

Independent Report

The Khan Review: executive summary, key findings and recommendations

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Table of Contents

The Khan Review: executive summary, key findings and recommendations.....1
Foreword.....2
Executive Summary.....3
Key findings.....4
 No strategic approach within Whitehall.....8
Recommendations.....13
Terms of reference.....18
What this Review does not examine.....19
Methodology.....20
 Acknowledgements.....20
 The Review’s understanding of ‘social cohesion’21
 Social Cohesion.....22
 What binds us together: Our nation’s democratic rights and freedoms.....22
 When differing freedoms and rights come into conflict.....23

Foreword

Britain's most precious asset is our diverse and cohesive democracy. Built on centuries of hard won rights, our democratic freedoms form the bedrock of our nation. However, it is a mistake to assume the endeavour towards building an inclusive and cohesive society is accomplished. Advancing and protecting our plural democracy requires constant vigilance.

Across the globe many democracies are facing internal fragmentation and polarisation as well as domestic and cross-border political, economic and social challenges.

Disillusionment with democracy, the emergence and growth of social media and artificial intelligence, the spread of disinformation and deep fakes; and the mainstreaming of extremism has profound consequences for democratic nations. How we preserve social cohesion while preventing, managing, and responding to these challenges is fast becoming one of the most important questions of our time.

This Review is an examination of some of the contemporary threats to social cohesion and our country's democratic resilience. Many of the risks I outline are eroding cohesion and our democratic norms at an individual, institutional and societal level. Rather than high risk and acute threats such as terrorism, cyber-security and foreign state interference, many of the cohesion risks I identify are chronic, insidious and often sit below the radar; the impact of which is not actively measured or even fully appreciated. There is a growing and dangerous climate of threatening and intimidatory harassment leading to serious censorship – what I have termed freedom-restricting harassment – affecting not just our politicians and those in public life, but members of the public too.

In the first polling of its kind, this Review demonstrates the shockingly widespread nature of this phenomenon across British society. Horrifying victim testimonies demonstrate how freedom-restricting harassment is poisoning the lifeblood of our public and civic life and our institutions; and is creating a pervasively censorious culture antithetical to our democratic way of life. While some are bound to 'cherry-pick' some victims and perpetrators over others to suit their own narrative, such an approach would be self-defeating as this trend crosses ideological and social divides, affecting individuals from all walks of life.

On the front line, local authorities are struggling to prevent, manage and contain the impact of conspiracy theories, disinformation and extremist activity, which is undermining social cohesion and, in some cases, causing democratic disruption. And while we have seen inspiring numbers come together and volunteer to support their communities during the Covid pandemic, cohesion indicators suggest this is against a backdrop of overall declining civic engagement as well as declining trust and participation in democracy and its institutions.

Despite this worrying picture, there is no strategic approach within Whitehall's machinery to deal with these threats to social cohesion and our country's democratic resilience. My

Review follows a twenty year long-line of government commissioned cohesion reviews and recommendations. It is disappointing that today there exists no strategic approach, or comprehensive analytical capability and framework to assess social cohesion trends and to ensure a robust and resilient response in the face of evolving risks.

I have met countless incredible people across our country on the frontline of local communities who are passionately working hard to build and preserve social cohesion. They are however being let down in the face of poor policy, insufficient data, and the lack of strategy and supporting infrastructure.

Our country has made giant leaps in becoming a tolerant cohesive society and we have much to build on, but I believe the scale and challenge of the cohesion threats we now face requires a radically new approach. I have put forward fifteen recommendations the large majority of which are for government. The government of the day may choose to continue to commission further reviews as it has done in the past, but it is implementation and decisive action that is ultimately needed.

In the year of a general election, I hope all political parties establish how they will address the issues I have raised. The government must demonstrate the political will, leadership and long-term commitment that is required to harness the many benefits social cohesion brings, while at the same time protect our democratic way of life from the many threats that seek to undermine it.

Executive Summary

Today there are significant challenges that impact social cohesion and the wellbeing of our democracy. National and international events feed polarisation and division on our streets with the recent conflict in Israel-Palestine a stark reminder of this. The unprecedented global rise and spread of dangerous conspiracy theories and disinformation, alongside unregulated and societal-changing technology such as artificial intelligence, has the potential to cause direct democratic disruption to our nation.

Some cohesion threats come from within our country. Disillusionment with democracy and distrust of its institutions and the political elite; the economic, cultural and social dislocation people and communities experience; and threatening forms of harassment and censorship cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the current cost of living crisis is seriously impacting the wellbeing of individuals and local communities. With one in five English councils facing a risk of bankruptcy, the potential impact on social cohesion in the short and long-term could be destabilising to our country.

Extremist and other malign actors capitalise on the tensions and discontent caused by these issues, in an attempt to breed further division, distrust and disillusionment. By exploiting people's grievances and resentment towards the perceived failure of our country to deliver for them, while also promoting a narrative that rejects pluralism and our shared democratic values, they attempt to stoke further division and hostility in our society.

These challenges are having a profound impact on social cohesion. If not addressed adequately, they have the potential to undermine the social fabric of our country. Unlike acute high-risk threats such as terrorism or other national security concerns, many of these cohesion threats are chronic, insidious and sit below the radar where they are not assessed, measured or even fully understood. The Reviewer believes that without a strategic approach to social cohesion, we will witness a slow erosion of the democratic rights and freedoms that are the bedrock of our nation.

Social cohesion is not just about protecting the democratic norms of our country. It has wide reaching benefits for society as a whole. From helping achieve sustainable economic growth, to reducing the threat of terrorism and hate crime, increasing societal resilience to shocks such as pandemics, improving public health, increasing volunteering and strengthening communities, social cohesion benefits a wide range of adjacent policy areas.

