Threats to Social Cohesion
And
Democratic Resilience:
A New Strategic Approach

Dame Sara Khan DBE

Independent Adviser to the UK Government for Social Cohesion and Resilience

March 2024

**THE
KHAN
REVIEW**

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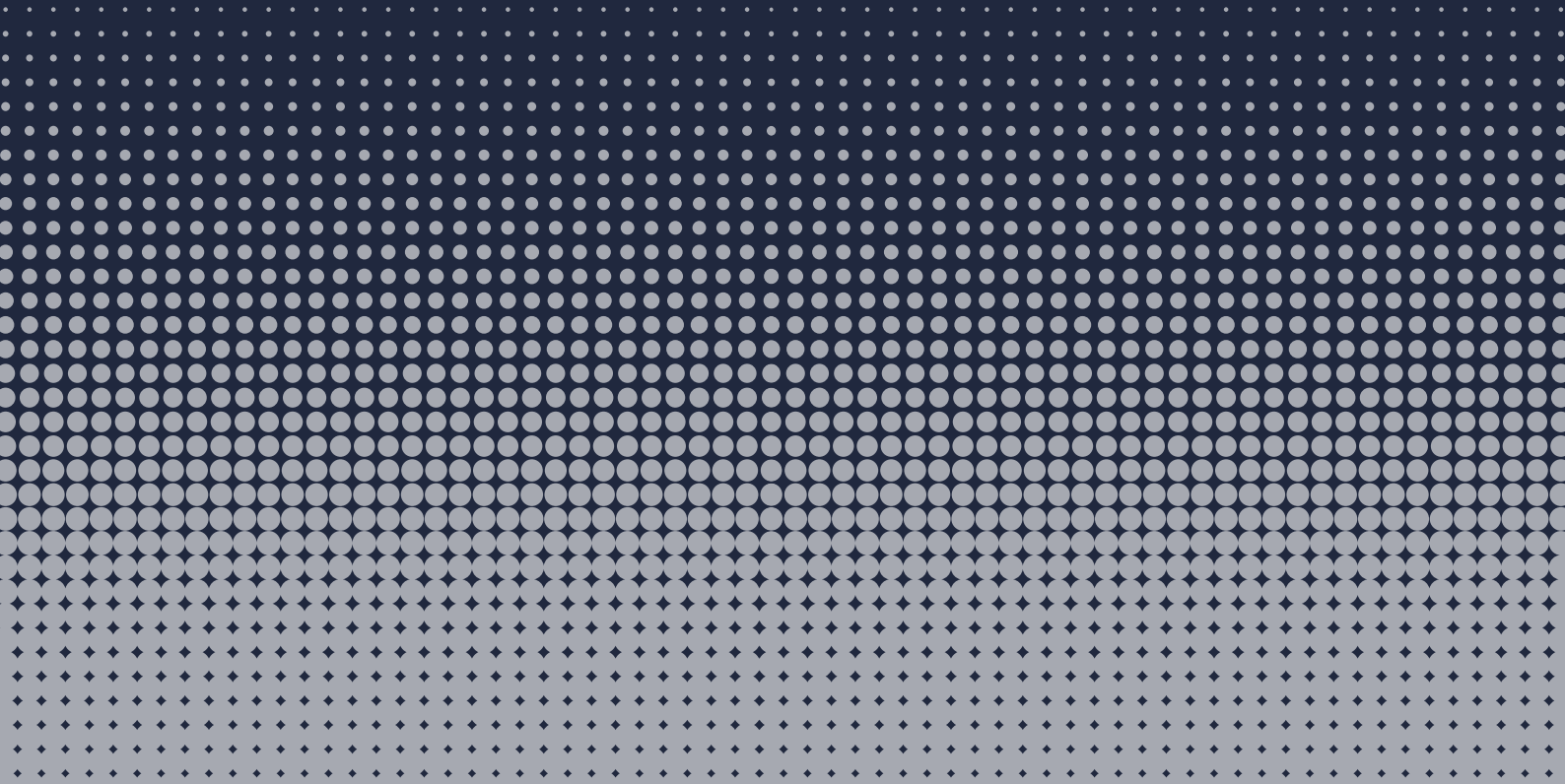Independent Adviser to the UK Government for Social Cohesion and Resilience

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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.

Dame Sara Khan DBE

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 five 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 six 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 DHLUC 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.[1] Many local authorities lack basic know-how while others endure counter-productive political interference from councillors.

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1   This 'culture of fear' was first identified by Herman Ousley in his Independent Review of Bradford in 2001 following disturbances in the city; "Bradford pride not prejudice" 2001; https://www.tedcantle.co.uk/publications/004%20Bradford%20pride%20not%20prejudice%20Ouseley%202001.pdf

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 OSDCR.

2. The Government to publish a five-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 three 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.[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.[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.[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.

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2   For the purposes of this Review we have used the Government's 2015 existing definition of extremism see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance-england-scotland-and-wales-2015/revised-prevent-duty-guidance-for-england-and-wales-2015; and the Commission for Countering Extremism's 2021 definition of hateful extremism as outlined in the report 'Operating with Impunity', see https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/602fe034d3bf7f7220fe10e1/CCE_Operating_with_Impunity_Accessible.pdf

3   In Commission for Countering Extremism (2021) 'Operating with Impunity': *Hateful extremism is defined as "Activity or materials directed at an out-group who are perceived as a threat to an in-group motivated by or intending to advance a political, religious or racial supremacist ideology: A).To create a climate conducive to hate crime, terrorism or other violence; or B) Attempt to erode or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of our democratic society as protected under Article 17 of Schedule 1 to the Human Rights Act 1998.'*

4   Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2023) 'The 'Public Health Approach' to Prevention', https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-public-health-approach-to-prevention/

5   See Commission for Countering Extremism (2019) 'Challenging Hateful Extremism', the case studies of Sunderland and Birmingham.

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.[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.

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6   Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2023) 'The 'Public Health Approach' to Prevention',

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:[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.[8,9]

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.

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7   See Professor Ted Cantle: https://tedcantle.co.uk/about-community-cohesion/
8   Chan et al (2006) 'Reconsidering Social Cohesion: Developing a Definition and Analytical Framework for Empirical Research'. Published in Journal of Social Indicators Research. Accessed at https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11205-005-2118-1
9   Bottoni, G. (2018) 'A Multilevel Measurement Model of Social Cohesion'. City University of London. Accessed at https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/G.Bottoni_A20multilevel20measurement20model20of20social20cohesion.pdf

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:[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".*[11]

This description provides a multi-dimensional 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

Integroup attitudes   Openness to people from other groups
Participation or engagement in social actions

"Micro" level: interpersonal relations with close others

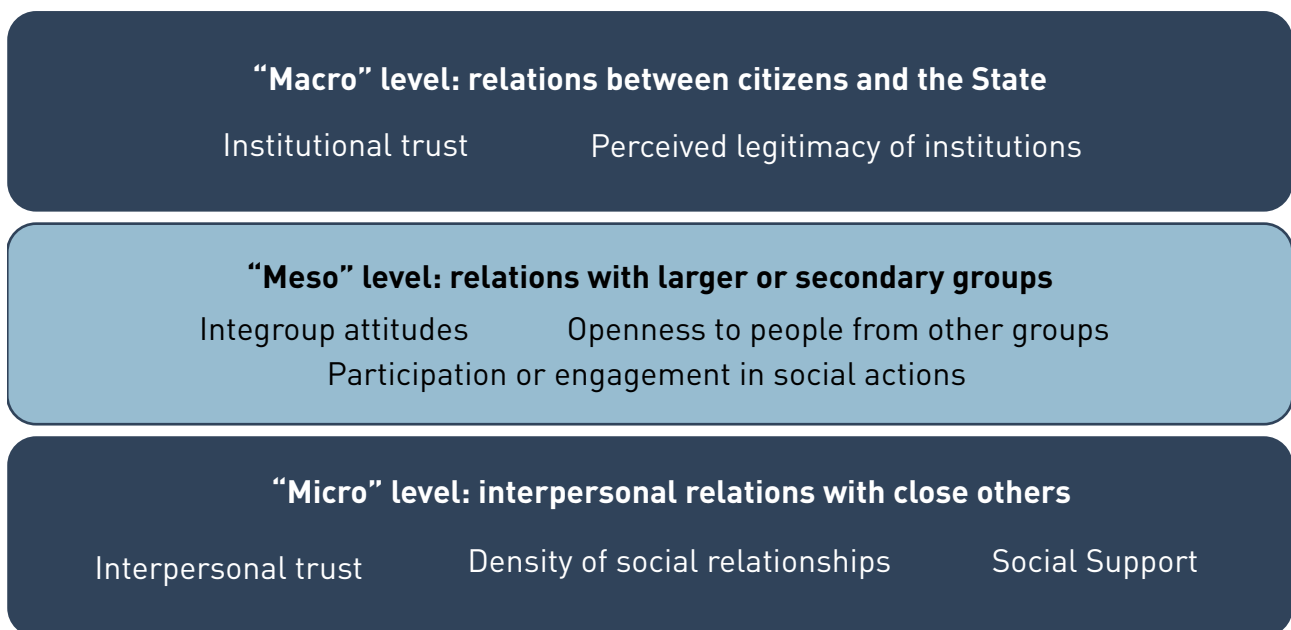Interpersonal trust   Density of social relationships   Social Support

Figure 1: A visual representation of Bottoni's multi-level measurement model of social cohesion[12]

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10   Bottoni, G. (2018) 'A Multilevel Measurement Model of Social Cohesion'. City University of London.
11   ibid
12   ibid

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."*[13]

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.[14] 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.

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13   Professor Timothy Garton Ash; George W. Bush Presidential Center (2021). 'Pluralism is the lifeblood of a genuine democracy'. Accessed at Pluralism is the Lifeblood of a Genuine Democracy | George W. Bush Presidential Center (bushcenter.org)

14   More in Common (2020) ''Britain's choice' Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain' https://www.britainschoice.uk/

In some of these cases, important judgements have been made by the courts after a lengthy, costly and timely process.[15] 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.[16] 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.

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15   See for example: Mermaids v. The Charity Commission,
      https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mermaids-v-Charity-Commission-judgment-060723.pdf;
      Maya Forstater v CGD Europe and Others, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60c1cce1d3bf7f4bd9814e39/Maya_
      Forstater_v_CGD_Europe_and_others_UKEAT0105_20_JOJ.pdf and; Birmingham City Council v Mr Shakeel Afsar and Others,
      https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Birmingham-CC-v-Afsar-No-3-2019-EWHC-3217-QB-Final.pdf
16   See case study example of Anderton Park Primary School, Birmingham, in Commission for Countering Extremism (2019) 'Challenging
      Hateful Extremism 2019' https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/
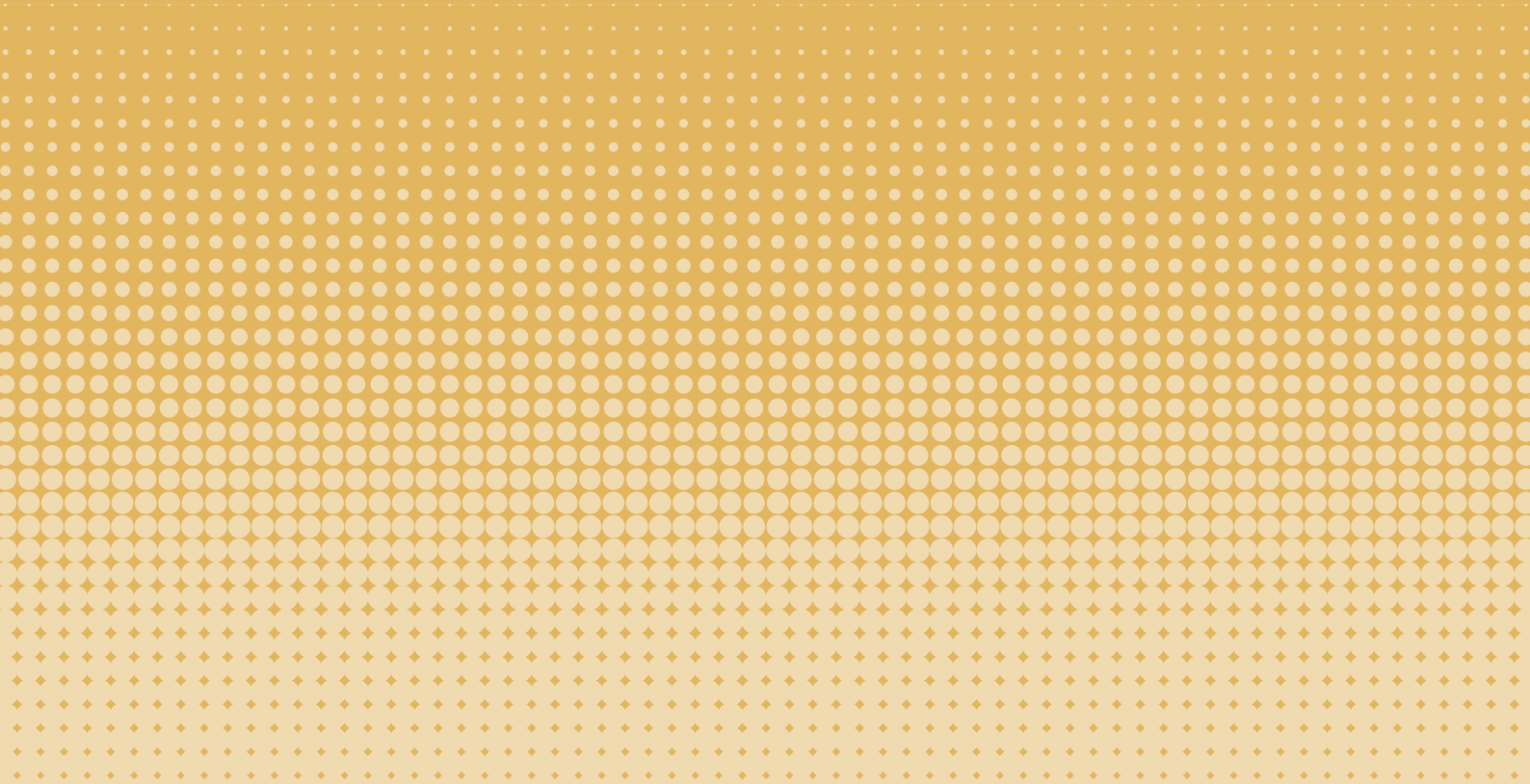   file/874101/200320_Challenging_Hateful_Extremism.pdf

Chapter 1

Introduction:
Why social cohesion
matters

Social cohesion does not remain static. It is sensitive to the evolving socio-economic, socio-political environment and to local, national and global challenges, as well as evolving threats and disruptive events. In this chapter, we outline some of the changing trends our country has experienced in recent years. We highlight incidences of serious conflict and tension, including the breakdown of local cohesion. We also demonstrate how other countries are grappling with a range of challenges which are impacting their cohesion and democratic resilience.

In addition, we provide evidence for the social and economic benefits of social cohesion and its positive impact on many other policy areas, including the Levelling Up agenda. We also examine the many costs to society when cohesion breaks down. These benefits and costs are often overlooked, despite the growing body of evidence to support them. As such, it is vital that we re-think social cohesion.

1.1 The changing socio-economic and socio-political context in the UK: a brief examination

During the last decade and a half, the UK has faced unprecedented challenges. A financial crash followed by years of austerity, uncertainty over how Brexit would impact the UK and a global pandemic have left significant concerns about the state of our country's finances. The EU referendum divided and polarised our society and its effects continue to be felt today.[17] In one study published in 2020, 50% of Britons felt that this was the most divided Britain had ever been – with three in five Britons saying they felt exhausted by the division in politics.[18] Since the EU referendum, political instability has ensued, with 2022 being one of the most unstable in modern British politics after the country went through three prime ministers.

The UK is currently in the midst of a cost of living crisis, the worst many have experienced in living memory. A combination of low growth and high inequality in Britain has left it trailing behind the comparable economies of Australia, Canada, France, Germany and the Netherlands.[19] As a result, households in Britain are 9% poorer than their French counterparts, while low-income families are 27% poorer, leaving them struggling to cope with the cost of living crisis.[20] Real wages have flatlined since 2007, costing the average worker £10,700 per year in lost wage growth.[21] The Office of National statistics claim that a fifth of adults report borrowing more money compared with a year ago.[22]

Low growth and high inequality are not only affecting people's living standards, they are also impacting unemployment levels and how effectively we are able to fund our public services.[23] Local authorities are experiencing severe financial crises, with survey data from the Local

17   Butler, P (2021). 'British Leavers and Remainers as polarised as ever, survey finds'. The Guardian. Accessed at
      https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/oct/21/british-leavers-and-remainers-as-polarised-as-ever-survey-finds
18   More in Common (2020). 'Chapter 5 – Polarisation and Division'. Accessed at
      https://www.britainschoice.uk/media/x2mhxg1z/britain-s-choice-chapter-5.pdf
19   Resolution Foundation et al. (2023) 'Ending Stagnation', Accessed at
      https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Ending-stagnation-final-report.pdf
20   ibid
21   The Resolution Foundation (2023) 'Ending Stagnation', accessed at:
      https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/reports/ending-stagnation/
22   Office National Statistics (2023) 'How are financial pressures affecting people in Great Britain', https://www.ons.gov.uk/
      peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/howarefinancialpressuresaffectingpeopleingreatbritain/2023-02-22
23   Centre for Economic Performance (2022). 'The Economy 2030 Inquiry'. Accessed at
      https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Ending-stagnation-final-report.pdf

Government Association suggesting that almost one in five local authorities are likely to issue a Section 114 notice this year or next, due to a lack of funding to keep key services running.[24]

The Carnegie Trust argue increasing costs of living and poverty will drive intersectional inequality and challenge social cohesion, due to a breakdown of our 'social contract'.[25] Inequality impacts society in many ways, from hindering social mobility, undermining social cohesion and diminishing trust.[26,27] The Social Justice Commission argue Britain is a deeply divided society and that the state of our nation is unwell.[28] In a report published in December 2023, they suggest there are deep systemic problems facing those at the bottom of society which are in danger of becoming permanent. Their evidence suggests Britain is broken for too many people and the gap between the haves and have-nots is in danger of becoming a chasm.[29]

There is a risk that where our poorest feel left behind, some become increasingly disillusioned with a democratic system which they feel is not supporting them. A growing distrust in politicians and the political system risks a disconnection with our democracy. Dissatisfaction could be used by extremists, attempting to radicalise and recruit people to their ideological worldview. For example, socio-economic factors are cited as a key driver in belief in conspiracy theories, which often in turn are found to further deepen distrust in politicians and scientists.[30]

This ever-changing socio-political and socio-economic context presents serious challenges to social cohesion and democratic resilience.

Emerging and future challenges

There are a range of existing and emerging threats to cohesion faced by local communities and society as a whole. Looking ahead for future threats to social cohesion both at a local and national level is critical but rarely considered. As we shall discuss in detail in chapter 4, disinformation, conspiracies and sophisticated, modern-day manifestations of extremism – in part aided by the advent of the internet and social media – now pose a far more serious threat to cohesion.

Minimising the risks posed by these existing and evolving threats is clearly vital. While there is a natural and healthy tendency to form group identities,[31] when social identities start to promote hostile 'us vs. them' narratives, active hatred of the other, and seek to deny the rights of fellow citizens, it can cause significant fragmentation, leading to an erosion of social cohesion.

Looking forward, the growing and world-changing influence of new technologies will inevitably also impact social cohesion. For example, artificial intelligence (AI) presents new opportunities to help humankind learn and could assist all walks of life in beneficial ways – including economic growth, sustainable development and innovation, as well as protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms.[32] AI also brings significant risks to social cohesion, resilience and our

24   Local Government Association (2023). 'Section 114 fear for almost 1 in 5 council leaders and chief executives after cashless autumn statement'. Accessed at
     https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/section-114-fear-almost-1-5-council-leaders-and-chief-executives-after-cashless-autumn
25   Wallace et al (2022) 'Taking a wellbeing approach to tackling the cost of living crisis'. Carnegie Trust. Accessed at
     https://carnegieuktrust.org.uk/blog-posts/taking-a-wellbeing-approach-to-tackling-the-cost-of-living-crisis/
26   Administrative Data Research UK. 'Inequality & social inclusion'. Accessed at https://www.adruk.org/our-work/inequality-social-inclusion/
27   The Centre for Social Justice (2023). 'Two Nations – The State of Poverty in the UK. An interim report on the state of the nation'. Accessed at
     https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CSJ-Two_Nations.pdf
28   ibid
29   ibid
30   Douglas et al. (2017) 'The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories', https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0963721417718261
31   Mounk, Y. (2023) 'The Identity Trap'. Penguin Books.
32   Gov.uk Policy paper (2023) 'The Bletchley Declaration by Countries Attending the AI Safety Summit'. Published on Gov.uk website at:
     https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ai-safety-summit-2023-the-bletchley-declaration/the-bletchley-declaration-by-countries-attending-the-ai-safety-summit-1-2-november-2023

democracy. The increased availability of rapidly evolving tools enables actors to target audiences, radicalise and disseminate disinformation, 'deepfakes' and hate,[33] often at unprecedented speed and in ways that can be increasingly hard to identify and counter.

There are already worrying examples, from how a chatbot encouraged an assassination attempt on the late Queen Elizabeth II,[34] to how far right extremists hacked Meta's AI to create a chatbot designed to radicalise individuals,[35] or how Cambridge Analytica used algorithms to target voters in the 2016 US election.[36] Deepfakes have already been seen to be powerfully convincing and there is increasing worry that they are impacting elections.[37]

Not enough consideration has been given to the impact AI could have on social cohesion in the long, medium and short-term, both positive and negative. If the technology is developed responsibly it could help to improve social cohesion, and being aware of potential threats will allow us to develop essential community resilience. For example, AI could be trained to battle disinformation and verify true information, make complexity accessible to a wider audience or help government make better policy.

International activity impacting social cohesion

A further trend in today's inter-connected world is that inter-ethnic tensions and social ruptures are increasingly crossing borders. Events at a local level in the UK might also be subjected to national and even international influences, from legitimate debate to divisive outside actors spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories to drum up local division. Similarly, events in other countries are ever more likely to lead to domestic unrest, to varying degrees and consequences.

We have seen this with movements such as Black Lives Matter following the murder of George Floyd in the United States and most recently, following events in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. In the case of the latter, there have been angry and often polarised debate about the conflict on our own streets and on social media platforms.

An erosion of social cohesion can leave the UK and others more vulnerable to not only domestic actors but also foreign state-sponsored and non-state sponsored actors, who seek to exploit these tensions for their own ends, to weaken, disrupt and destabilise our democracy. An effective cohesion policy can act as an important defence against such cross-border activity.

33   Brundage Et al. (2018) 'The Malicious Use of Artificial Intelligence: Forecasting, Prevention, and Mitigation'. Joint publication. Accessed at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323302750_The_Malicious_Use_of_Artificial_Intelligence_Forecasting_Prevention_and_Mitigation

34   Singleton, Et al (2023)'How a chatbot encouraged a man who wanted to kill the queen'. BBC News. Accessed at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-67012224

35   Siegel, D. (2023). 'RedPilled AI: A new Weapon for Online Radicalisation on 4chan'. Published by Global Network on Extremism and Technology. Accessed at 'RedPilled AI': A New Weapon for Online Radicalisation on 4chan – GNET (gnet-research.org).

36   Hern, A (2018) 'Cambridge Analytica scandal 'highlights need for AI regulation'' The Guardian. Accessed at Cambridge Analytica scandal 'highlights need for AI regulation' | Artificial intelligence (AI) | The Guardian

37   Fung, Et al (2023) 'How AI Could Take Over Elections – And Undermine Democracy'. Scientific American. Accessed at https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-ai-could-take-over-elections-and-undermine-democracy/

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict fuelling division in Britain

The May 2021 conflict in Israel-Palestine caused a significant spill-over of division and prejudice in Britain, triggering a wave of antisemitic and anti-Muslim hatred. During that time there was an increase of 500% in reported antisemitic incidents and 430% in anti-Muslim hatred cases.[38] The conflict was also exploited by both far right and Islamist extremists to stoke further divisions.

The Reviewer spoke to numerous organisations, activists and practitioners including Community Security Trust (CST), Tell MAMA, Muslims Against Antisemitism, Solutions not Sides, FODIP and others. There was a unified understanding that such tensions in our own country were highly predictable and unless a meaningful strategy is employed, we would see a worsening situation in the UK when conflict occurred in Israel-Palestine.

Fast forward two years later, and those exact fears were realised. The attacks by Hamas on October 7 2023 and the continuing Israeli bombing of Gaza have fuelled concerning levels of hatred, radicalisation, community tensions and outbreaks of unrest in Britain. 2023 was the worst year for UK antisemitism since 1984, when the CST began recording such data.[39] Tell MAMA recorded the largest recorded number of cases in the four months following the attacks by Hamas on 7th October 2023 – the highest figures, since Tell MAMA was founded in 2011.[40]

Police have also seen an 'unprecedented' rise in the threat of terrorism, describing the conflict as a 'radicalising moment'.[41] The Home Affairs Select Committee were informed that there had been a twelve-fold increase in the number of public referrals of online material, around 500 of which required investigation as potential breaches of terrorism legislation.[42] The number of calls to the anti-terrorist hotline also doubled in this time.[43]

Further concerns have been raised about a growing climate of intimidation and censorship felt among all sides. Polling indicates that 69% of British Jews report being less likely to show visible signs of Judaism, while 90% of British Jews say that they would avoid travelling to a city centre during a major demonstration.[44]

38   Dearden, L. (2021) 'Israel-Gaza conflict triggers spike in antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate in UK', Accessed at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/israel-palestine-conflict-uk-antisemitism-incident-b1850333.html

39   Ravikumar (2024) 'UK records worst year for antisemitism after outbreak of Israel-Hamas war', https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-records-worst-year-antisemitism-after-outbreak-israel-hamas-war-2024-02-15/

40   Tell MAMA (2024) 'Greatest Rise in Reported Anti-Muslim Hate Cases to Tell MAMA since Oct 7', Accessed at https://tellmamauk.org/greatest-rise-in-reported-anti-muslim-hate-cases-to-tell-mama-since-oct-7th/

41   Gardham et al. (2024). Sky News. 'UK's counter-terror chief warns of 'unprecedented' rise in terrorism threat since Israel Gaza war started'. Accessed at https://news.sky.com/story/uks-counter-terror-chief-warns-of-unprecedented-rise-in-terrorism-threat-since-israel-gaza-war-started-13052040

42   Parliament.uk (2023) Accessed at: https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/13990/pdf/

43   ibid

44   Parliament.uk (2023) Accessed at: https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/13941/pdf/; see also Campaign Against Antisemitism 27/11/2023; https://antisemitism.org/almost-70-of-british-jews-are-hiding-their-identity-and-almost-half-have-considered-leaving-britain-since-7th-october-new-caa-polling-shows/

Simultaneously, people shared with us their fear of being smeared and falsely accused of antisemitism if they criticised the actions of the Israeli government in Gaza. In December 2023, British artists accused cultural institutions of 'repressing, silencing and stigmatising' pro-Palestinian voices and perspectives, of 'threatening the livelihoods' of artists who express solidarity with Palestinians, and with cancelling artistic events and performances.[45]

The conflict has also had an impact on many of our schools. Despite the desire of pupils for informative and educational discussions, many teachers feel ill-equipped to talk about the conflict and are concerned about upholding their legal duty to remain impartial. As a result some schools are instead closing down any legitimate dialogue about the Israel-Palestine conflict which has the potential to further fuel anger, hate and polarisation.

Disinformation on social media has been prominent, for example with widespread accounts seeking to undermine the violence inflicted against Israeli citizens, and videos falsely suggesting Palestinians were faking their injuries.[46] Assistant Commissioner Matt Twist has stated that content propagating disinformation was being deliberately created in the UK to 'to fuel hate and polarisation'.[47]

Furthermore inappropriate language used by politicians can give fuel to existing prejudice. Calling out the hateful chants that have manifested in some protests and arresting those engaged in criminality, for example, is rightly needed, however, brandishing what the Metropolitan Police called largely peaceful protests as 'hate marches' risks alienating moderate voices and undermining cohesion.

The public believe extreme views are drowning out moderate voices on the conflict and are worried that if the conflict continues there will be worsening religious discrimination and divisions, and increased terrorism in society.[48]

While the focus has been on reacting to late-stage or downstream manifestations of these tensions, such as social unrest and terrorism, not nearly enough consideration has been given to more preventative or upstream cohesion work. Considering the predictability and disastrous consequences of these tensions, this is indicative of a lack of strategic approach that reduces our overall ability to better prevent, manage and deescalate tensions before they erupt. There is a lack of knowledge and understanding of how best to handle these tensions at the decision-making level.

45   Kendall Adams, G., (2023) 'Cultural institutions accused of censorship over Israel-Palestine war', Accessed at: https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2023/12/cultural-institutions-accused-of-censorship-over-israel-palestine-war/#
46   BBC News (2023)'Who's behind Israel-Gaza disinformation and hate online?', Accessed at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-67114313
47   Parliament.uk (2023) Accessed at: https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/13990/pdf/
48   More in Common (2023) 'More than choosing sides', Accessed at: https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/media/bujj4fjp/more-than-choosing-sides-more-in-common-report-december-2023.pdf

Social unrest and the breakdown of social cohesion in the UK: recent incidents

Our country has witnessed many recent outbursts of serious disorder and conflict which have left a large bill as well as lasting impacts on social cohesion. These have included:

- The violence which erupted in the city of Leicester between predominately Hindu and Muslim male youths in September 2022, causing significant damage and division to the area.[49]

- The fire attack on police cars and violent demonstrations outside a hotel accommodating asylum seekers in Knowsley in February 2023, and wider protests across the country often initiated by far right extremist groups.

- The numerous intimidatory protests outside schools which have left teaching staff and pupils frightened. Many of these protests were exploited by Muslim fundamentalist and extremist actors. These include the protests outside primary schools in Birmingham in 2019 and the protests outside Batley Grammar School in March 2021 among others.[50,51]

- The devastating impact of disinformation in Barrow, following the publication of a Facebook post by Eleanor Williams who claimed she had been tortured and raped by an Asian grooming gang in 2020. She was subsequently found guilty of perverting the course of justice.[52]

In many ways, these conflicts demonstrate the contexts and challenges described above. Despite the contextual differences listed here, each case often involved extremist and false narratives entering mainstream local life and the exploitation of tensions by extremist actors seeking to divide communities. Each situation witnessed the spread of online and offline disinformation and conspiracy theories at a local, national and even international level. Each incident came at a large social and economic cost, with the impact to cohesion often being long-lasting.

Managing these complex conflicts is evidently important but equally difficult, and yet there is insufficient understanding, skills and know-how to do so. The response to these incidences were often inadequate, with little pre-emptive planning done to prevent and mitigate against such incidents from occurring, despite early warning signs indicating tension had been building.

1.2   Cohesion: A challenge facing other democracies

The UK does not stand alone in the challenges it faces to social cohesion. Political polarisation and the erosion of state sovereignty, wider socio-economic concerns and rising inequality, reducing social cohesion, the mainstreaming of extremism and fragmentated societies are part of a global trend.[53] Those who do not tackle the challenges facing social cohesion head-on are vulnerable to divisive actors and risk being left with costly reactive responses.

In the USA, so-called 'culture wars' and the polarisation of politics has taken extreme forms. But while we have seen high-profile events such as the January 6 storming of Capitol Hill, it is also important to see that the gradual disappearance of cross-party cooperation and the increasingly established and irreconcilable divisions over time about the kind of country America should be have provided much of the background to such flashpoints.

49   BBC News (2022) 'Leicester: Why the violent unrest was surprising to so many'. Accessed at
        Leicester: Why the violent unrest was surprising to many – BBC News
50   Ryan, N. (2020) 'What really happened with the Birmingham school protests?'. Hope not Hate. Accessed at
        What really happened with the Birmingham schools' protests? – HOPE not hate
51   BBC News (2021) 'Batley Grammar School: Blasphemy debate leaves town 'at crossroads'' Accessed at
        Batley Grammar School: Blasphemy debate leaves town 'at crossroads' – BBC News.
52   Pidd, H. (2023) 'How Eleanor Williams's lies about grooming and abuse unravelled'. The Gaurdian. Accessed at
        How Eleanor Williams's lies about grooming and abuse unravelled | Crime | The Guardian
53   Ministry of Defence (2018) 'Global Strategic Trends The Future Starts Today'. Accessed at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/
        government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1065623/20181008-dcdc_futures_GST_future_starts_today.pdf

France has recently seen wide-spread riots and social unrest. Recent race riots in the summer of 2023 not only demonstrated the divisions in the country but further fuelled those divisions. In one week, it was reported that 12,031 cars were set on fire and 2,508 buildings attacked, including 436 shops, 370 banks, 273 police stations, 168 schools and 105 town halls. 3,505 people were arrested, the youngest aged 11 and the oldest 59. The average age was 17.[54] Violence spread from the Paris suburbs to Marseilles, from Strasbourg to Lyon and Toulouse but also in small provincial towns. Elected representatives were personally targeted and assaulted and it has been estimated that the costs for small and medium-size businesses amount to about €1 billion.[55]

Germany is seeing a worrying rise in neo-Nazi and far right extremism activity. A report by German intelligence officials, as reported by the press, found the number of right wing extremists has risen to 38,800 in 2022, from 33,900 the previous year, with 14,000 violent far right extremists living in Germany.[56] This follows the attempted German far right coup plot by the so-called 'Reichsburger', who were alleged to be planning to violently overthrow the German government. It has been reported that members of the Reichsbürger movement who reject the post-1945 German state are making a targeted effort to establish parallel societies and infiltrate existing structures including schools, clubs and public offices.[57]

In Australia, where social cohesion is actively measured, data published in 2023 indicates that social cohesion is under pressure and declining.[58] Declines in people's sense of national pride and belonging, increasing financial strain and a weakening sense of social inclusion and justice have raised concerns about the growing weakening in Australia's social fabric.[59] Falling levels in national pride and belonging in recent years are thought to be related to decreased trust in the government and increasing concern for inequality. Declining trust in the Federal Government is estimated to have contributed to 17% of the overall decline in the sense of national pride and belonging, while declining belief that hard work brings a better life contributes a further 27% to the decline.[60]

Many diverse democracies are also struggling with global migration, which has been on the rise since the 20th century.[61] Countries suffering the impact of war and conflict, disasters, climate change and where persecution exists has led to the forced migration and displacement of millions of people. The number of displaced persons rose from 84.8 million in 2019 to 89.4 million in 2020.[62] The growing number of refugees and internally displaced persons has been recognised by the World Bank as a global crisis that can exacerbate inequalities and conflict, especially

54   Sage, A. (2023) 'Riots reveal deep disillusion in France'. The Times. Accessed at
      https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/riots-reveal-deep-disillusion-in-france-hw9h8vw98
55   The Times (2023) 'Rioters want to defund the French police? No, this isnt America'. Accessed at
      'https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rioters-want-to-defund-the-french-police-no-this-isnt-america-8jns36n09
56   Sky News (2023) 'How the far-right has grown into the greatest extremist threat to Germany's democracy. Accessed at
      https://news.sky.com/story/how-the-far-right-has-grown-into-the-greatest-extremist-threat-to-germanys-democracy-12906136
57   The Guardian (2023) 'Far-right extremists' stage rural land grab across Germany'. Accessed at
      https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/27/far-right-extremists-reichsburger-rural-land-grab-germany
58   O'Donnell (2023) 'Mapping Social Cohesion 2023'.
      https://scanloninstitute.org.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/2023%20Mapping%20Social%20Cohesion%20Report.pdf. The Scanlon
      Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion series has been the pre-eminent source of information on social cohesion in Australia over the past
      16 years. The 2023 study is the 17th in the series.
59   ibid
60   ibid
61   Husain (2019) 'Migration in the 21st Century: Breaking the Myths'. World Food Programme. Accessed at
      https://executiveboard.wfp.org/document_download/WFP-0000111162
62   International Organisation for Migration (2022) 'World Migration Report 2022', Accessed at
      https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022

when economic conditions are difficult.[63] There are also economic migrants who seek improved economic opportunities and employment and a better standard of living overall out of choice.

The question of how democracies respond to global migration and the impact of immigration on social cohesion is increasingly debated. Most research focusses on the relationship between diversity and social cohesion and not between immigration and social cohesion.[64] As immigration tends to bring greater diversity, some argue people are less likely to trust each other or to feel connected with each other, contributing to the weakening of a country's social fabric.[65]

That impact however is not easy to assess, due to most research focussing on the relationship between diversity and social cohesion and not between immigration and social cohesion.[66] The data is in fact very mixed and can appear conflicting. Academics differ about whether there is a negative relationship between diversity and cohesion (as suggested in empirical evidence from the US), or whether wider factors such as socio-economic deprivation are more significant (as suggested by UK and European studies).[67] Indeed, some studies have also demonstrated that some cohesion measures such as a sense of belonging and trust in political institutions score more highly among migrants than native-born Britons.[68]

And while the World Bank's findings demonstrate that displacement can exacerbate inequalities and the potential for conflict, they also show that:

> *"...inclusive policies and development investments for both those who have been forcibly displaced and host communities can mitigate the negative effects of displacement effectively and can foster social cohesion. Several of the studies show that progressive policies that accord refugees and internally displaced persons the right to work, freedom of movement, access to social services, as well as property, can promote social and economic integration without causing a backlash."*[69]

What is clear is that in many Western and European democracies, the national political debate about immigration is fraught and has often been exploited by different actors including extremists, to further division and undermine social cohesion.

1.3 Counting the costs: when cohesion breaks down

The breakdown of cohesion entails significant costs. For example, social unrest can have significant social and economic costs. These can include the initial policing costs – for example the disorder and unrest in Leicester in September 2022 is reported to have cost Leicestershire Police £1.5 million.[70]

The August 2011, riots across many cities and towns in England saw over 5,000 crimes committed, including 1,860 incidents of arson and criminal damage, 1,649 burglaries and 366

63   The World Bank (2022) 'Forced Displacement and Social Cohesion'. Accessed at
     https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/social-cohesion-and-resilience/brief/forced-displacement-social-cohesion
64   The Migration Observatory (2019) 'Immigration, Diversity and Social Cohesion'. Accessed at
     https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/immigration-diversity-and-social-cohesion/
65   Social Research Institute (2022) 'Social Diversity and Social Cohesion in Britain'. Accessed at
     http://repec.ioe.ac.uk/REPEc/pdf/qsswp2210.pdf
66   The Migration Observatory (2019) 'Immigration, Diversity and Social Cohesion'.
67   ibid; and Saggar et al. (2012) 'The impacts of immigration on social cohesion and integration', accessed at
     https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/social-cohesion-integration.pdf
68   Saggar et al. (2012) 'The impacts of immigration on social cohesion and integration'
69   The world Bank (2022). 'Forced Displacement and Social Cohesion'. Accessed at
     https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/social-cohesion-and-resilience/brief/forced-displacement-social-cohesion
70   ITV News (2023) 'Autumn Leicester violence to cost police extra £1.5million' Accessed at
     https://www.itv.com/news/central/2023-02-06/leicester-disorder-violence-to-cost-police-extra-15-million

attacks on people.[71] The final bill of the 2011 UK riots was estimated at around £500 million in addition to significant wider economic implications – loss in tourism spending over the following year cost the economy an estimated further £520 million.[72] Riots can entail lasting impacts such as higher insurance rates, lower property values, higher prices, reduced tax revenue and decreased economic opportunity. Research into the 1992 Los Angeles riots estimated losses of $3.8 billion in sales activity and at least $125 million in tax revenue over the following 10 years.

Research into the 2011 unrest suggests that strong community cohesion, shared identity, community pride or having a stake in their local area stopped or reduced people rioting in their area, with analysis highlighting that 71% of the riots occurred in the areas ranked in the worst 10% for social cohesion.[73]

An IMF working paper found that unrest could also influence GDP, with contractions in manufacturing and service sectors as well as hits to the stock market, consumption and consumer confidence.[74] They found that democracy, civil freedoms and government accountability, as well as quality of private sector regulation, play a crucial part in shaping the consequences of social unrest. They found some evidence that the aftermath of social unrest is more severe in countries with weaker institutions and policy responses.

Aside from these relatively infrequent major events, lack of social cohesion also incurs costs every day, with increased intolerance spilling into hate crimes. International evidence highlights the significant cost of hate crime, with analysis from the US estimating that the 236,163 non-fatal hate crimes in 2019 cost a total of $2.9bn, or over $12,000 per instance.[75] The Reviewer has seen internal documents which showed the high unit costs of each hate crime in the UK. With the Home Office[76] reporting 155,841 instances of hate crime in the UK in year 2021/22, society picks up a huge bill for these crimes.

