



ERAVI

SANDWELL TENSIONS

MONITORING FRAMEWORK REPORT

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Foreword

This important report points to fractures in the social contract between members of local communities in Sandwell and public agencies tasked to provide core services & opportunities to meet their needs.

By going deep to listen to local people affected by a range of community safety concerns, the team of credible researchers unearth powerful insights as to why there is an urgent need to build positive accountable relationships between communities, public bodies and business, making sure everyone is heard and no one is left out.

Too often we have seen the consequences of what happens when we ignore this call to action or give it inadequate attention with community fun days without significantly improving what is on offer to local people from housing, jobs to youth services.

Reweaving the fabric of society so everyone feels they have a stake in where they live and how their lives are affected should be everyone's occupation. So, this milestone report invites us all in civil society, public services and business to dig deeper to demonstrate how we will meet this test.



Dr Saidul Haque Saeed
Lead Organiser, Citizens UK

Executive Summary

This report sets out the concept of the Tensions Monitoring Framework and provides an analysis of findings completed as part of the Sandwell Tensions Monitoring Framework pilot (STMF). Our approach is based on understanding community tensions through agile research and deep in-person engagement (ACE). In this project, tension monitoring means listening to residents and gathering evidence, in real time, about how safe and connected people feel, what concerns are emerging, and what might be increasing pressures between groups, or towards institutions.

The aim is to spot early warning signs, understand the structural and material conditions that contribute to tensions, and support timely, informed and collaborative responses. It is a preventative approach geared towards understanding the structural connections between issues; as well as what people are experiencing and feeling, so that partners can understand the level of need and respond before issues escalate. The pilot brings together on-the-ground qualitative research, survey feedback, and secondary data; to map where concerns are emerging and importantly ask what they stem from. STMF provides an operational model for ongoing monitoring in Sandwell, combining mobile deep-listening focused research, data analysis, tension mapping, and a clear communications approach. The areas where our team was deployed between February-March 2026, were chosen based on a mix of sources; information shared by local authorities', intel gathered by our team, and priorities flagged by the necessity of an even distribution across Sandwell's wards. This blended approach helped us make sure our presence on the ground reflected both local need and wider strategic focus.

Key Findings

Research findings indicate a profound breakdown of the social contract across Sandwell, where residents increasingly perceive that the "basic deal" of fair treatment and mutual responsibility is no longer being honoured by local authorities.

Pervasive safety concerns and visible economic neglect are interpreted by the community as a withdrawal of state protections and material investment, leading to a systemic erosion of trust and a normalisation of danger within the public realm.

In the absence of credible programmes addressing local grievances around lacking economic investment and opportunity, local issues around minor crime, housing, and youth behaviour are being amplified by social media and are hardening into exclusionary narratives that further fracture social cohesion.

Across British civil society and public life, the term 'the community', or its pluralising derivative 'our communities' abound. We have come to use this term so much that cohesion strategies can often turn into performative negotiations between this, or that, 'community'. Rather, we argue that local government needs to consider local society as a whole, and when

it comes to cohesion questions; connect them to broader considerations around safety, economic investment, and opportunity. Our research shows people interviewed understand social cohesion in relation to a broader web of public debates around immigration, wealth inequality, under-development, just to name a few which appear. Despite this, too often when considering social cohesion policy at the local government level we do not consider this broader structural web of relationships.

The findings of this report indicate that the social contract in Sandwell is frayed, that people consider their public realm to be dilapidated and at times dangerous. This project intends to strengthen connections primarily through promoting social encounter and fostering participatory engagement in understanding how Sandwell's public relations relate to questions of cohesion. To meet the target of building "resilience against flare-ups of community tensions", we believe that first we need to listen and collate evidence, in understanding the level of need, people's sentiments, and the association they draw to defining "community tensions". We also believe that this can be just the beginning for future work on mapping responsive, real-time tensions through developing a digital tool that can be used to inform both community cohesion policy and provide a basis for a two-track messaging system for the local public.

This report is structured in the following parts:

1. Explaining the conceptual and methodological approaches used in STMF
2. Analysing data gathered during STMF with a focus on established and emerging tensions in Sandwell.¹
3. Policy recommendations and possible actions - with a focus on communication strategy, youth work, and the importance of Sandwell residents' direct involvement in community cohesion policies

¹ Demographic data and town-breakdown annexes can be provided upon request.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of STMF

Sandwell Tensions monitoring framework monitors pressures on local safety and cohesion. In a hyper-digitalised global world, we are increasingly seeing how huge external pressures provoke, and often metamorphose, local issues in generating novel community cohesion tensions. As nascent multipolarity exacerbates global tensions. In the United Kingdom we are seeing huge socio-political challenges posed by Britain's structural struggles with economic stagnation, growing wealth inequality, and demographic change. All this is exacerbated by the transformation of a public sphere traditionally built around physical spaces and broadcast media; shifting towards the predominance of algorithm-driven digital platforms which can fracture, isolate, and inflame discourse, just as much as they can connect.

We also know that there exist variations and gaps in the way that different institutions gather data about local populations. Data discrepancies vary depending on which organisation does the research, and people, often the most vulnerable, can often be left unaccounted for. STMF takes these issues seriously in developing a deep research-focused system for detecting, interpreting, and addressing cohesion trends and community tensions. STMF takes a broad definition of the term tension. Rather than purely focusing on overt instances of conflict or disorder as isolated events, tensions in STMF are put in relation to their broader structural, material, and discursive contexts. The term itself is also conceptually understood in a subtler way; as the potential factors which can undermine successful cohesion policy. Tensions can thus be the proliferation of divisive narratives, the erosion of trust between groups or towards institutions, or structural stress-points which can later lead to eruptions of violence or disorder.

1.2 Methodology of STMF

Over the course of the project, the team was out on the streets 29 times - consistently on weekday evenings and weekend afternoons. Using the ACE (Agile Community Engagement) approach, they were able to strike up open, informal conversations with residents about the tensions, issues and challenges affecting their area, while also encouraging people to complete the online survey and other follow up signposts. The ACE methodology facilitates authentic, on-the-ground intelligence gathering. This approach moves beyond traditional consultation methods, strategically embedding our team within the natural rhythms and gathering spaces of local populations.

We engaged residents in various third spaces; local estates, parks, barbershops, salons, eateries, and places of worship; facilitating rich information sharing and authentic citizen voice capture. This non-statutory, grassroots approach is critical for success, particularly where trust in official services is limited, allowing us to capture raw, unfiltered intelligence in both text and verbal formats for collation and analysis.

Successful community cohesion policy must be rooted in the provision of space for open dialogue and oriented towards achieving mutual understanding across differences. We provided such space through the ACE method utilised by our mobile reporting unit. The project strengthens public connections in the following ways:

- **Facilitate shared vision:** Bring diverse voices and experiences together to find shared goals and a vision for a community-led approach to cohesion. The focus on providing physical space for people to share their concerns, and the recommendation of developing a digital forum for messaging helps put local communities at the centre of community cohesion, boosting resilience by providing people with agency. This will help develop a shared stake in local civic identity that cuts across differences, uniting people around a shared responsibility in local social engagement and cultural encounter.
- **Enable collaboration:** Transform monitoring from top-down oversight into bottom-up collaboration by inviting residents to safely and confidently report tensions through our mobile reporting team. When residents feel empowered to articulate concerns, they are less likely to express them through confrontation.

More seriously such issues can lead to social polarisation, hate crime, and at worst riots and other forms of unrest. The project builds community resilience through the following aims:

- **Accessible reporting:** The foremost purpose of our mobile monitoring is early identification; detecting weak signals of discord before they intensify. The value of this foresight is significant, as a single rumour corrected early, or hate crime resolved appropriately can prevent an incident from spiralling into national controversy.
- **Tensions mapping:** The Tensions mapping will comparatively assess established and emergent issues in the borough. The aim is to offer transparent in-time updates to the council around social unrest rumours, issues, and incidents. This will also enhance partnership between public and third sector through monitoring helps establish a shared intelligence framework, fostering unity of purpose among stakeholders which are vital components of shared community life.

