

14 January 2021

Conspiracy theories and COVID-19

Purpose of report

For information.

Summary

Dr Gareth Harris, independent researcher affiliated to Coventry University, and lead Facilitator of the Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism (SIGCE), and Dr Valerie van Mulukom, a cognitive scientist at Coventry University, will provide an update to the Board on conspiracy theories in the context of COVID-19.

Recommendation

That the Board notes the update.

Action

Officers to take forward any actions as directed.

Contact officer: Rachel Duke
Position: Adviser
Phone no: 07464 652612
Email: rachel.duke@local.gov.uk

14 January 2021

Conspiracy theories and COVID-19

Background

1. The pandemic has presented a number of cohesion and extremism issues for local areas. This has included activists adapting long-standing narratives to try and exploit widespread fear and anxiety to extend their reach and garner support, growing levels of hate incidents on and off-line, and reports of increased community tensions. Narratives have blamed a variety of groups or communities for the initial origins of the virus, its continued spread and for breaching control measures (the specific groups blamed have evolved over the course of the pandemic but have included students, more-deprived communities, and particular religious or ethnic groups). It is thought likely that extremists will look to capitalise on the post-COVID landscape to further common narratives; economic decline, increasing unemployment and rising inequality (or perceptions of these) in particular, have traditionally provided fertile territory for extremists to exploit.
2. The pandemic has also featured unprecedented awareness and mainstream circulation or advocacy of various conspiracy theories. Uncertainty, fear and the complexity of the pandemic are likely to have contributed to their growth and appeal during this period.
3. Conspiracy narratives have again included blaming certain groups for the origins or spread of the virus, but have extended to a range of other themes, including that the virus is a hoax, is exaggerated or has been deliberately manufactured; that the 5G network has helped spread or lower immunity to it (well over 70 attacks on 5G masts were recorded last year, with engineers subject to threats of violence); plus a range of narratives linked to vaccinations, including claims that vaccinations will include microchips or are designed to achieve global depopulation. Conspiracy theories on a range of issues continue to persist, with themes united around a deep mistrust of government and the mainstream media. It is worth noting too that conspiracy theories beyond the pandemic, for instance relating to the US elections, have also received significant attention in the UK during this same period.
4. There is some debate about the extent to which “conspiracy theories” and “extremism” occupy the same space, however there are obvious concerns that conspiracy theories can fuel discrimination and polarisation; be exploited by extremists and help to draw in those at risk of radicalisation; and spread mistrust in public institutions and scientific and medical information, which are clearly of particular concern in responding to the pandemic.

14 January 2021

5. Dr Gareth Harris, SIGCE Facilitator, will provide an update to the Board on the growth of conspiracy theories over recent months, and Dr Valerie van Mulukom will present on what makes people vulnerable to conspiracy narratives, particularly in the context of the pandemic.

Responding to conspiracy theories and support for councils

6. Nationally, much of the focus has been on the online space; the conduit for the spread of conspiracy theories. The Government consulted on an online harms white paper in 2019, which covered a wide range of online harms including illegal content, abuse and disinformation. [In the LGA's response to the white paper](#) we set out how the spread of misinformation on the internet can lead to mistrust in public services.
7. The [Government's response to the consultation](#) was published in December 2020, and sets out proposals that will make tech companies legally responsible for the online safety of their users. This will introduce a new regulatory framework establishing a duty of care on tech companies to improve the safety of their users online, which will be overseen and enforced by an independent regulator. The response proposes that companies will need to address disinformation and misinformation¹ that pose a reasonably foreseeable risk of significant harm to individuals (e.g., relating to public health) and that new legislation would introduce additional provisions (such as an expert working group) targeted at building understanding and driving action to tackle these.
8. The response also notes that in response to the pandemic, the Government stood up the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport-led cross-Whitehall Counter Disinformation Unit, to provide a comprehensive picture of the extent, scope and the reach of disinformation and misinformation, and to work with partners to ensure appropriate action is taken.
9. At a local level, the Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism (SIGCE - a council led network chaired by Leeds and Luton Councils) provides support to councils on countering extremism. Since its launch in 2017, it has achieved considerable successes in supporting councils and partners to counter extremism, including through roundtables, webinars, training, an online officer Knowledge Hub, regional elected member networks, and working groups on Far-Right extremism and Faith-based extremism respectively. The LGA currently funds the network and supports the design and delivery of its work programme.

¹ Disinformation is defined as the deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain. Misinformation is defined as inadvertently spreading false information.

14 January 2021

10. As noted above we recently supported a SIGCE seminar on conspiracy theories and COVID-19. Presentations from the session are available from the [SIGCE KHub](#), and we are looking at convening some follow-up sessions with councils to explore what more local authorities can do in response.
11. Over the next couple of months, we are rolling out a training programme for officers on effective communications and engagement to counter extremist narratives more broadly. Wider work has also started to develop and trial new approaches to community dialogue and engagement at a local level to help challenge extremist narratives (although much of this has been paused with pandemic restrictions in place).

Implications for Wales

12. The SIGCE provides support for councils across England and Wales.

Financial Implications

13. None.

Next steps

14. Members to note the updates from Gareth Harris and Valerie van Mulukom. Officers to take forward any actions arising from the discussion.