Social cohesion investment to improve long-term socio-economic conditions and social capital is also essential for the sustainable regeneration of areas that have fallen behind. This is key to achieving the goals of the Levelling Up agenda. Joining up social cohesion policy with the Levelling Up missions provides a vital opportunity to not only boost cohesion, but to ensure the long-term success of regional regeneration.

Too often, cohesion policy has not been given the attention it deserves by government, despite the growing body of evidence demonstrating its social and economic importance. Indeed, the wide-ranging benefits of improving social cohesion have the potential to vastly outweigh any cost of initial investment. Alternatively, a failure to harness the benefits of cohesion will result in society losing out on long-term economic, policy and social advantages that will strengthen our country.

Conversely, the current winds of extremism, polarisation and democratic disruption combined with social and economic issues may cause even more unrest. Social unrest and the erosion of democratic freedoms do not happen overnight, and acting to mitigate against such threats through early intervention is critical. Prevention is far more effective than cure, and prevention comes in the form of long-term work to build cohesion and resilience over time, as well as deploying pre-emptive interventions to early warning signs.

If we want to be prepared for the challenges facing us, how we build and deliver social cohesion must be overhauled.

Key findings

A) What this Review has termed ‘freedom-restricting harassment’ has become widespread and is corroding both social cohesion and our democratic rights and freedoms

Evidence gathered by this Review reveals a wide-spread phenomenon of extreme forms of harassment leading individuals into silence, self-censoring, or abandoning their democratic rights. The Reviewer calls this freedom-restricting harassment (FRH), defined as **when people experience or witness threatening, intimidatory or abusive harassment online**

and/or offline which is intended to make people or institutions censor or self-censor out of fear. This may or may not be part of a persistent pattern of behaviour.

FRH involves but is not limited to, acts of doxing, inciting hatred and violence against individuals and their families, sending death and rape threats, and other forms of threatening behaviour. This form of harassment and resultant censorship is creating a 'chilling impact' on freedom of expression and other democratic freedoms.

With significant attention given to the horrific abuse our politicians have endured, leading some to step down from political life altogether, it is widely assumed that such harassment is predominately reserved for those in public life. There is also a belief that such abuse is essentially an online phenomenon. Our evidence indicates that neither of these assumptions are true. Freedom-restricting harassment is a far wider phenomenon, whose victims range across political, class, belief and cultural spectrums, and which appears equally online and offline.

From intimidating and censoring journalists, those working in the arts and culture sector, to academics and teachers as well as non-governmental organisations and those engaged in civil society, freedom-restricting harassment is a wider societal threat that is impacting Britons across all walks of life.

The Reviewer uncovered countless examples of victims, some of whose testimonies are captured in this report. A director of a civil society organisation working against hate crime receiving regular death threats and whose staff have left their jobs out of fear; councillors living in constant fear and considering leaving office after receiving thousands of death threats; a university cancelling a proposed academic research centre after threatening harassment to staff; intra-faith harassment including an imam who had 18 months of police protection from Islamist extremists for his religious beliefs and a Sikh community activist having to take different routes home each night for fear of being followed by Sikh fundamentalists after years of threats and abuse.

A growing culture of freedom-restricting harassment in the United Kingdom

To better understand the extent to which people in the United Kingdom experience freedom-restricting harassment, the Review commissioned an online omnibus poll which involved a nationally representative sample of 1,279 respondents aged 16+ in the UK. The polling data presents a worrying picture of people's experiences of FRH and the impact they believe it is having on individual freedoms and social cohesion.

A large majority (85%) of the public believe freedom-restricting harassment **currently occurs in the UK, with 60% believing the problem is worse than 5 years ago.** 44% of respondents have witnessed FRH online, and equally 44% said they have witnessed FRH in person.

76% of the public reported having restricted expressing their personal views in public, out of fear of receiving FRH either to themselves or their loved ones. Additionally, 47% of

respondents reported having witnessed others experiencing FRH which had then resulted in self-censorship.

The impact of freedom-restricting harassment on people is broad. Of the 27% of respondents answering they've experienced 'life altering' FRH, when provided with options for how their life has been altered, 77% reported either not being able to fully express their opinion or experiencing a decline in their personal freedom. 61% of this group experiencing life altering FRH have taken specific actions, with 20% coming off social media and 17% saying they had taken additional security measures. Overall, **one in eight in this group reported life changing events and actions, including 15% having lost or changed their job and 13% having moved house.**

The majority of the public are concerned about the impact of FRH on individual liberty. **72% agreed that FRH undermines people's ability to live and speak freely in our country, while 69% feel that people are having to censor the way they live their professional or personal lives due to FRH.**

Concern also extends to the harm freedom-restricting harassment has on public life and social cohesion. 70% agree that FRH has had a negative effect on people living well together in our society, while 69% agree that FRH in public life is likely to put off other people from contributing to public life in the future.

Freedom-restricting harassment does not only undermine pluralism. It strikes at the heart of our liberal and cohesive democracy, contributing to a slow and insidious erosion of our democratic rights and freedoms. Without determined action, FRH will continue to operate below the radar and drive a toxic, censorious and pervasive culture antithetical to our democratic way of life which must be resisted.

B) Victims of freedom-restricting harassment suffer devastating impacts yet are often not treated as victims or offered the support they need. The impact on the religious studies teacher at Batley Grammar School provides a harrowing example.

As an in-depth victim case study and for the first time since the incident occurred, we reviewed the case of the religious studies (RS) teacher at Batley Grammar School who was forced into hiding in March 2021 following accusations of blasphemy. Having delivered an educational lesson on promoting fundamental British values, he faced an online and offline campaign of intimidation and abuse. Threats and harassment included incitement to violence against both him and his family.

