The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK

A foundational report by British Future and the Belong Network to the Independent Commission on community and cohesion

Literature Review

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PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

The UK is a successful, multi-ethnic democracy where, for the most part, people live well together. Yet deep-seated divisions and growing pressures are also placing strain on community life. These include declining trust between neighbours, a rising sense of isolation and loneliness.

Confidence in politicians and democratic institutions has also fallen. When citizens lose faith in their political institutions and leaders, this can lead to decreased civic engagement and increased support for populist or extremist ideologies, all of which can erode community cohesion.

While many of these challenges have developed over time, they were brought into sharp focus by the riots of summer 2024, which saw minority ethnic communities targeted. Prejudice, extremism, online intimidation and political polarisation have become troubling features of daily life in the UK.

Successive governments have failed to respond with consistent and proactive measures. Community and cohesion have too often been treated as secondary concerns – addressed only in the aftermath of shock events.

It is in this context that the Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion has been established. Over the coming year, the Commission will explore how our society can better respond to these challenges – and build stronger, more connected communities for the future.

The work of the Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion has been informed by foundational research published in July 2025, including an open call for evidence and this literature review.

About the literature review

The literature maps and synthesises research from different academic disciplines – anthropology, geography, political science, sociology, social policy and social psychology – to create holistic framework for understanding community and cohesion. It examines key concepts and trends, and policy and practice responses. The literature review also highlights gaps in knowledge.

Qualitative and quantitative academic studies, and policy and practice literature have been examined, including the assessments of four government-commissioned reviews on community cohesion undertaken over the last 25 years. These were the 2001 Cantle report into community cohesion, the 2007 Commission on Integration and Cohesion, the 2016 Casey review of opportunity and integration and the 2024 Khan review on threats to social cohesion and democratic resilience. The methodology used in the review was:

- A key word literature search, followed by analysis and interpretation of relevant studies. The Google Scholar and Scopus search terms are listed in the appendix.
- An analysis of organisational websites, in the UK and internationally.
- An audit of all local and combined authority policy and practice on community building and cohesion. This identified relevant policy documents and enabled us to understand how local and combined authorities approached community and cohesion policy

- The literature synthesises research from different academic disciplines – anthropology, geography, political science, sociology, social policy and social psychology.

The literature review is in four parts. Part One provides an introduction. It defines community strength and cohesion and looks at how these conditions can be measured.

Part Two examines barriers to community strength and cohesion.

Part Three look at the delivery of community development and cohesion programmes on the ground. It examines the approaches used by different organisations and the evidence on the impact of different programmes. The strategic role of local authorities is also examined, as well as learning from outside the UK.

Part Four draws together evidence on the economic and social case for investing in community development and cohesion and draws some final conclusions.

What is community strength and cohesion?

Successful policy and practice interventions to strengthen communities and address cohesion challenges require clear aims and outcomes. In turn, a project's goals and vision need to be underpinned by clear definitions of community strength and resilience. However, both conditions sometimes lack conceptual clarity and there different interpretations of community strength and cohesion as set out below.

What is a community?

Community strength and cohesion have concerned academics and policymakers for many years, with the literature drawing from a range of policy areas and academic disciplines. The word '*community*' itself refers to a group of people who share common characteristics such as living in the same neighbourhood or belonging to the same professional or social group (Crow and Allan, 1994). Mcmillan and Chavis's influential study defines community as "*a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together"* (Mcmillan and Chavis, 1986). While community is usually considered in place-based terms in relation to cohesion, there are other types of community which include:

- Communities of circumstance who are people who have been drawn together through a particular life experience.
- Communities of identity, for example, those who belong to a particular minority ethnic group.
- Communities of intention, whose members share the same values, for example, members of a commune, faith group or political party. This type of community can also include people who are drawn together through their hatred of an out-group.
- Communities of interest, for example, supporters of a particular football club.
- Communities of practice, for example, those who work in a particular profession.

Until recently, the connections between members of communities were mostly forged through face-to-face interactions. However, people are increasingly likely to be members of online communities (Castells, 2024). In other cases, social connections between members of a particular community take place online and offline. People may meet their neighbours in the street but also use Facebook or WhatsApp groups to intensify their connectedness with their local communities. Given the ubiquity of online communities, there is surprisingly little research on their impact on community strength and cohesion.

Early writing about community strength and cohesion

Ideas about community and cohesion was first discussed by Durkheim (1893) in relation to the inter-dependence of people in newly industrialised Europe. He saw cohesion as the bonds of loyalty, trust and solidarity between individuals. Durkheim was contemporary with Tönnies whose concept of *Gemeinschaft* (community) was characterised by kinship ties, face-to-face interaction and adherence to shared values and cultural practices (Tönnies, 1887). Both Durkheim and Tönnies concluded that urbanisation had weakened community ties and social solidarity.

Community strength and cohesion again become a subject for policy debate in the 1980s and 1990s, partly driven by research into urban regeneration in the Global North, but also through concepts that were being set out in development and disaster relief literature in the Global South. ***Community strength*** could be seen as the social and economic assets possessed by communities, enabling them to thrive, support their members, address disparities and increase people's overall quality of life. Ideas about community strength grew out of the community development movement, specifically approaches focusing on asset-based community development.

Asset-based community development – ABCD – draws from communitarian social theory, with its emphasis on communal responsibilities over individual rights and the positive impacts of social networks, shared norms and values on the economic and social well-being of communities (Etzioni, 2000; 2004). Asset-based community development aims to build on the identified strengths of communities. These may include physical and economic assets, but also faith and civil society organisations and those of community connectors. Asset-based community development influenced the work of the Social Exclusion Unit based in the Cabinet Office from 1997-2006, as well as large Government-led regeneration programmes such as the New Deal for Communities which ran from 1998-2011. Asset-based community development continues to influence a number of councils' economic development and community strategies (see, for example, East Hampshire Council, 2024; Gloucester City Council, 2020). The funder Local Trust and the thinktank UK Onward have been national advocates for asset-based community development. In its *Social Fabric Index,* UK Onward maps community assets in local authorities across the UK, identifying major disparities in their distribution (Tanner et al, 2022). Local Trust has also mapped community assets to inform its funding strategy, which focusses on 'left behind' communities (Local Trust, 2019). Asset-based community development also underpinned the Government's Levelling Up White Paper, which identities financial, physical, institutional, intangible, human and social capital as drivers of local growth (HM Government, 2022).

The notion of community 'assets' has also helped to focus thinking about the factors that make communities resilient in times of challenge (South et al, 2020; Young Foundation, 2021). ***Community resilience*** is another way of looking at the strength of communities. Aldrich (2012) and Tierney (2014) examine the conditions that help neighbourhoods manage and adapt to disasters and shock events, identifying the depth of social capital. Sandra Wallman, in her book the *Capability of Places*, looks at community resilience in three cities in the face of migration and economic downturns, concluding that social networks, patterns of employment and characteristics of the built environment – housing, public space and transport – can also influence a neighbourhood's ability to adapt to change (Wallman, 2011).

Social capital: the link between community development and cohesion

Closely linked to the condition of community strength and the process of community development is community cohesion. Community strength refers to the resources and resilience of the community; cohesion is about relationships, networks, norms and trust. While the goal of asset-based community development is to increase the overall quality of life for residents, and to address poverty and inequalities, community cohesion aims to increase the quality of social relationships and the interactions between diverse groups within society.

Community or social cohesion entered the modern UK policy lexicon in the 1990s, in relation to debates about urban regeneration. The research of Robert Putnam on social capital has had a significant impact on both community development and community cohesion policy. He saw social capital as a key driver of both community development and cohesion, comprising different forms: bonding, bridging and linking capital (Putnam, 2000).

Bonding social capital is formed through the strong relationships between people who share similar characteristics, for example between people who live in close-knit communities, in workplaces and between people from similar class or ethnic backgrounds. These links can help prevent loneliness and isolation. The Covid-19 pandemic also showed the crucial role of bonding social capital in times of crisis, with members of such networks providing mutual aid. Communities with strong bonding capital tend to experience lower crime rates and social fragmentation in times of crisis (Aldrich, 2012).

Bridging social capital is formed between people from different backgrounds, through relationships that span in-group out-group divides across society. Bridging social capital has been shown to reduce inter-group conflict, stereotyping, perceptions of threat and prejudice. Such bridging social contact builds empathy, trust and shared identities (Allport, 1954, Christ et al, 2014; Hesketh et al, 2023). In turn, shared identities help to break down the rigid demarcations between 'us and them' that impact on people's perceptions of out-groups. Much bridging social capital is the outcome of direct social contact. Bridging links can take the form of direct social contact, where differences are negotiated in everyday situations (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). However, indirect bridging social contact (having friends who have friends from the out-group) or contextual contact (knowing that other people have mixed friendship groups) has also been shown to increase empathy, trust and shared identities (Christ *et al,* 2014). Social media now plays an important role in contextual social contact.

Linking social capital is the relationships between people and institutions, for example, between MPs and their constituents, or between people and business leaders or council officials. These connections help build political trust and enable people to gain resources or bring about neighbourhood change (Woolcock, 1998).

Defining community cohesion

While social capital is clearly defined in both policy and academic literature, community or social cohesion has proved to be an elusive condition to describe and explain. Over the last 25 years there have been numerous attempts to define this condition, including those put forward in the four independent reviews of cohesion commissioned by the Government, in policy papers and in academic writing (see, for example, Abrams et al, 2023; Baylis et al, 2019; Friedkin, 2004; Jenson, 2010). It is striking, however, that the UK government has not put forward its own definition of cohesion in any of its own policy documents, nor in any white or green paper, command paper, statutory guidance or departmental statement.

The Cantle Review of Community Cohesion (2001) spent time examining the nature of community cohesion. It concluded that this condition comprised (i) common values, (ii) social order, (iii) social solidarity, (iv) a reduction of wealth inequalities, (v) supportive social networks and (vi) place attachment and identity. Cantle's understanding of social cohesion was undoubtedly influenced by the disorder in northern towns and cities that led to the commissioning of his report. Writing at the same time as Cantle, the Local Government Association defined a cohesive community as one possessing four key characteristics: (i) common vision and a sense of belonging; (ii) positive value for people's diverse backgrounds and circumstances; (iii) similar life opportunities amongst those from different backgrounds; and (iv) strong and positive relationships developing between those from different backgrounds, in workplaces, schools and neighbourhoods (LGA, 2002). The Cantle Review of 2001, the 2007 Commission on Integration and Cohesion (Darra Singh Review) and Local Government Association guidance, led to many local authorities in the period 2001-2010 adopting similar definitions.

More recently, the British Academy undertook a programme of work on social cohesion. Drawing from a wide range of research, it identities eight features of social cohesion. These are: (i) sense of belonging; (ii) homogeneity of values; (iii) attitudes and regard for diversity; (iv) participation or collaboration; (v) rules and institutions which rely on consensus; (vi) wealth/income equality; (vii) equal access to resources; and (viii) personal and collective autonomy (Baylis et al, 2019).

In contrast, Calderdale Council, in its new cohesion strategy, gives a narrative definition of cohesion. This policy document was published after an extensive public engagement exercise, which sought people's views about the type of community they wanted Calderdale to become.

> *"Social cohesion is where diversity is valued and positive interactions between people of all kinds are enjoyed. It is a vital part of what makes communities feel strong and safe. It happens when people from different backgrounds meet, mix and get along.*
>
> *"The work of cohesion and integration is about having living, working and social spaces where difference is welcomed and celebrated. It is about creating a place where empathy and curiosity about people 'not like me' is encouraged. When this happens, we can move beyond 'us' and 'them' towards kindness, trust and social cohesion between groups of people."* (Calderdale Council, 2025).

The 2024 Khan Review approached social cohesion from the perspective of pluralism. Unlike the Cantle and the Darra Singh Reviews, Dame Sara Khan places less emphasis on equality of opportunity. Instead her review sees cohesion in terms of how society navigates difference, stating that it is a process that encompasses *"how we live well together in a diverse democracy and how we peacefully navigate disagreements for the common good, despite the differences among us."* The Review states that cohesion does not mean consensus or conformity.

The Khan Review also focuses on social relationships in its definition of cohesion, drawing on Putnam's writing on social capital (see above) and the work of Chan *et al* (2006) and Bottoni (2018). Both Chan *et al* and Bottoni state that relationships in a cohesive community exist at micro-, meso- and macro levels and comprise subjective and objective conditions as set out in Figure 1.1 below.

Figure 1.1: A multi-level model of cohesion

Levels	Subjective conditions	Objective measurements
Micro level	Interpersonal trust Sense of social support	Density of bonding relationships Levels of reciprocity
Meso level	Openness to outgroups e.g. perceptions that people of different backgrounds get on well together.	Density of bridging relationships
Macro level	Institutional trust, e.g. people's trust in the Government, police, judicial system	Density of linking relationships between individuals and institutions Political legitimacy, e.g. election turnout, uptake of British citizenship

Despite many definitions and a lack of conceptual clarity, there is some consensus on the nature of community cohesion. It can be seen as a social glue or the 'ties that bind', involving social inclusion, mutual trust, social solidarity and the peaceful negotiation of difference. It is both a process and a condition or outcome. It is felt locally in communities, but also at a national level, through shared and inclusive national identities. Shared views of Britishness and shared English and other national identities ensure that everyone feels they belong and has a stake in society. Community cohesion is about people and their social relationships, but is also about places.

There are also some conditions that are rarely included in local authority definitions of cohesion, specifically perceptions of 'fairness'. In-group perceptions that they are being treated unfairly in relation to the outgroup can lead to societal divisions. The legitimacy of government and authorities such as the police and judiciary partly depends on public perceptions that they will be treated fairly. Perceptions of having a voice in processes that allocate resources can dissipate grievances towards outgroups (Hildreth et al, 2014)

The absence of 'fairness' in understandings of community cohesion is surprising given that at least 23 local authorities have run fairness commissions in the last 15 years. The extent of public involvement in these commissions varied considerably (Lyall, 2015). There is also a body of research that examines the impacts of perceptions of distributive justice (outcome fairness) and procedural justice (fairness of processes where outcomes are already allocated) on perceptions of out-groups (Lind and Tyler, 1988, Stephan and Stephan, 2000; Urbanska et al, 2019).

Criticisms of community strength and cohesion as policy and practice objectives

Notions of community strength and cohesion are not without their critics. Community strength, with its emphasis on shared values and mutual aid, could be seen as reinforcing existing social structures and traditions, rather than transforming them.

Asset-based approaches are also not the only models of community development. ***Pluralist models of community development*** aim to include different interest groups in decision-making and promote participation, collaboration, dialogue and power-sharing to address community needs. This model of community development places an emphasis on increasing linking social capital. Some of the participatory budgeting initiatives undertaken by local authorities are examples of pluralist community development projects (Gilman, 2016). ***Transformative community development*** is a more radical approach which aims to empower communities to take collective action to improve their lives, tackling the root

causes of social ills of communities (Alinsky 1972; Chambers, 1983; Freire, 2000; Gilchrist and Taylor, 2011; Twelvetrees and Todd, 2024). This approach to community development has inspired the community organising of CitizensUK as well as some place-based projects in deprived communities.

Community cohesion also has its detractors, some of which relate its lack of conceptual clarity and difficulties measuring it. Flint and Robinson (2008) describe cohesion as "*an empty vessel into which a variety of concerns are poured and rearticulated."* Rutter and Carter (2018) argue that cohesion is also a term that is rarely used or understood by the public. This presents a challenge to politicians who need to communicate to the public their responses to challenges such as the summer 2024 riots. It is notable that 'community cohesion' is rarely used by policymakers in Northern Ireland. Instead, 'good relations' is the preferred term, written into the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and subsequent policy documents (see, for example, Northern Ireland Assembly 2022; OFMDFM, 2005). 'Good relations' is a condition that is communicable and widely understood by the public in Northern Ireland. It has also proved to be broad enough to be used to cover inter-ethnic relations and not just relationships between Loyalist and Nationalist communities (Rutter, 2015).

Critics of community cohesion – as a policy aim – argue that it downplays the need to address structural inequalities and racism (Runnymede Trust, 2025). Some studies also suggest that there is a 'dark side' to social cohesion (Wallman, 2011; Young Foundation, 2019). Riley (2019) challenges the idea that a strong civil society sector increases democratic resilience. Instead he argues that authoritarian, fascist and populist regimes depend on a well-organised and strong civil society sector.

The audit of local authority policies (see Part Three) shows that community cohesion is largely framed as a process or policy priority that largely relates to ethnically diverse areas, rather than a process or condition that applies to all areas. Community cohesion is also sometimes a term that is used interchangeably with integration, although there are differences between the two terms. ***Integration*** is a process that ensures that newcomers to an area and longer-settled residents live well together and can be seen as a component of community cohesion (Broadhead, 2021). Integration and social cohesion policy, and a stronger articulation of shared values, became objectives of the Government's wider counter-terrorism strategy after the 2005 London bombings (HM Government, 2008). Critics of both cohesion policy and the Prevent programme have argued that both unfairly target Muslim communities and thus reinforce stereotypes and prejudices towards out-groups (Husband and Alam, 2011). Related to this, the framing of community cohesion by some local authorities has focused on minority communities, rather than making cohesion an 'everybody' issue (see Part Three).

Opposition to the terms 'cohesion' and 'integration' have led to some local authorities and civil society organisations using the term 'inclusion' as an alternative. ***Inclusion*** can be seen as creating an environment where people feel valued and respected (Thompson, 2017). Inclusion as a policy goal is often incorporated into broader 'Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) polices. Inclusion goes beyond diversity (having a mix of people) and equality (ensuring fair treatment) by actively fostering a culture of belonging where differences are respected and barriers to participation are removed. Inclusion could be seen as one aspect of community cohesion.

