

Community Cohesion

Purpose of report

For discussion and decision.

Summary

The violent murder of Lee Rigby, increased EDL activity and wider issues such as prosecutions for child sexual exploitation have resulted in a number of incidents of inter-community violence and have heightened media interest in the associated community tensions. This report therefore looks at the role of local authorities in the community cohesion agenda.

Recommendations

Leadership Board members are asked to:

1. Note the work that is currently undertaken by local authorities on community cohesion;
2. Consider this work in the wider context of service delivery; and
3. Provide a steer on what further work can be done to support councils' work on cohesion: options might be a private discussion at Annual Conference and/or a summit in the autumn to discuss these issues.

Action

Officers to implement the recommendations, and any other work identified as necessary by the Board.

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Background

1. There have been a number of recent reports of people arrested, tried and convicted for terrorist related offences in the UK. Figures for the year to September 2012 confirm the perception of an increased number of prosecutions, with 245 terrorism-related arrests, a rise of 60% on the previous year. In his Parliamentary Statement on 3 June, the Prime Minister highlighted three major counter-terror trials this year, in which 18 people were found guilty.
2. It is not clear why there has been such an increase in the number of arrests. It may be related to clearer intelligence and security efforts set in place during the Olympics, and more publicity about these cases. It may, however, be a manifestation of more individuals, either alone or in groups, seeking to carry out terrorist attacks. National security remains a top priority for successive governments and a key part of the overall strategy needs to focus on preventing individuals becoming radicalised to the extent that they want to commit violent acts.
3. Lee Rigby's murder, alongside the convictions in Rochdale and Oxfordshire for child sexual exploitation, has fuelled community tensions. Media reports suggest there were over 200 Islamophobic incidents in the week immediately following the murder in Woolwich, including attacks on 10 mosques. There have also been protests by far-right groups across the country with over 50 demonstrations by both the English Defence League (EDL) and British National Party (BNP) over the first weekend in June.
4. Following the tragic events in Woolwich, the Prime Minister announced that he will lead a task force that will focus on tackling extremism and radicalisation. The Group met on 3 June and we are in touch with Baroness Warsi's office to offer the support and expertise of the sector to ensure that councils' views on cohesion are understood. The Prime Minister has also asked the Intelligence and Security Committee to examine how the suspects were radicalised and whether any more could have been done to stop them, in order to learn lessons where possible.

The local government role

5. Councils have always worked closely with the police, schools, voluntary sector organisations, religious institutions and others such as prisons and probation on community cohesion, but the Prevent programme gave this work a specific focus on violent extremism. During the three years from 2008 to 2011, 94 local authorities identified as having some risk factors within their locality received a total of £55m of funding through their Area Based Grant for Prevent. Most councils undertake far less overt work on Prevent but the emphasis on cohesion remains pivotal to mainstream activity.

6. A small number of areas have continued to receive a grant for Prevent work. However, for the majority, the funding from central government has ended, with the expectation that councils have now incorporated this work into everyday council business. There are many good examples most notably in London and West Yorkshire where this work continues, through bodies such as cohesion boards.
7. The knowledge, expertise and maturity of councils has grown since the Cattle report in 2001; the Commission on Integration and Cohesion – Our Shared Future in 2007 which set out to deliver a vision of a society where people are committed to what we have in common rather than focusing on differences; and through the recent emphasis on preventing violent extremism. Areas already map their communities to provide a clear understanding of who lives in the local area and this provides a foundation for understanding conflicts between different groups and knowledge of the barriers and opportunities which exist.
8. The national counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, was introduced by the previous government, and was revised and updated by the coalition government in 2011. It has four strands, of which the Prevent strategy is one, which has the aim to ‘stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism’. This strategy overlays the existing work that councils undertake on community cohesion.
9. DCLG launched ‘Creating the Conditions for Integration’ in February 2012. Creating the Conditions recognises that integration is a vital local issue requiring a local response, with many references to localism and civic leadership, and strongly encourages local partners such as councils to take a lead. It acknowledges the excellent examples of locally-led action to build integration and challenge extremism.

