

HOPEFUL TOWNS: 'WHAT WORKS?' (1)

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN AREAS WITH A FAR RIGHT FOOTPRINT

BRIEF

The unwanted attentions of the far right can pose a big challenge to community resilience in a town. They threaten the happiness and safety of residents, potentially damaging an area's reputation and sense of pride. But how do you drive out those sowing hatred and division? And how do you rebuild trust and recreate a positive sense of identity?

With the populist radical right often honing in on areas that are experiencing change for the first time, it is easy for decision-makers and local leaders to be caught unawares. This event features some of the lessons learned by authorities that have been targeted by the far right in the past. We talk through the warning signs to look out for, the pitfalls to avoid and the strategies that worked. And we discuss how a place can change the narrative afterwards.

SPEAKERS

- **MAREK LUBELSKI**, Social Justice Manager, Luton Council
- **PETER ADAMS**, St Mary's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, Luton
- **CLLR SAIMA ASHRAF**, Deputy Leader LB Barking and Dagenham, Cabinet Member for Community Leadership & Engagement
- **PAUL MESZAROS**, Organiser, HOPE not hate charitable trust, Bradford, Yorkshire
- **CHRIS CLARKE**, Policy researcher, HOPE not hate charitable trust
- **ROSIE CARTER**, Senior Policy officer, HOPE not hate

CONTEXT

In this discussion we heard from three places: Luton, Barking and Dagenham and Bradford. These are three local authority areas which have faced marked challenges from the far right in the past – with particular flashpoints taking place in 2009, 2006 and 2001 respectively. There are notable differences – with the threat in Barking and Dagenham manifested in an electoral form and that in Luton being more centred around street activism, for example. But there were still a range of common factors.

These tensions occurred several years ago, in some cases – and the nature of the threat has adapted and become more digitised in the years since. But the aim of the session was to understand some of the core principles of what had been effective at the local level, before during and after the far right threat emerged.

We heard powerful accounts from community stakeholders, officers and politicians in the areas, about the form that tensions first took. And we also heard about how the three respective areas had sought to rebuild afterwards.

KEY THEMES

A fascinating range of topics came through in the discussions. Five themes in particular emerged.

1. NARRATIVE SHIFT

All of the speakers talked about the challenge of building back after the far right had left their footprint. They discussed how long the scars of community tensions can last, and the importance of a more hopeful vision for

communities branded 'racist places'. There was also an emphasis that these external perceptions were often at odds with the more cordial realities of those living in communities. And there was an additional feeling that a history of tensions could sometimes be used as a prompt for cohesion, encouraging the rest of the community to come together behind narratives of unity.

2. ENGAGEMENT AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

All of the three speakers stressed the importance of community engagement, and the hard graft of reaching out to everyone in order to build trust and ensure that people have the space to be heard. This process of "learning to listen again" applied both to council and non-council functions, political and non-political. There was talk, for example, about how low canvassing contact rates had become in one of the three areas, but also of engagement programmes by local agencies and authorities.

3. NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS

In each area, faith groups had played an important role, as key factors in reaching out to the respective communities and helping to steer the narrative. As well as offering physical space, congregations acted as a starting point for building community networks. Networks into communities were a key method by which word could spread and coherent strategies be developed. Partnership was the other element of this – with a coherent set of partnerships between community leaders, local media, the council and the police regarded as essential.

4. LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Leadership was a central tool for all three areas in building resilience against the far right. And while traditional forms of leadership, such as the local council, had played a pivotal role, non-traditional leaders had been some of the most effective actors in easing local tensions and rebuilding hope. These leaders often emerged through community work, and were closer to the neighbourhoods where the threat was most pronounced. There was some discussion of how this could be rolled out and how leadership at the local level could be encouraged.

5. CREATING RESILIENT SOIL

Understanding that the far right take hold in fertile soil was an important element of the conversation. The session revealed that a sense

“In their stupidity and their naivety [the EDL] succeeded in doing exactly the opposite of what they intended: they united the people of Bradford of all colours, creeds, races and religions as one.”

“Perhaps even more importantly they helped our city to lay to rest some of the ghosts of the riots of 2001. They helped prove that Bradford has moved on, it has grown to a point where it can acknowledge and deal with its differences without the need for confrontation and violence.”

This is a quote from a 2009 front page editorial in the Bradford Telegraph & Argus Newspaper. It was quoted by Paul Meszaros during the WHAT WORKS session. You can read more about it [here](#).

of loss tended to emerge thanks to deprivation, de-industrialisation and discomfort with change, especially in places with high population churn. These factors create an environment that is easier for the far right to exploit. Such challenges cannot be addressed overnight, of course, and cannot always be tackled at the local level. However, the discussion suggested that certain steps – e.g. high profile public realm interventions by the council – could mitigate residents' feelings of decline in some areas.

NEXT SESSION

The next webinar in the WHAT WORKS series will be on **February 18th, 2021, between 11am and 12.30pm**. Entitled 'Building a strong place identity and culture', it will pick up on some of the key topics discussed the first session, about narratives around place and how this can prevent divisive narratives from gaining traction. We hope to see you there.

In the meantime please encourage others who might be interested in the topics discussed to join our Towns Leadership Network: <https://www.hopefultowns.co.uk/network>