As we explore below, better social cohesion can have economic benefits, including helping achieve sustainable growth through improving output and productivity.[77] Likewise, areas with low or worsening cohesion forego these potential economic benefits and run the risk of being locked in a vicious cycle, as areas with reducing social capital might struggle to attract investment or retain talent and opportunity.[78]

A lack of belonging, self-worth, sense of equity and democratic participation in communities facing hardships can also create the conditions where extremist narratives take hold, which can be further harmful to the economy. Research shows that extremist messaging appeals strongest to those with limited opportunities or those more marginalised within their surrounding society.[79]

71   Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2012). '5 Days in August: An interim report on the 2011 English riots'. available at: 065 5 days in August Interim Report Riots 2011.pdf (tedcantle.co.uk)
72   Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2012). '5 Days in August: An interim report on the 2011 English riots'. available at: 065 5 days in August Interim Report Riots 2011.pdf (tedcantle.co.uk)
73   Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2012) '5 Days in August: An interim report on the 2011 English riots'. available at: http://www.tedcantle.co.uk/publications/065%205%20days%20in%20August%20Interim%20Report%20Riots%202011.pdf
74   Hadzi-Vaskov, m. et al. (2021) 'The Macroeconomic Impact of Social Unrest', Accessed at https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2021/05/07/The-Macroeconomic-Impact-of-Social-Unrest-50338
75   Martell, M, E. (2023) 'Economic costs of hate crimes' https://bcsh.bard.edu/files/2023/03/BCSH-Economic-Cost-of-Hate_3-13-23_Online-.pdf
76   Home Office (2022) 'Hate crime, England and Wales, 2021 to 2022' https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2021-to-2022/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2021-to-2022
77   Kolev , A. (2017) 'Enhancing Social Cohesion as a Means of Sustainable Poverty Eradication'. OECD Development Centre. Accessed at https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2017/04/Alexandre-KOLEV-social-cohesion-for-poverty-reduction.pdf
78   Gov.uk (2022) 'Levelling Up the United Kingdom Policy Paper'. Accessed at Levelling Up the United Kingdom – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
79   Mohen, S. et al. (2014) 'The influence of social capital on individual health: Is it the neighbourhood or the network?', Accessed at https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11205-014-0632-8

While we can account for some of the direct costs of social unrest, it is difficult to account for the longer-term implications, and still more difficult to properly cost a more pervasive lack of every day social cohesion in a community. This should be a call to further research into these costs, as well as into the economic benefits and gains social cohesion can bring.

1.4 The economic and social benefits of social cohesion

In contrast to the costly impact on society when cohesion breaks down, there is a growing body of evidence for the wide-ranging benefits of social cohesion in helping us rise to the significant opportunities and challenges in a changing world – from public health and long-term economic regeneration, to increasing societal resilience in the face of unprecedented emergencies such as the pandemic.

More effective social integration and higher perceptions of cohesion contribute to increased life expectancy, fewer mental health issues, better recovery from health issues, and overall better wellbeing.[80,81] In contrast, an absence of social cohesion can be highly detrimental to society,[82] as the breakdown of social relations can have knock on effects on numerous policy areas from crime to health.

Investment in social cohesion and community resilience during peaceful and prosperous times is critical to strengthening and using these resources during a crisis.[83]

The importance of this investment was demonstrated during the Covid crisis. Research by the Belong network evidenced that local authority areas that had recently prioritised and invested in social cohesion responded and mobilised far better during the pandemic crisis than other areas which had not received such investment.[84] They found that people in those areas had higher trust in national and local government, higher levels of volunteering, and greater active social engagement in general (i.e. volunteering, donating, signing petitions), higher levels of social connection, including closer relations with their family, friends, colleagues and neighbours and a stronger sense of 'neighbourliness'.[85]

Economic case for social cohesion

Experts have been talking about the economic benefits of social cohesion for a long time, yet they have simultaneously struggled to concretely demonstrate or quantify those benefits. This is largely due to the complexity and non-linear nature of the economic benefits of social cohesion and the large time lag from policy intervention to achieving economic results – the full extent of which may only be seen in an over several generations. Poor collection of social cohesion data over time also presents a challenge.

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80   Curtis & Congdon (2019) 'Individual and local area factors associated with self-reported wellbeing, perceived social cohesion and sense of attachment to one's community: analysis of the Understanding Society Survey'.

81   Helliwell Et al (2011) 'Trust and wellbeing'. International Journal of Wellbeing. Accessed at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/49615205_Trust_and_Wellbeing; Uslaner, E (2009) 'Segregation and Mistrust: Diversity, Isolation, and Social Cohesion'. SSRN electronic journal. Accessed at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/49615205_Trust_and_Wellbeing

82   The Greater Manchester Preventing Hateful Extremism and Promoting Social Cohesion Commission' (2018) 'A Shared Future', Accessed at https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/1170/preventing-hateful-extremism-and-promoting-social-cohesion-report.pdf

83   Jewett et al. (2021) 'Social Cohesion and Community Resilience During COVID-19 and Pandemics: A Rapid Scoping Review to Inform the United Nations Research Roadmap for COVID-19 Recovery Volume'. Sage Journals. Accessed at Social Cohesion and Community Resilience During COVID-19 and Pandemics: A Rapid Scoping Review to Inform the United Nations Research Roadmap for COVID-19 Recovery – Rae L. Jewett, Sarah M. Mah, Nicholas Howell, Mandi M. Larsen, 2021 (sagepub.com)

84   Abrams Et al. (2021). 'Beyond Us and Them – Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of Covid-19'. The Belong Network. Accessed at https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Belong_SocietalCohesion_Report_V5.pdf

85   ibid

However, there is an emerging evidence base to support these claims of economic benefits. Research suggests that social cohesion has the potential to generate additional social welfare improvements of up to £32 billion in the UK.[86] More work is needed to properly understand these potential economic benefits, but such figures point to the importance of not only investing in social cohesion, but also of investing in proper research in this area – in order to direct resources more effectively.

Building social capital has the potential to increase wellbeing, improve health and employability outcomes and unlock potential in local communities.[87] Of the potential £32 billion mentioned above, £12 billion could come from increases in productivity and decreases in sick days, thanks to the happiness and physical and mental wellbeing that a more cohesive society could bring.[88] Previous government cohesion policy initiatives have proven to have improved participant mental health,[89] although longer-term evaluation is needed to monitor how such benefits translate into improved productivity.

For example, in regions with strong collective identities, collective action tends to support universal public goods centred on public investments such as infrastructure, health and education.[90] The above analysis also estimated the value of current neighbourliness and cooperation (mutual support and the sharing of resources in neighbourhoods) at £15 billion – suggesting that increased cohesion could bring over £14 billion in further value. Other savings could come from the decreased reliance on health services at over £5 billion and decreases in police spending at £205 million.[91]

In more general terms, social cohesion can enhance economic growth for the following reasons[92]:

1. **It reduces transaction costs** – increased trust and ability to cooperate in a community reduces the economic costs of cooperating.

2. **It supports collective action** – cooperation in pursuit of shared objective is easier with public choice likely to focus on the productive, positive-sum allocation of fiscal resources.

3. **It prevents capital disaccumulation** – lack of cohesion can prompt the destruction of physical infrastructure as well as a 'brain drain', reducing the capital accumulation that enables supply-side growth.

4. **It increases allocative and productive efficiency** – cohesive societies with high cooperation and little discrimination between groups are more likely to allocate their resources efficiently helping to maximise economic welfare.

Evidence further indicates that social cohesion impacts on poverty reduction through influencing the trajectory of long-term growth. Social cohesion both impacts the sustainability of overall growth levels (through improving output and productivity), and the equitable distribution of

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86   The Big Lunch (2017) 'The cost of disconnected communities', accessed at
      http://www.safercommunitiesscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Big-Lunch_Cebr-report_Jan2017_FINAL-3-0.pdf
87   RSA (2015) 'The value of connected communities', accessed at
      https://www.thersa.org/reports/community-capital-the-value-of-connected-communities
88   The Big Lunch (2017) 'The cost of disconnected communities'.
89   DLUHC (2022) 'An evaluation of the ESOL for Integration Fund'
      https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-evaluation-of-the-esol-for-integration-fund
90   Foa, R (2011) 'The economic rationale for social cohesion – The cross country evidence' https://www.oecd.org/dev/pgd/46908575.pd
91   The Big Lunch (2017) 'The cost of disconnected communities'
92   Foa, R. (2011) 'The economic rationale for social cohesion – The cross country evidence'

those economic gains.[93,94] Some advocates argue that social cohesion is a necessary inclusion within the fiscal policy of any state that wants to maximise growth for its citizens as equitably as possible[95]. There have also been efforts to prove that higher social cohesion results in decreased deprivation[96]. Research showed that those living in areas with lower scores on Indices of Multiple Deprivation perceived cohesion in their neighbourhood to be stronger than those in areas with worse deprivation scores. However, proving this causation still requires more research.

Cohesion can also help reduce cynicism toward local and national institutions and government, which can help the efficacy of future policy interventions and initiatives, including those aimed at boosting local economic growth.[97] Additionally, grass roots investment in communities to foster social cohesion generates trust and strengthens social connections, and builds resilience to hatred and extremist narratives.[98] This can in turn reduce the instability and propensies for violence that can discourage economic growth.

While the evidence for many of these economic benefits needs further research, the long-term economic, policy and social benefits of investing in social cohesion have the potential to vastly outweighs the cost of investment.

93   Kolev, A. (2017) 'Enhancing social cohesion as a means of sustainable poverty eradication' https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2017/04/Alexandre-KOLEV-social-cohesion-for-poverty-reduction.pdf

94   Centre for Economics and Business (2017) 'The Cost of disconnected communities', Accessed at Research. http://www.safercommunitiesscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Big-Lunch_Cebr-report_Jan2017_FINAL-3-0.pdf

95   Kolev, A. (2017) 'Enhancing social cohesion as a means of sustainable poverty eradication'

96   Curtis, S. (2019) 'Individual and local area factors associated with self-reported wellbeing, perceived social cohesion and sense of attachment to one's community', https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/120919-Social-Fragmentation-full-report.pdf

97   Abrams, D. (2020) 'The Social Cohesion Investment: Local areas that invested in social cohesion programmes are faring better in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic', https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Social-Cohesion-Investment-Final-2.pdf

98   Belong Network (2022). 'How do we build community resilience to divisions and extremism?' Accessed at https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/news-and-events/how-do-we-build-community-resilience-to-divisions-and-extremism/

Social cohesion and Levelling Up – a symbiotic relationship

Social cohesion policy has long recognised that improving socio-economic conditions in an area is a key factor to the improvement of cohesion – including reducing economic inactivity, higher productivity and educational attainment. Likewise, worsening socio-economic conditions have often contributed to worsening cohesion.

Recently it has become clear that this relationship also works in reverse. Better social cohesion is an important factor in improving the long-term socio-economic conditions of an area. Stronger social cohesion has an interrelated, supportive role to play in local and national social-economic regeneration, and is vital to Levelling Up the country.

As the Levelling Up White Paper[99] outlines, Levelling Up requires the UK:[100]

- to boost productivity, pay, jobs and living standards
- to spread opportunities and improve public services
- to restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging
- to empower local leaders and communities

Social cohesion policy has an important role here, perhaps most directly in restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging. More generally, social cohesion is vital in the creation of both social and institutional capital, two drivers identified by the White Paper as essential to achieving Levelling Up. Indeed, building cohesive communities would clearly support the delivery and achievement of the Levelling Up strategy, and importantly help achieve sustainability of any social-economic improvements. Similarly, the success of the Levelling Up agenda and the improvement of geographic inequalities is equally crucial to supporting better social cohesion at a local and national level.

Despite the economic benefits social cohesion can bring, as argued here, social cohesion policy has struggled to find a place in mainstream economic thinking and policy making. The publication of the Levelling Up missions marks a unique opportunity to connect the thinking behind the socio-economic regeneration at the heart of Levelling Up with the related thinking on social cohesion.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have demonstrated the many benefits of social cohesion. We have also demonstrated the multitude of costs to our society if little consideration is given to it. Harnessing the many benefits and opportunities of a socially cohesive society, while protecting ourselves from existing and future threats, should be given serious consideration and commitment by government.

In the next chapter, we evidence the growth of one of those threats in our country: the phenomenon of freedom-restricting harassment.

99   DLUHC (2022) 'Levelling Up White Paper', Executive Summary
     https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom
100   DLUHC (2022) 'Levelling Up White Paper', Executive Summary
     https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom

Chapter 2

Freedom-restricting harassment: the undermining of social cohesion and democratic rights
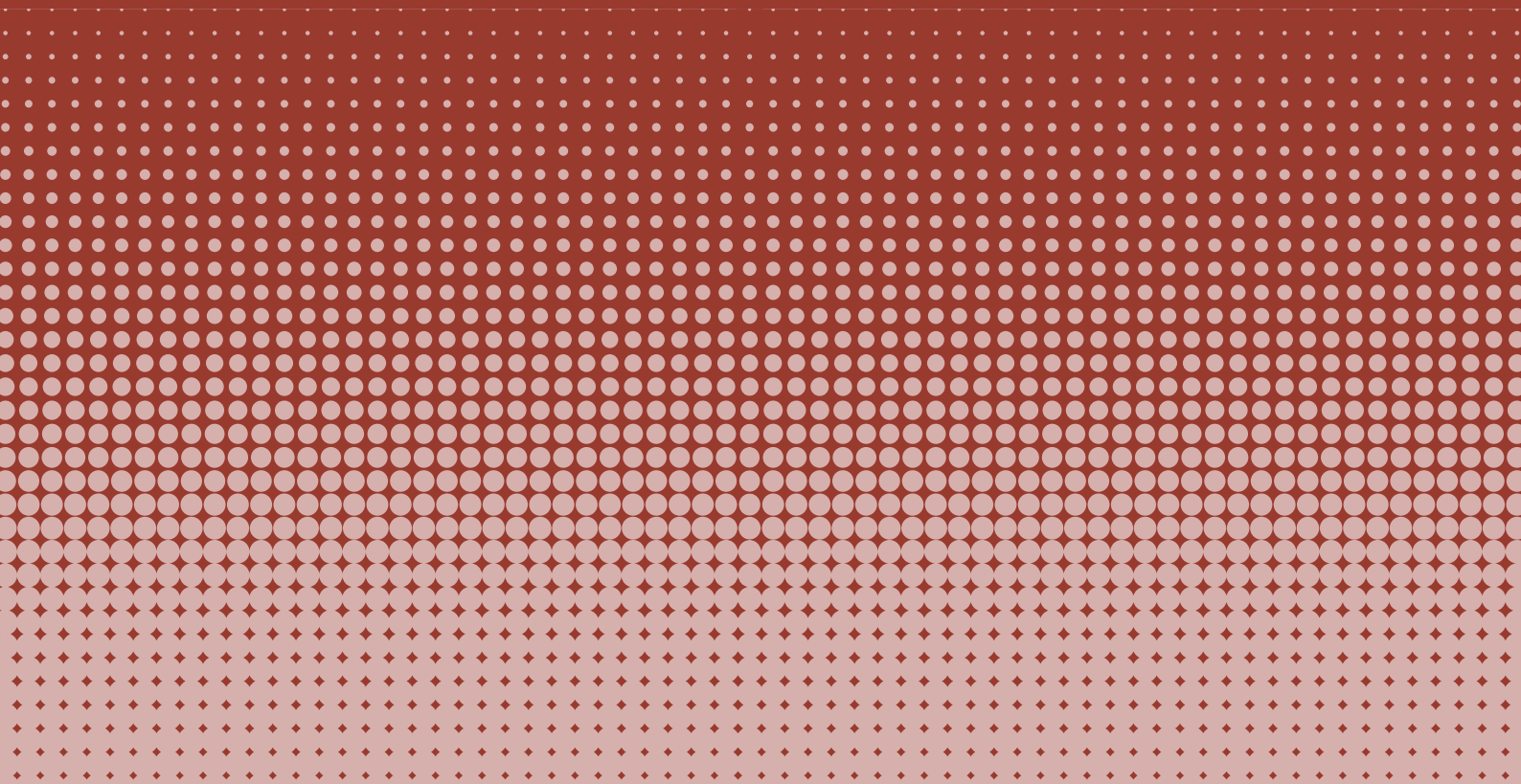
Introduction

In the last forty years, research suggests the UK has become more accepting of tolerance, equality and individual liberty in general.[101] Despite this trend, the Review has uncovered evidence that points to an ongoing, and arguably growing undercurrent of polarisation and intolerance – manifesting in intimidating, threatening and abusive forms of harassment that are directly causing people and organisations to censor themselves or avoid exercising their democratic rights out of fear.[102] The Reviewer has termed this distinct form of harassment *freedom-restricting harassment (FRH)*.

Victims of this form of harassment are found across society and from all sides of the political, class, belief and cultural spectrum. From politicians and councillors to members of the public attempting to exercise their democratic rights, and civic society and non-governmental organisations – from academics and journalists to teachers and others. These victims are targeted despite the legitimate and lawful nature of their work or activity.

Perpetrators of FRH may disagree with a political, academic, artistic, cultural or other view or belief and who then use threatening and intimidatory forms of harassment as a weapon to intimidate others into silence, forcing institutions to accept their demands, or restricting people's ability to exercise their democratic freedoms. Such repressive activity operating through fear and censorship creates a chilling impact on our democracy. It not only undermines social cohesion – it erodes pillars of democracy including academic independence, robust public debate, inclusiveness and a whole multitude of freedoms which are protected in our democratic society, including freedom of speech.

We argue that without action, freedom-restricting harassment will further erode these freedoms, undermining social cohesion and leaving citizens and organisations less able to live and speak freely.

Limitations in this chapter

The Reviewer has gathered extensive evidence including roundtables, victim testimonies, media articles and meetings with experts, practitioners and professionals. The Reviewer has also commissioned a call for evidence, polling and a rapid review.

We have not researched the drivers of FRH. There will be a multitude of motivations, ideological or otherwise, possible socio-economic factors and perceived or real grievances that perpetrators believe justifies their actions. This requires further research.

Nor have we examined who the perpetrators of FRH are. This requires further research including a typology of perpetrators. There will be a wide range of perpetrators and the only evidence we have collected is those victims of FRH who have been targeted by extremists. We have attempted to highlight who is experiencing FRH in this chapter but understandably have not examined every profession or field – for example the abuse health workers, doctors and nurses suffered during the pandemic.

While there remain significant data gaps that restrict our ability to understand FRH, the following exploration should demonstrate the pressing need to recognise and address this phenomenon.

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101   King's College London (2023) 'Rapid Review: Shared social values'
102   We use self-censorship and censorship interchangeably throughout this chapter

We are also aware that some perpetrators falsely and maliciously accuse victims of 'harassment' as a method of harassment in itself, in an attempt to punish and censor individuals whose views they disagree with. They to do this to get an individual fired from their job, to smear their reputation or to push a particular ideological worldview. While this must be addressed, this is something we have not examined in great depth in this chapter but do recognise this can be part of the harassment and censorship behaviour we are outlining.

2.1   The phenomenon of freedom-restricting harassment (FRH)

Defining this activity of threatening, intimidatory or abuse leading to censorship and/or self-censorship out of fear is needed. As such, this Review has termed it **freedom-restricting harassment** to distinguish it from other forms of harassment such as sexual harassment and workplace harassment.

Freedom-restricting harassment is 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.

Such harassment 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, intimidatory or abusive behaviour.

The consequences of FRH on individuals can be severe, including damage to mental health and wellbeing, loss of career/job/earnings, reputational damage and ostracism. But it also creates an effect on wider society where those who witness FRH occurring to others often self-censor and restrict their own freedoms out of fear as a result.

FRH is often personal and victims are targeted for many reasons. However, our evidence suggests the most common reasons appear to be because of the job they do or role they play in society, for holding a belief or opinion that should be protected in a democratic society and/or because they possess a protected characteristic. Victims are left alarmed, distressed and fearful, often leaving the individual concerned with long-term consequences. The impact on an institution can affect the culture and organisation as a whole.

Victim case study:

"As Leader of my Council I have received thousands of death threats, letters and messages saying they are following me home, threats to my 2-year-old daughter about being gang raped and trafficked. I receive these messages either as letters to my office, as direct messages on Twitter or on online forums. I make my daughter sleep next to a fire blanket in case someone firebombs my home, as a previous councillor has had her property firebombed. People are fearful, they want to defend me publicly but they know they too will experience pile-ons so they don't. The response from the police has been dismal and I've had little support. It has made me seriously question whether I want or can stay in politics."

Testimony from a Leader of a Council

It is widely assumed that politicians and those in public life are predominately at the receiving end of freedom-restricting harassment. Our evidence indicates that FRH is being experienced by people from across all walks of life. From intimidating and censoring journalists, to those working in the arts and culture sector, academics and teachers, as well as civil society, FRH is a wider societal threat.

> *"I work in hate crime and counter extremism and because of my work I get death threats from far right and Islamist extremists. It is sustained and exhausting. The everyday fear, the impact on my emotional wellbeing. Even members of my staff get death threats and as a result left working for my organisation because they feared attacks. I have to take care of my team too. I don't have a personal life, I don't want to be seen out publicly because I worry about being attacked. I change my route to work regularly, including taking different trains and I carry an alarm. And this is happening in Britain in 2023."*
>
> Testimony from the director of a non-governmental organisation

FRH is not confined to individuals but impacts institutions too. Our universities are great cultural institutions – they are the home of freedom of thought, where people are safe to challenge existing wisdom and to freely pursue knowledge. Universities maintain a clear covenant that ideas are challenged on their merits and not through censorship and restrictions. However, some universities have been targeted in an attempt to restrict and censor legitimate research. As demonstrated below, the University of Bradford found itself in a very difficult situation, where threats directed at staff and a campaign of intimidation alongside a lack of support resulted in the curtailment of academic freedom and research. Although this incident occurred in 2015-16, evidence suggests FRH has been occurring in our society for considerable time.

Institutional case study: Centre for the Study of Political Islam

In 2015, the University of Bradford received pledges for funding for a new academic and research centre, The Centre for the Study of Political Islam. It was promoted as one of the first centres in the world of its kind and was to be based at the university's acclaimed Peace Studies Department. Looking at peace and reconciliation, it hoped to understand the impact of political Islam and produce world class research. A full consultation had been carried out and the university's Board of Governors agreed to the new proposed centre.

The launch for the centre was scheduled to take place at the House of Lords in December 2015. However, within a week of invitations being sent out, local Muslim 'community leaders' who objected to the centre and the use of the term 'political Islam' raised concerns. The university organised a community event and invited local Muslim activists to learn more about the academic centre, its aims and objectives and to explain that political Islam was a legitimate academic study and discipline. Many who attended the meeting had no concerns, although others were still opposed to the centre.

A campaign of intimidation and fear quickly followed, calling for a boycott of the University of Bradford – with leaflets being distributed across social media, WhatsApp and in mosques across Bradford claiming the centre intended on 'demonising, stereotyping and alienating Muslims.' Activists claimed the university had an 'Islamophobic ideology' and called on people to write to one of the senior female academics involved with the centre. Leaflets also claimed that if the university continued with their 'Islamophobic ideology', protests would be organised at the university's Peace Garden.

In her testimony, the female academic told the Reviewer those who were opposed to the centre 'did not appreciate that this was an academic endeavour.' Instead, she found her name, photo and details published on a flyer which was being widely distributed to the local Muslim community. Staff told her that a British-based Islamist extremist group 'had her contact details' and she 'should be very careful.' She became fearful about her personal security and would park in different places across the campus and arrive at different times as precautionary measures.

The academic who was going to lead the centre was particularly concerned for his welfare, having receiving threats and hostile telephone calls from anonymous callers. As a result, he changed his working hours and had signs removed from office doors so that he could not be found easily.

Another senior member of staff involved with the centre told the Reviewer that there were Muslims in Bradford who supported and welcomed the proposed centre and disagreed with the complaints of these so-called 'community leaders', who 'acted like they owned the university.'

The Senior Leadership Team struggled to know how to deal with the growing conflict and the proposed centre was eventually cancelled out of fear of harm to staff, concerns about the university's reputation and the prospect of noisy and permanent protests disrupting life and safety at the university.

Those involved in the centre told the Reviewer they were highly critical of the lack of support from the local political leaders and institutions, who failed to publicly defend the university and its right to academic freedom and research.

Censorship and self-censorship

How we consider censorship and self-censorship is highly complex. This is because censorship exists on a spectrum and, for many people, self-censorship is an everyday reality. When and to what extent people self-censor is dependent on the context and implications to individuals. Self-censorship is not a binary condition of either total silence or complete free expression.[103] Nor are the implications of self-censorship binary between being benign or harmful. Most people engage in some degree of arguably harmless and everyday self-censorship, and drawing a line between harmful censorship and harmless censorship is particularly challenging.

Surveys largely indicate that sizable majorities in our country believe it is more important to protect free speech than to regulate it to avoid offending groups. One survey highlights how 68%

103   More in Common (2023) 'Rapid Evidence Review: Harassment and censorship'

or two thirds or respondents agreed that, in principle, people "should share their views more often, even though this might upset or offend others".[104] Recent research found that majorities agree it is 'important to learn when to keep an opinion silent around others to avoid causing offence' (77%), and that 'there are times when not expressing an opinion is appropriate to build good social relations with others' (79%).[105]

In contrast to 'everyday' examples of self-censorship, FRH can be a severe and harmful form of censorship, forcing individuals to either directly or indirectly self-censor, withdraw from public or civic life or choose not to exercise their democratic rights or freedoms, out of fear for themselves or family.

2.2   How widespread is freedom-restricting harassment?

Understanding the scale and impact of FRH is difficult and there is minimal data on the subject. Some of the traditional methods of collecting data on harassment (for example, subjective surveys and police incident reports) are complicated by differing definitions and methods and do not identify with the many examples we heard. However, there is consensus amongst the experts, victims and practitioners we spoke to that they see an increasing normalisation of harassment and censorship at a societal, institutional and individual level in our country. An expert roundtable held by More in Common for this Review also held this view.[106]

There is existing data that provides some detail about harassment and censorship as separate phenomenon, but none that draws them together, as would be needed to measure FRH. For example, according to the Office of National Statistics one in ten (11.1%) of surveyed adults reported that they experienced harassment in the previous six months.[107] This equates to over 6 million people across the country. It is not clear what type of harassment this involved and where, whether sexual harassment, workplace harassment or other types. We do know that more women (13%) than men (7%) reported they had experienced at least one form of harassment in the previous 12 months (December 2023).[108] We also know that a clear majority (66%) of the public say they are 'worried about the aggressive tone of public debate in the UK'.[109] One in five Britons say that something or someone they like has been banned, withdrawn, or cancelled due to public pressure in the last few years.[110]

To better understand the extent to which people in the United Kingdom experience FRH, the Review commissioned an online omnibus poll which involved a nationally representative sample of 1,279 respondents aged 16+ in the UK. This poll aimed to understand what awareness respondents had of FRH, whether they had experienced or witnessed it online or offline, and the impact it had on their everyday life, whether they felt it was increasing and what effect it had on our ability to live well together and to our society.[111]

104   King's College London (2023) 'Rapid Review: Shared social values'
105   Malcolm et al. (2023) 'Freedom of speech in UK higher education'. Accessed at
        https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/freedom-of-speech-in-uk-higher-education.pdf
106   More in Common (2023) 'Rapid Evidence Review: Harassment and censorship'
107   ONS (2023) 'Experiences of harassment in England and Wales: December 2023'. Accessed at
        https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/experiencesofharassmentinenglandandwales/
        december2023#:~:text=1.-,Main%20points,in%20the%20previous%2012%20months
108   ONS (2023) 'Experiences of harassment in England and Wales: December 2023'.
109   Juan-Torres, M., Dixon, T., Kimaram, A. (2020) 'Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain. More in Common'. Accessed
        at https://www.britainschoice.uk/
110   More in Common (2023) 'Rapid Evidence Review: Harassment and censorship'.
111   FRH Omnibus Poll (2024) 'Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience' Freedom restricting harassment in the poll was defined
        as where individuals are targeted with threatening, intimidatory and or abusive behaviour which causes them to feel fearful for the safety
        or wellbeing of themselves or their family/loved ones and is causing them to censor themselves, or restrict their rights or freedoms as
        a result.

The polling data presents a worrying picture of people's experiences of FRH and the impact they believe it is having on social cohesion.[112] Of all the people surveyed:

- A large majority (85%) believe Freedom-restricting harassment (FRH) currently occurs in the UK, with one quarter (25%) thinking that there is a considerable amount.

- Three in five (60%) believe that there is more FRH compared to five years ago, while only a minority (8%) thought that there is less.

- Over two in five (44%) reported witnessing FRH online.

- The same proportion said they have witnessed FRH in person (44%). (This differs from other forms of harassment where 75% of victims experience harassment in person compared to 21% online.)[113]

- 27% answered that FRH has left them fearful and caused them to alter the way they lived.

The poll found that an overwhelming majority of people censor themselves out of fear of receiving FRH, either to themselves or their loved one.

- When asked if they had ever witnessed others experiencing FRH which had then resulted in their self-censorship, nearly half (47%) said they had.

- Three-quarters (76%) reported having restricted expressing their view publicly out of fear of receiving FRH abuse to themselves or their loved ones

Among the 27% who have reported experiencing life altering FRH (n=356), three-quarters (77%) claimed to have experienced at least one change in their perception of themselves and/or others. The most stated change was feeling like they are not able to fully express their opinion (36%), followed by experiencing a negative effect in their personal or social life (29%), followed by saying they have felt a decline in their personal freedoms (26%). 61% said they have taken specific actions because of FRH, with the most stated action being to come off social media (20% claimed they had done this), abandoning specific tasks at work or taking additional security measures (17% claimed they had done this). Although a minority, one in eight claimed to have acted in a more life changing way because of FRH, losing or changing their job (15% claimed they had undergone this) or having to move house (13%).[114]

The majority of the public believe FRH restricts people's freedom, undermines social cohesion, forces people to censor themselves and discourages people from contributing to public life. 72% agreed (either strongly or slightly) that 'FRH of individuals will undermine people's ability to live and speak freely in our country'. This statement also saw the highest strength of agreement across all statements, with 36% strongly agreeing.

- 70% agreed (strongly or slightly) that they 'feel FRH has had a negative effect on people living well together in our society'.

- 69% agreed (strongly or slightly) that they 'feel people are having to censor the way they live their lives, either in their work or personal lives because of FRH'.

- 69% agreed (strongly or slightly) that 'FRH of individuals in public life is likely to put off other people from contributing to public life in the future'.

It is clear from the evidence that the public believe FRH is having a dramatic impact at a societal and democratic level in the UK. These results describe a stark picture.

112   FRH Omnibus Poll (2024) 'Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience'
113   ONS (2023) 'Experiences of harassment in England and Wales: December 2023'
114   FRH Omnibus Poll (2024) 'Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience'

2.3   Societal narratives about harassment and censorship risk normalising freedom-restricting harassment

In contrast with the severity and harm of freedom-restricting harassment, the Reviewer believes predominant societal narratives that people should expect and tolerate such abuse as a consequence of living in a diverse democracy have hindered attempts to address this phenomenon.

Repeatedly, victims reported how they were told to 'grow a thicker skin', 'to expect such abuse' as part of everyday online life, to 'turn a blind eye', 'to switch off your computer' and to remove one's presence from social media platforms as the solution to such targeting. This advice is counterproductive – rather than minimising FRH it normalises it in our society through a failure to address it. Furthermore, it reinforces a culture of victim-blaming where the onus is placed on victims to change their behaviour rather than holding perpetrators to account.

FRH is particularly insidious because the intended outcome of the harasser is typically an action taken by the victims themselves. In other words, the victims of this abuse *self-censor* by amending their own lawful and reasonable behaviour.

Some police forces are failing to investigate incidents of FRH with the seriousness it deserves. Even when the Reviewer heard examples of harassment that arguably crossed the criminal threshold, victims told us their concerns were not taken seriously, while perpetrators were insufficiently investigated and were rarely prosecuted. In some cases, the victims themselves were blamed for having 'agitated' the perpetrator because they expressed an opinion. Councillors and others in the public eye repeatedly told us that the police had told them such abuse was part of 'free speech' and that they should expect such behaviour as 'they had chosen to put themselves in the public eye.' Some were told erroneously by police that such criminality was in fact protected by freedom of expression laws.

"The response from police has not instilled confidence. I don't feel they take it seriously and that somehow I should expect it. They have a view that councillors have put themselves in this position, in the public eye. As some individuals are posting this material online rather than directly to the councillor concerned, they argue it doesn't count as harassment or malicious communications and instead have suggested that 'I have gone out my way to find this abuse online'. I'd like the police and the council to take this harassment and extreme abuse more seriously. Remove the victim-blaming or this view that by being in this role I have asked for such abuse. I haven't. I believe councils have a duty of care towards their councillors."

Testimony from a local councillor

Leading, independent and public figures who often had some of the worst experiences told us these societal narratives would not only delegitimise their experiences, but would leave them feeling powerless and resigned to the fact that this was the price they were expected to pay, irrespective of the short or long term impact it had on them or even on our society. There will be a multitude of reasons for the societal narratives that encourage 'tolerance' of FRH but we believe the most prominent three reasons are:

- The assumption that FRH is experienced online rather than offline and therefore the impact is not severe as if experienced in the 'real world.' There are two immediate issues with this. Firstly, our polling highlights that FRH is experienced equally on- and offline, with 44% reporting experiencing it online and 44% experiencing it offline. Secondly, it presupposes that online harassment does not have a significant impact on people.

- A perception that FRH is only being experienced by a tiny proportion of the population and is usually confined to public figures. Our evidence contradicts this view.

- A lack of awareness of the extent to which FRH is having a damaging impact on our society, including on freedom of expression and other democratic rights. There is a clear concern among roughly 70% of people in our nationally representative poll who believe FRH is having a negative impact on individuals, social cohesion and public life.

2.4 Freedom-restricting harassment and freedom of expression

The right and ability to express ourselves freely and without fear is fundamental to our democratic society. Freedom of expression includes the offensive, the shocking, the dissenting and the critical.[115] Freedom of expression however is a qualified right – the rights of the individual to freedom of expression must be balanced against the duty of the state to act proportionately in the interests of public safety, to prevent disorder and crime and to protect the rights of others. Expression can be restricted to preserve a functioning democracy, but those limits must be lawful, necessary and proportionate, as stipulated in Article 10 of the Human Rights Act 1998.

Passionate debates and disagreements are important markers of a healthy democracy. As tribunal judges ruled in the case between the transgender rights charity Mermaids and the LGB Alliance, there is "no legal right to be free from criticism by those who disagree with you or to prevent those who hold beliefs that the law recognises as protected from expressing themselves or seeking to persuade others to their point of view."[116] Such freedom of speech is a vital to democracy and must be upheld. The use of harassment, abuse, and threats to frighten and deter people from free speech, from doing their jobs or specifically to silence them, cannot be defended as it erodes the consensual order of our democratic society.

To complicate matters, a wide range of stakeholders told us that understanding where the boundaries or the line of legitimate criticism are has become much harder in recent years. The College of Policing told us police forces often feel there is a lack of clarity on what is considered as behaviour that leads to 'alarm, harassment and distress' as outlined in harassment legislation law. At the same time, the police are mindful not to inadvertently clamp down or over-police legitimate expression and speech, and they have been subject to significant criticism of this in recent years.

Furthermore, some argue that any attempt to tackle harassment type behaviour could amount to an attempt to restrict freedom of expression. Yet the inability and unwillingness to tackle freedom-restricting harassment is leading to not only a restriction of freedom of expression, but restriction of a wide range of other freedoms and rights.

In the next section, we evidence how FRH is affecting people across different professions and groups.

115 European Court of Human Rights (1976) 'Handyside V UK' Accessed at https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/ukr#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-57499%22]}
116 Courts and Tribunals Judiciary (2023) 'Mermaids V Charity Commission' Accessed at https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mermaids-v-Charity-Commission-judgment-060723.pdf

2.5 Freedom-restricting harassment: a societal problem experienced across different professions

Members of Parliament

- 81% of respondents in a 2019 survey reported that they or their staff had faced abuse in the past year, with 63% saying that they had been in contact with the police about threats in the last 12 months.[117]

The abuse and harassment of MPs has received considerable attention in the last few years. A review of intimidation in public life by the Committee on Standards in Public Life evidenced the serious and persistent abuse and threats of violence that MPs experienced.[118] The Committee noted that although intimidation in public life is nothing new, the scale and intensity of intimidation is now shaping public life in ways which present a threat to the very nature of representative democracy in the UK.[119] There has been understandably greater public attention of the abuse MPs experience following the murders of Jo Cox MP and David Amess MP.[120] After the murder of Jo Cox, the Metropolitan Police established a Police Parliamentary Liaison and Investigations Team to provide better support and assistance to MPs who experience threats and abuse.

The abuse and harassment experienced does lead to self-censorship of MPs and is already affecting the way in which MPs relate to their constituents. This includes removing themselves from Twitter/X and using social media more generally.[121] MPs are also changing the way they work. As the Joint Committee on Human Rights noted, constituents are less likely to see MPs going about their work, many MPs have changed the way they conduct their advice surgeries and are less likely to travel on public transport on their own.[122] As the Joint Committee stated, we do not know the full scale of the problem because MPs are reluctant to report and many threats and offences go unreported.[123]

The concern about the scale, intensity and impact of harassment is discouraging individuals from standing for public office, which threatens to damage the vibrancy and diversity of our public life.[124] Research suggests that consistently high levels of MP harassment over the last decade has deterred individuals from entering public life or hastened the withdrawal of other from public office.[125]

117   More in Common (2023) 'Rapid Evidence Review: Harassment and censorship'.
118   Lord Bew (2017) 'Intimidation in Public Life: A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life'. Accessed at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life
119   ibid
120   Several news articles have outlined the abuse MPs face.
       The Times (2021) 'Trolls deluge MPs with rape and murder threats', accessed at:
       https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/trolls-deluge-mps-with-rape-and-murder-threats-fcztxltll
       BBC News (2017) 'Mistreatment of women MPs revealed'.
       BBC News (2017) 'MPs tell of death threats and abuse at 2017 election'. See also Dispatches 2022 (Kim Leadbeater)
121   Ward and McLoughlin (2020) 'Turds, traitors and tossers: the abuse of UK MPs via Twitter'. Accessed at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life
122   Joint Committee on Human Rights, Democracy, freedom of expression and freedom of association (2019-2020), 'Threats to MPs First Report of Session'. Accessed at https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201919/jtrights/37/37.pdf
123   MPs do not report for a whole range of reasons: they feel they need to present themselves as champions of others, not victims; they do not want to make the assailant worse; or be seen to use scarce police resources. See: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201919/jtrights/37/37.pdf
124   Lord Bew (2017) 'Intimidation in Public Life: A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life'.
125   More in Common (2023). 'Rapid Evidence Review: Harassment and censorship'.

This loss of MPs and potential MPs presents a significant threat to the long-term strength of our democratic institutions.[126] This includes the lack of meaningful representation of our society in terms of both the diversity of views expressed and of candidates.

2.6   Councillors and local government

- Almost nine in ten councillors (88 per cent) report experiencing abuse or intimidation in their role as a councillor or candidate.[127]

- 31% of female councillors report feeling at risk as part of their job.[128]

Councillors and those working within local government experience consistently high levels of abuse. Almost nine in ten councillors (88 per cent) report experiencing abuse or intimidation in their role as a councillor or candidate.[129] The Local Government Association (LGA) are concerned about the abuse experienced by councillors and council officers. They told us there is evidence of increasing abuse and intimidation in public life and a toxification of public discourse more generally.[130]

They described how elected members were having to deal with alleged orchestrated smear campaigns based on discriminatory narratives and unsubstantiated reports of corruption. These campaigns were deliberately designed to divide people, encourage escalation, and are characterised by mass sharing and 'pile-on' abuse. We heard this directly from numerous councillors.

Such ongoing personal abuse and intimidation is pronounced and is causing "significant stress and is impacting councillors' mental health if perpetrators are not dealt with or insufficient abuse is provided to the councillor."[131] Their evidence indicated that councillors with protected characteristics may be at more risk of receiving personal abuse, and it appears this harassment was directly contributing to a climate of self-censorship. More than a quarter of councillors (27%) were unwilling to seek council office again. Of that group, most (68 per cent) said that abuse and intimidation had influenced their decision not to do so.[132] The LGA believe such harassment in not only harming individuals but also our democracy more generally.

126   More in Common (2023). 'Rapid Evidence Review: Harassment and censorship'.
127   Local Government Association (2022). 'Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy'. Accessed at Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy | Local Government Association
128   More in Common (2023). 'Rapid Evidence Review: Harassment and censorship'.
129   Local Government Association (2022). 'Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy'. Accessed at Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy | Local Government Association
130   Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience Call for Evidence (2024)
131   Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience Call for Evidence (2024)
132   Local Government Association (2022) 'Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy' Accessed at https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-impact-abuse-local-democracy

"Someone was arrested during one of the elections for plotting to attack another candidate. This person has now taken aim at me. I have contacted the police and told them how he has threatened to come to me personally. He has accused me of being a 'gender traitor and a liar'. As a councillor, my address is public and he lives nearby. I am frightened and in the house alone at night.

Police told me they can get him for harassment if he contacts me directly but not if he puts things on social media without tagging me, despite the fact he is posting public threats about me, but police say this isn't harassment. They have told me that I should expect such behaviour as 'I choose to put myself forward to be a councillor'.

