Birmingham VCFSE Community Cohesion Summit

Mobilising the City: Findings and Recommendations

July 2026 Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) and Birmingham Race Impact Group (BRIG)



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Foreword

Community cohesion is not a new idea. It has shaped public policy for many years. Yet it feels as though the conversation has acquired a new urgency. Reading this report, it is not difficult to understand why. The organisations and community leaders who came together for the Summit spoke of growing tensions, a declining sense of safety and an increasing gap between what communities are experiencing and how institutions are responding. Those are not abstract concerns. They are lived realities for many of Birmingham's communities.

For BRIG, this report invites us to reflect on the idea of community cohesion itself. It is an important concept and one that continues to have real value. But we also believe it has its limits.

Too often, community cohesion appears to enter the conversation at precisely the point where our communities become more diverse. This does not feel like coincidence. Somewhere along the way, community cohesion seems to have become shorthand for the challenges of living in a diverse city.

That matters because it risks narrowing the conversation.

If we think about community cohesion only in terms of how communities relate to one another, we risk overlooking the conditions that make trust, belonging and mutual respect possible in the first place.

The conversations captured in this report remind us that community tensions do not exist in isolation from poverty, inequality, racism, housing insecurity, the loss of community spaces or declining confidence in public institutions. Communities themselves made those connections repeatedly throughout the Summit.

That is why, from BRIG's perspective, community cohesion cannot be separated from anti-racism. Communities cannot simply be asked to get along better while many people continue to experience racism, exclusion and unequal opportunities as part of everyday life. Community cohesion is an important part of the answer. On its own, however, it is insufficient for the challenge Birmingham now faces.

One of the strengths of this report is that it does not pretend these issues are straightforward. It gives an honest account of what community organisations are seeing, hearing and experiencing across Birmingham today. It also reminds us that the knowledge, commitment and leadership needed to respond already exist within our communities.

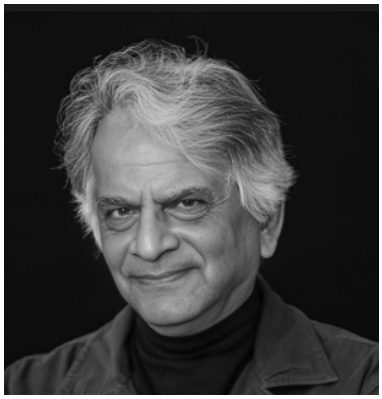
A debate about community cohesion is important when it affirms the fundamental principles of equality and fairness on which a civil society is built. It provides a framework in which anti-racist endeavour is located.

In BRIG's view, community cohesion can only be considered when there is a firm commitment to a more equitable distribution of power and influence across all the different cultural and racialised groups within the framework of a democratic society. If racial injustices are not addressed, community cohesion serves only to create the illusion of a country at peace with itself.

Without racial justice, cohesion is meaningless. Without cohesion, racial justice is unachievable.

If this report helps us ask better questions, listen more carefully to one another and broaden the conversation about what it will take to build a more inclusive Birmingham, then it will already have served an important purpose.

For me, that feels like a conversation worth having.



Ranjit Sondhi CBE
Chair
Birmingham Race Impact Group (BRIG)

Preface

Like Birmingham itself, this report emerged from a dynamic combination of different perspectives and experiences. It summarises the findings of our recent Community Cohesion Summit, which was convened at the request of community members who had expressed growing concern about an increasing sense of division, distrust — and even danger — within the city that is their home.

Birmingham is a city built on migration, solidarity and shared endeavour. Across generations, people from around the world have shaped its culture, economy and identity, creating a city whose strength lies in its diversity, resilience and shared sense of belonging.

Yet in recent months, those strengths have come under strain. Birmingham has seen a rise in racism, hate incidents and community tensions. Islamophobia and antisemitism have increased. Anti-migrant hostility has become more visible. Racist language has become more normalised in schools and public spaces. Women and girls are reporting feeling less safe. And the pressures of poverty, inequality and housing insecurity have deepened existing fault lines.

In response, we at Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) — alongside colleagues at Birmingham Race Impact Group (BRIG) — convened the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) Community Cohesion Summit on 23 February 2026. It brought together leaders from across Birmingham's VCFSE sector to explore how we could respond, collectively, to these challenges. The event was supported by Birmingham City Council, Birmingham City Partnership Board and Birmingham City Football Club Foundation.

