

17 June 2021

## **Social cohesion and resilience**

### **Purpose of report**

For discussion.

### **Summary**

Sara Khan has recently been appointed as the government's Independent Adviser for Social Cohesion and Resilience. Sara will be attending the meeting to update members on her plans for her role, and explore members' concerns about extremism and cohesion issues.

### **Recommendation/s**

That the Board notes the update and discusses councils' concerns on cohesion and extremism.

### **Action/s**

Officers to follow up as directed.

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

17 June 2021

## **Social cohesion and resilience**

### **Background**

1. Sara Khan has recently been appointed as the government's Independent Adviser for Social Cohesion and Resilience. Previously, Sara was the lead Commissioner at the Commission for Countering Extremism (the Commission is continuing with its work, with Robin Simcox recently appointed as Interim Commissioner).
2. It is expected that Sara will work to understand and build resilience against the negative impact of extremism in local communities. This will include working with frontline experts to develop recommendations on how to better support and protect victims of extremism, those working to tackle it, and communities affected by it; and explore the role of national and local government, public bodies and civil society in this space.
3. Sara will provide an update to the Board on her new role and her plans for the coming year. She is also keen to understand more about councils' concerns about cohesion and extremism issues.

### **Policy context**

4. Over recent years counter-extremism, counter-terrorism (including Prevent), and wider cohesion and integration work have each been framed at a national level by separate government strategies. Councils effectively have a number of statutory obligations as part of the Prevent duty, however there are no duties for councils specifically to tackle extremism or cohesion concerns more broadly.
5. The 2015 Counter-Extremism strategy was supported by work under the government's Building a Stronger Britain Together (BSBT) programme, part of which funded a number of dedicated counter-extremism posts in around 35 local authorities up until March this year. We anticipate that an announcement on the future direction of counter-extremism will be made by government shortly, but do not expect any further central funding to be made available to councils for specific work in the counter-extremism space.
6. We have long argued that understanding, responding and building resilience to extremism requires a joined-up approach across cohesion, counter-extremism and counter-terrorism, both locally and nationally. Counter-extremism work plays an important dual role; both as an early intervention tool in preventing terrorism through countering ideology and activists that might begin to draw people into radicalisation; and in addressing the wider harms caused at local level from activity which stokes division

17 June 2021

and sows mistrust between communities (even where this does not cross a legal threshold). Councils understand the need to: take a broad strategic approach to both tackling incidents and tensions as they emerge; invest in measures to build resilience and cohesion; and to prevent issues from coming to fruition through counter-extremism (and sometimes Prevent) work.

### **The extremism challenge**

7. The threats from extremism continue to change, presenting new and evolving challenges for local authorities. In our response to the [Commission for Counter Extremism's call for evidence](#) we noted how local extremist campaigns can have a far-reaching impact in local areas, including disruption to the life of local communities, affecting businesses and deterring residents and visitors from going into their town centres; a rise in local tensions; threats, intimidation and harassment; a diminished sense of safety amongst residents; and a deepening polarisation between different groups.
8. Recent years have seen the emergence of a number of cohesion and extremism concerns. This has included activists seeking out opportunities to stir tensions and to exploit otherwise mainstream concerns to garner support, such as CSE and sexual assault; immigration and the housing of asylum seekers; changes to RSE curriculum in schools; and local planning applications. Extremists have a track record of misrepresenting issues in order to either blame a particular community for a particular issue, or to alienate a group within society.
9. We have also been made aware of a number of councillors and council officers who have been victims of concerning levels of abuse, threats and harassment, both online and offline. This includes specific examples of distressing threats and receiving graphic imagery, for instance in response to supporting a local planning application for a Mosque, and holding a public meeting to discuss the housing of asylum seekers in local accommodation. During recent local elections there have been incidents where councillors have been subject to verbal and physical abuse whilst canvassing, and reports of misinformation campaigns against candidates.
10. COVID-19 has provided further opportunities for extremists to exploit, with narratives blaming certain groups for introducing, spreading the virus and breaching control measures. There have been concerns about younger people in particular spending more time online during this time, with possible increased risks of radicalisation. Many areas have reported concerns about rising community tensions during 2020, with a number of councils seeing significant increases in levels of hate crime, and racialised/racist narratives surfacing on a variety of matters in a way not seen for many years. The period also saw an unprecedented mainstream circulation of conspiracy theories and misinformation about the pandemic and measures to control it, as explored by SSCB members at the Board's January 2021 meeting.

17 June 2021

11. We anticipate that extremists will continue to try and use the post-COVID landscape to further support their narratives. Councils are increasingly concerned about the need to respond effectively and build resilience to extremism across communities.

### **Supporting councils**

12. The LGA has been providing significant support to councils on counter-extremism and building cohesion through our work with the LGA-funded [Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism](#) (SIGCE). Over the last year alone this has included developing and delivering a series of practitioner roundtables; three thematic webinars on online extremism and gaming, conspiracy theories and COVID-19, and monitoring local extremist activity; bespoke advice and guidance to councils facing issues; elected member network meetings in the North of England and East of England; coordinating working groups on Far-Right Extremism and Faith-Based “Islamist” Extremism, including developing approaches to improve community engagement; training courses for practitioners; and facilitation of the online Knowledge Hub.

13. We have recently committed to funding the SIGCE this financial year and are now firming up our work programme.

14. The LGA has also been undertaking work to support councillors facing intimidation. In December 2019, the LGA, Welsh LGA (WLGA), the Confederation of Scottish Authorities (COSLA) and the Northern Ireland LGA (NILGA) launched a campaign called ‘[Civility in Public Life](#)’, with the aim of curbing the public intimidation of councillors. The LGA has produced a [toolkit for councillors on handling abuse and intimidation](#). This is also being developed by the LGA into an e-learning course for councillors.

### **Discussion**

15. Sara is keen to hear from councils about their extremism and cohesion concerns and emerging trends or themes. Board members may also wish to explore the following issues:

- 15.1. The importance of retaining national and local focus on preventing extremism and building cohesion, particularly in the context of diminished resources and capacity
- 15.2. Opportunities for linking up Sara’s work with the Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism
- 15.3. The challenges and potential opportunities presented by the post-COVID landscape; how extremists might look to exploit economic decline and rising inequality (or perceptions of these), and how reassessing and rebuilding local places after the pandemic might impact on social cohesion

17 June 2021

- 15.4. How we can best ensure work across national and local government on countering extremism, hate crime and building cohesion is joined-up; what support do councils need from central Government?

**Implications for Wales**

16. Sara's role will cover England only. The SIGCE's support offer extends to councils in both England and Wales.

**Financial Implications**

17. As noted above, councils do not currently receive national funding for dedicated counter-extremism work. The LGA has been funding the SIGCE's support for councils since last autumn and this has now been extended until March 2022.

**Next steps**

18. Officers are exploring with Sara's team how to facilitate further conversations with council practitioners to better understand local challenges from extremism.