LGA submission to the Home Affairs Committee call for evidence: Combatting new forms of extremism

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1. About the Local Government Association (LGA)

- The LGA is the National Voice of local government. We're on the side of councils: promoting their work, supporting them to improve and helping them make a difference to people, places and the planet.

- We aim to be the best membership organisation we can be. As the national membership body for local authorities, we provide the bridge between central and local government and we help councils deliver the best services to their local communities.

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2. Background

- Councils have an essential role to play in combatting all types of extremism and the LGA is eager to work with Government to support that role.

- The building and maintaining of cohesive communities remains a key factor in limiting the growth of extremism and needs to go hand in hand with combatting the ideology and arguments of extremist groups that seek to sow division and hate.

- MHCLG is working positively with the sector to support and develop community cohesion work. MHCLG funding has enabled the LGA to organise training for councils on disinformation and to work with Belong to deliver cohesion guidance for the sector, which will be available later this year. We look forward to the publication of the planned cohesion strategy before the summer recess.

- Councils are in a strong position to understand the complexities and nuances of cohesion issues and drivers in their locality (for instance local demography, inter- and intra- community tensions, historical context) and what might work best in response.

- Councils also have a fundamental role as local convenors, working with and supporting local communities and partner agencies. Councils have long been at the heart of facilitating partnership responses to threats to public safety, including through community safety partnerships and safeguarding boards, and are well placed to support a united response that utilises information, experience and expertise from across the locality.

- Alongside partners, councils' counter-extremism work might include:

    - Using a range of tools and powers to disrupt local extremist activity.

    - Challenging extremists or other divisive actors and their narratives (including limiting opportunities for activists to propagate these, for instance through venue hire and IT policies).

- Working with communities to build resilience, including identifying, supporting and capacity building local mainstream voices and civil society groups.
- Providing support and services in the aftermath of extremist events.
- Raising awareness about hate crime and encouraging victims to report incidents.
- Facilitating engagement and dialogue with residents to understand and help address areas of concern.

- Until April 2021 the Home Office funded approximately 35 Community Coordinator posts in councils aimed at supporting counter-extremism, hate crime and resilience work. These posts were in turn supported by the Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism (SIGCE), funded by the Home Office/DLUHC, and co-chaired by Leeds and Luton Councils (supported at strategic and operational levels by the LGA). The SIGCE is a sector-led group to facilitate the sharing of best practice and the exchange of support and information.

- In 2020/21, central government funding for the SIGCE network ended. Consequently, the LGA has continued to fund the SIGCE ever since (while continuing to seek a resumption of central government funding), however its work has become more challenging as a result of the removal of the specific posts devoted to countering the extremist threat. Following the removal of Home Office funding for these posts, many councils simply do not have the resource to continue their work, particularly in the prevention space as there is no statutory duty around cohesion or extremism other than the Prevent duty.

- While overt manifestations of extremism are still likely to come to councils' attention through community safety teams and Prevent leads, the removal of Home Office support sent a further message that this was no longer a priority and removed the resource that allowed councils to tackle extremism on a consistent basis, particularly during periods in which fewer visible cohesion challenges are apparent, rather than taking a fire-fighting approach during periods of crisis. This is despite a significant number of complex cohesion and extremism challenges surfacing in the last couple of years, presenting a range of challenges for local authorities and partners. In the absence of central government support, many councils (especially those with non-specialist posts) are looking to the SIGCE for continued knowledge, advice and guidance.

- The SIGCE has been renamed the Special Interest Group on Countering Emerging Threats to reflect that its remit has expanded beyond extremism to also cover conspiracy theories, mis- and dis- information and Violent Fixated Individuals (VFI) work. The LGA continues to argue for central government to fund and support the group.

3. Recent trends

What trends are evident in the growth of extremism and radicalisation in the UK?

- There are two broad strands in extremism trends that we are currently aware of:
  - An apparent increase in 'traditional extremism', which can be broadly defined as

the radicalisation of adults through extremist ideology.

