

Company Number 11177145

## **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 to date and emerging themes ahead of the release of its major report in September. This paper provides an overview of the national policy framework, a summary of issues facing councils in countering extremism, and sets out some issues members may wish to raise at the meeting.

### **Recommendations**

That members of the SSCB:

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 15, which members may wish to raise with the Lead Commissioner at the meeting.

### **Action**

Officers to action any matters arising from the discussion as appropriate.

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## **Background**

1. The Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE) was established in 2018 as a non-statutory expert committee of the Home Office, operating independently from government. Its purpose is to support the government, public sector, civil and wider society and families to identify and challenge all forms of extremism. Sara Khan was appointed as Lead Commissioner for a period of 3 years.
2. Sara attended the Board in June 2018 to outline the plans for the Commission's first phase of work, including its initial objectives to:
  - 2.1. Engage widely on extremism and our fundamental, pluralistic values across the public sector, communities, civil society, families and legal and academic experts.
  - 2.2. Publish a study into the threat we face from extremism, and the current response.
  - 2.3. Advise ministers on the CCE's future structures, work programme and the appointment of further commissioners.
3. Cllr Blackburn sits on the Commission's Expert Group, which provides the Lead Commissioner with advice and challenge.
4. The CCE's work to date has included a public call for evidence, visits to 20 towns and cities, and commissioning 19 academic papers on extremism. A statistical summary of responses to the call for evidence was published in July, with a final report expected later in September. The first tranche of academic papers has also been released. Sara will attend the meeting to provide members with an update on the Commission's findings to date, discuss some of the emerging themes ahead of the publication of its report, and outline future plans.

## **Counter-extremism policy context**

5. The Government's 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. Extremism is defined in the Strategy 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". 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.
6. The Counter-Extremism Strategy is separate from the national Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST) and 'Prevent' duty, one element of CONTEST. Counter-extremism and Prevent are presented by Government as two distinct, but complementary policy

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areas. However, while the focus for these strategies may differ, the LGA has long argued that understanding, responding and building resilience to the threats from extremism and terrorism require a joined-up approach across Prevent, counter-extremism, and cohesion and integration more broadly, at both national and local levels.

7. In July 2019 the then Home Secretary, Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP, announced work had commenced on a comprehensive new Counter-Extremism Strategy. Although there are few details about the new strategy at this stage, it is expected that the outcomes from the CCE's work will be integral to its development. LGA officers will be meeting with Home Office officials shortly to discuss their plans for engagement on the strategy and ensure there will be opportunities for sector views to be fed in.
8. The change of government in July which saw Priti Patel appointed Home Secretary did not lead to a change in ministerial responsibility for Counter-Extremism. This remains with Baroness Williams.

### **Extremism challenges for councils**

9. Extremism can have a huge impact on local areas, with no authorities immune from its effects. In our response to the Commission's call for evidence<sup>1</sup> earlier this year, we outlined councils' core role in countering extremism, where local authorities are best placed to understand the complexities of local issues and what works in response.
10. In our response, and at the SSCB meeting in June, the Board outlined some of the key challenges from extremism facing local authorities, including increases in both the scale and breadth of extremist activity in recent years, and a step-change in the tactics used by extremists. This has included an increasing 'mainstreaming' of anti-Muslim and anti-minority narratives, promoted and amplified through social media platforms. Alongside this a number of campaigns exploiting apparently mainstream issues such as protests against sexual exploitation/assault, 'freedom of speech' and Brexit, have provided new and shared rallying points for a range of anti-minority actors.
11. Our response also set out some of the challenges for councils in tackling extremism, including: effective engagement and working in partnership with communities alongside other agencies; the importance of local leadership in responding to what can be very sensitive and complex issues; and the need for a long-term approach at both local and national levels to counter extremism and foster cohesion. We also highlighted however that significant funding challenges for councils have had a considerable impact across service areas and substantially inhibited efforts to address extremism and cohesion issues. This is particularly challenging for councils who do not receive direct central government funding for specialist counter-extremism posts.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/lga-submission-commission-countering-extremisms-call-evidence>

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### **Commission for Countering Extremism – findings to date**

