Communities within Communities:
Reflections on belonging, ethnicity and
neighbourhood relations in
Maybury-Sheerwater,
Woking.

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Introduction

The aim of this research was to explore the development of neighbourhood relations over a forty year period in the Maybury-Sheerwater ward of Woking. In doing this, we focused on people with the longest histories in the area. These are the white English majority, British Italian-Sicilian and British Pakistani residents.

We placed importance upon how people experienced their involvement in and attachment to the area they lived in. Such experiences are deeply individual, as well as collective, and they may also change over a life-time, and transform across generations. In an attempt to form an understanding of neighbourhood relations that reflect this complexity, the project was based on an exploration of family histories. In total, we conducted life story interviews with four extended families from each of the three ethnicities. Within each family, life story interviews were held with members of each generation. For ethical reasons, we did not interview anyone under the age of eighteen. When we refer to someone as “first generation” we mean that this person was one of the oldest members of the family with whom we worked. It follows that “second generation” represents the first generation’s children and so forth. The life history method has enabled us to focus upon the complexities of both individual and collective experiences within families, across generations and ethnic identities.

We decided to focus on families across ethnic identities to challenge the stereotype that people “stick to their own” and the idea that Britain is “sleepwalking” into social segregation. So far in our analysis we conclude that while people in the ward mostly identify with and relate to people of the same ethnic identity, there is nothing to suggest that people cannot cooperate across ethnicity if there is something to cooperate about. Many people with whom we worked suggested that their neighbours “keep themselves to themselves”, but at the same time there were many examples of inter-ethnic relationships forming at the personal level.
It should be noted that whilst we refer to the majority population as white English, we use the terms Pakistani, British, Muslim, Asian and Sicilian, Italian, British when we refer to residents who claim Pakistani and Italian identities respectively. We deploy these terms interchangeably and unsystematically. We decided to do this to express the unpredictable, personal and diverse ways in which the people with whom we worked articulated ideas of belonging.

Introducing the Maybury-Sheerwater ward

The following introductory sections are based on data from the 2001 national Census, our interviews with people in Woking and literature on the history of Woking.1

As national census data is collected and aggregated at the ward level, and the Maybury and Sheerwater neighbourhoods only became one ward in 2000, it is difficult to establish a picture of the long-term demographics of the ward. According to the 2001 Census, in terms of population and ethnic diversity, Maybury-Sheerwater is the biggest and the most multicultural ward in Woking Borough. However, the majority of the population in Maybury and Sheerwater is classified as “White”, with 5,310 out of a total 8,974 inhabitants defined as “White”. Out of the total population of the ward, 34% belonged to the Census category “people in ethnic groups”. By far the biggest minority population is those people who according to Census classification are “Asian or Asian British: Pakistani”.

The “Asian or Asian British: Pakistani” population in Woking numbered 3,517 — more than 60% of the total Asian Pakistani population in Surrey — and the majority (2,409) were residing in Maybury-Sheerwater. As the Italian-Sicilian minority population is not recorded in census reports and population statistics, it is difficult to get an idea of the size of the British Italian-Sicilian population in Woking. According to conservative estimates by members of the Italian-Sicilian community with whom we worked the numbers are between 1,500-2,500. The ward consists of three distinct neighbourhoods: The Walton Road area, Maybury estate, and Sheerwater estate.

Walton Road area (Maybury)

The Walton Road area dates back to the late nineteenth century. The area was built at the same time as the town centre and provided terraced housing, that was relatively “cheap” compared to the rest of Woking. Over the years, the small industries and Victorian buildings, characteristic of the area, have gradually been redeveloped into private dwellings, mainly flats. Historically and in the present, this part of Woking is the place where newcomers settle, in particular immigrants from abroad. Our interviewees explained that Italian-Sicilian and Pakistani immigrants settled here in the 1950s and 1960s, and an increasing number of Eastern European, African, and Asian immigrants have moved in over the last five to ten years.

Sheerwater estate

Residents from the Sheerwater estate told us that the area was developed in the early 1950s by London County Council, later renamed as the Greater London Council (GLC). The estate provided council housing for white English people displaced from London during the Second World War. The Greater London Council managed the estate up to 1980 when

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Woking Borough took over. According to local white English residents, the estate is now becoming increasingly ethnically diverse, with more British Asian families moving in.

