

# COMMUNITY RESILIENCE: THE POWER OF LOCAL NEWS





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# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

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**“A lie can travel around the world and back again while the truth is lacing up its boots”  
– Mark Twain**

When it comes to community resilience, misinformation can have significant negative consequences. In many areas it acts as a catalyst to tensions.

Misinformation can often take the form of myths or conspiracies about ‘no go zones’, or of rumours about migrant groups being offered preferential treatment by the council.

Increasingly in recent years, some locally focused Facebook groups or neighbourhood message-boards have become hubs of misinformation and hearsay. When writing our Building Back Resilient report in autumn 2021, we heard reports of this having become worse during COVID-19.<sup>1</sup>

This guide looks at how councils and other stakeholders can promote positive narratives about migration and diversity. It focuses on the role of local news outlets – and particularly local papers – but also looks at other ways of challenging misinformation.

## Who this guide is for

This guide is for three groups:

- 1. Charities, local groups and other practitioners**, who are working on topics around asylum, migration and refugee resettlement
- 2. Communities teams at local authorities**, who are promoting integration and tackling extremism
- 3. Communications teams at councils**, who want to promote their organisations and the work being done

The guide has been compiled by HOPE not hate, as part of the Hopeful Towns project, with help from local and national partner organisations. In particular it builds on the work pioneered by IMIX.

1. <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Building-Back-Resilient-FINAL63.pdf>

# THE ROLE OF LOCAL NEWS

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Misinformation thrives in a vacuum. This is especially true if public trust for decision-makers is low, if channels of communication between the council and the local press are not open, or if the social fabric in the wider community is frayed. **(Box 1 gives a fuller definition of misinformation)**

By promoting positive narratives about migrants and refugees, those looking to build resilient communities can make it harder for rumours and conspiracies that harm community relations to spread.

There is sometimes a view that local news outlets no longer carry the weight they once did, or that they have been usurped by social media. And it is true that many local papers now have smaller print circulations, with some having ‘gone under’ or been swallowed up by wider chains.

But local media remain a key ally in promoting cohesion and inclusion, and an important buttress against online conspiracy and hearsay. Below are several key reasons why they are so important.

- **Local media readerships and listenerships are often older, less well-off, more traditional in their values, and longer established in the area.** These groups are among those most likely to be anxious about change and difference.
- **Local media are often more trusted than national print titles.** They also tend to be more trusted than social media platforms.
- **The barrier between local media and social media is more porous than many realise.** Almost all local media (and especially print media) now appears in digital form. This means it frequently

acts as the basis for online content, or as the spur for discussions in chatrooms and message-boards.

- **Local news articles percolate into the national print and broadcast media.** A regional story, positive or negative, can quickly find its way into a national TV discussion or radio debate.

Councils and voluntary organisations often have strong, positive stories about the work they are doing to foster cohesion or to settle refugee groups. Yet these stories are sometimes not championed by local authorities, on occasion due to anxieties about how they will land with the public, or more often thanks to the daily pressures of dealing with a high volume of incoming media requests.

Among voluntary and community organisations, meanwhile, there tend to be additional issues around capacity. These can relate to a lack of knowledge of comms and messaging – or simply to basic time pressures. **(Box 2 offers some simple tips on engaging with print titles).**

By working together, public agencies and third sector partners can support one another, helping to tell strong, inclusive stories about diversity and multiculturalism in their areas. These act as a counter-balance against the negative stories that will inevitably emerge. And they help to ward off misinformation and conspiracies.

### **Box 1) What is 'misinformation'?**

Misinformation is broadly defined as incorrect or misleading information, unintentionally presented as fact, while disinformation is that which is deliberately false or misleading, often shared with intent to cause harm. Misinformation and disinformation can take the form of rumours, hearsay and gossip, or of deeper conspiracy theories.

Misinformation is often shared in good faith, by people who believe what they are saying. But it is also circulated as disinformation by extremists, who seek to undermine institutions and to break down trust between groups. We primarily talk about misinformation in this guide, as the majority of those sharing local rumours and conspiracies will not be doing so maliciously or cynically.

Misinformation happens at a national and even an international level – see, for example, Donald Trump's use of 'fake news'. But it has a local dimension too, particularly in an age when many communities have local Facebook pages or message boards. Rumours will often involve false reports of steps being taken by the council, or of changes happening in the local area. These very often have a far right or conspiracist dimension.

Social media has enflamed the rise of misinformation. There is both an online and an offline dimension to the challenges which this poses. This document looks at both elements, and at the role of more conventional media in tackling the issue.