2. Sandwell Tensions Mapping

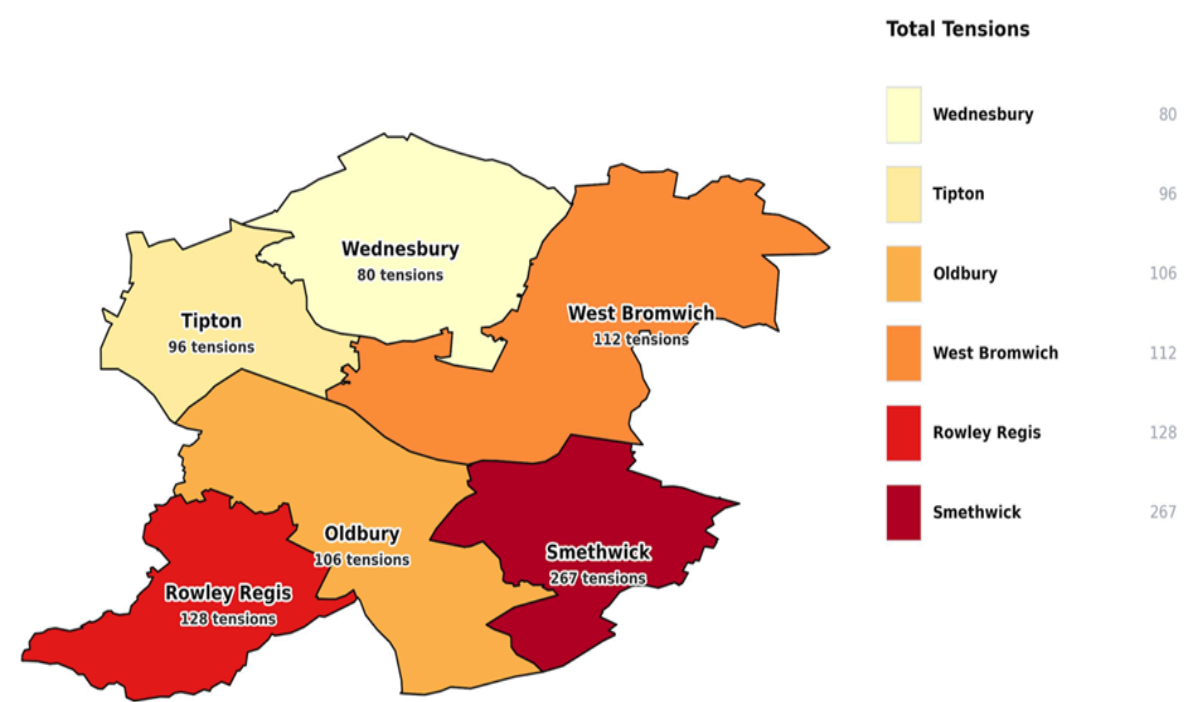


Figure 1: Choropleth map number of tensions reported through ACE interviews across Sandwell's 6 towns

Across the six towns, a total of 852 answers were recorded. Of these, 63 were initial "no issues" responses, while the remaining 789 were specific tensions raised by residents. It's important to note that these are response counts rather than unique respondents, the same person could (and often did) contribute more than one answer. In several cases, residents who first said there were "no issues" in their area went on to mention one or two concerns as the conversation developed with our team.

To make this volume of feedback easier to interpret, the raw responses were consolidated into eight overarching categories that capture the main themes residents raised² This grouping provides a clearer overview of the underlying concerns without losing the detail behind each mention, and together the eight categories account for the full 100% of tensions reported.

For the whole Sandwell borough, percentages are as follows: Safety concerns account for the largest share at 161 mentions (20.4%), followed by violence & knife crime with 121 (15.3%), community cohesion & environment with 114 (14.4%), and youth crime & anti-social behaviour with 106 (13.4%). The next tier covers distrust in authorities & services at 87 (11.0%), limited

² This grouping was applied because residents often used overlapping language to describe similar concerns.

opportunities & poverty at 83 (10.5%) and drugs & substance issues at 79 (10.0%), with homelessness & housing closing the list at 38 mentions (4.8%).³ Taken together, the first four categories alone account for roughly two-thirds of every tension residents raised, signalling a clear concentration around personal safety, community life, and the wellbeing of young people. Of those people who did speak with us, not all were comfortable sharing personal details such as their nationality, ethnic background or age, so the demographic figures in the annex should be read with that in mind.⁴

How safe do you feel in your area? Please rate how you feel on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Very positive and 5 = Very negative (105 Responses)

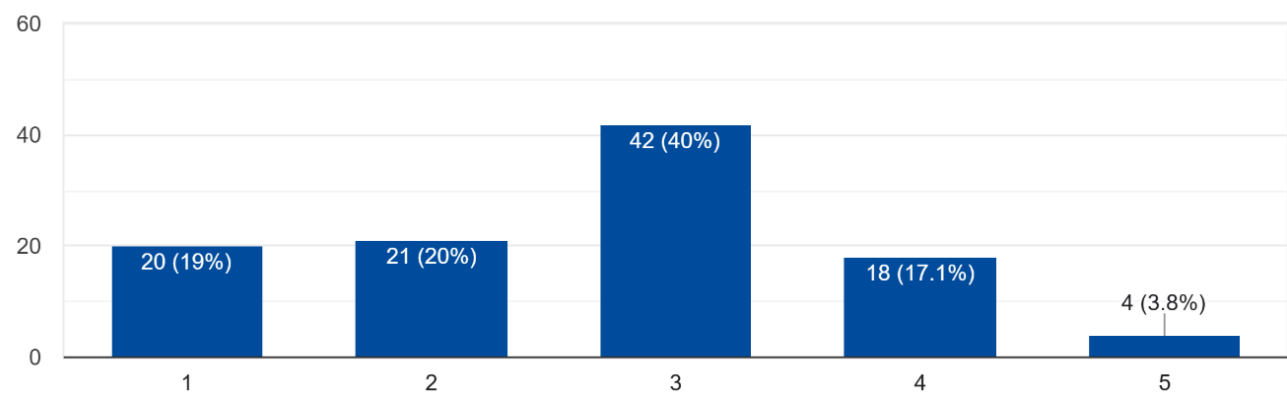


Figure 2: Online survey response on neighbourhood safety

The overall picture on community cohesion is complex and will be explored in further detail below. In both ACE street engagements and survey responses we see that people tend to react positively in relation to opportunities for interacting with people of different backgrounds. This is a positive that can be built upon in messaging around community cohesion, as well as by involving bottom-up approaches. If the broader public feel that in their everyday lives and interactions, people from diverse backgrounds interact organically, then perhaps focusing on such spaces of interaction can be a sensible place to begin community work. There has already been theoretical work done on this, based around the principle of convivial culture.⁵

³ Please see the pie chart below for more visual data
⁴ Annex with STMF ACE Interview graphs can be found from page
⁵ Samanani, F. (2023). Conviviality and its others: for a plural politics of living with difference. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(9), 2109–2128; Rzepnikowska, Alina (2019) *Convivial cultures in multicultural cities*.

How well and how often do people from different backgrounds interact with each other in your local area? Please rank from 1-5 how you feel, 1 being ‘Very well and very often’, and 5 being ‘Not well and not at all’ (105 Responses)

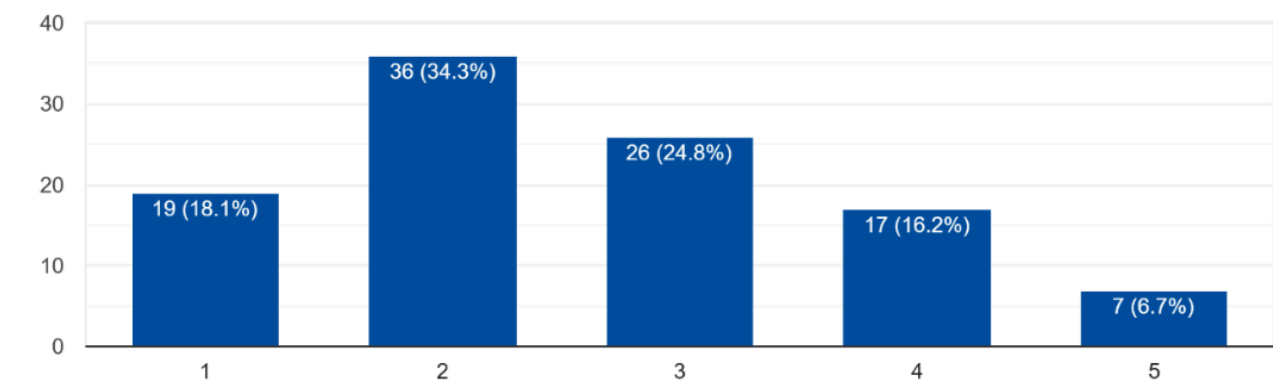


Figure 3: Online survey responses on level of interaction between diverse populations in Sandwell

Nevertheless, reports of tensions between ethnic, cultural, religious, or national groups were mentioned across the majority of Sandwell. We came across diverse cohesion related tensions both historic and emerging which will be explored in more detail below. Historic claims of tension particularly around ethnicity in places like Tipton were reported by Black British and Black Caribbean participants. While in parts of Sandwell with less history of diverse demographic mixing, tensions around ethnic, cultural, religious groups were mentioned. This was particularly noticeable in relation to changing demographics witnessed in the UK over the course of the 21st century and the corresponding political debates which have ensued. Less ethnically diverse towns such as Rowley Regis and Wednesbury recorded people having more questioning views around community cohesion and instead focused on nostalgic reflections of the borough, or understandings of their areas as “nice little communities” as contrasted in their minds to other wards and towns.

