

Social Cohesion

Engagement findings

9 June 2025

Background

1. As part of the Equality and Social Justice Committee's inquiry into 'Social Cohesion', the Citizen Engagement Team proposed a qualitative approach to engagement, comprising a series of focus groups.
2. This paper is based upon the contributions of 22 contributors from three Senedd regions, gathered during three focus groups held between 25 March and 3 May 2025.
3. Contributors were sourced through ACE (Action in Caerau and Ely), Indian Heritage Centre and Sunflowers Wales.
4. The engagement comprised two face-to-face focus groups and one online focus group (via Microsoft Teams). The format of engagement was largely comparable between sessions but varied slightly to meet the distinct needs of contributors.
5. Notes of each session are available to Members upon request. The following themes emerged from the discussions.

1. The meaning of social cohesion

6. At the outset of most focus groups, contributors shared their views on the meaning and importance of social cohesion. A wide range of definitions and interpretations emerged during discussions.



“Going back to the point of community cohesion, I see that as transcending race, gender and other barriers so we’re all able to talk and share commonalities.”

Focus group contributor

7. Several contributors broadly described the meaning of social cohesion as the ability to live harmoniously alongside one another while accepting and embracing differences.

8. One contributor elaborated on this, explaining that as a white male, he is not personally affected by many of the challenges facing other groups, but deeply values diversity, seeing it as both enriching and essential to society. This viewpoint was echoed by several contributors who maintained that social cohesion is not only about tolerance, but about celebrating the variety of backgrounds that contribute to the richness of communities.

Celebrating culture

9. This celebration of culture was a theme discussed during most focus groups. Ukrainian contributors explained that celebrating and honouring Ukrainian culture was an important way of strengthening identity and supporting mental wellbeing, particularly during a time of immense distress caused by the war in Ukraine. Whilst maintaining strong links with fellow Ukrainians in Wales was considered important, many were keen to emphasise the support from the communities in which they live. There was a strong desire among contributors to engage with Welsh society while maintaining their own cultural identities.

10. Similarly, contributors discussed the success of an event celebrating Indian culture, which featured sari draping, Indian tea making, and a classical dance workshop. Although most attendees were not of Indian heritage, the event was very well received.

Identity

11. The idea of identity and the importance of belonging within a community was also discussed during most focus groups. Some contributors shared personal stories to highlight how crucial it is to feel connected and supported by the places and people around them. For many, social cohesion goes beyond mere coexistence and involves fostering a sense of belonging, where individuals feel accepted, valued, and included in their communities.

“Someone said to me, who wasn’t born here, that since they’ve lived here, they feel Welsh. This is where they feel at home. They feel safe, they feel welcomed. As far as they’re concerned, they’re Welsh. I think that’s a feeling that people need to have. Not this ‘us and them’.

Focus group contributor

2. Barriers to social cohesion

12. Most contributors discussed the challenges involved in building and maintaining social cohesion. The most commonly identified barriers during the focus groups are summarised below.

Transport

13. Several contributors emphasised the need for frequent opportunities for people to meet and connect, rather than sporadic one-off events. These regular opportunities for interaction were seen as crucial in fostering a sense of belonging and community. This was particularly the case for Ukrainian contributors who explained that building and maintaining social cohesion among the Ukrainian community in Wales was challenging, especially given the wide geographic dispersment and relatively small population.

14. This was exacerbated by the lack of reliable public transport, especially outside cities. Many contributors expressed frustration at how difficult it is to access cultural and community events due to limited or unreliable services. For example, some described two-hour journeys each way to attend weekly dancing groups, which they considered vital for maintaining connections. Others said the complete absence or significant limitation of service on Sundays, made it difficult to participate in weekend activities that support social inclusion.

Loss of community spaces

15. Contributors also discussed the impact of changes to community spaces. As an example, one contributor discussed the loss of allotments in his area, which he said were once considered a cornerstone of the community. In the past, large allotments served as self-sustaining community hubs where people supported one another in informal, practical ways, such as sharing food with families in need. These spaces encouraged a spirit of generosity and connection that many feel has been lost.

16. Places like the Dusty Forge community centre were praised as essential, providing a physical space where connections can flourish. One contributor also emphasised the importance of community spaces that offer support, particularly for vulnerable individuals and those who suffer with their mental health.

17. The increasing cost of community spaces, along with the decline in communal activities, were seen as contributing to the erosion of these tight-knit, supportive environments.

Financial barriers

18. Discussion about the costs of hiring, renting, or purchasing community spaces expanded into a broader conversation about the financial implications of organising and attending events, projects, and other initiatives. Financial support for venues was seen as essential to fostering greater cohesion and enabling meaningful interaction among diverse groups.

19. Contributors highlighted the importance of having safe and accessible spaces to gather, particularly for minority and migrant communities. Several areas such as Mayhill, Townhill and Port Talbot were mentioned as posing logistical (in terms of public transport) and social challenges (anti-social behaviour). Some contributors also queried how resources are allocated and how decisions are reached on local funding priorities.

20. Community-driven projects which rely on funding, were considered increasingly difficult to sustain, and sports facilities, which help keep young people engaged and reduce the risk of trouble, are seen as vital yet often underfunded.