### **Box 2) Tips for engaging with local print titles**

- Work out the deadlines your local paper is working to – this will usually mean identifying the day of the week when the print edition comes out, and tracing backwards from there
- Some newspapers may upload their stories to their website, but others cover the news online first. Try to work out how your local paper operates by looking at the frequency of the digital news stories compared to that of the paper edition
- Follow local journalists on social media and read what they write in the paper, to get a feel for their interests and specialisms
- Get your head around the basic structure of the publication – i.e. the number of writers, the area covered and the news group they are owned by
- Think in terms of news hooks, so you can identify stories that are relevant to issues they are likely to be covering anyway
- Look at things which are coming up in your own calendar, so you can give them as much notice as possible

# FINDING THE RIGHT STORY

When we talk about positive stories, what specifically do we mean?

The idea is to identify examples which challenge far right narratives about a dangerous or threatening ‘other’, and which contest the idea of outsiders looking to take resources. There are plenty of these positive stories around. But finding them – and helping them to find their way into the public domain – is not always easy.

Below are three formats of news story which work particularly well when pitched in the past. They are not mutually exclusive, and really strong pitches include two or three elements.

## A. TALES OF PARTICIPATION

Stories work particularly well if they emphasise the participation of refugees and other people seeking sanctuary. This might include voluntary work or involvement in a local sports club. It could also relate to personal successes. It is important here to get the tone right, and to avoid sliding into ‘good refugee’ narratives, which imply that groups have a duty to assimilate or conform, or even that people’s right to sanctuary should be judged on their character. But, done well, stories of this kind can be really powerful.

These uplifting stories are based on personal interest, and work best when they include a person’s backstory and how they came to the UK. Identifying these examples often involves maintaining contact with people that have been in the UK for some time – i.e. after they have ceased to be in immediate contact with statutory and support services.

## B. TALES OF COMMUNITY PRIDE

The second set of positive stories are those which paint the local area in a positive light – emphasising civic pride. These may feature examples of a community leading the way in championing integration. Or it may include stories which emphasise the area’s proud history of welcoming new groups.



These stories reassure anxious communities, and emphasise that being open and welcoming is an asset for the area – which does not go against tradition or threaten local pride. Community and council stakeholders may sometimes be anxious about these sorts of stories, because they draw attention to issues like immigration. However, done well they build community resilience, emphasising that new groups add to an area’s strength and are part of its history.



### C. TALES OF HOBBIES AND PASTIMES

The final set of positive stories are those which show newer and more longstanding groups coming together around a hobby or pastime. This could be sport, gardening, cooking, or something else altogether.



The power of articles like this is that they tap into popular interests. They will be read by those interested in vegetable-growing or rugby, rather than focusing on diversity, cohesion or multiculturalism as the main story. Through presenting issues in this way, they become accessible to wider readerships, emphasising shared interests, and the ability of different groups to come together. **(As a short recap, Box 3 includes the key ingredients for a ‘good news’ story).**

#### Box 3) Key ingredients for a ‘good news’ story

- An authentic, human angle – based on achievement and contribution by people seeking sanctuary
- An element which is clearly rooted in the local community, and which presents that community (and its history) in an inclusive and welcoming light
- A common theme or interest – be it local history or sport – which is not directly related to asylum and immigration but which demonstrates shared values

Target audiences for these types of article tend to have low awareness of the migration or asylum issue – and will be likely to only hear about it at crunch-points or crisis moments.

In this context, you need not only to find good stories but to get your language right, so as to keep readers on board. If they cannot understand the story – or if journalists fear they will struggle to explain it to them – then they are not going to engage with it.

If in doubt, ask yourself whether a friend or family member would understand the terminology – and whether they would be interested. **(Box 4 features some more specific tips on language and framing).**

#### Box 4) Tips on getting the language and framing right

- **Simplify.** Keep it straightforward and avoid acronyms or jargon. For example, talk about ‘support with learning English’ rather than ‘support with ESOL’.
- **Shorten.** Go for short and punchy stories, with a single, simple idea at their core. Do not try to introduce lots of different themes at once.
- **Humanise.** Focus on language which we all have in common, and which everyone can understand. Examples include ‘family’, ‘safety’, ‘community’, ‘health’, ‘dignity’, ‘fairness’ or ‘support’.
- **Personalise.** Talk about ‘people’ not ‘migrants’ (e.g. ‘people seeking sanctuary’) and avoid immigration sector jargon like ‘those given indefinite leave to remain’. For example, describe Abdul the father or Abdul the barber, rather than Abdul the asylum seeker.
- **Tell stories and give examples.** Personal stories will always carry more of an impact than facts. They help to avoid generalisations and connect with audiences.