Distrust in authorities (11.0%), limited economic and social opportunities (10.5%), along with drugs & substance misuse (10.0%) all sit in a third tier and are raised consistently across every town. Issues related to people facing homelessness and social issues related to HMOs - though the smallest category at 4.8%, still surface in every area. A notable pattern is that no single town is free from any category, all eight issues appear everywhere, which points to systemic issues across the borough rather than localised problems. However, the intensity varies significantly by area, with Smethwick standing out as both the largest dataset and the most acute in several tension categories.

Issues & Tensions

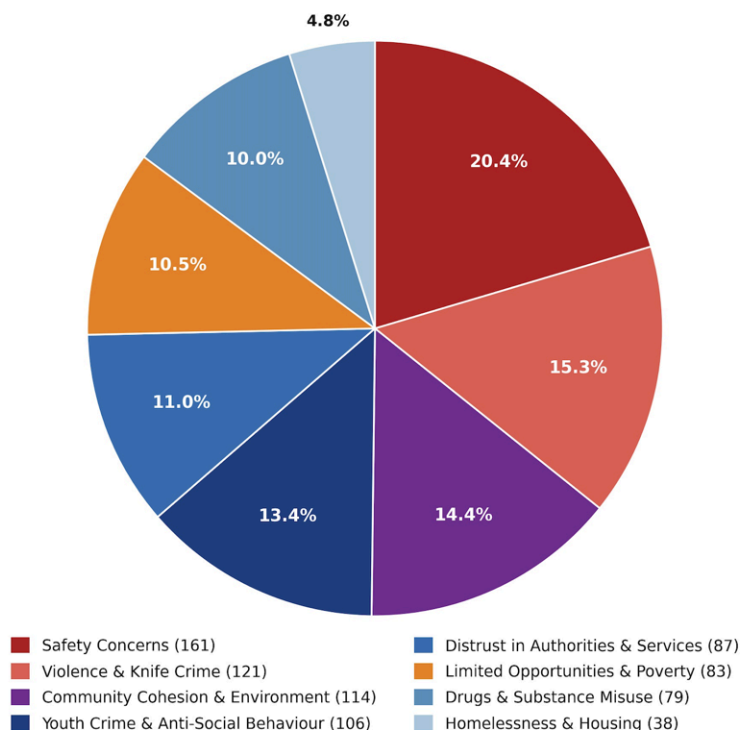


Figure 4: Pie chart showing the total spread of tensions gathered through ACE interviews across Sandwell

2.1 Sandwell Tensions Mapping - Choropleth Map Data

West Bromwich: A total of 112 tensions were mentioned. Out of these 112, the youth crime & anti-social behaviour category was raised 23 times, accounting for 20.5% of all mentions in the town - the highest share of any town across the borough for this category. The Violence & knife crime category was mentioned 19 times (17.0%), followed by safety concerns at 17 mentions (15.2%) and drugs & substance misuse at 16 mentions (14.3%) - also the highest drug-related share of any town in Sandwell. Community cohesion & environment, along with distrust in authorities & services categories were each mentioned 11 times, both sitting at 9.8% of the total. Homelessness & housing accounted for 9 mentions (8.0%), and limited opportunities & poverty came in lowest at just 6 mentions (5.4%) - the smallest share for that category in the borough, suggesting that residents in West Bromwich feel economic and structural issues less acutely than concerns around youth, violence and personal safety).⁶

Tipton: A total of 96 tensions were mentioned. Out of these 96, safety concerns led with 21 mentions (21.9%), followed by limited opportunities & poverty at 17 (17.7%) - the highest share

⁶ **Overlapping Categories:** If respondents can choose more than one option (like a "check all that apply" survey question), the total will likely exceed 100%. The figures that follow are calculated within each town rather than against the borough-wide total of 789. For every town, the eight categories are expressed as a share of that town's own mentions and add up to 100%, making it easier to see which concerns weigh most heavily for residents in that particular area.

for that category in the borough - and community cohesion & environment at 15 (15.6%). Distrust in authorities & services and youth crime & anti-social behaviour were each mentioned 13 times (13.5%), with violence & knife crime at 8 (8.3%), drugs & substance misuse at 7 (7.3%) and homelessness & housing lowest at just 2 (2.1%).

Wednesbury: A total of 80 tensions were mentioned. Out of these 80, violence & knife crime came top with 13 mentions (16.2%), followed by community cohesion & environment and distrust in authorities & services each at 12 (15.0%). Drugs & substance misuse accounted for 11 (13.8%), limited opportunities & poverty and youth crime & anti-social behaviour each for 10 (12.5%), safety concerns for 9 (11.2%) - the lowest share for that category in the borough - and homelessness & housing for 3 (3.8%).

Smethwick: A total of 267 tensions were mentioned, by far the most of any town. Out of these 267, safety concerns led with 69 mentions (25.8%), the highest share for that category in the borough, followed by community cohesion & environment at 50 (18.7%) and violence & knife crime at 41 (15.4%). Distrust in authorities & services accounted for 34 (12.7%), limited opportunities & poverty for 25 (9.4%), drugs & substance misuse for 19 (7.1%), youth crime & anti-social behaviour for 18 (6.7%) and homelessness & housing for 11 (4.1%). (24) is a major concern. This ward accounts for a third of all issues raised across the six areas.

Rowley Regis: A total of 128 tensions were mentioned. Out of these 128, youth crime & anti-social behaviour led with 24 mentions (18.8%) - the highest share for that category in the borough - followed by safety concerns at 20 (15.6%) and limited opportunities & poverty at 19 (14.8%). Community cohesion & environment and violence & knife crime were each mentioned 17 times (13.3%), with drugs & substance misuse at 14 (10.9%), homelessness & housing at 9 (7.0%) and distrust in authorities & services lowest at 8 (6.2%).

Oldbury: A total of 106 tensions were mentioned. Out of these 106, safety concerns led with 25 mentions (23.6%), followed by violence & knife crime at 23 (21.7%) and youth crime & anti-social behaviour at 18 (17.0%). Drugs & substance misuse accounted for 12 (11.3%), community cohesion & environment and distrust in authorities & services were each mentioned 9 times (8.5%), with limited opportunities & poverty at 6 (5.7%) and homelessness & housing lowest at 4 (3.8%).

2.2 Established and Emergent Tensions across Sandwell

The tensions data covered 789 mentions across all six towns. The clearest emerging pattern is that safety concerns are the single largest theme borough-wide, with 161 mentions accounting for one in five (20.4%) of all concerns raised. When combined with violence & knife crime (121 mentions, 15.3%), the two together make up over a third (35.7%) of everything reported. Safety concerns are the top category in three of the six towns - Smethwick, Oldbury and Tipton - and sit firmly within the top three across most of the rest. The picture is most acute in Smethwick, where 69 safety mentions alone account for 43% of every safety concern raised across the borough and outstrip the next three towns combined (Oldbury 25,

Tipton 21, Rowley Regis 20). This is partially due to instances of violent crime in the area that influenced repeated street engagement there.

Established Tensions: Augmented by Social Media

Established tensions in Sandwell are rooted in the visible decay of the public realm and a perceived withdrawal of authority. Across all six towns, antisocial behaviour (ASB), drug misuse, and retail crime are no longer seen as exceptional incidents but as part of the "everyday reality". What stands out is that this isn't just about crime as a statistic but about feeling unsafe; this feeling being composed of a complex constellation around local sentiments pertaining to local social issues, national stories, and international events; often blended and scattered through the matrix of social media seeking to grab attention and heighten emotion.