The above criticisms of 'cohesion' raise two issues. First, organisations such as Belong and British Future argue that community cohesion needs to be framed as an 'everywhere and everybody' condition that is relevant to all parts of the UK, while acknowledging that different areas have different cohesion challenges. Second, community cohesion policies and programmes need to be seen as legitimate by minority ethnic and faith communities (Belong et al, 2024).

It should be noted that the audit of local authority strategies shows greater numbers of councils now undertaking stakeholder and public consultation before developing integration and community cohesion strategies. In some cases, particular care is being taken to involve minority ethnic groups in pre-consultation and development stages of these strategies, in an attempt to increase support for such work and to defuse criticisms.

A systems model

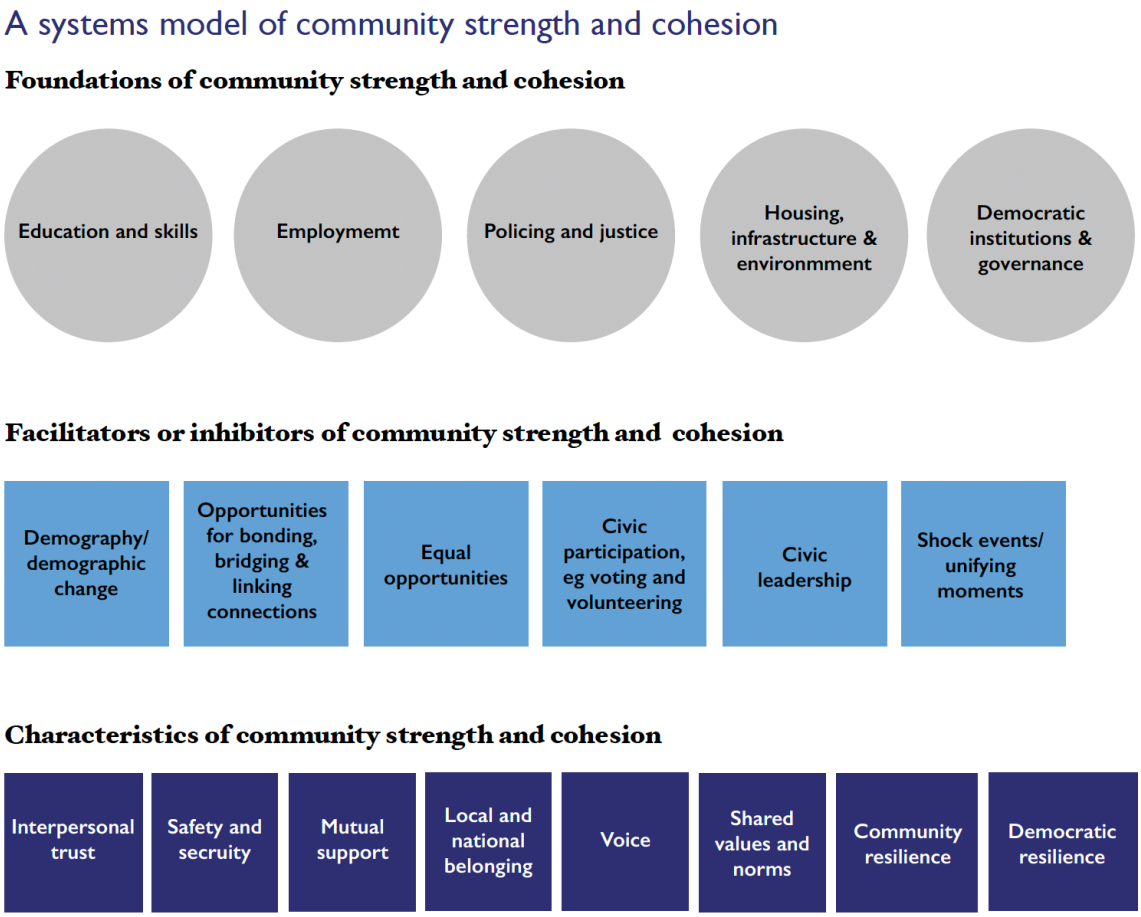
Some of the above criticisms of community strength and cohesion are addressed in systems models that take into account economic and structural factors that drive or inhibit community cohesion. Such systems models can also provide clarity for policy makers, as well as linking community strength and cohesion as concepts. The Home Office has adopted a systems model for migrant integration, drawing on the work of Ager and Strang (Ager and Strang, 2004; Home Office, 2019).

One such community and cohesion systems model was set out by British Future in the Talk Together Report (British Future, 2021). Talk Together involved nearly 160,000 people in conversations about what brought people together and what divided them during the COVID19 pandemic and while the UK Government was withdrawing from the EU. An amended community and cohesion systems model, which drew from Talk Together, is set out in Figure 2 below.

Community strength and cohesion is underpinned by a number of economic, structural and democratic foundations, as set out in Figure 2. Workplaces, schools and colleges are places where people meet and mix with others, forming the social connections that drive social cohesion. The layout of the built environment, and access to parks, cafes and leisure centres, also impact on people's ability to connect with each other. Such spaces are community assets that facilitate both conditions. Worklessness, poverty, discrimination and inequality can often undermine social cohesion. Democratic institutions and systems of governance are another foundation, as they underpin civic participation and give people a voice.

Community strength and cohesion can be boosted by the presence of factors that act as 'facilitators' or inhibitors as shown in Figure 2 below. These factors include demographic change, bonding, bridging and linking connections, equality and civic participation. These are discussed in detail in Part Two of the literature review.

Figure 1.2:



- **Interpersonal trust:** This is the confidence that people have in each other to act with honesty, fairness and goodwill. Interpersonal and neighbourhood trust grows over time through positive bonding and bridging social interactions. It further strengthens these social connections and helps to increase social resilience and fear of outgroups (Rotenberg, 2018; Shorthouse et al, 2010).
- **Safety and security:** This is how safe people feel and how secure they feel in their life circumstances. Where people feel safe and secure, they are more likely to trust others (Nguni and Bacon, 2010).
- **Mutual support:** This is the emotional and practical support people provide for each other and the feeling that if a person needs help there are people who are there for them. Mutual support enhances wellbeing and creates a culture of giving and receiving, reinforcing a sense of belonging. Communities with high levels of mutual support are more resilient in the face of crisis (Johnson et al, 2023; Oakley, 2024).
- **Local and national belonging:** This refers to people's inclusion, attachment and identification with their local community and the country as a whole, and whether they feel they have a stake in their local area and wider society. National belonging is shaped by shared experiences, collective narratives, as well as linking social relationships (see above) and the rights and responsibilities of British citizenship.
- **Voice:** This is where people feel that their needs are understood and their views and concerns are heard and valued by their peers and by government and local institutions. Where people have a voice, they have agency and the power to influence decisions (Gilchrist and Taylor, 2022; Twelvetrees and Todd).

- **Shared values and norms of behaviour.** These include tolerance, respect for the rule of law and acknowledging different viewpoints while maintaining mutual respect (Hewlett *et al,* 2023; Tanner *et al*, 2022).
- **Community resilience:** This is the ability of people and communities to adapt to shock events and change, i.e. resilience, and to avoid differences turning into division and conflict (Oakley, 2024).
- **Democratic resilience:** This is the ability of the democratic system to withstand and adapt to challenges while upholding its core principles and fair processes. Current challenges include online disinformation and misinformation, falling trust in democratic institutions, falling voter turnout and online threats and harassment (Khan, 2024). These threats to democracy are discussed in greater detail in Section Two.

Measuring How Well We Live Together

The 2024 Khan Review into Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience calls for a national cohesion assessment framework to enable the measurement of cohesion. Designing interventions to strengthen community relationships and cohesion requires that policymakers and practitioners have measurement tools to (i) identify challenges (ii) prioritise communities or places where interventions should be targeted and (iii) understand the impacts of programmes of work. However, there are some major shortcomings in the quantitative evidence base on community strength and cohesion.

This chapter looks at how community strength and cohesion might be measured. It starts by reviewing sources of data, looking at shortcomings and gaps. It then looks at how policymakers use this data, arguing there are five different ways of approaching this task. The chapter concludes by discussing some of the options for a better quantitative evidence base on community strength and cohesion that the Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion may wish to consider.

Sources of data

There are many quantitative datasets that have the potential to throw light on community strength and cohesion, providing measurements of the drivers of thriving communities. These are summarised below.

- The Census, which provides data on a range of factors that can impact on community strength and cohesion.
- National surveys with Accredited Official Statistics, for example, the Annual Population Survey/Labour Force Survey, the Community Life Survey, the ONS Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, and the National Survey for Wales.
- Surveys undertaken by universities and independent research institutes. Of particular relevance are the longitudinal Understanding Society survey, the British Social Attitudes Survey and the British Election Survey.
- Local surveys conducted by public bodies, for example local policing and crime surveys, and residents surveys.
- National administrative datasets, for example crimes reported to the police and the National Pupil dataset.
- Local administrative datasets from public bodies, which include tension monitoring data, and administrative data collected on users of local public services. Much local administrative data remains unanalysed, yet it has the potential to yield useful information from the perspective of community strength and cohesion. Furthermore, not all local authorities and Community Safety Partnerships undertake consistent and

robust tension monitoring, despite the existence of toolkits to help them do this (IcoCo, 2010, Eadson et al, 2011).
- Data generated from the evaluations of programmes of work to strengthen community relationships and boost cohesion (Hesketh et al, 2024).

Understanding Society and the Community Life Survey are the surveys that provides the most comprehensive assessment of community strength and cohesion in England (see Table 3.1). Understanding Society provides the fullest assessment of community strength and cohesion and includes variables that relate to democratic resilience. Chicago Neighborhood Social Cohesion Scale and an amended version of Buckner's Neighborhood Cohesion Instrument have been incorporated into some of the waves of this longitudinal survey. However, few researchers have analysed this survey from the perspective of community strength and resilience.

The Community Life Survey, with a core sample of 10,500 adults, covers people's social interactions, perceptions of their neighbourhoods, civil participation, charitable giving and well-being. However, community relations and cohesion tend to be experienced at a very local as well as at a national level. Many national surveys, including the Community Life Survey, do not have a sufficiently large sample size to generate ward-level or even local authority level statistics (Rutter, 2015). The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, which leads the Community Life Survey, is currently looking at merging this survey with its larger Participation Survey. If this move goes ahead, the new survey is likely to have an annual sample size of at least 175,000 respondents, enabling local authority area statistics on community strength and cohesion to be generated.

Table 1.3 :Surveys most relevant to community strength and cohesion

Survey	Sample size	Coverage	Gaps	Local authority level data
Understanding Society – UK Household Longitudinal Study	100,000 adults in 40,000 households	UK	Online behaviour, receptiveness to misinformation The survey does not cover migrants who arrived after 2009	For some variables
Community Life Survey	10,500 core with 2,000 ethnic minority boost	England	Variables that relate to democratic resilience	No
National Survey for Wales	10,000	Wales	Limited numbers of questions and gaps in relation to democratic resilience and shared values	Yes
Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey	1,400	Northern Ireland	A large and comprehensive range of questions on community strength and cohesion. It forms part of the Good Relations Indicators which have been published annually since 2015.	No
Scottish Household Survey	3,000	Scotland	A very limited range of questions on community strength and cohesion	No

Approaches to using quantitative data

The large array of data summarised above is used in different ways by policymakers and practitioners. These different user approaches are summarised in Table 3.2 below.

Table 1.4: Approaches to measuring community strength and cohesion

Approach	Description	Examples
Baskets of indicators	A compilation of separate datasets, covering drivers of cohesion and/or the conditions that comprise cohesion	Northern Ireland Good Relations Indicators MHCLG Outcomes for Integrated Communities (2019) Mayor of London's social integration indicators (2018) Home Office Indicators of Integration (2019)
Index	A composite metric that aggregates a number of individual indicators into a single or a small number of values.	Thriving Places Index Carnegie Life in the UK Index
Bespoke survey	A single survey covering the conditions that comprise cohesion	Community Life Survey (England) Scanlon Foundation Australian Cohesion Index Survey (2023) Buckner's Neighbourhood Cohesion Instrument (1988)
Cohesion modules in larger surveys	A module covering questions that relate to cohesion is included as part of a larger survey	Cohesion modules included in Understanding Society, the National Survey for Wales, the Scottish Household Survey and the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey
Live monitoring	Live monitoring of local administrative data, often to highlight rising tensions	A number of police forces or local community safety partnerships undertake tension monitoring

Baskets-of-Indicators-based approaches

A number of public bodies have compiled 'baskets of indicators' that throw light on cohesion, or related conditions such as social integration. Notable examples include the Northern Ireland Good Relations Indicators, MHCLG's Outcomes for Integrated Communities, the Home Office's Indicators of Integration (2019) and the Mayor of London's indicators of social integration. In theory, these baskets of indicators aim to help central and local government to identify priority areas for intervention. They are also meant to help local authorities recognise locations where they need to take action.

There are, however, shortcomings in baskets-of-indicators approaches to measuring community strength and cohesion. First, some indicators may be more important than others in driving or impeding cohesion, so changes over time can be difficult to interpret. Second, from a local authority or practitioner perspective, the complexity of some baskets-of-indicators approaches makes them difficult to use: the Home Office Indicators of Integration

comprises 172 different indicators, some of which have a tangential association with integration. Third, some of the survey data may be two or three years old and may not accurately reflect current conditions or the impact of shock events within the local authority. And fourth, not all the baskets of indicators cover local authority or ward-level data.

Indices

A community strength and cohesion index addresses the complexity of baskets of indicators. Such an index is a multi-dimensional measurement tool that aggregates and synthesises many different individual indicators into a smaller set of values. This helps to make a large number of quantitative datasets more accessible to local policymakers and practitioners. The Life in the UK Index, the Social Fabric Index and the Thriving Places Index are three examples of indices relevant to community strength and cohesion. Outside the UK, the Australian Cohesion Index, published every two years by the Scanlon Foundation, is drawn from indicators that derive from a bespoke attitudinal survey alongside objective indicators from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other sources (Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2023).

Oversimplification is the main disadvantage of a social cohesion index. A local authority level community strength cohesion index also risks reducing complex realities into a small set of scores. However, index scores can be accompanied by written commentary, which can provide a more nuanced account of community strength and cohesion. Further disadvantages of indices are 'cancelation effects' where a 'good' score for one indicator is cancelled out by a 'bad' score in another indicator, or extreme scores which skew the overall index score. The impact of cancelation effects and skew can, however, be reduced when the indicator data is normalised – putting all the indicator data in the same scale – and weighted to attribute greater importance to indicators that have the most bearing on social cohesion.

Bespoke surveys

A fourth approach that can be used to measure community strength and social cohesion is bespoke surveys. The Community Life Survey comes closest to a bespoke survey on cohesion. However, this survey, covering England, does not include questions on democratic resilience (Kantar Public, 2023). Buckner's Neighborhood Cohesion Instrument and the shorter Chicago Neighborhood Cohesion Scale are two survey questionnaires developed in the United States to provide assessments of community cohesion at a local level. Both instruments have been used by local government in North America, enabling areas to be compared and changes over time to be measured. Again, neither survey instrument includes questions on democratic resilience. In the UK it would be possible for central government to develop its own Community and Cohesion Index, which could be incorporated into any replacement of the Community Life Survey, but also used by local authorities that may wish to monitor trends at a local level.

Live reporting

Police forces undertake real-time analysis of local administrative data such as crimes reported to the police. Some local community safety partnerships have worked with the police to put in place tension monitoring schemes that draw from quantitative administrative data. However, the audit of local authority policy undertaken as part of this evidence review suggests fewer than one in five local authorities conduct regular tension monitoring. Furthermore, as the 2024 Khan Review argues, local tension monitoring does not usually take social media activity into account. Belong, British Future and the Together Coalition are among the organisations that have called for live tension monitoring to be a standard local authority and police practice, including social media monitoring (Belong et al, 2024).

Community strength and cohesion: current trends

- **Social isolation:** Some 26% of people reported feeling lonely some of the time or often in 2023-2024 (Community Life Survey, 2023-2024). While this proportion has been relatively constant in recent years, disabled people, LGBT people, the long-term unemployed and some minority ethnic groups are more likely to report that they often or always feel lonely.

- **Bonding social contact**: Some 69% of people chatted to their neighbours at least once a month, more than to say hello, in 2023-2024. People who live in private rental accommodation (52%) and 16–24-year-olds, were the groups least likely to speak to their neighbours regularly (Community Life Survey, 2023-2024).

- **Bridging social contact:** Some 37% of people reported that all their friends were from the same ethnic group, in the 2021-2022 Community Life Survey. In the same year, 22% had friends who were all from the same religious group, 20% had friends only from the same age group, and 22% only had friends with similar educational backgrounds.

- **Civic participation:** There has been a decline in formal volunteering in recent years, with 16% of people offering their time to formally constituted organisations in 2023-24, compared with 35% in 2013-14 (Community Life Survey, 2023-2024). Voter turnout is another indicator of civil participation and underpins democratic resilience: general election turnout has declined since 1997 and stood at 59.7% in the 2024 general election, falling below 50% in 55 parliamentary constituencies.

- **Linking social contact:** Some 14% of people have contacted an official such as a councillor or MP in the last 12 months. Four in ten people (41%) have taken part in some kind of civic participation, activism or consultation over the last 12 months, but there are big geographic variations in involvement in these activities (Community Life Survey, 2023-2024).

- **Inter-personal trust** Only 41% of people feel that many people in their neighbourhood can be trusted. Young people aged 16-24 (25%), gays and lesbians (31%), and minority ethnic groups and Muslims (25%) are least likely to say that many people in their neighbourhood can be trusted (Community Life Survey 2023-2024).

