

Step two: Gain commitment and buy in

This step is necessary to establish a shared understanding of what is meant by community tension, why you're doing it and the benefits.

There could be resistance or reticence from some people to share information or engage with the process as they may erroneously see it as 'spying' on communities or individuals, or they may feel that sharing information will bring no return as nobody will do anything about it.

The following could be used as a **basis for discussion** at the first meeting of the group with a view to gaining greater understanding and buy in. You will want to consider some local issues and discuss the barriers which will need to be overcome. This will help you develop an understanding of the different perspectives and possibly anxieties in the group. It should help in building a local vision together.

What is community tension?

Community tension is a state of community dynamics which may potentially lead to disorder, threaten the peace and stability of communities or raise the levels of fear and anxiety in the whole, or a part of the local community.

Strained relationships may build up within or between communities, or against particular institutions, based on real or perceived events or information or on fears, prejudices, circumstances or specific actions. They may develop over a long period and be inflamed by a 'spark' which leads to disorder and criminal activity.

Community tension may also arise as a result of the **absence** of those factors which produce cohesive communities, which is the term adopted by central and local government to describe communities where

- There is a common vision and sense of belonging
- The diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and positively valued
- Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities
- Strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds and circumstances in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.

Community tension is not intrinsically bad - we should expect some tension in healthy communities. For example, community activism and public protest are legitimate and potentially creative activities, though they may cause tensions. People have the right to express opinions and to 'peaceful assembly', providing they are not stirring up racial or religious hatred. These can often be positive means of promoting social change - it is legal expression and may produce tension.

The principal concern is about preventing disorder, the fear of crime, insecurity and actual illegal or criminal activity which often manifests itself when tensions are heightened.

Types of tension

Many different circumstances give rise to tension:

Political – such as extremist political activity (leafleting, graffiti, meetings); elections or by-elections at which extremist candidates are standing; issues potentially detrimental to community cohesion, which are prominent on the public agenda; local demonstrations; local political situations which are exacerbating tensions

Community – such as tensions between specific communities and incidents between specific communities

Immigration, asylum and refugee - such as local concerns about the effects of migration on the local area; impact of national policy on migration (such as asylum dispersal) on the local area; racist attacks motivated by anti-migrant sentiment

Racial and religious – such as actions of racist organisations; racially and/or religiously motivated incidents and offences; concerns within communities – including faith communities about hate crime

Criminal – such as gang activity and antisocial behaviour

National and international - such as incidents which have impacted upon or have the potential to impact upon the local community

Future – such as significant anniversaries and planned demonstrations

There are many examples of conflict and tension – the Lozells disturbances, the reaction to arrests in Yorkshire and London of those alleged to be involved in bombings, racist murders in a number of different towns and gang violence in London and other cities. Could they have been anticipated? Was the response appropriate? Would you be ready to respond in such circumstances?

Why monitor community tension?

- To keep a check on the 'temperature' in communities even when tensions are generally perceived as low – complacency and not listening are not responsible or accountable approaches
- Public bodies have general and specific legal duties with regard to the safety and well-being of communities and 'promoting good race relations'
- Failure to fulfil statutory duties and obligations may result in damage to property, injury and loss of life
- To prevent the serious impact of criminal activity
- To promote positive community relations and well-being where the whole community can live in peace and feel safe

- To understand potential conflict and minimise the risk of disorder, violence or crime, rather than to 'spy' on particular individuals and communities
- To manage a community incident well, tensions need to be monitored and assessed to broker the best responses
- To enable effective problem solving and appropriate management and interventions
- **And**, to recognise that large disorder on any significant scale will severely damage the local reputation and could result in the curtailing of investment in jobs, housing and employment

Key relevant legislation includes:

Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000

- to eliminate unlawful discrimination, to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups

Local Government Act 2000

- to promote and improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of their area

Civil Contingencies Act 2004

- to make provision for emergencies which threaten serious damage to human welfare, the environment or national security

Human Rights Act 1998

- to safeguard the rights and freedoms of individuals and balance those with what is necessary for a democratic society

Public Order Act 1986

- to define new offences relating to public disorder including fear of provocation of violence; intentional harassment, alarm or distress; stirring up of racial hatred; measures to control public processions and assemblies

Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994

- to extend police powers to stop and search in anticipation of violence

Terrorism Act 2000 and Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005

- to make provision about the restriction and prevention of terrorism

Education and Inspections Act 2006

- to introduce a duty on all maintained schools in England to promote community cohesion and on Ofsted to report on contributions made in this area