I am frightened he will come to the town hall or that I will see him on the street at night as he lives round the corner. The Council hasn't offered support beyond an attack alarm. They don't have a formal duty of care to me as they are not my employer. This is also the case with my political party who have not offered any formal support. I feel very alone, other councillors are also frightened to challenge this kind of behaviour as they don't want to be targeted too."

Testimony from a local councillor

We spoke extensively to councillors across England and were shocked at not only the abuse they were experiencing, but also the lack of support they were receiving and the failure of the police to treat these cases with the seriousness they demand.

2.7   Media and journalism

- More than nine in ten journalists (92%) report that abuse of journalists had increased.[133]
- Almost half said they promoted their work less online to minimise the risk of online harm, and almost a fifth (18%) said the threats had made them consider leaving the media industry altogether.[134]
- One in three female journalists do not feel safe operating as a journalist in the UK.[135]
- One in seven journalists said the nature of harassment, abuse and threats meant they avoided certain topics or issues out of fear or the risk of violence.[136]

A free press is vital to a functioning democracy. However, in recent years the threats and harassment faced by journalists has become of increasing concern globally.[137] This is also the case in Britain as the statistics above make clear. Almost four in five (78%) felt that 'abuse and harassment has become normalised and seen as part of the job'.[138]

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133   Beth Grossman (2021) 'Combatting online harassment and abuse: A legal guide for journalists in England Wales' Accessed at
       https://medialawyersassociation.org/news-2/
134   ibid
135   DCMS (2022) 'Call for evidence report Journalist Safety'. Accessed at
       https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/dcms-safety-of-journalists-call-for-evidence.html
136   ibid
137   United Nations News (2022) 'Intimidated, jailed, abused: Threats against journalists harms us all, warns UN chief'. Accessed at
       https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130117
138   National Union of Journalists (2020) 'NUJ Members' Safety Survey'. Accessed at
       https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-safety-report-2020.html

The problem is particularly pronounced for women, with one in three female journalists stating they do not feel safe operating as a journalist in the UK. A report based on a three-year study of women journalists identified a strong correlation between online and offline violence and attacks against women journalists in the UK, especially with regards to stalking.[139] The same report also found that the abuse black and minority women journalists experience offline is amplified and exacerbated online.

The direct consequence of such harassment on self-censorship is apparent. A fifth of the more than 400 who responded to a survey by Reach and Women in Journalism said they had considered leaving the media industry as a result.[140] Almost half said they promoted their work less online to minimise the risk of online harm, and almost a fifth (18%) said the threats had made them consider leaving the media industry altogether.[141]

The Media Lawyers Association found that persistent and growing abuse towards journalists is leading to significant numbers of journalists leaving their newsrooms, women publishing without by-lines or under pseudonyms, and some deciding to stop publishing altogether.

In 2021, the UK Government published the first National Action Plan for the safety of journalists, aimed at protecting journalists from abuse and harassment.[142] It established five objectives which included better support for journalists and their employers and improving the criminal justice response in tackling crimes against journalists.

Some progress has been made and the commitments in the National Action Plan which have now been delivered include a legal guide for journalists in England and Wales to combat online harassment and abuse; the appointment of Journalist Safety Liaison Officers by police forces across the UK; and an online safety toolkit which covers a variety of issues such as physical and digital safety, and mental health. However, the evidence to evaluate the impact of these measures has been limited.

In October 2023, a refreshed National Action Plan was published with new commitments including the National Union of Journalist and DCMS creating a data-gathering tool for journalists to highlight safety issues taking place in the UK, which will hopefully go some way to fill the data and evaluation gap. Such evaluation is essential to understand the impact and to learn more general lessons from the Action Plan that could support other individuals who are experiencing harassment and censorship, such as councillors.

Having assessed the available evidence provided to this Review, we do see the benefit of a dedicated safety officer who specialises in harassment law, who can promote the importance of reporting harassment and provide suitable support to those who do report. This harassment prevention officer role could be an expansion of or in addition to the journalist safety officer role.

139   University of Sheffield (2022) 'New report reveals link between online and offline violence against women journalists'. Accessed at https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/news/new-report-reveals-link-between-online-and-offline-violence-against-women-journalists

140   Tobitt, C (2023). 'Online abuse toll means fifth of women journalists considered leaving industry'. Press Gazette. Accessed at https://pressgazette.co.uk/media-audience-and-business-data/women-in-journalism-online-abuse/#:~:text=Three%2Dquarters%20of%20women%20journalists,media%20industry%20as%20a%20result

141   ibid

142   DCMS (2023) 'National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists'. Accessed at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-action-plan-for-the-safety-of-journalists/national-action-plan-for-the-safety-of-journalists

2.8   Academia

- The proportion of students who believe 'universities are becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints' has risen to 38% (from 24 per cent in 2016).[143]

- 36% of students think academics should be fired if they 'teach material that heavily offends some students' (more than double the 15% who said the same in 2016).[144]

- Academic staff in the UK are more likely to censor (35.5% agree) compared to their European counterparts (19.1% EU average).[145]

- Academic freedom in the UK declined between 2011 and 2021, according to the Academic Freedom Index Project – who suggest the UK is in the top 30% to 40% of countries when it comes to academic freedom.[146]

In recent years, public debate over freedom of speech in higher education has intensified.[147] Some argue that there is now a climate of censorship in UK universities,[148] with others believing that universities struggle to know how to protect free speech while also upholding equality legislation, preventing discrimination and restricting hateful narratives that can threaten cohesion. This includes debates around the duties and expectations placed on universities, including guidance issued by the Office for Students.[149] This Review is concerned specifically about the experience of freedom-restricting harassment by academics and others within higher education and the impact this is having on cohesion and our democratic values.

Over the course of the review and roundtable engagement with academics, the harassment found to be suffered by many has been abhorrent. Academics told us how they have been threatened, events and invitations to speak have been cancelled last minute, and character assassinations, smear campaigns and attempts to destroy their reputation by erroneously accusing them of being bigots were often experienced. They expressed how such a climate left them personally fearful of even giving lectures and seminars.

> *"I'm used to discussing controversial issues in class but I have never before feared going into a classroom as I always felt there was a relationship of trust where we can discuss difficult ideas, on democracy, race or anything else. However in the last few years I have felt anxious about these hostile tactics. That trust has now gone."*
>
> Academic roundtable participant

We heard shocking cases of the extent to which 'cancelling' was occurring – including cancelling the publication of academic books on legitimate areas of study. This was not because of any concerns about the content of the book but due to false reputational smears about the author.

143   Nick Hillman (2022) 'You can't say that!' (HEPI Policy Note 35)'. Accessed at
      https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/You-cant-say-that-What-students-really-think-of-free-speech-on-campus.pdf
144   ibid
145   Terence Karran and Lucy Mallinson (2017) 'Academic Freedom in the UK: Legal and Normative Protections in a Comparative Context'
      Accessed at https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8614/Academic-Freedom-in-the-UK-Legal-and-Normative-Protection-in-a-Comparative-Context-Report-for-UCU-Terence-Karran-and-Lucy-Mallinson-May-17/pdf/ucu_academicfreedomstudy_report_may17.pdf
146   Lindberg, S. et al. (2022) 'Academic freedom index 2022 update'. Accessed at https://www.pol.phil.fau.eu/academicfreedom/
147   Office for students (2022) 'Freedom to question, challenge and debate'. Accessed at
      https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/freedom-to-question-challenge-and-debate/
148   Index on Censorship (2018) 'Uncomfortable but Educational: Freedom of Expression in UK Universities'. Accessed at
      https://www.indexoncensorship.org/uncomfortable-educational-freedom-expression-uk-universities/
149   ibid

One professor told us the publishing of their book has been cancelled by the publishing company because they believed false statements allegedly made by the professor calling for 'the murder of transgender people.' The impact is not just on the academics themselves – senior leaders were also personally fearful of their wellbeing as well as concerns about the reputational risk to the university which could result in the loss of research networks.[150]

In the cases we heard, the institutional response to threats and censorship was either entirely lacking or too slow be of any real effect. Academics repeatedly reported feeling left on their own by their employers due to weak leadership, a lack of support from their institution and no knowledge of where to turn for support. Instead, they were often left to deal with the consequences of finding themselves being cancelled or harassed.

> *"There was a spectacular lack of support. Everyone in my university knew I'd been libelled. The university refused to publicly support me even though I had been exonerated. I wanted some support – for example a statement from the university. They wouldn't do it and didn't want me to speak out as they didn't want to escalate the situation. I really urge senior management to stick up for colleagues when libelled and to mediate given the opportunity. I found the refusal to mediate was traumatic. I demanded the university raise a debate with students who libelled me. They refused. If this had happened to a younger academic it would have had much more impact on their career."*
>
> Academic roundtable participant.

> *"There is common belief among senior university leadership that ignoring the behaviour will make it go away. That clearly hasn't happened."*
>
> Academic roundtable participant

In contrast, when leadership was demonstrated, it had a significant impact in reducing tensions and allowing academic debate to continue.

> *"A seminar was being organised and activists who didn't want the event to go ahead set up a Discord site, a letter writing campaign and encouraging activists who weren't students and staff at other universities to protest. However, my university responded immediately and offered practical support and to pay for extra security. The vice-chancellor put out a really powerful statement saying no student had the right not to be offended. That was a really strong act by the Vice-Chancellor and did make a difference."*
>
> Academic roundtable participant

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150   Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience Call for Evidence (2024)

Some concerns of censorship have been recognised by the Government, including through the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill which became law in May 2023 and establishes a new free speech complaints system and strengthens the legal duties on higher education providers in England to protect and promote freedom of speech on campuses. In June 2023, the government appointed a new director overseeing free speech at the Office for Students.[151] He has responsibility for investigations of breaches of the new freedom of speech duties. While many of the academics we spoke to support the spirit of the new act, many were less convinced that they would receive the help and support they needed when they found themselves in freedom-restricting harassment situations.

It should be noted that the Joint Committee on Human Rights did not find wholesale censorship of debate in universities and noted that the majority of student union officers who responded to their survey said they were confident students could speak freely.[152] The Office for Students also notes that it has received approximately 800 notifications in total since its inception in 2018, of which around 60 were about free speech issues.[153] We suspect there is under-reporting, and the scale and impact of the 'chilling effect' on freedom of expression that such harassment is having is not well understood or being captured.

2.9 Arts/culture

- More than 80% of artists who responded to Arts Professional in 2020 agreed that 'workers in the arts and cultural sector who share controversial opinions risk being professionally ostracised'.[154]
- A third of librarians had been asked by members of the public to censor or remove books and 82% of librarians are concerned about the increase in such requests.[155]

Ensuring an environment where artists can explore and share ideas, and debate and produce work is critical in a democracy. This is even more pertinent when those pieces of work are contentious, sensitive or polarised. Yet those working in the arts and culture sector have often found themselves intimidated and harassed in an attempt to censor an artist or author's work.

A survey published by Arts Professional[156] highlighted how 90% of respondents agreed that 'the arts and cultural sector has a responsibility to use its unique talents to speak out about things that matter, regardless of the potential consequences'. However, at the same time, more than 80% thought that 'workers in the arts and cultural sector who share controversial opinions risk being professionally ostracised'. 45% of those surveyed had been 'pressurised, intimidated, ostracised, coerced, trolled, harassed or bullied, either in person or on digital media' over their artistic and creative activities. Of that group, 44% had changed their product, programming or plans due to this pressure.

151   Department for Education (2023) 'University Freedom of Speech Bill becomes law', accessed at:
       https://www.gov.uk/government/news/university-freedom-of-speech-bill-becomes-law
152   Parliament.uk (2018) https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtrights/589/58902.htm
153   Office for students (2022) 'Freedom to question, challenge and debate'.
154   Adele Redmond (2020) 'Culture of censorship" as arts workers fear backlash' Arts Professional'. Accessed at
       https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/exclusive-culture-censorship-arts-workers-fear-backlash
155   Research carried out by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (2023) cited in Sarah
       Shaffi (2023) 'Third of UK librarians asked to censor or remove books, research reveals' The Guardian, accessed at:
       https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/apr/20/third-of-uk-librarians-asked-to-censor-or-remove-books-research-reveals
156   Adele Redmond (2020) 'Culture of censorship" as arts workers fear backlash'. Arts Professional.

Arts Professional believe the research suggests that the arts and cultural sector is intolerant of viewpoints outside of dominant norms. Anything that might be considered 'politically incorrect' to the liberal-leaning sector – including expressing support or sympathy for Brexit, the Conservatives or other right-wing political parties – was felt to be risky territory. Other taboo topics such as religions, gender and sexuality were also considered a 'minefield' and no-go areas for many.

Research carried out by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals found that a third of librarians had been asked by members of the public to censor or remove books. 82% of librarians are concerned about the increase in such requests.[157] The most targeted books as reported by The Guardian involve empire, race and LGBTQ+ themes.

2.10 Police officers

The Review heard worrying examples of how police officers are also experiencing freedom-restricting harassment and how this appears to have worsened in recent years. In one instance heard by the Reviewer a Metropolitan police officer who while policing a Palestine Solidarity Campaign march in Central London in 2024, had a 'boycott Israel apartheid' sticker stuck on his arm by a member of the public. The officer was unaware of this and later during the march another member of the public approached the officer, removed the sticker, and let the officer know that someone had stuck it on him. However, at some point when the sticker had been placed on the officer, a photo was taken of the officer which was then uploaded onto a Jewish organisation's twitter account which questioned the officer's impartiality. This led to significant online commentary including personal criticism and abuse of the officer from accounts with significant reach including MPs. The intensity and volume of the abuse, some of which was racist affected the ethnic minority officer deeply. People were actively trying to find out who he was, where he lived and threats were made against him. People were demanding the officer should be sacked and claimed that he was a 'fifth column.' The original tweet was later deleted but before it was it had received in excess of 8 million views.

The officer now no longer feels able to police events related to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and fears carrying out any frontline role in case he or his family is targeted. He felt the media and politicians also played a part in amplifying the original tweet which made it worse for him, with no consideration of the facts. This is just one example of many cases shared with the Reviewer by the Metropolitan police, who described a growing climate of police officers experiencing threatening, intimidatory and abusive harassment. As a result, they feel this is leading them to self-censor out of fear which is having a real impact on officers and potentially policing.

2.11 Group based harassment and censorship

- LGBTQ+ individuals were **twice as likely** to experience FRH, leaving them fearful, or altering the way they live, in comparison with their heterosexual peers (52% vs. 24%).[158]
- Ethnic minority Britons were **nearly twice as likely** to have experienced FRH that has left them fearful or altered the way they live, in comparison to white peers (40% vs. 25%).[159]

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157   Sarah Shaffi (2023) 'Third of UK librarians asked to censor or remove books, research reveals'. The Guardian. Accessed at
       https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/apr/20/third-of-uk-librarians-asked-to-censor-or-remove-books-research-reveals
158   FRH Omnibus Poll (2024) 'Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience'
159   FRH Omnibus Poll (2024) 'Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience'

- Disabled Britons were **almost twice as likely** to consider there to be a considerable amount of FRH than the non-disabled (40% vs. 21%).[160]
- **Four in five** transgender people have experienced some form of transphobic hate crime and when asked about the impact of this abuse on their daily lives, the most common answer was about self-censoring.[161]

Alongside individuals, freedom-restricting harassment is also being experienced at a group level because of the protected characteristics they possess. As data from our nationally representative polling suggests, ethnic minority Britons, LGBTQ+ individuals and disabled Britons are more likely to experience FRH that left them fearful or altered the way they live.

In a regional study carried out by the anti-Muslim monitoring group, TellMAMA in Northeast England, more than half the Muslim respondents (57%) said they had altered their behaviour because of anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination, particularly their appearance, awareness, and mobility.[162] Hate Crime figures for the year ending March 2022 found that religious hate crime offences were more likely to be directed at Muslims than any other religious group, with offences against Muslims accounting for 42% of all religious offences.

The Campaign Against Anti-Semitism's latest polling reported 61% of British Jews had witnessed or experienced antisemitism since 7 October 2023[163], while their 2021 Anti-Semitism Barometer found that 46% of British Jews now avoid displaying outward signs of their Judaism in public.[164]

Hate crime figures ending in March 2022 found that despite making up less than one percent of the total religious population, antisemitic hate crimes accounted for 23% of all religious hate crimes in the UK. In a recent survey, one in five Jewish people were found to be victims of racist physical assault prior to the coronavirus pandemic.[165]

2.12 The experience of apostates

A 2020 study found that 'apostates' – a term used to describe those who once identified as religious but now cease to hold those beliefs – are far more likely to experience assaults than any other group of non-religious people.[166] The study also identified the challenge of reporting harassment in intra-community contexts when perpetrators can often be close family members. Ex-Muslim apostates are especially likely to face abuse, according to the study's comparison of people leaving the Muslim and Christian faiths – although it noted the difficulties in comparing the experiences of different sects within these religions.[167] Anecdotal evidence suggests similar trends may exist among ex-ultra-orthodox Jews from Charedi communities.[168] Further research on the scale of this issue is important. Yet academics who sought to research the power dynamics and structures within highly controlled faith groups told us to do so was particularly

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160   FRH Omnibus Poll (2024) 'Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience'
161   Dr Cerys Bradley (2020) 'Transphobic hate crime report 2020'. Accessed at
        https://galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Trans-Hate-Crime-Report-2020.pdf
162   Hopkins, Clayton, Tell Mama (2020) 'Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Hatred in North East England'. Accessed at https://www.tellmamauk.
        org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ISLAMOPHOBIA-AND-ANTI-MUSLIM-HATRED-IN-NORTH-EAST-ENGLAND-090620.pdf
163   Campaign Against Antisemitism (2023) 'Almost 70% of British Jews are hiding their identity'. Accessed at https://antisemitism.org/almost-
        70-of-british-jews-are-hiding-their-identity-and-almost-half-have-considered-leaving-britain-since-7th-october-new-caa-polling-shows/
164   Campaign Against Antisemitism (2023) 'Antisemitism Barometer 2021'. Accessed at https://antisemitism.org/barometer/
165   Patrick Butler (2023) 'Britain "not close to being a racially just society", finds two-year research project'. The Guardian. Accessed at
        https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/09/britain-not-close-to-being-a-racially-just-society-finds-two-year-research-project
166   Parekh Et al (2020) 'Apostates as a Hidden Population of Abuse Victims'. Journal of interpersonal violence. Accessed at
        https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0886260519898428
167   ibid
168   ibid

difficult, due to what they saw as a censorious academic environment which attempted to shut down such research.

> *"Research is shut down by some of these sociologists. Those who leave highly controlling religious communities – their voices are dismissed often by academics and is an additional form of ostracism and shunning. Instead, those who leave religions commonly face accusations of bigotry or are viewed as blasphemous even by academics for leaving the religions."*
>
> Roundtable participant

2.13 Harassment legislation and its application

There is extensive legislation that seeks to address harassment in England, with both civil and criminal avenues for victims to pursue for legal redress. This includes the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, the Malicious Communications Act 1986, the Public Order Act 1986, the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, the Equality Act 2010 and the Anti-Social Behaviour and Policing Act 2014. Most, if not all, of the experts who specialise in harassment legislation suggested to the Reviewer there is sufficient legislation in England. We do not think therefore that recommending further legislation would help reduce the extent of FRH.

However, where we do have concern is whether the police have the appropriate level of training on harassment legislation and are effectively using it to prosecute offenders. Our conversations with the Victims' Commissioner's office, the Ministry of Justice and others who work within the criminal justice system highlighted some of the failings taking place within some police forces. This includes reported failures by police forces to understand the impact of incidents or to thoroughly investigate potential acts of criminality, which could have resulted in prosecutions. Police might also look at isolated incidents rather than patterns of behaviour over time. There is a further concern that those individuals who are in public life or have a public profile are being told by some police forces that victims should expect such behaviour 'as they have put themselves out there', including by the Labour MP Stella Creasy in her harassment case.[169]

Some stakeholders, including police colleagues, have suggested there is confusion in some cases about where freedom of speech ends and where harassment begins – noting complicated cases are those where it is borderline, where the definition 'harassment, alarm, or distress' as outlined in law will have different interpretations. Additionally, the ability of police to tackle online harassment was raised as 'almost an impossibility' and 'unpoliceable' due to the scale of such harassment and the nature of anonymity. Police capacity and resources will always struggle to respond to the scale of such harassment. The College of Policing have told us that harassment is a substantial part of police training.

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169   Hayden Vernon, Nadeeam Badash, Danya Hajjaji (2023) 'Stella Creasy says police "green lighting" trolls to target politicians' children'. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/apr/29/stella-creasy-targeted-by-troll-who-tried-to-have-her-children-removed-report

Limitations and challenges in legislation

Experts we spoke to are concerned that the phenomenon of threatening, intimidatory and abusive harassment leading to censorship – or FRH as we define it – goes beyond the activity that harassment legislation was designed to tackle. While it is the case that some of this behaviour would be prosecutable under existing legislation, a great deal of it describes a different challenge and problem. One example is the burgeoning online pile-on culture. Harassment legislation largely centres on individual culpability, which makes it difficult for the police to arrest when there could be thousands of perpetrators. There is also no specific legislation outlawing doxing – maliciously posting identifying personal details of a targeted individual online – despite the overwhelming distress such behaviour causes. Harassment legislation does state that an act that 'causes distress' is included and could in theory include doxing, although only when part of a course of action from the perpetrator. However senior police officers the Reviewer spoke to felt there was an absence of specific legislation designed to address doxing despite the serious and potential safety threats to a victim.

The Online Safety Act 2023 does deal with group harassment but as officials told us, in reality this would be difficult to enforce by the regulator responsible Ofcom. The hope is that social media sites will have to remove threatening comments immediately, and lower-level harassment once reported.

While the Online Safety Act 2023 may be able to help tackle some of this activity the Reviewer is concerned that, as with existing legislation, the problem might remain in the effective implementation of legislation rather than the legislation itself.

The Law Commission were asked by the government to review the 'communications offences' found in section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988 (MCA 1988) and section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 (CA 2003). They made a number of recommendations, including a harm-based offence aimed at targeting communications intended to and likely to cause serious distress. The Commission however concluded that specific offences criminalising pile-on harassment would not be proportionate or appropriate, and that the best way to address it is through a combination of direct action by platforms and the work of the online harms regulator alongside the application of the recommended harm-based offence.[170]

2.14 FRH: When victims are targeted by extremists

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, there is insufficient evidence of who the perpetrators are that engage in FRH and what their motivations are. There will be a range of different perpetrators. We do however have some evidence that when extremists target individuals and engage in FRH, this occurs because the intended victim is exercising their freedom of expression, and/or because of their work in delivering or promoting democracy, rights and equality.[171] Such targeting has forced some victims to withdraw from public or civic life altogether with the impact on their personal lives, professional lives and mental health substantial.

Harassment and intimidation were the most common forms of abuse experienced by those individuals and organisations targeted by extremists, but in contrast to organisations, individuals were more likely to experience doxing.[172] The use of doxing is particularly cruel

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170   Law Commission (2021) 'Modernising Communications Offences'. Accessed at
        https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/modernising-communications-offences-a-final-report
171   Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience Call for Evidence (2024)
172   ibid

and is multifaceted. Identifiable and personal information being shared publicly induces fear where an individual becomes acutely aware extremist perpetrators know where and how to target them. The Reviewer heard first-hand accounts of victims' families being targeted and in some instances victims taking the decision to relocate their families as a result of targeting and doxing by extremists.

Rather than being a one-off experience, our call for evidence indicates 79% of victims reported ongoing and repeated targeting by extremists. 74% further reported that the impact of such targeting lasted more than six months.

The long-lasting impact on victims of extremism is concerning. 44% of respondents to our call for evidence stated such targeting impacted their personal and/or family life, while 32% stated it had impacted them psychologically. Individuals also reported having experienced a loss of career, job and earnings. We have collated below a collection of chilling examples of the largest impacts suffered by victims as reported in our call to evidence.

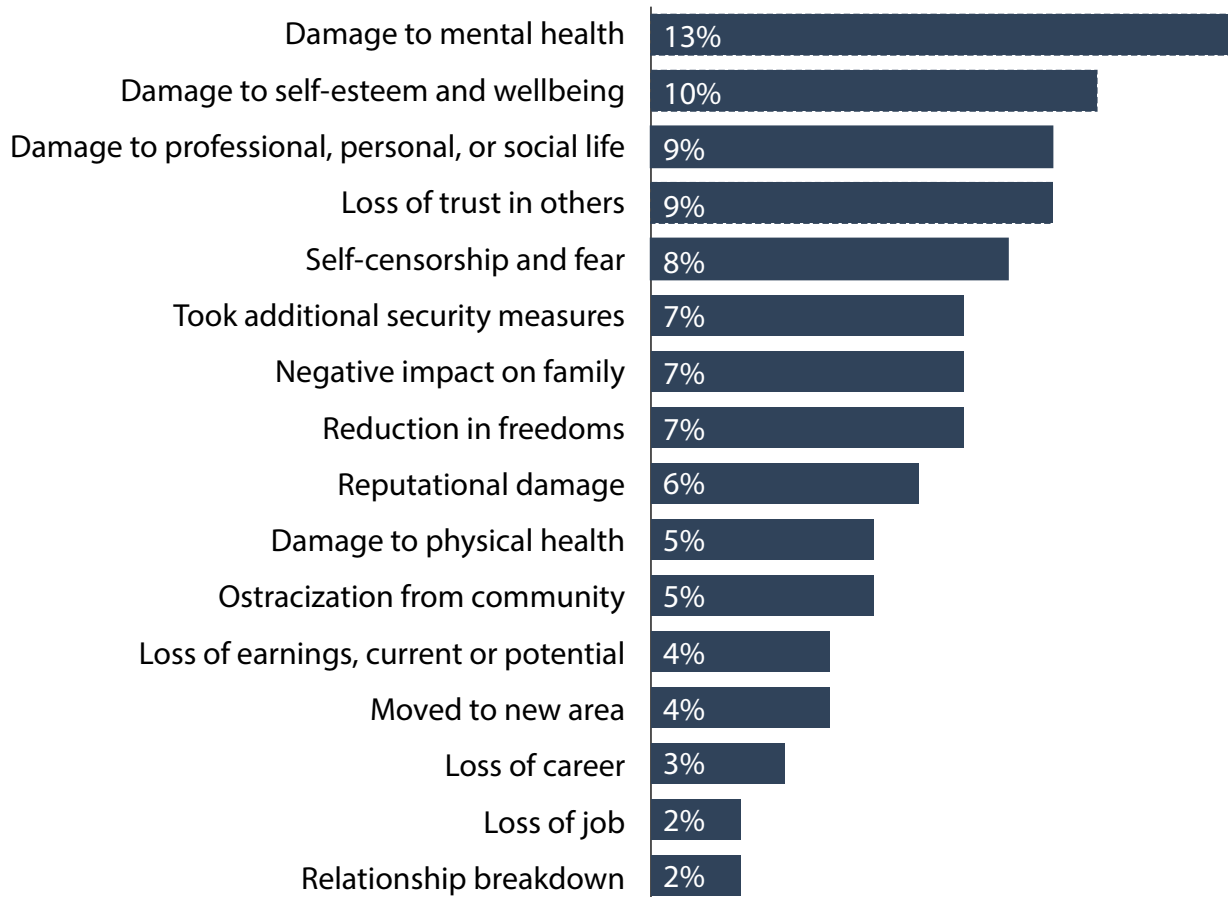| Impact	Percentage
Damage to mental health	13%
Damage to self-esteem and wellbeing	10%
Damage to professional, personal, or social life	9%
Loss of trust in others	9%
Self-censorship and fear	8%
Took additional security measures	7%
Negative impact on family	7%
Reduction in freedoms	7%
Reputational damage	6%
Damage to physical health	5%
Ostracization from community	5%
Loss of earnings, current or potential	4%
Moved to new area	4%
Loss of career	3%
Loss of job	2%
Relationship breakdown	2%

Figure 2: What was the impact on you/the individual of being targeted by extremists? (Overall)

Source: *Call for evidence – Independent Review into Social Cohesion and Resilience*

Despite the impact such targeting by extremists has on victims, evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that they received little if any support. 73% did not feel their experiences of victimisation by extremists were recognised by the law, police or government.[173]

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173   Independent Review of Social Cohesion Call for Evidence (2024)

Where respondents to the call for evidence were able to identify perpetrators, extremist and hate activists/organisations (23%) were the top perpetrator, followed by faith activists or faith leaders (15%) responsible for targeting individuals.[174] The Reviewer repeatedly heard of appalling levels of intra-faith harassment, as well as the subsequent lack of support and recognition these victims received from statutory agencies. The failure of the authorities to understand intra-faith harassment, support victims and prosecute those perpetrators motivated by extremism is concerning. We heard many cases of such targeting, some of which are included below.

However, in the continuing absence of any legal framework to outlaw hateful extremism[175], prosecuting extremists who deliberately target individuals and who are motivated by or intending to advance a political, religious or racial ideology means the severe impact experienced by victims is ignored. In many cases such victims will not benefit from the provisions of the Victims Code.

"I've been labelled a traitor, a lackey to the British, a snake who needs to 'watch my back'. My children have been harassed and have had to move school. My tyres have been slashed and my house is red-flagged. Threatening terms such as 'mushriq, munafiq, murtad' are openly used against me. The police don't understand the inciteful nature of such language, and how such language is creating a climate conducive to violence against other Muslims. Islamist extremists target Muslim practitioners in a way they do not target non-Muslim practitioners. I don't have confidence that either the police or the local authority understand the intra-community abuse I and other Muslims experience and how frightened we are. This intimidation directly contributes to a climate of fear among local Muslim communities – they are too frightened to challenge Islamist activists."

A Muslim official working for a local authority who is regularly targeted by an Islamist extremist organisation

"I'm a Sikh community activist. For years I have been repeatedly targeted by British Sikh fundamentalists. They have sought to discredit and undermine my work claiming I'm a traitor to the Sikh faith, that I'm not Sikh and that I seek to destroy the Sikh faith – even though I am very much a Sikh. They claim I'm a stooge of both the British and Indian government. These fundamentalist organisations and activists have initiated hate campaigns against me and written letters to other organisations to get me de-platformed and to stop me from speaking.

I've received a lot of messages and abuse by email including death threats and phone calls in the night. I have been accused of being a bad Sikh by community media outlets, reinforcing the messages of my perpetrators. This then gets shared on social media among the wider Sikh community. Attempts have also been made to try and silence and blackmail me.

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174   Independent Review of Social Cohesion Call for Evidence (2024)
175   Commission for Countering Extremism (2021) 'Operating with Impunity'

I don't feel safe going to certain areas across the country. I've also had to keep my home address a secret, and take different routes home each night for fear of being followed. They don't care about respecting my rights, they want to try and silence me and destroy me but I refuse to be silenced.

There is very little understanding of intra-faith abuse and harassment. The curtailment of my civil liberties and the freedoms I am entitled to hold in our country are undermined on a frequent basis with little recognition from the authorities. No one should live their life in fear in our country."

Testimony of a civil society activist

"I have regularly received death threats because of my work and because of my religious and academic beliefs which they consider heresy. As a Muslim, I have been repeatedly targeted by Islamist extremists with claims that I am a 'threat to Islam.' During one incident, I received many death threats which resulted in 18 months of police protection. I was very worried that my home would be firebombed, and my children used to cower underneath the kitchen table out of fear. I have been attacked both physically and verbally with my children by Islamist extremists. The impact on my career has been distressing. I have in effect been silenced. I had to turn down interviews and book deals as I could not cope with the trauma. I have been left traumatised and I know this intimidation has led me to self-censor when I did not want to."

Testimony from an Imam

Victims also shared how they were targeted by extremists because of their social cohesion and inter-faith activity. As one example, a Muslim woman told the Reviewer how she was fearful of sharing the fact that she had attended an inter-faith event held by the Chief Rabbi because she had previously experienced harassment and abuse from Muslim fundamentalists and extremists. She told the Reviewer other Muslim women are forced to self-censor, modify their behaviour and dress in fear of being targeted and abused by both Far-right and Islamist activists and that this was happening on a regular basis.

The targeting of victims, which is often public in nature, can create a wider climate of censorship and fear. The voice of community and civic partners is essential in building community resilience. Yet, we repeatedly heard how local civil society groups and community activists are less willing to challenge extremist activity, extremist activity or to even support cohesion efforts, because of the fear of also being targeted. The lack of support and response from authorities only exacerbates this issue. If not addressed, the likelihood of extremists being challenged becomes less likely. This will undermine social cohesion and encourage the mainstreaming of extremist narratives.

2.15 The Victims Code

We are concerned that despite the extreme cases heard about throughout the Review, individuals were often not given the support they needed. The Victims' Code of England and Wales focuses on victims' rights and sets out the minimum standard that organisations must provide to victims of crime.[176] The Code outlines 12 rights which victims should expect, including the right to be provided with information when reporting the crime, of being referred to services that support victims, having services and support tailored to their needs and other important rights.[177] However, these rights only apply to people who are victims of crime. It will be the case that some of the victims we identified, despite being victims of potential criminality have not been registered or treated as victims of crime by the police and thus not treated as victims under the code.

There are circumstances of some individuals whose experiences despite being lawful, has resulted in distressing circumstances for victims for example anti-social behaviour. We heard how Surrey Police are currently operating a separate approach to support victims of anti-social behaviour – as the Victim's Code does not apply to them, and there is an acceptance that their experiences require tailored support.

The Ministry of Justice told us that both they and the Home Office give funding to Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) to support victims of crime and in the case of the latter they have discretion to fund services for victims where criminal behaviour has not been proven. It is unclear as to what extent PCCs provide support to victims of FRH. The victims we have spoken to suggest it may be very limited or even absent.

2.16 Improving our response to FRH

As this chapter makes clear, one vital first step is to improve our data on FRH and its impacts. At an institutional level good practice can be taken from the NHS. The NHS Staff Survey is one of the largest workforce surveys in the world and has been conducted every year since 2003[178]. The Survey helpfully asks questions about harassment, abuse and the impact it has on NHS staff on an annual base. We recommend all professional bodies, unions, universities and regulators to conduct a similar annual survey, to understand the extent, severity and impact staff and members maybe experiencing from of FRH.

Furthermore, public institutions and statutory bodies should draft guidelines to ensure that they have the right protocols and approaches in place when dealing with incidences of FRH, especially when democratic rights and freedoms are being undermined. Alongside this, there needs to be greater training and guidance for staff and institutions about how they should respond to incidents and where support and help can be sought.

Since this Review was commissioned, the Online Safety Bill has now become law and Ofcom is the official regulator responsible for holding social media platforms to account. Social media platforms have a responsibility to create and support tools that restrict the ability of users to engage in behaviour that encourages harassment, pile-ons and other harmful activity. As the regulator, Ofcom should hold social media platforms to account on tackling freedom-restricting harassment on their platforms.

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176   Gov.uk (2005) 'The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales'. Accessed at
       https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-code-of-practice-for-victims-of-crime
177   ibid
178   NHS Website (2024) 'NHS Staff Survey'. Accessed at
       Working together to improve NHS staff experiences | NHS Staff Survey (nhsstaffsurveys.com)

Greater research is also needed on what interventions work in improving and changing people's negative behaviour to encourage cultural and societal change. While the law is one tool to help restrict such harassment, educational awareness is also needed. Lessons should be learnt from institutions such the NHS, Transport for London and others who have invested in zero-tolerance campaigns against abuse and harassment aimed at the general public. Learning can also be garnered from other similar campaigns, including those that aim to tackle sex-based discrimination and anti-social behaviour. Understanding who are the most appropriate voices and what approaches are effective in such campaigns is needed to help counter FRH. Experts who specialise in behavioural science and other relevant fields should also be approached to help build a holistic understanding and approach that could be applied to FRH.

Conclusion

"It is easy to dismiss harassment and self-censorship, especially in public life as the rough and tumble of politics. But when elected representatives are too scared to seek re-election and journalists fear pursuing public interest stories for fear of harassment and abuse, the effect on democratic life is a chilling one. But beyond politics and the media, harassment and self-censorship have an equally corrosive effect if universities fail to challenge group think, artists feel afraid to express themselves or people of faith feel unable to display symbols of their faith. In short, harassment and self-censorship strike at the heart of what it means to be a cohesive, liberal and open society, identifying and tackling both should be the goal of everyone involved in public and civic life."

More in Common[179]

This chapter attempts to identify, name and introduce what appears to be a prevalent phenomenon in our country which we have called freedom-restricting harassment. The Reviewer believes the evidence in this chapter is most likely to be the tip of the iceberg. There is so much we still do not know. Improving our understanding of the scale and impact of FRH, who the perpetrators are and their motivations is urgently needed, as it strikes at the heart of everyday life in Britain and the 'live and let live' culture that shapes our society.

The existence of such behaviour across our institutions will undermine the freedom and rich diversity of our country, as well as the very principles of our democracy: a free press, rigorous academic research, a diverse and inclusive political and public life and a healthy and active civic society. Witnessing FRH appears to directly contribute to the chilling effect of freedom of expression and other freedoms. It has the potential to create a downward spiral – breeding further fear, harassment and censorship potentially fragmenting our society.

FRH is arguably poisoning the bloodstream of our democracy. Defending pluralism and protecting the right of people to exercise their democratic rights is foundational to our nation, yet too little is being done to address this challenge.

There has been concern previously that attempts to tackle behaviour that causes harassment could amount to an attempt to restrict freedom of expression. However, this Review suggests the inability and unwillingness to tackle FRH is precisely leading to a restriction of freedom of expression, as well as a wide range of other freedoms and rights. The response or lack of

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179   More in Common (2023). Rapid Evidence Review: Harassment and censorship

response from the police, government and other institutions can either prevent the normalisation of FRH or encourage the normalisation of it. Demonstrating leadership at such times is critical.

It is important to recognise that tackling FRH is not just a legal challenge. It is ultimately a cultural and societal challenge. It is about human behaviour and how tolerant we truly are to difference, including diverse opinions, beliefs and faiths. It is about how much we recognise and value pluralism as a key characteristic of our democracy. If we want our rights and freedoms to be respected, we as individuals must respect the rights and freedoms of others in our country. There needs to be a wider public conversation about how such abuse and harassment cannot and should not be tolerated – and that any normalisation of such behaviour does not just affect those targeted but affects us all and the health and wellbeing of our nation. At its heart, FRH is about how we are citizens treat each other and what kind of country we want to live in.

Chapter 3

Freedom-restricting harassment: Victim case study of the Batley Grammar Religious Studies teacher
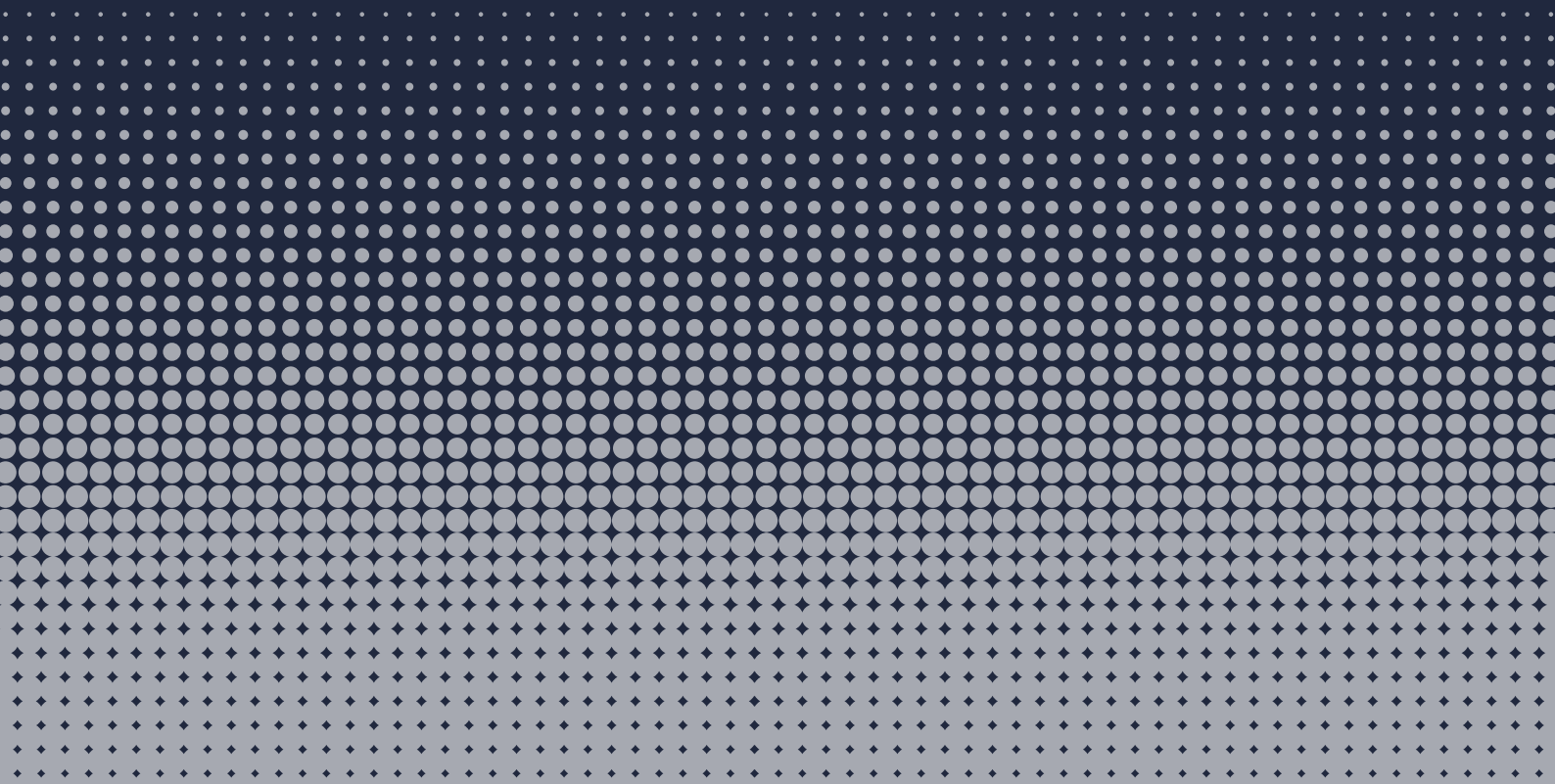
Introduction

In March 2021, a religious studies (RS) teacher at Batley Grammar School (BGS) went into hiding following accusations of blasphemy.[180] The teacher had delivered a lesson on free speech and blasphemy, with a resource that included images of the Prophet Muhammad, the Pope and Jesus Christ. At least two other teachers had also used the resource in question.[181]

Following the lesson, Muslims both from Batley and outside the area who took offence to the lesson arranged protests outside the school gates.[182] Almost immediately, the RS teacher began receiving threatening messages and an online campaign against him commenced. He and his partner's name and picture were published on social media.[183] Islamist and far right websites quickly hijacked the incident, worsening the growing tensions and anger.[184] Fearing for his and his family's safety, the teacher moved out of his home and the area on the first day of the protests. The school took the decision to suspend the RS teachers involved.[185]

Six months earlier, Mr. Samuel Paty, a schoolteacher who taught in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine outside of Paris, was beheaded by a jihadist on 16 October 2020 near his school.[186] The press reported that the attack on Mr Paty occurred following a social media campaign that allegedly had misrepresented his attempts to teach freedom of expression using cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad.[187] It is in this context that the following events took place.

