

Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism

Purpose of report

For information.

Summary

Councillor Debra Coupar, Deputy Leader at Leeds City Council and co-Chair of the Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism (SIGCE) will attend the meeting to discuss some of the challenges facing councils in their work on counter extremism and how the SIGCE can support local authorities in their responses.

Recommendation

That the LGA continues to support the work of the SIGCE.

Action

Officers to draw the SIGCE's attention to members' discussion.

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Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism

Background

1. Councils have a key role in countering extremism and building cohesive and resilient communities. Working together with communities and partner agencies, councils are best placed to understand the complexities of local issues and what works in response.
2. In recent years terror attacks in Manchester and London have demonstrated the influence of extremism at its most dangerous, and the terrorist attacker in New Zealand this year also referenced at least one campaign by UK-based extremists.
3. However many effects of extremism are less obvious and dramatic. Extremism can have a huge impact on local areas, and no area is immune. The threats from extremism are constantly changing, presenting new and evolving challenges for local authorities.
4. The Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism (SIGCE) is a local authority led network co-chaired by Cllr Debra Coupar (Deputy Leader, Leeds City Council) and Cllr Hazel Simmons (Executive Leader, Luton Council). Partnered by the LGA, and the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University - and funded by the Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) - it has been formally running since January 2018. LGA officers sit on its Steering and Delivery Groups.
5. The network is bringing councils together to share learning and experiences, and to promote good practice on countering extremism, with a remit to encompass all forms of extremism and intolerance relevant to councils and their communities. The SIGCE provides a platform for local authorities to explore common challenges and support each other through peer-to-peer learning, developing and sharing resources, and showcasing good practice.
6. Cllr Coupar will attend the meeting to outline in more detail some of the challenges facing councils in their work on countering extremism and discuss how the SIGCE can further support local authorities.

Counter extremism policy and challenges for local areas

7. The national Counter-Extremism Strategy was published in October 2015 and has four strands: countering extremist ideology; building a partnership with those opposed to extremism; disrupting extremists; and building more cohesive communities. 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 there is currently no statutory duty for councils to counter extremism.

8. The Home Office currently funds dedicated 'Community Coordinator' posts in around 40 'supported' councils to undertake counter-extremism and broader community cohesion work at a local level, as well as funding the Building A Stronger Britain Together programme.¹
9. The threats and challenges posed by extremism present an ever-changing picture for local authorities. Sharing information and exchanging ideas and approaches across councils can make a huge difference in supporting the sector's response to extremism and 'joining up the dots' across areas. For 'non-supported' areas in particular (councils who do not receive central government funding for Community Coordinator posts), having access to the knowledge and skills acquired in other areas about extremism challenges and what works (and what does not) in response is even more important.
10. Work to counter extremism can be sensitive and complex, bringing the role of local leaders in this space into increasing focus. In the LGA's response to the Integrated Communities Green Paper we accepted the call for local government to be bolder about tackling challenging cohesion issues and not shying away from difficult conversations or messages; we have argued that equipping members with the knowledge, tools and support needed to assist them in their work should be a priority.²

The SIGCE

11. The SIGCE was launched with an aim 'to support and enhance the capacity of councils and their partners to meet the challenges of extremism and intolerance'. The SIGCE is delivering a programme of work, initially funded for two years, to deliver this ambition.
12. The SIGCE has delivered six seminars and at least two more are planned, covering topics such as disruption of extremist activity, enabling community engagement to counter extremism and the role of political leadership. Attendances have grown as the SIGCE gains experience and is more widely recognised. A recent seminar on proactive responses to Far Right extremism attracted over a hundred local authority officers, elected members and police officers.
13. The increase in support for the Far Right has been a key issue for the SIGCE, with some councils experiencing acute problems as a result. A Far Right Working Group has been established involving officers from councils that have seen the Far Right presence increase in their communities. The aim of the group is to develop practical responses to racialised narratives around the safety of women and children and to build future resilience.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/building-a-stronger-britain-together>

