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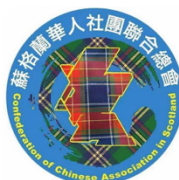## EDINBURGH

THE IMPACTS OF 'SOCIAL MIXING ACTIVITIES' ON PROMOTING THE CONNECTEDNESS AND SOCIAL COHESION IN WEST LOTHIAN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: PHASE ONE

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to assess how 'social mixing activities' promote connectedness and social cohesion in West Lothian, Scotland. This briefing summarises the key findings from phase one. This research will be conducted in three phases. Between May and June 2025, three focus group discussions (FGDs) took place: one with service providers, one with residents identifying as White or Scottish descent, and a third with residents from various ethnic backgrounds in West Lothian, Scotland. The purpose of these discussions was to understand participants' views on what factors encourage or prevent meaningful interactions within the community. They also helped determine the most suitable social mixing activities for the West Lothian area.
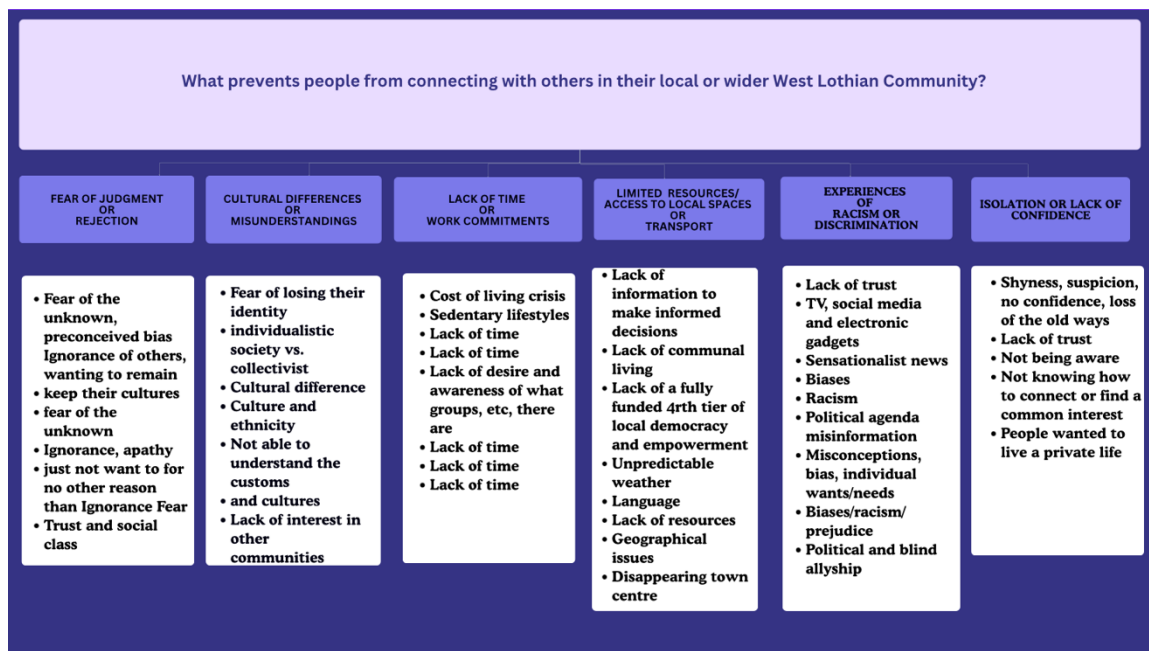
The second phase will involve organising a social mixing activity in West Lothian, following the guidelines provided by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in 2021 and 2022, as well as conducting surveys to assess whether these social mixing activities can promote meaningful interaction among various resident groups with different ethnic backgrounds. The final phase will involve carrying out semi-structured interviews with a selected group of participants. The primary objective of these interviews is to gain further insight into how social mixing activities can contribute to positive perceptions, foster meaningful relationships, and promote better social cohesion between long-term and new residents in West Lothian.