# GETTING ‘GOOD NEWS’ OUT THERE

## THE CHALLENGE

Those looking to promote ‘good news’ stories about migration and diversity are frequently at a disadvantage. This is particularly true if residents are socially conservative or wary of change. But it applies regardless of local attitudes, with councils or community groups more often asked to comment when something has gone wrong.

To put it simply, negative stories are usually more urgent, requiring an immediate response. Positive stories, by contrast, tend to be a) lower priority, b) harder to find a hook for.

Negative stories about hotels used for asylum accommodation would be a good example here. They attract the attention of hostile voices and consume the energy of comms teams – who have to spend their time rebutting a falsehood or defending a position. As a result, very little time is left to champion more positive stories.

This dynamic is especially acute if the press office is small (in the case of the council) or non-existent (in the case of a small community group). All comms capacity can end up being spent on responding to bad news.

## BREAKING THE CYCLE

Counter-intuitive though it may seem, championing positive stories is often the best way of breaking this pattern. It takes time in the first instance. But as a medium-term strategy it can disrupt the flow of negative stories – creating a clear counter-narrative which advocates of migrants or refugees are able to point towards.

Sympathetic journalists will increasingly approach the council for these positive



stories of their own volition, if they become more common. And they will often sound out the authority earlier when there are negative stories, too.

The ultimate aim is to create a set of virtuous circles, where the positive elements of migration and diversity predominate. The local narrative can become more positive, with press officers spending less time on the back foot.

The three stakeholder groups who this guide is written for each have a role to play in this, by creating a pipeline of ‘good news’. **(See diagram).**



### Box 5) Things to support the press release

- Confirmation that this person has consented to be named and photographed – and that it is safe for them to do so
- Personal, authentic stories that can be quoted, from the perspective of people with lived experience of migration – high on content, and told in the first person
- Back-up quotes from the community group/ practitioner, which give detailed explanations on the work going on (e.g. the community project, the sports club, the ESOL scheme, etc)
- Backup quote from a national charity or think tank outside the migration sector (e.g. Shelter, if the story is about housing)
- Photos and (even better) footage; local papers do not have to pay for council images, and will be more likely to report if this component is in there
- A sense of roughly which neighbourhood the events took place in – without being so geographically specific as to compromise safety
- A phone contact, who can explain the basics of the story – and who can put the journalist in touch with a practitioner who has the details

### CREATING A PIPELINE

Many positive stories will come from those directly responsible for delivery or community support. This sometimes sits within the local authority. But more often it comes from **voluntary and community groups** and from other **practitioners and providers** – who are working with asylum seeker, refugee and migrant communities on the ground.

This might include those delivering English classes or those running football training, gardening sessions or knitting groups. It might include those responsible for casework and support for vulnerable communities, or those working to increase employability for people seeking sanctuary.

The relationships between these groups and the **council team responsible for cohesion and migration** is vital in identifying ‘good news’. The latter may sit within the Communities, Place or Community Safety directorates within the council – or somewhere else. But through working closely with those on the ground, they can identify strong messengers, who have clear, positive stories to tell.

This might be done explicitly, by emailing grass roots organisations and providers and asking for potential stories. Or it might come through regular, informal conversations with partner organisations.

The channels of communication between these groups and **the local authority’s comms department or press office** are the final element. The latter department controls the council’s output. They will have strong ties to the local media and will know how to present and package a positive story about migration or diversity.

The community group or partner organisation will therefore struggle to get the story out without the involvement of the council press office. And the team responsible for migration or cohesion will not be able to. So a press team which is proactively placing positive articles is a central part of the solution. It is important to be clear here that the council comms team can only promote the work of voluntary groups on projects that the council has been involved in as a lead organisation. If the work has been carried out without the direct involvement of the

authority then the media will need to be approached via a different route. **(Box 5 looks at key elements to include in a press release of this kind).**

Success will often breed success here. As positive articles start to emerge, voluntary groups and partners become more confident in coming forward with more stories. So too those in other council departments.

# DEALING WITH ‘BAD NEWS’ STORIES

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We have argued above that positive coverage plays a part in this, creating more open channels between media, council and community stakeholders, and helping to reverse negative news cycles. But there are also times when it is important to directly rebut falsehoods or to challenge ‘fake news’. Likewise, at certain points, a negative news story about migration or diversity will need to be actively engaged with.

Below are some principles when facing up to bad news stories. They apply to the conventional news arena as well as to online spaces.