This report presents what participants told us. It is honest, direct and grounded in lived experience. It reflects a sector that cares deeply about this city, but it also makes clear that the VCFSE sector cannot carry this weight alone, and that adequate community infrastructure is far from universally available across the city.

The findings and recommendations in this report are addressed to all those who share a stake in Birmingham's future. We hope they will be a catalyst for the coordinated, visible and sustained action our communities need and deserve.

My thanks go to all our speakers and facilitators, and to everyone who took part on the day; to our partners in Birmingham Race Impact Group for their support, guidance and expertise; to the City Partnership Board for its sponsorship and commitment to using the findings to shape future partnership approaches; to Birmingham City Football Club Foundation for its generous hosting of the event; and to all my colleagues at BVSC — particularly Elizabeth Goodchild, our Strategic Communications Lead, and Dr. Sophie Wilson, Director of our BVSC Research team — for their hard work in convening and facilitating this important and timely event, and in collating its findings.

Brian Carr
Chief Executive
Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC)



The Context: A City Under Strain

Birmingham is the UK's second largest city and one of the most ethnically diverse places in Europe. With over 1.1 million residents, 51.4% of whom identify as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic and a youthful population in which 66% of school-age children are from global majority backgrounds, Birmingham is a genuinely superdiverse city.

That diversity has always been a source of strength and a keystone towards Birmingham's ambitions to be an Anti-Racist City. But it does not make the city immune to the national and international forces that are driving communities apart, the rise of far-right movements, the spread of online misinformation, the hardening of anti-migrant rhetoric, and the way in which global conflicts are generating local tensions.

51.4%
of residents identify as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic

1.1M
residents — 8.5% growth since 2011

Alongside these pressures, Birmingham faces deep structural challenges. It has a 10-year life expectancy gap between its most deprived and most affluent neighbourhoods. Unemployment among African-heritage, White and Black Caribbean residents runs at double the city average. Black residents are disproportionately represented in temporary housing. In addition, the historic cuts to youth services, community infrastructure and public spaces have hollowed out many of the places where communities once came together.

The city is, in the words of participants at the Summit, at risk of becoming a 'tale of two cities' — where experiences of belonging, safety and opportunity depend heavily on where you live and who you are.

> *"There's a growing sense that no one is going to do anything to help."*
> **— Summit participant**

Amongst growing community tensions, in Autumn 2025, BVSC and Birmingham City Partnership Board issued statements and agreed to convene a conversation on the VCFSE sector's role in community cohesion. Details and links to the statements are available here: www.bvsc.org/vcfse-mris

It is against this backdrop that the Birmingham VCFSE Community Cohesion Summit was convened and against which the findings in this report must be read.

About the Summit

The Birmingham VCFSE Community Cohesion Summit took place on 23 February 2026. Convened by BVSC and BRIG, with support from Birmingham City Council, Birmingham City Partnership Board and Birmingham City Football Club Foundation, the event brought together leaders from across the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise sector to:

- Share honest accounts of how community cohesion is being experienced in their communities
- Assess current responses and identify where they are falling short
- Explore the role the VCFSE sector can play in rebuilding community cohesion
- Develop a shared voice and set of priorities to inform city-wide action



Speakers included:

- Jasmine Gardosi, Birmingham Poet Laureate 2022-24
- Chantel Hunter, Communities Programme Manager, Birmingham City Football Club Foundation
- Nigel Bromage, Small Steps
- Lorna Shaw, Interim Chief Executive, BRIG (Birmingham Race Impact Group)
- Stephanie Neville, Stories of Hope and Home
- Virginia Waimiru, Stories of Hope and Home
- Rishi Shori, Deputy Chief Executive, Birmingham City Council / Birmingham City Partnership
- Brian Carr, Chief Executive, BVSC (Birmingham Voluntary Service Council) (Event Chair and Compere)
- Stephen Raybould, Director of Programmes, BVSC (Birmingham Voluntary Service Council)
- Sophie Wilson, Director of BVSC Research, BVSC (Birmingham Voluntary Service Council)

Further information on the Summit is available here:
www.bvsc.org/news/birmingham-vcfse-community-cohesion-summit-2026-mobilising-the-vcfse-into-action

The Summit used a mix of presentations, testimony, structured digital polling (Mentimeter) and facilitated table discussions. This report draws on all of these sources. Quantitative data from Mentimeter is used to illustrate the scale of particular views; qualitative themes from table discussions give those views depth and

context.