KEY FINDINGS: PHASE 1 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Forty-two participants took part in three FDGs. The results reveal various barriers that hinder communities from meaningful engagement. However, some positive indications show that certain communities are eager and willing to connect with members from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The main aim of these focus groups was to identify key barriers to meaningful engagement, share best practices, and find a social mixing activity suitable for the West Lothian context. The selected social mixing activity will be tested in Phase Two of the research to assess whether it can foster connectedness and social cohesion among residents of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Some of the key findings from phase one are presented below.

BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL INTERACTION:

While some participants across all three FDGs feel there is friendliness among community members of different ethnic backgrounds, the majority believe there are significant barriers, such as distance, segregation caused by misunderstandings, and mistrust. Some describe it as 'friendly but superficial', while others feel it varies from community to community. Overall, there is consensus that communities with different ethnic backgrounds tend to live in silos and keep themselves separate. However, the following factors were identified as key barriers to meaningful engagement and forming connections among some West Lothian residents:

What prevents people from connecting with others in their local or wider West Lothian Community?

FEAR OF JUDGMENT OR REJECTION	CULTURAL DIFFERENCES OR MISUNDERSTANDINGS	LACK OF TIME OR WORK COMMITMENTS	LIMITED RESOURCES/ ACCESS TO LOCAL SPACES OR TRANSPORT	EXPERIENCES OF RACISM OR DISCRIMINATION	ISOLATION OR LACK OF CONFIDENCE
• Fear of the unknown, preconceived bias Ignorance of others, wanting to remain • keep their cultures • fear of the unknown • Ignorance, apathy • just not want to for no other reason than Ignorance Fear • Trust and social class	• Fear of losing their identity • individualistic society vs. collectivist • Cultural difference • Culture and ethnicity • Not able to understand the customs • and cultures • Lack of interest in other communities	• Cost of living crisis • Sedentary lifestyles • Lack of time • Lack of time • Lack of desire and awareness of what groups, etc, there are • Lack of time • Lack of time • Lack of time	• Lack of information to make informed decisions • Lack of communal living • Lack of a fully funded 4rth tier of local democracy and empowerment • Unpredictable weather • Language • Lack of resources • Geographical issues • Disappearing town centre	• Lack of trust • TV, social media and electronic gadgets • Sensationalist news • Biases • Racism • Political agenda misinformation • Misconceptions, bias, individual wants/needs • Biases/racism/ prejudice • Political and blind allyship	• Shyness, suspicion, no confidence, loss of the old ways • Lack of trust • Not being aware • Not knowing how to connect or find a common interest • People wanted to live a private life

FEAR OF JUDGMENT OR REJECTION:

Several participants mentioned that past experiences of racism, along with fear of the unfamiliar and preconceived biases, may cause communities to feel fearful or reject individuals from different backgrounds. This fear of judgment and rejection often leads communities to prefer staying within their own cultures.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES OR MISUNDERSTANDINGS:

According to participants across all three FDGs, cultural differences can cause community members from both majority and minority groups to fear losing their cultural identities. This is often because adults may not have the same opportunities as children to learn about the benefits of cultural diversity. This lack of knowledge can also lead to difficulties in connecting with others, finding common interests, or developing empathy. Sometimes, there is simply a lack of interest or willingness to engage with others without an apparent reason.

LACK OF TIME OR WORK COMMITMENTS:

Lack of time due to work, childcare commitments, and the cost-of-living crisis can affect people's willingness to connect with other groups beyond their usual circles and lead to more 'sedentary lifestyles'.

EXPERIENCES OF RACISM OR DISCRIMINATION:

Most participants from all FGDs agreed that there is a significant lack of trust among communities across West Lothian. They identified experiences of racism as a key factor in increasing this mistrust. Although people from Black, Asian, and other minority communities face the most racism due to their skin colour, participants also noted that individuals with certain religious beliefs and non-native speakers can face severe racism. These experiences of racism are further reinforced by television, social media, electronic gadgets, sensationalist news that spreads fear, and the rise of right-wing politics.