21. Others discussed the financial pressures faced by many when it comes to attending community events or initiatives. Many said the increase in the cost of living and the cuts to benefits contributed to this and has left vulnerable groups in particular – who are often the least able to initiate change – feeling disconnected and unsupported.

“The costs of events are a barrier. People like to attend events but some can’t afford to. The numbers at events can vary because of this. We do try and arrange free events where possible. For example, we run free yoga sessions.”

Focus group contributor

Cultural shifts

- 22.** Discussion also touched on broader shifts in how people connect. Contributors noted that the decline in opportunities to gather in-person has coincided with an increase in the use of digital communication. Some felt that this change in communication has led to a more isolated society. People are less likely to reach out or engage face-to-face, often opting to text or communicate on social media, rather than make phone calls.
- 23.** This shift in communication, combined with the reduction in community spaces where people could naturally come together, has made it harder for people to form the strong, supportive bonds that once characterised many communities in Wales.
- 24.** In a different vein, some contributors explained that integrating with different communities can require a shift in cultural mindset - something that often does not resonate with, or appeal to some.

"For Indian and South Asian communities, getting integrated with the local community can be difficult sometimes, probably due to cultural issues. To belong to the local community some feel like they have to go to the pub, but that doesn't fit with them necessarily. But they do want to meet local people and get involved with their activities. Some are lucky - we have kids into sport, but not everyone has that."

Focus group contributor

Media

- 25.** Contributors also noted the negative impact of the media, particularly in how issues like immigration are portrayed. Many felt the press oversimplifies complex issues, often focusing on one-sided, sensationalised stories that contribute to division and misunderstanding. This portrayal, some argued, leads to a separation of communities rather than fostering cooperation and understanding.

3. Positive social cohesion

- 26.** Some focus group contributors shared positive experiences of how community support has played a significant role in helping them feel connected to their community.

27. One Ukrainian contributor described their experience living with a host family, who helped them integrate into the community. This family provided essential items for the contributor's child and introduced them to local baby groups and resources. The contributor expressed deep gratitude for the support, which allowed them to feel at ease and motivated to engage with community groups, attend English lessons, and explore job opportunities.

28. The sense of community and camaraderie created by third sector organisations was also highlighted as particularly valuable. Ukrainian contributors described attending events as an opportunity for them to relax, feel safe and speak their native Ukrainian language, which was considered especially important. Whilst contributors recognised the importance of adapting to their new environment and integrating into Welsh society, maintaining a connection to their homeland and language was equally important for their identity and mental wellbeing.

29. Some contributors explained that organisations like Race Council Cymru have allowed them to use spaces at venues such as Swansea Grand Theatre, where they gather and engage in activities. This has allowed them to keep their traditions alive, including sharing Ukrainian music with their children and participating in Ukrainian dancing, which was mentioned several times and considered very important.

30. Contributors also acknowledged the support from other local communities, such as the Polish community in Llanelli and the Turkish community in Swansea, who have been instrumental in offering assistance, including fundraising and sharing job opportunities. Interactions with these communities have created a rich, multicultural environment.

31. Contributors highlighted several initiatives that contribute positively to social cohesion, which included lunch programmes, men's groups and women's groups at spaces like St. Vincent's. Another example of good practice in fostering social cohesion was community garden projects, which encourages a mix of volunteers from different backgrounds. The shared experience of working on a common project, and witnessing the tangible results of that collective effort, was seen as a key driver of cohesion. However, some contributors noted that there is a gap in evening activities, leaving some feeling quite isolated at night.

32. Beyond physical gatherings, contributors also recognised the role of digital spaces in bringing people together. While social media often receives negative

attention, one contributor shared an example where a post about a child's stolen scooter led the entire community to offer support.

4. Solutions to barriers to social cohesion

33. When discussing possible solutions to barriers to social cohesion, some explained that this complex and often quite nuanced.

"Equality is a very big term, but what I'm looking for is equity. That is a more important space to be operating. The moment we say we want to change the existing system in the name of equality, that is where we have problems and where the nationalist sentiment creeps in and our own problems start. We should be aware of what we are trying to achieve. Even though we think and believe there is no class system here, it becomes an issue in economic classicism – this is where I would say awareness plays an important role. All of us who work in professional jobs are extremely comfortable where we work, whereas we can't stay the same when we're in the community. The moment people realise we're contributing, enriching, enabling, it's completely different. So if we can flip that and change the messaging so that people understand that it's because of people from different backgrounds who are supporting us in health, software, academia, that we have a community with cohesion, that changes the attitude.

It's also about understanding culture not as a religion, but more socially. A lot of us Indians don't come from religious backgrounds, we come from cultural backgrounds."

Focus group contributor

34. Other contributors emphasised the importance of community-based initiatives that foster connections and support. Groups like Men's Sheds and local sports activities, both for children and adults, were highlighted as excellent ways to bring people together. Similarly, funding initiatives such as food banks, utility assistance and financial advice at local community hubs was considered important.

35. Whilst many contributors recognised that increased funding for community spaces and projects is difficult in a challenging economic climate, they maintained that without it, projects are left struggling to survive on minimal

resources. Some explained that the reduction in funding for community support services has led to a decrease in the available resources, despite growing demand. The uncertainty around short-term funding and the impact of closing community resources were significant concerns, as these cuts create a sense of instability.