This is not a comprehensive academic study. It is a direct and honest account of what Birmingham's VCFSE leaders told us and what it means for the future of Community Cohesion in our city.



What We Heard: Key Findings

1. Growing Tensions and a Declining Sense of Safety

Participants consistently described an increase in community tension and a reduced sense of safety in public life. This was not a picture of isolated incidents; it was a broader shift in how communities are experiencing day-to-day life in Birmingham.

Specific concerns raised by participants

- Rising Islamophobia and anti-migrant hostility
- Racist language becoming more normalised in schools and public spaces
- Reduced confidence among women and girls in using public spaces
- Flags and symbols connected to global conflicts creating local intimidation
- Online misinformation and extremist content amplifying existing tensions
- A growing sense among some communities that 'no one is going to do anything'

Participants described a broader 'social defeatism' where communities have reduced their expectations of what an institutional response might look like or have stopped expecting a response at all. This disengagement is itself a community cohesion risk: when communities stop believing that systems can help, they are more vulnerable to harmful narratives that offer simple explanations and simple enemies.

2. Low Confidence in the Current Response

2.1 / 5

Average participant confidence score that current responses are improving community cohesion

This striking figure reflects something more than dissatisfaction, it signals a fundamental lack of trust in the City's current approach. When asked to describe the existing response, the words participants used were consistent: fragmented, reactive, slow, weak, chaotic, uncoordinated.

How participants characterised the current response

- Reactive rather than preventative: responding to incidents rather than building resilience
- Siloed: institutions and organisations working in parallel rather than in coordination
- Unclear in leadership and accountability: communities don't know who is responsible
- Symbolic rather than substantive: strategies and statements not translating into visible action

> *"Meaningful progress will require demonstrations of doing something - not just discussing solutions."*
>
> **— Summit participant**

Participants also raised particular concerns about engagement and consultation processes, which were frequently described as top-down and disconnected from lived experience. Where community input does not visibly influence decisions or outcomes, confidence in both the process and in institutions more broadly continues to decline.

In a few words, how would you describe Birmingham's current response to community cohesion challenges?



3. The Influence of Wider Structural Pressures

A recurring theme was the relationship between community cohesion and wider structural factors. Participants were clear that tensions cannot be understood or addressed in isolation from the social and economic conditions in which they occur.

Structural factors participants linked to rising tensions

- Cuts to youth services and community infrastructure
- Loss of safe civic and community spaces
- Housing insecurity and homelessness
- Reduced access to public services
- Declining trust in institutions
- Poverty and cost of living pressures creating competition between communities

Participants emphasised that many of the people most affected face several of these pressures simultaneously. Any meaningful response to community cohesion must address this intersection - it is not possible to build belonging in communities where basic needs are unmet and resources are depleted.

4. A Widening Gap Between Community Experience and Institutional Response

Participants consistently identified a gap between what communities are experiencing and how institutions are responding. This was described not simply as a communication issue, but as a structural disconnect between where decisions are made and where their consequences are felt.

Communities most significantly affected — as identified by participants

- People experiencing poverty or insecure housing (41 responses)
- Migrant and newly arrived communities (38 responses)
- Refugees and people seeking asylum (36 responses)
- People with no recourse to public funds (35 responses)
- Residents in geographically deprived neighbourhoods (35 responses)
- Young people — particularly those exposed to divisive online content
- Women and girls — reporting increasing fear in public spaces
- People seeking asylum housed in hotels

Participants noted that this gap has a cumulative effect. Where previous commitments have not been followed through, communities approach new initiatives with scepticism. Rebuilding confidence will require not just better processes, but demonstrable and consistent follow-through.

5. The Critical - But Overstretched - Role of the VCFSE Sector

Despite the challenges described, participants expressed strong and consistent confidence in the contribution the VCFSE sector can make to improving community cohesion. VCFSE organisations were seen as having a particular advantage: established relationships with communities, greater levels of trust, and the ability to facilitate dialogue in ways that statutory bodies often cannot.

Where participants believe the VCFSE sector can have the greatest impact

- Building trust with marginalised communities (41 responses)
- Supporting dialogue between communities (40 responses)
- Coordinating local action more effectively (39 responses)
- Challenging misinformation and stigma (38 responses)

However, participants were equally clear that the sector is operating under significant resource pressure. Funding, staffing and community infrastructure are all under strain. VCFSE organisations are frequently positioned as the primary point of support for communities experiencing tension or exclusion, but often without the resourcing or statutory partnership needed to fulfil that role effectively.