² <https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/integrated-communities-strategy-green-paper-lga-response>

14. The Working Group has facilitated direct support from community coordinators to areas without coordinators (non-supported areas), maximising the value of the funding for coordinators and epitomising the SIGCE's stated intention 'to bring together councils to form small working groups on a shared and specific issue in Action Research clusters'.
15. The SIGCE intends to extend this method of working to sharing learning around Islamist extremism. It has already provided informal support to councils to address dynamic threats including an increased extremist presence in campaigns in response to consultation on proposed changes to gender/identity legislation and the introduction of sex and relationship education in the national curriculum.
16. The creation of an online Knowledge Hub (KHub) site was a key aim of the group. This has been developed by the LGA, to collate, curate and share learning from the SIGCE's main outputs, and offer a go-to targeted resource and toolkit with discussion boards for local authorities facing emerging issues related to extremism. Predominantly aimed at officers, there are currently 170 participants signed up, representing just under 80 councils (covering both supported and non-supported areas), plus government officials and, increasingly, officers from other statutory agencies. The platform enables the sharing of learning and establishment of relationships around themes such as tackling forced marriage and honour-based abuse, building the confidence of frontline professionals to challenge hate-inspired narratives, and disruption tactics to prevent extremists being given a platform and share their narrative. The existence of this resource allows best practice to spread and develop by building a national (and international) culture of learning around countering extremism. Membership and usage are increasing and we expect this trend to continue.
17. Members of the SIGCE have attended a number of conferences to talk about the work of the group and further expand the network. The group has presented at five Leadership Essentials training events organised for councillors by the LGA, supporting the SIGCE's aim to increase the confidence and leadership of elected representatives in this field, and will also speak at a plenary session at the LGA's forthcoming annual conference.
18. The two chairing authorities have developed a good working relationship via the US Embassy with colleagues in Portland, Oregon and Seattle, sharing good practice and encourage joint working. To build on the SIGCE's efforts to secure political buy in, the co-chairs are in the process of establishing improved elected member networks in their areas to support closer working to tackle all types of extremism and a conference to debate and share good practice around a number of community related themes, which will include extremism, is being organised in the north of England. The SIGCE is now at a stage in its development where it is well positioned to strengthen the existing national and regional networks it has created and to build international links – a particularly important development given the international nature of extremism, especially online.

19. The SIGCE is also looking at developing a further support offer for elected members, complementing existing support provided by the LGA. This may include regular headline updates on developments in policy and practice; an informal peer-to-peer mentoring network; and regional network meetings.
20. The SIGCE's Delivery Group and Steering Group meet regularly to share good practice and learning, and to ensure that the overall aims of the SIGCE are on track. These meetings provide regular opportunities for the Home Office to engage with those delivering the counter extremism strategy, providing a bridge between delivery on the ground and policy at the center and a feedback loop for improvement, ensuring that practice and resources are grounded in experience. This process is reinforced by the KHub.
21. The SIGCE has also contributed to the development of future national policy, informing the LGA's work on counter extremism and establishing a good relationship with the Commission for Countering Extremism. The Lead Commissioner, Sara Khan, spoke at the SIGCE's leadership seminar last autumn, and the SIGCE produced a detailed joint submission with the LGA to the Commission's call for evidence, outlining some of the challenges from extremism facing local authorities and councils' work in response³.

Issues

22. As the network has developed, a core concern has been how best to reach out to and support councils (in non-supported areas in particular). The SIGCE is particularly keen to develop its understanding of the needs of non-supported areas and to shape its evolving support offer accordingly.
23. Members are invited to comment on the support offered by the SIGCE and contribute further ideas for consideration, in particular on what sort of support their authorities might find useful.

Implications for Wales

24. The SIGCE offers support to all councils in England and Wales and a number of Welsh authorities have signed up to the online KHub to date.

Next steps

25. The Board's views will be fed back to the SIGCE's steering group for consideration.

³ <https://www.local.gov.uk/lga-submission-commission-countering-extremisms-call-evidence>