The sources reveal a significant and nearly equal split between residents reporting direct, witnessed experiences of crime or conflict and those whose concerns are based on sentiments, perceptions, or hearsay. While many residents describe specific incidents that have personally affected them, a substantial portion of the fear in Sandwell is driven by social media, news reports, and general perceptions of area decline. An emergent theme here and one to be tackled through engagement and a strong communications strategy; is dealing with divisive social media posts which erode community cohesion by prioritising emotion heightening short form content. Knife crime was reported separately from general violence and appeared in every town, with comments describing "knives making life a misery," "organised weapons" and "park attacks", reflecting direct experiences. Similarly, the safety of frontline workers in retail, supermarkets, and hospitality also came up across Sandwell - with supermarket security guards in Oldbury reporting a "diabolical" mentality amongst offenders, with one guard recounting a "knife held to his throat". National Express drivers in the region describe being "spat at, threatened, sworn at and physically assaulted".

There were, however, many responses related to media consumption and local rumours related to such attacks - with a substantial volume of the data consisting of general feelings of unease around community safety. The sources suggest that sentiments and direct experiences often feed into each other, creating a "normalisation" of danger. This occurs when residents see chaos or hear of constant violence and eventually accept it as the everyday reality, leading them to withdraw from the community or take "DIY safety" measures like installing their own CCTV. As one respondent poignantly observed, "tensions are hidden until things build up and people explode" (56, White British, West Bromwich. It appears fear is often rooted in what people "have heard" or seen on the news, many respondents mentioned hearing about "different shootings and situations" even though they had not happened to them. Others noted they see many incidents on social media or in WhatsApp groups but have "never witnessed it" in person.

This sense of perceptive fear is linked to a sense of decline (both social and economic) rooted in a fraying social contract which shall be explored in more detail below. In many responses, tensions are often tied to the visual perception of neglect - litter, fly-tipping, and the sight of people under the influence of drugs or alcohol are treated as "visible signs of

apathy" - that contribute to a sentiment that the area is becoming "worse". Similarly tensions regarding migration are frequently based on perception rather than proven fact. Some residents "feel" or "believe" that newly arrived migrants are "getting more resources and support quicker" than local people, with one respondent noting that "xenophobia is a bit hidden" but driven by these underlying perceptions (36, Afro-Caribbean, Smethwick).

In West Bromwich and Smethwick, residents frequently report witnessing open drug use and dealing congregating around transit hubs and supermarkets, creating an atmosphere of intimidation. In Tipton and Wednesbury, this takes the form of street drinking and "rowdy youths" in balaclavas on electric scooters. Several issues converge around young people. Youth crime and anti-social behaviour is the fourth largest category overall, with 106 mentions (13.4%), but when viewed alongside the fact that 13.2% of those engaged were under 16 and 21.7% were aged 16–24, it becomes clear that young people are both affected by and involved in the tensions. Limited opportunities, particularly youth centre closures, lack of provision and the need for safe spaces and role models were all repeatedly raised. Drugs and substance misuse (79 mentions) is closely linked, with the recommendations sources consistently framing these as symptoms of a lack of youth provision rather than standalone problems.

"Italy had more decorum and togetherness." (Sudanese male, West Bromwich)

"The High Street is dying... Rough, run down, poverty, nothing around here for people and for youth." (white-English male, mid 30s, Tipton)

"You feel threatened when you see gangs... bikes and electric scooters going really fast." (white-English female, early 60s, Tipton)

Established Tensions Taking on New Forms

These tensions have existed in Sandwell for some time. What is new is the shape they are taking now.

Faith-based Tensions Evolving in New Directions

Tensions involving Sikh, Christian and Islamic communities are showing multi-directional characteristics - they are not one group against another, but several pairings emerging at once:

- **Christianity being positioned against Islam** in some right wing led conversations.
- **Sikh and Islamic tensions** being amplified through social media. Long-standing dietary differences (for example, Sikhs not eating halal meat) have been brought back into public conversation by incidents in other regions, including a Sikh restaurateur's altercations with members of Muslim communities. These have then spread into wider social media debates and into propaganda circulating in Facebook groups belonging to both faith communities.

The established tension is faith-based difference. The new form is that social media is now the main amplifier, and incidents in other regions can heighten local tension within hours.

West Bromwich ASB Hardening Into Racial Framing

ASB in West Bromwich is an established issue. What is new is that residents are now pinpointing the ethnicity of the young people involved in fights and disturbances around the bus stations and near Sandwell College. The behaviour has not necessarily changed; the explanation residents are attaching to it has. This is the same hardening-into-race pattern seen elsewhere in the borough, and it warrants careful monitoring.

Drug and Alcohol Activity in Great Bridge / Tipton Spilling Into the High Street Economy

Drug and alcohol issues in Great Bridge and Tipton are long-standing. The new form is the economic and social withdrawal that is now visible. Parents and vulnerable residents are deliberately not visiting local high streets, and this is limiting high street footfall and economic activity. A street-level issue is becoming a high-street-economy issue, which means it is also becoming a regeneration issue.

Comparative Analysis at a Glance

Theme	Established pattern	New form it is taking
Faith-based tension	Difference between communities	Amplified by social media; incidents elsewhere heighten local tension quickly
West Bromwich ASB	Behaviour-based concern	Hardening into a racial framing
Great Bridge / Tipton drug & alcohol	Street-level concern	High street withdrawal and economic loss
Youth recreational use	Alcohol and traditional drugs	Snus, balloons, vapes; cross-border mobility
Voting and political alignment	Predictable by demographic	Grievance cutting across ethnicity
Business landscape	Stable local economy	Established businesses leaving; grassroots safety net thinning
Information environment	Council and local press leading	Resident-led Facebook groups shaping perception faster than official channels. Deliberate misinformation risks.

Emerging Tensions: New Frontiers of Conflict

Comparative analysis between February and March data reveals several "emerging" tensions that are escalating in intensity:

- **The "Red vs Blue" youth wars (Rowley Regis):** A highly specific and dangerous tension has emerged among young people, involving violent rivalries between groups often linked to secondary schools. These conflicts are frequently fuelled by social media,

leading in worst instances to retaliatory stabbings. One young respondent noted that these conflicts are "bigger than people realise" and are often invisible to parents and teachers.

- **Growing generational divide (Sandwell wide):** There are huge reports by under-25s feeling that there exists a serious lack of economic and social opportunities for them in the area. While a large number of over-25s focus, at least in some part of their tensions reports on youth-related ASB, violence, and loitering. This generational gulf in opinion and outlook is one of the leading concerns found in STMF and is deeply linked to issues around economic and social provision for young people.
- **Grooming gangs rumours (Smethwick and Oldbury):** There is a rise in reports regarding "grooming gangs," particularly targeting Sikh girls in Smethwick according to an older Sikh Punjabi respondent. Also report of grooming of young white and black English girls in Oldbury made by a mid-50s Black-Caribbean woman and vulnerable children in care homes. Residents expressed frustration that these issues are often "hidden under the blanket" and not openly addressed by authorities. Such rumours, whether false or true, have the potential to spill over into serious tensions if allegations are couched along separate ethnic lines.
- **HMO proliferation and "suspicious" housing (Sandwell wide):** The rapid increase in HMOs is blamed for attracting "addicts" and "suspicious individuals" to residential streets, leading to increased noise, litter, and a perceived loss of "neighbourhood decorum".
- **Social media trends and techniques:** New conversations are appearing on social media at a pace that traditional consultation cannot match. Specific community Facebook groups and regional pages are playing a much bigger role in shaping how residents understand local events. It is not just the content that matters - it is the techniques being used to spread it. Posts are being framed to provoke reaction, screenshots are being shared without context, and resident-led groups are becoming primary news sources for whole neighbourhoods. Social media is now a strong pillar where community sentiment is being produced. Aspects and judgement of the social contract are being defined independently of Local Authorities.
- **Political shifts in stated voting intention:** Residents are openly discussing how they intend to vote, and the patterns are notable. The research is hearing:
 - **South Asian residents** openly discuss a preference for right leaning politics and taking issue with certain types of migration and immigration. They specifically referenced Reform in their arguments or rationale for wanting change from the current political direction of the country.
 - **White working-class residents** clearly stating intentions to vote for Reform, Advance UK, or Reclaim UK.

The strategic point here is not the parties themselves but the fact that stated voting intention is cutting across demographic lines that used to be more predictable. This is an early signal that older models of "which community votes which way" are no longer reliable, and that grievance is the stronger predictor than ethnicity. This is noteworthy as it indicates a need for sophisticated understanding and building Sandwell specific narratives.