Maybury estate

From speaking with people on the Maybury estate we have been able to construct the following picture of this area. The estate was a council estate developed by Woking Borough in the 1950s to house people from the borough. We were told by local white English residents that since the mid-to-late 1970s an increasing number of British Asian Pakistanis have moved onto the estate where they, according to residents and housing officers, now constitute a majority.

Introducing local residents

We shall now turn to a broad profile of the people with whom we worked. These profiles are sketched from our conversations with local people themselves.

Broadly speaking, the white English British majority that participated in our project were people who self-identified as either from Woking or immigrants and their descendants from London. Up to the 1980s, white English residents that lived on the Sheerwater estate came from the Greater London Area. By contrast, white English residents from Woking lived in the Walton Road area and the Maybury estate. Over time, this distinction between people who claimed to come from Woking or from London has become less clear-cut.

Londoners came to Woking in the 1950s, and Italians-Sicilians and Pakistani immigrants also settled in Woking during the 1960s and 1970s. Londoners were housed in Sheerwater by the London County Council in the face of slum clearance and bomb damage in London. The British Asian immigrants who participated in this project came from Kashmir and Punjab, with the majority coming from the Mirpur area of Pakistani-held Kashmir. Most of the Italian-Sicilian immigrants came from two villages in Sicily, namely Sutera and Mussomeli, and from villages in Campania, southern Italy. The men were employed on pre-arranged contracts that gave them the right to pursue employment within either the local farming sector or industry for a four-year period. Upon completion of their contracts, they were entitled to stay in Britain and pursue employment in other sectors.

According to Sicilian-Italian and Pakistani migrants to Woking, they were labourers, who worked hard to make a living and usually rented no more than a bed or a room in shared accommodation. After a few months or several years, wives and families would eventually follow. Whilst Sicilian-Italian and white English women often worked locally, Pakistani women explained how in the early days of migration their primary role was as wives and mothers in the home. But as Rubina², a first generation British Pakistani woman, explains in the textbox below, this has changed:

Previously the women used to say: “Why should we learn English? What are we going to do? We stay at home.” But now they think that if they learn English, they can get jobs.

From the 1950s to 1980s, the majority of the Maybury-Sheerwater residents across the three ethnicities worked locally. Indeed, the Lion Works in Maybury was the biggest employer. Since the 1980s, most local industries have gradually disappeared, and while it is difficult to identify particular patterns of employment for the white English population, both Sicilian-Italian and Pakistani immigrants developed their own business niches locally.

² Like all names used in this pamphlet, Rubina is a pseudonym.
Over time, a high number of Italian-Sicilian immigrants moved into employment as gardeners in private houses, and one interviewee estimated that 70% of immigrants either owned or worked for private gardening or landscaping businesses. Similarly, an increasing number of British Asians found employment in the taxi and catering businesses. Since the early 1970s, numerous Asian-run taxi companies have emerged, gradually expanding operations beyond Woking, and by 2008 an estimated one in four of British Asian men from Woking were employed in the taxi business.

Over time, the second and third generations across the three ethnic groups have acquired higher levels of formal education compared to older generations. In addition, by contrast to the older generations who lived and worked locally, most members of the younger generations work outside of Woking. Many first generation Italian-Sicilians, who are now entering retirement, have moved out of the ward with their families, while many British Pakistanis families have remained, in especially the Walton Road area and Maybury estate areas. According to many interviewees, one reason for this is the proximity of the Shahjehan mosque, built in 1889 as the first purpose-built mosque in Britain and viewed by many British Muslims that live in Woking as the heart of their community. Other interviewees suggested that the availability of comparatively “cheap” housing in the ward was the reason that they stayed in the area. While many of the Londoners, who moved to Sheerwater, now have passed away, some of the original settlers and their families remain in the area.

**Belonging to Woking**

Many migrants to the area from London, Italy-Sicily and Pakistan-Kashmir experienced uncertainty as to how long they would stay in Woking. In this regard, we were told by a number of Sheerwater residents who migrated from London that some of their neighbours never got used to all the greenery, peace and quiet of the estate, and so they eventually opted to return to London. In addition, one Londoner told us how he and his wife, also from London, used to return to London every weekend. However, this sense of attachment to London as a place and as an identity was not a sentiment generally shared by children and grandchildren.