This incident came just 6 months after the beheading of the schoolteacher Samuel Paty in Paris. We evidence the short and long-term trauma and impact the incident had on him; compounded by the lack of support and care by local agencies. This included feeling incredibly distressed and suicidal and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Despite being cleared of any malicious intent by an independent investigation two months later, our review of his case demonstrates that he was not considered a victim of crime, he was not entitled to, nor did he receive any of the provisions set out in the Victims Code. In failing to

understand the seriousness of the incident, he was let down by all the agencies involved, most notably Kirklees Council, West Yorkshire Police and the Batley Multi Academy Trust.

There was a considerable lack of leadership by the agencies named above. They should have issued clear messages that threats, harassment and abuse would not be tolerated under any circumstances. Nor was there any clear condemnation of those engaged in such behaviour who were creating an intimidatory and threatening climate. There was a disproportionate concern for not causing offence to the religious sensibilities of those who, unaware of the facts, chose to engage in intimidation and harassment. There also appeared to be a poor understanding of cohesion, where appeasing the protestors to secure the end of the protests – at the expense of the religious studies teacher – appeared to be the priority. Such an approach would arguably undermine cohesion in the long-term as it appears to appease and encourage those who create an intimidating environment to enforce their beliefs, irrespective of the rights of others.

We heard of more cases of self-appointed ‘community faith leaders’ aggressively interfering in everyday teaching at some schools in Batley and creating a climate of fear. This appears to suggest there is a wider cultural problem in the area that is not being adequately addressed.

We also heard of similar examples in other schools across the country and do not believe schools are given adequate support, guidance and training on how to mitigate and manage such incidents. There is a clear need for institutions to defend and support teaching staff who experience freedom-restricting harassment.

C) Local authorities and responders are struggling to manage evolving social cohesion threats. Whitehall lacks a national strategic approach to help improve local authorities’ capability in identifying, preventing and responding to cohesion threats.

Many local authorities lack the capability, expertise and resources necessary to deal with evolving cohesion threats. Not enough consideration has been given in supporting and improving the capability of local authorities and practitioners to respond effectively. To demonstrate the struggle local authorities are facing, we examined the harm and impact contemporary cohesion threats are having on three local authorities.

In Oldham, despite the extensive effort the local authority has made in promoting social cohesion, conspiracy theories and freedom-restricting harassment are causing severe local democratic disruption. Such activity is having a serious effect on the functioning of local democracy and restricting the ability of existing and potential future council leaders and senior officials to carry out their democratic mandate.

In Barrow-in-Furness, a number of incidents that took place from 2019 onwards including the publication of a Facebook post by Eleanor Williams, who was found guilty of perverting the court of justice in 2023 – led to a serious breakdown of social cohesion in the town. The spread of disinformation both off and online, alongside the involvement of far right actors

spreading racist and extremist narratives created a lasting impact including a permanent far right presence in the community where before there had not been one.

In Stoke-on-Trent, the continuing activity of far right and Islamist groups and actors is posing serious cohesion challenges. In April 2023, the city was no longer considered a Prevent priority area by the Home Office, which meant the loss of Prevent funding and resources. This is irrespective of the fact that the city continues to experience significant extremist activity which continues to undermine social cohesion and encourage radicalisation with local community infrastructure being subject to attempts at infiltration by extremist groups. A climate of intimidation has been created because of the activity of such extremist groups. In the absence of a national strategic cohesion and counter-extremism approach, cities like Stoke fall through the gap.

While the challenges faced by all three local authorities are different, the lack of training, guidance and support to deal with these challenges was a common theme all three – and other – councils raised. Furthermore, repairing relationships in local areas where serious conflict and flashpoint incidents have occurred is not taking place. If not resolved, the trauma experienced among local communities by such incidents runs the risk of being further exploited by extremists, contributing to more future unrest, division and, accumulatively, undermining social cohesion.

No strategic approach within Whitehall

There is no adequate national strategic approach to cohesion and democratic resilience within Whitehall. Neither the National Risk Register or the National Resilience Framework adequately address the chronic cohesion and democratic threats this Review has identified. While the Defending Democracy Taskforce seeks to reduce the risk of foreign interference to the UK's democratic processes, they do not focus on the chronic threat to democracy from domestic and non-state actors engaged in disinformation, conspiracies and extremism.

This is not to say the focus of National Security should be broadened to include the local and chronic threats we highlight. Nor would it be appropriate to expand the remit of CONTEST, as these threats are not of a terrorist concern. However, this means that other strategies are needed to address threats to cohesion and democratic resilience.

The Home Office and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) do not demonstrate a strategic or comprehensive approach to the cohesion and extremism threats we have identified. Improving our understanding of what makes some localities susceptible to extremism and other threats while other areas remain resilient is essential in allowing authorities to adopt a more strategic approach. However, there is an institutional knowledge gap within both the Home Office and DLUHC of such factors. While it is the case that one aim of the Government's 2019 Integrated Communities Action Plan was to reduce community tensions and mistrust, this arguably has not been successful. As we further demonstrate, it was not designed to identify, prevent or respond to cohesion threats we outline. Nor is there any existing strategic approach within DLUHC that attempts to address such issues.

In 2021, the government scrapped the Home Office's 2015 Counter-Extremism strategy, resulting in a significant loss of funding and resources for local authorities and civil society to help challenge extremism. The Hate Crime Strategy was due an update in 2020. This has not occurred. This paints a worrying picture of the lack of preparedness and resilience to the numerous emerging extremism and cohesion issues many local authorities are experiencing.

D) There is an incomplete, inconclusive and at times contradictory picture of social cohesion and democratic resilience in our country. An examination of some cohesion indicators suggests a declining trust, confidence and participation in democracy and its institutions, declining civic engagement, and a complex picture of how tolerant we are to difference despite progress made in recent decades.