POLITICAL AND BLIND ALLYSHIP:

Participants from all three FDGs noted that some local political figures, including councillors, spread hatred against migrants on social media, citing lack of oversight and accountability. They claim these politicians, hiding behind free speech, target minorities. Conversely, many community and political leaders from the majority openly display banners supporting minorities. Some participants described such support as 'white fragility'—a calculated attempt to seem non-racist while avoiding deeper racial biases. It was also mentioned by some of the participants that minoritised communities often operate in isolation, avoiding inclusion and collaboration with broader groups. Consequently, when community and political leaders promote only socially isolated initiatives, it leads to the exclusion of wider communities, preventing minoritised groups from benefiting from inclusive environments.

As mentioned earlier, due to various reasons, such as '*Shyness, suspicion, no confidence, loss of the old ways',* some community members from both majority and minority groups can be reluctant to engage with those outside of their friends and families.

Participants from all FGDs identified several key activities that help them connect with other community members, especially newcomers to West Lothian with different backgrounds. They highlighted similarities in individual identities, like ethnicity and religious beliefs, as well as shared interests such as community events and festivals. These shared activities offer a space for communities to learn about each other's cultures, foods, sports, and traditions. Additionally, participants mentioned a few other activities during the focus group discussions:

SHARED INTERESTS OR HOBBIES:

Participants noted that shared interests such as organising Gala days, litter picking, outdoor and art activities, and music can serve as ways to connect with new and existing community members. However, some participants highlighted that many events are hosted mainly by majority groups and lack diverse perspectives due to lower participation from minority groups. Across all FDGs discussions, it was raised

that cultural differences, past experiences of racism, and inward attitudes can hinder minorities from engaging with the local majority-led activities. Additionally, some minorities act as gatekeepers, often preventing information from reaching other community members. These gatekeepers gain a sense of validation and fulfilment from this role and may also experience financial security, which they may not have due to structural inequalities. Other participants mentioned that shared beliefs or common causes facilitate their connection with community members; for example, religious beliefs help people bond and support each other in times of need.

SHARED SPACES, COMMUNITY CENTRES AND THEIR SERVICES:

Public spaces such as schools and colleges act as centres of social interaction. Speaker 2 from FGD 3 explained, **'I'll just put schools and colleges because I think there are many people with different backgrounds and cultures, and we can learn from each other. We can learn how to respect others and behave properly, so I believe these are important places for that.'** Likewise, community centres and their services—such as social and sports groups, societies, and leisure centres—bring people together by offering opportunities to learn about each other's cultures and traditions. This cultural knowledge reduces anxieties about the unknown, fosters mutual trust, and helps build friendships across differences. Regular contact also encourages open-mindedness and understanding of others, whether their differences are visible or invisible.

PLACES THAT FACILITATE INTERACTION AMONG COMMUNITY MEMBERS FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS:

Participants from all three FDGs were also invited to identify key locations within West Lothian that strengthen community bonds. 24.6% highlighted the importance of community centres in connecting and maintaining relationships, while 19.7% mentioned schools and nurseries. Additionally, 8.2% emphasised the roles of libraries, shopping centres (4.9%), and charity organisations (11.5%). Festivals and events were noted by 18%.

WHAT ACTIVITIES COULD HELP COMMUNITIES INTERACT MORE MEANINGFULLY?

DO YOU THINK ANY OF THESE ACTIVITIES COULD HELP COMMUNITIES INTERACT MORE MEANINGFULLY?