> *"The sector is being asked to hold the system together — without being recognised as a strategic partner or properly resourced to do so."*
>
> **— Summit participant**

What Needs to Change: Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn directly from participant discussions at the Summit. They are structured across three levels - city-wide, sector-level and organisational - but they are interconnected. Progress in one area will reinforce progress in others.

1

Establish clear city-wide leadership and accountability on Community Cohesion

- Develop and communicate a shared definition and vision for community cohesion in Birmingham
- Agree a small number of clear, public commitments - ideally 4–5 priority actions with named leads
- Ensure ownership at Birmingham City Partnership Board level
- Introduce regular public reporting on progress, including what has changed as a result of community input

2

Shift from reactive responses to sustained, preventative approaches

- Invest in early intervention and community-led prevention work
- Develop a coordinated response to misinformation and extremism, including online narratives
- Support education and awareness initiatives that build understanding across communities
- Create space for ongoing dialogue - not just crisis response

3

Invest in community infrastructure and safe spaces

- Protect and expand community spaces, youth services and local infrastructure
- Support locally rooted, neighbourhood-based activity
- Ensure communities have accessible, trusted spaces to come together
- Address barriers to participation including cost, accessibility, language and location

4

Strengthen genuine partnership between VCFSE, statutory bodies and communities

- Move from siloed working to coordinated, place-based collaboration
- Recognise and invest in the VCFSE sector as a strategic partner - not just a delivery arm
- Create shared platforms for coordination and intelligence sharing
- Align funding to support collaborative rather than competitive approaches

5

Embed lived experience and community voice in decision-making

- Shift from consultation to genuine co-production with communities
- Ensure engagement reaches underrepresented and marginalised groups
- Provide clear feedback loops showing how input has influenced decisions
- Support community leadership and grassroots organising

6

Take visible action to rebuild trust and confidence

- Deliver quick, tangible actions that demonstrate change - not just further consultation
- Improve communication from institutions: clear, consistent, honest
- Actively challenge misinformation and harmful narratives
- Address issues that are highly visible to communities, such as neighbourhood conditions and public safety

7

Prioritise support for those communities most affected by Community Cohesion challenges

- Target support towards migrant and refugee communities, young people, women and girls, and people experiencing poverty or exclusion
- Develop intersectional approaches that recognise overlapping inequalities
- Ensure services are accessible, culturally competent and trusted by the communities they serve

Conclusion: A Call to Action

The findings from the Summit are sobering but they are not without hope. Across every table, in every discussion, participants demonstrated the knowledge, the relationships and the commitment needed to make Birmingham a more cohesive, welcoming and just city. What is missing is not will, it is the conditions that allow that will to be put to effective use.

This means clearer leadership. It means sustained investment. It means genuine partnership, not just between organisations, but with the communities most affected by the challenges we are trying to address. And it means visible, tangible action that communities can see, feel and trust.

> *"We know what needs to be done. Now we need to do it."*
> **— Summit participant**

The Summit demonstrated that Birmingham's VCFSE sector is ready to play its part. It is ready to build trust, facilitate dialogue, challenge misinformation and stand alongside the communities that are bearing the greatest burden of current tensions. But it cannot do this alone and it should not be expected to.

This report will be shared with the Birmingham City Partnership Board, which has committed to using its findings to provide the leadership and coordination that the City's communities urgently need. We call on all partners in the VCFSE sector, in local government, in health and public services, and in business, to respond to what they have heard, and to act.

Birmingham's commitment: a world-leading anti-racist city by 2035

That ambition starts now. It starts here. It starts with us.



About This Report

This report was produced by Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) Research in partnership with Birmingham Race Impact Group (BRIG), drawing on findings from the Birmingham VCFSE Community Cohesion Summit held on 23 February 2026.

The Summit was supported by Birmingham City Council, Birmingham City Partnership Board and Birmingham City Football Club Foundation. Its findings will be presented to the Birmingham City Partnership Board to inform the city's ongoing response to community cohesion challenges.

researchadmin@bvsc.org info@wearebrig.co.uk

Birmingham Voluntary Service Council, Latham House, 33-34 Paradise Street, Birmingham B1 2AJ

Birmingham Race Impact Group, 54-57 Allison Street, Digbeth, Birmingham, B5 5TH

www.bvsc.org
www.wearebrig.co.uk