Current available data on social cohesion in the UK is mixed and incomplete. It is therefore difficult to provide a full and conclusive analysis of the state of cohesion nationally or locally across the country. We have examined existing data of three indicators to provide a limited snapshot which strongly correlate with social cohesion and where good data already exists. These are:

- **Tolerance, prejudice and attitudes towards others**
- **Democracy, and institutional trust**
- **Civic engagement and social capital**

Evidence shows that in recent decades the UK has, in general, increasingly adopted liberal and tolerant attitudes towards differing groups. However, there has simultaneously been a rise in polarisation and the widespread nature of freedom restricting harassment is indicative of worrying levels of intolerance towards differing opinions, beliefs, characteristics or roles of individuals.

Furthermore, while the Covid pandemic saw an inspirational spike in community volunteering, this is against a backdrop of consistently declining civil participation. Both in the UK and internationally, we are seeing continually reducing trust in democracy as well as democratic participation. Time series data in the UK shows trust in the government has decreased over the last four decades, alongside continued low voter turnout, plummeting trust in parliament and decreasing confidence in political parties and the press. These indicators are key barometers of the state of social cohesion, and their decline has worrying implications for the health and wellbeing of our democracy.

E) In the absence of a comprehensive cohesion assessment framework, we lack the analytical capability in assessing the state of social cohesion at a national and a local level. This severely restricts the ability of local and national government to assess progress towards a more cohesive society, or to identify and respond to early warning signs of a break down in cohesion across the country.

The current available data allows only a limited analysis of these trends. While cohesion can be tricky to measure, delivery framework models and methods for evaluation have been

developed in both academia and in practice in other countries, for example Australia. A social cohesion assessment framework would provide an accurate picture of cohesion including a clearer assessment of why some cohesion data appears to conflict, while also helping to improve targeted policy, delivery and practice. As well as providing early warning signs of worsening local cohesion and potential costly unrest, it would also encourage rigorous scrutiny and accountability of local and central government of the state of cohesion in Britain's communities.

F) There have been twenty years of reports, recommendations and strategies on social cohesion, yet government focus has been intermittent, and the outcomes have been mixed. Today, there remains a continuing failure to institutionalise social cohesion. This is due to ongoing structural obstacles – identified as the 3Ps – where policy, practice and the politics of social cohesion have hampered progress.

The Reviewer, having examined the past 20 years of social cohesion policy and implementation, concludes that weaknesses in cohesion policy and practice include:

- A lack of a standardised understanding of social cohesion including a conflation with 'integration;' a lack of institutional knowledge and analytical capability within the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, including specialised knowledge on cohesion interventions; and a lack of long-term evaluation of programmes.
- There is insufficient focus and evidence on what interventions are effective to overcome community tensions and emerging conflicts. Studies related to peacebuilding and conflict resolution often relate to post-conflict countries, or in workplace settings rather than community settings in established democracies.
- The government's 2019 Integrated Communities Action Plan was limited in its impact in England. While the disruption of Covid severely affected the Plan's delivery and assessment there were limitations to the Action Plan. It was too focussed on 'bums on seats' type programmes, which recorded outputs such as the number of people attending a particular programme rather than outcomes and impact. There was also a standard 'one-size fits all' approach rather than bespoke interventions directed at different audiences. There was little recognition of intra-faith or intra-minority tensions which undermines social cohesion.
- There is too often a reliance on anecdotal and subjective evidence. Coupled with the perception that cohesion work is 'nice to have but not essential,' social cohesion policy finds itself in an impossible catch-22 situation in both national and local government. The lack of concrete data showing the impact of cohesion initiatives means funding is often very hard to secure, and with funding in short supply it becomes difficult to robustly implement and measure social cohesion policy.

Local authorities lack accountability in improving and protecting social cohesion. Even under existing statutory duties for example the Public Sector Equality Duty (s.149 of Equality Act 2010), public bodies are required to 'foster good relations' between differing groups of people. Yet this is not being adequately implemented by local authorities or assessed

adequately by the Equality Human Rights Commission. There also continues to be a 'culture of fear' among some local authorities, where they are not prepared to have the necessary and difficult conversations.[\[footnote 1\]](#) Many local authorities lack basic know-how while others endure counter-productive political interference from councillors.

The relationship between politicians and social cohesion can be inherently difficult and uneasy

Previous cohesion reports have shown how the action – or lack of action – taken by political leaders, has undermined social cohesion. This continues to be a problem and concerns about divisive, inflammatory language and poor political leadership were raised time and again. Our call for evidence raised uneasiness about the inconsistent national policy approach to cohesion, where the political narrative of some within government was often seen as conflicting with the cohesion messaging it was trying to promote. Examples of this include politicians fuelling division in the UK by engaging in so-called 'culture wars' for political benefits. Evidence indicates that 'culture war' debates can polarise society, increase conflict, contribute to disinformation and undermine social cohesion.

Furthermore, our review of local areas which had received government funding from the 2019 Integrated Communities Action Plan suggests those that limited political interference and control tended to be more innovative and successful in delivering cohesion programmes and projects. Where substantial local political interference existed, including attempts to politicise social cohesion, this hindered local authorities' efforts.

Conversely, the security concerns following the murders of Jo Cox MP and Sir David Amess MP have become a prominent concern for many MPs. The existence of freedom-restricting harassment and a well-founded fear of receiving violent threats is contributing to a toxic climate that discourages some politicians to deliver on their mandate or to counter extremism and other malign activity – highlighting how an erosion of social cohesion impacts the ability of some politicians to carry out their role.

G) This Review calls for a new approach to social cohesion and democratic resilience, to ensure we harness the many benefits while also ensuring we have the capability to identify and respond to new trends and threats.