This case study demonstrates the impact on victims of freedom-restricting harassment (FRH) and the failure of the authorities to respond adequately. The circumstances surrounding what happened to the RS teacher are profoundly shocking. What happened to him could potentially happen to anyone in the course of their job or profession. This lesson had been delivered at least four times previously, yet overnight his life changed and his ability to live in our free society was severely restricted.

An independent investigation examining what was taught in the lesson was announced shortly after and concluded in May 2021.[188] This did not include consideration of the wider context, the impact on the RS teacher, the implications for social cohesion or the appropriateness of the response by the school and statutory agencies. This chapter does assess these important issues. In recent years, some schools have had to respond to intimidating protests, campaigns against

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180 Drury, Colin.(2021) 'Batley school protesters demand teacher in Cartoon Row be dismissed', The Independent. Accessed at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/batley-grammar-school-protest-cartoon-teacher-b1823129.html

181 We are aware that there were other teachers who also used to teach the lesson but for the purposes of this case study we are going to be solely focussing on the RS teacher who went into hiding.

182 Sky News (2021) 'Batley Grammar School: Teacher suspended over Prophet Mohammed Image Row can return to classroom'. Accessed at: https://news.sky.com/story/batley-grammar-school-teacher-suspended-over-prophet-mohammed-image-row-can-return-to-classroom-12318003

183 ITV News (2021) 'Protests outside Batley Grammar school over Prophet Muhammad cartoon row 'not right', says minister'. Accessed at: https://www.itv.com/news/2021-03-25/dfe-accused-of-amplifying-divisions-over-prophet-mohammed-cartoon-school-row

184 ibid.

185 Adams, R. and Wolfe-Robinson, M. (2021) 'Batley teacher suspended after showing Charlie Hebdo image can return', The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/may/26/batley-teacher-suspended-after-showing-charlie-hebdo-image-can-return#:~:text=The%20teacher%20was%20suspended%20in,protests%20outside%20the%20school%27s%20gates

186 Bennoune, K. and Shaheed, A. (2021) 'Honour slain French teacher Samuel Paty by defending rights, defying fundamentalism – UN experts. United Nations'. Accessed at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/10/honour-slain-french-teacher-samuel-paty-defending-rights-defying.

187 ibid

188 Sky News (2021) 'Batley Grammar School: Teacher suspended over Prophet Mohammed Image Row can return to classroom'. Accessed at: https://news.sky.com/story/batley-grammar-school-teacher-suspended-over-prophet-mohammed-image-row-can-return-to-classroom-12318003

teaching staff and other activity which have generated significant fear.[189] It is vital that lessons are learnt to help improve support and guidance for schools and other partners, during what can be a distressing and complex situation. While criticisms are made of some of the agencies, it is important to recognise that there is inadequate support and guidance available when such events immediately occur. This must be improved.

This Reviewer spoke to numerous witnesses and relevant stakeholders, including:

- the RS teacher
- one of the other suspended teachers who had used the resource
- West Yorkshire Police
- Kirklees Council
- Batley Multi Academy Trust (The Trust)
- The National Education Union (NEU)
- other former and current teaching staff
- current serving police officers, including counterterrorism officers
- other relevant stakeholders, including local civil society actors
- The Department for Education
- local politicians and parliamentarians
- academics with specialised knowledge of the local area

3.1   Timeline of immediate incident

22 March 2021

The RS teacher taught a lesson at BGS on blasphemy which included pictures of the Prophet Muhammad, the Pope and Jesus Christ. Pupils were shown a caricature of the Prophet Muhammad wearing a turban containing a cartoon bomb. This RS lesson for Year 9 pupils aimed to facilitate a discussion on how pupils and society in general should deal with issues of free speech, blasphemy and appropriate ways to respond. As an RS teacher, he understood that he was obligated to teach students about appropriate responses to controversial issues as part of guidance on promoting fundamental British values, as part of spiritual, moral, social, and cultural (SMSC) development in schools.[190] The lesson had been taught for the two preceding years and was part of the school's curriculum, which had been signed off the by senior leadership team.

Later that afternoon, a parent of a child in the year 9 class called the RS teacher about the lesson, saying that the image of the Prophet Muhammad should not have been shown to pupils, before warning that 'there will be repercussions for his actions'. The RS teacher informed the parent that he should speak to the headteacher, but was shaken by the phone call and escalated the matter to the deputy head teacher.

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189   See for example: 2019 protests at Anderton Park Primary School,
      https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/shocking-moment-protester-points-anderton-17098180 or 2021 anti-vaccine
      protests at a Liverpoolschool, https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/sajid-javid-health-secretary-keir-starmer-liverpool-priti-patel-b962436.html
190   Department for Education (2014) 'Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools'. Accessed at: https://assets.publishing.
      service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380595/SMSC_Guidance_Maintained_Schools.pdf

23 March

The senior leadership at BGS took the decision to send a letter to the school community including all parents in every year group, apologising for the image used.[191] At the time of the incident, there were over 1,000 pupils at BGS.[192] The RS teacher spoke to the assistant headteacher, but was not consulted on the letter before it was sent out.

24 March

A departmental staff meeting was held to discuss the situation. The meeting was not attended by the RS teacher.[193]

25 March

That morning, the RS teacher was made aware of a Facebook post encouraging people to protest outside the school at 7:30am, to demand that the school take action with some calling for the RS teacher's resignation.[194] Between 40 to 50 protestors gathered outside the school. He was told by the school not to go into school. He was also told that some protestors had weapons, although the police and council have subsequently said they had not been made aware of any weapons at the protest.

The NEU held an online meeting with all teachers at BGS. Teachers were concerned for their welfare, the welfare of the primary aged school children and what would happen if acts of violence were to occur. Teachers expressed support for the RS teacher's welfare.

The RS teacher began receiving threatening messages on social media. His picture, home, car and name were also shared on Instagram and Snapchat, and messages on WhatsApp encouraged people to 'defend the Prophet.' Other messages included 'watch your back', while his and his partner's picture were shared on Facebook groups with comments including 'let's sort this out for the Prophet', 'he should be scared for his life', 'let us know if you know where he is', 'if u see him u know what to do [sic].' A local Muslim charity called Purpose of Life published an open letter naming the RS teacher.[195]

The RS teacher contacted the police about the protests, informing them that he was the teacher that was at the centre of the protests. The police stated they were already aware of the protests. He was unhappy with the lack of concern by the police. He prevented his young children from going to school that day – instead he gathered his family and a few belongings and left West Yorkshire. The RS teacher contacted the NEU for support.

The RS teacher was informed that he was suspended and that he could not communicate with members of staff because of suspension procedure guidelines.

191   Martin, H. (2021) 'Gavin Williamson condemns death threats against Batley grammar school teacher who was suspended after showing cartoons of prophet Mohammed sparking uproar among Muslim pupils and parents, Daily Mail Online'. Accessed at: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9404435/Gavin-Williamson-condemns-death-threats-against-Batley-Grammar-School-teacher.html
192   GOV.UK (2021) 'Get Information about Schools: Batley Grammar School, GOV.UK'. Accessed at: https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/Establishments/Establishment/Details/137487
193   The reasons for his non-attendance are disputed.
194   Dzinzi, M. (2021) 'Second protest at Batley Grammar School 'to defend Prophet Muhammad's honour' and show them 'we won't go away', Yorkshire Live'. Accessed at: https://www.examinerlive.co.uk/news/local-news/second-protest-batley-grammar-school-20259126
195   Hargrave, R. (2021) 'Regulator contacts charity over blasphemy protests at Yorkshire School, Civil Society'. Accessed at: https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/protests-charity-commission.html

Senior leaders at the school had a meeting with a number of stakeholders including a local Muslim activist who was one of the protestors despite having no children at the school. Following this meeting, senior leaders at the school organised a televised press conference, issuing an apology while also announcing an independent investigation into what happened to corroborate the facts.[196]

The Department for Education issued a press statement condemning the protests and threats made to teachers, and confirmed the right of schools to include a range of ideas and materials in curriculum, some of which may be challenging or controversial.[197]

Tracy Brabin, then Labour MP for Batley and Spen, issued a statement stating, "the upset and offence this has caused is understandable, but it was also predictable. I am pleased that the school has recognised it was inappropriate and apologised for the offence caused."[198] A few days later, Ms Brabin issued another statement making clear that, "no teacher should be facing intimidation or threats, there is no excuse for that…I welcome the school's apology and recognition of the offence this has caused…".[199]

26 March

Protests resumed. The Trust decided to close the school and proceed to online learning.[200]

BGS identified two further teachers who had used the resource in question and suspended them pending investigation.[201]

Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick stated during media interviews that teachers should be able to appropriately show images of the Prophet Mohamed.[202]

The Charity Commission issued a statement that they are aware of a letter from the Purpose of Life charity which included the name of the RS teacher.[203] They announced that they had contacted the trustees for further information, to respond to regulatory concerns. The letter was removed from the charity's social media.

27-29 March

There were no further protest outside of the school, although there were continued threats of further protests before the start of the Easter Break on the 29 March.

196   Teale, C. (2021) 'Batley head teacher issues 'unequivocal apology' for use of 'completely inappropriate' Prophet Muhammad cartoon in RS, Yorkshire Live'. Accessed at: https://www.examinerlive.co.uk/news/west-yorkshire-news/batley-head-teacher-issues-unequivocal-20256891

197   Leeson, Lucy (2021) 'Department for Education Issues Statement after Batley Grammar School protest, Yorkshire Post'. Accessed at: https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/education/department-for-education-issues-statement-after-batley-grammar-school-protest-3179228

198   Hazell, Will (2021) 'Teacher suspended at Batley Grammar School after Prophet Mohamed Cartoon Sparks protest, inews.co.uk'. Accessed at: https://inews.co.uk/news/education/teacher-suspended-batley-grammar-school-prophet-mohamed-cartoon-protest-929889

199   Turner, Camilla et al. (2021) 'Labour and union accused of not doing enough to stand up for Batley teacher, The Telegraph'. Accessed at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/03/26/labour-teaching-union-accused-not-enough-bately-teacher/

200   Davies, Gareth (2021) 'Batley Grammar School closes for second day as protesters gather in wake of Prophet Mohammed Row', The Telegraph. Accessed at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/03/26/batley-grammar-school-closes-second-day-protesters-gather-wake/

201   Chaudhary, Vivek. (2021) 'Exclusive: Two more staff are suspended at Blasphemy Row School over claims they knew RE teacher was going to show pupils 'offensive' image of the Prophet Muhammad', Daily Mail Online'. Accessed at: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9425973/Two-staff-suspended-Batley-blasphemy-row-school.html

202   BBC News (2021) 'Batley school protests: Prophet Muhammad cartoon row 'hijacked', BBC News'. Accessed at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-56523179

203   Hargrave, Russell. (2021) 'Charity Commission issues official warning to Purpose of Life after Blasphemy row, Civil Society'. Accessed at: https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/charity-commission-issues-official-warning-to-charity-at-heart-of-blasphemy-row.html

3.2   Reviewing the lesson taught

An independent panel was appointed in April 2021 by the Batley Multi Academy Trust, to investigate the circumstances surrounding the delivery of the RS lesson on 22 March 2021.[204] The investigation concluded in May 2021. An executive summary of the findings were shared with the Reviewer.

The investigation found that the RS lesson taught was, "in line with national guidance and Local Authority area agreements. Difficult issues such as blasphemy are included in the curriculum offer, as these are a key part of the national curriculum and are important learning points for all our young people. The image in question was used on 22 March as part of the 'controversial issues' topic in the RS scheme of work for Year 9."[205]

Furthermore, "the image was included to initiate a discussion about the meaning of 'blasphemy' within the secure confines of a classroom setting"[206] and that "teaching staff who developed and delivered the lesson genuinely believed that using the image had an educational purpose and benefit, and that it was not used with the intention of causing offence."[207]

3.3   Impact on RS teacher

The events of March 2021 have had a permanent and profound effect on the life of the RS teacher and his family. He is currently suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder because of his ordeal. Despite being subsequently cleared by an independent investigation, those who continuously targeted and threatened the RS teacher changed his and his family's life overnight. His name, picture and address were being shared widely on social media alongside threatening comments. Having made the decision to leave his home almost immediately, he was made aware from neighbours that groups of men and teenagers had been congregating outside his house. The threats against him continued for a prolonged period after.

Not feeling reassured by his conversations with West Yorkshire Police, he felt he had no other option but to go into hiding as he feared for his and his family's life. He left his home, his wider family and friends, the area he grew up in and the school he enjoyed teaching at. He told the Reviewer he felt 'totally isolated' and 'abandoned', stating he received no immediate support or any recognition of a duty of protection or care from the police, his local council (Kirklees), the local MP, the school, or the Trust. The trauma of his experience combined with the lack of support and care by the above agencies left him feeling suicidal. He, his partner and his young children were placed into temporary accommodation which he felt was squalid and unsuitable for living. His children had to sleep on mattresses on the floor and continued to miss out on receiving an education for many months afterwards. This followed on from the lack of in-school education his children had received as a result of Covid regulations. The impact on his mental health has been profound, compounded by the lack of help and support from the statutory agencies he expected would help him.

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204   BBC News (2021) 'Batley school protests: Probe into Prophet Muhammad Row'. Accessed at:
       https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-56587709
205   Humanists UK (2021) 'School to no longer show Prophet Mohammed'. Accessed at:
       https://humanists.uk/2021/05/27/school-to-no-longer-show-prophet-mohammed/
206   ibid.
207   ibid.

3.4   West Yorkshire Police

A) Initial response and analysis of West Yorkshire Police's actions

West Yorkshire police told the Reviewer that the incident was classified as a 'neighbourhood incident' and was dealt with by neighbourhood officers[208]. An experienced inspector took command of the incident and responded to the protests. They stated they sought guidance from National Counter-Terrorism Policing to assess the intelligence of the threat picture. They claim nothing in the intelligence urged caution or concern and the RS teacher was perceived to be at the lowest level of threat, as the threats were from 'unknown people by unknown means.'[209] As it was deemed low, with most threats online, local officers were used to handle the incident. A family contact officer was assigned and was part of the investigation team. Regular reassessment of the threat occurred but remained low. If the threat had been judged a medium risk, police suggested a different approach would have been taken.

Regarding protests at the school, the police told the Reviewer that in such situations their response must be proportionate and balanced. For example, turning up in riot gear would not have been helpful to the situation. They are mindful of the right for people to protest and to exercise their right to free speech, while also regarding community safety overall. The protests lasted for two days before the Easter holidays began and they did not feel it was a difficult incident despite its high-profile nature. West Yorkshire Police commented that as 'no-one was physically injured and no serious offence took place', the outcome from a policing perspective was positive.[210] They stated the partnership work they undertook went well and showed how local officers understood who they needed to engage with.

B) View of the RS teacher on the immediate response of West Yorkshire Police

The RS teacher is highly critical of the police, their lack of meaningful interventions and lack of support and communication. By 25th March as protests erupted outside the school and online threats against him were being made, he had already lost confidence in the police, their failure to understand the seriousness of what was occurring and the threatening nature of being accused of blasphemy. He was aware of the beheading of school teacher Samuel Paty in Paris six months earlier following accusations of blasphemy, and did not have any confidence that the police understood the potential risk and serious harm he was in.

After he relocated, he visited a police station for help, and they remarked that he had 'made it harder for them by moving' as the incident occurred under a different police force. He did not know who oversaw his case, instead claiming to have had five different police officers ringing to say they were in charge of his case.

He eventually had a DCI who helped him change the number plates on his car and who told him they considered there was a serious threat to his life. He has never been told by the police if the investigation has closed or if any progress has been made in arresting those who threatened him.

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208   Engagement meeting with West Yorkshire Police, 25.01.2023
209   Engagement meeting with West Yorkshire Police, 25.01.2023
210   Engagement meeting with West Yorkshire Police, 25.01.2023

C) The Reviewer's assessment of West Yorkshire Police

Although it is not clear why the protests were not dispersed considering the Covid restrictions in place at that time, policing of the incident was considered by West Yorkshire Police as being positive because no serious offences had been committed and no-one was physically hurt. This view however does not take into consideration that the threat of any potential violence was reduced significantly as the RS teacher left Batley almost immediately on the first day of protests.

The police did recognise the right for people to protest and to not unlawfully curtail freedom of expression, but they failed to understand the seriousness of the charge of blasphemy, the FRH he was subjected to and the censoring effect it had – on both the individual concerned and in the local area - and the climate of incitement that was evoked on social media.

Conversations we had with other experienced police officers were critical of the West Yorkshire Police response. Firstly, there was a lack of public robust messaging that made clear that any threatening, harassing or intimidatory behaviour against the RS teacher and other teaching staff would not be tolerated and individuals would experience the full force of the law. In their view, this would have been an important action to help create a climate which dissuaded people from engaging in further harassment and intimidation aimed at the RS teacher.

Treating this as a neighbourhood incident was a mistake due to the seriousness of the blasphemy charge. This was partly due to assessing the threat to the RS teacher as being low due to it being from 'unknown people and by unknown means.'[211] Such criteria as used by Counter-Terrorism policing is unhelpful when dealing with cases of blasphemy, as it fails to take into consideration that acts of blasphemy-related violence can often be from 'unknown' people. It is a mistake to assume that in the absence of direct intelligence, the threat to individuals must be low. Accusations of blasphemy have led to calls of violence in our country and abroad, and it only requires one individual to take violent action into their own hands.

Incidents of blasphemy related violence in the UK or to UK citizens have increased in recent years.[212] These include the threats and attack on Sir Salman Rushdie,[213] the 2016 murder of Ahmadiyah Muslim Asad Shah in Glasgow by Tanveer Ahmed,[214] the murder of grandfather Jalal Uddin by two ISIS sympathisers in Rochdale in 2016 and others[215]. Charges of blasphemy can result in serious cases of violence and even murder. The intelligence and policing community must make a wider contextual assessment if they are to be better prepared to prevent future incidents and attacks.

More widely, our conversations with stakeholders left us concerned about the use of so-called 'community leaders' as 'representative voices' and the poor level of training and understanding among some police forces. This appears to be a wider problem across the country, with the quote below representing a view we repeatedly heard.

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211   Engagement meeting with West Yorkshire Police, 25.01.2023

212   Duffy, L. (2023) 'Violence against perceived blasphemers in the West: From Khomeini's Fatwa to the Present', Counter Extremism Project. Accessed at: https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2023-06/Violence%20Against%20Perceived%20Blasphemers%20in%20the%20West_July%202022.pdf

213   Milman, O. (2022) 'Salman Rushdie Attack: Details emerge about New Jersey suspect', The Guardian. Accessed at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/aug/13/salman-rushdie-attack-suspect-new-jersey

214   Carrell, Severin (2016) 'Man who murdered Glasgow shopkeeper Asad Shah in sectarian attack jailed', The Guardian. Accessed at at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/aug/09/tanveer-ahmed-jailed-for-murder-glasgow-shopkeeper-in-sectarian-attack

215   BBC News (2016) 'Jalal Uddin murder: Syeedy guilty over Rochdale Imam Death'. Accessed at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-37388073

> *"The lack of training for police on understanding the diversity of theological interpretations and beliefs within a minority community is shockingly dismal. When it comes to diversity training, the extent of such training extends to 'to remember to take off your shoes when you enter a mosque.' It's rare for police officers to have any understanding of for example the Sunni – Shia schism never mind other sects e.g. Barelvi, Deobandi or other movements, their beliefs and views some of which are highly concerning. This includes those Barelvi clerics who preach murder for anyone who insults the Prophet Muhammad. Very few police officers have any understanding of these issues and instead end up inadvertently supporting extremist preachers in the misguided belief that they have a positive relationship with a minority community."*
>
> Local police officer who wanted to remain anonymised

This is not a new concern. In the case of Shakeel Begg V BBC, local police officers, other statutory partners and civic society activists supported and even provided a character reference for Imam Shakeel Begg despite his extremist activity.[216] Yet Begg was found by the court to have promoted and encouraged violence and had espoused a series of extremist Islamic positions, as well as supporting organisations that had campaigned on behalf of suspected terrorists.[217]

3.5 Batley Grammar School and the Multi-Academy Trust

A) Initial response and analysis of Batley Grammar School's actions

Batley Grammar School is a co-educational free school for pupils aged between 4 to 16 years of age.[218] It is part of the Batley Multi Academy Trust, who told us the school found itself in a difficult and distressing situation. They had never witnessed such protests in the past and the incident was a traumatic time. Their highest priority was keeping their young people and staff safe and ensuring minimum disruption to the delivery of education. The school leadership stressed that decisions were made under extreme pressure at the beginning of the crisis as it unfolded.

Despite the RS teacher later being cleared of wrongdoing, it was the Trust's view that the use of the actual image in the lesson was inappropriate because of the potential offense it could cause. Senior leadership of the school expressed to the Reviewer that they believe their response during this period was correct and stand by their actions.

The school told us the support of the teachers involved was a priority from the start of the incident. Advice was taken from the police and other agencies on ensuring safety, contact was maintained with the staff and their unions and access to confidential counselling services was made available via the Trust's employee assistance programme. The Trust informed us that they provided counselling support for the RS teacher for several months following the incident, although the RS teach claims only to have attended one counselling session in August 2021 which he found counter-productive.

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216   Begg V BBC (2016) 'Neutral Citation Number: [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB)' Accessed at
       https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/shakeel-begg-v-bbc-judgment-final-20161028.pdf
217   ibid.
218   https://www.batleygrammar.co.uk/

B) View of the RS teacher on the immediate response of Batley Grammar School and Trust

The RS teacher claims he did not receive any support when the incident was occurring, from either the Trust or BGS. He claims the senior leadership at the school had little contact with him and did not do enough to ascertain the facts before the press conference. He felt they did not show any kind of solidarity despite the fact that the lesson had already been delivered during the previous two years and had been signed off by the senior leadership team. The RS teacher believes the response from the senior leadership worsened his situation. In particular, he felt that sending out the letter of apology to the whole school community was akin to 'throwing petrol on a flame'. He felt such an action was not proportionate and instead acted as a catalyst for encouraging protests outside the school.

The Trust's engagement with a local Muslim activist with no children at the school was criticised by the RS teacher. He also believes that offering an apology at the press conference before the independent investigation had been carried out had in effect 'thrown him under the bus.' He claims there was no duty of care provided to him and the school's primary concern instead appeared to be appeasing the protestors rather than standing by and supporting the school's own teaching staff.

C) The Reviewer's Assessment of Batley Grammar School and Multi-Academy Trust

We recognise the difficult situation the school and headteacher found themselves in. We also recognise that the school's priority was to ensure children's education was not disrupted and to resume normal operation as quickly as possible. However, the school also has a duty to the safety and wellbeing of the RS teaching staff who were directly affected and to support them in such frightening scenarios.

We believe there are lessons to be learnt from this incident:

- The Reviewer questions whether the suspension of the RS teacher as part of the school's disciplinary process was the correct procedure to take. While some instances could warrant an immediate suspension, the RS teacher, in this case, was the victim of a campaign of harassment. While the Trust told us suspension is a neutral act, optically, some protestors saw the suspension as a win against a blasphemer while others viewed it as a capitulation to hardliners.

- Secondly, rather than suspending the RS teacher, a pause on teaching the specific blasphemy lesson could have been announced until the independent investigation concluded.

- As the suspension procedure dictates that the incident should not be discussed with other teachers, the RS teacher was told that he was not allowed to communicate with any other staff member at the school. This would have further added to the RS teacher's experience of isolation as he described. The Trust has a duty of care towards their teaching staff and are accountable for the health and safety of their teachers.[219]

- The Reviewer having seen a copy of the letter sent on 23 March to the entire school believes the content was unhelpful as it failed to provide any context within which the image in

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219   Department for Education (2022) 'Health and Safety: responsibilities and duties for school',
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-and-safety-advice-for-schools/responsibilities-and-duties-for-schools; see also
Department for Education (2020), 'Governance handbook Academy trusts and maintained schools'

question was in use, for example, that it had been used for educational purposes only without any malicious intent. Furthermore, the response should have been focussed on the parents of those in the class and, possibly, the year group. A response to all parents at this early stage was not necessary and the Reviewer believes that the letter most likely made the situation worse for the RS teacher.

- The engagement with self-appointed 'community leaders' who were not neutral nor have children at the school was unnecessary and counterproductive. Such activists should not have been consulted with or seen as people who could help calm the situation. Reliance on self-appointed faith 'community leaders' who claim to represent entire communities can be deeply counterproductive and in fact undermine cohesion and those Muslim voices who seek to come to a peaceful outcome.

- At the press conference held on 24 March, it was made clear that the image of the Prophet Muhammad shown in the classroom was a 'totally inappropriate image which should not have been used.'[220] However, the context of its use should have been made clear in that the image was being used as part of a lesson about blasphemy to facilitate discussion in the safety of a classroom. It was definitely not the RS teacher's intention to cause offence, create division or for any other malicious reason.

- At this press conference, and in the statement by the Trust following the independent investigation, it should have been made clear that threatening and intimidatory messages to teaching staff will not be tolerated and would be reported to the police. Messaging could have helped set appropriate boundaries and send a strong message of what constitutes unacceptable behaviour.

- The Trust's response to the independent investigation in April 2021 stated that it would "not avoid addressing challenging subject matter in its classrooms but it is committed to ensuring that offence is not caused at any point and that this is always done with care and sensitivity, enabling students to build empathy, mutual respect and understanding." The Reviewer is concerned what this means in practice. The very nature of challenging and controversial topics will result in some finding such discussion and material offensive. Protecting pupils from offense, which is often subjective, should not be the priority. Instead, focus should be placed on how pupils should respond to things that they will inevitably see in their lifetime in a diverse democracy that do cause offense. This is what the original RS lesson tried to teach.

- The lack of national guidance and support for schools in advising how best to respond to such incidents is inadequate. Such incidents can be frightening and intimidating. The Department for Education has a crucial role to play in providing guidance and resources for headteachers and wider school leaders.

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220 Teale, C. (25 March 2021) 'Batley head teacher issues 'unequivocal apology' for use of 'completely inappropriate' Prophet Muhammad cartoon in RS', Yorkshire Live. Accessed at:
https://www.examinerlive.co.uk/news/west-yorkshire-news/batley-head-teacher-issues-unequivocal-20256891

3.6   Kirklees Council

A) Initial response and analysis of Kirklees' actions

Council officials believe the approach taken by the school was the right one, including the letter sent by BGS to the whole school community. Like the school, they felt it was important to ensure school lessons and the children's education were not disrupted. They also stated it was important to them to maintain a long-term relationship with the local Muslim community, some of whom were impacted by what was happening at the school.

They had regular communication with the police and were being guided by them in relation to the threat assessment and appropriate response. The police did not suggest there was a significant risk to the teacher. If they had done, the council claim they would have taken a different approach, but did not specify what this would have looked like. Although they did speak to the RS teacher's NEU representative, they did not have any direct contact with the RS teacher himself, nor did they assess the wellbeing or impact on his children. They did not make any public comment and believed putting out any kind of statement would have been counterproductive. When the RS teacher left the area, they express this limited what they were able to do.

B) View of the RS teacher on the immediate response of Kirklees Council

The RS teacher told the Reviewer he was appalled at the lack of input or any apparent concern for his or his children's wellbeing. He claims he received 'zero support and help from the council'. He is highly critical of the council's approach and believes they did not any at any point consider or believe they had any duty to provide him or his children support.

C) The Reviewer's assessment of Kirklees Council's response

Kirklees Council told us they deliver significant work to help build community cohesion and that it is an important priority for them. They also say their priority was to ensure the protests did not disrupt the education of children at the school.

The Reviewer was struck by the lack of consideration for the RS teacher and his family. Our engagement and conversations with Kirklees Council left us feeling there was a lack of any empathy or consideration for the RS teacher, his partner and his children. While being provided ample opportunity to engage, the Reviewer was disappointed in the defensive approach taken by Kirklees Council from the outset which exhibited a complete lack of receptivity to reflect on or learn from what had happened.

We appreciate that council officials may have received little, if any, training on the issue of blasphemy and how to respond to such incidents. However, this does not excuse the council from doing much more to consider what help and support they could provide to the family overall. While they were right to want the education of pupils at BGS to resume as quickly as possible, they did not appear to consider the education or wellbeing of the RS teacher's children who were directly impacted by the incident. Council officials clearly did not understand or appreciate the seriousness of the incident, and the devastating impact it had on him and his children.

Understandably, the council wanted the protests to end as soon as possible. They believed it was critical to ensure long term damage was not done to their relationship with the local Muslim community, in order to maintain cohesion in the area. But it is erroneous to think that they had to 'pick a side' and support either the teacher or those local Muslims who were offended. There is not a singular Muslim view on such issues, nor is there ever. Many Muslim parents, while

concerned about what was being taught, did not support the protests, the protestors or those engaging in intimidating behaviour towards the RS teacher. In fact, many supported the RS teacher and remarked he was a good teacher who did not deserve to be suspended.

We do not accept the council's view that putting out a statement during the time of the protests would have worsened the situation. Calling for calm, asking people to think about the impact of protests on the welfare of children and making it clear that teachers should not be threatened or intimidated in any situation would have demonstrated much needed leadership. It would have helped send a clear message that this kind of behaviour is not justified under any circumstances.

Equally the role of local MPs in articulating a clear, unequivocal, and public message is critical.

3.7   Overall assessment

With incidents like this there are many considerations – from reducing the disruption to children's education and ensuring public safety and people's right to protest, to protecting those individuals and victims who are being threatened or intimidated. Significant consideration had been given to some of these issues, but in the view of the Reviewer, far more could have been done in:

a)   taking a victim-centred approach and providing support to the RS teacher and his family

b)   all actors articulating a clear and robust message that any online or offline activity that was designed to intimidate, harass, or cause significant fear would not be tolerated. In fact, there appeared to be little if any condemnation of those perpetrators who did engage in such activity.

Engaging with all parties is clearly necessary. However, the Reviewer is concerned this did not happen in practice.

Before the facts were fully established of what had been taught in the classroom and why, inaccurate assumptions had been made about the motivation of the RS teacher. The teacher and his family quickly became the victims of ideologically motivated perpetrators who felt justified in targeting the RS teacher. It is the view of the Reviewer that such perpetrators had no concern about cohesion or the RS teacher and instead engaged in such activity as a means of enforcing their dogmatic beliefs on the school and wider community.

It goes without saying that parents can raise concerns about what their children are taught at school. It is also important that schools engage with parents to provide a factual account of what is being taught, why, and to address any concerns they may have. This is important because as we have repeatedly seen, misinformation, is often employed in such scenarios which further inflame the situation and rile up protestors.[221]

Those parents who did have concerns but chose not to protest or engage in threatening behaviour demonstrated the importance of engaging with the school in a respectful way and in the spirit of mutual dialogue.

It is evident that there is a need to improve training among statutory agencies on dealing with such incidents and the need to take a victim centred approach. This Review has identified a wider systematic failure in recognising victims of freedom-restricting harassment. Despite the NEU

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221   Commission for Countering Extremism (2019) 'Countering Hateful Extremism', https://assets.publishing.service. gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874101/200320_Challenging_Hateful_Extremism.pdf; see also Court Judgement (2019) Birmingham City Council – v – Mr Shakeel Afsar & Others https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Birmingham-CC-v-Afsar-No-3-2019-EWHC-3217-QB-Final.pdf

not having had any particular training on such issues the Reviewer is aware of, we have been impressed by the leadership, support and care demonstrated by the NEU to the RS teacher. From the moment they were contacted, the local representative responded with urgency, immediately recognising the seriousness of the issue and the need to protect and support the RS teacher. Whether engaging with the media, the local authority, or the police to monitoring social media abuse and providing daily support and advice to the RS teacher, the NEU have continuously provided immeasurable support for the RS teacher.

The RS teacher was well liked by many students and parents. A petition calling for him to be reinstated at the school at the time of the protests reached 60,000 signatures.[222] Those protestors who felt justified to use threatening and incendiary behaviour because they had been religiously offended is no defence. While engaging with all parties in these situations is clearly necessary, the Reviewer is concerned that this did not happen. Instead, in attempting to defuse the protests, the protection of religious sensibilities and not wanting to cause offence became the primary concern for the agencies and authorities.

Current victim support structures in general do not officially recognise victims of freedom-restricting harassment like the RS teacher despite the long-lasting impact on his life. Nor was the Victim's Code applied to the RS teacher despite the serious and traumatic nature of his case which was compounded by the lack of recognition and support for him. We have highlighted our concern about this in this Review and have put forward recommendations in response.

Other considerations

3.8 Limitations on protests outside schools

Whilst limitations on the right to protest are rightly the topic of significant debate, the Reviewer questions whether it is right that protests should be permitted potentially indefinitely directly outside primary and secondary school premises. In relation to blasphemy, one poll found that half of British teachers believe that if blasphemy-related protests led by external advocacy groups or activists occurred outside their schools there would be a risk to their physical safety.[223] Three quarters of teachers (75%) thought that if protests break out, they would be 'damaging' to the teacher involved, with around four in ten (39%) indicating that they would be 'very damaging'.[224]

Freedom of speech and freedom to protest are hugely important to our democracy. However, any environment in which an intimidating and threatening atmosphere is generated at primary and secondary schools should surely be avoided which can impact children's education and their safety and overall wellbeing. School is a place of learning and education and should provide a safe and welcoming environment to children. Children should not have to experience angry and disruptive protests which may present physical dangers such as blocking pavements or create an intimidating and frightening environment that can impact their education and overall wellbeing. The Reviewer notes that for some time it has been illegal to protest outside abortion clinics, as well as other restricted zones.[225]

222   Elliott, S. (2019) 'Over 60,000 sign petition supporting Batley teacher', accessed at
      https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/over-60000-sign-petition-supporting-23815557
223   Dr Damon L Perry (2023) 'Blasphemy' in Schools. Policy Exchange Accessed at
      https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/blasphemy-in-schools/
224   ibid
225   Badshah, Nadeem (2022) 'MPs back plans for abortion clinic buffer zones in England and Wales', The Guardian. Accessed at:
      https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/18/mps-back-plans-for-abortion-clinic-buffer-zones-in-england-and-wales

The harm of such protests to the school community and local area has already been recognised. In the case of Birmingham CC v Afsar (No 3) [2019] EWHC 3217 (QB) protests outside Anderton Park Primary School that were held for months resulted in the harassment, abuse and distress of both staff and students. In this case, the High Court imposed a permanent injunction outside the school.[226]

We recommend that a similar prohibition be enshrined in law – that a buffer zone of 150m be placed around schools, with the possible exception of pickets relating to industrial action by school staff.

3.9 Concerns about press reporting

Such a story would inevitably receive local and national media interest and rightly should be reported about as a matter of public interest. However, concerns were made to us by the police, the local authority, the RS teacher, the NEU representative and the Trust about the behaviour of some journalists. These included:

* some members of the media pretending to be local parents to engage other parents in conversation
* staff were approached on the way in and out of the school. In some cases, members of the press obtained home addresses and telephone numbers for school staff

Concerns were also raised about the behaviour of some journalists outside the RS teacher's home, which drew further attention to where he lived, and reporting of personal information in the press about the RS teacher.

It is vital in such cases that the press also take a victim-centred approach and take into consideration the welfare and safety of those individuals who find themselves in such extreme and threatening situations. While the media does an important job in reporting on such cases, it is also essential that they are careful not to publish any personal details that could compromise the safety of victims.

3.10 Teachers avoiding engaging in controversial subjects.

We heard that the growing targeting of teachers and the teaching of controversial subjects beyond blasphemy is being increasingly viewed as too high risk. The NEU and teachers told us school staff have become more cautious, fearful and wary of teaching such topics, despite their importance and relevance to pupils living in a diverse modern democracy such as Britain. Pupils will inevitably be exposed to all kinds of distressing and violent material – for some children, the classroom will be the only place where such topics are discussed and where a good understanding is taught. Harassment and targeting of schools and teachers is likely to create a climate of censorship and will not help build cohesive communities. In one study, around a fifth of teachers have already reported that they had self-censored in relation to issues either of gender and sexuality (20%) or race (21%).[227]

Teachers we spoke to were concerned there is little national guidance on teaching controversial issues often found in RS and personal, social, health and economic lessons. Many are concerned that teachers will shy away from such topics. This is made worse by the lack of guidance on

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226   Birmingham CC v Afsar (2019). Accessed at:
       https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Birmingham-CC-v-Afsar-No-3-2019-EWHC-3217-QB-Final.pdf
227   Dr Damon L. Perry (2023) 'Blasphemy' in Schools'

what should or should not be taught, what is optional and what is not.[228] Finally, there is a perceived lack of central support when issues do arise. The Department for Education cannot expect teachers to teach controversial issues without guidance and support if teachers then find themselves targeted or threatened. For example, one primary headteacher explained to the Review that the Department for Education put them in a difficult situation by stating in their guidance that they 'highly recommend' primary schools talk about LGBT issues, without making it clear whether it was optional or not. The headteacher said that protesters have picked up on this and accuse the school of going against Department for Education guidance, despite the lack of clarity.

We also heard from teachers at other schools who raised concerns that there is insufficient support for them by both central and local government when they find themselves at the receiving end of such protests and hostile activity. Sarah Hewitt Clarkson, headmistress at Anderton Park Primary School, told us that more could and should have been done earlier when protests erupted outside her school in 2019.

3.11 Attempts to interfere in education at schools in Batley: a wider problem.

As part of our investigation, the Reviewer was concerned to hear about predominately male Muslim activists and 'community leaders' aggressively interfering in everyday teaching at schools more widely across Batley. From successful attempts at banning legitimate religious books, to interfering in essays, class discussions and debates about religion or other topics, such activists seek to impose their dogmatic religious beliefs in non-faith schools and interfere in the teaching of the National Curriculum.

We heard how these faith activists appeared to exert disproportionate influence among institutions and public bodies in the area and had created a climate of fear among some schools, who felt they had little power to push back. The failure of the local authority and other agencies in challenging such figures or supporting such schools is unacceptable and must be better addressed.

Conclusion

In a diverse democracy, the beliefs and views of people sometime conflicting with each other is inevitable. Managing such differences, avoiding violent conflict and upholding democratic freedoms is what social cohesion should seek to achieve. While being mindful of not being gratuitously offensive, pupils should be taught how in a diverse democracy, they will inevitably come across all kinds of issues that offend them but that there are appropriate ways to response. Harassment, intimidation and threatening behaviour is not the way to respond. Teaching this is all the more critical in light of the growing climate of freedom-restricting harassment in our society.

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228   Department for Education (2014) 'Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools'. Accessed at: https://assets.publishing. service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380595/SMSC_Guidance_Maintained_Schools.pdf

At the time of the incident, many protestors jumped to unfounded conclusions, quickly assuming the worst intentions of the RS teacher before knowing the facts. This is something common that the Reviewer has repeatedly heard, that disinformation, unfounded rumours, and videos edited to remove context to cause outrage spread rapidly and can quickly compromise the safety of the targeted individual.

The experience of the RS teacher is shocking and appalling. There is no justification for the freedom-restricting harassment he and his family had to endure. An independent investigation cleared the RS teacher of wrongdoing – yet despite this, the RS teacher's life and the life of his family changed permanently overnight, because of the threatening actions of those who were offended by what he had taught.