For most of the first generation Sicilian-Italians and British Pakistanis we talked to, the sense of belonging to two places was perhaps best illustrated by the decision to own houses in both their “home” village and in Woking. A sense of connection to “back home” for migrants to Woking from Pakistan-Kashmir was captured and conveyed by early settlers’ decision and desire to be buried in their homeland. It is perhaps indicative of people’s deepening sense of belonging to Woking that an increasing number of first generation settlers choose to be buried in Woking.

The Shahjehan Mosque in Maybury
A reoccurring theme across our interviews with Italian-Sicilian migrants to Woking was that buying a house and the bringing-up of children were key factors that have led people to decide to stay in Woking. As Simona, a first generation Italian woman told us:

Thirty-one years. A long honeymoon [...] he said, “oh we stay here for four, five years and then we go back” [...] and then we have our daughter, we have our son and we’re still here!

All older Italian-Sicilian interviewees expressed a feeling of fairness and stability surrounding employment opportunities in Britain: “you work hard, you get paid” was how one Italian man put it. This compared favourably to some of our interviewees’ perceptions of access to jobs in Sicily and Italy at the time they migrated. While all the Italian-Sicilian families that participated in the project returned to Italy-Sicily at least once a year to visit family and friends, they described how they were increasingly treated like “outsiders” and “guests”.

Most members of the younger generations of British Italians were born in Britain, and like their parents, they also visited Sicily-Italy on a regular basis. Alessandro explained how he became more Sicilian when he visited his family’s village, because it was in Sicily that he engaged with other Sicilians-Italians whom he knew from Woking. In contrast, Sophia told us that it was when she went to Italy that she felt most English. Both Alessandro and Sophia saw themselves as outsiders in their parental villages, but they did not perceive this in a negative way, and Alessandro’s sister married a Sicilian and now lives in Sicily.

While the feeling of belonging to London was not passed onto second and third generations, British Asians shared with British Sicilian-Italians the sense of diasporic connection to their parents’ homeland and village. But while British Italians visited Italy-Sicily annually, the majority of British Asians we talked with visited Pakistan less regularly, but when they did visit they often stayed for longer.

What’s in a name?

As already mentioned, we are using the terms English, British, Pakistani, Muslim, Asian, Italian, Sicilian interchangeably. This is meant to capture and convey something of the complex and shifting ways in which our research participants explained their belonging and attachment to several localities, countries, cultures and religions.

In the Maybury project workshop, Yasmin explained to the meeting the ways in which her son narrated his and her identities. When Yasmin’s teenage son had to tick a box in a questionnaire, after some hesitation, he settled for “British Muslim” to explain his feelings of belonging to the place of his birth and the significance of religion in shaping his sense of identity. Further, he described his mother’s identity as “British Pakistani”, in order to reflect her upbringing in Pakistan and her life in Britain. We also found that the ways in which some people think about their identities can change across their life-time. This is exemplified in the following extract from Ole’s conversation with Tahir, who self-identifies as “British Asian”:

… when I was younger, I was Pakistani. But now that I’m older, and you understand how things work a bit more, you know, I am a British Asian […]. You know, if we were both walking down the street and somebody was to look at us and judge who we were, you wouldn’t be called Danish, they’d look at you and say “oh, he’s English and he’s Asian”.

Areoccurring theme across our interviews with Italian-Sicilian migrants to Woking was that buying a house and the bringing-up of children were key factors that have led people to decide to stay in Woking. As Simona, a first generation Italian woman told us:
Over time Tahir has come to identify as “British Asian”, and not “Pakistani”. Importantly, for Tahir “English” is a term applied to white people. From this point of view, Ole Jensen, who is white and Danish, might look to an observer to be English, unlike Tahir who was “born and bred”, so to speak, in Britain.

