

**10 September 2024**

**Community Cohesion**

**Ward(s): All**

**Portfolios: Leader of the Council**

**1 Aim**

- 1.1 The aim of community cohesion is to foster a sense of belonging and unity among diverse groups. It focuses on reducing inequalities, improving living standards, and promoting cultural competencies. By addressing barriers to education, employment, and health, it seeks to create inclusive, resilient communities where everyone feels valued and connected.

**2 Recommendations**

- 2.1 Members are recommended to support the current approach to Community Cohesion aligned to Community Building and Resilient Communities and advise on how to best embed it with the four locality areas from their perspective.

**3 Report detail – know**

- 3.1 Walsall has a long history of welcoming new communities that had settled in the town seeking work, education, affordable housing, or refuge. Whilst the borough is still moderately diverse compared to our black country neighbours such as Wolverhampton or Sandwell, we are amongst the 20 fastest changing local authorities considering the increase of population from diverse cultural backgrounds during the last decade<sup>1</sup>.
- 3.2 Walsall Council has a well-established community cohesion service that sits within the Community Building and Cohesion function aligned to Resilient Communities. This function includes support services for voluntary and community sector and operational management of libraries. One of the key priorities of this service is to utilise the ‘ABCD - asset based community building’ model in codesigning council provision with residents and partners on the grass-root level, maximising the assets in each area. This ensures that provision reflects the diversity of each area.
- 3.3 In 2017, a cross-party working group made a recommendation to Scrutiny for the Council to develop a standalone ‘cohesion and social integration strategy’. The recommendation included a specific reference to social integration of newly settled communities as one of the key priorities. The *Walsall Council Community Cohesion and Integration strategy* published in 2018 was recommended as best practice by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and this led

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<sup>1</sup> Census 2021 and Cohesion Atlas.

to Walsall being chosen as one of the 5 local authorities for the 'Integrated Area' investment.

- 3.4 The Integrated Area Programme assisted the Council in codesigning Walsall for All as our community cohesion delivery vehicle between 2019-2023. Over 15,000 people benefited from the funding as direct beneficiaries, taking part in social mixing and school linking programme, community dialogue, hate crime reduction, English as a Second Language learning, women empowerment, and job support as well as the Covid-19 prevention project run by our Covid-19 community champions. The Walsall for All social media platform was created attracting 177,000 engagements and 3.6 million impressions only in 2 years.
- 3.5 The programme helped us expand our ambitions and connect with government benchmarks, while letting us test innovative ideas with partners like the college, DWP, WHG, and the West Midlands Combined Authority. We completed it with an evaluation report<sup>2</sup> and celebration video<sup>3</sup> in June 2023.
- 3.6 The current Executive Leadership Team recognises the Walsall Council's current ambition is to make social cohesion and integration a foundational policy that fits into our *Equality and Diversity strategy, the Council plan and We are Walsall 2040*. The legacy of Walsall for All partnership continues to be the main vehicle for a community cohesion. The partnership currently leads development of the new Community Cohesion and Integration strategy 2024-2030, co-produced with our partners and diverse community representatives. The strategy is due to be published in November 2024.
- 3.7 Walsall continues to be the best practice and one of the founding members of Belong: The Cohesion and Integration Network who are the leading charity in this field. Walsall featured in several academic studies including:
  - **Beyond Us and Them** research<sup>4</sup> developed in partnership with the University of Kent, MHCLG, Go-Science and SAGE. The key finding was that those local authorities that had invested in social cohesion/integration prior to the Covid-19 pandemic managed much better during the pandemic in terms of building trust, health prevention and good community relations.
  - **Power of Connection Through Volunteering**<sup>5</sup> a partnership project evidencing that there is a virtuous circle between volunteering and strengthening social cohesion at local level.
  - Since 2023, Walsall Council had a privilege of **chairing their Local Government Network** and shaping the agendas on a national level.

## 4 Financial information

- 4.1 The statutory function of Community Cohesion services is funded as a core service within the Resilient Communities - Community Building and Cohesion department. There are two specialists 'community cohesion officer' roles. This service oversees community cohesion micro-grants totalling £87,000 and provides funding amounting to £150,000 for the key priorities of Walsall for All, which include community ESOL,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.walsallforall.co.uk/evaluation>

<sup>3</sup> [https://youtu.be/hP0X0sOtt8U?si=sukV5DPW\\_uswApZE](https://youtu.be/hP0X0sOtt8U?si=sukV5DPW_uswApZE)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/project/beyond-us-them/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/project/the-power-of-connection-through-volunteering/>

alternative formats, Spaces for All, and partnership management. The partnership has now been constituted as an independent CIC (Community Interest Company) and plans to secure its own funding starting in 2025. This allows current administrative costs to be reallocated towards implementing new priorities associated with the updated strategy.

## 5 Reducing Inequalities

5.1 The Community Cohesion and Integration Strategy that is currently being coproduced with Walsall for All partnership has a strong focus on reducing inequalities identified in the Marmot review. The key areas of action planning focus on building ‘cultural competencies’ into services and reducing barriers to education, employment, improving living standards, ill-health, and discrimination for all our communities. There is a particular emphasis on aligning this strategy with Children and Young People’s Alliance priorities.

## 6 Decide

6.1 It is being proposed that the new strategy will also be aligned to Resilient Communities model particularly in these areas:

- **Community led solutions** and enabling people to have **personal responsibility**: An example of this principle would be **VCS Locality Leads** - communities in various parts of Walsall cooperate and codesign interventions together to make their area inclusive and welcoming, from external grants’ identification to celebration of events. This feeds into **Team Walsall** approach and ‘a virtual circle between increasing volunteering and strengthening cohesion.’
- **Integrated services** – an example of this would be a **Shared Ground** learning programme with Belong - focusing on management of hate crime and community tensions. Several agencies took part in this learning programme together including the Council’s community safety, Police and VCS. Other examples include the **Hate Crime research** conducted with DE Montfort University and the launch of the multi-agency **Walsall Resilience Forum** as part of the counter-terrorism strategy. Further work on integrated services will take place as we are currently transforming our libraries and Walsall Connected, increasing cohesion and volunteering.

6.2 **EDI (Equality, Diversity & Inclusion) approach** – seeking to balance cultural competency with British values and common purpose – the example would be an annual inter-faith Iftar, Walsall Asian Sports Association tournament, Walsall Pride, International Women’s Day celebrations that focus on breaking down barriers in an inclusive and inter-sectional way so that all can get involved.

## 7 Respond

7.1 Walsall Council is currently co-producing its new Community Cohesion strategy developed as an external element of our EDI strategy. This new strategy is underpinned by ABCD principles of codesign and maximising our assets on the ground. At the same time, it will serve as an example of good practice in Council’s efforts to progress the Council’s accreditation with the Equality Framework for Local Government of Local Government Association planned for 2026.

7.2 To further our ambitions, it is important that Walsall keeps active membership of Belong as it is a cost-effective way of gaining access to knowledge, research, feedback, and free resources relating to fulfilling our statutory duties under Equality Act 2010 as well as the Council plan.

## **8 Review**

8.1 The Council currently has an interim Corporate Performance Framework. Community cohesion indicators are being developed as cross-cutting indicators linked to several performance areas, including customer services, children services, adult social care, and public health. This is being considered as part of the discussion on the new EDI strategy with ELT. Feedback from elected members will be sought as part of the EDI strategy finalisation.

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