12. In July the Commission published a statistical summary of responses from its call for evidence, which received over 3000 responses. The summary distinguished responses between those who identified themselves as members of the public and those who identified as practitioners. Headlines from the report include:
- 12.1. 75 per cent of public respondents find the Government’s current definition of extremism “very unhelpful” or “unhelpful”. Just over half (55 per cent) of practitioners found it either “very helpful” or “helpful”.
  - 12.2. Just over half (52 per cent) of respondents had witnessed extremism in some way. Of these, two fifths (39 per cent) reported seeing it in their local area. Of those who had witnessed extremism, just under half (45 per cent) reported seeing it online.
  - 12.3. Examples of extremist tactics documented included:
    - 12.3.1. Mainstreaming views so that they become accepted officially as ‘community norms’, with groups setting up as charities or NGOs and/or which are regarded as the ‘authentic’ voice of the communities they claim to represent.
    - 12.3.2. Hate preachers using social media and local prayer centres to preach hate behind closed doors; radio/TV used to recruit people; and social media to recruit youngsters for a cause/ to promote hate.
    - 12.3.3. The online space, which provides a permissive environment for the exchange of extremist narratives (increasingly in the form of conspiracy theories), where vulnerable individuals can find content that reflects and endorses their world view and can provide them with the justification for escalation to violence.
  - 12.4. The public and practitioners associated the Far Right with propaganda (e.g. on social or traditional media), events (e.g. marches) and criminal offending (e.g. hate crime) more than with any other activities. The public associated Islamist extremism with criminal offending and links to terrorism, while practitioners associated it with propaganda, criminal offending and incidents in regulated spaces.
  - 12.5. Examples of harms from extremism included the impact on communities and town centres, the long-term effect on individuals and the normalisation of extremism.
  - 12.6. Both the public and practitioners agreed that “a lot more” should be done online to counter extremism (56 per cent and 73 per cent respectively). When asked who has a role to play, practitioner respondents’ top choice was social media and tech companies while the public respondents chose faith groups and leaders.

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13. Alongside the statistical summary, the CCE has published 13 academic papers to date, covering themes including the evolution of far right extremism; far left extremism; the online space; and approaches to countering extremism.

### **Online Harms White Paper**

14. In April the Government published an Online Harms White Paper for consultation, setting out a number of proposed legislative and non-legislative measures to tackle online safety. The consultation outlined a range of different harms associated with use of the online space citing material which threatens national security; grooming and the physical safety of children; the use of online platforms for abuse and bullying; and the way in which social media echo chambers can undermine our democratic values and principles.
15. The paper set out plans for both legislative and non-legislative measures to tackle harmful content and activity, and an ambition for the UK to be the first country to establish a new regulatory framework for this. The proposals included:
  - 15.1. Establishing a new statutory duty of care to make companies take more responsibility for the safety of their users and tackle harm caused by content or activity on their services.
  - 15.2. Enforcement of the new duty of care by an independent regulator with a suite of powers to take action against any companies breaching the duty.
  - 15.3. Codes of practice to support companies to fulfil the new duty.
  - 15.4. A new online media literacy strategy to support a coordinated and strategic approach to online media literacy education and awareness, ie digital resilience.

### **Supporting councils**

16. At the June SSCB meeting, members heard from Cllr Debra Coupar, Deputy Leader of Leeds City Council and Co-Chair of the local authority led [Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism](#) (SIGCE) (alongside Cllr Hazel Simmons, Leader of Luton Council), about the network's work to build and disseminate good practice and provide support to local authorities in countering extremism across England and Wales. The SIGCE's work includes a series of seminars; an online Knowledge Hub for exchanging information and pooling learning, 'Action Research' clusters for councils facing shared distinctive issues; and regional networks for elected members.
17. As we noted, sharing information and exchanging ideas and approaches across councils can make a huge difference in supporting the sector's response to extremism, and for 'non-supported' areas in particular (councils who do not receive central government funding for dedicated counter extremism 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.

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18. Beyond specific work to support the SIGCE, the LGA has developed a support package for councils and councillors around counter-extremism, Prevent and cohesion. Over the last year we have run a number of leadership essentials training courses for councillors reflecting the importance of the local leadership role in tackling extremism, giving members the opportunity to explore these policy areas in depth, and share learning with peers. Details for further courses over the coming months will be confirmed shortly. We have also produced a number of case studies of good practice on countering extremism, undertaken a review of community engagement techniques, published updated guidance on community cohesion and are expecting to publish scrutiny guidance on Prevent and counter-extremism for scrutiny councillors soon.

### **Issues for discussion**

19. Sara will provide an overview of the Commission's forthcoming report and recommendations. Board members may wish to explore the following themes:

- 19.1. The challenges from extremism continue to evolve and require a flexible and dynamic response. What does the Commissioner see as the most pressing current and future threats?
- 19.2. While some 'supported areas' receive dedicated Home Office funding to support local activity, it is clear that extremism presents issues for local authorities across the country. What are the Commissioner's views on ensuring that all areas get the support they need?
- 19.3. The policy space for counter-extremism is also developing. Since the Commission was established, the Government has published an integration strategy in the form of the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper; a new CONTEST (counter-terrorism) strategy; announced a review of Prevent; and has started work on a new counter-extremism strategy. How can we ensure a joined-up approach at national and local levels?

### **Implications for Wales**

20. The Commission's remit covers both England and Wales.

### **Financial implications**

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

### **Next steps**

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