Economic empowerment 6.8%
Reading clubs 2.3%
Sports 11.4%
Youth exchange programme 6.8%
Youth led activities 2.3%
Cultural celebration 27.3%
Cooking Together 34.1%
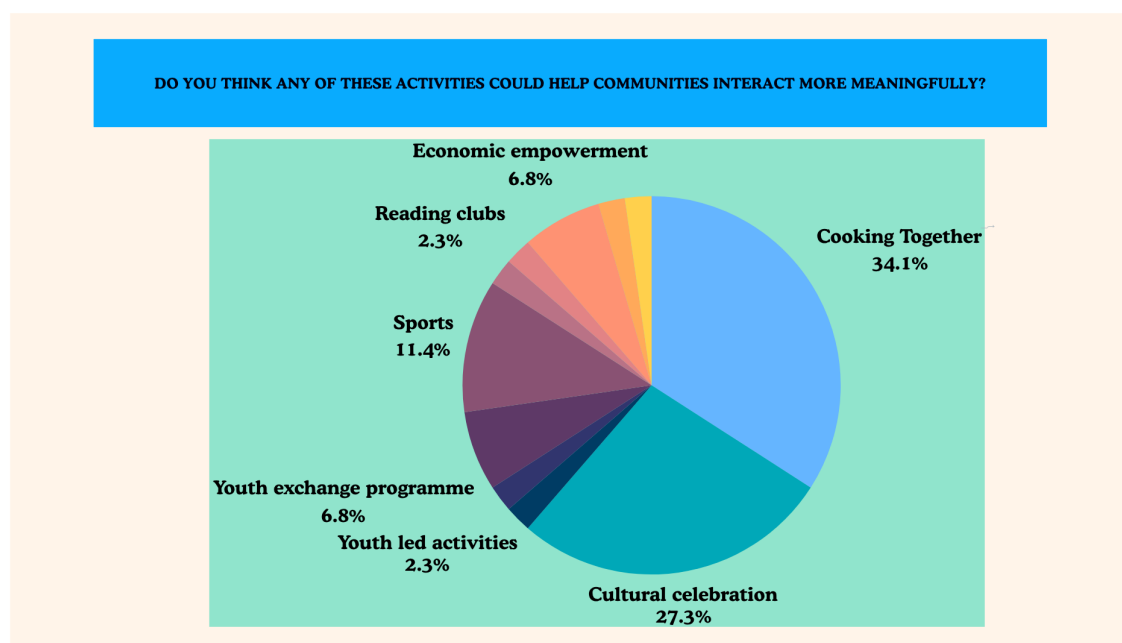
All participants were introduced to various activities, including **cooking together, cultural celebrations, youth-led initiatives, engagement programs, sports, reading clubs, economic empowerment, gardening, filmmaking, and a music festival,** following IOM guidelines. However, participants were also encouraged to suggest other activities. Findings from three focus groups indicated that **34,1% believe cooking together** fosters community bonds by providing opportunities to learn about different cultures and traditions, which can help reduce misunderstandings embedded in social systems through misinformation spread via social and electronic media. Meanwhile, **27.3% viewed cultural celebrations** as effective for community building; for example, multi-cultural events hosted in partnership with Whitburn Service Users Group, West Lothian Chinese Community Hub, West Lothian Community Race Forum, and West Lothian Council were cited as successful in bringing diverse communities together and facilitating cultural learning. Other activities like **youth-led initiatives (2.3%),** youth engagement

programs **(6.8%), sports (11.4 %),** and economic empowerment **(6.8 %)** were also seen as vital venues for residents from different backgrounds, especially young people, to connect across socio-economic lines. These activities are perceived to reduce tensions among youth, decrease hate crimes at schools, and address rising racism and far-right views expressed on social media. Participants voiced concerns about the increase in racism in schools and the lack of motivation within schools to address these issues effectively.

This briefing summarises the findings from three FGDs conducted during the first phase of this PhD program. Results indicate that while some participants see friendliness among different ethnic communities, many believe there are significant barriers such as distance, segregation driven by misunderstandings, and mistrust. Some describe these interactions as 'friendly but superficial,' while others highlight differences between communities. Overall, there is an agreement that communities tend to operate in silos and remain isolated. Nonetheless, all FGD participants agree on several activities that foster connections, especially for newcomers to West Lothian from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. These include community events, festivals, shared cooking, sports, youth-led initiatives, and economic empowerment projects. Participants emphasise that these activities create shared spaces where communities can learn about each other's cultures, foods, sports, and traditions. Based on these findings, I plan to facilitate a social mixing activity for six weeks in Phase two (October to November 2025) and conduct pre- and post-surveys to evaluate whether the social mixing activity can enhance connectedness and social cohesion in a context like West Lothian. Please follow the link below to stay updated about upcoming phases.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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