

Community Resilience

Purpose of report

As background to the discussion.

Summary

Fresh challenges for councils have been raised over the summer by recent events in Syria and Iraq and the recruitment of British citizens for extremist purposes, the role of faith in Birmingham schools, and children's safeguarding in Rotherham. These events have generated debates about national security, extremism, British values, cohesion and the resilience of our communities.

The Minister of State for Security and Immigration, James Brokenshire will speak to the Forum alongside Stephen Rimmer, West Midlands Strategic Lead for Preventing Violence against Vulnerable People.

Recommendation

Members are invited to note the presentations and raise issues from a local government perspective.

Action

Officers will take forward actions identified.

Contact officer: Helen Murray
Position: Head of Programmes
Phone no: 0207 664 3266
E-mail: helen.murray@local.gov.uk

Community Resilience

Resilient and cohesive communities

1. Councils have been working hard over the last decade to address the cohesion challenges they face – from influxes of new migrants, to far right extremists, to tensions arising from serious crime incidents – and have made progress in strengthening community cohesion, preventing individuals being radicalised and countering extremist views. They have been successful because they are experienced in providing an effective and appropriate response to incidents, often issuing public statements urging calmness and unity, offering meetings with residents, and calling faith leaders together to respond collectively. Although recent developments provide fresh challenges, councils seek to use an evolving response, which takes into account the values and perspectives of the community as a whole and necessarily needs to be a local response.
2. However work to build cohesive and resilient communities can be rapidly undermined where issues such as those in Birmingham's schools, are handled insensitively and conflated with discussions around countering terrorism. Whitehall departments do not always appear to be acting together, and it can sometimes be hard to identify a coherent message that reinforces the work of councils and assists in tackling extremism and those who seek to radicalise others. The presentations for this item provide the opportunity to identify how the OSCT, Home Office and other Whitehall departments can better assist councils in their work to build cohesive and resilient communities and prevent individuals being radicalised and committing acts of terrorism.

Birmingham Schools

3. In the last few months there has been extensive coverage and comment in the media about allegations of radicalisation in a small number of Birmingham schools with high Muslim populations. Following the allegations, the City Council, the Department for Education and Ofsted all commissioned reviews. The result thus far has been that four academies and one maintained school have been put into special measures. Eleven further schools were judged to require improvement. Subsequently there were also reports of similar concerns about schools in Bradford, Luton, and Tower Hamlets, which Ofsted have been investigating.
4. In an Advice Note in June to the Secretary of State for Education, HMCI Sir Michael Wilshaw found that 'Some governors are trying to impose and promote a narrow faith-based ideology in what are non-faith schools'. Although the Ofsted inspections did not suggest there was an organised plot to radicalise children with an extremist goal in mind, they did raise real concerns about governance in these schools and a culture of separatism.

5. The Government's review was led by Peter Clarke, ex-Metropolitan Police. He concluded that there had been 'a determined effort to gain control of governing bodies at a small number of schools' and that those doing this had sought to introduce a distinct set of Islamic behaviours and practices. This investigation found clear evidence that a number of people associated with the schools or their governing bodies espoused, endorsed or failed to challenge extremist views. The report concluded that this would limit the ability of their pupils to exploit opportunities in Britain and would make it harder for them to question or challenge radical influences in the future.
6. Birmingham City Council's own review conducted by Ian Kershaw, noted that the problems being investigated were confined to a very small number of the 437 schools in the city. Like the other reviews, Kershaw concluded that while the behaviour of a number of linked individuals at the schools was a matter of concern, there was no evidence of a systematic plot or plan to promote violent extremism or radicalisation. The Kershaw review did conclude however that attempts by a small number of governors involved in improving standards at the schools had involved unacceptable practices.
7. The Government responded to the publications by announcing a number of measures to tackle these issues: no-notice inspections; a duty 'to promote British values'; and the exclusion of known individuals from governing bodies. Birmingham City Council has committed to work with the Department for Education on a number of actions including the appointment of a new education commissioner at the council, improving recruitment and training for governors, making closer links with academies and introducing school improvement link officers.
8. The LGA responded by calling for stability to be restored to the education system by returning to councils the power to intervene in all underperforming schools, including academies. This reflects our concern about the unclear and confused accountability for schools. Parents, governors and staff need to know who they can turn to if they have concerns about a school. Councils are best placed to perform this local oversight role.

The Prevent Strategy

9. The national counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, was introduced by the previous government, and was revised and updated by the coalition government in 2011. The Prevent strand has the aim to 'stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism'. It states, very reasonably, that: 'All schools are required to teach a broad and balanced curriculum' and to 'promote community cohesion'. Although work with schools is an important part of the Prevent strategy, it does highlight that this work needs to be proportionate and must not start from a misplaced assumption that there is a significant problem which needs to be resolved these issues must be kept in perspective'. Some believe that this issue was given undue prominence in the Ofsted inspections and has called into question its impartiality.
10. We have not always agreed with the Government's rhetoric on Prevent, particularly at the outset, as the focus on Muslim communities felt heavy handed and was felt by many to undermine cohesion work. However, we have come a long way since then and

we are, collectively, in a better place now in understanding some of the grievances, concerns and vulnerabilities we need to address in our communities.

Social tensions

11. There is no doubt that the label 'Trojan Horse', media coverage, the inspection regime, and the published reviews have had a negative effect on the children and young people at the schools in question, their teachers and parents, and the wider Muslim community. The community felt they have been victimised and labelled as extremists. There were reports that parents and pupils were being harassed by the press at the school gates and there is real worry about the reputation of the schools, for example, in the eyes of future employers.
12. More widely, this has instigated a debate about faith schools and what is acceptable practice within the national curriculum. The Muslim community is no different to any other faith community in having a spectrum of opinions, from liberal to conservative, on what is the correct balance between secular and religious values in education. These are debates which will need to happen openly and in an inclusive way.
13. The ability of communities to withstand shock and the work of councils to support and create places where people want to live can come under intense pressure and scrutiny as recent events in Rotherham demonstrate.

Syria

14. The context for these debates has been made more complicated by events in the Middle East, and the participation of British citizens in the civil war in Syria and as members of the so-called Islamic State. Estimates for the number of Britons fighting in Syria and Iraq are difficult to calculate but recent media reports have suggested around 500 individuals.
15. The Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism is extremely concerned about the involvement of Britons in Syria and Iraq both because it could result in more individuals going, often recruited via social media channels, and the impact those returning may have on radicalisation within the UK. OSCT are therefore keen to engage with councils to see if they are aware of individuals who may be thinking of travelling to Syria, and more generally in disseminating information to counter extremist narratives.

Financial Implications

16. There are no financial implications arising from this report.