- **Belonging:** Some 84% of people feel fairly or strongly that they belong to Britain, including 85% of those of Asian ethnicity and 86% from Black ethnic groups. Some 63% of people feel they belong to their neighbourhood (Community Life Survey 2023-2024). Neighbourhood belonging is lower among young people and people in private rental accommodation.

- **Political trust:** The 2024 British Social Attitudes Survey showed a record high of 45% of adults now saying they ‘almost never’ trust governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party, up by 22 percentage points from 2020 during the height of the pandemic. Some 58% of people now say they ‘almost never’ trust politicians of any party to ‘tell the truth when they are in a tight corner’, also a record high.

- **Hate crime:** There were 140,561 hate crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2024, a fall of 5% compared with the year ending March 2023. Race-based hate crimes are the most common and accounted for

98,799 offences. Religious-based hate crimes have seen a 25% rise from the previous year, from 8,370 to 10,484 reported offences (Home Office, *Hate crime, England and Wales, year ending March 2024,* October 2024).

Foundations of community strength and cohesion: current trends

- **Income and poverty**: In 2024, one in five people (21%) lived in relative low income after housing costs were taken into account (Households Below Average Income statistics, 2024). The annual Carnegie Life in the UK Survey showed 14% of people can't afford to keep their home warm and 11% can't afford to socialise with friends or family outside of the home once a month if desired.

- **Unemployment:** Some 13.4% of young people aged 16 to 24 were not in education, employment, or training (NEET) between October and December 2024, the highest level since 2013 (ONS, *Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: February 2025).* The employment rate of some ethnic minority groups is significantly below average (House of Commons Library, 2004).

- **Skills:** The 2021 Census found that more than one million people in England and Wales could not speak English well or at all. Some 18% of adults in England have low literacy skills (OECD Survey of Adults Skills 2023). People with poor literacy are more likely to be unemployed and more likely to believe damaging or divisive fake news, and less likely to vote or to volunteer in their communities.

- **Housing**: A snapshot on 30 September 2024 found that 126,040 homeless households in England were in temporary accommodation, an increase of 15.7% from 30 September 2023. (*MHCLG: Statutory homelessness in England: July to September 2024,* February 2025).

- **Policing:** Despite rising between 2006 and 2016, trust in the police has fallen in recent years. Some 79% of people reported they had overall confidence in the police in the 2016 Crime Survey of England and Wales, falling to 68% in 2023.

Conclusions

The UK Government currently has no official or working articulation of community strength and cohesion that has been set out in any of its recent policy documents. This has meant that these conditions lack conceptual clarity. There is also a risk that community development and cohesion can be framed as policy priorities that largely relate to deprived or ethnically diverse areas respectively.

The absence of a clear definition of community strength and cohesion has also meant that there is no consistent measurement tool. Understanding Society is currently the survey that provides the closest assessment of community strength and cohesion across the four nations of the UK. However, its sample size means that it cannot be used to generate local authority level data for all its variables. There is a clear need for a consistent measurement tool of sufficient sample size that could be used by local authorities and their partners. This could take the form of a bespoke survey or scale, or an agreed basket of indicators.
in the UK.

PART TWO: BARRIERS TO STRONG AND COHESIVE COMMUNITIES

There is an extensive literature that examines the many barriers and threats to community strength and cohesion. These studies highlight a wide range of inter-related economic, structural. socio-demographic and political challenges that have negative impacts on community strength and cohesion. This section summarises these factors and looks at:

- Economic and structural barriers to community strength and cohesion: income and poverty, employment, skills, housing tenure and the built environment.
- Social fragmentation and disconnection.
- Prejudice.
- Social segregation.
- Affective and issue-based polarisation.
- Population change: internal and international migration.
- Integration.
- Peripherality.
- Contested views of nation.
- The move to an online world .
- Declining democratic resilience.
- Crime and policing.
- Extremism.
- New challenges to community cohesion.

Inter-group conflicts and out-group prejudice lie at the roots of many the current challenges and barriers to cohesion. Tensions and inter-group conflicts can often be worsened by poverty and inequality, individualism and social isolation, failures to meet people's basic needs and insufficient democratic resilience.

Economic and structural barriers to community strength and cohesion

Income and poverty: In 2022-2023, 14.3 million people in the UK (21% of the population) lived in relative poverty after housing costs were taken into account, meaning their equivalised household income was below 60% of the median in that year. The UK also has one of the highest levels of income inequality – as measured by the Gini coefficient - among developed countries, ranking 7th most unequal out of 38 OECD countries in 2023 (Francis-Devine, 2024).

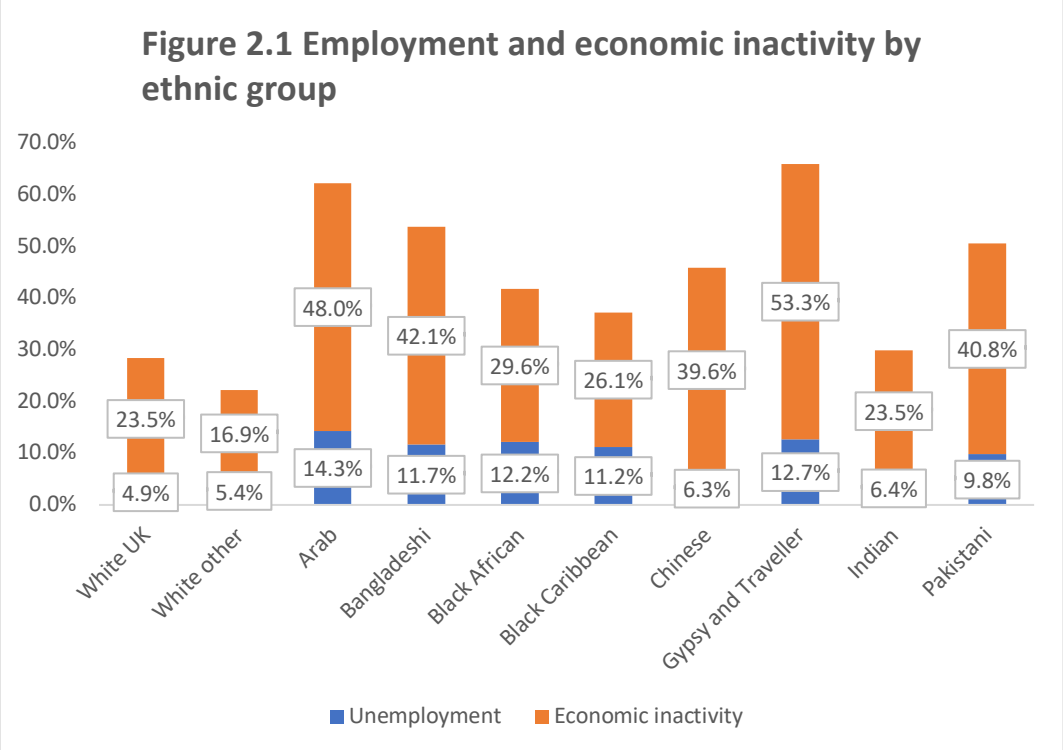
Both poverty and income inequality have a significant impact on community strength and cohesion. The 2023-2024 Community Life Survey showed that just 20% of people who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods (bottom Index of Multiple Deprivation decile) feel that many people who live in their neighbourhood can be trusted, compared with 60% of people who live in the 10% least deprived neighbourhoods.

Financial hardship can prevent people from going out and taking part in the activities that bring people from different backgrounds together. Poverty and inequality can also increase people's views that society is unfair, damaging their trust in democratic institutions (Carnegie UK, 2024). It can also increase grievances against out-groups in relation to perceptions about unfair access to public goods and services. In the face of an ongoing cost of living crisis, the Dame Sara Khan review (2024) stated "*There is a risk that where our poorest feel*

left behind, some become increasingly disillusioned with a democratic system which they feel is not supporting them".

Employment: The systems model outlined in Section One places work as one of the foundations that underpin strong and cohesive communities. Workplaces are also one of the most important places where adults mix and meet with people from different backgrounds to themselves. The Social Integration Commission (2019) and a Neighbourly Lab study argued that workplaces can have a positive impact on bonding and bridging social links, as well as trust and belonging. This is driven by a shared identity developed by working for the same employer, shared goals through working on the same projects, official policies which establish boundaries for behaviour, and relationships independent of work hierarchies through open-plan offices and social activities (Harris et al, 2025). Workplaces are often more diverse than other places where we interact with others, such as neighbourhoods. These benefits do not accrue to people who are not in work. Unemployment and economic inactivity are barriers to a connected and cohesive society and in some areas and among some socio-demographic groups high proportions of the working age population are not in employment.

The Annual Population Survey suggests that 13.4% of young people aged 16 to 24 were not in education, employment, or training (NEET) between October and December 2024. Figure 2.1 below shows Census 2021 data on unemployment and economic inactivity rates for selected ethnic minority groups. Bangladeshi and Pakistani minority ethnic groups and people who have come to the UK as asylum-seekers are more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive that the white British population, although some recent labour migrants have higher rates of employment than the white British (Fernandez-Reino and Brindle, 2024).



Communication skills: These underpin a connected and cohesive society, enabling people from different ethnic groups to speak to each other, resolve conflicts and make informed choices. Income and employment inequalities can be widened where people lack communication skills. Census 2021 showed 1,041,000 people in England could not speak English well or at all in England and Wales, with their numbers including asylum-seekers, refugees and people who came to the UK to join family members. Asylum-seekers and people deemed to have no recourse to public funds are unable to study English on a concessionary fee rate in England and Northern Ireland.

The 2023 OECD Survey of Adults Skills suggested that 18% of adults in England had low literacy skills. People with poor literacy are more likely to be unemployed and more likely to believe damaging or divisive fake news, and less likely to vote or to volunteer in their communities. Some 3% of the adult population in the UK are internet non-users, either because they cannot afford or cannot access the required technology and infrastructure (primary digital exclusion), or because they lack the skills to navigate the online world (secondary digital exclusion) (Ofcom, 2024). A further 10% of adults (5.3 million people) are limited internet users, facing barriers which restrict their engagement with online life on a day-to-day basis, for example through poor skills or having to share devices with other family members (Good Things Foundation data). Digital exclusion often goes hand-in-hand with poor literacy skills or a lack of fluency in English.

The built environment and housing tenure: The places where people live and the features of the built environment in our neighbourhoods can have an impact on community strength and cohesion. There has been a considerable debate about residential segregation in the UK by race and faith, which is discussed below. There is a body of research that shows that configuration of the built environment can impact also on social mixing and people's attachment to their place of residence. There is a strong body of research that shows that certain features discourage social connection (Create Streets, 2020). Housing developments more than seven storeys high, or public space that lacks greenery, is litter-strewn or feels unsafe, are less conducive to social mixing (Holland et al, 2007).

Bonding, bridging and linking social connections tend to be less dense in high-churn neighbourhoods where many people move in and out each year. High-churn neighbourhoods usually have high proportions of private rental accommodation, and often large student or migrant worker populations. Evidence from Australia and the United States links local population churn with lower levels of inter-personal trust, but there are no comparable studies in the UK (O'Donnell, 2024; Putnam, 2007). *Public housing* tenants also express lower levels of *interpersonal trust,* even after controlling for socio-demographic factors.

Social fragmentation and disconnection

There is evidence to suggest that over time, bonding connections have weakened in many urban communities. As a society, people in the UK are less likely to live near extended family that they did 100 years ago, although recently there has been a small rise in intergenerational households . Some urban neighbours, particularly in large cities, are experiencing high levels of social fragmentation. This is being driven by a rise in single person households, private renters and population churn in urban areas (Grigoroglou et al, 2019). Socially fragmented neighbourhoods tend to experience lower levels of mutual support and inter-personal trust.

Trends in social fragmentation are seen alongside increased individualisation of our social lives and the time we spend by ourselves at home, thus weakening bonding and bridging connections. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, an estimated 12% of UK workers had worked

at least one day from home in the previous week, with 5% reporting that they work mainly from home. The proportions of those working from home increased during the pandemic and today still remains higher than pre-pandemic levels. The 2024 ONS Opinions and Lifestyle Survey showed 28% of UK workers following a hybrid work pattern and 13% mostly working from home. A meta-study undertaken by the Advanced Workplace Institute (2020) found conflict impacts of home and hybrid working on social relationships and cohesion. On one hand, home and hybrid working reduce face-to-face bonding and bridging relationships in the workplace, leading to less collaboration and trust. Conversely, those who work mostly from home may forge stronger support networks with their colleagues or in their local community.

Lifestyle changes alongside concerns about child safety mean that children and young people spend more time indoors and online. A OnePoll survey for Save the Children conducted in 2022 suggested that 27% of children said they regularly play outside their homes, compared to 71% of the baby boomer generation. Among adults, many of the institutions that brought people together outside the home no longer have such an influence or large membership. As factories closed, so did many of the working men's clubs, trade union branches and chapels, and with them the bonding and bridging networks in the UK's industrial towns and cities. Recent research from the funder Power to Change (2025) has examined the impact on political trust of membership of associational organisations such as social clubs, faith organisations and unions. People who are members of an associational organisation are more likely to report they are satisfied with democratic institutions. Membership of such organisations can provide the linking social relations that enable people to connect to politics.

Over the last five years, rising living costs have also reduced some people's social activity. A Sutton Trust survey in 2023 found that 47% of students had stopped or reduced going out socially with friends to save money on rent and bills. The demise of the local pub symbolises the loss of this common space. While overall turnover has been relatively stable since 2008, 14,000 pubs closed between 2008 and 2018 (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Prejudice

Prejudice undermines community cohesion by fostering mistrust between social groups, contributing to social isolation and marginalisation. When people feel they are treated unfairly, it can weaken their sense of belonging. Prejudiced attitudes can lead to discrimination and also provide the 'oxygen' of tacit support for hate crime.

Prejudice towards ethnic and religious minorities and LGBT people was once common in British society. But in recent years UK society has become more accepting of ethnic and faith differences, over time and across generations, with significant (though uneven) falls in levels of prejudice towards out-groups. Polling undertaken by Ipsos in 2020 showed 89% of people stating they would be happy for their child to marry someone from another ethnic group. Some 93% of people disagreed with the statement that 'to be truly British you have to be White' (Ipsos, 2020). Over the past decade, the proportion of people who believe that immigration "enriches cultural life" in Britain has roughly doubled (26% in 2011 to 48% in 2021) (Hewlett et al, 2023).

But prejudiced attitudes are still held by significant minorities in society, in respect to ethnicity, faith, sexuality, as well as age. Older people and those without higher level qualifications are more likely to be less comfortable with their children marrying someone from a minority group.

Prejudice can provide the societal consent for hate crime. There is no national survey that measures prejudice, so it is difficult to analyse year-on-year trends. Instead, ad hoc surveys and administrative data have to be used (Hewlett, 2023). A recent trend is a large rise in antisemitism since October 2023: the Community Security Trust (CST) recorded 3,528 antisemitic incidents in the UK in 2024, the second-highest total ever reported to CST in a single calendar year. Tell Mama, the organisation that supports those impacted by anti-Muslim hatred, verified 5,837 incidents of anti-Muslim prejudice and hatred in 2024, a 165% increased compared with 2022 (Tell Mama, 2025).

While prejudice towards minority ethnic groups is well-documented, Gypsies and Travellers have sometimes been overlooked. A report from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) published in 2018 showed that more people expressed negative feelings towards Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (44%) that any other group, double that towards Muslims (22%) and transgender people (16%) (EHRC, 2018).

Social segregation

As previously noted, inter-group social contact has the capacity to reduce out-group prejudice and perceptions of threat of an out-group, while generating empathy and shared, 'more in common' identities. This bridging contact can take place in different spaces and places. Previously, the Community Life Survey (then the Citizenship Survey) included questions on sites of meaningful inter-group contact, a theme that was also explored by the Social Integration Commission (2019). Shops, workplaces and educational institutions are the most common sites of inter-group contact. The 2008 Citizenship Survey also highlighted the importance of interest groups and of volunteering organisations in bridging social contact.

Residential, workplace and educational segregation means that opportunities for bridging social contact are unevenly spread across the UK. Social segregation was a major theme of the 2010 Cantle review, which described residents of many northern towns leading separate lives. The 2007 Commission on Integration and Social Cohesion (Darra Singh review) and the 2016 Casey review also focused significantly on social segregation, arguing it was a major barrier to community cohesion in the UK. Current trends are discussed below.

Residential segregation

Where people live impacts on their opportunities for bridging social contact. High levels of residential segregation can lead to neighbourhoods being associated with an in-group, leading to feelings of exclusion for those who feel they do not belong. The biggest divide in housing is created by differences in income and wealth, although in England wealth-based residential segregation receives limited attention from policymakers (Dorling, 2014). The impacts of residential segregation by ethnicity and faith were examined in the Cantle, Singh and Casey reviews. This trend also received media coverage in articles about 'white flight' and 'ghettoes', most notably Trevor Phillips in 2005 who suggested the UK is "*sleepwalking into segregation*" (Phillips, 2005).

Research on residential segregation can be contested and there are different ways it can be measured. However, an analysis of census data over a 30-year period shows that the residential segregation of all ethnic groups is declining in England. More neighbourhoods are ethnically diverse, and diversity has been increasing in most localities. Places labelled as 'minority-majority' tend to be ethnically diverse, home to people from many different ethnic groups (Catney et al, 2023).

While residential segregation is declining, some minority ethnic groups tend to be more clustered than others. The availability of private rental housing impacts on where new

migrants tend to settle, with ethnic and national communities later clustering in and around these neighbourhoods. Populations that cluster together tend to be those that depend on each other for work or social support (Phillips, 1998; Sumption, 2009). Experiences of discrimination and racism can impact on where minority ethnic communities choose to live. Since local housing markets are difficult to change in the short and medium term, reducing migrants' experiences of exclusion and racism, and increasing their independence and integration, may be the most effective way to reduce residential segregation.