■ **Ask whether there is truth in a negative story, and decide your response on this basis.** Whether the issue relates to demographic changes, planning decisions or a local crime, the reality behind the story will determine what you do. Act quickly to identify all the facts of a case and/ or the underlying

reasons behind a decision. *Example: If the far right are seeking to capitalise on a decision about housing to suggest that newcomers are being prioritised then work to identify the true details of the case.*

■ **If negative new stories – or those which could enflame tensions or be sensitive – are based on truth then be honest and up-front.** They are likely to get out anyway, so put yourself ahead of the game by telling the true story in the safest way you can. Guarding stories for fear of drawing attention to an issue is rarely a good idea. *Example: If a local hotel has been chosen for asylum accommodation then establish early on as many of the key details as you can – e.g. how many people will be staying and for how long. Promote an inclusive narrative about how you expect the area to respond.*





- **Think hard, in rebutting stories, about messengers who can provide reassurance.** Messengers for negative stories will be different to those for positive ones. Depending on the nature of the story, successful messengers might include: a) respected local figures who are non-party-political, b) senior figures within the community, who are trusted and known or (occasionally) c) neutral experts who can explain why something has happened. *Example: If issues around Channel crossings are gaining traction, then a quote from the RNLI could support your response.*
- **Seek to neutralise the narrative by focusing on the wider context.** The aim is to stop something which is extremely small scale, like the settling of 2-3 families, from distracting from the wider issues that the area faces. *Example: If you are managing a story about asylum accommodation, talk in broader terms about housing issues locally, of which asylum is only one part.*
- **If stories are false then work out how widely believed they are.** This is an important test in deciding whether to engage. If a local piece of ‘fake news’ is being discussed on a Facebook

group with 200 followers then a council statement may give oxygen to the falsehood. Likewise, if there are unsubstantiated rumours about groups being ‘illegal’ then talking about the issue of ‘illegality’ will play directly into far right frames. *Example: If there is a baseless conspiracy theory about the council banning St George’s Day then take time to work out how widespread it is. Undertake targeted engagement if the rumour begins to go mainstream – but not before that point. (See decision matrix above).*

Many of the questions above will be addressed by the comms team at a council in the first instance. But the two other stakeholder groups (local authority cohesion teams and community partners) will have to deal with fallout and address the concerns of affected groups.

If the local authority is coordinating a response, such as a factsheet or Q&A, then it will be important to disperse it to these other two groups. This effectively means ‘going back down the pipeline’ described in the previous section.

**(Box 6 gives practical guidance about removing dangerous or offensive content on social media).**

## Box 6) Reporting offensive content and misinformation on social media

Getting misinformation removed is difficult, and is ultimately the duty of the platform. But individuals can play a role.

Much concern regarding the spread of misinformation centres on the role played by Facebook groups. So, the guidance below focuses on this platform. However, many of the key principles can be applied to other sites, such as Reddit.

When reporting content posted by the user of a Facebook group – which you can do by clicking ‘Find support or report post’ (see image) – you are presented with two options. You can a) report it to Facebook’s own moderation team, or b) report the post to the administrator.

### a) Reporting to Facebook

Reporting to Facebook’s own moderators can be tricky but is also really important to do. Action is often taken days or weeks later, when the post has already reached its maximum audience. But reporting material this way also has its advantages. These are listed below:

- Facebook moderators have far greater powers to take action against individuals responsible for harmful posts, including the permanent suspension of their accounts. This is particularly important when addressing an individual’s pattern of behaviour across multiple groups.
- If a group is subject to regular reports by user, the combined number of those reports might lead to the group itself being placed under greater scrutiny in future even if the individual reports do not result in action.


### Report post to admins

Let the admins know what's wrong with this post. No one else will see your name or the content of this report.


- Breaks group rule >
- False news >
- Member conflict >
- Spam >
- Harassment >
- Hate speech >
- Nudity or Sexual Activity >
- Violence >
- Other >

- Reports to Facebook are anonymous and group admins will not be notified, making them preferable in cases where you do not expect the group admins to be sympathetic to your issue.




### b) Reporting to admin

-  **Save Post**  
Add this to your saved items.

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-  **Turn on notifications for this post**

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-  **Report post to group admins**
-  **Hide post**  
See fewer posts like this.
-  **Find support or report post**  
I'm concerned about this post.