- Changes in the nature of extremism, with a significant increase in 'extremist' behaviour (typically an interest in violence) that is either not linked to ideology or in which the influence of an ideological cause appears to be transient. This change has been accompanied by a significant increase in Prevent referrals relating to under 18-year-olds. While there are questions over whether 'extremist' and 'radicalisation' are the right terms to use where behaviour is not ideologically motivated, the risk of mass casualty harm, the continuing influence of extremist ideology and similarities in the 'radicalisation' process suggest that it continues to be useful to consider what are now being termed Violent Fixated Individuals (VFI), alongside 'traditional' extremists.

What factors are contributing to a rise in extremism?

- Ideological extremism appears to be growing as a result of:
  - Extremists exploit fears and grievances which are rooted in lived experience of the audience they target. These include perceptions that: specific areas are being left behind economically; opportunities for the groups extremists claim to represent are unfairly limited; that public services are either falling apart or being monopolised by 'rival' groups; that democratic politics is not capable of solving these issues, and in some cases, the conspiracist view that mainstream politicians are deliberately causing these problems.
  - Rapid demographic change in some areas which have not experienced such change before can pose a challenge to social cohesion.
  - This issue also plays out in a specific manner in asylum and resettlement. Councils must be fully engaged well in advance of any decisions on opening or closing asylum accommodation, including hotels. We remain keen to work with Government to co-design review and reform of the future asylum accommodation and support system. The recent confirmation of the aim to close hotels during the course of this Parliament is a welcome step towards this. This however needs to lead to a more equitable distribution of asylum seekers across the UK by the Home Office and their providers in order to reduce the impacts on areas already facing disproportionate pressures. Any savings from hotel closure could also be rerouted to councils to recognise current costs and support the integration of all new arrivals, foster welcoming communities and reduce risks of community tensions.
  - Separately, the general worsening of international relations also plays a significant part in fuelling extremism. Before the disorder of last year, councils were telling us of an unprecedented challenge to community cohesion arising from events in the Middle East.
  - The increased use of mis- and dis- information (including through the use of AI) to undermine faith in democratic politics and encourage hate of specific groups. One example is the false claims, via a deep-fake video, that a local election canvasser in Birmingham had used a racial slur. Another good example is the rapid emergence of disinformation in the wake of the incident in Liverpool, spreading the idea that the 53-year-old white man the police arrested was not the driver of the car and misidentifying the driver as a Muslim. While some of this may have been speculation rather than deliberate misinformation, there is

evidence to suggest that deliberate attempts were made to mislead.

- The effect of this trend is magnified by attempts to legitimise concepts of collective guilt and to justify collective punishment. The most obvious examples of this are antisemitic conflating of the UK's Jewish community and the Israeli government, and blaming of minority groups for crimes committed by members of these groups. The causes of last summer's disorder are of course complex and we are not suggesting that misinformation and collective punishment can solely explain those events, but their role as a trigger emphasises the dangers of both disinformation and the notion of collective guilt/punishment.

- The continued underfunding of local government makes it difficult for councils to provide non-statutory services such as community cohesion work. This is exacerbated by the financial pressures on our voluntary sector partners. Councils tell us that changes to Prevent funding and restriction on its use have in some cases removed resource that as previously available for this work.

- Councils tell us that the lack of an effective counter-narrative to extremist claims is undermining counter extremism and cohesion efforts at a local level. Last year, the LGA provided evidence to the Home Office's Counter Extremism Sprint. We have yet to hear what the outcome of this is and have not received any counter-extremism support from the Home Office.

- One issue that has been raised with us by councils through the SIGCE is the importance of effective tensions monitoring. On this front we would like to see better arrangements for sharing information between councils and the police. This is a two-way ask, both for the police to share more information that can inform councils' cohesion work and for more effective channels through which councils can feed intelligence to the police. The current picture is mixed, with good practice in some areas, but scope for improvement generally.

- The growth of 'VFI extremism' and the growing number of children being radicalised is harder to account for, although all of the above factors are relevant. There is a clear need for greater understanding of the factors behind both. We suggest that research could be usefully targeted at:

    - The role of online self-radicalisation and the responsibility of social media providers for online harms, including the threat posed by com networks.

