

Commission for Countering Extremism

Purpose of report

For discussion.

Summary

Sara Khan, Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism, will be attending the meeting to provide an overview of the Commission's work and emerging outcomes, and discuss ways to engage with councils around countering extremism. This paper provides an overview of the national policy framework and background on the Commission for Countering Extremism, and sets out some issues members may wish to raise.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

1. note the updates on national counter-extremism policy, the Commission for Countering Extremism and support for local authorities; and
2. consider the issues and suggested questions outlined in paragraph 20, which members may wish to raise with the Lead Commissioner at the meeting.

Action

Officers to note Members' views on emerging issues to inform the LGA's response to the anticipated call for evidence from the Commission.

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Commission for Countering Extremism

Background

1. Sara Khan was appointed as the Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism earlier this year. Sara is keen to engage with councils as part of the Commission's work and has been invited to attend to provide the Board with an update on the work of the Commission so far, emerging issues, and future plans.

National Policy Framework for Countering Extremism

2. Nationally, work on countering extremism is framed by the government's cross-departmental Counter-Extremism Strategy, which was published in October 2015. The Strategy sets out how the government will defeat extremists and defend shared values.
3. The Strategy defines extremism as "the vocal or active opposition to our fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also regard calls for the death of members of our armed forces as extremist".
4. The Strategy comprises four strands:
 - 4.1 countering extremist ideology;
 - 4.2 building partnerships with those opposed to extremism;
 - 4.3 disrupting extremists; and
 - 4.4 building more cohesive communities.
5. It notes that extremism causes a wide range of harms, including the promotion of hatred and division, violence and discrimination against women and girls, the encouragement of isolation, and the rejection of the democratic system and the rule of law.
6. The Strategy identifies threats from Islamist extremism and far-right extremism as priorities, but seeks to cover extremism in all its forms.
7. The Strategy identifies local authorities as key partners for government, in particular in developing links with individuals, groups and organisations already standing up to extremists in their communities. However, it asserts that some local authorities have failed to confront extremism as fully as they should have done.
8. It should be noted that the Counter Extremism Strategy is separate from the national Counter-Terrorism Strategy and 'Prevent' (which is one of the four strands of the Counter-Terrorism Strategy). Prevent is concerned with stopping individuals from being drawn into terrorism and providing support to those at risk of being radicalised; counter-extremism work is concerned with tackling extremists/extremist groups and ideology, building community resilience, and responding to some of the wider harms from

extremism beyond terrorism, including harmful illegal cultural practices and hate crime. Prevent and counter-extremism are presented by government as two 'distinct but complementary' policy areas.

9. While Prevent is underpinned by a statutory duty under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, there is currently no specific legislation on counter-extremism; Bills announced in the Queen's Speech in May 2015 and in May 2016 did not subsequently materialise.

Commission for Countering Extremism

10. In June 2017 the Queen's Speech announced the establishment of a new statutory independent Commission for Countering Extremism. Its purpose is to support the government, public sector, civil and wider society and families to identify and challenge all forms of extremism.
11. The appointment of Sara Khan as Lead Commissioner was announced in January 2018. The role is for a period of three years, and will be supported by a small secretariat.
12. The Commission's Charter sets out that it will:
 - 12.1. provide government with impartial, expert advice on the tools, policies and approaches needed to tackle extremism;
 - 12.2. support the public sector, communities and civil society to confront extremism wherever it exists; and
 - 12.3. promote a positive vision of our core, shared values.
13. The objectives for the Commission's first year have been announced as:
 - 13.1. Engaging widely and openly on extremism and Britain's values across the public sector, communities, civil society, and with legal and academic experts.
 - 13.2. Producing a strategic assessment of the threat faced from extremism, and the current response.
 - 13.3. Advising Ministers on the Commission's future structures, work programme and the appointment of further commissioners.
14. It is expected that there will be a formal call for evidence announced shortly, which is likely to invite submissions on the scale of extremist threats; the impact and harms of extremism in communities; and the current response to extremism, including examples of good practice.
15. The Commission has indicated that it views local authorities as key stakeholders and is keen to engage with both the LGA and individual councils.

Support for local authorities

16. From summer 2016 the Home Office began to establish a network of 'supported areas' – 41 local authority priority areas in England and Wales, with funding for a dedicated 'Community Coordinator' post. Community Coordinators are responsible for:
 - 16.1. improving local understanding of extremism, including drivers, prevalence and harms caused;
 - 16.2. shaping local strategies and interventions; and
 - 16.3. making links with/building the capacity of local community groups.
17. Forty areas have or have had Coordinators; 35 are currently in post with recruitment underway for the remaining areas. Coordinators are currently funded by the Home Office on a year-by-year basis.
18. The LGA has been supporting Leeds and Luton Councils to establish a Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism (SIGCE); a local authority-led network across England and Wales which launched in November 2017 to provide support to councils, and develop and share good practice. The SIGCE's programme of work includes delivering a series of free thematic seminars and developing associated resources.
19. A key feature of the SIGCE is that it can help councils that have not received funding for a Community Coordinator post by disseminating best practice and sharing ideas across all local authorities.
20. The SIGCE is supported by an online Knowledge Hub, co-facilitated by LGA officers, which hosts the emerging outputs from the SIGCE's work, including a resource library and a platform for discussing issues and ideas. There are currently 52 local authorities signed up to the KHub and we are keen to expand the network further.
21. The LGA continues with a broader programme of work to support councils around countering extremism, including producing case studies and guidance materials and running a series of leadership essentials courses for elected members.

Issues and points for discussion

22. Members are asked to note the following issues and suggested questions for the Lead Commissioner:
 - 22.1. Extremism challenges and trigger events can be very locally focussed. Effective responses require a sound understanding of the complexities and nuances of the local context, as well as well-established relationships with local grassroots groups. What is the Commissioner's view on a locally-led versus national top-down approach to countering extremism?
 - 22.2. The challenges from extremism are constantly evolving and require a flexible and dynamic response – including notably the recent rise in anti-minority groups

exploiting sexual assault allegations to mobilise support. What does the Commissioner see as the most pressing current and future threats?

- 22.3. While ‘supported areas’ receive dedicated Home Office funding for Community Coordinators to support local activity, it is clear that extremism presents issues for local authorities across the country. While we are seeking to support these areas through the SIGCE and beyond, there are concerns that non-supported areas do not have the resources they need to respond and build resilience. What are the Commissioner’s views on ensuring that all areas get the support they need?
- 22.4. Councils have identified some specific difficulties or blockages to local counter extremism work which may require a national response (such as a reticence amongst some partner agencies to introduce an injunction like the one used by Bedfordshire Police to limit Britain First activity). How can we ensure that existing tools are being fully utilised? How can the LGA work with the Commissioner to help disseminate learning and develop practice across different partners?
- 22.5. The establishment of the Commission sits alongside a number of other significant national developments in related policy areas, including the recent publication of the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper and the new Contest counter-terrorism strategy. Where does the Commissioner see counter-extremism in relation to these other areas and how can we ensure a joined-up approach at national and local levels?
- 22.6. The Commission is expected to issue a call for evidence shortly. How can the LGA and councils best engage with this?

Implications for Wales

23. The Commission’s remit covers both England and Wales. LGA officers will seek to liaise with the WLGA regarding a response to the call for evidence, once this has been announced.

Financial implications

24. LGA improvement activity for counter-extremism is supported by grant funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Next steps

25. Members are asked to note the issues and questions set out under paragraph 20. Officers will note specific concerns raised by members at the meeting to feed into the LGA’s response to the anticipated call for evidence.