

Report on ‘Rushmoor Voices’ project

April 2025

About this document

This note sets out

- Information on work carried out by Belong between November 2024 and March 2025 in line with a commission from Rushmoor Council to support the delivery of the workplan of the Community Engagement Task and Finish Group, which has the aim of ‘working with local community groups and leaders to better understand and address community concerns’
- Information on issues which have been raised during our work, with brief observations on those issues
- Suggestions and proposals about further work that the council could do – often with partners. Belong proposes making inputs and providing support to some strands of this work, on the basis of a further commission

Work carried out by Belong

A small team from the charity Belong has worked on the Rushmoor Voices project, by making in-person visits to the borough, taking part in Teams meetings, and having multiple phone conversations and email exchanges. We have carried out the following work:

Supporting council officers in preparing for and running a public meeting (20 November 2024) which attracted around 40 participants, including members of campaigning groups and organisations, voluntary sector groups and community members

Regular liaison with key council officers

A briefing session / interactive workshop with council officers as part of gathering views and perspectives (27 January)

Meetings, conversations and email exchange with workers and volunteers from a range of organisations, including an informal group made up of disabled people, groups of asylum seekers / refugees, a litter-picking group and:

- Aldershot Football Club
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Grub Hub
- Hampshire Constabulary
- Holy Trinity Church
- Nepali Women's Group
- Potters International Hotel
- Resettlement Team (CAB)
- Rushmoor Voluntary Service
- Shiva Cultural Centre

We have also had recurrent meetings, conversations and email exchanges with members of a range of campaigning organisations.

We have met the local MP and have regularly engaged with local councillors:

- Update (online) to Community Engagement Task and Finish Group (17 December)
- Evening briefing and seminar open to all members (16 January)
- Meeting (online) with some members who were unable to attend evening briefing and seminar (5 March)
- Meetings (online and in person) with individual councillors as appropriate

We have liaised with other agencies working in the borough or with a direct interest in the borough, including local arts and culture organisations who want to deliver events and activities that support community cohesion and celebrate integration and diversity; the Thinking Place consultancy; and Civil Service colleagues from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

We have also spoken with many diverse members of the public in informal settings including cafes and pubs.

Issues and observations

In this section, we highlight the issues in respect of which views and feelings which were shared recurrently through our work. Team members can provide verbally a great deal of additional information, including specific quotes and particular observations which have been put to us: when sharing information in this way, it is our definite practice to respect the commitments we have made to people who have spoken to us in respect of confidentiality.

Given the context of our commission, our conversations have often taken in views and feelings about the protests over and opposition to ‘migrant hotels’; the disorder in summer 2024; a meeting at Holy Trinity Church on 6 December’; issues to do with behaviour at and the handling of issues at an Extraordinary Council meeting on 5 February; a protest planned outside the Potters Hotel on 12 March, and a planned counter-protest on that date; and other altercations between people with different views on issues around migration.

It should be noted that we have not always ‘steered’ people towards such topics, especially when talking to members of community groups, and to residents in general, so as to help us ascertain the extent to which issues around migration and race are – or are not - key concerns for Rushmoor community members overall.

Impact of / perceptions around immigration

- Concern over migrants / asylum seekers being housed in particular locations, some of which are seen as ‘high profile’
- Antipathy towards migrants
- Racism and Islamophobia
- Activity of an anti-migrant campaigning group
- Activity of pro-migrant campaigning groups
- Support offered by some to residents of Potters Hotel
- Experience of Nepali community members / integration of Nepali people into Aldershot
- Protest / counter-protest dynamic: meetings and disruption of meetings
- Extent to which political actors from outside Rushmoor are involved in / encouraging / orchestrating dynamics of protest and counter-protest
- Role of social media in relation to these issues: ‘misinformation’; ‘disinformation’
- Sense of vulnerability on the part of campaigners (expressed in particular forms by both pro-migrant and anti-migrant campaigners)

Wider relevant social issues

- Cost of living pressures
- Issues of economic and social disparity
- A sense of competition ('are others getting what we should be getting?')
- Community safety (especially at night, especially in Aldershot)
- Physical improvements promised but not delivered? 'Landscape' / appearance of urban centres seems 'stuck' to some residents (though the recent unveiling of Union Yard shows that things have been happening behind hoardings, and this development has been well-received)

Trust in / responsiveness of council and other agencies; health of democratic process

- Some evidence of lack of trust in / distance from / alienation from 'council' (referring both to the council and to public sector agencies more generally)
- Uneven understanding of council role and powers
- Desire by police to further improve links with council / councillors and to build increased public trust and confidence in the police
- Questions about quality and effectiveness of communication (episodic rather than regular, responsive rather than sustained?)
- Political disagreement about extent to which council is open / secretive' / engaged
- Questions about extent to which 'the council' and other agencies are 'fluent' and confident in respect of race and equalities issues
- Political disagreement has sometimes been expressed in polarised and hostile terms: local expressions of wider shifts in political culture / culture wars'?
- Issues about 'terms of engagement' during political debate / disputes over social issues: what are the levels of 'tolerance' for dissent expressed in blunt terms? What language is appropriate / inappropriate?
- Concern on part of some elected representatives about personal safety / well-being given context of polarisation

Potential future directions

- Most people express a desire to get ‘back to normal’
- Reaction against the idea that disturbances of summer 2024 or campaigns against migrants do or should define the borough
- Interest from a range of people and organisations in taking steps to build links and connections across lines of difference: ‘a desire to forge more useful dynamics’
- Interest from a significant number of people in taking steps to increase capacity to have difficult conversations / handle contention well

Suggestions and proposals for practical steps to address issues

Belong has made some detailed suggestions about further work that the council could do – often with partners. Belong proposes making inputs and providing support to some strands of this work. The work areas listed below cannot and should not all be done ‘at once’: prioritisation and sequencing is appropriate, as is alignment with other plans and processes.