The implementation of effective cohesion policy faces many obstacles, not least of which was the political instability of the last few years. This is exemplified by the fact that since this Review started in 2021, there have been five Secretaries of State at DLUHC all of whom have had different interests, priorities and political will in relation to social cohesion. Cohesion policy is often vulnerable to the prevailing political winds and the individual interest of ministers, meaning it is relatively easy for it to fall off the government's agenda. The continuing institutional knowledge gap and lack of a strategic plan across local and national government, including in DLUHC, demonstrates the lack of progress made in recent times.

That is why we believe a new model for social cohesion must be developed and recommend the establishment of an independent and impartial Office for Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience (OSCDR.)

OSCDR will fill the current hole in analytical and assessment capability, by developing robust metrics as well as collecting data and evidence of best practice to assess and improve on the delivery of a new cohesion strategy. This data role of the OSCDR would also help the government to take a more strategic and evidence-based approach in driving a cohesion strategy. This data would provide valuable insight to support and inform many other policy areas including Levelling Up, counter-extremism and hate crime, public health, education, housing and CONTEST. In its capacity of building a repository of positive interventions and evidence, OSCDR would also deliver training and provide support to local authorities.

Recommendations

1. The government to establish and fund an independent, impartial Office for Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience (OSCDR)

1a) The OSCDR should establish a national cohesion assessment framework to identify and collect relevant national and local data including from all local authorities. This will support the publication of a yearly 'State of Cohesion and Democratic Resilience in England' report. The report would provide a picture of the state and progress of cohesion and democratic resilience nationally and across all local authorities, and over time assess the progress made by local authorities. The report would examine national and local trends, as well as identify growing challenges and threats to social cohesion to help better inform policymakers and government.

1b) The OSCDR should help build understanding of 'what works' in the short, medium and long-term. It will commission and publish research examining what the risk factors are in an area that make it susceptible to a weakening of social cohesion, for example extremism and disillusionment with democracy. It will also examine what the protective factors are that encourage societal and democratic resilience. It will build up the evidence base on the interventions needed to counter conspiracy theories, disinformation and other acute and chronic threats.

1c) The OSCDR should establish a communications unit to support local authorities and respond to dangerous and harmful conspiracy theories and disinformation that are attempting to undermine social cohesion. We recommend the OSCDR should establish such a unit as an independent and impartial body, rather than the government.

1d) The OSCDR should undertake an inquiry examining the scale, impact and trends freedom-restricting harassment is having on censoring democratic rights and freedoms in England. The inquiry should also examine who the perpetrators are and what is needed to prevent and restrict such behaviour.

1e) The OSCDR should organise training, programmes and materials for local authorities on crisis management, conflict resolution and mediation, and how to hold difficult conversations. This will ensure local authorities are better equipped to protect social cohesion and respond to tensions and conflict. Improving training on conflict resolution must become a fundamental part of social cohesion training.

1f) The OSCDR should assess the progress made by local authorities and if, insufficient progress persists by July 2026, it should call on the government to legislate for a statutory duty on social cohesion – the details of which would be provided by the OSCDR.

2. The government to publish a 5-year Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience Strategy (SCDR) and Action Plan, with long-term objectives alongside the Levelling Up Strategy. An integration strategy should be distinct from the SCDR strategy.

Driven by the evidence produced by the OSCDR, the SCDR strategy should take a public health approach and have 3 main objectives:

- **Promote and protect** social cohesion including democratic freedoms
- **Identify, pre-empt and prevent** threats and activity that would undermine social cohesion
- **Respond to and recover from** threats and incidents

The SCDR strategy and action plan should be framed around the following seven strategic priorities:

2a) **Promote social cohesion** through a dedicated government effort, amplifying and reinforcing democratic freedoms and norms; and supporting evidence-based local cohesion initiatives.

2b) **Build resilience** in local communities against extremist ideologies and narratives, including conspiracy theories and disinformation.

2c) **Engage people** using an audience segmentation approach to help deliver bespoke interventions and programmes to different audiences and ensure a more targeted approach. This includes those who are sympathetic to extremist narratives.

2d) **Develop an early tension warning system** that monitors and alerts DLUHC, the local authority and other key local partners about growing tensions.

2e) **Marginalise and isolate extremist and other malign actors** to prevent the mainstreaming of extremist ideologies and dangerous conspiracy theories which are causing severe harm and disruption in local areas.

2f) **Respond** quickly and effectively to flashpoint incidents and triggers.

2g) **Repair** relationships and engagement between local communities where they have broken down following serious conflict and flashpoint incidents.

The government should ensure funding and resources for local authorities, in particular where data demonstrates local areas are struggling with significant cohesion threats. Such data would be provided by the OSCDR.

3. The government should create a cross-Whitehall Cohesion Response Unit.

In partnership with relevant local authorities and other key stakeholders, the Unit should respond to early tensions and live flashpoint incidents in a quicker and effective manner. The unit would also undertake regular horizon-scanning initiatives in partnership with the OSCDR to ensure better preparedness to upcoming threats.

4. Government departments should proactively engage with local authorities in a timely manner in advance of taking action, where there is concern that those actions could fuel serious conflict and violence or undermine social cohesion in a local area – for example in relation to asylum dispersal or other issues.

Contentious or challenging policy is best delivered in conjunction with local government, who maintain greater expertise on place, whilst at the same time an engagement or even co-delivery approach mitigates against any potential tension that could be exploited by extremists and other divisive actors.

5. Government should officially recognise the phenomenon of freedom-restricting harassment and publish an Action Plan detailing how they will work to prevent and respond to it.

The OSCDR would help provide the evidence base of the scale, impact and trends of freedom-restricting harassment.

6. Government should officially recognise victims of freedom-restricting harassment and alongside the Victim's Commissioner.

To consider ways of improving support for them including the viability of the Victim's Code to such individuals, the role played by support bodies such as Victim Support and improving ways of holding perpetrators to account.