    - The impact of COVID lockdowns on the mental health of young people who were at a crucial stage in their development during the lockdown period.

    - The consequences of the lack of mental health support and services for young people.

What impact are new technologies, such as AI, having on efforts to combat online extremism and radicalisation?

- We are not aware of the use of new technologies to combat extremism. We are aware that AI is being increasingly used by producers of disinformation and extremists.

To what extent do 'com networks' represent a new form of online extremism?

- We are aware of growing concern around these networks and have raised this with our member councils through our Special Interest Group on Emerging Threats. However, a trend in counter-extremism policy in recent years has been to fixate on the latest threat, possibly to the detriment of work on existing threats which have not necessarily diminished. Work on com networks needs to sit alongside continued work on other existing threats.

4. Remedies

What changes might be required to ensure Prevent is set up effectively to stop people with mixed, unclear and unstable ideologies from becoming radicalised?

- The development of an effective referral system for young people identified as being at risk of both ideological and VFI forms of extremism is essential. The LGA is eager to work with Government in developing new approaches and adapting existing approaches such as Prevent. Given its expanded remit, the SIGCE continues to have a key role to play in sharing information and best practice and as a source of front-line intelligence. This role needs to be properly and sustainably resourced.

- There is a clear need for improved resource for Prevent and if it is to bear the brunt of this new work, thought needs to be given as to whether the current geographical emphases of the programme make sense.

- Councils tell us that the increase in cases and the changing nature of extremism poses a significant capacity challenge for Prevent. This challenge has been exacerbated by the loss of experienced staff through changes to the way Prevent is funded. The volume of cases is posing problems for Channel Chairs and there is a risk that these positions become impossible to fill. There is also a danger in seeing Prevent as the repository for difficult cases that everyone else can wash their hands of, because Prevent is 'dealing with it' when in reality Prevent has neither the capacity nor the right tools to address.

Are any mechanisms other than Prevent required to address mixed, unclear and unstable ideologies?

- As indicated above, improved mental health and support for young people who may be at increased risk of 'radicalisation' and their families is essential, particularly given the possible impact of COVID lockdowns as that cohort of young people passes through the challenges of adolescence.

- Schools have a vital role to play both in identifying those at risk and educating out some of the risk factors (for example the pernicious influence of misogynist influencers).

- Under the Online Safety Act, most social media providers have specific duties in relation to illegal content and content accessed by children, including terrorism and inciting hatred and violence.

- Social media providers must take responsibility for designing their platforms with safety in mind and removing those advocating violence and hate, promoting self-harm and

suicide, com networks, etc., while protecting free speech.

- Additionally, Ofcom and the Government must hold providers to their responsibility and ensure that regulations keep pace with the rate of online innovation.

What factors will determine whether or not new Youth Diversion Orders would be effective in preventing young people from becoming radicalised?

- The effectiveness of a proposed Youth Diversion Order in preventing young people from becoming radicalised will depend on how well they are integrated with wider early intervention frameworks, including proposals such as the Young Futures programme and Prevention Partnerships.

- Both of these are designed to ensure young people at risk of entering the criminal justice system are diverted into other activities. The model is based on consent of the child and parent. A judicial order radically changes the dynamic of engagement with that young person and potentially can lead to a withdrawal from voluntary schemes.

- Success of a new order will rely on timely identification of vulnerability, strong multi-agency collaboration, and the ability to offer credible, trauma-informed alternatives to harmful pathways. The Young Futures programme's emphasis on sustained support and trusted relationships provides a strong foundation for this approach, while Prevention Partnerships offer a mechanism to coordinate local efforts and share intelligence across services.

- To be effective, diversion must be seen as legitimate and constructive by young people themselves, not punitive or stigmatising and must be accompanied by clear accountability, long-term funding, and robust evaluation of outcomes beyond reoffending. This includes measures of belonging and disengagement from extremist activity.