- **Young people: snus, balloons and vapes:** The recreational landscape for young people is shifting. Snus, nitrous oxide (balloons) and vaping are appearing as part of everyday youth lifestyles in ways that older drug and alcohol frameworks do not fully capture. At a Britannia Park event, the team directly witnessed young people vaping and smoking cannabis in a corner of the park.

There is also a mobility pattern worth flagging: young people are crossing borough boundaries to travel to Birmingham and Walsall for ASB and "rizz girls," and recent March shootings in Bearwood appear linked to youth with Wolverhampton links. This means youth ASB in Sandwell cannot be fully understood as a Sandwell issue alone. More research is needed to map that full picture.

- **Business and grassroots withdrawal:** Established high street businesses are reporting frustration and, in some cases, leaving. At the same time, social enterprises and grassroots organisations - the kind of groups that would normally step in to support the most vulnerable - are reducing their services or closing altogether.

This is an emerging tension with serious downstream consequences. The groups most affected by other tensions in this report are the same groups losing the local infrastructure that would have absorbed some of the impact.

Compared with 5 years ago, do you think your area is... (101 Responses)

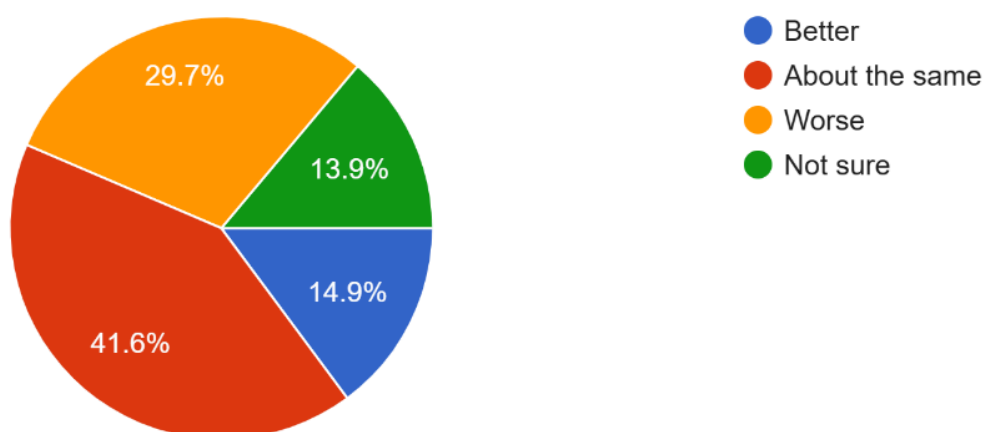


Figure 5: Pie chart revealing perceptions of decline polled in survey data

71.3 % survey respondents holding negative or indifferent opinions on the condition of their areas is a cause for concern. The survey and street interview data shows a thematic connection across perceptions of indifference related to several issues - community safety, access to services, relationship with authorities, state of public infrastructure. Street interviews show a pervasive and multifaceted sense of decline narratives which cut across all core demographic populations living in Sandwell. What unifies opinion across the six towns in both survey responses and ACE street-interviews is a sense of indifference which is at times connected to nostalgia about the past in terms of social connections, material investment, and public safety. It is interesting once again that the intermediate sentiment once again dominates. It is significant to note several factors here. Firstly, 5 years ago was still during COVID restriction period with society slowly coming out of the pandemic, people won't have overwhelmingly positive perceptions of this past.

This could potentially help understand how people perceive life in their area now being better. What is therefore of more concern are perceptions of things either getting worse, or stagnating at the level of "about the same". It is interesting that at this stage the trend we see emerging is that what connects the thematic areas of the survey - community safety, social tensions, cohesion and belonging, access to services/relation with authorities - the trend that connects these four areas is one of majority indifference. Question 16 explores how such social apathy can be addressed in helping create more positive perceptions and sentiments.

Residents frequently describe a transition from a historically "safe" or "vibrant" community to one plagued by:

- Generational disconnect
- Economic and visual decay
- Normalisation of violence
- HMO proliferation
- Youth ASB and knife culture
- Political disillusionment

Distrust in authorities appears consistently across all six towns (87 mentions, 11%). The detail behind the numbers is telling; the council not communicating, schools not listening to parents, GPs not helping, drug support being weak, people being put off reporting, not knowing where to get help. This suggests a systemic breakdown in the relationship between residents and the services meant to support them, one that likely compounds every other issue, when people feel unheard, they disengage, and problems deepen.

How much do you trust local authorities (such as the Council, Police, schools, community organisations, or churches) to deal with local problems. Rate on a scale 1-5, with 1 being 'A lot', and 5 being 'Not at all' (103 Responses)

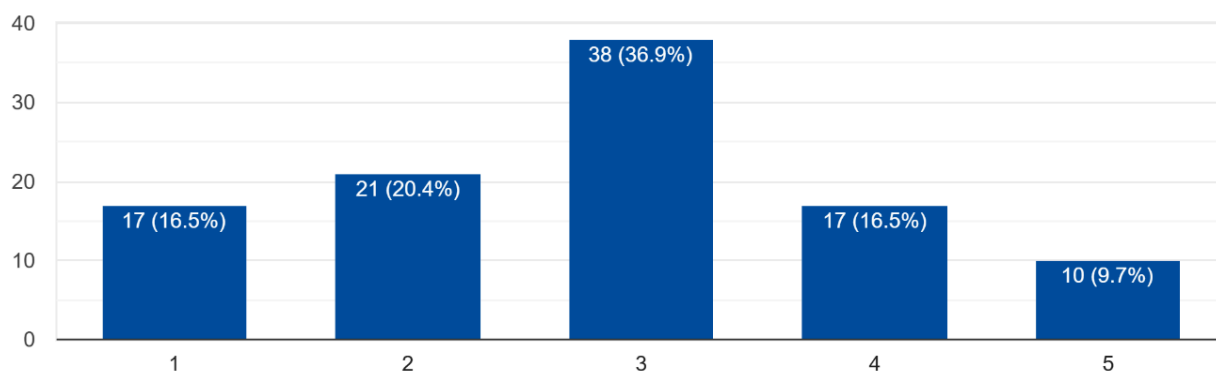


Figure 6: Online survey data revealing the pervasiveness of indifferent feeling towards local authorities

The concept of the social contract is highly relevant to community cohesion and safety. Our data has found several threads fraying Sandwell's social contract. In our hyper-digitalised global world, we are increasingly seeing how huge external pressures provoke, and often metamorphose, local issues in generating novel community cohesion tensions.

As nascent multipolarity exacerbates global tensions. In the United Kingdom we are seeing huge socio-political challenges posed by Britain's structural struggles with economic stagnation, growing wealth inequality, and demographic change.

All this is exacerbated by the transformation of a public sphere traditionally built around physical spaces, civil society, mass politics, and broadcast media; shifting towards the predominance of algorithm-driven digital platforms which can fracture, isolate, and inflame discourse, just as much as they can connect.

Perceived withdrawal of State protections include:

- High reporting of absence or ineffectiveness of the police
- Lack of material investment in public infrastructure – with a particular emphasis on the degradation of the high street and criminality within it.
- Lack of support for small businesses trying to survive
- Political disengagement and disillusionment from established mass politics
- Resource friction and perceived injustices
- Normalisation of violence and social disengagement

Alarminglly this variance displays fractures of opinion and aspects of ethnic and cultural segregation across Sandwell’s towns. For example, towns like Smethwick and West Bromwich with established histories of migration and multicultural mixing held much stronger positive opinions on community cohesion, in relation to less ethnically diverse towns in Sandwell such as Rowley Regis and Tipton.