Residential segregation in Northern Ireland, between nationalist and unionist communities, offers limited opportunities for bridging connections across sectarian divides. There are long-standing residential divisions across Northern Ireland as a whole, caused by the Plantation of Ulster, population displacement, urbanisation and emigration. Residential segregation in urban areas increased during the Troubles (1968-1998) and was symbolically reinforced by the physical presence of 'peace walls' that divided communities. Segregation is most pronounced in urban Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, and in social housing. There is some evidence to show that segregation has decreased a little since 2001, although Shuttleworth and Lloyd (2016) argue that this has been partly driven by Roman Catholic immigrants from EU states settling in predominantly Protestant wards. The Northern Ireland Executive, in partnership with the Housing Executive and social landlords, has put in place programmes to reduce segregation in social housing, most recently through *Together: Building a United Community Strategy*. New social housing in being built in designated mixed neighbourhoods, each of which is required to have a good relations plan.

Educational segregation

Nurseries, schools and further and higher education are important sites for inter-group contact. However, there is significant segregation by faith and ethnicity, as well as social class, in the UK's educational institutions, although patterns of segregation are complex and often localised. Research in 2004 using the National Pupil Dataset found that levels of school segregation by ethnicity and faith were higher than for residential segregation, especially for South Asian ethnic groups (Burgess et al, 2004) . The 2016 Casey Review later reported Church of England and Catholic schools as having proportions of White, Black and Asian pupils that were close to the local average. Muslim, Hindu and Sikh schools were less likely to be representative of their local area, although sometimes draw pupils from a wider catchment area (Casey, 2016; The Challenge et al, 2017). Some 34% of English state schools have faith-based admissions criteria (Manzoni and Rolfe, 2019. The role of faith schools in reducing or increasing inter-group social contact received particular attention in the 2016 Casey Review and the Government's 2018 Integrated Communities Green Paper.

There is marked educational segregation in schools in Northern Ireland, where children from the Roman Catholic Nationalist community are largely educated in different institutions to those from the Protestant Unionist community. Although the number of integrated nurseries and schools has increased in recent years, data from the 2022-23 School Census showed that just 7% of children attended integrated settings. Of children who attended integrated schools and nurseries in that academic year, 34% were identified as Roman Catholic, 35% as Protestant and 31% 'other', which includes children from other faiths and none, and mixed marriages. While integrated education only reaches a small minority or children, more Northern Ireland schools are now taking part in the Shared Education programme. This encourages the social mixing of school children across sectarian divides through joint outings, field trips and cross-community educational projects (Loader, 2022).

There is also evidence to show ethnic segregation in early years' provision, at least in London. Using the National Pupil Dataset, Harding and Hardy (2016) found that 83% of Bangladeshi children and 64% of Pakistani children who received early education attended a nursery run by a school or local authority. This compared with 43% of white British children and 39% of Black Caribbean children, with both groups much more likely to attend private or

not-for-profit sector nurseries, which are more likely to offer childcare outside of school hours and term times. Working patterns may be a major factor in some ethnic groups having much higher levels of maternal employment than others.

Within universities there is substantial ethnic and class segregation in some areas of study in Great Britain, particularly in the performing and visual arts, medicine and dentistry and veterinary sciences (Gamsu and Donnelly, 2017). However, further education colleges can be important sites for inter-group contact. In Northern Ireland, going to university may be the first opportunity for many young people to get to learn with someone from a different politico-religious community. (Nelson et al, 2003)

Segregation by social class is also a complex issue. Arguably, it does not receive sufficient attention from policy makers. Schools serving high proportions of children from low-income households often face concentrations of disadvantage. Using free school meal uptake as a proxy measure of social class, new research from the Sutton Trust showed that secondary school attainment is lower in areas of high segregation by social class (Cullinane, 2024). Areas with grammar schools and faith schools in England – particularly Roman Catholic faith – schools tend to have higher levels of educational segregation by social class.

Workplace segregation
Among adults, the workplace can be an important site of positive inter-group social contact. The Social Integration Commission (2019) found that British people have more positive interactions with others who are different from them in the workplace than in their social lives. It argued that shared professional identities, shared goals and workplace norms of behaviour and workplace social activities all contributed to positive inter-group contract. Bridging contact in workplaces has been shown to have a greater impact on reducing prejudice than interactions in a neighbourhood context.

Fernandez-Reino and Brindle (2024) provide a comprehensive analysis of migrants' labour market positions. This shows a clustering of migrants in hospitality, distribution and IT. There was a clustering of non-EU migrants in social care – a sector where there are many opportunities for inter-group contact. Foreign-born workers were more likely to work night shifts and in non-permanent jobs than the UK-born, which may limit inter-group social contact. Zwysen and Demireva (2020) showed that migrants from visible ethnic minority communities were clustered in low-paid sectors, while white migrants tend to have better pay outcomes.

Affective and issue-based polarisation

Society has always been made up of people who have different sets of values and beliefs. These may relate to views on how the government should manage the economy, which place us on the left, centre or right of the political spectrum. Social values divide people who sit at different points in the social liberal-social conservative spectrum. Social liberals tend to put greater emphasis on qualities such as individual rights and care for the vulnerable, while social conservatives tend to put greater emphasis on qualities such as group loyalty and respect for authority and tradition. Differences in these social values are manifest when considering issues such as Brexit, immigration, race and empire, transgender rights and free speech. These issues have become the focus for identity conflicts between social liberals and social conservatives in the UK, which in some cases have led to affective as well as issue-based polarisation.

Affective polarisation is when individuals begin to see themselves as members of a value-based in-group and begin to dislike and distrust the 'opposite side' irrespective of their views on matters of policy (Duffy et al, 2019). Issue-based polarisation is where a divide is formed

around a particular policy issue, for example, the UK's membership of the European Union or transgender rights.

Polarisation presents challenges to community strength and cohesion in a number of ways. It can lead to values-based segregation, particularly in employment, as people choose to work and spend time with their political 'tribe'. Polarisation can reduce the space for constructive dialogue. In more extreme circumstances, affective polarisation can lead to inter-group conflict (Goldsworthy et al, 2021).

The **echo chamber effect** on social media can reinforce polarisation. Algorithmic personalisation prioritises the content that people see. Alternative views are filtered out and people tend to follow accounts that hold similar views (Krasodomski-Jones, 2016; Terren and Borge-Bravo 2021). This process is particularly relevant in relation to identity-based 'culture wars' issues such as free speech, 'woke' versus 'anti-woke', race, immigration, gender identity, net zero policies and preservation of rural communities. Debates about race, decolonisation and identity politics have been particularly divisive on social media (Katwala, 2023).

However, a number of UK studies have questioned the extent of real-world polarisation on so called 'culture war' issues. Benson and Duffy (2021) argue that that the UK population can be segmented into four groups in relation to their views on 'culture wars' issues. These groups are the disengaged (18% of adults), moderates (32%), progressives (23%) and traditionalists (26%). The UK has not seen the issue-based and affective polarisation of countries such as the United States, or indeed Hungary and France. Britain's Choice, a large-scale study of public values and attitudes by More in Common, shows that a large majority of people of all backgrounds agree that climate change and inequality are important issues for everyone (Juan-Torres et al, 2020). Nevertheless, there is some evidence of a recent increase in issue-based and affective polarisation in the UK, set out below:

1. There is evidence of values-based polarisation by geography, discussed below, where social liberals and social conservatives are decreasingly likely to live and work with each other (British Future, 2021; Furlong and Jennings, 2024; Jennings and Stoker, 2016).
2. England and Wales have seen significant political realignment, where the main political parties have ceased to represent people with a diverse range of social identities. Such a situation incentivises politicians to use narratives or enact policies that appeal to their base, increasing political polarisation (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).
3. High-salience, binary identity conflicts that require a person to be 'for' or 'against' an issue have increased affective polarisation, in particular, the 2014 Scottish Independence campaign and the 2016 EU referendum campaign (Duffy et al, 2019). The legacies of the Scottish and EU referendum on community cohesion are discussed later in this section.
4. The UK has become more polarised along party political lines when it comes to people's positions on immigration. In the Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker, a longitudinal survey of 3,000 people, some 81% of Reform supporters and 72% of Conservative supporters wanted immigration levels to be reduced, compared with 43% of Labour supporters and 43% of people who support the Liberal Democrats. The same survey shows left-right political polarisation on the impacts of immigration and sympathy for channel migrants (British Future, 2024).
5. The conflict *in Northern Ireland* is an example of a more localised polarisation. Since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, and despite Brexit, there is evidence that affective polarisation has slightly declined, as evidenced by public opinion data (Whiting and Bauchowitz, 2022).

A number of studies have examined the **legacy of the EU referendum** on social and political polarisation (Duffy et al, 2019; Evans and Schaffner, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020; Surridge, 2019). Essentially a social identity conflict that was a long time in the making, the Brexit debate has increased affective polarisation in the UK and has had wider impacts on community cohesion. There was a documented spike in hate crime in the months after the EU referendum. Home Office analysis showed 80,393 hate crime offences recorded by the police in England and Wales in 2016-17, up from 62,518 in 2015-16. The Home Office suggested that this rise "reflects both a genuine rise in hate crime around the time of the EU referendum and is also due to ongoing improvements in crime recording by the police" (Home Office, 2017). EU migrants reported feeling unwelcome, with many feeling anxious about their future right to remain in the UK (Sigona et al, 2022). By strengthening people's social identities, the EU referendum created new in-groups and out-groups, not just in respect to Leavers and Remainers, but also as people who saw themselves as Europeans or EU citizens (Hobolt *et al,* 2018; Sigona *et al*, 2022). Existing social identities were also deepened, particularly those that related to age and geography.

At the end of 2020, group identities as Leavers or Remainers were strongly and persistently held by an estimated 25% of people (British Future, 2021). Hobolt *et al* (2018) and Sobolewska and Ford (2020) have examined what these identity conflicts mean in everyday life, showing that people attached positive descriptions as 'intelligent', 'open-minded and 'tolerant' to their own side, while describing their opponents as 'selfish' or intolerant' (Hobolt et al, 2018). By 2023, British Future found a small majority of people (59%) wanting a less heated debate on the UK-EU relationships (Rolfe and Puddle, 2023).

Talk Together, a national conversation on community and cohesion conducted by British Future in 2020, warns of the future risk of **values-based polarisation** by geography (British Future, 2021). Values-based polarisation by geography reduces opportunities for bridging social contact across political and identity divides. Population change brought about by deindustrialisation and the expansion of higher education has led to increasing values-based polarisation by geography. Younger and more socially liberal graduates have become clustered in the UK's biggest cities, while our towns and smaller cities have populations which tend to be older and more socially conservative. In their seminal paper, the political scientists Jennings and Gerry Stoker write about 'Two Englands': one that is *"global in outlook, relatively positive about the EU, pro-immigration, comfortable with more rights and respect for women, ethnic communities and gays and lesbians and generally future-oriented*," and another England that is "*inward looking,*[and] *relatively negative about the EU and immigration*". Values-based polarisation by geography is also explored by Sobolewska and Ford (2020) and Goodhart (2017) who writes about the clustering of 'anywheres' (social liberals) and 'somewheres' (social conservatives) in different parts of the UK.

Internal migration and the ability to work from home may slow or reduce values-based polarisation by geography in the future. Britain's suburbs, in particular, have become diverse, in terms of age, class, ethnicity and politics (Lomax and Stillwell, 2017).

A number of UK commentators have argued for greater action to address affective and issues-based polarisation, including those that relate to geography. These writers include the charity leader Jon Yates, whose book *Fractured* calls for a recovery of the 'common good', which he defines as the shared interests, values and experiences that bring people together across lines of polarisation (Yates, 2021). Sunder Katwala (2023) makes the case for 'inclusive patriotism' to defuse the 'culture wars' that lead to polarisation.

Demographic change: gentrification

Gentrification, while helping to halt neighbourhood decline, can be associated with cohesion challenges through inter-group tensions and grievances. There may be increased competition for public goods such as school places; longer-settled families may also be priced out of the housing market (Almeida, 2021). Gentrification can also increase inequalities and disrupt existing social networks (Lees et al, 2008). The identity of an area can change in ways that are less inclusive. The changes brought about by gentrification can be gradual or more rapid, often as a result of local planning decisions, urban regeneration projects or new housing developments. There are numerous UK examples of communities using fears of gentrification to mobilise against new housing developments. Such campaigns can bring communities together, though studies suggest that rapid gentrification may be more likely to result in inter-group conflict. Interventions such as community engagement and dialogue are rarely used in the UK to address concerns over gentrification, although there are examples outside the UK of such work (Bernstein and Isaac, 2021).

Demographic change: international migration

Where integration does not take place, or where population change is very rapid, international migration can be a challenge to community cohesion.

The Annual Population Survey suggests that 16% of the population of England and Wales, in the year to June 2024, was born overseas. Ten years previously, 13.7% of the population of England and Wales was born abroad. Net migration into the UK – the number of people entering the UK minus the number leaving – has been the highest it has ever been in 2023 and 2024 and was estimated at 728,000 in the year to June 2024. This recent increase in immigration is a consequence of rising student and work visa migration, increases in the numbers of asylum-seekers and the impact of resettlement schemes covering Ukraine and Hong Kong.

Increased numbers, particularly in relation to channel boat arrivals, has driven up the salience of immigration as an issue of public concern. In January 2025, the Ipsos Issues Index put immigration in the public's top three most important issues facing the country. This is not the first time in the UK's recent history that immigration has been highly salient. Asylum was a high-profile issue in the period from 1994 until 2004, after which it was displaced by public concerns about migration from the EU (Rutter, 2015).

There are many UK studies that explore the local impacts of international migration on community strength and cohesion (See, for example, Andrews, 2015; Ehsan and Mansfield 2024; Hesketh *et al,* 2021; Hickman et al, 2012; Mort and Morris, 2020; Muir, 2008; Phillimore and Pemberton, 2018; Rutter and Carter, 2018; Saggar *et al,* 2012; Wessendorf, 2022). This writing sits alongside a large international literature on the relationship between immigration and community strength and cohesion, including Robert Putnam's seminal *E pluribus unum* (Putnam, 2007). A number of conclusions can be drawn from this literature:

- There is no clear and direct relationship between immigration and social cohesion. Rather, the characteristics of migrants themselves, and the people, institutions and characteristics of the area to which they move, have a bearing on social cohesion.
- Immigration is more likely to lead to inter-group conflict in deprived areas (Sturgis et al, 2013).
- Areas which have seen rapid population change are more likely to experience inter-group conflict and cohesion challenges, particularly if the area is deprived or had little previous history of immigration. Cohesion challenges may arise as a result of

competition for resources, such as housing and healthcare, threat perceptions about out-groups, and failures to encourage meaningful social and economic integration.

- Mosaic neighbourhoods of high ethnic diversity are associated with lower levels of trust, particularly if an area is 'super-diverse'. In the past, migrants to the UK tended to come from a small number of countries and were more homogenous than today in relation to their background. Today, in parts of urban Britain, many different ethnic and national groups live side-by-side and are diverse in terms of their national, ethnic and class backgrounds, residency status and length of time in the UK. Super-diverse neighbourhoods are often those with low densities of bonding and bridging links, and low levels of trust and civic participation, although deprivation and housing tenure have a bearing these relationships (Phillimore and Pemberton, 2018; Putnam, 2007; Shorthouse et al, 2019.
- Temporary migration is less conducive to community cohesion (Hesketh et al, 2021).
- Asylum-seekers have been the focus of public concerns in some dispersal areas. These concerns centre on pressures on public services and housing, personal and public safety, the validity of their claim for asylum and the inability of the government to enforce border controls (Rutter and Carter, 2018).
- There is no UK research that has specifically looked at the impacts of irregular migration on community cohesion, although potentially this type of migration could contribute to inter-group conflict and perceptions of threat. Estimations of the numbers of irregular migrants in the UK vary considerably.

Uneven migrant social integration

Rutter and Carter (2018) write that "immigration is a national issue seen by the public through a local lens" of social and economic integration. Failures of local integration in the form of migrant unemployment and social segregation reduce opportunities for bridging social contact, and the formation of shared identities that can diffuse stereotypes and prejudice.

There is a large literature on migrant integration, of relevance to UK community and cohesion policy and practice. As well as policy-focused studies such as the Commission on the Integration of Refugees (2024), this extensive literature comprises quantitative, qualitive and mixed methodology research (See, for example, Cheung and Phillimore, 2013; Cook et al 2011; Donato and Ferris, 2020; Platts-Fowler and Robinson, 2015; Rutter, 2015). Academic literature is dominated by studies of refugee integration, with far fewer studies on those who come to work in the UK, or migrate for family reasons. A number of key themes can be drawn from this literature:

- Migrants do not always experience integration as a smooth, linear process, but rather a journey that involves ups and down. Migrants and refugees can be integrated in one domain of their lives, for example their workplace, but less integrated in other sites of social interaction such as their local neighbourhood, a condition described as 'bumpy integration' (Gans, 1992).
- Schools and colleges are important sites for bridging social contact for migrant children. Cross-cultural friendships formed between children in schools can have positive impacts on wider community cohesion. Such bridging connections can shift social norms and challenge stereotypes among parents (Kendall et al, 2024).
- Among adults, workplaces are key sites of meaningful bridging social contact between migrants and longstanding residents (Commission on the Integration of Refugees, 2024). This workplace-based social contact has wider cohesion impacts in local communities through a process of indirect bridging and contextual social

contact described in Section One. Conversely, labour market segregation and migrant unemployment limit social integration and wider community cohesion.

