

Fact or fiction columns

A regular column in the council magazine, received by all households, sets the record straight about some myths and false rumours circulating about the council. The council provides factual information that contradicts fictions about allocation of resources, cover-ups of racist incidents, boundary reorganisation, provision of mobile phones for asylum seekers, supposed bans on Christmas music, and flying the union flag on council buildings. In one council the column is hosted by the chief executive who has said: "Citizens can read what I'm saying and see that I believe what I'm saying."

Ingrained misconceptions

While there is an urgent necessity to counteract negative influences and messages, particularly where aimed at causing disruption, experience of the Pathfinders shows that where perceptions are ingrained, general myth-busting or awareness programmes have little effect. More direct routes into communities are needed to provide a platform for challenging such perceptions. Measures are needed to tackle ingrained perceptions, as well as to challenge rumours, myths and misconceptions.

Local media

Misinformation in local and national media can have serious consequences in a locality, yet editors and reporters pursuing a news agenda do not necessarily appreciate the impact that stories may have on community cohesion. Some Pathfinder authorities are engaging the media in strategic debates about the nature of the community, and the commercial benefits to the press of representing all sections of the community. Lessons learnt show that a more positive proactive relationship can deliver benefits. A compact with the editors of local newspapers can create greater awareness of the issues and mutual confidence. The editor of the local newspaper can be invited to chair public debates on issues of local concern. A local newspaper may carry a fact or fiction column, or regularly feature information of value to a minority community. Even where co-operation is difficult, the council can adopt a policy of consistently correcting misinformation in the local press. Helpful in assisting councils and the press in getting to grip with the issues, the MediaWise Trust website carries guidance for journalists on the need to report asylum and immigration issues accurately and fairly.

Scanning incidents

In partnership with police, community and voluntary organisations, race equality councils, and others, councils can ensure that the emergence of rumours and misinformation, and occurrence of racist incidents are monitored. Any instances that may be indicators of potential community conflict can be anticipated, so that diversionary steps can be taken, and rumours contradicted at an early stage. There are options for the council to publish counter-information itself, ensure that misconceptions are challenged in the local press, or to engage partner organisations in providing accurate information, or by funding or otherwise supporting the voluntary sector to do so.

A newspaper editor

“A cohesive community is a community which feels comfortable with itself, its people are involved in what is happening in those communities... they are more likely to turn to their local newspaper to find out what is happening.”
Community Conflict

Resource mapping

As many myths and misconceptions arise over the availability and allocation of resources, being able to obtain and provide access to reliable information on the use of resources and on future plans is critically important. Arrangements for gathering, managing, and disseminating information ought to be included in policy planning, with particular care taken where transparency is needed to avoid perceptions of unfairness, and where the reasons for a decision need to be widely understood. Home Office guidance on regeneration schemes also advises that such information should be targeted not only at the recipient community, but also any adjoining communities.

Supporting the roles of individuals

Elected members, equalities officers, directors of communications and their staff, strategic policy staff and chief executives will all have a pivotal role to play in a communications strategy. Elected members and council leaders have key

roles to play on a non-partisan basis, as community representatives:

- developing and supporting the communications strategy
- challenging misinformation and rumours
- explaining and promoting understanding of council decisions
- resolving conflict
- building partnerships.

Council officers, too, need the confidence and skills to be able to counter myths and promote good race relations. This will involve putting forward the facts, and also making sense of the facts by explaining the reasoning underlying council decisions.

These roles may well involve dealing with controversial issues, in a context where individuals may fear antagonising people further, and which require skills and sensitivity and assertiveness. Pathfinder authorities have invested time and resources in training and support to equip people with the skills and confidence to take on proactive roles. Councils should consider training requirements of officers and members. A group of local government officers and colleagues in the North West has set up 'Cohesion Matters', supported by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. This organisation has developed a new set of training materials, and may be able to help identify and meet training and development needs.

Cross party agreements

Where possible, lead members should aim for cross-party support for the communications strategy. Cross-party engagement can include members of different parties chairing public meetings, holding shadow portfolios, and engaging in overview and scrutiny of communications and community cohesion issues. At election time, politicians should obtain a joint declaration of ground rules on avoiding misinformation and racist campaign comments.

Making the argument

An often reported misconception is that “all government monies go to Asian areas”, and the Home Office warns that regeneration projects may be hampered by a lack of awareness among residents of the scheme in their area, leading to perception that areas are receiving funding unfairly, and on a basis other than real need.

Members of voluntary and community groups may also be involved in delivering positive messages, and need to be included in support and training plans. Partners in local strategic partnerships will also benefit from being included in training programmes.

Election periods

Local authorities are able to proactively promote better race relations even during an election period. The code of recommended practice, which regulates local authority publicity, does not prevent councils, while exercising proper caution, from providing accurate and impartial information without making reference to a particular political campaign. Indeed, it may be necessary to take action to counter rumours, myths and misinformation during an election campaign, for example, where election materials contain misinformation about the area or services provided by the council that is considered likely to have an impact on community cohesion during the run-up to or following the election.

Councils have experience of countering misinformation while remaining within the code of practice. Councils with a recent history of social disruption report on the value of maintaining a consistent approach to countering myths and misconceptions throughout the year, and, where there are candidates from parties taking a negative stance on immigration and nationality issues, taking extra care with the role of elected members during the run-up to elections. By establishing a consistent approach, the council demonstrates independence and impartiality.

The frequency of council publications may be relevant: a CRE case study suggests that a weekly council newspaper may provide the opportunity to give accurate and impartial information on council services and policies during an election period. The council could, as an alternative, provide accurate and impartial information to the local press. Accurate information could also where appropriate be provided by voluntary or community sector partners (these will be subject to similar constraints if funded by the local authority). Other public sector organisations may also have a role to play in ensuring that inaccuracies are corrected.

Local authorities need information; monitoring the appearance of rumours and misinformation from the local press, and through partners in the community and public sector, will be particularly important in the run up to elections. From the point of view of the council, every legitimate effort must be made to ensure that campaign posturing and tactics do not cause lasting damage to community cohesion.

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Commission for Racial Equality:
Code of Practice on the Duty to Promote Race Equality
http://www.cre.gov.uk/downloads/duty_code.pdf

The duty to promote race equality, a Guide for Public Authorities
http://www.cre.gov.uk/downloads/duty_guide.pdf

Promoting Good Race Relations, a guide for public authorities
<http://www.cre.gov.uk/duty/grr/index.html>

Cohesion Matters:
Training toolkit advice and support
www.cohesionmatters.co.uk

Conflict resolution:
Community Conflict, causes and action Lemos & Crane, 2004
www.lemosandcrane.co.uk

Home Office resources:
Community Cohesion advice for those designing and developing area based initiatives
http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs2/abi_advice.pdf
Community cohesion pathfinders, information and practitioners toolkit
<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/co/mrace/cohesion/pathfinder.html>

Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust:
The Far Right in London: a challenge for local democracy?
The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd, York, 01904 625744.

The MediaWise Trust:
Reporting asylum and refugee issues
www.mediawise.org.uk

Refugee Council:
Frequently asked questions about asylum
www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

LGIU publications:
The Right Side of the Law: a guide to local authority publicity
Scrutiny of Community Cohesion: an LGIU Guide
These can be ordered from:
Central Books, 99 Wallis Road, London E9 5LN.
Tel: 0845 458 9910,
Fax 0845 458 9912,
Email: mo@centralbooks.com

Local authority websites:
www.wiganmbc.gov.uk
www.oldhamir.org.uk
www.burnley.gov.uk