7. The Department for Education (DfE) should:

7a) Put forward legislation that restricts the ability for protests to occur immediately outside primary and secondary schools as is the case outside abortion clinics. We recommend a buffer zone of 150m be placed around schools, with the possible exception of pickets relating to industrial action by school staff.

7b) Establish a Cohesion and Conflict Unit which:

Brings together existing advice to schools such as the teaching of fundamental British values, dealing with political impartiality and others, while also providing clearer guidance and resources on other areas of conflict including when protected characteristics conflict and other controversial issues. The unit should issue guidance, training materials and resources to support schools in teaching what it means to live in a diverse democracy, how to manage opposing and different opinions, how to debate well and the importance of critical thinking.

7c) The Unit should provide better support and care for schools and teachers who find themselves being threatened and harassed. This should include immediate support for those schools and teachers who are having to deal with flashpoint incidents. DfE should collect and publish figures of the scale of targeting and harassment experienced by schools and teachers.

7d) The Unit should collect cohesion data to assess the progress of key cohesion indicators e.g segregation – ethnic and other – and other relevant issues. The OSCDR would ensure DfE are collecting the necessary cohesion indicators.

8. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) with adequate Government funding should:

8a) Hold local authorities and public bodies to account on part 3 of the Public Sector Equality Duty (s.149 of Equality Act 2010) which places a legal duty on public bodies to 'foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.' The Act describes fostering good relations as tackling prejudice and promoting understanding between people from different groups.

8b) Issue public guidance to improve understanding among public bodies of part 3 of the Public Sector Equality Duty (s.149 of Equality Act 2010).

8c) Consider what could be done to help respond, clarify and resolve clashes between different freedoms, rights and protected characteristics as set out in the Equality Act 2010, which as a result are fuelling conflict and threatening behaviour, often leading to harassment and severe abuse. The approach taken must be rapid to help assist local authorities early to deal with such incidents before they worsen and are exploited by extremist and other divisive actors.

9. Recommendations for Policing

9a) All 39 police forces in England should have a dedicated safety officer who specialises in harassment and malicious communication legislation, to engage, advise and support those individuals who are experiencing extreme or persistent harassment while also working towards holding perpetrators to account. This includes each safety officer having a comprehensive understanding of apostate and intra-faith hatred, and the theological narratives employed by perpetrators that incite hatred and cause harassment.

9b) The College of Policing should review and assess its training and understanding of social cohesion and diversity within local areas, and the principles that guide community engagement. This is particularly pertinent in relation to intra-faith and intra-minority diversity and tensions. Police forces must have a thorough understanding of the diversity among a local faith or minority community to ensure effective policing. It is vital that police forces do not inadvertently support hate preachers and extremist actors in the misguided belief that such activity supports social cohesion or diversity and inclusion principles.

10. Recommendations for HMG's Assessment community

Improve assessment and intelligence gathering of blasphemy related incitement and violence, and extreme incidences of freedom-restricting harassment which pose a threat or potential threat to life.

11. Recommendation to the Committee on Standards in Public Life

Undertake an inquiry and put forward recommendations which support elected representatives to consider how best to protect and promote social cohesion in line with the Nolan Principles. Such an inquiry should examine where conflict and potential conflict can exist, how they should be addressed and how elected officials can be held accountable to ensure the public have confidence and trust in them.

12. Recommendations to local authorities and local partners

12a) All local authorities should ensure social cohesion and democratic resilience is embedded in their long-term strategic plans. Social cohesion should not be treated as an 'add-on' but instead recognised as foundational to the successful delivery of a local authority's overall strategic plan and wider policies.

12b) Local authorities should conduct regular polling, mapping exercises and other initiatives, including open events to encourage greater participation in local democracy. This will ensure local authorities have in-depth understanding of the views, beliefs, grievances and sense of belonging of the local population they serve. This includes the extensive intra-diversity that exists within ethnic and faith-based minority groups in their local area of which there is often little understanding and where outdated notions of engagement with self-appointed and self-representative 'community leaders' continue to persist.

12c) Local authorities should consider adopting deliberate democracy models to help encourage greater citizen participation and engagement in the democratic system. This includes the setting up of a local cohesion and democracy forums or citizens assembly to support these objectives.

12d) Local authorities should improve their ability to respond to conspiracy theories, disinformation and incidents of high tension and conflict. Responding to such activity can be difficult and complicated but has become necessary in modern times. This should include:

- Developing the skills and expertise to know when and when not to intervene, what kind of messaging should be issued and how.
- Ensuring relevant officials and councillors have conflict resolution skills and training to deal with local incidents more effectively. The OSCDR would work to deliver such training.
- Ensuring those appointed to support and deliver social cohesion policy have the right skillset and experience.

12e) Local authorities in the implementation of Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 (the Public Sector Equality Duty) should ensure they fully comply with Part 3 of the Public Sector Equality Duty, which places a legal duty on public bodies to 'foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.' Local authorities should demonstrate when publishing information on how they are delivering on the PSED, how in particular they are meeting Part 3.

12f) Local businesses, charities and philanthropists should support long-term funding for local civil society organisations, charities and academic research. This would help deliver vital social cohesion and conflict resolution programmes, projects and interventions.

13. Recommendation to social media companies

Social media platforms have a responsibility to create and support tools that restrict the ability of users to engage in behaviour that encourages freedom-restricting harassment, pile-ons, doxing and other harmful activity. It is ultimately the responsibility of social media

platforms to tackle such activity occurring on their platforms. Like campaigns run by the NHS and Transport for London, social media companies should deliver online zero tolerance campaigns and other campaigns to discourage freedom-restricting harassment, and where necessary to ban users and to report to the police if users engage in criminality.

14. Recommendation to OFCOM

To hold social media platforms to account on tackling freedom-restricting harassment on their platforms.

