



OLDHAM - FIVE YEARS ON

Introduction

1. Professor Ted Cante and a team re-visited Oldham five years after the riots to review progress in achieving community cohesion. They reported on 30 March 2006¹. This note summarises, and comments on, their findings.
2. Their brief was to assess the current level of community cohesion in Oldham, to identify threats and opportunities, and to draw on best practice elsewhere.

The Report

3. They concluded that:

"Given the sheer scale of Oldham's problems - communities leading parallel lives with high levels of segregation reinforced by differences in language, culture and religion - any assessment had to be realistic about what could be achieved."

4. Indeed, many of those interviewed were anxious to communicate their frustration with what they perceived as a lack of progress on the ground. The team found that the Council tended to be cautious in their approach to tackling segregated communities, ever mindful of the potential "political cost" of more radical initiatives being exploited by far right groups. They were struck by the extent to which divisions within, and polarisation between, Oldham's many communities continued to be a feature of social relations and the seeming reluctance of many sections of the community to embrace positive change. There had been determined leadership from the Council but this had created a dependency culture. It was now necessary that the onus for change should pass to Oldham's many communities. Furthermore, community cohesion should now really engage with long-standing white communities as much as with different minority ethnic groups.
5. It was essential to begin to break down the segregation in neighbourhoods, especially in terms of housing and education, by giving individuals and families real choices and to at least ensure that clusters and patterns of segregation do not become even more entrenched. The most immediate impediment to change is the mindset of deeply entrenched communities but there is a reduction in negative views on diversity compared with two years previously.
6. The key recommendations included setting clear strategic objectives, a new "bottom up" approach with far more importance attributed to local communities taking responsibility for driving change, and the involvement of more women and young people. Black and minority ethnic participants will have a key role to play in tackling divisions between their own communities. An economic development strategy to tackle the gap between Oldham's least and most deprived wards is all the more pressing given projected changes in the composition of Oldham's population and workforce over the next two

¹ Challenging Local Communities to Change Oldham, Report of the Institution of Community Cohesion, 30 March 2006.

decades. A long term and determined approach is needed to get pupils to relate better with each other during school hours.

7. The final recommendation remarks that Oldham is at the cusp of real change and now needs to demonstrate sustained progress in tackling what are extremely difficult issues. If a new Oldham is to become a reality, accelerating the pace of change is critical. Oldham will experience dramatic changes in the composition of its population over the next two decades with its white population declining and its black and minority ethnic population increasing. All will need to make a concerted effort to ensure that the pace of change in building community cohesion is not overtaken by the potential for conflict.

Comment

8. Reading between the lines, the review team clearly found that a great deal of activity had taken place, most of it led from the top. There was an implication that it lacked co-ordination and direction. Furthermore, it seems to have had limited impact on the leaders of the various ethnic communities.

9. However, the key finding on community cohesion is in recommendation (4) on page 18. It reads as follows:

"A major factor in building community cohesion in Oldham over the next two decades will be projected population change within the Borough and in particular the relative growth in the Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage population. The potential risk is that the pace of change in building community cohesion and re-generating the Borough may be overtaken by the potential for population change to generate division and conflict. Oldham will need to demonstrate that its vision and strategy for a positive future is at ease with and indeed built on projected changes in the make-up of its population.

10. What lies behind this is the population projection buried in subsidiary papers. It shows that, in the next 15 years, the Pakistani population is expected to increase by 50% and the Bangladeshi population by 70%. Meanwhile, the white population will decline slightly."

11. Two major reasons for the rapid growth of the ethnic communities are marriage to partners from the countries of origin (probably still over 50%)² and the fertility rates of first generation Bangladeshi and Pakistani women which are 3.9 and 4.7 compared to 1.6 for all mothers born in the UK³. Internationally arranged marriages are, therefore, an important factor in the rapid growth of population which the Report identifies as a potential risk to community cohesion.

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² See paragraph 16 of Migrationwatch Briefing Paper 9.13

³ ONS Birth Statistics FM1 No 33 Table 9.5