- Bonding and bridging social connections, alongside a secure immigration status and English language fluency, are associated with higher rates of employment among migrants and refugees (Cheung and Phillimore, 2013).
- Refugees face specific barriers to employment, which include lack of fluency in English, long periods of unemployment while they wait for refugee status, little prior UK work experience, poor physical and mental health and limited labour market knowledge (Kone et al, 2019). Annual Population Survey data from 2023 suggests that the employment rate for people who came to the UK as refugees was 51%, compared with 75% for the overall population. Census 2021 data for England and Wales found that 46% of the working-age Afghanistan-born population was employed. Among Sudan-born people this figure was 39% and for those born in Somalia it was 47%.
- There are many thousands of migrants in the UK who have limited meaningful social contact with local residents and experience high rates of social and economic exclusion. They include irregular migrants, those waiting for an asylum decision and those newly granted refugee status who have yet to find employment (Hynes, 2011, Sigona and Hughes, 2012). At the end of June 2024 there were 87,217 asylum applications awaiting an initial decision from the Home Office. Figures released by the Ministry of Justice in March 2024 showed a backlog of 41,987 asylum appeals cases.

It can be seen that employment is a significant facilitator of migrant and refugee integration, yet refugees experience higher rates of unemployment and economic inactivity than the overall population. In turn, this reduces opportunities for bridging social contact. Programmes focussed on the integration of migrants and refugees are examined in Section Three.

Peripherality

Peripherality might be defined as being on the margins – either geographically, economically, socially or politically – relative to the centre of power, resources or wealth. ‘Left behind’ is a term that has been used by policy makers. It is not just remote, rural communities that can feel peripheral. The term can be applied to some coastal towns, ex-coalfield communities, deindustrialised areas, outer-city estates and some ethnic minority enclaves.

Peripherality can impact on community and cohesion because people may feel they have no voice and that their concerns are not heard or valued, leaving them feeling marginalised or resentful of out-groups. Most peripheral areas in the UK are less ethnically diverse and physical distance and poor transport can limit social contact with out-groups. Many peripheral areas have seen the out-migration of younger people and graduates, leading to values-based polarisation by geography. More positively, peripheral communities can be close-knit, with high levels of self-help, strong bonding connections and a shared identity.

There is a significant literature that looks at peripherality, mostly from the perspective of political realignment or regeneration. Many peripheral communities have seen considerable political realignment, voting to leave the EU in 2016 and also switching support from Labour to the Conservatives. Sobolewska and Ford (2020) look at the reasons for this realignment, while Payne (2021) provides a journalist’s interpretation of the factors that led to traditionally Labour ‘Red Wall; seats switching sides politically. In 2024, many Red Wall seats saw a large swing to Reform UK, which increased further in the 2025 local government elections.

There is also a large academic literature on peripherality from the perspective of community development and regeneration. (See, for example, Abreu and Jones, 2021; Telford, 2023; Wenham, 2020). Local Trust has published quantitative analysis of the factors associated with peripherality and identifies 206 electoral wards at particular risk of being 'left behind'. It identifies low levels of civil participation, lack of access to services and a weaker civil infrastructure as risk factors (Local Trust, 2019).

Peripherality is a key theme that runs through the Government's 2022 Levelling Up White Paper. This argues that peripheral areas lack some of the 'capitals' that are needed to thrive. These capitals are:

- Physical capital (housing, transport, digital and industrial infrastructure.
- Financial capital (investment).
- Human capital (workforce skills).
- Intangible capital (innovation, patents).
- Social capital (social relationships, interpersonal trust).
- Institutional capital (public services, governance and the rule of law).

The 2022 Levelling Up White paper marked a shift in government thinking as it argues that community strength and cohesion as prerequisites for regeneration.

Contested views of national identity and the nation

Section One suggests that cohesion is a condition that is felt nationally as well as at a local level, through a shared sense of national identity. In *How to Be a Patriot*, Katwala (2023) describes national identity as common values and democratic principles, symbols and cultural references that contribute to people having a sense of national and local belonging. Language – English or English and Welsh in Wales – is also a component of national identity.

The system model set out in Section One shows that shared national belonging and shared identity are key components of cohesion. A shared identity builds trust between different social groups, reducing inter-group conflict. If people believe they share common values and cultural references, they may feel they have a stronger stake in local communities, fostering solidarity, mutual support and pro-social behaviour. A shared national identity strengthens the social contract between citizens and the state (House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement, 2018).

There is a degree of societal consensus about the nature of shared national values. An evidence review commissioned by the 2024 Dame Sara Khan review found that the majority of people in have a clear commitment to the value of tolerance, reflecting a growing liberalisation of social attitudes towards minority groups (Hewlett, et al, 2023). Fairness and equality are also seen as core values by a majority of people (Morgan and Taylor, 2019). Research by More in Common in 2020 showed 73% of people in Britain believing inequality to be a serious or very serious problem (Juan-Torres et al, 2020).

In a pluralistic society, people's views on what comprises national identity differ. People may put greater weight on some elements of national identity that others. Britishness, for example, may be viewed differently or felt more intensely by different social groups and in different locations. The public's sense of national identity is not static, as can be seen by shifting views on Britishness and Englishness in particular.

Many people in the UK have over-lapping, dual or multiple national identities, with much of this complexity relating to the constitution of the United Kingdom as a union of four nations.

Moreno scales can be used to measure the nature and strength of national and sub-national identities. Census 2021 (undertaken in England and Wales) required respondents to choose an option that best reflected their national identity, with findings reflecting huge shifts in how we see ourselves. In 2021, some 54.8% of people saw themselves as 'British only' up from 19.1% in 2011. Some 14.9% saw themselves as 'English only', down from 57.7% in 2011.

Northern Ireland

National identity is a particularly complex question in Northern Ireland where, alongside religious and political affiliation, it is a marker of group identity. The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey shows increased secularisation in Northern Ireland, particularly among those previously affiliated to Presbyterian and other free churches. The proportion of people identifying as neither Unionist nor Nationalist rose from 33% in 1998 to 50% in 2018, but has since fallen back to 37%. Data on national identity given in Table 4.2 show a fall in people who identify as British, or have an 'Ulster' identity, with an increase in those with a Northern Irish and Irish identity.

These findings, supported by other studies, suggest significant changes in the manifestation of national identity in Northern Ireland. 'Third way' and non-aligned national identities are emerging in post-conflict Northern Ireland, with stronger affiliation with a Northern Irish identity and rejection of bi-partisan politics (Hayward and McManus, 2019).

Secularisation and the rejection of bi-partisan politics has been strongest among middle class Protestant and Unionist communities. Catholic, Nationalist and Irish identities have proved to be more resilient. While fewer people attend Sunday mass, the GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) now plays a significant role in bolstering a confident sense of Irish and Nationalist identity in ways that are seen as progressive, future-facing and attractive to younger people (Cronin, 1996). These shifts have left many in working-class Protestant neighbourhoods feeling their identities are less valued and their way of life is under siege. In such circumstances, paramilitarism, paramilitary symbols, parades and bonfires are a means of showing confidence, defiance, and control, in a context where people might otherwise feel powerless or marginalised (Graham, 2004). White (2013) argues that "*challenging extant conceptions of identity comprise part of a protracted transition to a more peaceful Northern Ireland"*.

Figure 2.2: Trends in religious, political and national identity in Northern Ireland

Identity marker	**1998**	**2018**	**2023**
No religion	9%	17%	26%
Catholic	38%	39%	34%
Church of Ireland/ Anglican/ Episcopal	15%	15%	10%
Presbyterian and other free churches	29%	21%	19%
Unionist	40%	26%	30%
Nationalist	25%	21%	28%
Neither	33%	50%	37%
British	41%	35%	26%
Irish	27%	28%	31%
Northern Irish	23%	25%	32%
Ulster	6%	2%	2%
Other	2%	9%	8%

Sources: Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys, 1998, 2018 and 2023.

Threats to community cohesion
While shared national identity acts as a social 'glue', not everyone who lives in the UK holds British citizenship or feels British. Some expressions of national identity risk deepening divisions and reinforce boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. Independence movements in Scotland and Wales and persistent tensions in Northern Ireland have the potential to pose a threat to community cohesion.

Exclusionary citizenship policies
The last 25 years have seen high levels of immigration, as people move to the UK to work, study, join family or seek asylum. The Costa Review of Citizenship Policy (2020) argues that in this context, the social bond of British citizenship assumes greater importance, "*providing a shared identity and a social glue in an increasingly diverse society"*.

Home Office statistics show that there were 202,041 grants of British citizenship in 2023, 15% more than in 2022. But the bond that British citizenship provides, and its positive impact on community and cohesion, will not be realised if British citizenship is out of reach for many who migrate to the UK. Currently, the fees for British citizenship are the highest of all OECD countries. In April 2025, naturalisation cost £1,605 per applicant, with a fee of £50 for a citizenship test and £130 for the citizenship ceremony. Unless they are covered by the EU Settlement Scheme, most people applying for British citizenship have to have been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain, which costs £3,029 per applicant.

New changes to Home Office good character guidance introduced in February 2025 will also make it harder for people who entered the UK illegally, or who arrived through irregular routes, to be granted British citizenship. This change will apply to people granted refugee status because of their well-founded fear of persecution, leaving them without a pathway to citizenship. Census 2021 showed 9.7% of the population of England and Wales having a 'non-UK' identity only, up from 8% in 2011. This number may increase if citizenship becomes unaffordable or inaccessible.

Nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales
In Scotland there has been a small increase in the proportion of people with a 'Scottish only' identity from 62.4% of people aged over 3 years in 2011, to 65.5% in 2022. There has also been an increase in people stating a 'British only' identity in Scotland, from 8.4% of people in 2011 to 13.9% of people in 2022, but a fall those with a 'Scottish and British identity' (18.3% in 2011 to 8.2% in 2022). This suggests some national identity polarisation in Scotland in the context of an active independence campaign and the 2014 independence referendum.

Debates about Scottish independence have a long history. The Scottish National Party (SNP) was formed in 1934, but struggled for support until the 1970s, when it won 11 parliamentary seats in the October 1974 general election.

The 1997 general election saw Labour elected with a manifesto commitment for a Scottish Parliament with devolved powers. A 1997 referendum found 74% of voters supporting the creation of a Scottish Parliament, with 63% supporting it having tax-raising powers. The opening of the Scottish Parliament gave momentum to the independence movement, giving people a taste of self-rule while exposing some of the shortcomings of independence. The Scottish Parliament also gave a platform for the SNP to create a distinctively Scottish civic rather than ethnic nationalism (Mitchell, 2014).

In 2007, the SNP emerged as the largest party in the Scottish Parliament, with 47 of 129 seats. Sobolewska and Ford (2020) argue that his electoral success was the outcome the SNP's appeal to both those on the progressive left and to social conservatives. The SNP mobilised social conservatives by framing the English and the Conservative party as threatening out-groups (Brand et al, 1994). In 2011, the SNP won an overall majority in the

Scottish Parliament with 69 seats, which enabled the SNP successfully to argue for a referendum on Scottish independence which was held in September 2014. The 'No' side won with 55.3% of people rejecting independence, on a high turnout of 84.6%.

The 2014 independence referendum had many impacts on community cohesion. It was the first campaign where positions were debated online, differing from the 1979 and 1997 referendums in this respect (Buchanan, 2016). The binary nature of the referendum created divides in families, among friends and neighbours and in workplaces, described in research such as *Talk Together* in 2020-21. As well as personal accounts, a survey conducted for this research showed 60% of people were worried about divisions associated with different views on independence (British Future, 2021). Anticipating division, a number of projects were set up in 2012-2014 to encourage dialogue and civil political debate. Some of these initiatives could be applied more widely across the UK and learning from them is summarised in Section Three.

The referendum increased levels of political engagement, particularly among younger people, with 16- and 17-year-olds allowed to vote (Turnout in the 2015 general election stood at 71.1% in Scotland compared with 65.9% in England). It also politicised Scottish identity, with this process further strengthened in 2016 after EU referendum, when 62% of Scottish voters chose Remain. The SNP saw a surge in support and won 56 of the 59 Scottish seats in the 2015 general election. Although the rawness of the 2014 referendum has healed, underlying tensions remain and surface from time to time. Scottish social media remains polarised when it comes to politics (Henderson et al, 2022). The SNP experienced a setback in the 2024 general election, but polling still finds that 40-50% of the public supports Scottish independence[1].

In **Wales** some 55.2% of people identified with a 'Welsh only' identity in the 2021 Census. This represents a slight decrease from 57.5% in 2011 and may be partly due to international and internal migration into Wales. Some 8.1% of people in Wales identify as Welsh and British, up from 7.1% in 2011. There has also been an increase in people in Wales who see themselves as 'British only', from 16.9% in 2011 to 18.5% in 2021.

Welsh nationalism has taken a different path to Scotland, with the public showing ambivalence on constitutional issues but strong support for maintaining the Welsh language and culture (Aull Davies et al 2006; Price, 2010). Recent YouGov polling shows 92% of Welsh adults approving of attempts to expand the language's usage, with 63% of those who cannot speak Welsh also being supportive[2]. Overall 72% of adults believe it is important for children to learn the Welsh language, although there are party political divides among people's views. Of those who vote for left-of-centre parties, 95% of Plaid Cymru voters and 80% of Labour voters believe it is important for children to learn Welsh, compared with 54% of Conservative and 54% of Reform voters.

Plaid Cymru was founded in 1925 to campaign for Welsh independence and to safeguard the culture, traditions and language of Wales. However, the party has never won more than 15% of the vote in a general election. A number of small nationalist paramilitary groups carried out arson and bombings in the period 1979-1992, though they received little public support. Recent Labour governments have supported devolution, but just 50.3% of people voted in favour of a Welsh Assembly in 1997. A further vote in 2011 on extending the powers of the then Welsh Assembly saw 63% of people vote in favour, albeit on a turnout of 35%.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_on_Scottish_independence
[2] https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/51587-should-use-of-the-welsh-language-be-promoted-more-in-wales

Recent polling shows support for Welsh independence at about 30%, with this figure increasing since the Covid-19 pandemic[3]. However, support for the unionist Reform UK is also growing in Wales, with opinion polls suggesting that the party's support in Wales now matches that of Labour and Plaid Cymru[4]. This suggests growing political polarisation.

Wyn-Jones and Larner (2020) argue that greater recent support for independence or devolution in Wales has been built on the existence of a strong, distinct and increasingly inclusive sense of Welsh cultural identity. Measures such as the Welsh Language Act 2011, the Welsh Language Standards, the promotion of Welsh-medium education and funding of the Eisteddfod have been used to bolster and in-group identity and co-opt support for greater devolution or independence. At the same time, Welsh Government policies have supported a more inclusive and civic Welshness. While the Welsh language remains central to national identity, its promotion has shifted toward inclusion rather than exclusion. Policies are framed around bilingualism to encourage non-native speakers, including ethnic minorities, to learn Welsh, rather than using the Welsh language as a gatekeeper to Welsh identity. The new school curriculum for Wales includes histories of minority ethnic communities as a core part of learning about Welsh history and identity. Arts organisations and the Eisteddfod have played a role in helping to build an inclusive Welsh identity.

The crisis in English identity

A number of writers argue that a crisis in English identity is driving a rise in populism, in ways that have similarities with the marginalism of traditional Loyalist identities in Northern Ireland (Henderson and Wyn-Jones, 2021). Traditional markers of English identity – the monarchy, Remembrance, manufacturing industry, church and chapel – no longer unite people as they did in the past, leaving a sense of cultural dislocation (Kenny and Sheldon, 2017). Unlike Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there is no English parliament. While devolution has strengthened inclusive and confident Scottish and Welsh identities, Katwala (2023) suggests that Englishness is still associated with "grievance politics." The absence of a confident, positive and inclusive English identity has been a significant driver of the rise in populism in England. Voters who felt marginalised or that their identity was under threat opted for Brexit in 2016 as a means of cultural and political reassertion of the English identity (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

Northern Ireland

Violent inter-group conflict cost the lives of 3,500 people between 1968 and 1998, of whom 1,935 were civilians. Legacies of the Troubles include continued residential segregation, 'peace walls', unresolved murders, intergenerational trauma, mistrust for authorities, competing narratives about the past and polarised and sectarian politics (Dawson, 2010). Cultural symbols, parades and bonfires continue to reinforce divisions.

There remains a serious and persistent threat to cohesion from residual terrorist groups in Northern Ireland. The frequency of these terrorist incidents has declined since 2010, but the period 1 August 2022 to 31 July 2023 saw 40 bombings and shootings carried out by these residual groups, resulting in one death and 29 casualties (Breen Smyth, 2024). Some 18% of respondents in the 2023 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey said paramilitary groups created fear and intimidation in their area. These groups lack popular support and a coherent political agenda. As well intimidating those who challenge their control, residual terrorist groups are linked to organised crime, including drug dealing, fuel laundering, illegal money lending, human trafficking and sexual exploitation (House of Commons Northern Ireland Committee, 2023). In its 2023 report, the Independent Reporting Commission noted that almost 200 households were made homeless in 2022-23 as a result of coercive control.

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_on_Welsh_independence

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_next_Senedd_election

The constitutional settlement of the Good Friday Agreement is based on a fragile balance of power between unionist and nationalist parties. While this has enabled peace, it has also led to political deadlock and issue-based polarisation. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 provides the legal basis for a border poll – a referendum on uniting Ireland. Polling shows that support for a united Ireland is currently between 30% and 40%[5]. The legacy of the Brexit vote and demographic change in Northern Ireland makes a border poll highly likely at some point in the future. But a border poll has many risks. Many unionists see a border poll as a threat to their identity and way of life. It forces voters to make a binary choice, entrenching polarisation and making cross-community political cooperation more difficult. There are risks that tensions would be exploited by bad-faith actors. Experts, as well as those involved in grassroots conflict resolution, argue that planning for a border poll must include measures to address the anxieties of Unionist communities, reduce the risk of unrest and provide a clear roadmap for the process of unification (Whysall, 2019).

