

## **Commission on Integration and Cohesion: Interim Statement**

*(Summary produced by IDeA – February 2007)*

The Commission on Integration and Cohesion was announced by Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government on 28 June 2006. On 21 February at Charlton Football Club, the Commission launched its interim statement. Below is a summary of the five key areas of the statement.

### **The Commission on Integration and Cohesion**

The Commission, a fixed term advisory body, is considering how local areas can make the most of the benefits delivered by increasing diversity. It will also consider how they can respond to the tensions it can sometimes cause. It will develop practical approaches that build communities' own capacity to prevent problems, including those caused by segregation and the dissemination of extremist ideologies.

The Commission is chaired by Darra Singh, Chief Executive of Ealing Council and is due to report to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in June 2007. Other members of the Commission include Councillor Nargis Khan from Hackney Council, Frank Hont, North West Regional Secretary of Unison and Leonie McCarthy from Peterborough Council.

### **Interim statement**

The interim statement is a short summary of the Commission's thinking so far. It signposts areas that it will consider in more detail in its final report and encapsulates views expressed during initial consultation. As well as visits to local communities and discussions with researchers and practitioners working on integration and cohesion related projects, it received over 600 responses to its consultation paper.

The statement provides context and covers five key areas, which are set out below:

#### **Context**

The statement sets out the background to the increasing interest in issues relating to cohesion and a number of 'acute issues' that are key to building cohesion. These are:

- rapid change to the UK labour market and workforce caused by the arrival of young migrant workers often to areas with limited recent experience of migration

- apparent scrutiny of particular communities – many respondents highlighted the fact that integration is about everyone in the UK engaging positively with each other
- increased public concern about immigration – a 2006 MORI poll found that race relations / immigration / immigrants was named as the main issue facing Britain today
- confusion around the idea of multiculturalism which means very different things to different people

### **Integration and cohesion**

This section looks at definitions of integration and cohesion. The Commission found that many people are distanced by the jargon around the current integration and cohesion debate. It sees an opportunity to create a more user-friendly definition based on five themes:

- engagement and participation
- meaningful interaction
- respect for diversity and social trust
- solidarity and collective community action
- equality of opportunity, access, treatment and service

It is likely that the final report will recommend that these themes are used by local practitioners to ask local communities to define what cohesion means for them. Respondents have made clear that ownership of the cohesion agenda works best where communities determine what integration and cohesion means for their neighbourhoods.

The terms ‘place-shaping’, ‘shared sense of belonging’ and ‘shared futures’ look likely to become the new language of cohesion.

### **Key barriers to integration and cohesion**

A significant response to the Commission was that isolation and segregation go along side poverty, inequality, discrimination and other forms of deprivation. Other identified barriers to cohesion that go along side deprivation and inequalities include:

- competition for shared resources – the tensions that arise from different groups in an area competing for resources such as education, jobs, housing and public grants
- an inability to speak English, with 60 per cent of respondents identifying language as a key issue
- fear of crime – anti-social behaviour, no-go areas and lack of respect are all seen as undermining the common values that cohesion is built on

- residential segregation – although some people believe this is a major barrier to integration and cohesion others contest this and highlight the advantages of communities gathering together

### **Integration and cohesion - interaction is the key**

The statement expresses concern that a current lack of social interaction undermines a sense of community and results in a drift into division between different communities. It identifies schools, the work place, sports, culture and leisure and shared public spaces as opportunities to create stronger interaction. One suggestion is that all publicly funded programmes should have integration and cohesion criteria and the Commission welcomes views on this.

### **Shared values and a sense of local belonging**

The Commission believes that shared civic values and the values of citizenship are critical to making debates about cohesion and integration resonate with local people. Feedback from consultation shows that a local focus may make the concept of ‘Britishness’ mean something to people at a ‘grassroots’ level.

The statement sets out a suggested framework of civic values, which includes:

- respect for the rule of law
- democracy and engagement
- protecting the disadvantaged
- commitment to making a contribution
- commitment to equality and fair play
- listening to all views
- interaction and communications
- freedom of speech where it doesn’t incite harm to others

The Commission would like feedback on what shared values means to different people. But it also highlights that any discussion about identity needs to happen at a local level as part of activity by local communities to build a sense of belonging.

### **Speaking English as the key bridge to cohesion**

A lot of the media coverage around the launch event was about the interim statement’s focus on the view that not speaking English is the biggest barrier to successful integration and cohesion. In fact, the Commission’s own press release leads with this.

In it, Darra Singh, Chair of the Commission stated that:

“Just as mastering reading and writing for school children opens up the rest of the curriculum, mastering English opens up participation in British society and accessing

employment. If you can't speak English – whether you are a new migrant or someone who has lived here for years – you are on a path to isolation and separation.”

MORI research produced on behalf of the Commission found that 60 per cent of people asked agreed that the biggest barrier to 'being English' was not speaking the language.

The Commission has focused on three key questions in relation to learning English:

- should there be greater onus / more support for employers to provide language courses?
- are translation services helping or hindering integration?
- should there be a requirement for spouses to learn English before arriving in the UK?

### **What happens next?**

The Commission will continue to collect evidence over the next four months and will report in full by the end of June 2007. During this time it will explore the themes set out in the Interim Statement in further detail and will say more about the role of local organisations, including local authorities, in building integration and cohesion. The Commission will also have further discussions on:

- political trust and community participation
- challenges posed to communities by extremism
- tackling negative attitudes, perceptions and behaviours
- local leadership and vision