The lack of response from the school and response from West Yorkshire Police and Kirklees Council was poor. They were ill-equipped to deal with such an incident and failed to understand the significance of the potential threat to life of the RS teacher and the impact upon him and his family. At the time of writing, we are not aware of anyone being arrested for any of the harassment he experienced.

It is also striking that the Victims Code would not necessarily provide individuals like the RS teacher the support he required. This must be re-examined.

At the heart of this incident is an issue of leadership. The attempt to appease aggressive actors and failing to protect democratic freedoms may be considered successful in the short term. But in reality, this only galvanises such actors who believe that by engaging in such intimidatory tactics their unreasonable demands will be met. This is one reason why in the last few years we have seen increasing numbers of protests outside schools and other institutions. Such actors know that more often than not, their demands will be met by fearful statutory bodies, schools and local authorities.

In the absence of strong leadership, the silence of the council and weak response from political leaders, the interests of Islamist and far right actors were served who then attempted to hijack the tensions. This theme has been repeated throughout the evidence gathering for this Review – in the absence of leadership and a clear condemnation of threatening activity directed at individuals, extremist groups will attempt to exploit and push their own divisive narrative, further fuelling anger and radicalisation and undermining cohesion further. The Reviewer is concerned that the failure to defend democratic freedoms when threatened and the inability to address FRH will result in a gradual erosion of our democratic values. Such institutions must be held to account as to how they respond to such incidents.

This case study further supports the Reviewer's recommendation to overhaul how we deliver social cohesion in England, which includes providing better training to public bodies and local governments, holding them accountable in promoting and protecting social cohesion as well as improving the skills of local partners to deal with conflict as part of social cohesion training.

> *"The killing [of Samuel Paty] was an attack on cultural rights, freedom of expression, academic freedom, freedom of religion or belief – and of course his right to life [...] The most important ways to honour Mr. Paty's memory are to champion these very human rights, challenge fundamentalism, uphold respect for pluralism, and ensure the security of those who promote thoughtful academic debate to these ends."* [229]

229   Bennoune, K. (2021) 'Honour slain French teacher Samuel Paty by defending rights, defying fundamentalism – UN experts' Accessed at https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/10/honour-slain-french-teacher-samuel-paty-defending-rights-defying

Chapter 4

Contemporary threats to social cohesion and the lack of a strategic approach

Introduction

Local authorities and practitioners working in cohesion and counter-extremism are concerned about the growing and evolving threats facing them and the struggle to respond effectively. In this chapter, we explore how contemporary extremist tactics, as well as the virulent spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation, pose rapidly evolving threats to local cohesion. Increasingly disinformation, conspiracy theories and extremist narratives are entering the mainstream.[230] Many local authorities are understandably struggling to respond to these challenges and worry about future threats such as AI, and the impact they could have on local cohesion.

As we witnessed, the potential impact includes the disruption of the functioning of local democracy, increasing community anger and division, episodes of unrest with knock-on economic effects alongside growing distrust and disillusionment with democracy. Our call for evidence revealed high levels of concern about extremist activity in their local area from both individual and institutional respondents. The repeated failure to respond to these chronic threats can slowly erode cohesion, as well as society's democratic norms and freedoms.

In the next chapter, we provide case studies of the challenges facing three local authorities and how they are struggling to deal with contemporary cohesion threats. There is a lack of training and guidance available to them before and during episodes of social unrest, with many feeling they are left to deal with such issues with very little support or knowledge. This is partly because of the existing gap across Whitehall, where there is little focus on addressing contemporary cohesion threats.

Preventing a breakdown of local social cohesion by extremist and other malign actors requires a continuously pro-active approach of developing community resilience over time. The Reviewer repeatedly heard that areas with greater activity directed towards building social cohesion had stronger responses to tensions and crises when they arose. This is partially due to the fact that they had built networks, good practices and trust around cohesion activity. Likewise, respondents to our call for evidence stated that if social cohesion was not a priority for their local authority, they were more likely to express higher levels of concerns about extremist activity in their area.[231]

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230   Savanta (2023) 'Conspiracy Poll'. Kings College London. Available at:
       https://savanta.com/knowledge-centre/published-polls/conspiracy-poll-kings-college-london-13-june-2023/
231   RSM (2023) 'Sara Khan Review Call for Evidence Final Report'

Extremism, disinformation and conspiracy theories: threats to social cohesion and democracy

4.1 Extremism

The extremist landscape in Britain has changed substantially in recent years. As explored by the Reviewer in a previous report, the threat of extremists and other malevolent actors have evolved rapidly in the past decade and presents a far greater and more sophisticated danger to social cohesion.[232] The social media age allows for the bypassing of traditional mainstream media, the rapid spread of information peer to peer and the evolution of advanced audience targeting strategies.

Aided by online platforms, extremists have been able to 'professionalise', employing sophisticated tactics and audience targeting techniques to propagate their content and recruit.[233] Extremists acting and coordinating at a national or international level deliberately exploit local tensions and unrest, both online and offline.

While extremism can never be fully eradicated from a democracy, a successful democracy is one that is able to confine and contain extremism to the fringes. However, extremist narratives are arguably moving from societal fringes and entering evermore into mainstream consciousness, media and debate.[234] Local practitioners and experts expressed concern about how visible extremist narratives and conspiracy theories were becoming in their localities. Without an adequate and effective response to both online and offline manifestations of extremism, we are likely to see this trend continue.

Understanding how extremism arises at a local level is a crucial part of pushing back against these trends. Although there are personal factors that can drive individuals to extremism, local environment and context are essential to understanding how extremism arises. Local areas can be 'extremism-enabling places' which make individuals more prone to the adoptions of extremist belief.[235] Factors that contribute towards such an environment include perceptions of loss of effective control, feelings of insignificance, fear, and more generally factors that undermine an individual's belief in a rules-based society.[236]

Improving our understanding of what makes some localities susceptible to extremism while others remain resilient is essential in allowing authorities to help build resilience and protect social cohesion. However, the Reviewer's conversations with officials in the Home Office and DLUHC demonstrated there is an institutional knowledge gap of such factors, as well as insufficient data collection to improve understanding.

While the focus of Prevent, the Government's anti-terrorism strategy, attempts to stem the radicalisation of individuals into terrorism, there is a knowledge gap in what factors in a local area create a climate conducive to extremism and what factors create resilience to extremism.

232 Commission for Countering Extremism (2021) 'Operating with Impunity – Hateful extremism: The need for a legal framework'. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/602fe034d3bf7f7220fe10e1/CCE_Operating_with_Impunity_Accessible.pdf
233 ibid
234 ibid.
235 Bouhana, Noemie. (July 2019) 'The Moral Ecology of Extremism – A Systemic Perspective'. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d8b7993ed915d036da0e677/Bouhana-The-moral-ecology-of-extremism.pdf
236 ibid

It is clearly not enough to take action on the individuals at most risk of radicalisation, while ignoring the places and contexts around individuals which provide the environment for their radicalisation. To do so is to tackle the symptoms without addressing wider and relevant causes.

Furthermore, a great deal of extremism activity falls directly and purposefully below the terrorism threshold.[237] Extremists, mindful of these thresholds, attempt to undermine cohesion, engage in entryism[238], and infiltrate the local population by spreading their extremist and divisive narratives. Both far right and Islamist groups in Stoke-on-Trent have been successful in this goal to some degree, as we shall explore in the next chapter.

Extremist groups operating at a national level are often well aware of just how susceptible some communities are to their narratives. The Reviewer noted time and again how they deliberately target those vulnerable communities in areas where they believe they are more likely to be influenced by their message. Any void left by a lack of action, information or leadership from the authorities and community groups in vulnerable areas will all too often be filled by extremist actors looking for traction. This was evident in the Batley Grammar School incident in March 2021 and well demonstrated in the Barrow-in-Furness case study.

The exploitation of asylum hotels by far-right actors

Immigration and asylum policy is a legitimate yet contested democratic and political issue. While the right to protest is protected, there is an extremism and social cohesion concern when such protests lead to harassment, intimidation and violence in a local area. This includes attacks on asylum seekers and the police. A view shared by councils in many areas, and by councillors across the political spectrum - all of whom had a range of views on asylum as a policy and political issue - was how in the absence of effective communication between the Home Office and local authorities, it was more difficult to prepare and communicate effectively with residents, to ensure any tensions were managed and not exploited by extremist actors.

This issue of asylum hotels is of growing importance for social cohesion as anti-minority and far right actors have increasingly seized on the issue to fuel division.[239] In 2022, anti-migrant activists visited accommodation housing asylum seekers 253 times, a 102% increase on 2021.[240] More recent data suggests anti-immigrant protests are growing; in 2023 there was a 13-times increase in public demonstrations with much of the activity organised by far right groups.[241] Divisive actors spread misinformation and rumours to agitate local communities and to feed anger.[242] For example, protests broke out in Knowsley in February 2023 outside a hotel housing migrants which resulted in violent clashes with the police.

237 Commission for Countering Extremism (24 February 2021) 'Operating with Impunity'. Available at:
Operating with impunity: legal review – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
238 Entryism is a tactic pursued by extremists of gaining power in politics, institutions and other bodies to exert influence.
239 Dearden, L. (2020) 'How Britain's far right is trying to capitalise on Channel crossings', The Independent,
https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/english-channel-crossings-migrants-boats-far-right-britain-first-b720979.html
240 Khan-Ruf, S. (2023) 'Far-right harassment of migrant accommodation doubles in 2022'
https://hopenothate.org.uk/2023/03/01/far-right-harassment-of-migrant-accommodation-doubles-in-2022/
241 Chesire, T. (2024) 'Far-right groups 'hijacking' anti-migrant protests - including demonstrations against asylum plans at RAF Scampton,'
Sky News, https://news.sky.com/story/far-right-groups-hijacking-anti-migrant-protests-including-demonstrations-against-asylum-plans-at-raf-scampton-13093502
242 Dearden, L. (2023) 'Mobilising the mob', The Independent,
https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/knowsley-asylum-seeker-hotel-riot-b2281367.html

Every local authority the Review spoke to raised the issue of asylum hotels. While they appreciated the plight of asylum seekers and the national context in which contingency accommodation is needed quickly, they raised concerns about the impact on social cohesion when the Home Office did not provide notice or very short notice without engagement and planning with the local authority.

It inevitably falls on local authorities to manage any potential fallout of asylum accommodation and hotels, yet we repeatedly heard about the lack of consultation from the Home Office and their contractors about the exact arrangements or the potential implications to an area especially if local tensions were already high. At times, asylum seekers were already placed before the local authority was made aware. In some cases, local authorities told us that far right groups knew about local asylum hotels before they did. In December 2022, the Home Office committed to improving engagement with local authorities but in a limited way – an email notification would be sent to the local authority not less than 24 hours prior to arrival on-site.

However, when adequate consultation and communication did happen in advance, this improved local authorities' ability to prevent unrest. When Kirklees Council received advanced notice, they were able to quickly mobilise a team to engage residents door-to-door about the arrival of asylum seekers in the area. Staff repeated the exercise when asylum seekers had arrived, also engaging hotel staff and the asylum seekers themselves. This approach made it difficult for far right groups to get traction from local communities despite concerted attempts. Kirklees council argued this approach had helped to mitigate against potential cohesion risks.

On the other hand, the Barrow-in-Furness case study in chapter 5 highlights how heightened social tensions and unrest were exacerbated by the deployment of asylum hotels in the area – despite the local authority requesting that the Home Office delayed deployment until social tensions were back under control.

While providing immediate accommodation can be challenging, the Home Office should try their utmost to engage with local authorities in a timely and informative manner as is possible to help manage the arrival of asylum seeker in a way that is conducive to the local area. Indeed, the asylum hotels issue is a prime example of how government should be joined up, in this case with other policies considering their impact on social cohesion. Government departments need to proactively engage with local authorities in advance of taking potentially divisive action, especially where there are significant standing cohesion issues. **Contentious or challenging policy is best delivered in conjunction with local government, who maintain greater expertise on place. Advanced engagement may be key to mitigating against any potential tension that could be exploited by extremists and other divisive actors.**

4.2 Disinformation and conspiracy theories

Concerns about the spread and impact of conspiracy theories and misinformation in the UK have been discussed extensively over recent years.[243] This is nothing new, but the internet and social media revolutions have exponentially increased the ability of such information to rapidly spread, provide an air of legitimacy and reach far larger audiences. Developments in AI will only heighten this threat further. Understanding the full impact on social cohesion has however, often been overlooked.

Research carried out among the British population demonstrates how a significant proportion of the country subscribe to conspiracy theories, with around a third of the public saying various conspiracy theories are true or are probably true.[244] This is not to say that all conspiracy theories are dangerous or harmful – distinguishing those that are from those that are harmless is important. However, harmful and dangerous forms of disinformation and conspiracy theories are becoming so widespread that they are having real word consequences on social cohesion and democracy – including the undermining of the values, trust, and institutions that are essential for a healthy democracy.[245]

Support for conspiratorial beliefs has been linked to a lack of trust in the political system and disengagement from democracy. It is often associated with segments of society that feel powerlessness and disenchantment.[246] Indeed, one of the primary consequences of engagement with conspiracy theories, which often sow distrust in the state, is that individuals become discouraged from engaging in mainstream political processes such as voting, and develop feelings of disenchantment and powerlessness.[247]

Where social cohesion is low, disenchanted groups in society can adopt disinformation and conspiracy theories in a defensive manner 'to relieve the self or in-group from a sense of culpability for their disadvantaged position'.[248] The adoption of these points of view can then lead to behaviour that worsens social cohesion and makes individuals more prone to these alternative beliefs.

The use of disinformation and conspiracy theories is also a tactic regularly employed by hateful extremists to spread their world view, increase their reach and to recruit to their causes.[249] Conspiracy theories tend to build on prejudice by creating an 'us vs them' dichotomy that reinforces differences between groups in society.[250] The creation of extremist communities online can create an echo-chamber effect which can further propagate those world views, radicalise and shape extremist beliefs. Once radicalised in this environment, it becomes difficult to deradicalise and dissuade conspiracy theorists about their beliefs.

243 Cabinet Office and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2023) 'Fact sheet on the CDU and RRU'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/fact-sheet-on-the-cdu-and-rru. The fact sheet noted 'UK Government defines disinformation as the deliberate creation and spreading of false and/or manipulated information, where misinformation is the inadvertent spread of false information.'

244 Kings College London and the Policy Institute (2023) 'Conspiracy belief among the UK public and the role of alternative media'. Available at: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/conspiracy-belief-among-the-uk-public.pdf

245 Cecil, J and Vinjamuri, L (2022) 'Disinformation is a high-stake game threatening freedom'. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/disinformation-high-stake-game-threatening-freedom

246 Douglas, et al. (2023) 'What Are Conspiracy theories?', Annual Review of Psychology https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031329

247 ibid.

248 Douglas, K. M., et al. (2017) 'The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories'. Current Directions in Psychological Science. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0963721417718261

249 Cox, Kate et al. (2021) 'COVID-19, Disinformation and Hateful Extremism'. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60c868448fa8f57ce58ce901/RAND_Europe_Final_Report_Hateful_Extremism_During_COVID-19_Final.pdf

250 Douglas, Karen et al. (2019) 'Understanding Conspiracy Theories'. Political Psychology. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pops.12568

Worryingly, those that hold beliefs in conspiracy theories also appear more likely to support 'radicalised and extremist methods'.[251,252] Furthermore, academic researchers have repeatedly linked conspiracy theories to antisemitism, anti-black prejudice, Sinophobia and anti-Muslim hatred.[253]

The Covid pandemic no doubt exacerbated the already growing influence of conspiracies and disinformation. Collective and societal trauma from events such as terrorist attacks, pandemics and national tragedies can cause an increase in the belief in conspiracy theories and a decrease in social cohesion. Research has shown how this can entrench differences between groups.[254] Today, these issues arguably pose a bigger threat than ever before to social cohesion in our country.

4.3   Responding to these contemporary threats

Many local areas are left alone to provide the complex responses needed to counter such threats. The Reviewer heard repeatedly from local authorities and practitioners that they were struggling to tackle not only rising community tensions and incidents of unrest, but the ongoing and evolving threats posed by extremism, disinformation and conspiracy theories.

Local authorities and responders often lack the capability, expertise and resources to deal with many of these cohesion threats – some of which are playing out under the influence of sophisticated extremist tactics, including the spread of online and offline disinformation – with national and even international actors weighing in. It is unrealistic to expect struggling local authorities and practitioners to always be able to respond to these rapidly changing and challenging threats effectively. Some local authorities even lack a communications department to help drive forward a response.

The Carnegie Trust recommend solutions in their 2024 guide to countering disinformation, such as media literacy education, fact-checking, labelling of social media content and changing recommendation algorithms.[255] It is currently unclear how scalable responses such as this are to the local level.

251   ibid.

252   Also see: Douglas, Karen et al (2019) 'Understanding Conspiracy Theories', Political Psychology
         https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pops.12568

253   For example: Allington, D., Hirsh, D. & Katz, L. (2023) 'Antisemitism is predicted by anti-hierarchical aggression, totalitarianism, and belief in
         malevolent global conspiracies.' Arden University. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01624-y

254   Bilewicz Michal et al. (2019) 'Traumatic Rift: How Conspiracy Beliefs Undermine Cohesion After Societal Trauma?' Available at:
         https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6396693/

255   Bateman, Et al (2024). 'Countering Disinformation Effectively: An Evidence Based Policy Guide'. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
         Accessed at Countering Disinformation Effectively: An Evidence-Based Policy Guide – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The lack of a strategic approach and infrastructure

4.4   Social cohesion: an infrastructure gap in Whitehall's machinery

The Reviewer met with officials across Whitehall to understand why there is insufficient support for local authorities when faced with socially destabilising events, as occurred in Barrow-in-Furness and other areas. Much resilience work is geared towards acute crisis, such as flooding or terrorist attacks. One of the recurrent themes the Reviewer found was that socially destabilising events mostly did not cross the high threshold to trigger national resilience mechanisms.

While extremism can manifest in incidents such as a terrorist attack, it can also manifest in ways under the radar – undermining social cohesion, trust in democracy and its institutions. Understanding and measuring the full and negative impact is often not fully appreciated. The harm from extremism can have an impact across the whole of society.[256] These include social division and intolerance; crime, violence and harassment; mental health and wellbeing; censorship and restriction of freedom; delegitimising authority and undermining democracy and economic harms.[257]

4.5   An overview of current resilience infrastructure and gaps

The National Risk Register (NRR), is the public version of the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA), which is the government's assessment of the most serious risks facing the UK.[258] The most recent version of the NRR, published in 2023, shows that the UK faces a broad and diverse range of risks, including threats to lives, health, society, critical infrastructure, economy and sovereignty.

The risks that meet the threshold for inclusion in the NRR would have a substantial impact on the UK's safety, security and/or critical systems at a national level. This includes large-scale disorder that could significantly impact the emergency services and government, but the vast majority of public disorder events do not reach this threshold and will instead be considered and coordinated at the appropriate level and included in departmental or Community Risk Registers. The Cabinet Office told us that chronic risks, defined by the government as 'long-term challenges that gradually erode our economy, community, way of life, and/or national security', will generally be dealt with by the government as strategic, operational or policy challenges, rather than through the national civil contingency or resilience arrangements.

The NSRA/NRR includes acute manifestations of chronic risks e.g. flooding, severe weather etc., but the chronic risks themselves, have been separated from the National Security Risk Assessment since 2022. As outlined in the Integrated Review Refresh[259], the government is establishing a new analysis to identify and assess these continuous challenges, with further detail on the analysis of these more continuous challenges will follow in 2024.

256   Commission for Countering Extremism (October 2019) 'Challenging Hateful Extremism.' Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov. uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874101/200320_Challenging_Hateful_Extremism.pdf
257   ibid.
258   HM Government (2023) 'National Risk Register'. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/ uploads/attachment_data/file/1175834/2023_NATIONAL_RISK_REGISTER_NRR.pdf
259   HM Government (2023) Integrated Review Refresh 2023.

The National Security Secretariat did acknowledge there is a lack of communication and a disconnect between national security concerns and the issues we identified at a local level through the case studies. At present, it is not clear who is responsible for delivering the strategic, operational or policy responses when it comes to threats to social cohesion and democratic freedoms. While under the Lead Government Departments model it is the responsibility of DLUHC and the Home Office via the police, to support local authorities which are dealing with local tensions, whether acute or chronic.

However, our conversations with both Home Office and DLUHC officials and an examination of the work they do deliver has demonstrated the cohesion and extremism threats we have identified are not being dealt with adequately. There is a lack of a wider strategic approach. Our review of the 2019 Integrated Communities Action Plan in Chapter eight demonstrates it was not designed to identify, prevent or respond to such cohesion threats. In 2021, rather than updating the then already outdated 2015 Counter-Extremism strategy, the government scrapped it – resulting in the 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, which has not occurred. This paints a worrying picture of the lack of preparedness and resilience to extremism and cohesion issues.

National Resilience Framework and Resilience Directorate

The UK Government's National Resilience Framework seeks to strengthen our country's resilience in order to "better prevent, mitigate, respond to and recover from the risks facing the nation".[260] The Resilience Directorate in the Cabinet Office drives the implementation of the measures set out in the framework, including the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) to consider, "the chronic vulnerabilities and challenges that arise from the geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts, systemic competition, rapid technological change and transnational challenges such as climate change, health risks and state threats that define contemporary crises."[261]

Senior officials from the Resilience Directorate said that social cohesion issues would theoretically be included in the framework. However, in practice this was not the case.[262] The emphasis on local contingency planning undertaken by Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) tends to focus on the risks identified through the NSRA and local risk assessments (issues such as flooding, fires etc).[263] Furthermore, it is very hard to assess whether there is sufficient join up with local community teams responsible for dealing with resilience challenges linked to social cohesion or enough know-how and capacity to adequately address them. Our conversations with local authorities suggest to us there is inadequate and inconsistent join up between social cohesion threats and the work of LRFs.

Defending Democracy Taskforce

The Defending Democracy Taskforce was established in November 2022 to reduce the risk of foreign interference to the UK's democratic processes, institutions and society, and ensure that these are secure and resilient to threats of foreign interference.[264]

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260   HM Government (2022) 'The UK Government Resilience Framework'. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1131163/UKG_Resilience_Framework_FINAL_v2.pdf
261   ibid.
262   Engagement meeting, 18.08.2023
263   Engagement meeting, 18.08.2023
264   Western, M. (25 April 2023) Written Question – 'Defending Democracy Taskforce'. Available at:
      https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-04-25/182673/

Taskforce officials stated that they recognise but do not focus on the chronic threat from domestic actors engaged in disinformation, conspiracies and extremism – nor the impact this can have on our democracy. They do assess acute threats, for example potential threats in destabilising the upcoming general election and threats posed to parliamentary democracy.[265] However, with a specific focus on foreign interference, their focus is not defending or protecting the wider democratic norms and freedoms of our country, or assessing the chronic and long-term impact divisive domestic actors are having in eroding those freedoms.

Conclusion

As this Review argues, many social cohesion threats are contributing to a chronic and insidious erosion of the democratic rights and freedoms of our country. But as demonstrated, the threats we have identified are not being strategically addressed by existing Whitehall infrastructures.

Furthermore, when it comes to modern-day extremism, disinformation and conspiracy theories, the distinction between home grown and international threats is often blurry. However, the Reviewer believes that not enough is being done to address the domestic aspects and chronic threats facing our democratic freedoms at a local and national level.

One of the challenges in developing strategies for community and democratic resilience is that, while there is generally a good understanding of the 'what' – i.e., the threats and challenges – this is not the case with the 'how'. This requires knowing how to build and improve community resilience to threats that undermine cohesion. The major challenge at a local level is a lack of know-how in responding to incidents. If local authorities and other partners know in advance what to do and how, and have built the necessary infrastructure and approach, this will lead to a more effective response.
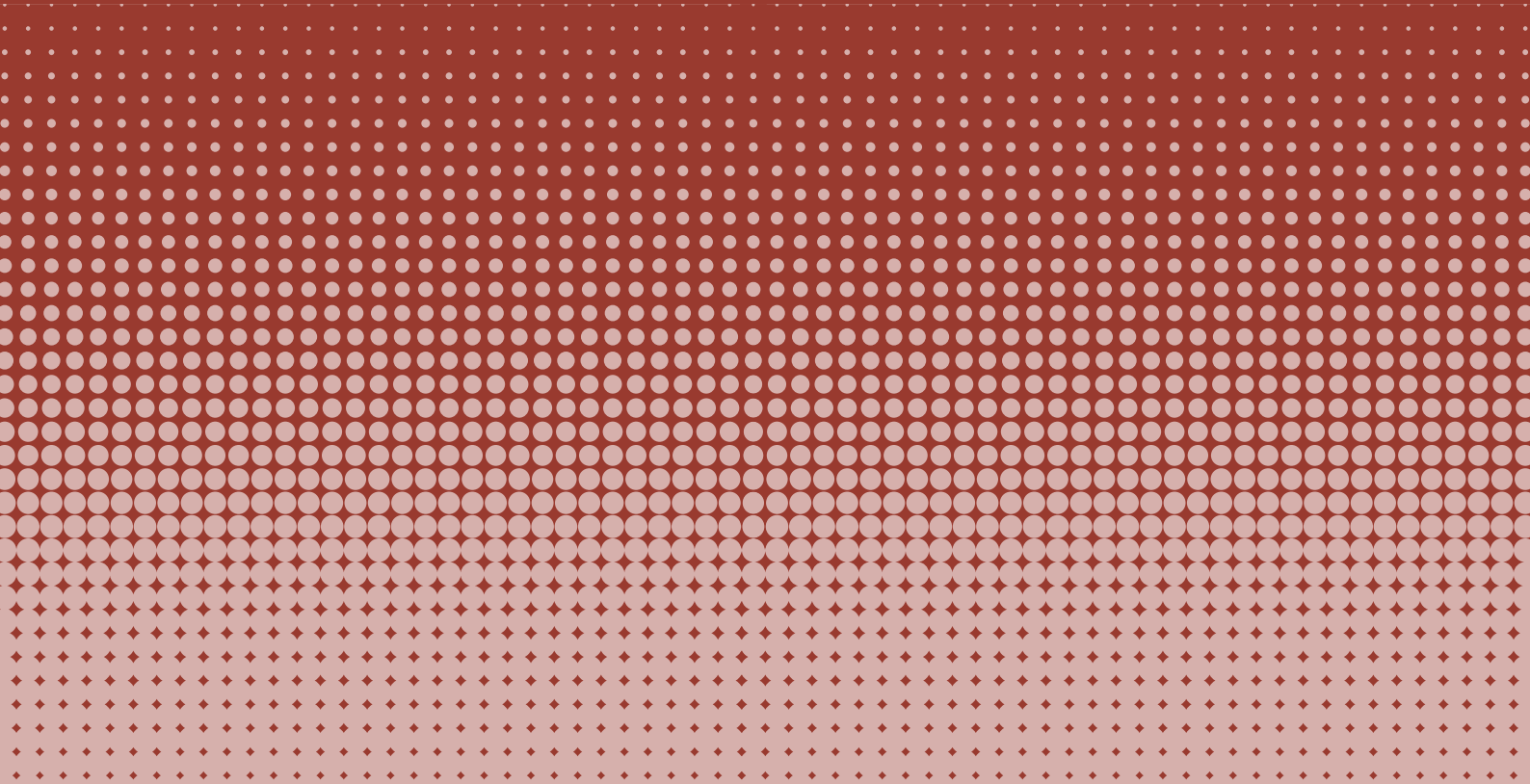
The Review recognises that assessing the likelihood and impact of risks will vary on a case-by-case basis. It is not proposing that the NSRA/NRR should include the acute and chronic threats to social cohesion and democracy as outlined in this Review. However, in the absence of any strategic approach to respond to threats that destabilise social cohesion and which can cause a chronic erosion of our democratic freedoms, the Reviewer proposes a social cohesion and democratic resilience approach is developed.

The Reviewer is aware that DLUHC is currently building greater capacity when it comes to social cohesion and extremism. It is essential that this machinery addresses the resilience gaps explored above and links to wider local and Whitehall machinery to deal with both the acute and chronic threats to social cohesion.

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265   Engagement meeting, 12.11.2023

Chapter 5

Contemporary threats to social cohesion: Local authority case studies

The Reviewer visited and spoke to numerous experts, practitioners, victims and officials up and down the country, including 30 meetings with local authorities and 46 meetings with civic society groups. During these meetings, the Reviewer repeatedly heard how local authorities and responders were struggling to deal with contemporary social cohesion threats, including disinformation, conspiracy theories and evolving extremist tactics.

This chapter uses three local authority case studies to demonstrate these challenges.

- **Oldham:** The spread of conspiracy theories, disinformation and freedom-restricting harassment (FRH) is chronic and is causing 'democratic disruption' – impacting the ability of elected officials and the local authority from carrying out their regular functions. Senior leaders told us there is no infrastructure in place to tackle such activity or to provide necessary support and guidance, despite the intimidatory climate that is being created.

- **Stoke-on-Trent:** Historical and continuing far right and Islamist extremist activity is creating a permissive environment for radicalisation and the mainstreaming of extremist narratives within communities. Despite Stoke-on-Trent having significant extremism activity, it no longer receives counter-extremism or Prevent funding – exposing the gaps in existing social cohesion and counter-extremism strategies.

- **Barrow-in-Furness:** Complex tensions caused by the Eleanor Williams case which were being exploited by racist and far right actors to drum up division, resulted in short and long-term cohesion damage, including permanent extremist activity in the area.

While these three areas each have differing characteristics in terms of size, demographics, and socio-economic and political contexts, they illustrate common themes faced by local communities – shedding light on how flashpoint incidents are addressed at the local level. These case studies also demonstrate a common problem of a lack of capability and no established infrastructure to help local leaders deal with destabilising activity. This lack is representative of a wider systemic problem that leaves similar towns and cities across the country ill-equipped to respond to serious tensions, disinformation and extremism.

5.1 Case study 1: Conspiracy theories and democratic disruption in Oldham

Background

Oldham is a town in Greater Manchester with a population of over 240,000. It was one of the centres of the textile industry until the mid-twentieth century, when it experienced industrial decline. As of the 2021 census, Oldham has an Asian population of 24.6% and has in the past experienced racial tensions as well as issues around housing, deprivation and ethnic residential segregation – factors that potentially make the area susceptible to a break down in cohesion. Since 2001, Oldham's deprivation relative to other local authorities has worsened.[266]

In May 2001, tensions rose between Asian and white youths, resulting in some of the worst race riots the area had witnessed. Local stakeholders told the Review team that while ethnic residential segregation persisted, significant effort was being made to improve social mixing at a school, community and wider civic level. Some residents feel that the negative reputation Oldham gained after the 2001 riots continues to unfairly tarnish it, despite significant progress

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266   MHCLG (2019) 'The English Indices of Deprivation: Research Report'. Available at:
        https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d8b364ced915d03709e3cf2/IoD2019_Research_Report.pdf

being made. The contribution of communities in supporting cohesion and local services often on a voluntary basis is exemplary as demonstrated in chapter 7.

Oldham has had to deal with persistent threats to social cohesion. Divisive actors in and outside of the area continue to fuel tensions. For example, with Tommy Robinson visiting the area in 2019,[267] widespread leafleting by Patriotic Alternative in 2022,[268] or the direct action by pro-Palestine groups against Elbit Systems Ltd in 2019.[269] As demonstrated in chapter 7, the local authority has gone to great lengths to improve engagement with its residents and to prioritise social cohesion efforts. However, the challenges it faces today from conspiracy theories and disinformation as well as FRH are undermining local democracy.

Disinformation and conspiracy theories in Oldham

The Review team heard that Oldham Council faces an increasing battle over disinformation and conspiracy theories, which are impacting not only cohesion but also local democracy.[270] The activity of divisive actors is causing what senior leaders described as 'massive democratic disruption' and inducing a climate of fear and incitement.

One illustrative example concerns historic child sexual exploitation and the spread of false allegations on social media that Oldham Council orchestrated a cover up over grooming gang activity in the town. This led to the commissioning of an independent review of historic safeguarding practices in November 2019, which reported that, while safeguarding practices were inadequate, there was no evidence of a cover-up or any misconduct in public office by any council staff.[271]

Despite this, conspiracy theories on the topic continue to insidiously disrupt the area, fuelling what some stakeholders described as a frightening environment. Senior elected members told the Review team that far right groups had exploited the child historic sexual exploitation cases agitating towards 'civil unrest'.[272] Such groups came to Oldham to distribute thousands of incendiary leaflets and worked alongside local activists to spread social media content furthering such conspiracy theories. Council meetings held to discuss the findings of the independent review were disrupted by protestors and, on some occasions, saw instances of violence.[273]

Freedom-restricting harassment connected to such issues has also been rife in the area. Councillors and officials have been deliberately targeted, including the current and two former council leaders in a deeply worrying trend. In 2021, former Oldham Council leader Sean Fielding was targeted in an online campaign accusing him of a cover up while calling him a 'corrupt paedophile-protecting politician' who had 'improper relationships' with Muslim 'cartels'.[274]

267   Manchester Evening Times (2021) 'Twenty people charged after violence erupted in Tommy Robinson's visit to Oldham'. Manchester Evening News, https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/twenty-charged-tommy-robinson-oldham-17853287

268   The Oldham Times (2022) ''Fascist' group founded by Nazi sympathiser behind Royton leaflets', https://www.theoldhamtimes.co.uk/news/20777947.fascist-group-founded-nazi-sympathiser-behind-royton-leaflets/

269   The Meteor (2019) 'Activists occupy roof of Israeli-owned Oldham company', https://themeteor.org/2019/07/01/activists-occupy-roof-of-israeli-elbit-ferranti-in-oldham-call-for-arms-embargo/

270   Engagement meeting, 11.01.2023

271   Newsam CBE, M., and Ridgway, G. (2022) 'Independent assurance review of the effectiveness of multi-agency responses to child sexual exploitation in Greater Manchester'. Police and Crime Commissioner. Available at: https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/6198/final-oldham-assurance-report-8-june-2022-14-digital-version.pdf

272   Engagement meeting, 11.01.2023

273   BBC News (2022) 'Woman injured as people try storm Oldham Council meeting'. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-63514732

274   Mutch, J. (2021) 'Former council leader speaks out over campaign allegedly accusing him of covering up grooming gangs', The Oldham Times. Available at: https://www.theoldhamtimes.co.uk/news/19423632.former-council-leader-speaks-campaign-allegedly-accusing-covering-grooming-gangs/

In July 2021, the then leader of Oldham council Arooj Shah had her car deliberately fire-bombed in an arson attack.[275] The former Council leader Amanda Chadderton described the death threats, frightening levels of harassment and incitement she has faced, as well as the false accusations of covering up child sex exploitation.[276] Chadderton lost her seat in the May 2023 elections, which she partly blamed on conspiracy theories and 'overtly racist' dog whistle politics.[277]

The impact

The open and frank conversations the Reviewer had with elected members and senior officials left a lasting impression of the despair and worry such persistent activity was having on social cohesion. This was exacerbated by the lack of national support and the failure of existing infrastructures to deal with such threats. From feeding distrust of local institutions, to the targeting of council leaders and vitriol directed at them, this was having serious effects on the functioning of local democracy and restricting the ability of existing and potentially future Council leaders to carry out their democratic mandate. The CEO of Oldham council Harry Catherall told the Reviewer how a small number of aggressive activists were easily able to flood social media with conspiracy theories, run hate campaigns and post horrendous and threatening messages.[278]

During local elections, some councillors were targeted with lies and disinformation being spread about them. This included officers of the Council. For example, Mr Catherall's picture was spread on social media alongside claims that he was a 'paedophile protector' and a 'dead man walking'. Yet when he raised this with police, he states they claimed that such activity did not cross any legal or criminal thresholds.[279]

Mr Catherall's own words describe the impact of this on local democracy:

> *"The impact on officers and elected members and their wellbeing is huge. People are deciding whether to leave office or stand for office. This is undermining local democracy. Our ability to deliver on our strategic agenda has becomes constricted as such activity has had a massive impact and drains resources. Funding has to be spent on increasing security or take civil claims against such actors.*
>
> *Yet there is no infrastructure to deal with these challenges. It does not fit in the remit of Prevent as it is not terrorism related; yet the harm and impact of such disinformation and undermining of democracy requires a distinct approach if we want to limit the disruption of local democracy."*

Harry Catherall, CEO Oldham Council[280]

Summary and key learnings

The cohesion challenges facing Oldham demonstrate the damaging combination and impact of conspiracy theories, disinformation and FRH to local democracy. Despite this, there is no existing infrastructure to help Oldham or any other council in its battle to uphold local democracy and push back against insidious disinformation and conspiracies.

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275   Wace, Charlotte. (2021) 'Oldham Council leader Arooj Shah targeted in car firebomb attack', The Times. Available at:
       https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/oldham-council-leader-arooj-shah-targeted-in-car-firebomb-attack-jdzkvq73k
276   Engagement meeting, 11.01.2023
277   BBC News (2023) 'Ousted Oldham Council leader says town's politics remain toxic',
       https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-65536516
278   Engagement meeting, 11.01.2023
279   Engagement meeting, 11.01.2023
280   Engagement meeting, 11.01.2023

5.2 Case study 2: Stoke-on-Trent

Background

Stoke-on-Trent is a city in Staffordshire with a population of just over 250,000, with 83.5% of the population identifying as white according to the 2021 census. A former centre of heavy industry, Stoke is now primarily a centre for service industries and distribution centres. There are also a number of social, political and economic challenges facing Stoke, and the city has suffered extensive levels of deprivation and residential ethnic segregation.

Community stakeholders shared their concerns about racial, religious and wider identity fractures among the local population as well as a sense of people feeling disconnected with local democracy.

> *"There is a significant section of the local population who don't feel connected with democracy and are therefore less engaged. Political literacy has decreased in Stoke and disinformation can spread easily. This can create a really worrying vacuum which divisive figures exploit, telling people they're not being listened to in politics. Improving political literacy is important as is engagement with the local population by leaders, driving forward a positive narrative while also challenging those narratives that are negative and divisive. If the Council and elected leaders don't speak out others who don't care about cohesion end up controlling the narrative and the ability to influence others."*
>
> *NGO stakeholder*

There has also been a long standing far right and Islamist presence in Stoke-on-Trent. In the late 1990s, the British National Party (BNP) began systematically campaigning in the area, rapidly gaining a strong foothold. In 2002, the city elected its first BNP councillor and by 2003 the organisation had established itself as the main opposition to the Labour Party. Although the BNP had lost all its council seats by 2011, in 2008 they were the joint-second largest party, with nine councillors. In 2010, the English Defence League (EDL) held a significant demonstration, including a 1300-person march . There has also been cases of historic racial violence against minority and newly arrived communities.

Local leaders told us that far-right political movements often target the city and exploit underlying tensions.[281] Today, there is evidence of neo-fascist and neo-Nazi activity in the city.[282]

Stoke has also a significant history of Islamist extremism, with Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT)[283] and Al-Muhajiroun activity since the early 1990s. High profile examples include Usman Khan, the London Bridge terrorist, who was active in Stoke-on-Trent Islamist groups – and Kamran Hussain, an imam who was found guilty in 2017 of preaching Islamist terrorism at High Street Mosque in Stoke.[284] Officials, stakeholders and community organisations informed us that HT – whether those associated with the organisation, or its ideology – have their own community centre and gyms in the city, while also running youth clubs, sporting and social activities for women and children. Local stakeholders expressed concern that they were using such facilities to actively recruit and radicalise young Muslims. Multiple stakeholders explained how HT

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281 Engagement Meeting, 30.06.2022
282 Engagement Meeting, 30.06.2022
283 This organisation was proscribed by the UK Government as a terrorist organisation in January 2024
284 BBC News (2017) 'Stoke imam jailed for supporting Islamic State group'. Available at:
      https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-stoke-staffordshire-41428215

continually attempt to infiltrate Stoke-on-Trent's school governing boards, forums and mosque management committees, and have a strong online presence.[285]

The Review heard from local MPs and other stakeholders that Hizb-ut-Tahrir have repeatedly attempted to interfere with general elections. They reportedly have discouraged local Muslims from participating in the democratic process by distributing anti-democratic literature, scaremongering and shaming local Muslims exercising their democratic rights, employing these tactics even at the ballot box.

The presence of far right and Islamist extremist groups in Stoke has at times, created an intimidatory environment. Terrible abuse is often experienced by democratically elected politicians, both Members of Parliament, local councillors and local officials.[286]

However, despite the challenges the city has tried to counter extremism through the work of the statutory, voluntary and community sector.

Using Prevent funding to tackle extremism in Stoke

Until April 2023, Stoke-on-Trent was designated a Prevent priority area by the Home Office, due to concerns of radicalisation and persistent extremist activity that could lead to terrorism. This meant the city received funding from the Home Office which supported local projects and two post holders to support statutory partners, organisations, schools and other institutions to improve their counter-radicalisation response.

