# Integration Area Programme: Community Conversations Evaluation

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Author(s)
IFF Research

## Aims

The aim of this study was to evaluate the ‘Community Conversations’ activity which formed part of the Integration Area Programme (IAP). The IAP was launched in 2019 by the then Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). It followed the 2018 Integrated Communities Strategy green paper. It took place in five local authorities and involved testing new social integration approaches. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) commissioned IFF Research to conduct the evaluation.

## Methodology

- The Community Conversations activity that was the subject of this evaluation took place in three of the five integration areas: Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford and Walsall.

- Community Conversations participants were asked to complete pre and post activity surveys (364 responses in total).
- Project co-coordinators and participants took part in qualitative interviews (about a dozen in each area).
- Observations were undertaken at community events at Blackburn with Darwen.

Management information was analysed.

## Key issues

The Community Conversations activity varied between participating areas. For example in Bradford it was called ‘Bradford-as-1’. Community leaders were trained to facilitate events to bring the community together, including exhibitions and workshops. It was run by the Thornbury Centre in the following areas:

- Keighley – the activities were undertaken remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions. The theme was food, and participants were invited to share recipes and photos, to be displayed in a shop window. There was also a sewing demonstration and competition.
- Little Horton – a garden party with food from different communities.
- Ecclesfield – a garden party at the church.

The evaluation focused on the activities in all three integration areas involved in the Community Conversations intervention (Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford and Walsall). It measured participant outcomes in six key community integration areas:

- ‘meaningful social mixing’
- ‘feeling comfortable communicating with different groups’
- ‘respecting differences between others’
- ‘feeling empowered to create positive change’

- ‘having an increased sense of belonging’
- ‘feeling personally able to influence decisions in the local area’.

The authors acknowledge that overall, due to the small sample size, it wasn’t possible to determine whether any project impacts in these areas were statistically significant. The exception is that a statistically significant impact was detected relating to the outcome of ‘feeling empowered to create positive change’ – after the intervention, participants were more likely to agree to being ‘personally motivated to work with others to improve the neighbourhood’.

Despite the issues relating to statistical significance, the authors state that the evaluation has yielded helpful learning and qualitative insights. For example, it was found that participants’ inter-cultural awareness improved as a result of the intervention, and their recognition of similarities between groups in the community. Some indicated that taking part in social events had increased their confidence, and some had made new friendships and connections as a result of the activity.

Several key learning points were identified for successfully delivering a Community Conversations intervention:

- Events should include a mix of community groups – enough time needs to be allowed for the recruitment of people whose current community engagement is limited.
- Elements that make for successful sessions include clear ground rules, good facilitation and structure, a specific subject to discuss, and a focus on the local area.
- In person events can work well for people who are socially isolated or digitally excluded. Meeting online can be better for people who are busy, and are familiar with using digital communication platforms.
- Examples of good facilitation technique were reminding participants to discuss their personal experience rather than generalising, and challenging views with the use of role play. It’s

important for facilitators to be trained in such techniques, and for them to be able to share ideas as part of the structure of the session.

Structured participant follow up could help create lasting change, for example by creating channels for continued contact following the event, or pointing participants towards additional resources.

## Conclusion

Local delivery partners and participants viewed Community Conversations positively, with the activities being seen as having enabled new connections and open discussion.

The authors state that ‘Evaluation limitations mean that it is not possible to say with certainty whether or not the Community Conversations intervention works to achieve its intended outcomes’. However, they found evidence to suggest that the activity had influence with regard to ‘meaningful social mixing’, in particular participants’ confidence to discuss varying beliefs and attitudes with different groups from their community.

There was also evidence that participants may be more motivated to facilitate community change, as a result of the intervention.

Web Link
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-the-integration-areas-...
Topic
Community and society
Community cohesion
Integration
Place
Bradford
Year

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Report

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