This association of “English” with “white” identity was also experienced by many younger Sicilian-Italian research participants who described how they could blend in with the white English majority population and culture. In this way, second and third generation Italians might be described as an ‘invisible minority’, only noticeable when they choose to be. From this point of view, Italian identity becomes publicly visible when there is cause for celebration of things Italian. For example, when Italy won the 2006 Football World Cup, and the periodic hanging of the Italian flag from the first floor of a Roman Villa on Monument Road when Ferrari wins a Formula One race. On a more personal level, a sense of being Italian was an experience that was often related to family and home, as Sophia, a third generation Italian woman, explains:

Like we have Italian TV, so that’s always on. Several TVs in our house have all got Italian TV, you know, the older, my nan’s friends come round all the time and they’re all Italian. You know when I’m at home there’s no way I could consider myself English because of what’s going on around me.

To conclude this section, as Tahir has pointed out British Asian identities are visible to the white English majority, whereas white Italian minority identities remain mostly invisible in public, but become felt, lived and experienced across generations at home.

Social cohesion

“Social cohesion” is a term widely used in policy and media circles to describe and define the processes that are thought necessary to develop communities of shared values at local and national levels. Our research suggests that social cohesion in Sheerwater and Maybury emerges in situations where residents come together around a specific purpose. This may include a team of residents working together to organise the resurfacing of a private road, or the cooperation of various neighbourhood groups working across ethnic identity to organise the Sheerwater Festival (an annual summer festival). In other words, social cohesion emerges when there is something to be cohesive about, or when there is something to be cohesive against, which will become apparent in the following examples.

In this discussion of social cohesion, we use the examples of past and contemporary formations of community on the Sheerwater estate and British Asians’ involvement in local politics. These examples show the ways in which people who perceive themselves to be “outsiders”, mobilise along ethnic lines in order to stake their claims and gain influence. A further example illustrates how residents can come to act collectively across ethnic identities in order to hold local authorities accountable for the upkeep and management of their neighbourhood.
A view on social cohesion from the Sheerwater estate

The early history of Londoners who settled on the Sheerwater estate provides a good example of how social cohesion emerges around ideas of ethnicity, place, community and belonging. In addition, the residents formed a sense of collective identity in the face of feeling discriminated by locals and the Woking Borough Council. These ideas are captured and conveyed in the following quotation taken from *The Sheerwater Pylon*, the Sheerwater neighbourhood magazine.

> At one time, as you would know, Woking did not want anything to do with Sheerwater. We were Londoners dumped in their town and they were afraid we were going to pinch their jobs .... there were prejudices and differences, and because of them a “Little London” was almost created in our midst. It may have seemed to Sheerwater that a tight boundary line had been drawn around them.


As it is evident from this quote, Londoners in Sheerwater were acutely aware of Woking people’s distrust and dislike of them. Consequently, a number of Sheerwater-based community organisations emerged. In this vein, *The Sheerwater Pylon* describes the Londoners’ struggles with Woking Borough to gain access to local amenities, such as bus routes in and out of Sheerwater, and telephone boxes on the estate. ³

According to Mr Smith, a white Sheerwater resident from London, this sense of community was also dependent upon a feeling of solidarity and neighbourliness amongst the Londoners:

> …when that man opposite fell out of work, first thing Susan [a pseudonym] did, she went, there used to be a Co-op shop where Londis is, yeah?, she went round there, [brought] two bagfuls of groceries, “there you are”. But she did it on tick [he laughs]. But it didn’t make any odds, that family, the husband had fallen out of work, they had children to feed, so two bags of shopping she got, that’s how people worked

From Mr Smith’s point of view, it was the transfer of ownership and management of Sheerwater estate from the Greater London Council to Woking Borough that signalled the decline of the area’s community “spirit”. He said:

> Woking Council took on this estate, and as soon as they did that, we started to get all sorts of people moving on to the estate. And that spirit just basically drifted away until, well it’s only old people like myself who are left now out of the original.

Following the “right-to-buy” policy designed by the Thatcher government, Woking Borough Council offered its tenants the opportunity to purchase their council houses. The implementation of this policy has led to a shortage of council housing in the town.

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³ For a compilation of *The Sheerwater Pylon*, see Ian Wakeford (2002) *Sheerwater Pylon (the first ten years).*
As the numbers of council-owned one-bedroom flats on Sheerwater was higher than the other wards, there has been a concentration of so-called “vulnerable households” from the borough to the Sheerwater estate. From our conversations with local residents in Sheerwater, we conclude that it is this concentration that has contributed to both long term residents’ and outsiders’ perceptions of the social and economic decline of the area and its community spirit. The residents of the one-bedroom flats were generally held in low regard by white English interviewees, who at times characterised them as “yobbos” and “undesirables”.