The funding helped set up a Prevent Headteachers' Board, which has been used as a model of good practice across the country. At a meeting with the board before the funding was cut, headteachers expressed concern to the Reviewer that if funding was cut, the Board would struggle to run in the same capacity. The work undertaken to date simply would not have happened without Prevent support.[287]

The loss of Stoke's Prevent and counter extremism funding

In December 2021, the Home Office wrote to the council informing them that Stoke-on-Trent would no longer be designated as a Prevent priority area, as it did not meet the evidentiary threshold that was required. As a result, since April 2023 Stoke no longer receives funds to deliver Prevent and counter-extremism measures, despite the continuing far right and Islamist extremism activity.

Since Stoke's prevent funding was cut, the Council took the decision to self-fund the two Prevent officer roles because of the serious concern and impact extremism has on the local area. However, relying on councils to value and self-fund such roles is risky: Stoke-on-Trent Council has warned that it is on the verge of bankruptcy.[288] This could mean that long-term social cohesion and resilience work could easily come under threat.

Previously Stoke also received further funding from the 2015 Counter-Extremism strategy which sought to support those areas and community groups to help tackle extremism in their area. However, the CE strategy was scrapped in 2021 with nothing to replace it. Stoke did not receive any funding or resources from the 2019 Integrated Communities Action Plan.

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285   Engagement Meeting, 30.06.2022
286   Engagement Meeting, 30.06.2022
287   Engagement Meeting, 30.06.2022
288   Eichler, W. (2023) 'Stoke-on-Trent Council at risk of bankruptcy', LocalGov.co.uk. Available at:
       https://www.localgov.co.uk/Stoke-on-Trent-Council-at-risk-of-bankruptcy/57857

Summary and key learning

Towns and cities like Stoke who are dealing with extremism but do not meet the requirements of being designated a Prevent priority area often lack the necessary resources and can struggle to deal with arising cohesion and extremism issues. It is entirely possible that other areas similar to Stoke where there is a permanent presence of extremist groups who are encouraging radicalisation and undermining social cohesion will not meet the Prevent Priority criteria and therefore not qualify for support.

This raises questions as to what support and resources is provided to local areas where extremist activity is persistent and is harming social cohesion. Without such support, places like Stoke fall through the gaps despite the permissive extremism environment and harm it is causing to the city.

5.3   Case Study 3 – The Eleanor Williams case in Barrow-in-Furness

Background

Barrow-in-Furness is a port town in Cumbria with a population of just over 55,000. The town has an industry focussed around the BAE nuclear submarine plant and has a tight-knit, strong and predominately white working-class community, with 97% of the population identifying as ethnically white in the 2021 census. The town has also experienced the challenges of long-term unemployment and deprivation. Stakeholders also told us that many people are disillusioned with how local democracy works believing that it does not deliver for them.[289]

In May 2020, a Facebook post from a young female Barrow resident went viral. Eleanor Williams claimed to have been trafficked and raped by an Asian grooming gang in the area. In March 2023, Manchester Crown Court found her guilty of lying and falsifying evidence about this as, well as a series of other rape accusations. She was imprisoned for perverting the course of justice.[290] Williams' claims and her subsequent conviction raised tensions in the town and divided the community.

In late 2019, a few months before the Williams case, there had been a planning permission request by some local Muslim residents for a community centre in neighbouring town Dalton-in-Furness, which would be open to all and contain a prayer room. Britain First and Patriotic Alternative campaigned against the community centre, which was labelled as a giant mosque, with leafleting, protests and residents being encouraged to write letters of complaints to the local council.[291] This encouraged existing community tensions. Councillors who supported the proposed centre received death threats and police presence was required at a meeting to discuss planning permission for the centre .[292]

This meant that tensions along race and religious lines were already running high in the area when Eleanor Williams claimed on Facebook that she had been raped by an Asian grooming gang. The situation was also heightened by the Covid lockdown, with residents spending more time online where extremist content and disinformation over the Williams case was being

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289   Engagement Meeting, 01.08.2023

290   McCann, Phil. (14 March 2023) 'Eleanor Williams: The lasting impact of fake rape claims', BBC News. Available at:
       https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cumbria-64950299

291   The Mail (2019) 'Britain First targets Dalton planning dispute',
       https://www.nwemail.co.uk/news/18085561.britain-first-targets-dalton-planning-dispute/;
       The Mail (2022) 'Far-right activists condemned after protest at Dalton Islamic centre site'
       https://www.nwemail.co.uk/news/20031496.far-right-activists-condemned-protest-dalton-islamic-centre-site/

292   Engagement Meeting, 01.08.2023

actively spread. These factors, as well as the decision by the Home Office to set up a contingency hotel for asylum seekers in the town centre in August 2021, created 'a perfect storm in Barrow' for far right actors to exploit and undermine social cohesion.[293] Requests to the Home Office for a temporary pause of the setting up of a contingency hotel while tensions were high were ignored, which according to senior leaders exacerbated the cohesion concerns and tensions even further.

The Impact of Eleanor Williams's post

Following the Williams's Facebook post, conspiracies were spread about grooming gangs on social media, which went as far as to name specific Asian restaurants in Barrow as being involved.[294] There were protests in the town, with Asian restaurants vandalised, and Asian staff in those restaurants abused. Restaurant owners who were falsely accused claimed to have lost up to 80% of their business.[295] The town saw a large increase in hate crime, with Cumbria police reporting an extra 150 crimes in the aftermath, 86 of which were classed as hate crimes.[296,297] One South Asian restaurant owner reported receiving frightening telephone calls issuing death and rape threats to him and his family.[298] A local newspaper reporter also received death threats.[299]

The Review heard how community relations between the white and South Asian communities fractured during this period. Many who worked at the local hospital including professionals and doctors felt increasingly fearful, with some considering leaving the town altogether.[300]

Far right actors, who had targeted Barrow with limited success in the past, restarted and intensified targeting of the area, stirring up further attention and anger. Tommy Robinson arrived in the town to 'investigate' the case and led a convoy of vehicles in 'solidarity' with the 'victims of grooming' and against the Police, drumming up local discontent.[301] Fuelled by the Williams case, Patriotic Alternative also began leafletting in Barrow and the surrounding area with racist material and targeted asylum seekers housed in local hotels.[302] The local MP, Simon Fell, told the Review that there is now a permanent and visible far right presence in the community, where before there hadn't been one.[303]

Analysis

While Eleanor Williams was found to have perverted the course of justice and was sentenced in March 2023, the existence of some form of sex trafficking in the area has been acknowledged, not least by the judge for Williams trial.[304,305] At the time of Williams' post, there were widespread concerns from locals that sexual exploitation and/or trafficking existed in the local area and

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293   Engagement Meeting, 01.08.2023
294   ibid.
295   ITV News (2023) 'Restaurant owner 'loses 80% of business' due to false Asian grooming gang claims'
      https://www.itv.com/news/2023-03-14/restaurant-owner-loses-80-of-business-due-to-false-asian-grooming-gang-claims
296   Long, Jackie. (2023) 'Eleanor Williams jailed for eight and a half years over rape lies', Channel 4 News. Available at:
      https://www.channel4.com/news/eleanor-williams-jailed
297   BBC News (2023) 'Eleanor Williams: The lasting impact of fake rape claims', https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cumbria-64950299
298   ibid
299   Long, Jackie. (2023) 'Eleanor Williams jailed for eight and a half years over rape lies', Channel 4 News.
300   Engagement Meeting, 01.08.2023
301   Pidd, Helen. (2020) 'Appeals for calm after Tommy Robinson visits Barrow amid protests', The Guardian. Available at:
      https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/may/26/appeals-for-calm-after-tommy-robinson-visits-barrow-amid-protests
302   Taylor, Dan. (2023) 'Far right group spreads 'hateful garbage' in Barrow', The Mail. Available at:
      https://www.nwemail.co.uk/news/23448832.far-right-group-spreads-hateful-garbage-barrow/
303   Long, Jackie. (2023) 'Eleanor Williams jailed for eight and a half years over rape lies', Channel 4 News.
304   Pidd, Helen. (2023) 'Eleanor Williams jailed for eight and a half years after rape and trafficking lies'. The Guardian. Available at:
      https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/14/eleanor-williams-jailed-lying-rapes-trafficking
305   Shield, Darren. (2023) 'Barrow MP Simon Fell's column reflects on Eleanor Williams verdict'. The Mail. Available at:
      https://www.nwemail.co.uk/news/23235928.barrow-mp-simon-fells-column-reflects-eleanor-williams-verdict/

there was a huge appetite for information on the issue. However, in responding to the outbreak of unrest, the council and local responders faced several issues they struggled to navigate.

Firstly, reporting restrictions in order not to prejudice the Williams's trial made commenting on the specifics of the case impossible and neither the council nor the police could provide a running commentary. On the other hand, social media allowed the rapid, decentralised spread of disinformation and alternative narratives. This allowed events to rapidly unfold and also allowed hate, conspiracies and disinformation to spread widely before any considered official or traditional media response could be given. This left local leaders to be constantly on 'the back foot' and their response work to be only of a reactive nature.

The council also lacked resources to have a communications officer trained in handling such tensions and consequently had limited ability to join up comms messaging. The council were highly concerned that their messaging should not worsen the situation and they did not feel they had enough experience to navigate such challenging issues proactively.[306] Their initial response was to stick to the facts, work with local agencies to promote cohesion messaging, and act to stop instances of hate crime where they could.[307]

Cumbrian police were no doubt in an extraordinarily difficult position, seeing the unrest increase while having already begun their investigation into previous allegations made by Williams. For example, they had already covered extensive evidence by the time of her post that her earlier claims of being trafficked were in fact lies. However, the statement they issued which confirmed they had found 'no evidence' of grooming gangs exploiting young women in Barrow[308] was repeatedly cited as a catalytic moment to growing community tensions, considering the wide-spread belief in William's claims.

A lack of community engagement by elected leaders was also apparent. The Reviewer was informed that there was very little appetite from elected officials at the time to engage directly with residents whose opinions were perceived as being politically dangerous.[309]

Simon Fell MP looked to play a role in calming tensions and told the Review he was shocked to find that there was no wider or national support available to him or other local leaders in dealing with situation such as this.[310] Although the Local Government Association provided some help for the council, there was no guidebook, tool kit or national approach from central government or national resilience networks to provide support in such difficult instances.

Understandably, local leaders told us they struggled to know what to do in such a complex situation. Making public statements without the appropriate knowledge and support was considered risky. One senior member of Westmoreland and Barrow council believed that if a similar flashpoint instance happened again, they would still struggle to know how to deal with it in the most effective manner.

An information vacuum was created in the absence of local leaders directly addressing the concerns of the community, as well as the police statement denying the existence of grooming gaps. This allowed racist and extremist actors to claim the authorities were orchestrating a cover up, filling the information void with disinformation and their own divisive narratives. In our

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306 Engagement Meeting, 01.08.2023
307 Engagement Meeting, 20.08.2023
308 Fenton, Amy. (2020) Video: 'Police chief says 'no evidence of gang of Asian sex abusers in Barrow', The Mail. Available at: https://www.nwemail.co.uk/news/18466530.police-chiefs-video-statement-barrow-sex-abuse-allegations/
309 ibid.
310 Engagement Meeting, 19.06.2023

view, Tommy Robinson was able to effectively exploit the appetite for information and provide a divisive and anti-establishment narrative.

Summary and key learnings

This case study highlights many of the challenges to social cohesion. Disinformation, the involvement of national and out of town extremist groups in local issues, as well as disillusionment with local democracy and lack of trust in institutions. It also highlights the rapid way disinformation and division can spread locally in the social media age.

The Barrow case also highlights how local authorities and local leaders can feel isolated by the lack of institutional support available to them when such situations occur. Responses to such events must be both rapid and robust, and often local authorities will understandably lack the skills, experience and knowledge to do so. When Eleanor Williams was found guilty, we asked the local council if they had used the opportunity to engage and challenge conspiracy theories, in an attempt to help repair the breakdown in cohesion. The council told us they did not and recognised it was a missed opportunity.

Conclusion

The three specific case studies explored in this chapter have illustrated some of the evolving cohesion challenges facing local authorities. Local authorities and communities must be better supported in tackling such complex threats which endanger cohesion. Many do not have the strategy, capability or communication tools to respond to social unrest – they must be better supported in preventing, managing and responding to early tensions and cohesion flashpoints. Without the tools or knowledge to promote and protect social cohesion, extremist narratives can gain traction, which in some cases will lead to a disruption in democracy and breakdown of trust of institutions.

As identified in the previous chapter, there is a lack of a strategic approach and infrastructure within the Whitehall machinery to support local authorities. The examples of Oldham, Stoke-on-Trent and Barrow-in-Furness demonstrate the impact of the absence of a social cohesion and democratic resilience strategic approach.

Chapter 6

Measuring social cohesion: Key indicators, trends and gaps
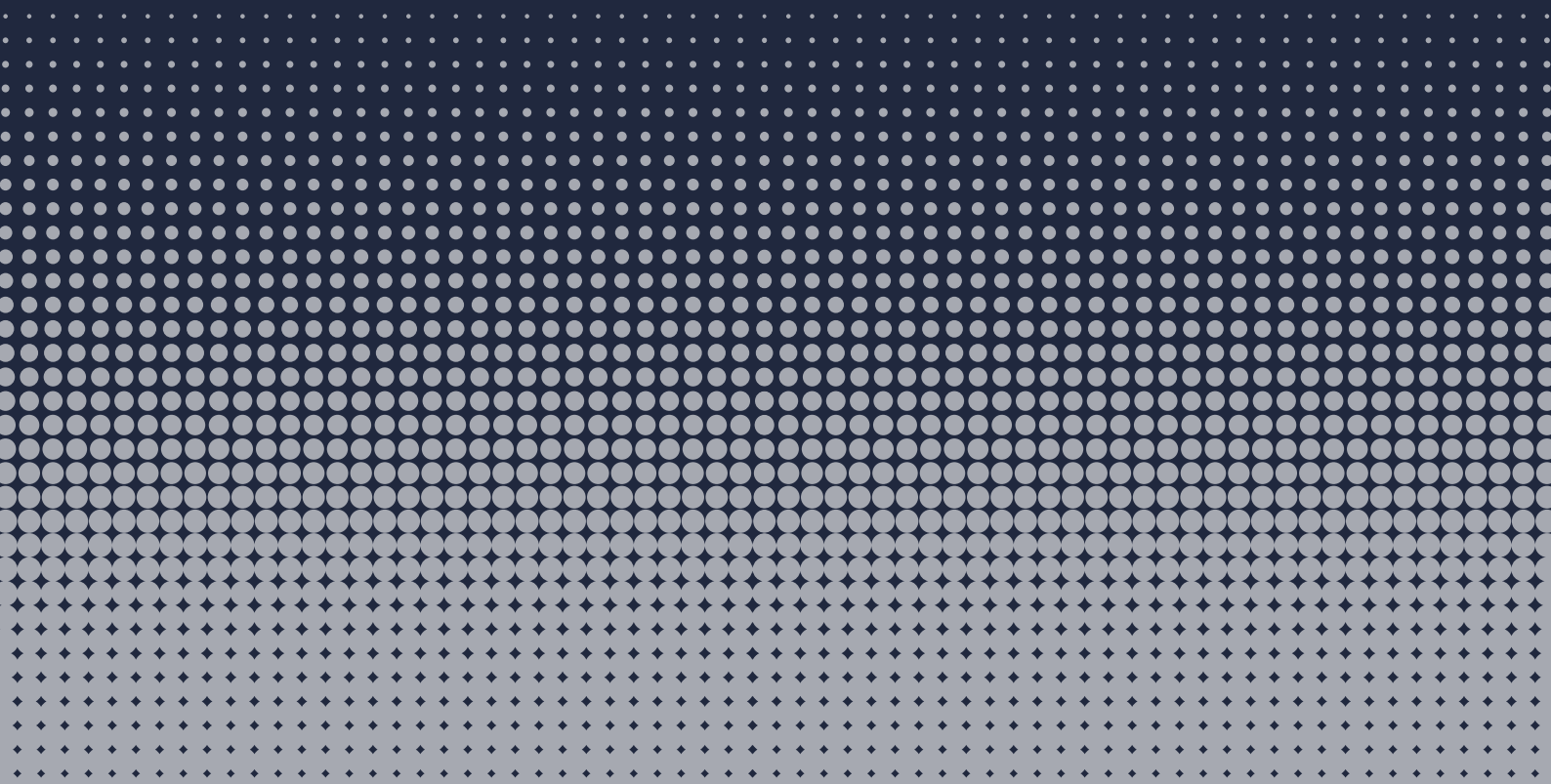
Britain is a country of diversity, tradition, and change. Continual demographic inflows and outflows can rapidly change one area, while another area may see only gradual change over time. Culture is in continual evolution as it responds to socio-economic shifts, technological advancements, new ideas, political movements, events and threats. It is not surprising that social cohesion rarely remains static – and while social cohesion maybe strengthening in one part of the country, it may be weakening in another.

Knowing the extent to which social cohesion is changing for the better or worse should be vitally important to policy makers and government. However, a lack of data collection and an assessment framework to capture the state of social cohesion makes it difficult to have an accurate and coherent picture at a local, regional and national level. Where data and indices do exist, they provide patchy or even contradictory pictures, suggesting an incomplete dataset.

The lack of independent, impartial and continuous assessment also makes it difficult to hold local authorities and political leaders to account if cohesion is worsening in a local area. It also hinders the development of targeted policy, practice and intervention and makes the accurate tracking and progress monitoring of any policy or intervention exceedingly difficult.

In this chapter, the Reviewer assesses three social cohesion indicators using current available data. These are:

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

These three indicators have been chosen for their fundamental importance to social cohesion and the fact that a reasonable amount of national data exists in these areas. Because we do not have a comprehensive social cohesion assessment framework, these three areas provide a limited look at how cohesion is faring in our country.

The key findings of this chapter are that:

- The increasingly liberal and tolerant attitudes of differing groups in the UK indicate improving social cohesion. However, a simultaneous rise in polarisation and freedom-restricting harassment suggests the picture of tolerance in our country is more complicated and that both of these findings can be true at the same time.

- Trust in democracy and democratic participation are good indicators for societal cohesion. Both are in decline, which has worrying implications for social cohesion.

- Civic engagement and social capital are vital to social cohesion. While large parts of the UK population came together to volunteer for the NHS and support their communities during the Covid-19 pandemic, research generally shows that civic engagement and social capital has declined.

The latter part of the chapter briefly outlines what a national framework could look like.

6.1 Tolerance, prejudice, and attitudes towards others

Individual attitudes towards other people are a good indicator of how well differing communities can live together. In a diverse democracy, increasing levels of tolerance of others, their beliefs, opinions and their way of life, along with lower levels of prejudice, generally indicate a more cohesive society, with lower levels of inter-community tensions.

Evidence points to generally increasingly tolerant and liberal attitudes in the UK over the last half century. For example, the British social attitudes survey found that there has been a 'substantial liberalisation in moral attitudes' over the past four decades.[311] Time series data from the National Centre for Societal Research also shows how the UK has generally become more committed to the values of tolerance and individual liberty over the last four decades[312].

Supporting this data, a rapid review on 'Shared Values' commissioned by this Review from King's college London's Policy institute shows the UK becoming more accepting and appreciative of difference.[313]

Tolerance exists as a spectrum and can be understood as a three-level pyramid hierarchy. This includes, 'acceptance of diversity' at the most basic level, followed by 'respect for diversity' and 'appreciation of diversity' at the top of the spectrum. Such appreciation is seen as the highest form of tolerance as seen in Figure 3. Data suggests Britain is increasingly becoming a more tolerant country at the basic level of 'accepting diversity' but also showing a growing 'appreciation of difference'.[314]
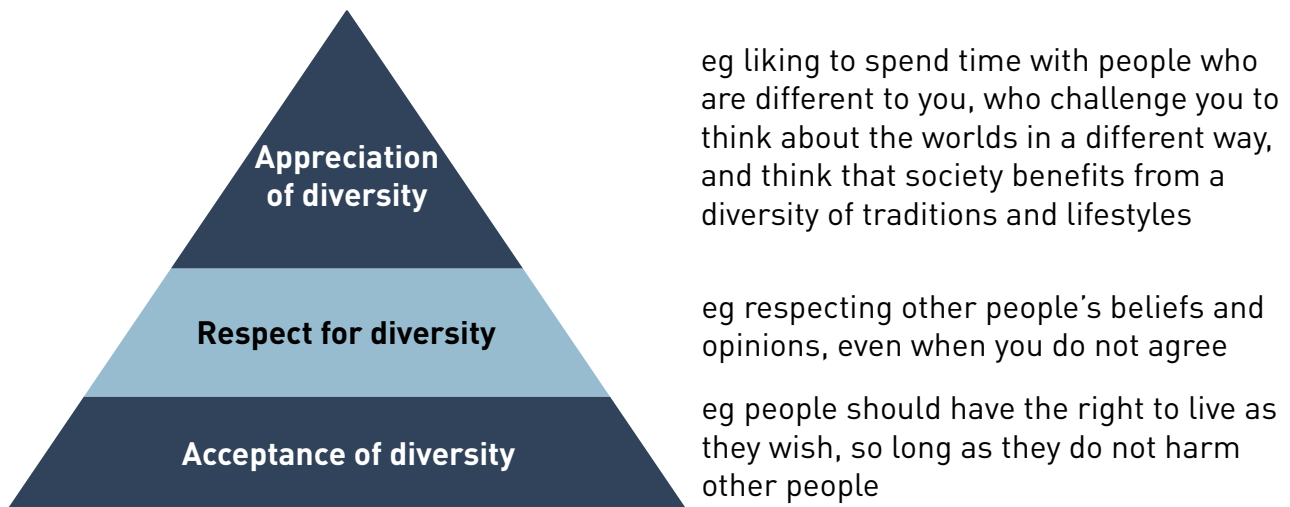

Figure 3: Levels of tolerance[315]

These trends are further developed in Figure 4, which illustrates that considerably fewer people in 2021 take issue with having neighbours with certain protected characteristics, compared with aggregate views in the 1980s. These trends indicate improving cohesion as groups and communities learn to accept their differences. While we have become more socially liberal and

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311 National centre for societal Research (2023) 'British social attitudes: 40', Accessed at
     BSA 40: A liberalisation in attitudes? | National Centre for Social Research (natcen.ac.uk)
312 ibid
313 Kings College London (2023) 'Rapid Review: Shared Societal Values'
314 ibid
315 Hjerm Et al (2020) 'A new approach to the study of tolerance: conceptualising and measuring acceptance, respect and appreciation of different'. Accessed from https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-019-02176-y

accepting on a wide range of issues including homosexuality and race, some challenges remain when different population subgroups and situations come into tension with each other.[316,317]

On this list are various groups of people. Could you please mention any that you would not like to have as neighbours? (% mentions)
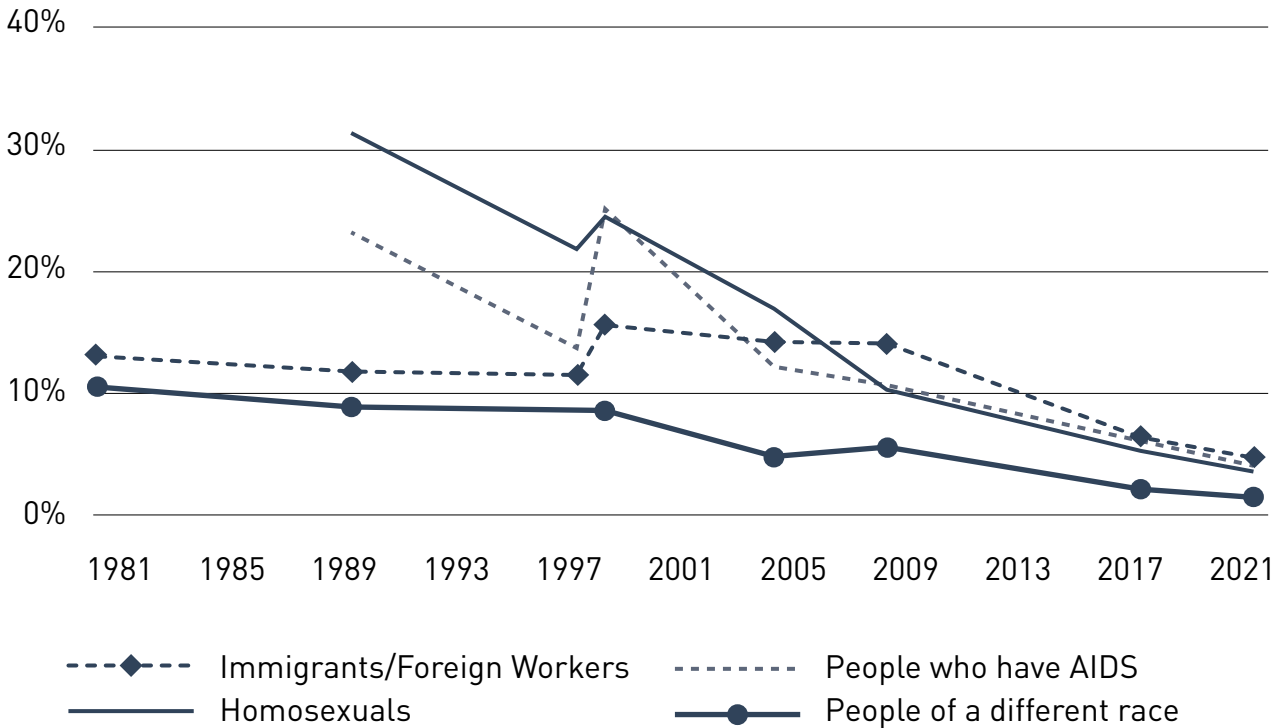

Figure 4: Undesirable Neighbours[318]

While this data shows a general trend of increasing tolerance in the UK, this doesn't mean intolerance doesn't exist. Results from a 2020 survey conducted by research group IPSOS found that one third of participants (32%) felt 'influences from other countries and cultures […] threatened the British way of life'.[319] This indicates that the full picture is complex, where higher tolerance can be seen regarding some subjects and towards certain groups, but not universally across the board.

As evidenced earlier, the extent to which people are experiencing FRH should give cause for concern. Such harassment is fundamentally an expression of intolerance to other people's opinions, beliefs, characteristics or roles in society. Three-quarters of people (76%) said they've avoided expressing a view publicly and have censored themselves out of fear, either to themselves or their loved ones.[320]

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316   Kings College London (2023) 'Rapid Review: Shared Societal Values'
317   National Centre for Societal Research (2023) 'British social attitudes: 40'
318   World Values Survey & The Policy Institute (2023) 'Love they neighbour, accessed at, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/love-thy-neighbour.pdf
319   IPSOS (2020) 'Tolerance across the divide'. Accessed from Tolerance across the values divide? | Ipsos
320   Kantar – Polling on Freedom Restricting Harassment (2023) commissioned by this review.

While traditionally a great deal of research on tolerance has focused on majority-minority relations, or attitudes towards different groups of people, further research is needed to determine how tolerant we are to different opinions, political views and beliefs that clash with our own views – and to what extent and why people engage in harassment, intimidation and violence as a result.

6.2 Democracy and institutional trust

Trust in the democratic processes, politicians and democratic participation are important indicators of social cohesion. There are clear links between trust in politics and feelings of societal belonging. Indeed, a sense of belonging and cohesion are far more likely to develop when people feel a sense of trust towards their elected leaders and feel represented by them, as well as believing they have a stake in society. However, the available evidence suggests trust in democracy and its institutions is declining, as well as democratic participation, which has worrying implications for social cohesion.

This section will highlight the low levels of trust in politicians and institutions, poor voter turnout and a disillusionment in democracy, before exploring the implications for social cohesion.

Declining trust in democracy

The UK is experiencing declining trust in democracy. While trust, distrust and mistrust in government have been examined by a range of academics, Jennings and Stoker provide the following useful definitions:[321]

- 'Trust' is an assumption that government will act in your best interests
- 'Mistrust' reflects some scepticism about the 'other'
- 'Distrust' is a decided upon, immovable negative opinion that government is completely untrustworthy

They argue that some mistrust is valuable in a democratic society and people should question their leaders, hold them to account and to high standards. However, it is the volume and the extent of the distrust that should be of concern to high functioning democracies.

Over half of the UK population are dissatisfied with democracy, according to 2020 research from The Centre for the Future of Democracy.[322] Time series data from the British social attitudes survey further shows how trust in our government has decreased over the last four decades, as seen in Figure 5. This illustrates how the climactic conditions influencing social cohesion are evolving over time. The continued low voter turnout, low trust in the government[323] and plummeting trust in parliament, clearly have concerning implications for social cohesion.[324,325]

Carnegie UK argue that measuring the health of our democracy is incredibly important to check the temperature and wellbeing of the nation.[326] A loss of trust is linked to the inability of

321 Jennings, W. et al. (2021) 'How trust, mistrust and distrust shape the governance of the COVID-19 crisis', Journal of European Public Policy, 28:8, 1174-1196
322 Centre for the Future of democracy & Bennett Institute for Public Policy Cambridge (2020) 'Global satisfaction with democracy', https://www.cam.ac.uk/system/files/report2020_003.pdf
323 House of Commons Library (2021) 'Political disengagement in the UK: Who is disengaged?'
324 ibid
325 The Policy Institute, Kings College (2023) 'Trust in Trouble?'. Accessed at https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/confidence-in-institutions.pdf
326 Carnegie UK (2020) 'Loss of Public trust in Government is the biggest threat to democracy in England' Accessed at https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/blog-posts/loss-of-public-trust-in-government-is-the-biggest-threat-to-democracy-in-england/

governments to function effectively.[327] Their research found that a third (32%) of the public claim that a loss of trust in the government is the biggest threat to democracy right now. 76% of the public in England don't trust MPs to make decisions that will improve their lives, while 73% don't trust the UK Government on the same measure.[328]

Trust in the Government has fallen
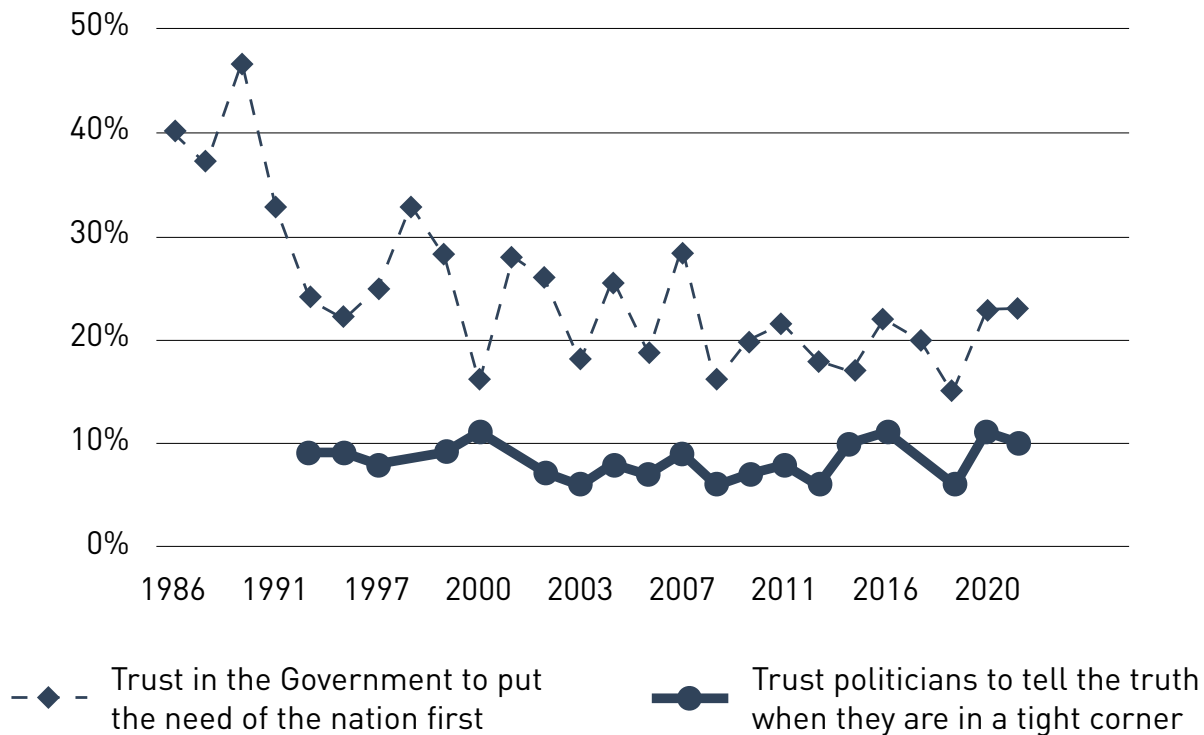Proportion of people who trust always or most of the time, 1986-2020

Figure 5: Proportion of people who trust the Government all of or most of the time[329]

Research indicates that there is a general global trend towards declining trust in democracy, its institutions and politicians.[330,331,332] A report from the Centre for the Future of Democracy at the University of Cambridge, who have assessed 154 countries over several decades, found that 2019 had the 'highest level of democratic discontent' since 1995.[333]

Research also compares the state of trust in democracy in the UK with our closest democratic neighbours. Data from the World Values Survey tracks democratic sentiment across the globe, with Figure 6 showing where the UK ranks against several other countries. This data shows that confidence in UK democratic institutions is low in comparison to other European democracies (France, Spain, Germany etc).

327   ibid
328   ibid
329   The National Centre for social Research (2021) 'British Social Attitudes 38: Democracy', Accessed at
      https://bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39436/bsa38_democracy.pdf
330   Kings College London Policy institute (2023) 'Trust in trouble? UK and international confidence in institutions', Accessed from
      https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/confidence-in-institutions.pdf
331   IPSOS knowledge Panel (2023) 'The state of Democracy', Accessed at
      https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-12/Ipsos-KnowledgePanel-TheStateOfDemocracy.pdf
332   Centre for the future of democracy & Bennett institute for Public Policy Cambridge (2020) 'Global satisfaction with Democracy'.
333   ibid

I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, please indicate how much confidence you have in them (% who say a great deal/quite a lot)

Government

Country	%
China	95%
Philippines	82%
Indonesia	79%
Norway	59%
Russia	53%
Iran	52%
Sweden	51%
S Korea	51%
Canada	46%
Germany	44%
Nigeria	40%
Japan	40%
US	34%
France	31%
Australia	30%
UK	24%
Italy	24%
Poland	23%
Brazil	23%
Spain	22%
Morocco	21%
Mexico	17%
Greece	13%
Egypt	

Parliament/congress

Country	%
China	93%
Philippines	70%
Norway	70%
Sweden	64%
Iran	64%
Indonesia	51%
Canada	44%
Germany	43%
Russia	38%
Nigeria	33%
France	33%
Spain	32%
Japan	31%
Italy	28%
Australia	28%
UK	22%
S Korea	21%
Morocco	20%
Poland	19%
Brazil	16%
US	15%
Mexico	14%
Greece	14%
Egypt	8%

Political parties

Country	%
China	91%
Philippines	63%
Iran	49%
Indonesia	37%
Norway	36%
Nigeria	33%
Sweden	32%
Russia	31%
Japan	26%
S Korea	24%
Canada	24%
Germany	23%
Morocco	19%
Spain	18%
UK	13%
Italy	13%
Brazil	13%
France	12%
US	11%
Mexico	11%
Australia	11%
Poland	8%
Greece	7%
Egypt	2%

The press

Country	%
Philippines	71%
Japan	70%
China	68%
Iran	60%
Nigeria	54%
S Korea	50%
Indonesia	50%
Canada	43%
Sweden	40%
Norway	39%
Brazil	37%
Germany	36%
Spain	33%
Russia	32%
US	30%
Italy	30%
France	30%
Mexico	27%
Poland	26%
Morocco	23%
Australia	18%
Greece	14%
UK	13%
Egypt	8%

UK base: 3,056 people ages 18+, surveyed 1 Mar-9 Sept 2022. Other countries all surveyed in wave 7 of WVS at various points between 2017 and 2022. See WVSA website for sample information of other countries.
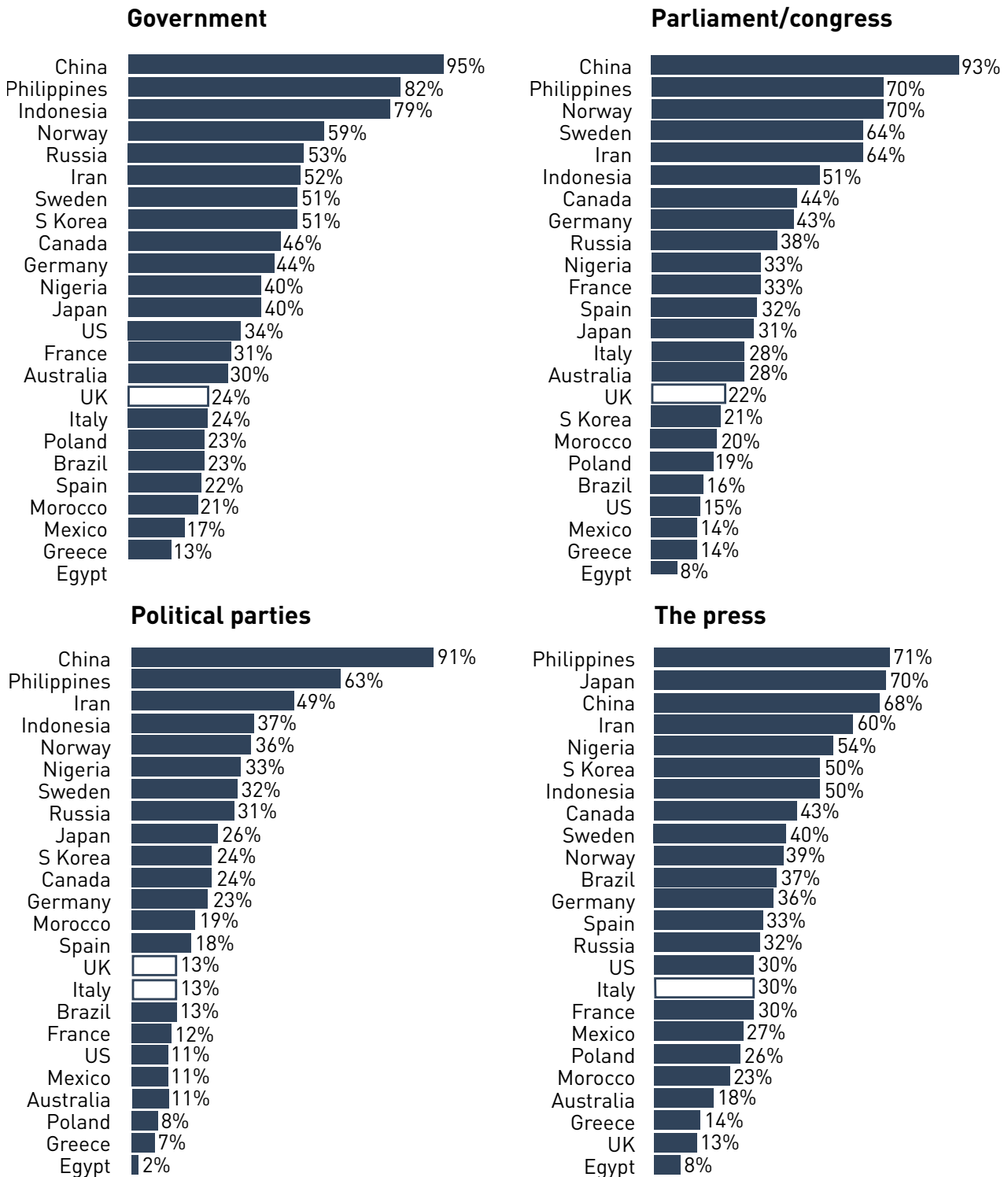
Figure 6: Confidence in institutions around the world[334]

334   Kings College London Policy Institute (2023) 'Trust in trouble? UK and international confidence in institutions'

The UK is among the least likely of other Western democracies to have confidence in the government, parliament, political parties or the press. Confidence in Parliament (46%) has halved since 1990 and, in 2022, fell to an historic low of 23%.[335] Just 13% of the UK public say they have confidence in political parties, with confidence low across all generations.[336]

Understanding the trends towards declining democratic trust, and why our democratic neighbours fare better is worthy of further research.

Declining participation in democracy

The UK is also experiencing a general declining participation in democracy.

