



BRIDGE: Building Refugee Inclusion and Development through Group Engagement

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Key messages

- Inclusion and community cohesion are multi-dimensional, operating on individual, community and policy levels.
- Creative methods can support inclusive and accessible environments between diverse communities by:
 - reducing language barriers by utilising creative expression as a universal tool, which in turn can reduce isolation, stigma and discrimination.
 - supporting diverse communities in navigating trauma, building resilience and confidence in communities.
 - celebrating shared heritage and facilitate a space to share creative skills, providing new opportunities for diverse communities to build their capacity.
- Creative approaches can address the multi-layered dynamics of inclusion and community cohesion through facilitating inclusive governance, creating spaces for diverse communities to connect and share skills, whilst serving as a vehicle for intercommunity education.

BACKGROUND

Policy Context

The 2024 riots, which spread across twenty-five towns in the United Kingdom, highlighted the complex interplay between community cohesion, public perception, and immigration discourse. Policy frameworks have often focused on building strong community networks, tackling social fractures, and promoting equal opportunities for all residents (for example, the Conservative Government's 'Integrated communities action plan'; HM Government, 2019). However, the multi-layered nature of integration and community cohesion is often overlooked, despite the transformative potential for creative, capacity-building approaches to foster inclusive and cohesive communities.

Note on terminology: Through the course of our research, we uncovered stigma and unconscious bias associated with the terms 'refugee', 'migrant' and 'asylum seeker', influenced by media representation and political constructs. For this report, we adopted the term 'sanctuary seeker', offering a humanitarian approach to individuals fleeing persecution and seeking refuge within the UK. We appreciate that sanctuary seeking is used to refer to other marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as those experiencing homelessness and those fleeing domestic violence. However, in this case, we are making specific reference to refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant communities.

Underpinning Research

BRIDGE (Building Refugee Inclusion and Development through Group Engagement) was a feasibility study which sought to develop transitional spaces for sanctuary seekers in the UK, with an emphasis on the role of creative methodologies as a global language to reduce isolation and nurture belonging and unification. BRIDGE was based in Barrow, Cumbria, and worked with twenty members of a predominantly white, low-income community (which we refer to as the local community) and eight members of the sanctuary seeking community. Each group engaged in creative, participatory workshops, where clothing and printmaking textiles were used to elicit conversations about home, belonging, and integration. The research also involved 10 individuals from the third sector and local government in order to understand their perspectives. We recognised the short-term nature of the data collection and the small sample size; however, the project successfully achieved its aims in identifying key themes for further research.

UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS TO INCLUSION WITHIN COASTAL COMMUNITIES

Sanctuary seeking, local and stakeholder groups articulated their experiences of how inclusion between diverse communities was influenced by forces operating on numerous levels (see Figure 1).

INDIVIDUAL INTERACTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

The individual barriers listed below were influenced by community and wider policy factors. However, within the context of this report, we have referred to how these were felt to impact on the individual:

- **Language barriers:** Local communities felt that a lack of shared language presented challenges in connecting sanctuary seekers with others in the community. Stakeholders felt that limited multi-lingual resources restricted access to services, compounded by *systemic barriers* such as English lessons being unavailable to sanctuary seekers until they had been in the UK for six months.
- **Compromised health and wellbeing:** Poor health and wellbeing impacted sanctuary seeking and local communities, with both frequently reporting trauma, loneliness and isolation. Accessing health services was universally recognised as a *systemic barrier* facing all communities.
- **Economic restrictions and oppression:** Sanctuary seeking community members often commented on their reliance on state aid and were keen to find ways to support themselves economically. In contrast, welfare was not mentioned by local communities, despite many participants being in receipt of some form of state aid. Daily financial struggles, however, were a dominant theme.
- **Limited inclusive religious spaces:** Members of the sanctuary seeking communities described how practicing faith could create a sense of belonging within the community. However, they described feelings of alienation due *language barriers* within the churches they attended. Stakeholder organisations suggested that some local church communities could unintentionally offer spaces that were not welcoming. The role of faith and religion did not feature in discussions with local communities.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN GROUPS, ORGANISATIONS, AND COMMUNITIES

- **Lack of inter-community engagement:** Those seeking sanctuary expressed fear of engagement beyond their immediate communities and were more likely to engage in new activities if supported by a trusted person. Local communities provided examples of inviting sanctuary seeking communities into shared community spaces but felt that engagement was limited. Stakeholders expressed concern that although shared spaces may be offered by the local communities, there was often a lack of understanding regarding the complex challenges faced by the sanctuary seeking community in accessing these spaces.
- **Stigma and discrimination:** Sanctuary seeking, local and stakeholder groups alike noted that sanctuary seeking communities were vulnerable to stigma and discrimination from some members of the local community, often shaped by *media misinformation* concerning the motivations for seeking sanctuary in the UK, relating to *economic restrictions*.

