UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

IN PURSUIT OF SHARED VALUES IN BIRMINGHAM

worthy endeavour or waste of time?

by

Dr Chris Allen & Dr Arshad Isakjee

July 2012

A THINK-PIECE ON BEHALF OF BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL'S SOCIAL INCLUSION PROCESS: PEOPLE KLOE (KEY LINES OF ENQUIRY)

Institute of Applied Social Studies, School of Social Policy

In pursuit of shared values in Birmingham
worthy endeavour or waste of time?

What are 'values'?

If we consider the term 'value', it has a number of meanings. When considering 'shared' values, it is likely that our understanding will be of something that is attributed with importance, worth or usefulness and which is likely to be a standard or principle of behaviour which is deemed important in life and therefore something with which to share with others. Values therefore should not be routinely dismissed out of hand. However, as all of us are different, it is likely that we attribute different levels of importance, worth or usefulness to a whole range of different things hence the focus on 'shared values', things that all or at least many of us might attribute with importance or worth.

Policy approaches to 'values'

Much has been made of 'shared values' in recent years largely as a consequence of the notion of cohesion and integration taking a more central position in policy and political discourses, itself a response to Britain's increasingly diverse population, ongoing immigration as well as inter- and intra-community tensions. Perceived anxieties about increasingly separate lives and the spectre of terrorism have also been significant causal factors. Central to these discourses therefore has been the need to improve understanding about how different people and different communities get along in order to do more of this whilst also respecting differences. In essence, cohesion policy has sought to develop a shared sense of belonging and purpose, something which has typically included a focus on values also.

In recent years, the drive towards identifying shared values has been prominent in debates about 'Britishness' and 'British values'. A quick reflection of recent prime ministers and there understandings of what it means to be British highlights one of major weaknesses of trying to set out what being British and holding British values might mean. For Margaret Thatcher, Britishness was about individual responsibility and industry: the Protestant work ethic; the upholding of democracy; the promotion and spread of liberty; and the importance of the family as much as for Parliament, Church and Monarchy also. Whilst Thatcher's Britishness was undeniably patriotic, John Major's was of a nation characterised by cultural imagery: of warm beer and cricket on the village green, of going 'back to basics' and the instilling of traditional values. Under Tony Blair, Britishness was more about social justice and the rebranding of 'Cool

Britannia'. Blair also specifically cited, "creativity built on tolerance, openness and adaptability, work and self improvement, strong communities and families and fair play, rights and responsibilities and an outward looking approach to the world." Critics might also argue that Blair's Britishness also involved seeing Britain as an unquestionable ally of America's interventionist foreign policies. More recently, David Cameron spoke of British values as being "hospitality, tolerance and generosity...to name just three", echoing one of his New Labour predecessors.

Civic and cultural values

From these brief examples, British values fall into one of two categories: civic or cultural. So in the first, you have Blair's social justice whilst in the second, you have Major's warm beer and village green. Both however are problematic. When trying to establish that what is 'British' or more precisely what are 'British values', civic values rarely hold their own. Civic values relating to social justice, equality, fairness, democracy or freedom of speech amongst others are far from unique or specific to the British context. There are few nation states around the world which would not subscribe to such values both as a nation and for its people. So whilst British values may well be about all of these things, so too would the values of Canada, Germany, Sweden and numerous others be pretty much the same. As such, civic values are far from individual and far less the preserve of one nation or people.

As regards cultural values – the warm beer and village greens – most are far from homogenously applicable. Typically dependent upon the socio-cultural and socio-economic heritages of different individuals and communities, cultural values are therefore as much subjective as they are exclusive. So for example, whilst warm beer and village greens may be attributed with importance and worth by somebody living in a Cotswolds village, it is highly unlikely that somebody living on a Moss Side council estate in Manchester would feel the same. It might also be argued that such cultural values are 'banal'. Bring into the equation differences in age, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, education and a whole host of other variables and the identification of even a handful of universally accepted values become increasingly difficult. And as British society becomes increasingly diverse, so the identification of a single set of values that have universal importance and worth – and are unique to Britain and its people – becomes an increasingly complex endeavour.

And the same can be applied at the local level of Birmingham also. If a set of shared values are established – for instance, if tolerance, fairness and courtesy were established as 'Brummie values' – why might they be unique to Birmingham? Would those same values not apply to Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham and elsewhere also?

If those same shared values were cultural – that Brummies attribute worth to Cadburys chocolate, Rover cars and heavy metal music for instance – what happens to those who

dislike Cadbury's chocolate, choose not to drive a Rover and despise heavy metal? Are they seen to be lesser Brummies because they do not share 'our' values; might their rejection of 'our values' be used to demarcate who 'we' are at the expense of recognising who 'they' are?

What about those also who only come to Birmingham to work or play? Do they have to share Brummie values while they are in the city or can they choose to continue to share their own values characterised by where they are from?

And finally, what about those for whom Birmingham might be where they live but may never be 'home'? Are they to rid themselves of their cultural, national, ethnic and other affiliations and allegiances, of their emotional, spiritual and physical attachments in order to truly share in Brummie values?

Establishing a set of shared values is therefore extremely difficult.

Alternative approaches

There are however alternatives. One approach with which to consider the notion of value is to explore what it is that people value about the place they live in. Instead of therefore trying to establish a set of Birmingham values, you instead begin to better understand what it is that is unique, important and valued about Birmingham. Not only does this provide an opportunity to engage all people irrespective of difference, it also provides an opportunity to understand what is unique about the city to the myriad of people who engage with it in an equally myriad number of ways.

In this way, the starting question not only acknowledges the heterogeneity – the complexity and diversity - of the city but so too provides opportunities for the homogeneity of a diverse population to contribute equally. As such, all are able to share in communicating what they value about Birmingham.

Another way to look at the issue is by viewing it as an investigation of 'experiences' rather than values. We would suggest the idea that what brings people together and what Brummies share is not a unique set of values, but a unique set of experiences. Anecdotally we can say that many people within the city feel that the city is important to their sense of home or belonging – these feelings are often emotional rather than rational - and are based on rich histories of families from a myriad of backgrounds building their lives here. They are also constructed by everyday experiences that are mundane but meaningful. By exploring the everyday lives of Brummies, we can collect a picture of how the city's population's histories intersect. And by promoting an understanding of the very human emotions, positive and negative, that the city's residents have experienced, we can find narratives that might provide the basis for feelings of togetherness.