

Written evidence from Dr Joseph Owen (Research Fellow in English, University of Southampton), Professor Nicky Marsh (Professor of English, University of Southampton) and Dr Michael Howcroft (Future Leaders Fellow, University of Glasgow) [CCI0015]

1. We are researchers from the University of Southampton. We lead on projects in the [Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities \(SIAH\)](#), including [Poetry, Policy and Place](#), [Neighbouring Data](#), and [Feeling Towns](#). This last project explores pride and place attachment, and it has produced findings on community cohesion. These AHRC-funded projects together form the [And Towns](#) network, which hosts a suite of [policy resources](#).
2. The Feeling Towns project, funded by the AHRC Place Programme, sought to understand what pride in place means to different communities. Because pride in place was a key, exploratory metric in the 2022 Levelling Up White Paper, we worked with policymakers, heritage organisations and arts practitioners to understand how pride could be meaningfully evaluated.
3. Although pride in place is no longer an explicit policy objective for the new government, it is still a prominent feature of local governance and a key driver of community cohesion. In collaboration with researchers at the University of Glasgow and Southampton City Council, we are designing pilot projects and testing methods to explore the relationship between pride and community cohesion with neighbourhoods in Southampton. This work will report findings towards the end of 2026.
4. Feeling Towns conducted case-study research in several English towns from 2021 to 2023, focusing on projects that followed the delivery of Levelling Up funding. This work included research on community cohesion in seven places: Bournemouth, Southend, Southampton, Darlington, Herefordshire, Dorchester and the Isle of Wight. We partnered with policymakers in several Westminster government departments such as DLUHC and the Community Ownership Fund, and we collaborated with national heritage bodies such as Historic England. We worked closely with English local authorities and community organisations.
5. We spoke with more than 500 people across seven locations, generating rich, ethnographic, place-specific understandings of how relationships in communities were comprehended, enacted and felt. For more information on our research, please read our [peer-reviewed journal article](#): “Levelling Up, affective governance and tensions within ‘pride in place’”, in *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*. We also developed a [practical think-kit](#) for partners and policymakers.

What assessments have been made of community cohesion in the UK in a local and national context?

6. We found that towns and councils approached community engagement in very different ways. Our work suggests that local authorities and their stakeholders

have different working definitions of community cohesion and different views of what successful “cohesion” looks like. Here are three case-study examples of how community cohesion was viewed differently by councils and residents:

7. The shortlisted City of Culture bid, [Southampton 2025](#), provoked questions about the city’s sense of place and identity. The Council’s Cultural Strategy, [Southampton Together](#), foresaw that by 2031: “Through culture, Southampton [will be] an inclusive city that collaborates and connects at home and on the national and international stage to ignite imaginations, innovation, pride and a sense of belonging across the whole city.” In this vein, pride was understood as a key driver for cultural regeneration and social cohesion.
8. In **Darlington**, sport was an important driver of social cohesion for residents. A boxing gym in Northgate was seen as a rare community space for young people in the town. Darlington Football Club was spoken of as being a key link between communities and an opportunity to improve social cohesion, despite the history of racism attached to the club. As one resident noted, “football has no religion.”
9. We supported new opportunities for **Dorchester** Town Council to engage with communities it had identified as seldom heard, including young people, many of whom leave Dorchester for new lifestyle and career opportunities. This point echoes priorities in the [Dorchester Directory of Aims and Aspirations](#), which promises “ways of engaging and supporting minority and isolated groups” and to “encourage diversity and equal opportunities to increase community cohesion.”

What are the primary barriers and threats to community cohesion?

10. There is positive pride that brings together individuals as a collective, building community cohesion and civic engagement. There is also negative pride that leads to division and resentment in communities. Our research suggests that new frameworks for understanding and recognising these felt forms of knowledge and experience are crucial to solving issues of community cohesion.
11. It should not be unexpected that [pride in the economy](#) has fallen. We need not only a new deal for local authorities, which stimulates local as well as national growth, but a change in how growth, success and feelings are understood, measured *and validated* as forms of knowledge in decision-making processes.
12. The importance of local feelings for mobilising political action and establishing community cohesion was evident during the riots of early August 2024 when a unified and local [community presence](#) was widely understood to have quashed the threat of widespread far-right disorder. [City leaders](#) in Liverpool have since celebrated how ‘proud’ they are to ‘represent a city of many faiths’. Prime Minister Keir [Starmer](#) himself spoke of the ‘real pride’ he felt ‘in those people who cleaned up the streets. Rebuilt the walls. Repaired the damage’.
13. This emphasis on the importance of *feelings*—of understanding the [lived and felt experiences](#) of place—is central to our own research. We found that local pride and community cohesion are important but complex and deeply place-specific.

We found that pride in place is often particular to the hyper-local rather than to the administrative definitions of cities, towns and wards. People can have pride in their streets, histories, parks—even chip shops—and these sites can be at odds with the designated identities and cultural-community assets of the towns, cities and nations in which they live. Yet this pride is important to understanding how people act and feel, now and in the future.

14. We found that a sense of pride, belonging and community cohesion in local areas were present when people felt that they had been seen and recognised, when they volunteered, and when they gathered to meet shared goals to support each other. Yet we also found that, in common with [other researchers](#), the social capital and infrastructures necessary to maintain and grow these local possibilities have been radically hollowed-out by 14 years of austerity. We found that the lack of local leaders and meeting places, and the limited possibilities for local voices to be heard, have left deep-seated wounds and cultures of distrust in communities that need to be understood at the grass-roots level.

What can be done at a local and national level to improve community cohesion?

15. **Improving communication:** In all case studies, we noted problems of miscommunication between service providers, including Councils, schools, and the community, though it is not always clear why this breakdown is happening. Hyperlocal areas need champions to articulate residents' needs to Council Directorates. Organisations such as Sure Start would benefit from more visibility and effective promotion, but community members are often unaware of where to look for this kind of information. In some cases, residents turn to family or neighbours for information, though they may be uninformed. A local and public space, accessible to all, is needed where communities can find out information and where advisory services might be based.
16. **Supporting local governance and civic upskilling:** Many residents across places were not convinced that local democracy is working as effectively as it might: ward councillors, and particularly local MPs, were considered too absent by some. Councillors and services should deploy digital means to contact residents. Neighbourhood WhatsApp and Facebook groups can be an effective way to develop awareness of local issues and supply information to residents. While this action does not address digital and literacy barriers, it provides a way of engaging with a significant proportion of the community.
17. **Building creative and participatory projects:** These projects can be devised to understand how common knowledge is circulated locally, including strategies to dispel local myths and misinformation. This work could develop basic citizenship skills, such as team-work, communication and confidence. Community events might consider developing these skills and abilities in partnership with local schools, the university and other stakeholders including creative organisations and private businesses, who should be encouraged to contribute money and resources. Place-based leadership skills, such as running meetings, defining

aims and understanding stakeholder needs, are essential. Councils should look to sustain effective Community Interest Companies and Community Trusts.

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