In the past 12 months, have you personally experienced or witnessed tension, arguments, or conflict between people in your area? (105 Responses)

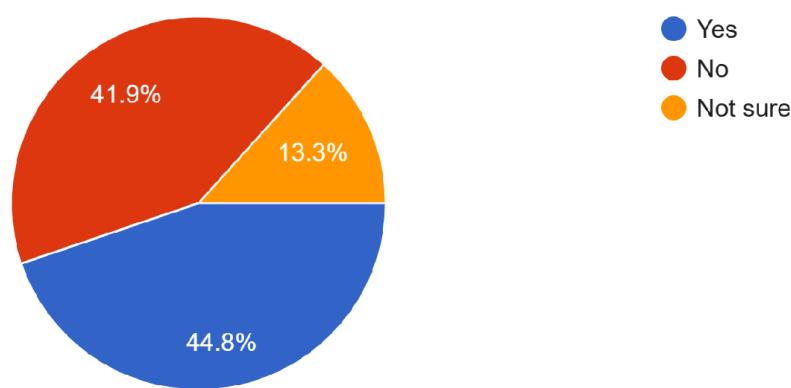


Figure 7: Online survey data reflecting participants witnessing tensions over the past year (February 2025 - March 2026)

If yes, what was it mainly about? (46 Responses)

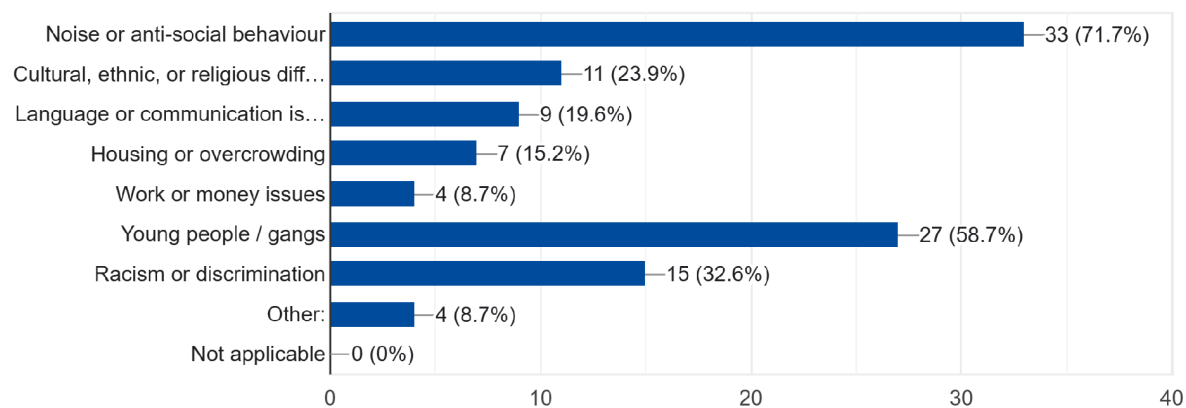


Figure 8: Online survey data reflecting types of tensions witnessed by participants

Community cohesion and environment is the third largest category of concern in ACE interviews (114 mentions, 14.4%). "Lack of community spirit" was one of the most frequently reported individual issues, appearing in all six towns (76 mentions in total). Combined with littering, lack of respect and the discrimination issues folded into this category - including racism, ageism and LGBTQ+ concerns - the picture is of communities that feel disconnected and declining. Unlike homelessness, which scores low overall (38 mentions, 4.8%) but is concentrated in specific towns (Smethwick 11, Rowley Regis 9, West Bromwich 9 together account for three-quarters of the borough total), cohesion concerns are spread more evenly, suggesting a borough-wide erosion of social connection rather than a localised problem.

Smethwick stands out as a clear hotspot, accounting for roughly a third of all issues raised (267 out of 789, or 33.8%). It leads in safety concerns (69), violence & knife crime (41), community cohesion problems (50), distrust in authorities (34) and limited opportunities & poverty (25) - and is also the top town for drugs (19) and homelessness (11). This concentration suggests either a more severe set of conditions on the ground or a community that is more vocal and engaged - possibly both.

The demographic data shows a highly diverse population was engaged - 31% White British, 21.7% Asian Indian, 9% Black African and over 20 other ethnic backgrounds. The issues raised, however, are largely universal across ethnic groups - safety, opportunity, trust, connection. This is significant: the problems cut across ethnic lines rather than being community-specific, which matters for how interventions should be designed. Solutions need to be area-wide and inclusive rather than targeted at particular communities.

2.3 Intersection of Tensions and Shaping of a Mindset

This section sets out the main factors residents are telling us are driving tensions locally. The picture is not about single issues. It is about several pressures sitting on top of each other, and how residents make sense of those pressures when they do not feel they are being heard or helped.

The strongest theme running through the feedback is that residents feel the social contract is eroding. In simple terms, people feel that the basic deal - you do your part, you wait your turn, you get fair treatment in return - is no longer being honoured. Some feel others are getting an unfair advantage over them. Others feel they aren't getting what they are supposed to.

That sense of unfair advantage is being described in two main ways:

- People accessing resources "ahead of their turn" - residents feel that some groups are receiving housing, support, or services in a way that does not match how they understand the system is supposed to work.
- Businesses feeling squeezed by a rising trend of "neo-retailers" - local businesses are pointing to the growth of shops selling vapes and imported snacks or drinks, barber shops, and food retailers focused on deliveries. The concern being that these shops are reputed to be linked with organised crime and also not adhering to ethical business

practices. There is sense that established businesses are operating under different pressures and expectations than newer ones - the reported unfair business practices include: longer opening hours powered by cheap labour; selling products to under aged youth, suspected money laundering activities; sales of prohibited or restricted medication and cigarettes - at the same time as the research was taking place mainstream media was covering similar stories in Sandwell.

Whether or not each individual claim is accurate, the feeling is consistent and widespread. Residents are describing a system they no longer trust to be fair.

Residents are not experiencing inequalities one at a time. They are experiencing several at once, and the inequalities reinforce each other:

- Housing - quality, affordability, availability.
- Health - access, waiting times, outcomes.
- Education - provision, support, and what schools were able to deliver in earlier years.
- Income - cost of living and the gap between earnings and outgoings.

When a resident sets out to find a solution to one of these issues, they very quickly run into another. Housing issues knock into health. Health issues knock into income. Income issues knock into education choices for their children. The inequalities are stacked, and so is the effort required to deal with them.

This is where the social contract story and the inequality story meet. When residents look for help and find that the system is hard to navigate and feel that others are being helped ahead of them, animosity and frustration build over time. The tension does not come from one bad experience. It comes from many small experiences pointing in the same direction.

One particularly striking finding is the consistency of reports about special educational needs (SEN) support being missed. This is showing up across age groups and across roles:

- Teens up to residents in their fifties describing their own educational needs being missed when they were at school, and reflecting on the part that played in their later life outcomes.
- Parents report that their children's needs are being missed in school now.
- Other parents report a perception that newly arrived families are getting an advantage through specialist language support that their own children, in their view, have never had access to.

This is one of the clearer places where a service issue, an inequality, and the social contract story all come together. People who feel the system did not catch their needs as children are

now watching, as adults and parents, what they perceive as other families being supported in ways they were not. Whether or not the perception is accurate in every case, it is a powerful contributor to the wider feeling of unfairness.

For the local authority, the strategic point is that SEN support is not just an education issue locally - it is acting as a long-running source of grievance that feeds into broader community tensions.

The final factor is the speed at which perceptions are now forming. Social media is intensifying and accelerating how residents understand what is happening in their area. Stories, images and claims travel quickly, and they shape opinion before any formal response can catch up.

The practical consequence is that misinformation is outpacing official communications. By the time accurate information is available through formal channels, residents have often already settled on a version of events drawn from social media. That version then becomes the baseline against which any later council communication is judged - and often disbelieved. The pace of the conversation has changed, and the council's communications approach has to change with it.

How These Factors Fit Together

It is important to see these four factors as a connected system rather than a list:

- The social contract story provides the emotional frame - people feel things are unfair.
- The overlapping inequalities provide the daily evidence - people keep running into walls.
- The SEN story provides a long memory - people have been feeling unheard for years, sometimes decades.
- Social media provides the speed - perceptions harden faster than they can be corrected.

Tensions in Sandwell are not being driven by any one of these on its own. They are being driven by all tensions merging together, with each one making the others harder to address.

Any response from the local authority will be more effective if it is designed with that interaction in mind, rather than treating each factor as a separate problem.

3. Policy Recommendations

Our report provides clear, operational prioritisation, and the strongest single conclusion is that Sandwell's tensions are not isolated incidents but a borough-wide pattern of safety, cohesion, youth pressure and weak trust in institutions. The pilot also gives a solid basis for targeted delivery, because it identifies both the most affected locations and the main drivers behind the tensions.

Such a site can use a two-track messaging system which 1) celebrates success, 2) provides updates on social tensions. based on the data gathered and impactful stories shared we will develop a pilot for two-track messaging on social media.

A reciprocal form of media messaging and communication which provides notices of issues and public safety warnings to raise awareness and dispel any myths or misconceptions (track 1). As well as issuing positive, reinforcement messaging about community cohesion successes (track 2).