However, the view of Sheerwater as an area of social decline is not held by all residents. Rather, at the project workshop held in Sheerwater, residents and community workers discussed what a pleasant and friendly place present day Sheerwater is to live and work. This view is expressed by Mary, a white English woman who moved to Sheerwater in 2002:

People here are very friendly, they’ll talk to you over the fence, they’ll chat to you on the street, you know you won’t get anywhere else in Surrey, it doesn’t happen in Guildford, it is an amazing place. I can’t think of anywhere else where somebody will just chat to you on the street.

By contrast to the “old” Sheerwater residents from London that formed a “community within a community” in Woking, Mary, like the workshop participants from Sheerwater, focused much more on the friendly and inclusive nature of the estate.

A view on social cohesion and local politics

The development of local politics in Maybury-Sheerwater provides a further example of how residents that perceive themselves to be a minority work collectively to gain a voice. Traditionally local politics in the ward has been dominated by white English councillors who represented the Labour Party. In addition, a white English Sheerwater-elected Labour councillor was Major of Woking from 2001-2002. However, during this decade, white English representation of the ward at the political level has slowly declined. In 1996, the first British Asian Pakistani councillor was elected, and by 2008 all four locally elected councillors were British Asian Pakistanis. This political success illustrates how British Asians have began to have influence in local government, a voice that was felt very necessary given Asians’ minority status in Woking. As Hussain, a British Asian man puts it:

The first generation was a lot more head down, hard working and so on and so forth, and you see the second and third generation who want a level playing field and are not as willing to play the subservient role in society.

British Asians’ political engagement with local government contrasts with the perceived disengagement of white English and Italian-Sicilian residents that live in the ward. We learnt from key figures within the Italian-Sicilian community that there has been little tradition by Italians and Sicilians to engage collectively in local politics. Moreover in recent times, the white English electorate in the ward has been characterised by resignation and apathy. As a former councillor in Sheerwater contends: “the biggest job for local democracy is to get that feeling of value of your vote back into the white English”.

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This was contrasted by the large numbers of British Asians that voted in local elections. In this vein, Mr Smith reflected:

You get people complaining about the Asian community, the fact of the matter is they’re prepared, they’re doing the same as what we did donkeys years ago. Now in consequence you’ve got four Asians representing Sheerwater and Maybury.

Mr Smith draws parallels between the community spirit and activism of Londoners in the early days of the Sheerwater estate, and the contemporary mobilisation of the British Asian electorate. In this sense, like the white Londoners before them, British Asians are determined to gain a voice and influence in Woking.

A view on social cohesion and collective action

While the preceding examples show how people have mobilised around ethnic identity to bring about change, we also came across examples of community based organisations that brought people together across ethnicity. One key example is the Alpha Road Tenants and Leaseholders Association (ARTAL), located in Maybury, just outside Maybury Estate. ARTAL consists of residents from Alpha Road who feel neglected by local authorities and service providers. As, the Chairperson argued, “we are the forgotten ones”. Consisting of fifty-four mainly white British and British Asian members, ARTAL was formed with the aim to improve the low maintenance and repair standards of the estate. Thus the primary purpose of ARTAL is to hold local service providers to account, and regular meetings are held for that purpose. The successful establishment of ARTAL demonstrates how collective action across ethnicity is feasible if there is something specific to be cohesive about and against.

Some of the complexities of inter-ethnic relationships

While the examples discussed above relate to organised expressions of social cohesion and collective action in Maybury-Sheerwater, this section explores relationships formed across ethnicity in the context of everyday life at the personal and individual level.

When Shakira, a British Muslim woman, was asked by Ole where and how members of different ethnic communities actually met, she suggested the following:

Shakira reflects on the difficulty of identifying locally specific situations and formalised settings where people meet and interact across ethnicity. At the same time, she suggests that people get on and get along across ethnic identity. What Shakira identifies as a “sense of co-existence” was expressed in various ways by our interviewees. While neighbours often became familiar, interaction between neighbours across ethnic identities was limited. “They keep themselves to themselves” was a response used by white English, British Italian-Sicilian and British Asian Pakistani research participants when we asked them to characterise their local relationships across ethnicity. As Barbara, a white first generation English woman, explains in a conversation with Ole.
But yet simultaneously, Barbara’s experience that she could count on her Pakistani neighbours in situations of crisis was echoed by other interviewees across ethnic identities. There were numerous examples of how neighbours had kindly stepped in and helped out in difficult situations, only to then withdraw again to “keep themselves to themselves”.