Voter turnout is an indication of engagement and trust in the democratic system. As Figure 7 highlights, turnout has decreased from its peak of 83.9% in 1950. Although recent general elections have seen increases in turnout, levels are still lower than the long-term average.[337]
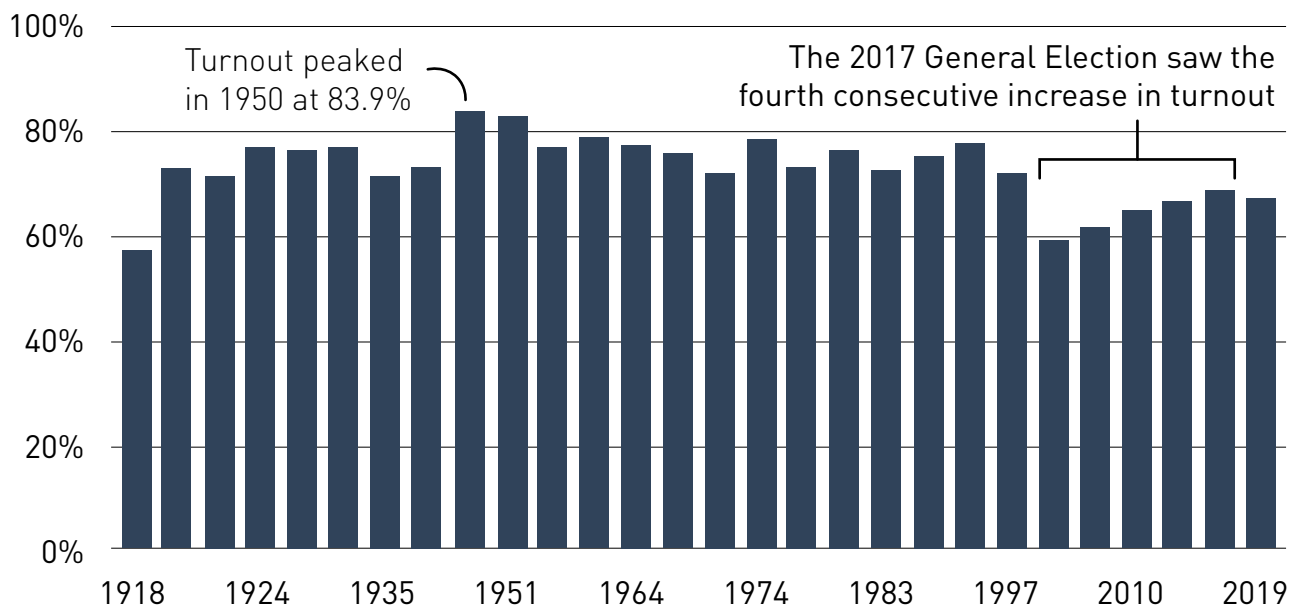

Figure 7: Turnout at UK General Elections, 1918-2019[338]

The ONS finds that half (49%) of the UK population feel confident in their ability to participate in politics. However, the majority (58%) of the population do not feel confident that people like them have a say in what the UK Government does. Over one-third (36%) were not confident in their own ability to participate in politics.[339] Apathy can be attributed to a lack of trust in the political system, as citizens may not get involved if they think their opinion will not influence decision-makers.[340]

335   ibid
336   ibid
337   House of Commons Library (2021) 'Political disengagement in the UK: Who is disengaged?'
338   House of Commons Library (2021) 'Political disengagement in the UK: Who is disengaged?'
339   Office for National Statistics (2021) 'Trust in Government, UK: 2022'. Census
340   Carnegie UK (2022) 'A spotlight on democratic wellbeing'. Accessed at
       GDWe-A-spotlight-on-democratic-wellbeing-FINAL.pdf (d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net)

Emerging methods of public participation and citizen engagement, such as citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting, seek to increase individual and collective voice and choice. Yet, for people to feel positive about participating in democratic processes and decision making, they must have public trust in government.

Deliberate democracy: Improving citizen engagement, trust and decision-making

Contemporary deliberative democracy is the idea that political decisions and policy making should involve contribution, representation and discussion among citizens. This includes deliberation (careful and open discussion to weigh the evidence about an issue) and representativeness, achieved through sortition (random selection).[341] These principles are not new and were used throughout various points of history until around two to three centuries ago.[342]

However, in recent years deliberative democracy has demonstrated its usefulness in strengthening the liberal democratic model. Citizens councils, panels, assemblies and citizens reviews have been institutionalised in numerous democracies including the US, Sweden, Austria, Canada, Poland and France.[343]

There has been much praise for the contributions made by the Climate Assembly UK. Climate Assembly UK, the first of its kind, brought together over 100 people from all backgrounds and opinions to discuss how the UK should meet the legally binding target set by Parliament of reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2050.[344] As the assembly chairs noted, setting the target was the easy part. How to achieve it was far more difficult.[345] Assembly members met over six weekends, heard balanced evidence and put forward recommendations about what the UK should do to meet the target. It was a successful example of the benefits of taking a deliberate democracy approach.

As was the Irish Citizens' Assembly, where 100 citizen members considered five important issues over a 19-month period and made recommendations based on expert, impartial and factual advice. Many of these topics were divisive, emotive, and controversial, including the issue of abortion which had been the subject of passionate debate for decades in Ireland.

"The Assembly process brought forward tangible policy and legislative proposals that were uniquely citizen led. The approach adopted through the Citizens' Assembly allowed for a mature and informed debate that ultimately led to an amendment to the Irish constitution and related legislative change on this highly charged topic."[346]

Two constitutional amendments have been passed in Ireland which originated as proposals put forward by deliberative democracy exercises.

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341   Chwalisz, C., (2019) 'A New Wave of Deliberative Democracy'
      https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/11/26/new-wave-of-deliberative-democracy-pub-80422
342   ibid
343   ibid
344   See: https://www.climateassembly.uk/
345   See: Climate Assembly (2020) 'The Path to Net Zero', final-report.pdf (climateassembly.uk)
346   Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (2016) 'The Irish Citizens' Assembly', https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/the-irish-citizens-assembly/

Taking a deliberative democracy approach can reinvigorate our democratic model. In an era of growing disillusionment with democracy, mistrust of government and politicians and voter apathy, as well as the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, institutionalising deliberate democracy should be considered as an important feature of strengthening inclusive and cohesive democracies.

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy[347] argues that giving citizens a more meaningful role in public decision making can enhance public trust in government and state institutions; create deeper discussion and engagement in effective and shared decision making; lead to better policy outcomes; and provide greater legitimacy to hard choices.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has suggested eight models that could help implement deliberative democracy. These range from embedding representative deliberative processes in local strategic planning to connecting representative public deliberation to parliamentary committees and requiring representative public deliberation before certain types of public decisions.[348]

Local and national government should consider new and innovative ways of including deliberative democracy models to help strengthen social cohesion and people's engagement, trust and contribution to our democratic model.

Declining trust and participation in democracy deeply impacts social cohesion

Declining trust and participation in democracy are worrying trends for social cohesion. To participate in democracy effectively, differing groups and individuals must have some shared common ground consisting of certain societal values, democratic norms and some notion of a national identity, in order to live a life within society rather than feeling outside of it. This common ground should also protect the rights and freedoms of all groups and individuals within society and therefore protects social cohesion in a diverse democracy.

When a population has widespread distrust of democratic processes, social cohesion and our democracy suffers as a result. The organisation More in Common reports that half of the UK population show deep dissatisfaction and disengagement,[349] arguing that 'this has made democracy more vulnerable to the forces of extremism and division'.[350] Such disengagement can make sections of the population more susceptible to disinformation and more likely to support non-democratic alternatives.

How susceptible some subgroups are is also dependent on the effectiveness of leadership. As we witnessed, in the absence of effective and trusted leadership, especially during times of tensions and crisis, this can leave a void that is exploited and often filled by extremist actors, further fuelling division and distrust.

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347   Keutgen, J, (2021) 'How deliberative processes could save democracy',
      https://www.wfd.org/commentary/how-deliberative-processes-could-save-democracy
348   OECD (2021) 'Eight ways to institutionalise deliberative democracy',
      https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/eight-ways-to-institutionalise-deliberative-democracy.htm
349   Tryl, L. et al. (2021) 'Democratic Repair What Britons want from their democracy'.
350   ibid

Societies that are divided and unequal tend to lack social stability.[351] If social cohesion worsens, it can be argued that this leads to more societal breakdowns, less participation, and violent, costly manifestations of this dissatisfaction with the democratic system.[352] But the reverse is also true. Improving social cohesion, along with ensuring equitable distribution of wellbeing, rights and civic engagement[353], is a necessary step for widespread democratic participation.

6.3   Civic engagement and social capital[354]

The third indicator of social cohesion explored in this chapter is civic engagement and social capital, defined as the shared resource a community has to achieve common goals.[355]

A considerable element of civic engagement is volunteering, where individuals either formally or informally conduct unpaid, voluntary work for the benefit of others outside of their household.[356] The Belong Network and The University of Kent strongly link volunteering to increased social cohesion. A review by both organisations concludes that investment in volunteering improves cohesion[357] – arguing this is because volunteering increases social contact throughout communities and increases exposure and positive awareness of outgroups. Volunteers, as well as their beneficiaries, express feelings as members of the same community.

Volunteering is heavily connected with concepts such as neighbourly trust.[358] The think tank Onward argues that communities with higher volunteering are both more trusting and have stronger community relationships.[359] Onward's Social Fabric Index, published annually, lists community relationships such as 'membership and participation' which includes volunteering as an important element to help build a community with a strong social fabric.

However, volunteering in the UK is currently a mixed picture which varies throughout the nation. During the Covid pandemic, the UK witnessed staggering contributions made by Britons, from helping the old and vulnerable, to over a million people signing up to volunteer for the NHS. Such contributions are nothing short of awe-inspiring and paint a positive picture of social cohesion.[360]

Research in 2023 by the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) measures global giving and presented the following statistics regarding the charitable behaviours of UK citizens[361].

- 71% of Britons surveyed said they had donated in the past month – making the UK the third highest country in this category.

351   Council of Europe Forum for the future of democracy (2011) 'The Interdependency of Democracy and Social Cohesion', Accessed at
     https://docplayer.net/148236833-Council-of-europe-forum-for-the-future-of-democracy-october-2011-limassol-cyprus.html
352   ibid
353   Dr Roberto Cuellar (2009) 'Social cohesion and democracy'. International institute for democracy and electoral assistance. Accessed at
     https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/chapters/the-role-of-the-european-union-in-democracy-building/eu-democracy-
     building-discussion-paper-27.pdf
354   Blagden, J. & Valentin, F. (2023) '2023 social fabric index'. Published by Onward. Accessed at
     wcms_789950.pdf (ilo.org)https://www.ukonward.com/reports/2023-social-fabric-index/
355   Claridge, T. (2004) 'Social Capital and Natural Resource Management: An important role for social capital?', Accessed at
     https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/literature/definition/https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/literature/definition/
356   International labour Organisation (2021) 'Volunteer work measurement guide', Accessed at
     https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/publication/wcms_789950.pdf
357   Abrams Et al. (2023) 'Linking volunteering and Social cohesion: Causal evidence in the UK and Beyond'. The Belong Network & University of
     Kent. Accessed at https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Social-cohesion-and-volunteering-lit-review_final-.pdf
358   Blagden, J & Valentin, F. (2023) '2023 social fabric index'
359   ibid
360   Butler, P. (2020) 'A million volunteers to help the NHS and others during Covid-19 outbreak'. The Guardian. Accessed
     at https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/13/a-million-volunteer-to-help-nhs-and-others-during-covid-19-lockdown
361   Charities Aid Foundation (2023) 'World Giving Index 2023', Accessed at
     https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-research/world-giving-index-2023.pdf?sfvrsn=44dd5447_2

- While the UK's population is one of the most likely to donate money, the country was only 58th in the world for volunteering and 112th for helping a stranger.
- Across all three measures, the UK ranked as the 17th most generous country, the same as the previous year.

While Britons may be generous in donating money, other indicators suggest a less positive picture. For example, Onward note that the UK appears to have suffered a long-term and broad-based decline in the networks and institutions that make up the social fabric of communities, including falling volunteering numbers and lower levels of trust in civic institutions.[362] These findings are significant due to the interconnectedness of civic engagement and social cohesion. [363] Where there are less community relationships and less volunteering, the social fabric and cohesion of a community suffers.[364]

In conclusion, while much of the UK population came together to support their communities during the Covid-19 pandemic, this appears to be against a broader picture of declining civic engagement and social capital which affects the cohesiveness of UK society.

Onward: Social Fabric Index 2023: In stronger communities, people are more trusting[365]

"There is clear link between the strength of the social fabric and the willingness to trust strangers. For example, St Albans has the highest Social Fabric score in England and is also the third-most trusting area. Kingston-upon-Hull, on the other hand, is the most frayed and is the sixth-least trusting area.

This is driven by a number of ingredients for a strong community life: high rates of volunteering, religious attendance, and participation in local groups, stronger families, good health, and low crime.

This relationship likely runs both ways. More trusting citizens are more engaged in community life, and a stronger society facilitates greater levels of trust. This shows the importance of non-economic factors in understanding why, in some parts of the country, people feel that their communities are fraying."

362   ibid
363   Abrams Et al. (2023) 'Linking volunteering and Social cohesion: Causal evidence in the UK and Beyond' (2023). The Belong Network & University of Kent.
364   Blagden, J & Valentin, F. (2023) '2023 social fabric index'
365   Blagden, J & Valentin, F. (2023) '2023 social fabric index'

6.4   Measuring social cohesion: The need for a national framework

The three indicators explored throughout this chapter all have proven and considerable links with social cohesion. Measuring cohesion is challenging, partially due to the subjectivity of certain measures, as well as the ongoing absence of a comprehensive cohesion assessment framework that analyses and compares different cohesion indicators. Such an approach would help give a more definitive picture of social cohesion and democratic resilience in our country.

Examples of methods and models to measure social cohesion exist in academia and in practice in other countries. In academia, for example, Bottoni has developed an integrative seven pillar model of social cohesion which includes institutional trust, legitimacy of institutions, openness, participation, interpersonal trust, social support and density of social relations.[366]

This Review also commissioned the Belong Network to collate and synthesise a wide collection of measures that could be used to capture social cohesion.[367] Using 23 different data sources taken from academic and grey literatures and several large-scale social surveys administered in the UK, they identified the most commonly measured aspects. These include social trust, belonging and identity, civic engagement, tolerance toward others and political engagement. These six aspects were then organised into six broad themes: trust, identity, local connections, prejudice and intergroup relations, politics and social order, and external indicators.[368] Further details about Belong's potential cohesion framework are available to read alongside this report.

An effective and practical example of determining national social cohesion is the Scanlon Foundations work in Australia, explored below.

366   Bottoni, G. (2018). 'A Multilevel Measurement Model of Social Cohesion'. City University of London.
367   University of Kent & Belong Network (2023) 'Rapid Review: Measuring social cohesion'
368   The Scanlon Foundation website. Accessed at https://www.scanlonfoundation.org.au/about-us/

Mapping Social Cohesion: how Australia determines social cohesion

The Scanlon Foundation is an Australian philanthropic organisation focused on enhancing, supporting and measuring the country's social cohesion.[369] They commenced the Mapping Social Cohesion survey in 2007, which has now become the pre-eminent source of information on social cohesion in Australia. The 2023 study is the 17th in the series and is the largest to date. It relied on a nationally representative survey of 7,454 Australians, with additional targeted boost surveys of 251 first – and second-generation Australians and 55 in-depth qualitative interviews with people who have migrated to Australia over the years.

The Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion is constructed by aggregating responses to 17 survey questions on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey. In 2021 the index was re-developed and now comprises of an expanded set of 29 questions across the five domains of social cohesion. Responses are organised into the following five core measures or domains of social cohesion:

- Belonging: the sense of pride and belonging people have in Australia and in Australian life and culture.
- Worth: the degree of emotional and material wellbeing across society, as measured through levels of happiness and financial satisfaction.
- Social inclusion and justice: perceptions of economic fairness in Australian society and trust in the Federal Government.
- Participation: active engagement in political activities and the political process, including through voting, signing a petition, contacting Members of Parliament, and attending protests.
- Acceptance and rejection: attitudes to immigrant diversity, support for ethnic minorities, and experience of discrimination.

Conclusion

Some of the cohesion indicators measured in this chapter, while not exhaustive, show a mixture of both encouraging and worrying trends in the UK that warrant further research. While we have in general become more tolerant to different groups in our country, there are other indicators pointing to growing warnings signs. From freedom-restricting harassment, to decreasing trust and participation in democracy, and declining civil participation and social capital, there remains an incomplete and inconclusive picture of social cohesion and democratic resilience in our country.

The development of a comprehensive cohesion assessment framework will help address this.

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369   ibid

Chapter 7

Ongoing structural obstacles to social cohesion – the 3 Ps: policy, practice and politics

Despite almost two decades of government commissioned independent reports, reviews and inquiries, social cohesion policy continues to be neglected. While there is some essential work happening across the country, there has been a failure to invest and institutionalise social cohesion. A central challenge is the lack of data and assessment about the changing state of social cohesion across the country, with major evidence gaps and a lack of robust evaluations to inform policy interventions.

This chapter outlines what the Reviewer considers to be the most significant obstacles affecting social cohesion efforts in Britain, identified as the 3Ps. They are:

- **Policy** – weaknesses in previous and current policy approaches that have impeded cohesion efforts
- **Practice** – outdated and ineffective approaches, avoidance of difficult issues and unclear outcomes
- **Politics** – the lack of political leadership when cohesion interests clash with political interests

7.1   Policy and practice obstacles

A) The lack of a standardised understanding and remit of cohesion

A failure to define social cohesion, its aims, objectives and what 'success' looks like has continued to hamper government efforts. Instead, as observed by the Oxford Migration Observatory and the British Academy, how social cohesion is defined differs across the UK and these definitions can reflect different political, ideological, social and economic priorities.[370]

This was evident to the Reviewer early on. Different understandings were prevalent among practitioners, councillors, local authorities and even senior officials within DLUHC. Some articulated limited views, while others would advocate a very broad understanding. Outlining a standardised description of social cohesion is needed for policy and delivery purposes.

B) Conflation in language and understanding between 'integration' and 'social cohesion'

It is important to distinguish 'integration' from 'social cohesion,' yet often these terms are used interchangeably. This has been highlighted before, including by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in 2007.[371] In policy circles, the term 'integration' has often been used as a shorthand to describe ethnic minority Britons and the need for them to be 'integrated', despite being citizens of third, fourth generation or beyond.

In the view of the Reviewer:

An integration strategy should be considered as a short and medium term approach, with the aim of helping new migrants successfully integrate in Britain. In recent years, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have arrived in the UK from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine. These individuals and families have a diverse range of needs that need to be met to help them integrate into the country. These include access to housing, schooling, employment

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370   See University of Oxford & The Migration Observatory (2019) 'Immigration, Diversity and Social Cohesion' https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/immigration-diversity-and-social-cohesion/ and; Donoghue, M. and Sarah Bourke, S. (2019) 'Cohesive Societies Policy Review' https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/cohesive-societies-policy-review/

371   THE COMMISSION ON INTEGRATION & COHESION (2007) 'Our Shared Future'. The Commission noted *"we do not believe integration and cohesion are the same thing as some argue. Cohesion is principally the process that must happen in all communities to ensure different groups of people get on well together; while integration is principally the process that ensures new residents and existing residents adapt to one another."* https://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Education/documents/2007/06/14/oursharedfuture.pdf

and healthcare. Equally, supporting new arrivals to learn English, understand the norms and laws of the United Kingdom, including its diverse culture, democratic rights and freedoms as well as responsibilities, is also essential to any integration strategy. The success or failure of integration strategies will undoubtedly affect and contribute to social cohesion. However, social cohesion goes much wider.

Social cohesion takes a long-term approach of helping diverse yet established citizens and communities to live well together and be resilient to inevitable tensions that will occur from time to time. This includes the intra-minority and intra-faith tensions that also present themselves in our country but to date have largely been ignored by social cohesion practitioners. This is important in pluralistic societies, when 'us v them' narratives can present serious conflict, or when people oppose respecting the rights and freedoms of others. Other threats to cohesion should also be considered, for example the spread and support for conspiracy theories, the challenges of misinformation and disinformation, disillusionment with democracy and a lack of trust in democratic institutions, among others.

C) The lack of a national framework to measure the strength of social cohesion

The lack of agreed measures, measurement frameworks or data for social cohesion, both to provide assessments at a single point in time or to track change, is a significant issue.[372]

At a national government and even sometimes at a local authority level, it is not always known where hotspots of polarisation or tension exist, or are increasing, between which groups of people and why. Often this only becomes apparent when a flashpoint or trigger incident occurs resulting in violence, a surge of hate crime or a breakdown in public order. This undermines the purpose of social cohesion policy to recognise early tensions and respond pro-actively before a trigger event. This also prevents us from delivering essential interventions and evaluating where they are succeeding and where not.

Previously, the MHCLG Place Survey collected the views of people about the place they live, with progress measured on the National Indicators in the Local Performance Framework.[373] However, this survey stopped in 2014 and nothing substantial has taken its place. There is often a reliance on anecdotal and subjective evidence and social cohesion policy finds itself in a difficult catch-22 situation. The lack of data showing impact means funding is often in short supply. Simultaneously, with funding in short supply it is impossible to robustly implement and measure social cohesion policy.

Practitioners and local council officials we spoke to were strongly in support of a standardised framework for assessing social cohesion. While each area will have its own local challenges and priorities, this does not mean a national standardised approach cannot be taken. We can take learning from areas like public health and the work of the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities.[374] Likewise, the work delivered by the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) who publish an annual report highlighting the progress made towards improving social mobility in the UK.[375]

Producing an annual 'State of Cohesion and Democratic Resilience' report based on data collection as part of a cohesion framework could be a powerful tool for understanding and action.

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372   Belong (2023) 'Rapid Review: Measuring Social Cohesion'
373   MHCLG Place Survey 2014; accessed at https://www.data.gov.uk/dataset/590601fb-1a79-43ff-b3b8-badd3cc5ce29/place-survey
374   Office for Health and Improvement Disparities (2023)
      https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/office-for-health-improvement-and-disparities
375   See: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/social-mobility-commission

D) What works, what doesn't and why – lack of evaluation

Alongside the lack of standardised measurement, another concern is the lack of research or long-term evaluation of interventions and programmes that seek to strengthen social cohesion and overcome tensions and conflict. Without well designed evaluation, it is not possible to generate robust evidence on 'what works.'[376]

Contact based theory has been written about extensively in social cohesion literature. It shows that bringing people from different groups together can, under the right conditions, help reduce prejudice.[377] These interventions can help promote positive intergroup outcomes. Further research suggests that interactions must be meaningful and that negative contact experiences can actually worsen hostile attitudes towards outgroup members or the 'other.'[378] The quality of contact appears to be more important than the quantity of contact in encouraging positive attitudes towards others.[379]

Empirical evidence suggests that in the absence of the right conditions, contact interventions can be counter-productive and result in negative outcomes. As such, building the evidence base of the design and delivery of such interventions, including who and how they are delivered, is vital.[380]

The growing use of online, social media and virtual reality in our society inevitably means evaluation of indirect contact interventions are also needed. A systemic review of studies examining the use of virtual reality interventions to reduce prejudice resulted in mixed results, with such interventions helping to decrease participants prejudice and in some cases worsening them.[381]

Cohesion and resolving conflict interventions: Findings from a rapid evidence assessment

This Review commissioned the Kings Policy Institute to carry out a rapid evidence assessment (REA) into:

- what interventions have been tried to promote stronger, more cohesive communities and the effectiveness of them
- what interventions have been tried to overcome tensions and conflicts between groups and how effective they are
- where are the main gaps in the evidence base around what works to promote social cohesion and overcome tensions

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376   King's College London Rapid Review (2023) 'What works social cohesion and overcoming tensions'
377   In 1954 Gordon Allport proposed the idea of contact theory and argued bringing people from different groups under the right conditions can help reduce prejudice. Allport, G. W. (1954) 'The nature of prejudice', Accessed at https://faculty.washington.edu/caporaso/courses/203/readings/allport_Nature_of_prejudice.pdf
378   Tropp, L. R., et al. (2022) 'Intergroup contact and prejudice reduction: Prospects and challenges in changing youth attitudes.', Accessed at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/10892680211046517
379   Abrams, D., et al. (2021). 'Beyond Us and Them – Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of COVID-19'. Accessed at: https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/resources/beyond-us-and-them-societal-cohesion-in-britain-through-eighteen-months-of-covid-19/
380   King's College London Rapid Review (2023) 'What works social cohesion and overcoming tensions'
381   Tassinari, M., et al. (2022) 'The use of virtual reality in studying prejudice and its reduction: A systematic review'. PloS one, 17(7), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0270748

Their assessment included 46 studies including 12 review studies and four meta-analyses published in the last five years.[382] While they were able to draw out a number of important themes, the Policy Institute conclude that greater research and understanding is needed about the types of interventions, how interventions are designed and how they are delivered.[383] Some of the weaknesses identified in existing evaluation evidence include small sample sizes, failure to include control groups and high drop-out rates from programmes.[384] There are also instances of interventions not being evaluated, or only capturing short-term outcomes. There is very little evaluation of the long-term impacts whether those involved in programmes revert back to previous behaviours and/or attitudes. This is particularly the case with counter-extremism interventions.

There is some evidence about the benefits of interventions in schools and other educational contexts, both here in the UK and in other countries.[385] Programmes delivered by the Linking Network and the National Citizen Service (NCS) have demonstrated positive outcomes. As an example of a contact based intervention in the UK, the NCS brings young people aged 16 and 17 together to participate in a range of programmes designed to foster social cohesion. Over half a million young people have taken part in the programme since 2009, with evaluations indicating that those who did participate showed improvement in social cohesion. For example, over three quarters who participated in NCS programmes in the summer and autumn programmes in 2018 reported increased tolerance to those from different backgrounds.[386] Despite being well-evaluated, it is not clear whether the improvements have a long-term effect.

While there is more evidence on general approaches to social cohesion, there is a significant lack of evidence around what works to overcome community tensions and emerging conflicts.[387] Studies related to peacebuilding and conflict resolution tend to focus on low-income and post-conflict countries, or in workplace settings rather than community settings in established democracies. There is some evidence that indicates training in mediation and conflict resolution can help students develop skills and may improve outcomes, but how transferrable this is to community settings is unclear.

The evidence base is particularly low around interventions to respond to acute tensions when they emerge in local communities, despite the urgent need for such information to inform policy makers.

382   King's College London Rapid Review (2023) 'What works social cohesion and overcoming tensions.'
383   ibid
384   ibid
385   For greater exploration of educational based interventions see: King's College London Rapid Review (2023) 'What works social cohesion and overcoming tensions'
386   Kantar & London Economics (2020). 'National Citizen Service 2018 Evaluation'
      https://wearencs.com/sites/default/files/2020-09/NCS%202018%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf
387   ibid

Lack of institutional policy knowledge

In 2001, the Home Office published 'Building Cohesive Communities', otherwise known as the Denham Report.[388] It was noted by John Denham the then Minister at the time that any response needed to be evidence based, and that at this time there was insufficient evidence to prescribe detailed policy proposals for all issues raised.[389] It is concerning that when senior DLUHC policy officials were interviewed for this Review, it was apparent that a significant institutional knowledge gap persists. While departmental social scientists demonstrated a good and thorough understanding, this was not always utilised at a policy or delivery level.

Two decades on from Denham's comments, one would have hoped there would be a much stronger degree of institutional knowledge and greater repository of evidence. While there will be several reasons for this, it is the Reviewer's belief that one of the reasons will include the high turnover of civil servants and a lack of specialised and expert knowledge being retained in DLUHC. As the Institute of Government have noted, high internal civil service turnover is harming productivity, contributing to reduced 'institutional memory', disrupting projects and undermining the quality of policy advice.[390]

E) i) The perception problem: cohesion is viewed as too 'soft'…

Stakeholders shared their concern that there is a tendency to view social cohesion as 'soft,' or 'nice to have but not essential.' Arguably, some of this perception has arisen out of social cohesion efforts themselves. In her review into opportunity and integration, Dame Louise Casey lamented that efforts to boost integration amounted to little more than 'saris, samosas and steel drums for the already well-intentioned'.[391]

Local government officials told us cohesion policy is often the first to get its funding cut when a local authority is facing difficult financial pressures. Part of the reasons given was this 'nice to have but not essential' perception that plagues social cohesion. In the absence of any meaningful data and evaluation that demonstrate impact, the lack of any legal duty to deliver on social cohesion, and ongoing if not worsening financial challenges for local authorities, this is unsurprising.

However, social cohesion is essential during times of crisis and socio-economic challenge. When times are difficult, social cohesion and community resilience efforts should be supported, not cut. Evidence demonstrates that economic difficulties experienced by some people can galvanise far right extremists to create divisions and promote active hostility towards others.[392]

It should also be noted that the 'soft' and 'nice to have' perception of cohesion is not a view supported by senior operational partners in counter-terrorism, who emphasised to the Reviewer that focusing on upstream cohesion efforts is essential to help decrease the extremism and terrorism threat they respond to.

388   John Denham ((2009) 'Building Cohesive Communities: A Report of the Ministerial Group on Public Order and Community Cohesion'
        https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/sites/default/files/2009-01/docl_7132_79187980.pdf
389   ibid
390   Institute for Government (2022) 'Staff Turnover in the Civil Service'
        https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/staff-turnover-civil-service
391   Casey, L (2016) 'The Casey Review'
392   Rosie Carter and Nick Lowles (2022) 'Fear and Hope 2022 – A realignment of identity politics',
        https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Fear-HOPE-2022-FINAL-1.pdf

E) ii) …or social cohesion is viewed as too difficult

While there is a balance to be made between avoiding causing unnecessary offence and building social and community relations, local authorities and statutory bodies have an important role in addressing tensions that are undermining social cohesion. This includes addressing derogatory, hateful and hostile views expressed in a locality, irrespective of one's race or religion. As reiterated in previous reports, a critical part of this is the capacity and willingness to have 'difficult conversations' about social cohesion.

It has repeatedly been noted that this can present real challenges, including in the 2001 Cantle Review,[393] which showed the lack of such conversations; and the 2016 Casey Review, which suggested there can be a tendency for interventions to focus on positives but neglect the 'negatives'.[394] While we witnessed good practice by some local authorities and civil society organisations who were willing and prepared to have difficult and honest conversations, this appeared to be an exception rather than the norm.

We saw far more examples of local authorities struggling to know how best to respond to tensions and conflict. Silence or turning a blind eye was seen as the easier option if it meant avoiding giving offence or being accused of offending others. This was even the case when it was clear that local authorities should be challenging discriminatory and hostile narratives among its local population. In his 2001 report of Bradford following the disturbances in the city, Herman Ousley highlighted the culture of fear that persisted in the area. These included:[395]

- A fear of people talking openly and honestly about problems, either within their communities or across different cultural communities, because of possible repercussions, recriminations and victimisation.

- A fear of leading and managing effective change because of possible public and media criticism.

- A fear of challenging wrong-doing because of being labelled 'racist', which applies across all ethnic groups.

This Review found that these fears continue to cause paralysis among local authorities, hampering social cohesion efforts. With better training, guidance and support, confidence to tackle discriminatory and hostile behaviours can be built. However, greater accountability is also needed if local authorities are to overcome these barriers. Meaningful challenge, dialogue and engagement to support cohesion is essential to driving social cohesion. Action is required to equip local authorities with the tools and confidence to achieve this.

Striking the right balance between causing gratuitous offence and defending democratic rights and freedoms can be difficult for local authorities. Research suggests reluctance in expressing an opinion or intervening in controversial issues appears to be a widespread cultural norm in Britain.[396] More than 7 in 10 (77%) agree it is 'important to learn when to keep an opinion silent around others to avoid causing offence'. Nearly 8 in 10 (79%) believe that 'there are times when not expressing an opinion is appropriate to build good social relations with others.'[397]

393   Ted Cantle (2001) 'Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team'
394   Dame Louise Casey (2016) 'The Casey Review'
395   Herman Ousley (2001) 'Bradford pride not prejudice'
       http://www.tedcantle.co.uk/publications/004%20Bradford%20pride%20not%20prejudice%20Ouseley%202001.pdf
396   King's College London Rapid Review (2023) 'Shared social values'
397   Malcolm et al. (2023) 'Freedom of speech in UK higher education'. Accessed at
       https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/freedom-of-speech-in-uk-higher-education.pdf

Most Britons believe in the importance of politeness, respect, and not deliberately giving offence to others.[398]

It is true that offence is subjective and we should be mindful of the views and beliefs of others. However, the Reviewer believes that defending the democratic rights and freedoms of citizens must take priority over and above the causing of offence. Local authorities have a legal duty under the Public Sector Equality Duty, as discussed below, to not only foster good relations but to also end unlawful behaviour that is banned by the Equality Act 2010 including discrimination, harassment and victimisation.[399]

Oldham Council: Engagement with residents and volunteering – an example of good practice

Engagement

Despite the challenges facing Oldham as outlined in chapter five, including a lack of resources, the council has prioritised social cohesion and demonstrated good practice by being open in acknowledging the issues in the area, improving their evidence base of data and its engagement approach with residents.

The council has invested in building an approach that helps them to understand the challenges and opportunities across different wards. Oldham used its Thriving Communities Index (TCI) which gives an understanding of how neighbourhoods in Oldham function as communities, by measuring the level of community assets, nature of social norms, community behaviours and tensions and the level of associated service demand.
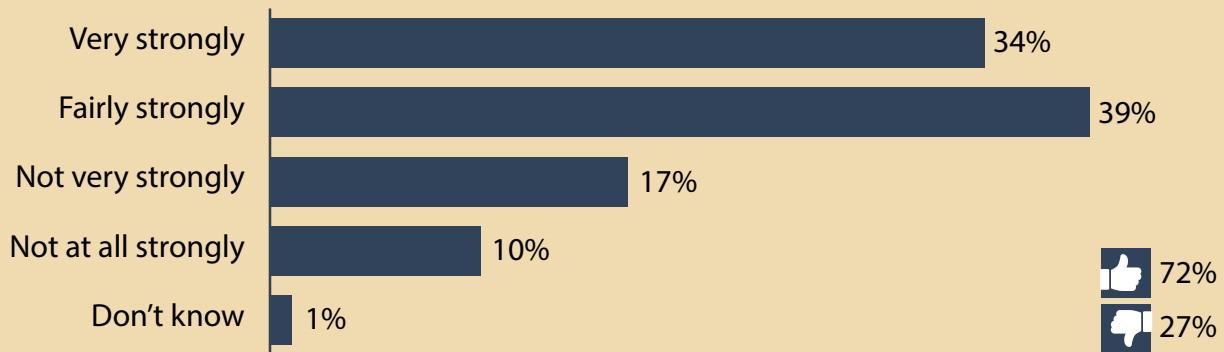
Oldham council also carries out a residents survey, including questions about how strongly they feel they belong in the local area or how often they take part in activities with people outside their household. The data they collect can also be broken down by ethnicity, as shown in the graphs below.

The data gives the council excellent insight into the communities they serve and allows them to direct resources to where they are most needed. For example, the data revealed that some geographical areas which were traditionally not seen as areas of concern in fact had worrying cohesion issues. Other areas, despite extensive deprivation, showed higher than expected levels of integration and resilience.

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398   Luke Tryl, Conleth Burns, Tim Dixon (2021) 'Dousing the Flames'
       'https://www.moreincommon.com/media/galmcw4p/dousing-the-flames-july-2021-v2.pdf
399   See: https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/public-sector-equality-duty-psed

How strongly do you feel you belong to your local area?

Very strongly	34%
Fairly strongly	39%
Not very strongly	17%
Not at all strongly	10%
Don't know	1%

👍 72%
👎 27%

Analysis by ethnic group

White	Mixed /Multiple	Black/Black British	Asian/Asian British	Ethnic minorities total
72%	66%	60%	84%	75%

▨ Strongly
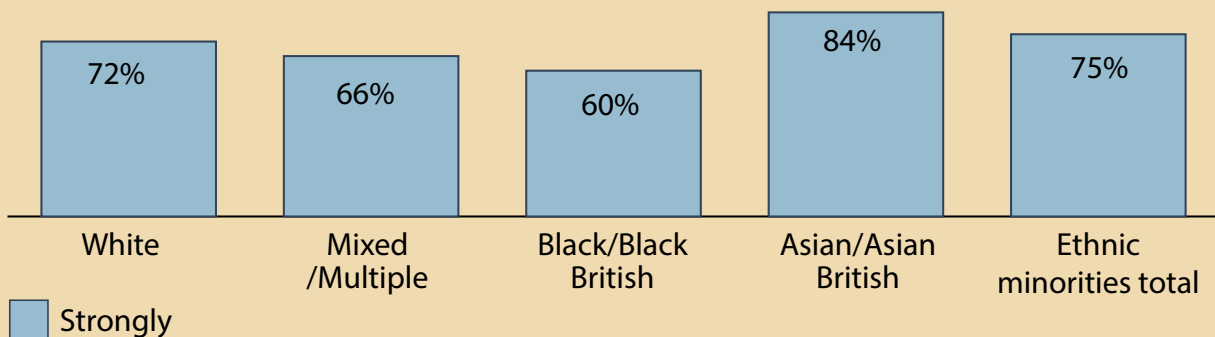
Figure 8: An example of an Oldham residents survey response

The council have deployed Doorstep Engagement Work, whose team make their way around the borough knocking on the doors of residents where they hold around 1,700 to 1,800 conversations per month. This gives residents an opportunity to speak about their concerns and have their voices heard. It also gives the council an opportunity to understand how residents feel about social cohesion. For example, picking up residents' concerns about their fellow neighbours' wellbeing and readiness to look out for each other in the colder months of the year.

Volunteering

Quantitative research reveals a positive, two-way relationship between volunteering and social cohesion.[400] Cohesion provides a basis for more volunteering, and volunteering helps to build further cohesion. By working together, they create a circle that strengthens community resilience.

This was something we saw first-hand in Oldham. The town has a thriving community and volunteering network of charities and community groups, some of whom the Reviewer was privileged to talk to. There is an inspiring sense of belonging, volunteering and strengthening community spirit irrespective of people's background.

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400   Belong and University of Kent (2023) 'Linking Volunteering and Social Cohesion', accessed at:
       https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Social-cohesion-and-volunteering-lit-review_final-.pdf

For example, Neon Oldham Community hub provides support for 150-200 people every week. They provide a range of services from bereavement counselling and men's groups, to cooking and reflexology for new mums, as well as being a foodbank. They also play an important role in sharing local intelligence about drugs, crime and anti-social behaviour in the area to statutory agencies. The hub is voluntary led by people who feel passionate in supporting the diverse community of Oldham. Deprivation and poverty is one of the most significant challenges facing the area and there is a growing demand for their service. At the same time, the hub recognises that the local council cannot deliver everything and the community and voluntary sector is key, despite the constant struggles for funding.

F) Promoting and protecting social cohesion: a lack of accountability of local authorities

Social cohesion is key to the successful delivery of a local authority's overall strategic plan and wider policies. Building relationships and trust requires extensive engagement with all key local sectors and supports local authorities to have a better 'ear on the ground' and understanding of issues emerging in the area. Such relationships not only improve trust of local government, they also provide important and necessary local intelligence to help pick up, prevent and better respond to early tensions and incidents of tension, in partnership with civil society organisations and other local partners.

This level of engagement or in-depth understanding of the views, beliefs, grievances and sense of belonging of the local population they serve does not exist in all local authorities. This understanding is particularly poor in relation to the extensive intra-diversity that exists within ethnic and faith-based minority groups in their local area where too often there exists outdated notions of engagement with self-appointed and self-representative 'community leaders'.

Holding local authorities accountable for what they do or do not deliver in relation to social cohesion is needed. The absence of a legal duty around social cohesion, alongside the lack of data, makes holding local authorities to account for their action or lack of action particularly difficult.

There is no doubt that some local authorities care passionately about social cohesion and see it as central to their strategic aims and objectives. We were impressed how some local authorities prioritised social cohesion and understood how relevant and important it is to all their other policies. We also saw examples of poor leadership, an unawareness or even denial of the challenges that exist in an area. It is difficult to know if progress is being made, as local authorities are in effect marking their own homework.

Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) (s.149 of Equality Act 2010)

While there is not a specific social cohesion legal duty, the Public Sector Equality Duty does, in part, seek to address some of the social cohesion challenges outlined in this Review. Local authorities and other statutory bodies must have **due regard** to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act

- advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

- foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) told us that the third aim of 'fostering good relations' is often the least considered role of the PSED. The amount of equality information being published by public bodies has decreased in recent years. While some local authorities are good are at demonstrating compliance with the PSED, others need to do more to demonstrate their compliance as required by the PSED specific duty regulations. Based on its recent work with local authorities, EHRC agreed with us that placing a greater spotlight on the third limb of fostering good relations would be a positive approach. Providing further guidance and encouraging public bodies to demonstrate compliance with the duty to 'foster good relations' is needed.

However if – as proposed by the this Review – the proposed Office for Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience (OSCDR) assess that insufficient progress in providing evidence on cohesion data hasn't been made by local authorities by July 2026, the OSCDR should call on the government to legislate for a statutory duty on social cohesion.

G) Cohesion programmes: The mistake of adopting a one-size fits all approach

This Review has found a tendency to adopt a one-size fits all approach rather than devising specific programmes for different audiences. One way of taking a more nuanced approach to intervention targeting and tailoring is to take an 'audience segmentation' approach, something that has been largely absent from the 2019 Integrated Communities Action Plan.