15. Recommendations to professional bodies, unions, universities, charities and regulators

15a) Conduct an annual survey to understand the extent and severity of freedom-restricting harassment faced by people within their respective professions and what censorship impacts this is having on them. This would help provide useful year on data to senior leaders to understand the scale and address accordingly.

15b) Draft guidelines to ensure that they have the right protocols and approaches in place when dealing with incidences of FRH and ensure sufficient support for victims.

Terms of reference

In April 2021, the government appointed Dame Sara Khan to carry out an independent review into social cohesion and resilience in England. As the Independent Reviewer, she was tasked with examining the negative impact that extremism and other divisive activity was having in local communities and on victims. This was in recognition that more was needed to be done to improve our response at a local level and to strengthen community resilience against such division.

Extremism does not only manifest as terrorism.[\[footnote 2\]](#) Non-violent forms of extremism or ‘hateful extremism’ have a corrosive effect on social cohesion, undermining the rights and freedoms of others and often promoting active hostility and dehumanisation towards other groups.[\[footnote 3\]](#) While hateful extremists can share the same ideological worldview and goals as terrorists, they do not support the use of terrorism to achieve their aims. In fact, many are often forthright in their opposition to the use of terrorism. They instead prefer to use tactics such as entryism, ideological propagation, radicalisation, incitement and other means, in an attempt to mainstream their views and achieve their aims among communities and across our society.

It is the Reviewer’s view that no examination of extremism and other threats can occur without examining the existing state of social cohesion. Extremism does not occur in isolation – instead it appears and takes root in conducive environments and contexts. Specific social, political, economic and historical factors within a local area can either act as ‘risk factors’ – which can make an area more susceptible to extremism – or ‘protective factors’ – those factors that support community resilience against extremism.[\[footnote 4\]](#)

Furthermore, when social cohesion breaks down between different groups of people at a local level, extremists regularly exploit such tensions and divisions for their own nefarious purposes.^[^5]

Whilst extremism is specifically drawn out in the terms of reference, there are a range of divisive activities occurring in our country which are undermining social cohesion and our country's democratic resilience and require greater examination. For example, disinformation and conspiracy theories are being used both by extremists and others in our society to undermine social cohesion. Only focusing on when extremists use such tactics as opposed to other malign actors is to take a narrow and counter-productive approach when the harm and impacts on local areas and individuals are often the same.

To solely focus on tackling extremism would only be treating the symptoms. Tackling the root of the problem requires taking a public health model approach to social cohesion, one which identifies and measures the cohesiveness of communities and such risk factors. [\[footnote 6\]](#) For example, research demonstrates that trust and engagement in the democratic model can act as a protective factor against extremism taking root. We highlight data that points to the disillusionment some members of our society have towards democracy and its institutions. This can be exploited by extremists and act as a risk factor to social cohesion.

What this Review does not examine

Previous cohesion reports and reviews have identified a range of other factors that are important to social cohesion. These include the importance of quality housing, deprivation, encouraging social mixing and preventing ethnic segregation, immigration and the importance of new migrants learning the English language, etc. While all these issues are important and some of these issues are touched on in this Review, we have chosen not to simply repeat what many of these previous reports have already stated. It would not be possible to do justice to all these complex issues in the limited time available. Arguably, some of these issues could merit a review in themselves.

Furthermore, as the terms of reference indicate, this Review is examining contemporary threats to social cohesion and what more should be done to counter them. Since the last review by Dame Louise Casey in 2016, there have been new and evolving challenges as outlined in the introduction including rapid political and government change following the EU Referendum, the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis.

In addition, this Review is not about 'integration' per se, which is a different but related concept to social cohesion, as we shall explore. While there is inevitably some overlap, integration focuses on the ability of newcomers to successfully join and contribute to our society, with an understanding of the norms and laws, rights and responsibilities that are placed on them as members of our society. Social cohesion is a much broader concept, as defined in the next section.

Methodology

While gathering evidence for this review, the Reviewer met over 500 people at nearly 180 meetings and roundtables. This included 40 meetings with officials from government departments and agencies, 30 meetings with councillors and local authorities, 46 meetings with various civil society groups and victims, and 14 meetings with academics. As part of the Review, a call for evidence survey was launched in April 2022 to explore the public's experience of being targeted by extremists and their views on social cohesion. This elicited over 250 written responses, which were thematically analysed and followed up by 15 in-depth externally conducted personal interviews, as well as a further 10 meetings and roundtables with victims conducted by the Reviewer.

The Reviewer also commissioned four rapid reviews of academic and grey literature (published alongside this Review) to research and report back on the following themes:

- 1) 'Measuring social cohesion', examining how social cohesion can be measured;
- 2) 'Shared social values', looking at the attitudes of the UK public to rights, freedoms and values in the UK;
- 3) 'Harassment and censorship', looking at the trends and impact of harassment and censorship in the UK
- 4) 'What works in social cohesion and overcoming tension', examining the success and gaps of social cohesion and conflict interventions. We also commissioned an online omnibus poll which involved a nationally representative sample of 1,279 respondents aged 16+ in the UK, to understand the public's experience of freedom-restricting harassment.

As well as investigating high-profile cases and talking to experts practitioners in the field as well as community and civil society groups, the Reviewer also followed the evidence and themes as they arose.

Acknowledgements

Dame Sara would like to thank every single individual who spoke to her and for providing evidence to the Review. She is grateful to all those who contributed and in particular would like to thank those courageous victims who shared their experiences. While we were not able to include every victim testimony provided, they were vital in helping to draw out the Review's findings and themes.

Sara would also like to express a special thank you to the religious studies Batley Grammar School teacher for confiding and trusting her to share his experience. Sara also wants to express her admiration for all those on the frontline in our local towns, cities and communities who often voluntarily and selflessly are working to build a more cohesive and compassionate society.