The move to an online world

Adults who use the internet now spent an average of 4 hours and 20 minutes online every day in the UK, according to Ofcom's 2024 Online Nation Survey – up from 3 hours and 15 minutes in 2018 (Ofcom, 2019; 2024). The internet serves many social functions, but despite the variety of potential online activities Ofcom's 2024 survey showed nearly half (48%) of the time that UK adults spend online is on services owned by Alphabet or Meta (YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram).

The impact of internet use on offline relationships
Today the internet has a major presence in most of our lives. Social media has the potential for both positive and negative impacts on community strength and cohesion. During the Covid-19 pandemic, social media was a lifeline for those forced to isolate during successive lockdowns. The use of platforms such as Facebook or WhatsApp can deepen people's connections with neighbourhood communities, although not for everyone in a locality (Ublacker et al, 2024).

There is some evidence that social media can support bridging social connections, particularly those that span economic and class divides. Evidence from research that looked at UK-based Facebook users suggested that UK social networks are less stratified by class than in the US. High income people in the UK have more high-income friends, but the poorest 50% of people in the UK still have about half (47%) of their friendships with high-income people, compared to about 39% in the US (Harris et al, 2025).

These positives are balanced, however, by evidence that social media can exacerbate social disconnection, loneliness and isolation (Hertz, 2020). Social media also lays claim to people's time and commitment over other face-to-face and communal activities.

Social media and community cohesion
There are many negatives impacts of social media on community cohesion, which were explored in detail in the 2024 Dame Sarah Khan review and in a number of research reports. It has changed the tone and nature of political discourse. The character limitations of Twitter/X do not allow for nuance. People behave differently when protected by online anonymity compared to face-to-face interaction, expressed through incivility, harassment or self-censorship. In turn, this discourages people from engaging in political debate, leading to those with the loudest and most polarising voices dominating political discourse. The 2024 Dame Sara Khan review used the term 'freedom restricting harassment' to describe

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_on_a_United_Ireland

intimidation – online and offline – that prevents people from participating in public debate or standing for public office.

As noted above, social media is a driver of issue-based polarisation. It can also amplify prejudice. Social media dynamics do not simply reflect off-line norms; they can shift public perceptions of out-groups and perceptions of boundaries of acceptable or unacceptable conduct, as the spread of the summer 2024 riots illustrated. In that instance, social media facilitated the rapid spread of misinformation and extremist content, which significantly contributed to the escalation of violence (Belong et al, 2024).

Social media amplifies misinformation, which is shared without the intent to deceive, and disinformation, which deliberately intends to manipulate or deceive. Social media also spreads conspiracy theories, which can foster mistrust between social groups or undermine confidence in democratic institutions. About a third of the UK public showed some support for conspiracy theories in a King's College Policy Institute Study (2023), with those who use social media as their primary news source being most vulnerable to believing this form of mis- or disinformation.

Support for conspiratorial beliefs has been linked to a lack of trust in the political system and disengagement from democracy. It is often associated with sections of society that feel powerless (Douglas et al, 2019). However, one of the impacts of conspiracy theories is that they further deepen distrust in democratic institutions, in a vicious circle. The Great Replacement Theory and the Great Reset are among a number of conspiracies that risk increasing anti-Muslim prejudice and antisemitism (Antisemitism Policy Trust, 2024; Community Security Trust, 2022). The 2024 Dame Sara Khan review also sets out the negative impacts of conspiracy theories on democracy. Such dis- or misinformation can undermine the integrity of elections, erode factually based debates, damage trust in democratic institutions or rally the cause of extremist or anti-democratic actors.

Addressing harmful online content

The 2024 Dame Sara Khan review describes how the UK government, as well as other actors such as councils and educators, are struggling to address harmful online content. The Online Safety Act 2023 puts a legal duty of care on platforms to remove harmful content, especially that which relates to child abuse, terrorism, self-harm, and racism. It requires that social media platforms assess and mitigate risks of harm, giving Ofcom the powers to issue non-compliance fines. The National Security and Online Information Team, based within the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, leads the UK government's response to misinformation and disinformation.

There are a number of fact-checking services that work to counter misinformation and disinformation. However, a survey for the Alan Turing Institute (2017) suggests that just 7% of the adult population use them. PHSE and citizenship education in schools usually cover media literacy and online safety. The Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools (2025) recently made recommendations on improving educational responses in these areas, through cross-curricular and whole-school approaches and more training.

Many political and civil society voices continue to put pressure on social media companies to remove harmful content. But these actions in themselves can sometimes be divisive. Contested boundaries between what is perceived as being free speech and what is prejudice have become commonplace on social media. British Future (2025) argues that greater confidence in navigating this contested boundary – in political, civic and educational settings - will be important if people are to feel that their voice is heard and valued in a democratic culture that can handle disagreements.

Declining democratic resilience

Voter turnout is an indicator of civic engagement and trust in the democratic system, and has declined since 1997. In the 2024 general election, where overall turnout stood at 59.7% of the eligible electorate, turnout fell below 50% in 55 parliamentary constituencies. The British Social Attitudes Survey (2024) showed 45% of respondents saying that they 'almost never' trust governments to act in the national interest – up 22 percentage points since 2020. In the same survey, 58% of adults believed politicians 'almost never' tell the truth in tough situations – up 19 percentage points since 2020.

Falling democratic participation and declining trust can erode the legitimacy of institutions, weaken perception of shared values and increase the appeal of extremist or non-democratic alternatives. The trends described above led the Government to commission Dame Sara Khan to include democratic resilience as an explicit theme in her 2024 review of social cohesion. The review indicated further issues of concern, which included:

- The intimidation of those standing for public office or of voters (Johnston and Davies, 2025).
- The actions of hostile state actors in influencing elections, including through misinformation and disinformation.
- The future risks of AI on the integrity of elections (Swatton et al, 2024).

Despite some initiatives to increase democratic resilience, described in Section Three, the 2024 Dame Sarah Khan review found local stakeholders often struggled to find ways to address disengagement and mistrust and increase democratic resilience.

Crime and policing

Crime and anti-social behaviour reduce community cohesion. The ONS Crime Survey of England and Wales shows that crime experienced by individuals and households has generally decreased over the last ten years, with some notable exceptions such as sexual assault. Data from the year ending June 2024 showed an estimated 9.2 million incidents of headline crime (which includes violent crime, theft, robbery, criminal damage, fraud and computer misuse). Homicide is a rare crime, but as a 'shock event' can have a high impact on community cohesion, locally or nationally.

Impact of crime on community cohesion

Crime has a range of impacts on community strength and cohesion. It erodes inter-personal trust, making people less likely to socialise or help each other. Personal experiences and fear of crime, or the negative experiences of friends and family, can discourage people from taking part in communal activities or visiting specific areas. In turn, this can reinforce patterns of social and residential segregation.

Mutual support is a component of community cohesion. In high-crime areas this weakens, as people avoid contact with others. Persistent crime may also weaken pro-social norms of behaviour and trust in institutions such as the police, particularly if policing is seen as ineffective (Anderson, 1999). Conversely, in cohesive communities with dense bonding, bridging and linking relationships, residents are able to exercise informal social control, which discourages may crimes and anti-social behaviour (Sampson et al, 1997).

Hate crime

There were 140,561 hate crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2024, a fall of 5% compared with the year ending March 2023. Race-based hate crimes are the most common and accounted for 98,799 offences. Religious hate crimes have seen a 25% rise from the previous year, from 8,370 to 10,484 offences. This has been driven by a rise in offences against Jewish and Muslim people since the beginning of the Israel-Gaza conflict. The Crime Survey for England and Wales suggests that the actual level of hate crime experienced is far higher than the number of incidents recorded by the police. Both the Dame Louise Casey (2016) and Dame Sarah Khan (2024) reviews describe how hate crimes can act as shock events, triggering wider conflict.

Fear of crime

Public perceptions about crime and policing also impact on cohesion. Duffy (2019) argues that despite significant decreases in overall crime rates, many people continued to believe that crime is increasing. Social media plays a role in driving this misconception. The Crime Survey of England and Wales found that older people, women and minority ethnic groups are more likely to fear crime.

Fear of violent crime contributes to gendered experiences of community cohesion. Personal testimonies suggest that men and women have different experiences of community and cohesion, with women having different patterns of social interaction and being more likely to report feeling lonely (Institute for Global Prosperity, 2025). Despite these gendered experiences, there is comparatively little UK research that has looked into this issue.

Differential treatment by the police

Perceptions about unfair and discriminatory policing have contributed to community tensions, online polarisation and a decline in trust in the police. Having risen between 2006 and 2016, trust in the police has fallen in recent years. Some 79% of people reported they had overall confidence in the police in the 2016 Crime Survey of England and Wales, falling to 68% in 2023. Distrust in the police can exacerbate existing tensions, particularly in diverse communities, and may be an underlying cause of unrest.

Over the last 50 years there have been numerous reports that have focused on the discriminatory treatment of black and minority ethnic people in the policing and criminal justice system, as potential suspects or victims. The 1999 Macpherson Inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence was a landmark report which used the term institutional racism to refer to the behaviour of the police. While there have been improvements in the relationships between the police and minority ethnic communities since 1999, there is still evidence of discriminatory treatment (see for example, HMICFRS, 2023). The 2023 Casey Review into the standards of behaviour in the Metropolitan Police Service described *"overt acts of homophobia, misogyny and racism by serving officers and staff in the Met"; "bias in the policing of London, including under-protection and over-policing of Black communities"*; and "*systemic failures to root out racist behaviours and address discrimination."*

The term '*two-tier policing*' is now being increasingly used to suggest that *police* are more lenient with some groups than others. This phrase has mostly been used in context of the policing of online harassment, Muslim communities, Palestine demonstrations and the treatment by the criminal justice system of those who took part in the 2024 riots.

While the police deny differential treatment, a 2024 YouGov survey showed that many adults do believe that the police are more lenient with some groups. However, there is disagreement over which groups that applies to – and whether they are being over or under-policed (YouGov, 2024). Some 51% of GB adults believe black people are treated differently by the police, compared to 28% who think they receive equal treatment. But those who think the police treat disorder by black people differently are divided on how that manifests: 29% think the police are stricter, while 22% think they are more lenient (ibid). The 2024 YouGov

polling also shows that perceptions of differential police treatment have particular resonance with those on the populist right. Some 77% of Reform UK supports believe that Muslims are treated more leniently by the police, compared with 46% of Conservatives, 29% of Liberal Democrats and 26% of Labour supporters.

Where policing fails

Local and national cases where the police fail in their duty to maintain public order and prevent and investigate crimes have the potential to impact on community cohesion. As well as damaging trust in the police, these failures can amplify perceptions of two-tier policing and stoke inter-group tensions. The Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal is probably the most well-known example of police failures that have impacted on community cohesion. An estimated 1,400 children were groomed by predominantly Pakistani-heritage men, who offered them drugs, alcohol and attention before subjecting them to sexual abuse (Jay, 2014). Despite multiple complaints, statutory services failed in their policing and child protection duties because they feared being labelled as racist or offending community leaders (Casey, 2015). Casey (2015) argues that by failing to take action, the police and council have contributed to increasing inter-group tensions in Rotherham. Political and institutional trust has fallen and the far-right have also used the scandal to rally support in the area.

As well as Rotherham, there have been prosecutions of people involved in grooming gangs in many other locations in the UK. However, the Rotherham case remains the exception in respect to the numbers of children involved and institutional failure. There have been wider impacts on community cohesion across the UK through inaccurate generalisations about Muslim communities. The Rotherham scandal has also influenced narratives about integration and multiculturalism (Rutter and Carter, 2018). Populist and far-right actors have used the Rotherham scandal to boost support by positioning themselves as voices against political correctness.

Shock events

Crime or policing failures can also act as trigger events that spark unrest. There have been three widespread periods of rioting in the UK over the last 25 years, in 2001, 2011 and 2024. There have also been many localised disturbances, including the 2017 Newham riots and the violence which broke out in Leicester in 2022, predominantly between young Muslim and Hindu men.

The most widespread riots of recent years were in 2011, following the shooting by the police of Mark Duggan. Riots took place in 66 locations across England, five people lost their lives and 205 people were injured. As well as bringing rioters to court and helping businesses and communities tackle the damage, the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition commissioned the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel to look at the causes of the riots and what could be done differently to prevent future unrest (Riots, Communities and Victims Panel, 2012). This was chaired by Darra Singh, who had also chaired the 2007 Commission on Integration and Cohesion. It reported in 2013, with recommendations mostly focusing on ways to increase personal resilience and boost pro-social behaviour through better citizenship education, extending the Family Nurse Partnership scheme for young parents and employability support (Riots, Communities and Victims Panel, 2012).

Extremism

The UK Government currently defines extremism as the "*The promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to:*

1. *Negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others;*
2. *Undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or*
3. *Intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve 1 and 2."*

The UK government's approach to addressing extremism focuses on early intervention and prevention through the Prevent strategy**,** which aims to identify and support individuals at risk of radicalisation. The number of local authorities receiving Prevent funding has been reduced. The government has appointed a Commissioner on Countering Extremism, who reports to the Home Secretary. The Commissioner, supported by his staff, currently provides advice to the government, offers training to local authorities and provides independent oversight of the Prevent programme.

Extremism has far-reaching impacts on community cohesion. It can reinforce 'us versus them' narratives, as well as reducing interpersonal trust and inter-group social relationships. One form of extremism can reinforce another, for example Islamist extremism leading to a far-right backlash. Extremism may provide tacit support for terrorism.

There is a large literature that examines extremism, including assessments made by Dame Sara Khan, who held the post of independent Commissioner on Countering Extremism (CCE) from 2018 to 2021. Far-right and Islamist extremism present the greatest cohesion challenges in terms of prevalence (Khan, 2024). The CCE has also identified other forms of extremism that are prevalent in the UK, including that associated with Hindu or Sikh nationalism, far-left extremism, misogynistic extremism, conspiracy-based extremism or that which is associated with particular causes such as animal rights. The Southport murders and a shooting in Plymouth in 2021 that killed five people have thrown a light on mixed or unclear extremisms, for example where lone actors blend conspiracy, incel and far-right themes (Roberts and Wallner, 2023). Home Office Prevent statistics from 2024 show that these mixed, instable or unclear ideologies now account for the greatest number of referrals to Prevent.

Research on extremism focuses on different themes:

1. Causes and risk factors that predispose individuals to support extremist ideologies (Pilkington, 2023). There is no single profile of an extremist. Rather, individual and peer group conditions make some people vulnerable to radicalisation. Marginalisation, a search for purpose, social networks, perceived grievances and charismatic recruiters all play a role, with online narratives amplifying risk factors.
2. Analysis of the tactics of extremist individuals and organisations (see, for example, Hamid, 2019; Lee, 2019 and publications from the campaign organisation Hope not hate).
3. Evaluations of programmes to prevent extremism, build resilience among those at risk from radicalisation, disrupt extremist actors and promote desistance and deradicalisation for those already involved in extremist networks (see Section Three).

There are gaps in knowledge, including a lack of research about the wider impacts of extremism on communities. Dame Sara Khan (2024) also notes that the research environment on extremism can be highly politicised, which presents a risk of silencing and exclusion of certain perspectives.

Conclusions

A very large body of literature on community and cohesion shows that there are many different structural, economic, demographic, social and political factors impacting community strength and cohesion. As previously noted, inter-group conflicts and out-group prejudice lie at the root of many the current challenges and barriers to cohesion. Such conflicts can be worsened by poverty and inequality, individualism and social isolation, failures to meet people's basic needs and insufficient democratic resilience.

Factors that have negative impacts on community and cohesion differ in their prevalence, salience and impact on community and cohesion. While many of these challenges and barriers described above are widespread and not limited to specific locations, some are rooted in local contexts. National policy needs to address a wide range of inter-related challenges, prioritise those which are most prevalent, salient and have the largest impact, and be flexible enough to allow local policymakers and practitioners to address conditions that are specific to their local areas.

There are some challenges to community and cohesion over which the UK government has limited direct control. These include the impact on community cohesion in the UK of non-UK conflicts, such as the Israel-Gaza and Kashmir conflicts. Here, the government's strategic response needs to focus on building community resilience to division and conflict and taking steps to defuse tensions and conflict when they occur.

While the impact of many of these factors happens over a period of time, shock events can act as a trigger, causing rising inter-group tensions or an outbreak of public disorder in localities that may be vulnerable to violence. Policy-makers need to consider how best to build societal resilience, to enable communities better to withstand trigger events..

The literature review also shows an ever-shifting range of challenges, which now include conflicts far from the borders of the UK, the malicious use of artificial intelligence and a globalised social media. The development and implementation of community and cohesion policy therefore needs to be iterative and ongoing, to address new challenges.

PART THREE: THE DELIVERY OF COMMUNITY AND COHESION PROGRAMMES ON THE GROUND

In the UK, programmes of work on community development and cohesion are undertaken by a range of different organisations in the public, not-for-profit and sometimes in the private sector. Central government and councils have convening and strategic roles, but, much grassroots work to deliver community development and cohesion programmes is undertaken by faith-based and civil society organisations.

This section looks at the delivery of community and cohesion programmes, examining the approaches that are used. It also reviews the work of central and local government. Finally, it draws on examples of policy and practice from outside the UK.

Community development and cohesion organisations: a typology

Data from charity regulators suggests there were an estimated 205,000 registered charities in the UK in 2024. It is not known how many of these organisations are working on community development and cohesion, but is likely to be many hundreds across the UK. Faith-based organisations, social landlords, educational institutions, local authorities and the police are also involved in the delivery of community and cohesion initiatives.