A single administrator can be responsible for a group of unlimited size, so the ideal option is to get harmful content removed this way. Group admins mostly have far fewer reports to deal with, are not bound by the complexities of Facebook’s moderation policies, and will understand the local dynamics and context of a post in their group. However, this route depends on

the attitude and ethos of the group admins in question. While the majority of local discussion groups are managed responsibly, there are some that are set up specifically to pursue a particular agenda. These may be unwilling to remove content that supports their positions.

Hence, a starting point for addressing the spread of misinformation on Facebook is to consider the nature of the group. Who founded it? Who are its admins and moderators? And what rules have they put in place about the parameters of discussion?

Most groups will have a list of rules on the 'Announcements' tab. But many choose a short generic list, which does not always reflect actual moderation policies.

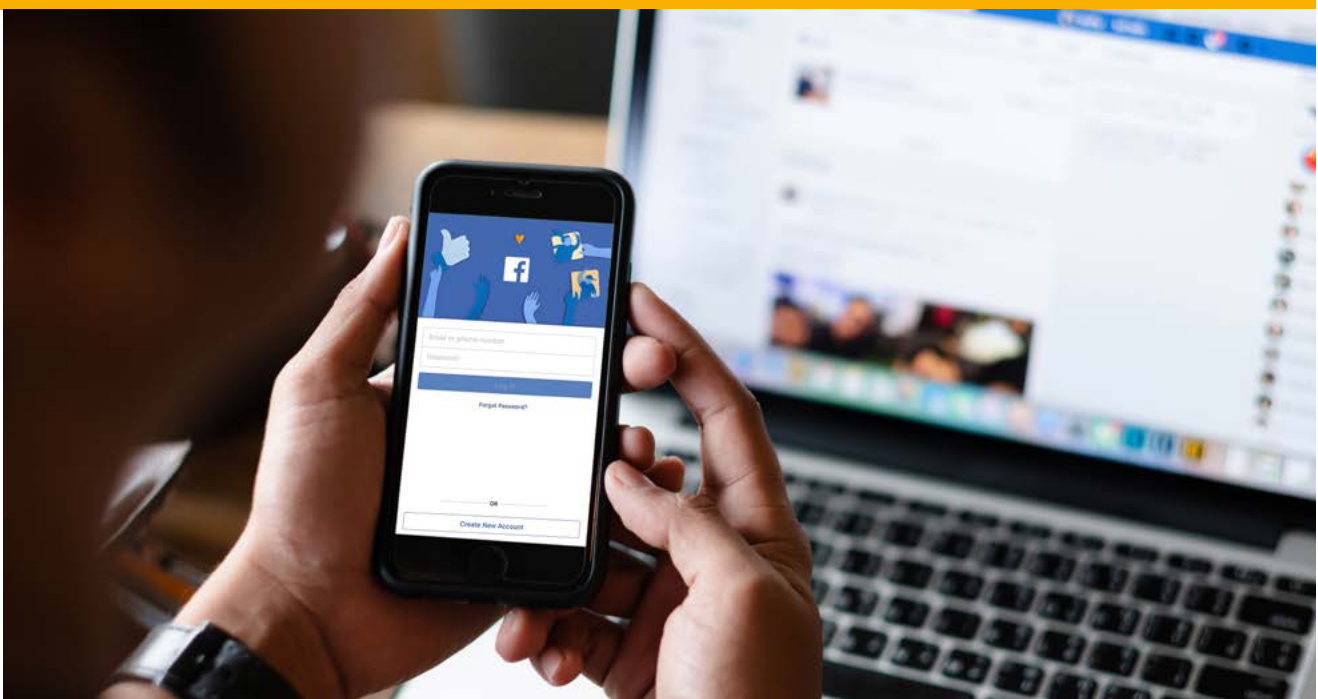
Yet group admins also receive warnings if their groups are repeatedly hosting posts that violate Facebook's rules. (These are generated either by user reports or by Facebook's own auto-moderation). So, even group admins that do not personally care about hate speech or misinformation may feel obliged to remove the more

flagrant examples for fear of losing the group entirely.

When reporting group posts to the admin team, a list of reasons is provided (see image). Misinformation of a generic nature can be reported as 'False News'. However, if misinformation is deliberately smearing an individual or group it may be more appropriate to report it as 'Harassment' or 'Hate speech', respectively.

Facebook unfortunately does not allow for an explanatory message to be sent with such reports. While in many cases the reason for your report might be very clear, in cases where the implications of the post are more obscure, you may wish to message the group admins directly, to explain the reason for your report and provide additional context or evidence. A list of group admins and moderators is available at the top of the group's 'Members list'.

**Note that reports sent to group admins are not anonymous, and the entire admin team will know that you were the one who reported it. The user whose post you reported will not be notified.**



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