Overall cohesion approaches

There should be a process of identifying the approaches and actions which the council and its partners are taking and could take to promote social cohesion in the coming years. In settled circumstances, this could take the form of developing a cohesion strategy which would not replace or rework existing strategies, plans and intentions, but complement them and sit alongside them, confirming and looking to maximise the extent to which these contribute to good relations and cohesion. Such a strategy or framework might cover:

- The case for building strong and resilient communities²
- Acknowledging and addressing social issues and concerns – specific local issues and those which are expressions of wider national and international developments

The process would include focus groups and design lab process on specific issues and particular areas of work to maximise the extent to which these can contribute to cohesion; and to ensure that services activities are appropriately coordinated and publicised.

² More socially connected, cohesive local areas generate individual and community level benefits: higher levels of individual subjective wellbeing; increased levels of volunteering / active social engagement / more extensive participation; cohesive communities have increased resilience against problems / crisis / shock; improved capacity to anticipate, manage and make the best of social change (handling its negative aspects, maximising its positive opportunities).

The resulting document would guide the work of the council, working through both mainstream services and future plans and initiatives to look at how to

- Deliver and promote these well
- Deliver and promote them in ways which attend to the specific needs of particular groups of people (including but not limited to the needs of people with protected characteristics in equalities legislation)
- Deliver and promote them in ways which attend to everybody's interests

Rushmoor's current position in the context of proposed local government reorganisation should be taken into account in scoping and managing such processes: the ambitions formed on the basis of Rushmoor Council's assessment of needs and possibilities should inform a partnership approach and become central to the shaping of future local governance arrangements. This is corporate management and governance work which Belong is not placed to lead, but in respect of which we could provide substantial specialist consultancy and peer support.

Respond to the need / desire for shared community spaces

In the future development of public space and facilities, attention should be given to maximising the extent to which these can be shared spaces, facilitating interaction between people from different backgrounds. Belong is not placed to lead on this work, but members of our network – both local councils and particular organisations – have relevant expertise. Related issues in respect of public space include the need to address community safety issues through design.

Developing skills, capacity and confidence – addressing contested issues and building good relations

A range of skill-sharing sessions and training programmes could be delivered so as to increase the extent to which contention and disagreement in the borough can be handled well, and to increase the extent to which relationships can be made, developed and strengthened across lines of difference. These sessions and programmes would combine established approaches with bespoke material and sessions which would be specifically tailored to Rushmoor, and would comprise a variety of types and formats of sessions which would be delivered so as to suit different potential participants:

- Elected councillors
- Council officers (from senior level to ‘front line’) and workers from partner organisations
- Residents and volunteers involved with community, voluntary and faith organisations
- Members of campaigning organisations

The content of these sessions and programmes would cover

- Sharing skills in conflict awareness and in having difficult conversations on potentially divisive issues
- Skills to initiate positive encounters and build communication and – where this is desired – better links and stronger connections across lines of difference, between people from varied backgrounds
- Skills to run dialogue programmes, including through development of skills to facilitate dialogue
- Confirming appropriate means to work through democratic process on conflicted issues, including in respect of language use
- Further developing relationship mapping and tension monitoring and community sentiment analysis systems and mechanisms
- Partnership work between agencies and community organisations to identify and develop appropriate and effective approaches to countering misinformation, challenging prejudices and stereotypes, and building trust, including through work to develop and promote critical thinking in relation to social media

Positive communications

Communications work both to underpin cohesion and to promote the borough as great place to live, work and invest is needed around the long-term promotion of Rushmoor, its towns and its places, and the nurturing and celebration of shared identities. This should take place in the context of changing structures of local governance, but the basis for this work could be laid now.

More immediately, there is a need for a review of the language and key points in council communications, including promoting agreed and clear messaging on some controversial issues on which residents and campaigning groups have raised concerns and questions, and which could be answered. Specifically, and as an example, some of the queries and concerns that have been raised about issues to do with migrants being allocated places in local hotels could be answered with accurate information which the council holds, and which can be put into the public domain, and this would be a response to requests from

members of campaigning groups which are perceived as both ‘anti-migrant’ and ‘pro-migrant’. Such work would form part of effectively responding to misinformation and divisive disinformation detailed above.

Whilst there is the need to hold further discussion about the specific details of initiatives suggested here, there is clear value in now progressing a range of activities, which could be implemented and would evolve in line with the Council’s priorities and policies and would be visible by stakeholders and the public.

For more information on the content of this note, please email Belong, referring to ‘Rushmoor’ in the email title: hello@belongnetwork.co.uk