- **Provide physical/digital tensions monitoring mechanisms:** Utilise a mobile reporting vehicle staffed by trauma-informed multilingual advisors to liaise with local agencies and encourage safe reporting. Subsequent mapping and two-track messaging can help co-develop with the council's flexible and real-time targeted community cohesion policy. We also believe that such mapping can be used in the future to develop a digital site which can be used by residents to provide links to support services, mediation services, youth programmes, and local faith groups, thereby reassuring, informing, and connecting residents.
- **Build trust:** The foundational principle is that communication builds confidence through physical encounters both between diverse communities as well as diverse social actors (local authorities, councils, civil society, etc.). We believe that when residents understand the work being done to protect cohesion and feel part of the process, they are more likely to trust institutions.

The project builds resilience against possible community tensions by leveraging deep listening as a form of both public engagement and data gathering.

The follow up actions in two-track messaging rely on transparent communication, and targeted counter-messaging. Community tensions are defined as often subtle, including the proliferation of hostile narratives which start through falsely stoked information, minor tensions, and the lack of space for deliberation.⁷

⁷ In today's environment local social issues mesh with national and international contexts, often through discursive trends augmented by a world of AI-powered social media that favours antagonistic politics – "The production of echo chambers paradoxically maximises ideational heterogeneity at the systemic macro-level, by eroding shared spaces of communication. The struggle over political signification, once mediated within a shared public sphere, now unfolds between dislocated discursive economies which involve pronounced in-group/out-group logics through the deployment of rhetoric. In this sense, rhetorical antagonisms formalise the frontiers that AI-powered social media generate." (Anastasiou, *AI, social media and echo chambers, from algorithmic prediction to antagonistic politics and democratic potential*, 2026).

Top Locations

The clearest priority areas from the pilot are:

1. **Smethwick** - 267 mentions, the highest of any town, and strongest hotspot across multiple categories.
2. **West Bromwich** - 112 mentions, with the highest borough share for youth crime and anti-social behaviour.
3. **Rowley Regis** - 128 mentions, with particularly high youth crime and limited opportunities.
4. **Oldbury** - 106 mentions, with high safety and violence concerns.
5. **Tipton** - 96 mentions, with safety, poverty and cohesion issues strongly present.

Wednesbury also matters, but it sits just outside the top five by overall volume while still showing strong violence, cohesion and trust issues.

Top Tensions

The five most important inter-community tensions to prioritise are:

1. **Safety concerns**, including fear of violence and unsafe public spaces.
2. **Violence and knife crime**, which appears across all towns.
3. **Community cohesion and environment**, including litter, decline, discrimination and weak shared belonging.
4. **Youth crime and anti-social behaviour**, especially where young people are both affected by and linked to escalation.
5. **Distrust in authorities and services**, including reluctance to report and frustration that issues are ignored.

These are the categories most likely to shape day-to-day resident experience and to affect whether interventions feel credible.

Main Drivers

The main drivers are deprivation and limited opportunity, visible environmental decline, weak trust in institutions, and the influence of social media in amplifying fear. The report also links many tensions to a “frayed social contract,” where residents feel the state is not delivering safety, investment or future prospects in return for their trust. Youth provision is repeatedly presented not as a separate issue, but as a key underlying factor behind anti-social behaviour, drugs and school-linked conflict. There is also a strong sense that some tensions are shaped by perception and hearsay, not only direct experience, which makes communications and reassurance work especially important.

Delivery Focus

This is not just a map of problems, it is a map of people trying to stay safe, protect their children, and hold on to dignity in places where they feel unheard. The most effective pilot response would be to focus on a small number of places where the overlap between safety, youth pressure and distrust is strongest, especially Smethwick, West Bromwich, Rowley Regis, Oldbury and Tipton. In practical terms, we can work with local partners and would like to bring young people into solution design rather than treating them only as a risk group.

Suggested Operational Framing:

- **Priority places:** Smethwick first, then West Bromwich, Rowley Regis, Oldbury and Tipton.
- **Priority tensions:** safety, violence, cohesion/environment, youth ASB, distrust.
- **Priority drivers:** deprivation, weak provision, environmental neglect, mistrust, online risks
- **Priority response style:** visible local presence, trusted intermediaries, youth co-design, business network engagement, and targeted reassurance messaging.

Things to Consider For Us:

The high level of deprivation and poverty means some interventions will need to be realistic, low-cost, and rooted in existing local assets rather than expecting quick fixes.

We need to be mindful of the change in local government. In practical terms, that means relationship-building with the new councillors should be treated as a priority in itself, because trust, continuity, and early buy-in will shape what can happen next. A short, collaborative engagement phase with them could help align expectations, define shared priorities, and reduce friction later.

The youth point is especially strong. The report already suggests that youth issues are not just about ASB, but about missing opportunities, lack of safe spaces, and a need for meaningful local pathways. Framed positively, this is less about “managing young people” and more about retaining talent, giving young people reasons to stay, contribute, and feel that the area has something for them.

So the operational message becomes:

- Deprivation limits the scale of intervention, so focus on targeted, high-impact activity.
- Build early working relationships with the new councillors to secure continuity and shared ownership.
- Treat young people as a resource to develop, not just a group to intervene with.
- Prioritise local opportunity, skills, leadership, and visible routes into activity that keep talent in the area.

Given the levels of deprivation, we need to be realistic about what can be delivered immediately and focus on interventions with the greatest local return. In light of the recent change in local leadership, relationship-building with new councillors will also be important to ensure continuity and support. Alongside this, there is a clear need to deepen understanding of young people's experiences and create local opportunities that help retain talent and build longer-term resilience.

The most important finding to lift out of this phase is that residents are actively interested in being heard on the tensions they are living with. It is a community waiting for a credible space in which to do so. For the Community Safety Team, that is a significant strategic asset - the raw appetite for dialogue is already there, and the question now is how to facilitate it consistently rather than how to generate it from scratch.

The corollary is equally important: consistency of doing the sprint research activities is a clear solution. What determines the quality of the intelligence the team receives is whether the space to talk shows up reliably, in the right format, with the right researchers, often enough to build trust and track change over time.

The use of researchers with lived experience is one of the clearest reasons this phase has surfaced the depth of insight it has. Residents are responding to being asked questions by people who visibly share some part of their reality, and the candour that produces is difficult to replicate through conventional consultation. The longer the same lived-experience researchers are in post, the more relational trust accumulates, and the more residents move from initial impressions to deeper, more strategically useful disclosures.

The sprint format is itself a strength worth naming explicitly. It moves quickly, surfaces emerging signals while they are still emerging, and produces actionable intelligence on a timescale that matches how community sentiment actually shifts. A single sprint, however, is a snapshot. Its real analytical power is unlocked when sprints are run repeatedly over time, because that is when the team starts to see:

- **Direction of travel** - whether a tension is hardening, softening, spreading, or being absorbed.
- **Seasonality and trigger events** - how local incidents, service changes, or national news refract through community sentiment.
- **Cohort-specific drift** - how the views of particular groups (disabled residents, migrant residents, older people, young people) evolve relative to one another.
- **The effect of the council's own interventions** - whether actions taken between sprints are landing as intended.

There are still areas this phase has not yet reached, each sprint completes a layer of the picture, and successive sprints add resolution. The strategic case for the team is that the intelligence value compounds - sprint two is more valuable than sprint one because it can be read against sprint one.

Residents with Lived Experience of Disability

Disabled residents are demonstrating a particular analytical strength: they are able to articulate, in precise terms, how their local area is not working for them. Their accounts trace a clear causal line from changes in local facilities through to real, observable consequences for the local authority, for health services, and for social cohesion. This is structurally useful intelligence - it is the kind of insight that links operational decisions (a facility closing, a service relocating) to strategic outcomes (service demand, cohesion). The opportunity for the team is that, if this cohort is engaged consistently across multiple sprints, they will effectively act as an early-warning system for the downstream effects of decisions taken elsewhere in the council.

Migrant Residents

Migrant residents are bringing a distinctive analytical contribution. Many have lived in other regions of the UK or elsewhere, which gives them a comparative frame that long-term local residents do not have access to. Their feedback tends to be notably balanced, often weaving in elements of gratitude or measured reasoning alongside their critique. This matters for two reasons. First, it is valuable in its own right as a perspective the team would otherwise miss. Second, it is methodologically valuable: including migrant voices systematically in citizen feedback acts as a bias-reducing input in the overall research picture, helping to counterbalance narratives that may have hardened locally without challenge. The opportunity here is to treat migrant residents not as a hard-to-reach group but as a calibration cohort whose comparative perspective improves the reliability of everything else the team is hearing.

