The recent fractures in western democracies have generally been along ethnic and faith fault lines. However, the aim of community cohesion is to tackle the ‘fear of difference’ more generally and to enable people to be more comfortable with all areas of difference, including those based on sexual orientation, disability, social class and age. The community cohesion agenda can also be applied to all types of communities whether in towns and cities, or in suburban and rural areas, where ethnic minority and faith communities are very small. Indeed, the host community in monocultural areas may be far more intimidating for minorities, who feel that they are treated with suspicion and believe that they are unwelcome and even unsafe in such areas. This can also apply to people moving to them on a temporary basis, for example, for holiday purposes, and will certainly inhibit their wider freedom to live, work or even visit, them wherever they chose.

Community cohesion programmes must clearly, therefore, embrace all parts of the country and not just those with high proportions of ethnic or other minority populations. Indeed, in a modern multicultural community which is attempting to come to terms with its diversity, and in which people inevitably move to different areas for education, work and leisure purposes and communicate in so many different ways, no part can be successfully isolated from the other. And the implication of being part of a national democratic framework, in which priorities are decided, resources are allocated and where measures to maintain security are created, is that each individual will make a real effort to understand the needs and aspirations of fellow citizens.

Community cohesion (and democracy itself) therefore also depends upon the use of a common language, or languages. This will generally be confined to just one language unless all information is available on an equal basis in more than one language with translation and interpretation facilities so advanced as to ensure that meaningful dialogues can take place across the language divides. Most modern multicultural societies, however, now have a wide range of minority languages, with no real ability to maintain a regular
dialogue in those languages outside each of those minority communities. In these circumstances, the acceptance of the dominant language, together with the active pursuit of the development of good language skills, will be necessary to ensure that the democratic dialogue and interaction can take place. This should not imply, however, that the use of minority languages will not be supported within those communities, used together with the dominant language or languages.

Dialogue is a prerequisite for common understanding and may also lead to the development of common values. But ‘dialogue’ does not necessarily imply a generalised and societal-wide debate, or large-scale re-education programme. Information is imparted, understanding and trust developed and attitudes and values are shaped – possibly all the more easily – by direct involvement in everyday activities and events. However, local-level engagement is unlikely to create a common understanding unless it is reinforced by an overall value system.

Community cohesion, therefore, asserts a new model of multiculturalism, one in which a common vision and sense of belonging is built, with justice and fairness at its heart and where diversity is seen as an enriching and positive experience for all faiths and cultures, including for the majority community. This will depend, to a large extent, upon whether people have created meaningful relationships and mutual respect, as a result of positive interaction, across cultural boundaries.

Constructing a programme

With the development of any new programme, there is always the temptation to create a special series of initiatives. This will inevitably be necessary to some extent in the first instance when new techniques and approaches are being considered and developed. However, the history of special initiative programmes is not good and they often remain as marginal to the main business or service. In terms of monetary value, they are generally minor compared to the mainstream service and initiatives and invariably wither on the vine once the additional special resources come to an end and the ‘newness’ loses its shine. Community cohesion programmes should, therefore, be quickly turned into part of the everyday way of doing things and put into the mainstream activity of public service, private enterprise and voluntary effort.

This means being able to use the initiative to reshape mainstream services and to ensure that they accept the future responsibility for anticipating the social and psychological impacts upon people in their workplace, in their communities and in their social and other settings. It also means considering how such actions will affect those needs and be perceived. In particular, it means questioning how they will contribute to heightening or lowering the tensions between different groups – and the fear and acceptance of