While some elderly white English residents reminisced about the close community and strength of neighbourhood relations in the past, workshop participants reminded us that these were the days when workplaces were integral to the neighbourhood, and colleagues might also be neighbours. We found that second and third generation interviewees’ lives and experiences were less focussed upon and around the ward, as educational trajectories and employment opportunities pushed people to form social networks that went beyond the neighbourhood. Workshop participants emphasized how inter-ethnic friendships were formed at workplaces, and it was increasingly common that friends from other ethnic groups were present at significant events, for example weddings and funerals. As Ishrad Ahmad pointed out at the Maybury workshop: “You see English, Italians, Portuguese – they do not just say something on the street, they go to the Mosque and to the grave. You have all sorts, they put on the headscarf and they join the men and the women”.

Indeed, the potential of interethnic friendships to facilitate individuals to move beyond stereotypes is illustrated by Jane’s words below. Jane is a second generation white English woman who grew up on Maybury estate:

As I’ve been reminded, I replaced the word “Muslim” with “friend”, so when he says “Muslims”, I’m thinking people, he’s thinking Muslim kind of thing. So you know, I’m thinking of the people that I know whereas he’s thinking of the groups […]. Whereas I am just thinking of Lubnah and Mariyam, and you know, that’s not the same. But I guess that’s where the problem is, isn’t it?

Barbara thinks that “Pakistanis” are good neighbours, because she knows that she can depend on her neighbours in times of crisis. At the same time, there appears to be a lack of continuity to her relationship with her neighbours. But rather than attributing this to ethnic differences, some of the white English participants at the workshop held in the Maybury Centre recognised this lack of familiarity as an expression of “English reserve”. The latter was considered to be a characteristic specific to white English people from the south. From this point of view, this attitude was thought to contrast with people from the North of England, who were considered to be more outgoing and friendly. One white English woman at the meeting argued that: “we’re so reserved because we are afraid of getting rejected”.

Barbara: I am perfectly safe here, because I have got good neighbours. They may be Pakistanis, but they are good neighbours. If I needed anything they would be there, I know they would.

Ole: I remember you saying that they are good

Barbara: No, no, they don’t intrude, and they don’t, they keep themselves to themselves, but if I need anything, they’d be there. I mean when my husband died, the two girls were the first on the doorstep, you know, to offer their sympathy, and could they do anything for me, you know. So they are fine.

Ole: So when you’re saying that they don’t integrate, what’s missing?

Barbara: You don’t see a Pakistani having a white friend or a white, I mean some of the white girls have got Pakistani girls as their friends, but then their families are not friends, do you know what I mean?
Jane developed long-term friendships with local Muslim girls that she met at school in the area. The formation of these lasting childhood friendships means that for Jane Muslims have become individuals rather than members of ethnic and religious groups. So from Jane’s point of view, friendships across ethnicity and religious identity can potentially break down group stereotypes.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we should stress that the ideas that we have presented here constitute our first preliminary analysis. While we trust that this pamphlet provides an outline of the development of inter-ethnic relations in Maybury-Sheerwater, it does not do justice to the richness and the detail of the fieldwork data we have collected.

While national social cohesion policies often attempt to address social cohesion within specific areas and neighbourhoods, such policies do not always reflect the realities of the lives of people living within such areas. While ethnicity certainly remains a marker of difference in Maybury-Sheerwater, we did not experience ethnic differences as entrenched. Though it is difficult to point to many organisations or settings where local residents get together across ethnicity – and it is certainly easier to identify organisations where they do not – it is important to stress that ethnic identity does not impede cooperation across ethnicity when there is something specific to unite around or against. Equally important are the emerging inter-ethnic relationships and friendships at the personal level which may be the best way of challenging racial, ethnic and religious stereotypes.

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**Cover illustrations:**

Front cover: Dartmouth Avenue, Sheerwater.

Back cover: Woking Youth Centre, Walton Road.