CHANGE IN THE COMMUNITY

- **Media Misinformation:** There was universal concern about the propagation of fake news shared via social media and the circulation of misinformation about the resources that sanctuary seekers receive (relating to *economic restrictions*). Members of the sanctuary seeking community were aware of the “negative projection” of their communities in the UK media, leading to *stigma and discrimination*.
- **Systemic barriers:** Sanctuary seeking communities shared their experience of multiple challenges navigating various systems. These included, but were not limited to, access to mainstream and adult education, child welfare, social services, asylum processes and housing. These challenges were exacerbated by the *language barriers* and *economic restrictions* faced by the sanctuary seeking communities, hindering participation and inclusion in the broader community.

OFFERING CREATIVE, SAFE SPACES TO NURTURE COMMUNITY COHESION

Engaging in shared, focused, and creative activities was perceived as having the potential to build trust, enhance capacity, and reduce loneliness. Participants also felt that activities centred around creative expression promoted community cohesion by:

- Creating supportive spaces with a shared purpose
- Reducing language barriers with creative expression as a universal tool
- Navigating trauma, building resilience and confidence in communities
- Reducing isolation, stigma and discrimination
- Celebrating shared heritage for future preservation
- Facilitating diverse skill sharing and capacity building

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our research highlights the multidimensional narrative of inclusive spaces, underscoring the need for policy and practice interventions at multiple levels (see Figure 1). We advocate for moving beyond an approach that focuses solely on intergroup contact and have previously highlighted the critical need to adopt a policy stance that recognises the importance of intersecting identities and the lived experiences of all community members, appreciating the social realities of both local and sanctuary seeking communities (Wilson et al., 2025). We also highlight the responsibilities of all stakeholder groups in promoting inclusion and community cohesion (see Figure 2).