The activities of informally run associations can also have a bearing on community strength and cohesion, for example, informal sports clubs, reading groups or the mutual aid and neighbourhood groups that organised themselves during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic (Power to Change, 2025). The All-Party Group on Social Integration (2020) mapped 2,773 such mutual aid groups in April 2020. Roy *et al*, (2023) reports that mutual aid helped to maintain community cohesion, by increasing bonding, bridging and linking capital.

The workplace is an important location for community development and cohesion, but employers are largely absent from national or local debates about these issues. Some employers are involved in not-for-profit sector community development programmes, particularly in the delivery of employment support programmes. Workplaces are sites of inter-group contact. Successful businesses are generally those that are cohesive, in that staff tend to trust each other, collaborate and share common goals and values. Employers, including large ‘anchor’ employers, can also impact on social relationships in their local communities through their recruitment practices or involvement in civil society initiatives. The Cantle Report (2001) noted the under-representation of minority ethnic groups in some industrial sectors and concern was also raised in the Dame Louise Casey report in 2016. The Social Integration Commission (2019) and the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) examined the role of business in greater detail, with the latter proposing an integration and cohesion forum for employers to be coordinated by the CBI and the CIPD.

Some large employers are now involved in local resilience forums. Some have supported migrant integration initiatives, with the UK Ukraine Business Consortium being one example. However, there are relatively few case studies of business involvement in cohesion initiatives, or much discussion about the role that they could play in promoting community cohesion.

Typology

There are many different ways that the organisations working on community and cohesion could be categorised. They could be segmented by their target groups or the type of organisation. A more helpful categorisation, from the perspective of understanding their impact, would be to categorise organisations by the approach that they use, as set out in

Figure 3.1. below. Here, community development and community cohesion programmes are segmented by the approach that they predominantly use in their work. It should be noted that there are relatively few organisations that exclusively use one approach. For example, an inter-faith programme such as Near Neighbours aims to increase bridging social contact across faith divides, but it also delivers dialogue-based conflict resolution through its 'Real People, Honest Talk' project.

Figure 3.1 Practice approaches used in community development and cohesion projects.

Overarching approach	**Activities**
Community development	Anti-poverty and equalities initiatives targeted at individuals Asset-based community development Community ownership Community resilience programmes Community organising
Social contact programmes	Befriending Bridging Welcoming
Inclusive identity programmes	Decentring projects Inclusive identity programmes Inclusive place-making
Conflict resolution	Dialogue De-escalation Mediation Narrative change Conflict resolution Post-conflict peacebuilding Post conflict reconciliation and restorative justice
Civic participation	Community ownership Community organising Participative and deliberative policy making Volunteer promotion Voter registration and turnout promotion
Democratic resilience	Knowledge- and skills-based citizenship education Critical thinking Community organising Participative decision making Deliberation and deliberative democracy Depolarisation Voter registration and turnout promotion

Community safety, violence reduction and counter-extremism	Reporting and victim support Event and venue security Addressing anti-social behaviour Community-focused crime prevention through norm-setting, counter-stereotyping and perspective-taking Behavioural change Restorative justice Counter-narratives Community resilience
Migrant integration	Integration orientation and citizenship education programmes aimed at individuals Welcoming

Community development

Community development programmes aim to empower local people to address issues that matter to them, building stronger, more resilient communities (Gilchrist and Taylor, 2020). It comprises different types of work:

- Anti-poverty, equalities and wellbeing initiatives targeted at individuals, for example employment support.
- Asset-based community development to build on the identified strengths of communities in relation to economic assets, social capital and the organisations that bring people together.
- Community ownership, which gives people control over local assets such as buildings, land or services so they can manage them in ways that meet community needs. Community ownership has been boosted by a 'Community Right to Buy' policy, the Government's £150 million Community Ownership Fund and the work of the organisation Power to Change.
- Community resilience programmes to increase the ability of communities to withstand shock events or change.
- Community organising, which brings people together to decide on solutions to common problems and to take collective action for change. CitizensUK is the largest community organising programme in the UK.

Community development organisations tend to be located in deprived urban areas, with around 1,000 organisations in the UK that use the community development approaches described above. Most organisations work in one locality. An example of a community development organisation is the Wharton Trust, based in Hartlepool. Over more than 20 years it has helped residents access employment and training. It also organises wellbeing and healthy lifestyles programmes. It runs youth groups and has worked to improve residents' IT skills in its IT suite, and through free internet browsing. The Wharton Trust uses community organising approaches to give local residents a greater voice in decision-making. It has worked with construction apprentices to refurbish a community-owned building where it is now based[6].

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Combined authorities, National Lottery Community Fund, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust as well as local community foundations are major funders of civil society community development in the UK. Nevertheless, some organisations struggle for sustainable funding (Harris, 2018). Some

[6] www.whartontrust.org.uk

community development projects operate in isolation rather than collaborating, for example, with organisations working on community cohesion. Successful community development projects often rely on a core group of skilled and committed individuals to drive them forward in the early stages. However, not all communities have this capacity readily available (Bertotti et al, 2012a; 2012b).

Social contact programmes

Bonding social contact

Bonding social connections are those formed between people who share similar characteristics. As well as preventing loneliness and isolation, bonding social connections are associated with higher levels of mutual support and greater community resilience in times of crisis or shock events. Over the last ten years there has been an increase in the number of initiatives that address social isolation. This has been driven by:

1. The publication of *A connected society* (2018) the Government's strategy to end loneliness, following on from the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness report in 2017. The Government Strategy committed to a cross-departmental approach to tackle loneliness and social isolation, and ensured National Lottery Community Fund funding for befriending and social prescribing projects.
2. A greater number of local organisations running befriending services for groups at risk of social isolation, driven by the Covid-19 pandemic. Most befriending services rely on volunteers and befriending takes place online, through phone contact or in person (Befriending Networks, 2024).
3. Greater NHS recognition of the role that social prescribing can play in boosting physical and mental health. This practice connects individuals to community activities and services to address their non-medical, health-related social needs, address social isolation and improve their wellbeing. People can self-refer to social prescribing services or be referred by their doctor or another professional. The National Academy for Social Prescribing reported that more than 3,500 social prescribing link workers were employed within English primary care teams in 2023, with other social prescribing practitioners based in civil society organisations.

The embedding of social prescribing in primary healthcare has meant that programmes of work to increase social connection reach hundreds of thousands of people. Indeed, it has been estimated that there were 2.7 million referrals to NHS social prescribing link workers between 2019 and 2023 (O'Connell Francischetto, 2024). Every part of the UK is served by social prescribing and befriending organisations. For example, residents in Lewisham have access to prescribing through primary healthcare. A further 15 social prescribing projects are delivered by civil society organisations and adult and community education. Lewisham residents are also served by at least nine local befriending projects, some of which target older people, carers or people experiencing poor mental health.

There has been some research that has drawn on evaluations to highlight design features and practices that contribute to the success of befriending programmes and social prescribing (Cordis Bright, 2019). For befriending programmes, elements that contribute to success include the careful matching of 'clients' based on shared interests, clear communication, regular and reliable contact, and providing ongoing support for both the befriender and the person being befriended.

Bridging social contact

As described in Chapter Two, bridging social connections are the relationships that span intergroup divides. There is a considerable body of research that shows the impacts of bridging social capital on reducing inter-group conflict, stereotyping, perceptions of threat

and prejudice relating to out-groups, as well as building greater empathy, trust and shared identities (See Christ et al, 2017; Hewstone, 2006).

Globally, bridging social contact programme are widely utilised to boost community cohesion. Some of these initiatives have been evaluated in terms of their impacts and to understand the conditions that contributed to success (process evaluation). However, it is also important to acknowledge weaknesses in the methods used to evaluate social contact programmes (Hesketh et al, 2023). Many cohesion interventions receive no evaluation. It can be difficult to run randomised control trials of community cohesion interventions – these are the gold standard of evaluation, enabling causal inferences to be drawn. Nevertheless, Ramalingam (2014) and Hewstone (2023) argue that more organisations should undertake theory-of-change-based process evaluations. Furthermore, the literature review located few examples of systematic reflective practice outside school-based or peacebuilding programmes. Reflective practice is a continuous learning process where organisations systematically examine their experiences and actions to gain new insights and improve their practice.

Inter-group contact is most effective in building social cohesion where contact is meaningful, positive and sustained and where the two groups have broadly equal status. Institutional support for social contact, for example from schools or sports clubs, also increases the impact of bridging social contact on inter-group relations, as do the shared goals and practical engagement of activities such as sports and craft (Abrams et al, 2021; Hewstone et al 2018). In the absence of positive bridging contact, a single negative contact with an out-group can lead to wider generalisations about them and the development of prejudice: an effect known as inference ladder theory (Laurence and Bentley, 2018).

In the UK, interventions that aim to build bridging connections have been mostly delivered through (i) inter-faith initiatives (ii) sport and cultural activities and (iii) programmes that target children and young people in education and youth work settings. Bridging social contact activities have also been incorporated into conflict resolution initiatives in Northern Ireland and welcoming hubs for refugees.

Examples of current social contact programmes in the UK include:

- Near Neighbours, an inter-faith initiative of the Church of England Church Urban Fund. It helps to bring faith communities together in diverse areas, to talk openly and productively about challenging local issues. It aims to empower people to make a difference in their neighbourhoods.
- The Linking Network, where classes of children connect across difference, with groups of children coming together for activities, often in a neutral space. After the classes meet, teachers receive more support, then the children visit each other's schools. Evaluations of the programme have shown that this approach encourages participants to be more confident forming new relationships with those who they see as being different. The Linking Network is currently supporting work in 25 English local authorities and extending its work to Wales, although it is local organisations that run these 25 programmes.
- Integrated education and the Shared Education Programme in Northern Ireland. As of June 2025 there were 76 state-funded integrated schools, educating 28,000 pupils. A greater number of children are reached through the Shared Education Programme, which encourages schools to engage in cross-community teaching and learning activities. Children might take part in clubs or residentials together, or schools share teaching (National Children's Bureau, 2022). Conflict resolution initiatives also form part of the Shared Education Programme in some cases.
  A quasi-experimental evaluation of the Shared Education Programme has been conducted. This found small positive impacts on pupils' trust and attitudes towards

out-groups. However, it found no effect on children's willingness for future contact and their willingness to question dominant cultural norms and practices (Reimer et al, 2022). This evaluation highlights some of the limitations of social contact programmes where they are delivered in the context of societies that remain divided. These programmes will struggle to have positive impact on participants' attitudes to out-groups where more powerful forces are pulling people apart.

Volunteering

Volunteering helps to build bridging and linking social capital, which drives cohesion. In turn, cohesive societies encourage further volunteering (Abrams et al, 2023b). However, rates of formal volunteering – giving unpaid time to a formally constituted organisation – are declining in the UK. In the 15 years between 2001 and 2016, the Community Life Survey showed an average of 27% of the population offering their time as formal volunteers at least once a month. This figure had fallen to 16% in the most recent Community Life Survey.

People's propensity to volunteer is strongly associated with age, education and social grade, with under 25s and the over 50s most likely to volunteer. There is evidence that one-off volunteering opportunities, for example at a community or sporting event, are an effective method of encouraging further volunteering in local communities (Spirit of 2012).

Inclusive identity programmes

Inclusive identity-based programmes draw from social identity theory, which suggests that people have a predisposition to identify with in-groups whose qualities they see as positive. At the same time, they may attach negative qualities to those whom they see as belonging to out-groups (Brown, 1995; Tajfel, 1978). Inclusive identity programmes aim to break down strongly held 'in-group' identities – a process known as decentring – and to work with groups of people to build more inclusive, shared identities that can accommodate differences.

Decentring activities have been included in conflict resolution programmes in the Balkans and Northern Ireland (Nagle and Clancy, 2012). In the UK, sports and heritage projects have been used to foster inclusive national and local identities. English Heritage created an interactive flag displaying the surnames of almost everyone in England. With over 32,000 names listed on an online tool, The Names of England project explored their meaning. These names were printed on St George's Cross flags which were flown from English Heritage buildings ahead of the 2020 men's football Euro finals[7].

Football has been used to encourage inclusive fan-based identities, for example Huddersfield Town AFC's video campaign described in Puddle (2024). Some local authorities have conducted inclusive identity campaigns as part of their place-making agenda – creating places where people want to live and work and where young people want to stay. Examples include the #WeAreAllBristol campaign, which started as a film to welcome migrants.

Evaluation evidence from these projects suggests that some of this work has been successful in opening up strongly held in-group identities to make them more inclusive. A key ingredient for their success is involving target communities in the co-design of projects. Where there is little or no co-production, there is a risk that such projects fail to engage people, or are seen as externally imposed or patronising (Appe et al, 2025). Changing public attitudes is a long-term task which needs continual reinforcement. Many inclusive identity programmes are not sustained in the long-term.

[7] https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/about/search-news/englnd-united/

Conflict resolution

Conflict resolution covers a range of activities, from initial dialogue, tension monitoring and de-escalation, through to mediation, conflict resolution, post-conflict peacebuilding, reconciliation and restorative justice.

A legacy of the Troubles is a strong faith and civil society led conflict resolution sector in Northern Ireland. These have been developed in the specific context of its sectarian conflict (Edwards and Bloomer 2012). There is a large number of civil society initiatives involved in conflict resolution in Northern Ireland, where dialogue as a means of addressing division has been normalised (Stanton, 2021). Civil society led conflict resolution has taken place in parallel to the implementation of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, arrangements for the decommissioning of armaments, a review of policing and a legislative framework for good relations. There are some lessons from Northern Ireland for those involved in conflict resolution elsewhere in the UK. Long-term and supportive funders who are flexible and willing to take risks have made a difference to civil society organisations doing sensitive and complex work (Feenan et al, 2020). Conflict resolution has also taken place alongside community development to address people's social needs. Neither are linear processes and civil society organisations need to retain flexibility in their approaches. Involving the right people is key to success, to bring onboard informal and grassroots community leadership as well as those in higher or more formal positions.

There are fewer community cohesion initiatives that have used dialogue, community mediation, conflict resolution or restorative justice in England, Scotland and Wales. However, the summer 2024 riots have led to greater interest in dialogue-based interventions, community mediation and restorative justice programmes, and the work of existing conflict resolution projects working in England, Scotland and Wales.

Case study - Who is Your Neighbour?
Who is Your Neighbour?[8] is a South Yorkshire-based charity that facilitates dialogue in communities experiencing conflict and change. It creates spaces where residents can discuss sensitive topics such as race, immigration and identity, usually over a period of time. The organisation's work is underpinned by principles that emphasise open discussion and the good intentions of most people.

Who is Your Neighbour? does not aim to persuade or change minds. Instead it provides a platform for voices that often go unheard, especially in economically disadvantaged or predominantly white communities. Through these conversations, participants can confront discomfort, explore differences and discover shared experiences. Beyond local dialogues, Who is Your Neighbour? offers training and advice to organisations across the UK, helping them navigate complex community tensions. Evaluations show its work contributes to building resilient and inclusive communities.

Practice in England, Scotland and Wales
Dialogue is being used to address inter-ethnic and inter-faith divisions in some areas. The inter-faith organisation Near Neighbours runs a programme called 'Real People, Honest Talk'. This brings people together in safe spaces to have constructive conversations about the issues facing their communities. The Faith and Belief Forum's Building Closer Communities project ran inter-faith community dialogues in Barking and Dagenham and Birmingham, alongside other social contact and conflict resolution initiatives in these areas. Building Closer Communities was evaluated, with participants feeling the dialogue increased

[8] Whoisyourneighbour.org.uk

their sense of belonging and their ability to initiate social contact with people from different faith or ethnic backgrounds. Participants from minority ethic groups felt safer (Peacock, 2021). However, the evaluation highlighted one major challenge of dialogue-based projects in that they can only directly reach a small number of people (Hesketh et all, 2023). Some projects have addressed this by making short films where participants talk about the discussions, then using targeted social media to reach wider sections of the community.

Many areas are served by community mediation services, where a trained neutral facilitator attempts to resolve disputes between different groups of people (Scottish Community Mediation Centre, 2024). Following the summer 2024 riots, Sunderland Council has recently trained a group of community mediators to de-escalate tensions in the city. The Centre for Good Relations in Scotland and Who Is Your Neighbour? are also uconducting training and capacity building on conflict resolution.

The summer 2024 riots have also raised the profile of restorative justice approaches, which are also used in conflict resolution. **Restorative justice** aims to repair the harm caused by wrongdoing or conflict. It brings together those who have caused harm, those affected by it, and sometimes the wider community, to acknowledge what happened, understand its impact, and agree on steps forward. Restorative justice programmes are used with offenders in the UK. There have also been pilots that have used restorative justice to address hate crime (Walters, 2014). Formal restorative justice programmes are also used in conflict resolution (Miller, 2008). Restorative justice can also be initiated less formally or informally (Ellison and Shirlow, 2008). Example of more organic and informal restorative justice were the community clean-ups which followed the summer 2024 riots (The Interfaith Restorative Justice Project, 2025). These events had some local community leadership, which often came from faith leaders. However, they soon developed a momentum of their own.

Democratic resilience

Democratic resilience is the ability of democratic society to withstand and respond to threats while protecting the integrity of democratic institutions, the rule of law, a free press and upholding shared values. In the UK, councils have statutory responsibilities to safeguard democracy through their legal duties to administer elections and support councillors to fulfil their duties. However, there is evidence of polarisation, the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and the intimidation of those standing for public office. These themes formed part of Dame Sara Khan's 2024 review of social cohesion and democratic resilience.