4. The Opportunity in Summary

What this phase has shown is that the method is working - communities are willing, lived-experience researchers are unlocking depth, and specific cohorts are producing the kind of intelligence that connects everyday experience to strategic outcomes. The opportunity is to build on this rather than treat it as a one-off exercise. Running sprint research consistently and repeatedly over time would convert a strong snapshot into a continuously improving picture, with each cycle adding cohorts, sharpening signals, and giving the team a sustained line of sight into how tensions evolve and how council action is landing.

The variable that matters most is not whether people will talk. They will. It is whether the Local Authority can hold open the space for them to keep talking.

Across the citizen feedback, one pattern is doing a lot of the work: narratives are forming in the absence of counter-information. When residents do not have access to clear, credible facts about what is happening locally, they fill the gap themselves. Once those gap-filling stories take hold, they become harder to shift - and they tend to drift in a particular direction, picking up suspicion, blame, and certainty as they go.

This is why these tensions are not standing still. They are hardening.

The clearest example of a tension that is hardening is the generational friction around youth anti-social behaviour. The friction is not limited to one group reacting to young people - it is showing up across three distinct groups at once, each with their own reasons:

- **Older residents** feel unconfident and dismayed. The two things they point to most in West Bromwich are seeing knife carrying, and seeing young people show no fear even when police presence is high. For this group, it is the apparent loss of consequence that is doing the damage. Each new incident reinforces the view that nothing will change.
- **Local businesses** in West Brom, Great Bridge and Wednesbury are reporting their own friction points with young people, which compounds the picture for residents who hear about incidents through shopkeepers and traders. Businesses reporting that youth are also recording or creating social media content when engaging in misdemeanours is a behaviour crystalising the frustrations.
- **Vulnerable residents** - women, people with mental health conditions, autistic people, and people with physical or health-related disabilities - describe genuine fear in response to the range of ASB they witness. Fear is shaping their daily decisions about where to go and when - West Bromwich was consistently mentioned as a region that some try to avoid.

The concerning drift here is that some residents are starting to frame youth ASB in racial terms, and those racial framings are circulating unchecked. The behaviour being described has not changed, but the explanation being attached to it is hardening into something different. A behavioural concern is being recast as an ethnic one, and because nothing is interrupting that story, it is travelling.

We do not expect this to escalate into cross-generational violence. The more likely outcome is quieter and, in some ways, more damaging: apathy. When residents are invited to come together - to rally, to co-produce, to attend a community event - those most affected by or witnessing ASB may not respond; or are likely to arrive with their resilience, optimism and hope already eroded. The result is limited cooperation and limited compliance at exactly the moments the council needs residents to lean in. The tension is not exploding; it is settling, and as it settles it is taking civic energy with it.

A separate but related pattern is emerging in Rowley and Great Bridge/Tipton. Two strands of conversation are happening in parallel:

- **People of colour** - Black African and South Asian residents - describe feeling uneasy about certain behaviours they have witnessed in the area in recent times.
- **White British residents** are having their own conversations, some of which are reinforcing racially charged framings and pointing the finger at specific groups.

These two strands are not in dialogue with each other. They are running on parallel tracks, and each is hardening on its own terms.

The Role of HMOs and Hotels

HMOs and hotels are coming up repeatedly as a focal point for racial tension. The widespread view in these conversations is that HMOs are housing "immigrants" or "asylum seekers." When some residents are asked whether this is actually the case, they are not able to confirm it - but they describe it as a shared understanding across the area, which means the belief is operating as fact even where the facts are not established.

Two concerns are stacking on top of this:

- A sense that the local area does not feel safe because of the HMOs.
- A sense that British-born residents do not get the same access to resources or support as people housed in the HMOs.

The drift here is significant and worth naming plainly. A housing issue is hardening into a race and entitlement issue. The original concern - what is happening in a specific building on a specific street - is being absorbed into a much bigger story about who belongs, who is being looked after, and who is being left behind. Once a tension drifts in that direction, it is no longer about the HMO; it is about identity, and that is much harder to resolve through operational action.

The absence of counter-information is doing the same work here that it is doing on youth ASB: where the council, partners, or credible local voices are not present in the conversation, residents are constructing their own version of events, and that version is hardening into local common sense.

Two tensions are moving in the same direction at the same time, for the same underlying reason:

1. **Generational tension around youth ASB** is hardening into a racialised framing and is eroding the civic energy the council relies on.
2. **Racial tension in Rowley and Great Bridge/Tipton** is hardening around xenophobic perceptions in relation to HMOs and hotels and is drifting from a housing concern into an identity concern.

In both cases, the trigger for the drift is the same: people are talking, and nothing credible is talking back. That is the gap the team has the most direct ability to close.

Follow up Actions:

- Youth leadership development around STMF issues - with EWA CIC, Aspire4u CIC, and Citizens UK community - organising, policy development, and project planning package, giving Sandwell's youth work experience and active stake in community cohesion policy.
- Development of two-track messaging with Sandwell Council.

5. Recommendations on How to Work With Communities

Distinguish "New Tensions" From "Old Tensions in New Clothing"

This is the single most important habit. Every tension surfaced in the research should be tagged in one of three ways:

- **Emerging** - new in both shape and content.
- **Evolving** - established issue, new form.
- **Recurring** - same issue, same shape, returning in cycles.

This stops the team from treating every signal as new and helps prioritise resources towards the tensions that are genuinely changing.

Track Tensions Across Boundaries - Not Just Within Them

The youth mobility example (Sandwell to Birmingham and Walsall; Wolverhampton to Bearwood) is a reminder that community safety issues do not respect borough lines. A small amount of structured intelligence sharing with neighbouring authorities would significantly strengthen the team's picture, particularly for youth ASB.

Watch for "Narrative Migration"

A pattern appearing repeatedly in this research is that concerns about behaviour are migrating into concerns about identity (race, faith, immigration status). Tracking this migration explicitly - at what point does a behavioural concern become a racial one in residents' accounts? - gives the team an early-warning indicator that is genuinely actionable.

Build a Small Set of Standing Comparative Questions

World-leading teams ask the same handful of comparative questions every cycle. For example: *Is this tension wider or narrower than last sprint? Is it sharper or softer? Is it spreading to new groups? Is the explanation residents attach to it changing?* Consistency in the questions is what allows change to be measured. The team does not need many of these - five or six well-chosen questions, asked every time, will produce a longitudinal picture that very few local authorities currently hold.

6. Acknowledgments

None of this work would have been possible without the support of Sandwell Council and our colleagues within the Community Safety Team, in particular Wendy, Denise, Aaron, and Rameez.

The work undertaken involved a substantial range of interactions, each shaped by openness, honesty, and deep reflection from both residents and our delivery team. These encounters reinforced the importance of creating spaces where people feel safe to speak openly and be genuinely heard.

We are also sincerely grateful to our partners at That's All Media CIC, RUDA CIC, and Aspire4U. Their collaboration reflects the strength of partnership working when organisations come together with a shared purpose: to listen, to learn, and to centre the voices of local people in shaping understanding and future responses.

Most importantly, we extend our deepest thanks to the residents of Sandwell who engaged in nearly a thousand conversations with our team. Their willingness to share personal experiences, perspectives, and concerns provided the foundation of this work. These contributions must not be viewed as data alone, but as lived experience - rich with meaning, resilience, and insight into what safety, sense of belonging, and trust in society truly look like from a community perspective.

Active listening, embedded at the core of this project, has offered an invaluable understanding of the lived realities, hopes, and concerns of Sandwell's diverse communities. It has revealed a detailed and complex picture of inner resilience, shared values, and a collective aspiration for safer, more connected neighbourhoods. It also underscores a clear message: communities do not simply wish to be consulted-they wish to be meaningfully heard, continuously engaged, and actively involved in shaping the decisions that affect their lives.

We therefore strongly urge that the voices captured through this work are not only acknowledged but meaningfully reflected in policy development and decision-making at all levels of government. There is a clear responsibility to ensure that this engagement is not a one-off exercise, but part of a sustained commitment to listening, learning, and co-producing solutions with communities.

This report should be seen not as an endpoint, but as the beginning of a longer-term journey-one that continues to centre the voices of residents and ensures that their contributions lead to visible, lasting impact.

From all of us at EWA CIC - thank you!

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