There are number of examples where audience segmentation has proven helpful. It can support development and delivery of targeted and bespoke methods, improving engagement efforts and dialogue. Such an approach has been adopted by some NGOs. More In Common worked with data scientists at YouGov and social psychology academics to build a model that maps the British population according to their values and core beliefs, instead of their party, age, income or other demographic factor.[401] Hope Not Hate also take a segmentation approach, based on a subset of both hard and soft questions on issues to do with race, multiculturalism, immigration, religious minorities and their impact on British communities; as well as participants' perceptions of their own racial, religious and their perceptions of what makes somebody British.[402]

There is evidence to demonstrate the benefits of taking an audience segmentation approach. Evaluation of the Home Office's counter-extremism Building a Stronger Britain Together (BSBT) programme found some of the outcomes included an improved sense of belonging, local civic engagement, increased tolerance to others and improved resilient communities. The most successful interventions were those tailored to specific target audiences and addressing local needs which drew on existing relationships with the relevant local communities.[403]

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401   More in Common (2020) 'Britain's Choice', accessed at https://www.britainschoice.uk/
402   Rosie Carter (2018) 'Fear, Hope and Loss' https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/FINAL-VERSION.pdf
403   Home Office (2021) 'Building a Stronger Britain Together' in King's College London Rapid Review (2023) 'What works social cohesion and overcoming tensions'

Delivering a dialogue-based programmes by taking an audience segment approach by British Future

A pilot dialogue-based programme delivered by the independent non-partisan think-tank British Future demonstrates the importance of taking an audience segmentation approach. The desired target audiences recruited for the programme had hardened views but remained outside the 10% of the population who hold the most overtly prejudiced attitudes. The target audience were:

- concerned that political debates about issues such as immigration and race are closed down too quickly (even when people are not crossing the line into expressing extreme, anti-democratic or prejudiced views)
- frustrated at their lack of voice or recognition (but open to having these addressed constructively)
- aggrieved about the perceived asymmetry of treatment of their social group and other groups (but have the capacity to value that different views are legitimate in a democratic society)

British Future's research shows that this primary target audience, are less likely to have regular inter-group social contact with people from different backgrounds, leaving them susceptible to developing mistrust and/or intolerant views towards other groups of people.

A second group of participants from a similar social background who held more mainstream conservative views, than the primary target group, were also recruited to perform a resilience or 'inoculation' function. British Future's hypothesis was that this secondary group, with more mainstream conservative views, could encourage perspective-taking and democratic norms among the primary target audience.

By focussing on 'tough but engageable' audiences, the project intended to help promote social cohesion, and reduce levels of community tension, in areas where stereotyping and prejudice are becoming more widespread. This was done by discussing issues that were important to the participants in a safe space and without judgement with the hypothesis that encouraging such discussions is constructive in helping strengthen confidence in the democratic process and challenge stereotypes and misinformation about out-groups.

The results were promising and helped deliver on these objectives. British Future intend on delivering further research to improve learning.

H) Slow and ineffective responses to local threats and flashpoints

Almost every meeting held with stakeholders highlighted the overwhelming struggle faced by local authorities and other local partners in knowing how best to respond to conflicts, flashpoints and rising trends in their area. Even in areas where significant conflict had occurred, councillors expressed concern that if such an incident were to arise again, they would struggle to know how or what to do. Others, including Members of Parliament, expressed shock and dismay that there was a lack of a national and local infrastructure, and institutional knowledge to deal with such incidents that was affecting their constituency.

While many cited the Local Government Association which provided some advice and guidance, many local authorities and agencies told us of the need for more training, support and 'toolkits' to help respond quickly and effectively.

7.2 Politics, politicians and social cohesion: an inherently difficult and uneasy relationship

Building socially cohesive and resilient societies requires a whole society approach. Educational establishments, civic society, religious and social institutions, businesses and others all have an important role to play in helping social cohesion to flourish in our country. They can act in a way which increases social cohesion, or act in ways that worsen conflict – whether in relation to class, race, religion, culture, identity and other issues.[404] This is particularly true of government, local and national politicians in general.

Social cohesion has not been an easy area of policy for successive British governments. It has often been viewed as a highly controversial, complicated and a messy policy area which governments would rather avoid.[405] This can be exacerbated by the long-term nature of key social cohesion challenges and interventions. This can mean such interventions lose out to policies which can demonstrate more immediate and direct outcomes.

Political instability and persistent changes in political leadership since the EU referendum has also impacted cohesion policy and delivery. Since this Review started in 2021, there have been five Secretaries of State at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), all of whom have had different interests, priorities and political will in relation to social cohesion. This challenge is clearly not limited to cohesion policy, but it does demonstrate how precarious cohesion delivery is especially when it is a complicated area of policy which governments would rather avoid.

In the last two decades, reports and reviews into social cohesion and integration have repeatedly raised the concern about political leadership and the failure of politicians to support social cohesion. The actions or lack of action taken by leaders have been documented as creating an environment for extremism to grow and encouraged divisive actors and so-called community leaders to undermine the rights and freedoms of others.

These have been evidenced in the 2001 Cantle Review, the independent Reviews into Burnley, Oldham and Bradford and the 2016 Casey Review. Casey highlighted how some politicians were guilty of ignoring practices that worsened inequality and held back community integration. Her review also highlighted how regressive, discriminatory and harmful attitudes and behaviours were 'being sanctioned by authorities in the name of tolerance and multiculturalism.'[406]

Today, there is a growing concern around the perception of politicians fuelling division in the UK by engaging in so-called 'culture wars' for political benefits. 'Culture war' debates can polarise society, increase conflict and contribute to disinformation, undermining social cohesion and our ability to live well together.[407]

Research published in November 2023 identified that 6 in 10 (62%) people now agree that politicians invent or exaggerate culture wars as a political tactic – up from around four in 10

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404   Capshaw, C. (2005) 'The social cohesion role of the public sector' https://www.jstor.org/stable/3497052
405   Policy Exchange (2022) 'Whatever happened to integration?'
406   Dame Louise Casey (2016) 'The Casey Review'
407   Luke TRYL, Conleth Burns and Tim Dixon (2021) 'Dousing the Flames'

(44%) in 2020.[408] Around half (51%) say that when politicians focus on divisions over cultural issues it only divides society further – far greater than the 12% who say this focus helps highlight ways we can improve society.[409]

Political leadership and social cohesion: a continuing challenge

It would be unfair and inaccurate to accuse all elected officials of failing to uphold and defend social cohesion. The Reviewer noted many examples of politicians taking a stand to protect social cohesion and defend democratic freedoms. We saw many excellent cases of local councillors and parliamentarians who, despite the backlash and abuse and the potential backlash they knew they would face, were prepared to speak out against divisive and hostile rhetoric to support social cohesion. They would do so even in the face of death threats and other threatening behaviour.

Yet the concern about poor political leadership was raised time and again. Our call for evidence raised concerns from respondents about the inconsistent national policy approach to cohesion where the political narrative of government was often seen at odds with the cohesion message it was trying to promote.[410]

The Reviewer herself witnessed some politicians, local and national, who either chose not to act or speak out against malign actors when leadership was needed; or chose to engage in behaviour or language which directly or indirectly undermined social cohesion. In the case of the latter, this same inflammatory language would be co-opted by extremists and used to undermine local cohesion in an area. We witnessed politicians promoting their personal or political interest often at the expense of social cohesion. This is a dereliction of duty and undermines the high ethical standards outlined in the Nolan principles.

When local politicians were asked why they choose to remain silent in the face of tensions and conflict, they gave varied reasons. In some cases there was a well-founded fear of abuse and harassment, security and wider wellbeing concerns. The murder of Jo Cox MP and Sir David Amess MP in recent years and the climate of freedom-restricting harassment justifies such fears. We repeatedly heard how local politicians felt fearful of speaking out because of the threat of violence and harassment they knew they would experience.

In our view however, others quite clearly sought to deny or downplay any problems. As one example, a councillor in one Northern town which continues to have significant cohesion and extremism concerns told the Reviewer that there were no problems or tensions whatsoever in the city but outside of it. This was all the more remarkable, as the Councillor was in fact the portfolio holder for neighbourhoods and community safety. Others prioritised their voter base and would choose to ignore the divisive and even extremist activity if it meant votes were not jeopardised.

Politicians, leadership and the Nolan principles

Leadership is one of the seven principles of the Nolan Principles. Leadership is also an essential component for successful cohesion. As one former Prime Minster told us this requires an active rather than a passive defence of our values, especially when they are threatened or undermined. Yet a majority of the British public do not think MPs in general upheld the Nolan principles.[411]

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408   The Policy Institute at King's College London and Ipsos UK (2023) 'Woke vs anti-woke? Culture war divisions and politics'
       https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/public-increasingly-see-politicians-as-stoking-culture-wars-study-finds
409   ibid
410   RSM (2023) 'Independent Review of Social Cohesion Call for Evidence'
411   Survation (2021) 'Polling the Nolan principles: The public's take on ethical standards in public life'
       https://www.survation.com/polling-the-nolan-the-publics-take-on-ethical-standards-in-public-life

The Reviewer is concerned about the potential conflict of interest between politicians and their role in supporting social cohesion and a lack of accountability. It is unclear what the consequences are if political leaders do not uphold the Nolan principles. It is also unclear what the consequences are if they refuse to uphold and defend democratic norms or prioritise political interests over and above social cohesion which can contribute to fragmentation and extremism.

As such, it is no surprise that there has been debate in recent years about the strength of the Nolan principles and whether we now find ourselves in a post-Nolan age.[412] At the same time, research demonstrates that trust in politicians is decreasing, with half of those polled (52%) believing that politicians had lower ethical standards than ordinary citizens.[413] It also shows how most voters want stronger mechanisms to ensure politicians follow the rules, with four out of five saying the current system needs reform so that politicians who do not act with integrity can be punished.[414] The health of UK's democracy is a significant concern for voters.[415]

Local government and councillor leadership

All councils are required to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by councillors under section 27 of the Localism Act 2011, and all are required to have a councillor code of conduct[416] and mechanism for investigating breaches. In 2020, the Local Government Association (LGA) developed the Model Councillor Code of Conduct as a template for councils to adopt in whole and/or with local amendments. The code is designed to protect the democratic role of councillors, encourage good conduct and safeguard the public's trust in local government.

The LGA's Model Councillor Code of Conduct puts forward a useful list of general behaviour of respect and avoiding bullying, harassment and intimidation. Dealing with impartiality and confidentiality, there is an absence in the code of encouraging councillors to uphold and protect social cohesion and the democratic right and freedoms of others. This could be a useful addition to the code as part of local authority's attempts to maintain high standards and the Nolan Principles.

Furthermore, the Casey Review found that in practice there is very little recourse to address inappropriate behaviour by councillors, even where this was seen to be damaging or divisive.[417] The Committee on Standards in Public Life's (CSPL) Review into Local Government Ethical Standards made clear that there was evidence of misconduct by some councillors where the majority of cases related to bullying or harassment, or other disruptive behaviour. There was also evidence of persistent or repeated misconduct by a minority of councillors.[418]

The CSPL concluded that while local authorities should retain ultimate responsibility for implementing and applying the Nolan principles in local government[419], it has suggested that the sanction regime currently available is insufficient and may damage public confidence in the standards system and, by default high office.[420]

412   Lord Evans of Weardale, The Hugh Kay Lecture (2022) 'Are we in a post-Nolan age?', available at:
      https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-hugh-kay-lecture-are-we-in-a-post-nolan-age
413   Renwick et al. (2023) 'Public Preferences for Integrity and Accountability in Politics',
      https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/freedom-of-speech-in-uk-higher-education.pdf
414   ibid
415   ibid
416   Local Government Association (2020) 'Local Government Association Model Councillor Code of Conduct',
      https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-government-association-model-councillor-code-conduct-2020
417   Dame Louise Casey (2016) 'The Casey Review'
418   Lord Evans of Weardale (2019) 'Local Government Ethical Standards', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/
      media/5c5c3f68e5274a3184bac66f/6.4896_CO_CSPL_Command_Paper_on_Local_Government_Standards_v4_WEB.PDF
419   ibid
420   ibid

Conclusion

The 3Ps of policy, practice and politics outlined in this chapter are obstructing the ability to deliver social cohesion and protect it from a wide range of diverse threats. It is notable that some of these have previously been reported in other reviews. Yet little has been done to resolve them and as a result continue to hamper cohesion efforts. This must change.
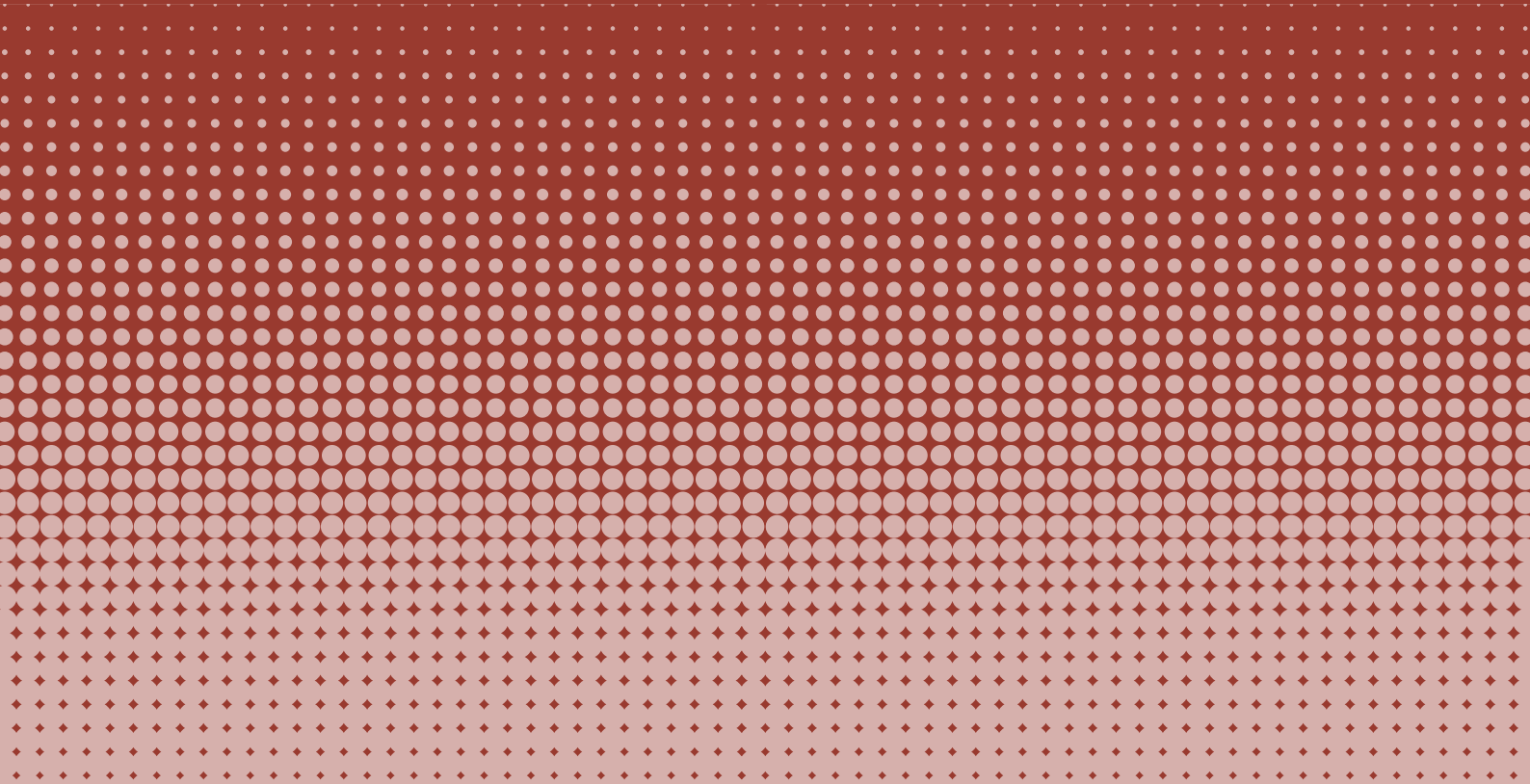
This chapter has also explored how the relationship between politicians and social cohesion is itself an uneasy and controversial one. Social cohesion requires political and local leaders to navigate differences and cultural change in a sensitive way that does not inflame or divide.[421] In the absence of such leadership, we will instead see, as has been observed many times before, the voices of divisive and extremist actors attempt to fill the void with their narrative and gain traction among susceptible cohorts of the population.

421   Luke Tryl, Conleth Burns and Tim Dixon (2021) 'Dousing the flames' https://www.moreincommon.com/dousing-the-flames/

Chapter 8

Review of the 2019 Integrated Communities Action Plan

The last major government strategy on integration and cohesion was the government's 2019 Integrated Communities Action Plan.[422] The Plan was a combination of both integration and cohesion objectives. The impact of this work has been difficult to fully assess due to the disruption caused by the Covid pandemic and a reliance on anecdotal evidence including among the five local areas which received government funding.

However some evidence suggests that in the context of the Covid pandemic, those five areas that prioritised social cohesion fared better during the pandemic, demonstrating a positive while limited impact of the investment made. Assessing the wider impact in the five local areas objectively has been difficult to ascertain for reasons outlined in previous chapters. All the five funded areas told the Reviewer they recognised the need for a cohesion assessment framework that could measure the state of cohesion in the area as well as the outcome of cohesion interventions.

While some good work was undertaken, many of the objectives of the Plan were not achieved – including the foundational, long-term impact that was intended. Too much focus was placed on 'bums on seats' and one-size-fits-all types of programmes, rather than bespoke interventions directed at different audiences. Evaluation of interventions often reported on outputs rather than outcomes, with little evidence if any of any medium-long term outcomes. Methods of measuring impact, of collating and learning from best practices need to be far more robust in future strategies.

Of the 70 commitments listed in the Action Plan, 14 were delivered, 14 were partially delivered or ongoing, 15 commitments were not delivered or were paused and the status of 4 recommendations were unknown. Furthermore, the government did not strengthen the enforcement regime for independent schools or strengthen Ofsted's powers in relation to unregistered schools as promised.

8.1   Introduction to the ICAP

In February 2019, the government published its cross-government Integrated Communities Action Plan, (ICAP) following the publication of the Casey Review in 2016.[423]

As part of its work, DLUHC identified failures in previous integration and cohesion work. It highlighted the failure to deliver strong integration outcomes and criticised duplication of resource, stressing the importance of local co-ordination. The plan also highlighted the importance of focussing on preventative measures.

The ICAP outlined 70 cross-government commitments under eight priority areas:

• Strengthening leadership

• Supporting new migrants and local residents

• Education and young people

• Boosting English language

• Places and communities

• Increasing economic opportunity

• Rights and freedoms

• Measuring success

422   Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) *'Integrated Communities Action Plan'*, accessed at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-communities-action-plan

423   Louise Casey (2016) *'A Review into Opportunity and Integration'*, accessed at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-casey-review-a-review-into-opportunity-and-integration

£50m was invested to support the ICAP and its programmes. The ICAP aimed to drive forward work across government to create economically stronger, socially stronger, more confident and integrated communities. It took a place-based approach, with the aim of testing what works in practice. Five local areas were selected for integration funding and for creating their own local Integrated Area Programme (IAP). The five areas were Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall and Waltham Forest. Each area identified its local priorities and the most effective ways to address them.

The five areas were selected based on criteria including:

- rapid growth in migration
- high demand for housing and local services
- high rates of residential segregation and household deprivation
- high rates unemployment and low social mobility
- presence of non-English speaking populations of up to 7%

Some of the areas reported the existence of insular communities and a loss of sense of community.

At the time of conducting this Review, the ICAP was the main government approach to address issues of integration and cohesion. We understand a new action plan is due to be published by the Government in 2024, but at the time of writing this has not been published.

As part of this review of the 2019 ICAP, we examined:

- DLUHC's vision and aims, objectives and outcomes, how success was defined and how they intended to measure and evaluate delivery of the ICAP
- how many of the 70 commitments had been delivered as set out in the ICAP
- the work of the five areas, discussing the opportunities and challenges they faced, as well as evaluations and learnings from their work
- any evaluations undertaken to understand what in practice 'works'
- the overall effectiveness of the 2019 ICAP, the challenges faced and what improvements could be made

It must be noted that both the government priority of delivering Brexit and the consequences of the Covid pandemic hampered the delivery of the ICAP, and the ability to evaluate its effectiveness. All five local authorities also reported Covid 19 disruption, which affected many in-person programmes that were forced to adapt, deliver online or even cancel. This heavily disrupted any planned evaluations of those projects and made evaluation difficult, with strained resources and competing priorities.

8.2 Aims and objectives of the 2019 ICAP: Vision and defining success

In documents seen by the Reviewer, DLUHC gave considerable thought to developing a shared understanding of objectives. These included:

- improving economic and social outcomes for isolated communities, particularly women, by providing support for learning English and improving access to the labour market
- tackling gender inequalities and empowering marginalised women with improved knowledge of rights and increasing civic participation
- an increase in meaningful social mixing particularly among young people

- a reduction in community tensions and mistrust between communities through dialogue, engagement and communications
- stronger leadership and partnerships working together across all sectors

Short, medium and long-term plans for the ICAP were considered, including outcomes and outputs that should be achieved up to 2030 and beyond. This included expanding integration and cohesion work in several other areas, seeing a positive cultural change and narrowing the gap in important key socio-economic indicators that an area is facing.

8.3 Assessment of delivery of the 70 commitments listed in the ICAP

The Reviewer was able to categorise the status of each commitment as either:

- a) delivered
- b) partially complete or ongoing
- c) not delivered or paused
- d) unknown

Of the 70 commitments, 41 were judged to have been 'delivered', while 14 were 'partially delivered or ongoing'. 15 of the commitments were 'not delivered or paused' while the status of 4 of the recommendations remain 'unknown'.

8.4 Brief analysis of the 2019 ICAP

In the absence of outcome focused evaluation or data, it is difficult to assess whether the aims and objectives have been achieved overall. Many of the five IAP areas provided anecdotal evidence of positive impact on social cohesion, for example evidence of programmes designed to increase social mixing or facilitating ESOL classes to support women's ability to learn English.

However, when asked for the medium-long term impact of such programmes, the overwhelming majority of the five funded areas accepted they did not collect or have the data to assess whether those women who did learn English encouraged economic and social participation, or if programmes on social mixing had medium-long term longevity.

As a result, the Reviewer believes the ICAP was limited in its impact in England.

More generally, it is not clear whether the focus of the ICAP was cohesion, integration or both, even though the language used throughout the ICAP referred to integration. The Reviewer does not believe that enough focus was given to deliver on aims around addressing community tensions and mistrust. The ICAP did not provide guidance on how to detect early tensions in an area or how best to prevent and respond to conflict when it occurred. Neither did the ICAP address some of the challenges local areas were struggling to deal with, including conspiracy theories, disinformation and other challenges such as extremism or religious fundamentalism. There is no acknowledgment of intra-faith or inter-faith tensions that could destabilise social cohesion. As a result, there has been a lack of essential support and guidance to local authorities and other key partners.

A significant flaw of the programme was the disconnect between central government and local authorities. Before the Levelling Up missions were announced, local authorities often had a bigger vision and set of objectives that went beyond the scope of the ICAP. For example, local authorities wanted to tackle a lack of integration and mixing at schools, improve transport links in a local area, encourage small businesses and other economic initiatives.

Local authorities understood that these issues were key to supporting wider cohesion and integration aims, but the ICAP was not set up to address some of these deeper systemic issues. Senior officials at the Department for Levelling Up told us that efforts were made to encourage other government departments to support join up, but they did not raise interest or support – highlighting the disconnected approach across Whitehall. Furthermore, the Cross-Ministerial Group which was responsible for this only met once, when it was expected to meet every six months.

This disconnect resulted in the Department providing money for, as one senior official told us, 'bums on seats' type activities – recording outputs such as the number of people attending a particular programme, rather than outcomes and impact.

The planned expansion of the ICAP into different local areas beyond the initial five did not take place, nor was there any attention given in supporting the delivery and sustainability of long-term plans. The rapid turnover of ministers within the Department disrupted delivery, including some cases of a lack of ministerial interest in collecting and assessing evaluation data, and understanding the effectiveness of programme delivered.

While softer goals were met, such as supporting the five local areas, publishing guidance and providing funding, the more challenging goals of legislation and others were not met. The government did not fulfil its intentions to strengthen the enforcement regime for independent schools or to strengthen Ofsted's powers in relation to unregistered schools.

It is also clear that there was a lack of long-term planning. The programmes delivered in the five integration areas were limited. Many of the local tensions that flared up were not often dealt with effectively and it was clear, as identified in the previous chapter, that difficult conversations were either avoided or not tackled well.

In some of the five integration areas, ICAP legacy projects and networks have continued. In other areas, these have now gone, highlighting the limited and short-term impact of the programmes. Underlining reasons include a lack of continued funding from central government, other local priorities and concerns including financial difficulties post-pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis.

The pandemic and focus on Brexit delivery significantly impacted the delivery of the integration area plans. The Department refocussed its cohesion work to encourage communities to get vaccinated against Covid – especially in areas where there was high levels of scepticism and low uptake. However, there has not been a strategic refocus on social cohesion since, including on preventing activity that undermines it. The ICAP demonstrates how in the face of competing government priorities, it is easy for social cohesion policy to fall off the agenda and the inability of government to demonstrate a long-term commitment to it.

8.5   Council evaluations and impact of the Integrated Area Programme (IAP)

Each of the five areas responsible for delivering their respective integration programmes (IAP) cared passionately about building cohesive communities. They recognised the foundational role cohesion plays in helping not only to build resilience, but also to support the delivery of almost all other local policy areas, as well as its centrality in making their local area a good place to live.

Local people voluntarily and selflessly served their area with a strong desire for people to get along, break down barriers, and to challenge stereotypes and hatred of others that helps feed suspicion, mistrust and division.

While various evaluative reports were undertaken by the five IAP councils, as we explore below, not all councils evaluated their programmes as a whole and the reports that were carried out were inconsistent in their evaluative approach. This limits the extent to which we can understand the impact of individual projects and of the programme as a whole, as well as making any meaningful comparison difficult between different areas.

However, from the available evaluations and from conversations the Reviewer had with the councils as part of the evidence gathering for this Review, it is possible to discern amongst others the following positive impacts from the IAPs:

- Councils gained credibility and trust in their local communities through engagement and good relationships built up over the course of the three years.

- Benefits included an increase in volunteering, the learning of new skills, young people gaining employment or apprenticeships and providers reaching new audiences for their services.

- Councils reported that the strong community links, volunteer networks and trust built up with IAP projects allowed them to rapidly mobilise in response to the Covid 19 pandemic. Councils also reported, that although the programme funding has finished, there are still positive legacies of the programmes in the communities in terms of better connections communities, volunteer networks, and trust in the local council.[424]

- Learning English as a secondary language (ESOL) projects were reported as being particularly successful, reaching people who had not accessed English language education, bringing people together and helping them gain skills and confidence needed to progress into work.

- IAP projects allowed funding to be directed to areas which previously had very few community groups, for example, funding women's empowerment projects, which brought marginalised women together to speak about shared issues and challenges. One council reported that localities previously assessed as 'integration cold spots' become hosts of the important conversations.[425]

- Many unengaged individuals participated in projects, giving a voice to less heard groups, such as young people. Projects also connecting community practitioners with a new audiences.

- Some data collected showed increased levels of 'people getting along with each other', and higher levels of trust in local government and connectedness with neighbours.[426]

8.6   Limitation of the evaluations

While some good work was delivered, the overall impact of the IAPs is difficult to measure. This is due to a number of factors, not least the inconsistent evaluation and measurement already mentioned. This was partially by design, as DLUHC did not identify key metrics to improve at the outset. In part, this decision was to allow the local areas to identify their own challenges and devise plans to tackle those challenges using local knowledge.

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424   Engagement Meeting, 13.06.2023
425   Walsall City Council (2022) 'Walsall for All Evaluation Report', accessed at
      https://www.walsallforall.co.uk/_files/ugd/f29822_89a7dfd934054071aa59aa17d1dab0de.pdf
426   Dr Kaya Davies Haydon, Dr Jeni Vine and Bradford Council (2022) 'The Bradford for Everyone Programme', accessed at
      https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Executive-Summary-Bradford-for-Everyone-Evaulation-Report.pdf

A lack of an overarching method of evaluation has limited our ability to understand the success and full impacts that some of the IAP projects undoubtedly had, as well as our ability to measure, compare and learn from such success. All of the integration areas we spoke to requested better guidance on evaluation, measurement and data collection as well as how best to assess long term trends.

Some of the reports had good qualitative data from feedback and informative lessons learnt, but they contained more detail about outputs from bums on seats type activities rather than focussing on targeted, measurable and comparable outcomes over an appropriate timeframe. There was simply a lack of long-term follow up with people who had attended programmes to measure longer-term outcomes. For example, many of the areas could tell us how many people attended ESOL classes but could not tell us how many then went on to further education or became employed or were contributing to civic society as a result. The lack of joined up data and inability to understand the full impact of short-term interventions on social cohesion is missing.

This is not to underestimate the difficulty of measuring such projects. Cohesion is often difficult to quantify and measure, and as this report has outlined, the impact of cohesion projects need to be measured in the short, medium and long term. But however difficult the task, a lack of coherent evaluation methods does run the risk of undervaluing any successful impacts on social cohesion a project may have and further prop up the stereotype of integration and cohesion as 'fluffy' policy area, with little meaningful evidence and data of its impact.

8.7   Good practice and lessons for the future

Despite Covid disruption and limited evaluation of the programmes, there are still lessons to be learnt.

The councils' role / community-led projects

Councils played a vital leadership role in the IAP process. Their status enabled them both to co-produce the reports and to convene voluntary and community sector groups within their areas. The approach of delivering projects 'with communities, not to them' was continuously cited as key to their success – this approach built trust between communities, practitioners and the councils, who reported gains in credibility as a result of sustained work over the course of the programme.[427]

Councils gained extensive knowledge, relationships and knowhow from the IAP projects. The projects helped community work and moved thinking about community impacts from a fringe concern to the mainstream of council thinking. IAP councils report they can now operate more effectively and are better equipped to tackle integration and cohesion challenges, for example in how they reach out to communities or to respond to local tensions.

The success of the IAPs also highlighted the huge positive impact of councils maintaining reach on the ground throughout communities, rather than only listening to the voices of a few community leaders. Better outreach led to better understanding of locality and needs.

All councils involved in IAPs stressed the importance of effective ESOL to integration and removing barriers to work. The impact of ESOL should also be measured through such outcomes such as health, skills, wellbeing and employment to show holistic results.

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427   King's College London Rapid Review (2023) 'What works social cohesion and overcoming tensions'

Relationship building / local focus

Relationship building is resource intensive, but it is unavoidable for any organisation aiming to ensure inclusion and trust within communities, and build strong ties. It typically pays dividends in futureproofing against the unexpected challenges that local government invariably face, when communities are far more likely to engage because of this prior bridge building.

In the IAPs, the hands-on role of project support officers meant that all programmes included an ongoing exchange of ideas and feedback over a three-year period. As well as building trust, this enabled councils to tailor activities so that they responded to specific local challenges and opportunities.

Long term government strategy and investment

The success of the IAPs has demonstrated the need for integration and cohesion projects to be long term; once the projects ended, a clear gap has emerged and the positive impacts are fading slowly.

As well as having sustained investment, projects should be integrated into wider government strategy rather than conducted in isolation. DLUHC funding for IAPs allowed for permanent teams working on stronger communities to be set up within the councils. This supported the local approach, and enabled preventative work as well as reactive, which is a good model for future projects.

Measuring outcomes

Proper evaluation and scrutiny of council-led projects is essential to identifying success and best practice. Government guidance and a framework for measuring impacts and outcomes should be laid out, which should enable scrutiny both from government and local population.

The IAPs didn't lead to enough learning on 'what works' in building cohesion or how to build resilience. Built-in learning and evaluation from the start would have given a stronger base for central and local policy makers to build on.

Reduced political interference in cohesion issues

Programmes with limited political involvement tended to both be more innovative and more successful, whereas those with more substantial political interference, such as attempts to politicise social cohesion, hindered local authorities' efforts to deliver on programmes and projects.

Some IAPs took an innovative approach to avert this problem, such as Walsall Council. The council leadership created an independent local body responsible for identifying the integration and cohesion priorities in the area, before making that independent body responsible for delivering them. This was an approach that worked remarkably well in contrast to other IAP areas. Shifting responsibility away from the council allowed projects to operate independently without being caught up in politics. The independent local body expressed praise for the councillor responsible for resilient communities, who recognised the importance of keeping the politics out of the running of the body while providing essential support to them.

Chapter 9

Conclusion
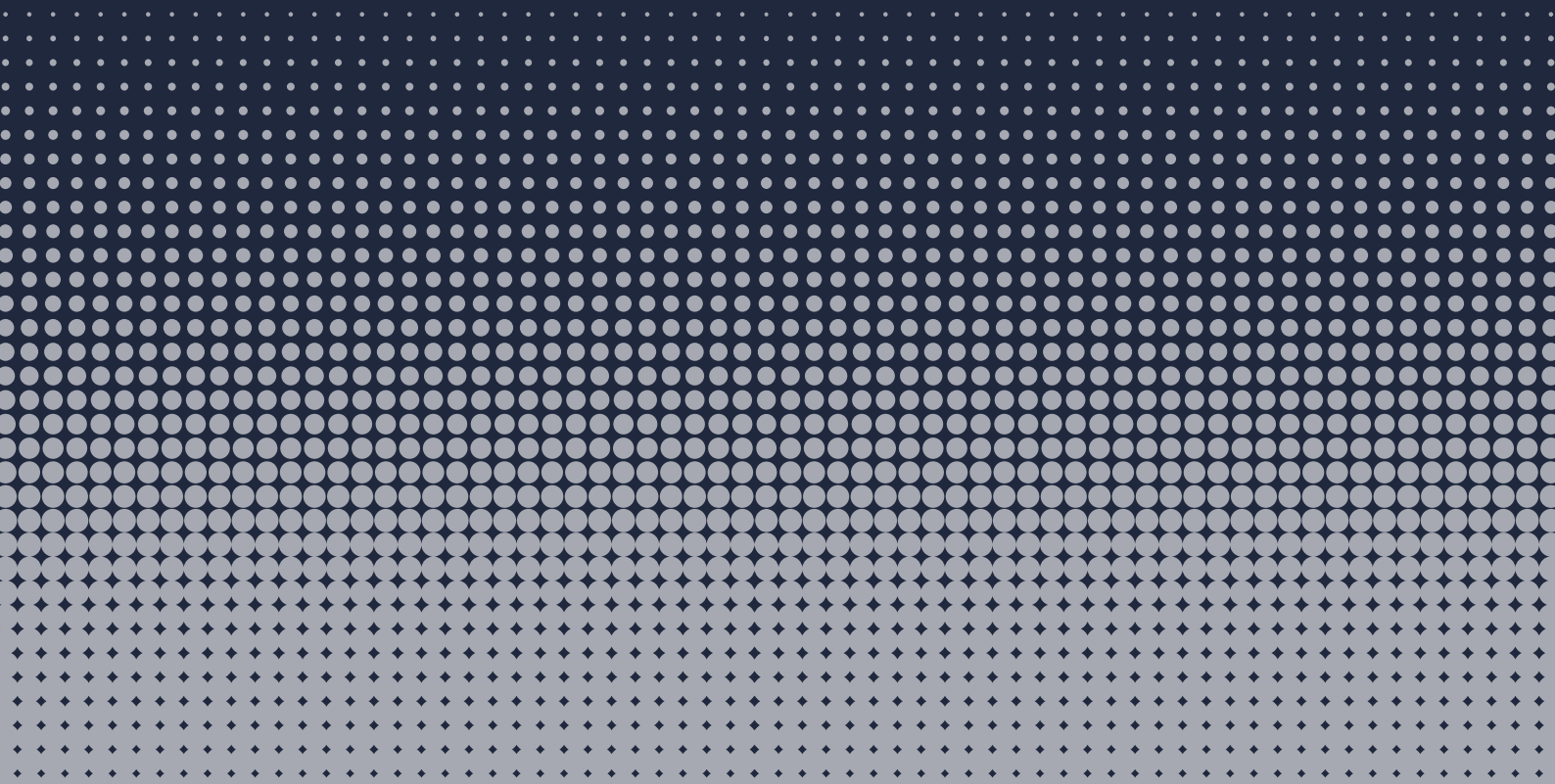
> *"Too often in politics we talk about the right economic, health, housing or education policy and only at the end of our speech or manifesto do we talk about cohesion – the central question of how we can create the multi-ethnic, multi-faith, opportunity-based democracy that we want our country to be. It is time to turn that around; to make that cohesion question the central one we are trying to answer and make all the other policies subservient to it."*
>
> Former Prime Minister David Cameron, writing in the Times 2022[428]

Social cohesion matters. The ability to live well together in Britain, as one of the most diverse, multicultural, multifaith and multi-racial countries in the world is something we rightly celebrate. We are defined by hundreds of different languages, cultures, cuisines, beliefs and traditions. As citizens we live, work and socialise together on what is a relatively small island. Very few countries do this as well as Britain.

Unlike autocrats who repress the plural democratic model, we do not fear diversity whether that is manifested in belief or religion, sexuality, political opinion or race. And unlike authoritarian countries, we value open, public disagreement and dissent in our desire to hold those in authority to account and to further strengthen our country and its democratic values. Successful democracies protect and promote pluralism in recognition that in its absence, they are weaker, fragile and repressive.

We have made significant strides in the last few decades in becoming more inclusive, cohesive and tolerant. Yet new and old challenges threaten our society and have the potential to disrupt our democratic way of life.

Disillusionment with the political elite, distrust of democracy and its institutions, and economic, cultural and social dislocation cannot be ignored. However, it is unrealistic to expect this Review to put forward recommendations that address the many colossal socio-economic and socio-political conditions that our country is grappling with. This responsibility falls on political parties to demonstrate their vision for our country and how these challenges can be surmounted. This Review attempts to make clear the impact such issues have on social cohesion and equally how strengthening cohesion is a vital component in supporting efforts to help tackle some of these socio-economic and socio-political issues.

There is a continuing failure to tackle the deliberate and harmful activity of far right, Islamist and other extremists who while stopping short of encouraging terrorism, are undermining social cohesion and targeting individuals. Conspiracy theorists and other divisive actors are causing local and national democratic disruption by spreading distrust of our institutions and breeding hatred of others. The threat of disinformation, artificial intelligence and deep fakes will be significant risks to our democracy.

The phenomenon of freedom-restricting harassment (FRH) is antithetical to our free and democratic society. It undermines academic and press freedom and shuts down public debate. It inhibits creativity within our arts and culture, hinders the work and decisions of elected officials and those in public life. It creates a chilling effect on freedom of association and poses a serious threat to the health and wellbeing of our democracy. FRH will gradually erode our plural and

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428   David Cameron (2022) 'We can't let strategy be defeated by extremists' The Times
       https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/we-cant-let-strategy-be-defeated-by-extremists-fgxw5mvvr

tolerant nation, and if not addressed it will fragment our society and undermine the common ground that holds us together as a society.

In the past few years, there has been little in way of a strategic approach to cohesion and democratic resilience. There is no adequate support or guidance for local authorities to prevent and respond to cohesion threats. Local authorities often lack the tools, capabilities and know-how to prevent, respond or resolve such threats. To some degree, this is replicated in the Levelling up, Housing and Communities Department. Equipping local authorities with such tools is critical. Yet as we identify, there is currently no adequate or strategic approach within Whitehall.

We can and must do more. Since 2001, reviews, inquiries, reports and commissions have been published in an attempt to improve our country's approach to social cohesion. To date, insufficient progress has been made and we do not have the comprehensive cohesion assessment framework or the analytical capability to assess social cohesion and democratic resilience trends in our country. We have not built a good evidence base of how to prevent and respond to incidences of conflict, or how to repair broken relationships following such incidences and local tensions.

The recommendations made here attempt to strengthen our approach. Institutionalising social cohesion will help prevent and respond to acute and local incidents; and yield a range of long-term benefits beyond any election cycle. This should be embraced and acknowledged by government, while demonstrating investment and a clear strategic approach.

Building an inclusive and socially cohesive country requires a whole of society approach. Leadership, both political and community is an essential requirement. The actions and language of our political leaders is of utmost importance. They have the ability to reduce tensions, bring people together and promote a positive and inclusive vision for our country where all citizens are treated equally irrespective of our differences and identity. However, politicians also have the power to inflame, divide and polarise our society which can undermine social cohesion and fuel disillusionment with democracy. The responsibility that falls on our politicians cannot be overstated.

While the Government has a significant role and responsibility, so do our institutions, businesses, social media companies and civic society. A strong and vibrant civic society is also a sign of a healthy democracy, however its longevity requires long-term support and funding. Businesses, philanthropists and the private sector must play their part in supporting civic society and strengthening social cohesion overall. Public bodies must recognise the part they play in supporting local cohesion efforts and defending democratic freedoms in the face of those who seek to erode such principles. Embedding social cohesion in their long-term strategic plans, rather than being viewed as an 'add on' are foundational to the successful delivery of a local authority's overall strategic plan and wider policies.

Finally, as citizens, we also have a responsibility to our democracy; respecting pluralism and the rights and freedoms of others. Polling demonstrates that the British public value diversity and believe it is important that we can disagree and yet still come together. This demonstrates the positive and hopeful nature of our country which should be embraced as we navigate our way through testing times of polarisation and division. Democracies are fragile and are vulnerable to the forces of fragmentation. Which is why protecting social cohesion requires serious long-term commitment by successive governments to help advance and preserve our democratic way of life.