



Submission to Commission on Integration and Cohesion

Neighbourliness in relation to cohesion and integration

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(Local Level is an independent community development consultancy)

I welcome your interim report which is an admirably lucid summary of issues. I'm writing to urge you not to overlook the significance of the most informal neighbourly interactions: these underpin local social relations which in my view are fundamental for integration and cohesion. In some views, neighbourliness is in crisis.

The recent book *Respect in the neighbourhood*¹ accentuates the profound and essential connection between local social interactions and the quality of civil relations in the wider society.

We don't know whether or not there is a crisis of neighbourliness because of the difficulty of measuring it. The data we have tends to depend on questions like 'how often do you visit in neighbours' houses?' or 'how many of your neighbours do you know by name?' – questions which largely ignore the subtleties and significance of minimal neighbouring.

I suggest that the most minimal, informal, non-committal interactions between neighbours - the nod, the half-smile, the grunt of recognition - are among the building blocks of civil relations. Recognition of others, rather than having meaningful conversations with neighbours in their houses, is a key indicator of the health of society. These tiny exchanges of acknowledgement accrete to form a platform for individual support in time of need and for community action and participation. They constitute a social resource which we are only likely to value when it's gone missing. In some places, it's gone missing, which is why, it could be argued, the Commission exists.

The Commission is stressing 'the need for interactions to be meaningful in order to promote integration and cohesion'. I am concerned that this emphasis might lead to us overlooking the importance of the neighbourhood as a basic arena for learning simple civility and respect towards others through polite recognition and acknowledgement.

I would therefore like to try to persuade you that addressing 'the problem of neighbourliness' is important to your cause. The problem can be summarised as follows:

¹ Published by Russell House. A copy can be sent on request.



1. Contemporary neighbouring is increasingly discretionary; personal social networks are fragmented and dispersed; and neighbourhood connections are typically individualised rather than collective.² There is a diminished *need* to be neighbourly.
2. We would therefore expect that levels of neighbourly interaction have diminished, because people no longer have to invest so much in these relationships.
3. With families and friendship networks increasingly dispersed, it is harder to learn the subtleties of civil relations in the neighbourhood. But it's not clear that there are adequate *alternatives* to the neighbourhood, for most people to learn these subtleties. Meanwhile, increasing diversity increases the pressure.
4. Neighbouring is essentially a set of *informal* and voluntary behaviours (comprising friendliness, helpfulness and respect for privacy) - it is thus unlikely that direct formal policy measures can be applied.

Emphasising 'meaningful' interactions might lead us to overlook the significance of those exchanges that are mundane and trivial, but which can contribute hugely to a sense of security, can promote stability and sense of belonging, contribute to mental well-being, and constitute the basis for collective action.

Many welcome initiatives are underway to improve the layout of our neighbourhoods, stimulating walkability and hence social interaction: this trend needs to continue. We also need to explore and invent new ways of stimulating local social relations, without jeopardising the essentially informal and voluntary nature of neighbouring. In my view (and following a seminar run yesterday by Shared Intelligence at NCVO, where this was discussed) the key ingredients are probably semi-formal groups and schemes that are at arms-length from formal agencies, together with intergenerational projects and creative events like street parties. Initiatives that are *not* likely to be widely successful are neighbourliness incentive schemes, and formalised volunteer-based neighbouring schemes.

Finally, as an aside, I would draw attention to the importance of food sharing, once basic neighbourly relations have been established. In particular, baked food can be a focus for cultural explanation.

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² Research sources for each of these assertions can be provided.