The Review's understanding of 'social cohesion'

'Social cohesion' as a term can mean different things to different people. Here we outline the Reviewer's understanding of the term and how it is used in this report.

Social cohesion is concerned with how we live well together in a diverse democracy and how we peacefully navigate disagreements for the common good, despite the differences among us. As we outline, this remains as important today as it has ever been. Previous independent reviews and reports into social cohesion identify the characteristics of a cohesive community and society. These include:[\[footnote 7\]](#)

- being able to provide a positive and common vision of our country
- nurturing a sense of belonging for all citizens
- cultivating a stronger sense of an individual's rights and responsibilities
- providing similar opportunities and access to services to people from all backgrounds
- appreciating and recognising the value of diversity among people
- encouraging meaningful relationships between people from differing backgrounds in their local areas

Cohesion does not mean consensus or conformity. Instead, cohesion embraces and recognises the importance of pluralism, dissent and debate in a liberal democracy and the need to protect it.

The reports and reviews of the last 20 years have focused predominately on the racial and religious tensions and clashes between white majority communities and ethnic or religious minority communities. While this is an important area to consider, cohesion can break down along many other fault lines, such as political affiliations, protected characteristics, class and the holding of certain beliefs and opinions. Similarly, we also need to consider tensions at an intra-racial and intra-religious minority level. This Review understands cohesion in this broader, more holistic sense.

The definition of social cohesion that this Review uses draws on the academic work of Chan et al and Bottoni.[\[footnote 8\]](#)[\[footnote 9\]](#)

Social cohesion encourages the strengthening of relationships between individuals, within and between different groups of society; and between citizens and the state. This is best described by Bottoni (2018) and Chan et al el (2006) who characterise social cohesion by both the horizontal interactions (relationships between individuals, communities and groups) and vertical interactions (the relationships between members of society with the state and its institutions). Bottani also highlights that social cohesion has both a subjective perspective that focuses on people's perceptions (attitudes and state of mind), and an objective perspective that consider people's manifest behaviours.

The horizontal and vertical nature of social cohesion can be broken down further at a macro, meso and micro level, as described by Bottoni who identifies three levels of social cohesion:[\[footnote 10\]](#)

- **A macro level** that reflects a sense of membership of broader society, and trust and relations with institutions.
- **A meso level** that reflects connections with secondary groups (larger social in – and out – groups that can provide social identities).
- **A micro level** that reflects interpersonal connections with and trust in close others (mostly within families and between friends).

Social cohesion is therefore:

...a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations.

This description provides a multidimensional analysis of social cohesion that is helpful for understanding life and society in our modern and diverse liberal democracy.

Social Cohesion

- “Macro” level: relations between citizens and the State
Institutional trust
Perceived legitimacy of institutions
- “Meso” level: relations with larger or secondary groups
Intergroup attitudes
Openness to people from other groups
Participation or engagement in social actions
- “Micro” level: interpersonal relations with close others
Interpersonal trust
Density of social relationships
Social Support

What binds us together: Our nation’s democratic rights and freedoms

Pluralism is the lifeblood of a genuine democracy. Without pluralism, there is no democracy.

We are a country made up of different races, religions, beliefs and political opinions. In such a diverse democracy it is inevitable, and even healthy, that tensions and conflict do emerge into the public sphere. The British public value such diversity and believe it is important that we can disagree and yet still come together.[\[footnote 12\]](#) The challenge of preserving this pluralism sits at the heart of this Review.

In previous reports, there has understandably been a focus on identifying the ‘shared values’ that bind us together as a nation. This has often been a hotly contested topic and continues to generate debate and division. At the same time however, the teaching of such values have

often been viewed positively within schools. The duty placed on schools to promote fundamental British values including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and belief have been widely embraced.

While many would not disagree with such values, the debate and disagreement about shared values continues to occur. We saw this first-hand during the Review. While the principals behind the values may be sound, the language has evidently failed to bring people together.

It is essential that a cohesive democratic society has common ground around which various groups and identities can coalesce. In a pluralistic society the Reviewer believes this common ground must be based on the fundamental principles of democracy including the democratic rights and freedoms of all within our society. These principles include but are not limited to the importance of individual liberty, non-discrimination, freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, gender and racial equality and human rights.

One cannot force individuals to value any of these principles – what we value is complex, personal and cultural. However, social cohesion can help individuals to respect, appreciate and abide by such principles and norms as a basis for preserving their own rights and freedoms. More than a form of social contract, this should form part of the common ground that helps bind diverse groups together in a pluralistic society. The support, protection, and defence of democratic rights and freedoms must lie at the heart of social cohesion.

When differing freedoms and rights come into conflict

We have a range of rights, freedoms and protections set out in legislation (e.g. equalities and human rights legislation etc.) These rights and freedoms signal a broad set of social and democratic principles and norms that are important to life in Britain (e.g. academic and press freedom).

One concerning challenge is where different rights, freedoms, and protections appear to conflict or come into serious tension with each other. We have seen this play out in a range of ways: the biological sex versus gender identity and trans rights debate; protests outside schools which teach LGBT equality but which some religious parents oppose; the debate about freedom of expression and intolerance, to name just a few. Both ‘sides’ may or may not believe in the importance of all these freedoms. Yet conflict often arises over the lack of immediate clarity and which freedom should take precedence at the point and time of contention.

In some of these cases, important judgements have been made by the courts after a lengthy, costly and timely process.[\[footnote 13\]](#) While the eventual clarity provided by our courts is critical, there is a risk that a failure or inability to determine which freedoms take precedence quickly and in real-time, in response to live incidences can potentially fuel hate crime, harassment and undermine social cohesion.[\[footnote 14\]](#) How this can be addressed is a complex challenge the Equality and Human Rights Commission also recognise and

which requires greater consideration. A multitude of different approaches will most likely be needed including improving societal and educational awareness.