Responding to incidents

10. Councils continually face a number of community cohesion challenges - from influxes of new migrants, to far right extremists, to tensions arising from serious crime incidents.
11. Councils are experienced in providing an effective and appropriate response to incidents, often issuing public statements urging unity and calmness, offering joint meetings with the police to explain activities, and calling faith leaders together to respond collectively to condemn violence of any kind. However, this activity, such as that seen in Woolwich, can be made more complicated by the response from groups such as the EDL. Again, however, over time councils have built up expertise in dealing with marches/ demonstrations and this is now widely shared, principally through the EDL special interest group, which is led by officers and members from Blackburn with Darwen and Luton Borough councils. This group has a comprehensive plan of work which includes: understanding the role of social media, reviewing legislation, best practice case studies, the development of an elected member mentoring programme and provision of online resources and secure shared spaces to discuss and debate issues.

Wider issues

12. There is no single path that leads people to turn acceptable radical views into violent extremism: social; foreign policy; economic; and personal factors all play a part. Tensions in communities can arise through a number of issues such as unemployment, especially for young men, slow growth in the local economy and migrant groups who do not always easily integrate into society can have a profound impact on identity and feelings of belonging. Some of these individuals can experience identity crises and feel resentful towards their adopted society which leads them to search for an ideological cause, making them open to extremist messages which they feel resonate with their experience and circumstances.
13. Recently, child sexual exploitation (CSE) has received increased media, political and public attention in part due to a number of high profile court cases principally concerning that of vulnerable young girls exploited by 'Asian men'. However, the Children's Commissioner's interim report in November 2012 found that the perpetrators and victims of CSE in recent cases have come from a wide range of ethnic and social backgrounds. The danger of a narrow focus on one particular form of CSE is that attention can be diverted from crimes which do not appear to match that model, with an associated risk to victims.
14. Councils have reported concern about the impact of cases on community cohesion and some are in active discussions with local faith and community leaders. The Community Alliance Against Child Sexual Exploitation, a coalition of organisations representing different faiths was launched in May. It is led by the Islamic Society of Britain and the campaign '*HOPE not hate* aims to raise awareness of CSE; provide training for faith and community leaders; break down misconceptions; and, create a zero tolerance attitude to CSE.
15. Reports suggest that there are a further 54 on-going investigations across the country into cases of child sexual exploitation. Whatever emerges from those cases, particularly around warning signs, preventative action taken and the response from public authorities, will have learning for councils in taking this work forward.

Political leadership

16. Councils and councillors know who lives in their local area and this provides a foundation for understanding conflicts and a clear leadership role in dealing with issues around violent extremism, child sexual exploitation and other cohesion issues. It is therefore vital that elected members feel comfortable in tackling these issues head on and do not look to ignore or play down incidents that occur in their areas.
17. The Prime Minister's task force will, no doubt, want to consider how British foreign policy can cause tensions in communities and as a two-way dialogue councillors will be keen to act as the link between their communities and national government so that views are taken into account in developing policy.

Communications

18. The importance of effective communication is critical relating to community cohesion, both to re-assure and bind communities together in an atmosphere of tolerance. Developing a local counter narrative to confront extremist ideology, creating alternative choices, and using credible voices to expose flawed arguments are critical parts of a local strategy to ensure extremist messages do not take hold.
19. The cohesion agenda has become more complex in a very short period of time, principally due to the role and impact of social media. It can be used by extremist organizations like the EDL to rapidly organise protests, and it can also create division and foster rumour. It also means there is an ever increasing awareness of international events and what is happening in real time in other cities and towns. However, as was seen during the civil disturbances in August 2011, social media offers a means of getting information out to communities, discrediting rumours, and bringing people together. Councils and other agencies have already been making good use of social media for these purposes.

Next steps

20. Although there is a raft of work underway in the LGA to address CSE, there is a need to refresh and update our support for councils around community cohesion and on Prevent. The new model work, *Rewiring Public Services: Rejuvenating English Democracy*, will provide the framework for a new focus on resilient communities, building social capital and civic engagement and a new way of funding this work through community budgets.
21. The LGA Communications Team is developing a workshop to share best practice and case studies which will cover the spectrum of community cohesion communications issues. These are planned to be rolled out in the autumn, following the launch of the CSE toolkit and will be hosted regionally.
22. Officers would welcome a steer from the Leadership Board about the focus of the LGA's cohesion work going forward. This could include a fringe session at Annual Conference and a summit in the autumn for leaders, Ministers and other stakeholders to come together to articulate a clear narrative about the role of local authorities and to highlight the good work in this area.

Financial Implications

23. This work can be progressed by scaling back work on other safer communities issues.