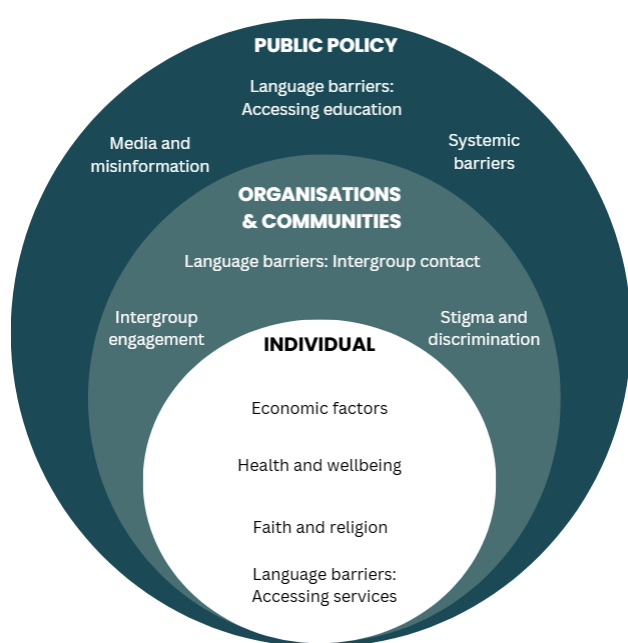


Figure 1: Multi-level barriers to community cohesion

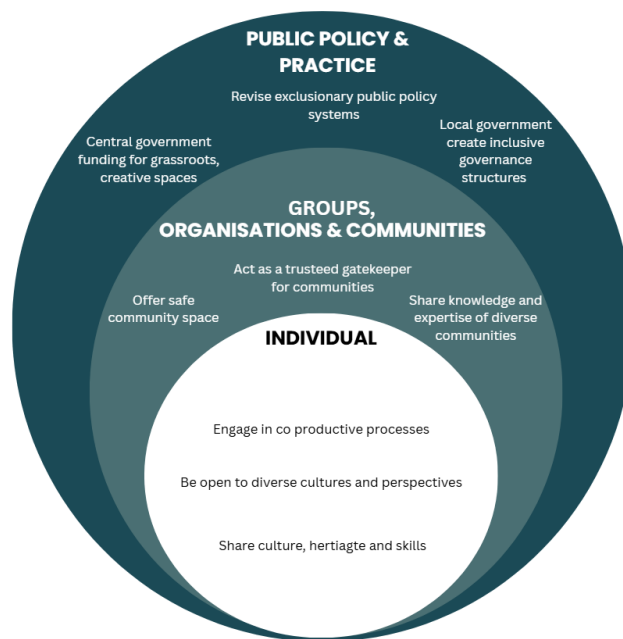


Figure 2: Multi-level approach to promote community cohesion using creative spaces

There are substantial policy literature (Khan Report, 2024), independent reports (The Independent Commission on Community & Cohesion; Together Coalition, n.d.), and government departments (Community Cohesion Unit; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) seeking to promote integration in the UK. The following recommendations contribute to this body of evidence, focusing on the application of creative approaches in response to the multifaceted nature of inclusion.

Inclusive Governance:

- The Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (2025) proposes to provide communities with tools to shape their local areas. At present, it focuses on the role of Devolution and the position of the Elected Mayor in challenging the traditional power structure. This leaves a gap concerning community empowerment, particularly for those who feel most distant from decision-making at the local government level.
- Creative methods can enable inclusive governance, where **participatory democratic methods** facilitate the development of systems that impact the lives of both local and sanctuary seeking communities. Welfare systems, housing and education are particularly contentious policy areas where inclusive strategies would be beneficial in providing a space where all voices feel heard. Creative methods can serve to minimise *language barriers* and provide alternative means of expression.
- Local authorities have a critical role in facilitating a **partnership** between grassroots community organisations, local authorities, central government and statutory services, alongside members of local and sanctuary seeking communities, who themselves have the responsibility of engaging in the co-productive process and being open to diverse cultures and perspectives.
- By providing an accessible, **co-productive space**, *systemic barriers* and traditional power structures have the potential to be challenged, offering an alternative inclusive platform that propagates voices from both communities can feel heard, promoting not only *health and wellbeing* and a sense of purpose, but also a sense of belonging and community cohesion.

Co-Produced Creative, Inclusive, and Capacity Building Spaces:

- The 'Community Cohesion and Resilience Programme' (CCRP), which is part of the UK Government Resilience Action Plan (UK Government, 2025), offer funding to Voluntary Community and Faith organisations in local areas to deliver projects that build community relationships and work to prevent and combat harmful narratives.
- Our findings suggest that **creative expression** can serve as a powerful tool to foster *inter-community engagement* around a **shared purpose**, something currently missing from this policy approach. Moreover, the research proposes that inviting diverse communities to share skills related to their culture and heritage has the potential to build capacity and economic resilience (as opposed to *economic oppression*), in building unique employability skills.
- It is recommended that **central government funding** be allocated for grassroots community organisations to offer physically and emotionally safe community spaces. Acting as trusted gatekeepers for both local and sanctuary seeking communities, these organisations can **collaborate to co-produce inclusive spaces** offering creative, capacity-building activities.

Intercommunity Education:

- The Education and Inspections Act 2006 amended the Education Act 2002 to include the duty to promote community cohesion. It means schools are legally obligated to actively work towards fostering positive relationships and a sense of belonging within their school and wider community. Guidance is offered, but this fails to acknowledge the role of creativity or heritage (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007).
- Decolonising the history of Britain within the national curriculum can challenge accepted narratives regarding the **complex, multicultural heritage** (including *faith and religion*) and how this shapes the society we live in today (Mason, 2022).
- Greater emphasis should be placed on equipping all young people with the **critical thinking skills** to question narratives based on limited evidence, acting as a counter to *media misinformation*.
- The mainstream social media marketing, which perpetuates stigma and discrimination, may be challenged by providing funding for local organisations to bring communities together to create inclusive **alternative discourse and narratives** in the media.

At the time of publication (September 2025), the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee are conducting an ongoing enquiry into community cohesion (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2024). These recommendations for a multilevel, creative approach can contribute to shaping national policy and advancing the community cohesion policy agenda in the UK, promoting greater integration and inclusivity.

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