Democratic resilience programmes aim to address threats to community cohesion in different ways by building people's ability to identify misinformation or disinformation, and by strengthening the capacity of people to take part in and engage critically and constructively in democratic processes. Such work encompasses:

- Citizenship education, which forms part of the England National Curriculum for children aged 11-16 (Department for Education, 2013; Gearon, 2022).
- Critical thinking programmes.
- Social media literacy. Schools, colleges and youth organisations have a major role in helping children and young people identify misinformation and disinformation, but it is much harder to reach adults. In 2022 the UK government funded 17 UK organisations to pilot new ways of boosting media literacy skills for vulnerable adults.
- Voter registration, for example, the work of operation Black Vote.
- Giving the public more of a voice in decisions that impact on their lives through participative decision-making (Smith et al, 2021). As well as formal consultations and surveys, many other methods can be used, which include crowdsourcing,

participatory budgeting and pop-up democracy. The UK charity Involve has expertise to help local partners increase participative decision-making.
- Deliberative democracy, for example, citizens' juries and citizens' assemblies, which are representative groups of randomly selected people who come together to deliberate on a specific issue and make recommendations to policy-makers (Bachtiger et al, 2018).

Despite the recommendations of Dame Sara Khan review (2024) and the prevalence of online mis- and disinformation and falling political trust, there are relatively few local civil society organisations working to increase democratic resilience.

Community safety and counter-extremism

Interventions to counter extremism are relevant to community cohesion, particularly in the area of preventing extremism and building community resilience to extremist narratives. There is a very large literature on effective approaches to counter-extremism (see for example, Bonnell et al, 2011; Home Office, 2021; Jugl et al 2021; Lobato et al, 2021).

The UK Government Prevent programme, which is currently being reviewed, aims to stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism by identifying individuals at risk of radicalisation and providing early intervention and support on a voluntary basis. Some of this support is offered by civil society organisations, some of which received capacity building support through the **Building a Stronger Britain Together (BSBT)** programme. BSBT received Government funding between 2016 and 2020 to support civil society organisations to **counter extremism and build community resilience (Home Office, 2021).** Some 252 grants were made and BSBT is an important example of civil society capacity building. Its evaluation reported that the BSBT programme increased organisational awareness of how to tackle extremism and improved their communications capabilities. However, in the absence of continued counter-extremism-related funding, it was uncertain whether improved capability will be sustained into the future in these organisations.

The BSBT programme also increased knowledge about what works in counter extremism, with its evaluation supporting other meta-analysis and studies in this area.

Migrant integration programmes

Programmes targeted at groups such as migrants and refugees are also an approach used in broader community cohesion programmes. Such interventions broadly aim to increase migrants' economic, social, cultural and political participation in the UK. These aims are achieved through the provision of advice, language support and employability programmes, and interventions that aim to increase social contact between migrants, refugees and local residents (Rutter, 2015). While refugees and migrants receive language and employability support from public sector organisations, much integration support in the UK is delivered by civil society and faith organisations.

There are many critiques of UK integration policy. The UK has historically lacked a coherent, long-term integration strategy, although the Scottish Government (2024) has published a refugee integration strategy. The Scottish Government sees integration as process that should start upon a person's arrival in the UK, although this 'from day one' approach has been resisted by the Home Office, which sees refugee integration applying just to those who have been granted refugee status and not to asylum-seekers (Phillimore et al, 2021).

Refugee organisations have highlighted shortages in English language (ESOL) provision (Refugee Action, 2019). Skills Funding Agency data showed the number of funded ESOL places fell after 2010, but new analysis shows that in the 2022/23 academic year, a little over 150,000 places were funded in England, the highest level since 2012/13 (Migration Observatory, 2024).

Katwala et al (2023) argue that integration is not just about jobs and language, but also about belonging, shared identities and participation in community life. Rutter and Carter (2018) has also warned that failure to acknowledge and respond to public anxieties about migration can damage social cohesion.

The strategic role of councils

Councils have strategic and convening roles in relation to community development and cohesion, and also fund or deliver work in these areas. These roles are summarised in Table 3.2, with statutory duties indicated by (S).

Table 3.2 Council roles that relate to community development and cohesion

Activity/responsibility	Relevance to community development cohesion
Public Sector Equality Duty (S)	Councils are obliged to eliminate unlawful discrimination and advance equality of opportunity, with equality objectives having to be published at least once every four years. The impact of council policies on equality also needs to be assessed.
Public Section Equality Duty – duty to foster good relations between people who have protected characteristics and those who do not (S)	Good relations are enshrined in law, but in practice this isn't really followed through with action.
Housing – including managing social housing stock, overseeing ALMOs, preventing homelessness and maintaining standards in private rental sector (S)	Pressures on the housing stock and badly maintained HMOs can lead to intergroup tensions. In practice, HMOs are inconsistently regulated. There is scope for councils to do more to address population churn and neighbourhood decline associated with badly maintained HMOs, including through selective licensing.
Planning duties include creating the Local Plan, processing planning applications (S)	There is scope to involve the public in development of the local plan. Areas receiving Plan for Neighbourhood funds will also have to work with communities to produce a Neighbourhood Plan (see below).
Economic regeneration, e.g. support for local businesses and regeneration, employment support, anti-poverty programmes	Economic regeneration helps to address foundational issues that impact on community strength and cohesion. Workplaces are sites of social contact; reducing worklessness increase opportunities for social contact.
Public health (S) – includes JSNAs, services for substance misuse, support for mental health and wellbeing, action on wider social determinants of health and heath inequalities.	Many social prescribing roles are funding by councils through their public health budgets. Social prescribing is being used to address isolation. Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs) are a good source of local data.
Community, cultural and commemorative events	Events can bring people together. Event volunteering is also a pathway to more regular volunteering.

Under 19s education (S) – strategic role, school and childcare place planning, school admissions, administration and funding of free early education, special needs, Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE)	Councils may have opinions on plans for new schools or changes to school admissions criteria which may affect inter-group contact. The SACRE currently decides on the local RE curriculum, with potential for this to do more to promote good interfaith relations.
Youth services	Can reach most excluded young people. Have a role in employment support, life skills and citizenship education.
Adult and community education Skills (S)	These services receive funding to provide ESOL and other basic skills provision e.g. IT, literacy, numeracy. Leisure courses are also provided, which can address isolation and bring people together. Some community education services offer employability support.
Refugee resettlement and coordination of integration support for migrants and refugees	
Care for unaccompanied children and child victim of modern slavery (S)	7,830 unaccompanied asylum-seekers were being looked after by local authorities on 31 Dec 2024, of whom 96% were male.
Community safety: Community Safety Partnerships (S), community safety plans, crime and anti-social behaviour prevention.	Strategic role in preventing and addressing hate crime. Some councils have community safety teams, or Prevent teams
Counter-extremism: Prevent duty (S) plus wider non-statutory work through community safety partnerships	
Emergency planning and resilience (S) including risk register and local plan, and working with Local Resilience Forum	
Registrar is responsible for local citizenship ceremonies (S)	Local communities value the sense of belonging created when people settle and become British. A small number of councils have involved local people in the ceremonies, a gesture that communicates welcome.
Maintaining electoral register, administering elections and supporting councillors fulfil their duties (S)	Essential for democratic resilience
Non-statutory work to strengthen democracy, eg by encouraging voter registration and participation, young mayor schemes, participatory budgeting, and deliberative democracy	These approaches can increase civil participation and help build democratic resilience
Libraries (S)	These can be sites of social mixing. Libraries can provide information and advice that can help people access services and support

Arts, heritage	Arts and heritage organisations can be sites of social mixing, with the culture also able to help explore contemporary issues relevant to cohesion.
Leisure and recreation – parks, playgrounds, greenspace, sports facilities, leisure centres, non-statutory allotments (S)	These can be sites of social mixing. Sport can help boost civic pride and inclusive civic identities.
Funding for local civil society organisations	Provide grants, maintain community centre, encourage volunteering.

The period 2008-2012 also saw almost all English local authorities publish community cohesion strategies, driven by concerns about violent extremism, the Government's Prevent Strategy, increased EU migration and Equality Act 2010 duties (Rutter, 2015). While most councils still have a cabinet member for 'communities', a relatively small number of English and Scottish councils have explicitly named 'community cohesion' strategies today. Instead, community cohesion is incorporated into other policy strategies, particularly community safety and equality, diversity and inclusion. A few local authorities have included community cohesion in community engagement strategies.

English councils that have standalone community cohesion strategies are more likely to be northern, urban and ethnically diverse. This suggests that in England, many council officials and elected members do not understand community cohesion as an 'everywhere' issue, relevant to all parts of the UK. This contrasts with Northern Ireland and Wales, where all councils have strategies.

Combined authorities, combined county authorities and the Mayor of London:
The Government's devolution agenda aims to grant combined authorities powers over transport, housing and planning, skills and economic development. Combined authorities thus have a role cohesion debates, through:

- The leadership and public voice of mayors/leaders, who can promote unity in times of crisis.
- The convening and advocacy role of mayors and combined authorities.
- Funding of programmes of work to promote social contact, cohesion and integration.
- Some combined authorities have cabinet members for communities, or community cohesion. A few combined authorities have community cohesion or integration strategies, for example, All of Us, the Mayor of London's 2018 strategy for social integration.
- The elected mayors in Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and London have policing and crime commission roles which cover community safety, hate crime and extremism.

To date, there are 15 combined authorities, plus Greater London. Five further devolution deals are in development and a further eight mayoral and county deal are in an earlier stage of negotiation, including a Staffordshire County deal which would cover Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent.

Parish, community and town councils
These bodies sit below unitary or district councils and they are elected. The day-to-day administration of town and community councils (mostly located in larger cities) is undertaken by a clerk. Their remit is of relevance to community cohesion as these councils may oversee community centres, allotments, playing fields and parks. Some town and community councils offer small grants to local charities.

Critiques of local government

As previously noted, the Government has commissioned four independent reviews into community cohesion since 2001, namely the 2001 Cantle report into community cohesion, the 2007 Commission on Integration and Cohesion, the 2016 Casey review of opportunity and integration and the 2024 Khan review on threats to social cohesion and democratic resilience. The 2024 Khan review highlighted the challenges that local authorities are facing in addressing a changing cohesion landscape, in particular responding to misinformation and disinformation.

These reviews looked at the performance of local government in detail. They highlighted many examples of good practice but also set out some of the shortcomings of local government. Common themes emerged in these reviews, namely:

- Inconsistent leadership, with many local authorities lacking strategies on community cohesion.
- Failure to embed community cohesion considerations across a range of services, leading to siloed or disjointed efforts.
- A reluctance to have 'difficult conversations' or address harmful practices such as gender discrimination or extremism.
- Complacency over residential and educational segregation.
- Inconsistent efforts to foster common values, citizenship and opportunities for inter-group contact.

Central government approaches

While local public and not-for-profit organisations deliver community development and cohesion programmes , national government is also a key stakeholder. Its role is to provide leadership, set strategic direction and policy and provide funding and support.

In England, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has been the lead department for community cohesion since 2006. MHCLG also has a UK-wide role, through its administration of a number of funding streams (see below). As a policy area community cohesion currently sits within the Local Government Resilience and Communities Directorate, where there is a cohesion unit. In addition to the Secretary of State, ministerial leadership is provided by an Under-Secretary of State for Faith, Communities and Resettlement[9].

Responsibilities for 'community' policy is shared between MHCLG,which leads on regeneration and local economic development, and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) which leads on civil society. DCMS's Civil Society and Youth Unit has responsibility for civil society policy, youth policy, volunteering and tackling loneliness.

The work of other government departments, and a number of non-departmental impacts on community and cohesion policy, is summarised in Table 3.3 below.

[9] Information retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ministry-of-housing-communities-local-government, 14.04.25

Table 3.3: Responsibility for community and cohesion policy across national government

Department or organisation	Responsibility
Prime Minister	Setting out a unifying public-facing narrative and the over-arching aims of social cohesion policy.
Cabinet Office	Supports No 10 and Prime Minister. Coordinates national security policy and government responses in times of crisis. Leads on political and constitutional reform. Its agencies and non-departmental public bodies include the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, the Social Mobility Commission and the Office for Equality and Opportunity.
Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	Leads on culture, arts, media, sport, tourism and civil society. Its agencies and non-departmental public bodies include the National Lottery Community Fund, the National Heritage Memorial Fund, Arts Council England, Historic England and Sport England.
Department for Education	Leads on children's services, early years, schools, further education, higher education and skills in England. Its agencies and non-departmental public bodies include Ofsted.
Department for Science, Innovation and Technology	Leads on innovation, productivity and science and ensures technologies are safely developed and deployed. Has responsibility for online safety. Its agencies and public bodies include Ofcom.
HM Treasury	Leads on economic and financial policy and public spending.
Home Office	Leads on immigration and nationality, policing, fire and counter-terrorism. Has responsibility for resettlement programmes and refugee integration. Its agencies and non-departmental public bodies include the Gangmaster and Labour Abuse Authority, the Migration Advisory Committee and the Commission for Countering Extremism
MHCLG	See above. Leads on housing, planning, local government, regeneration, cohesion and faith. Its agencies and non-departmental public bodies include the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation.
Ministry of Justice	Leads on the justice system, including courts, prisons and the probation service. Has responsibility for restorative justice. Its agencies and non-departmental public bodies include the Victims Commissioner.

Source: www.gov.uk retrieved 14.04.25

Across national government, community and cohesion policy is delivered through:

1. Specific initiatives that specifically relate to community development, civil society community cohesion.

2. Through related policy areas, namely:
    - Economic development, regeneration and anti-poverty policy.
    - Civil contingencies strategy to increase resilience to shock events.
    - Devolution policy, in relation to public engagement in decision making.
    - Social justice policy to reduce inequality and discrimination.
    - Immigration and citizenship policy.

- Migrant integration policy to support the economic, social and civic integration of new migrants who come to the UK.
- Counter-extremism policy.

3. Through core policy areas of the Government, for example, local government finance, devolution or skills policy. (see Table 3.1)

Key policy interventions on community and cohesion

A timeline summary of key national policy decisions on community and cohesion is given in the Appendix to this literature review and is discussed in more detail below.

The period 2006-2010 saw a significant amount of government policy on community cohesion in the wake of the 7/7 London bombings and increased international migration from the EU. This included:

- The commissioning of an independent review on integration and cohesion, chaired by Darra Singh (Commission on Integration and Social Cohesion, 2007).
- A review of migrant integration policy (DCLG, 2008c).
- A review of equalities chaired by Trevor Philips, which published its final report in 2007. This included proposals to tackle persistent discrimination and disadvantages experienced by British Bangladeshi and Pakistani women.
- Publishing a consultation on inter-faith dialogue (DCLG, 2008b).
- Making £35 million available per year in 2009 and 2010 for the Migration Impacts Fund, which aimed to help local authorities manage some of the pressures caused by rapid population change. Councils have considerable flexibility in how they spend their money. The Migration Impacts Fund was resourced from levy on visa fees, which aimed in part to show that migrants were contributing to the cost of local initiatives (Broadhead, 2020).

There was also an expansion of council-coordinated work on community cohesion, with many local authorities publishing community cohesion strategies during this period.

2010-2020: Central government cost-saving measures in 2010 saw the closure of Migration Impacts Fund and the Refugee Integration and Employment Service, funded by the Home Office. ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) funding also fell by half between 2009/10 and 2014/15 (Foster and Bolton, 2018). Local government budget pressures after 2010 reduced the appetite of councils to follow through their community cohesion strategies.

It was not until 2015 that the Government undertook significant new work on cohesion. Through its new the Controlling Migration Fund, which ran from 2016-2020, the Government made £140 million available to deal with the local impacts of immigration. It also commissioned the Dame Louise Casey review into opportunity and integration, which reported in 2016. The Government later drew on Dame Louise Casey's recommendations in its 2018 Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper and the 2019 Integrated Communities Action Plan. The Government also provided £50 million funding to five Integration Action Areas – Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall and Waltham Forest – to carry out programmes of work to boost integration and cohesion.

A cross-departmental ministerial group on integration and cohesion was also revived at this time, co-chaired the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

2020 to present: The COVID19 pandemic disrupted the Integrated Communities Strategy with plans to extend the five integration action areas put on hold and many of the

recommendations of the Action Plan not implemented. Research by Belong showed that that local authority areas that had recently prioritised and invested in social cohesion through the Integration Action Areas programme saw higher levels of volunteering and greater trust in the government during the pandemic than areas that had not seen this investment (Abrams et al, 2021).

The pandemic also shone a light on new challenges to social cohesion, particularly the spread of divisive conspiracy theories, many of which have become a focus for mobilisation by the radical right. The 2024 Dame Sara Khan Review of Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience argued that central and local government were ill-equipped to deal with this fluid landscape of racialised grievances and conspiracy theories spread online.

More positively, the pandemic saw much social solidarity which crossed ethnic, faith and class divides, and it was estimated that 12.4 million people helped out their neighbours or offered their time as volunteers (Together Coalition, 2021). Research by the Belong network evidenced that local authority areas that had recently prioritised and invested in social cohesion saw higher levels of volunteering and greater trust in the government than areas that had not seen this investment (Abrams et al, 2021). The positive role that faith communities played in the pandemic relief effort has led to a shift in the relationship between government and faith organisations. This was partly driven by an appreciation of the critical role that faith communities played during the Covid-19 pandemic. Faith organisations are seen more as partners in areas of work related to community development and cohesion (Bloom, 2023).

Most recently, in response to the 2024 riots, the Government has provided a £15 million Community Recovery Fund for the 35 local authorities which experienced disorder. The Government's Plan for Neighbourhoods is the new UK-wide regeneration programme. Its aims are broad, and cover regeneration and growth, and also community cohesion. Its first phase is targeting 75 locations, each of which will receive £20 million over the next decade to invest in regeneration and community services. Spending decisions will be the responsibility of Neighbourhood Boards which have just been formed and who will have until December 2025 to work with local authorities to develop Neighbourhood plans to be submitted to MHCLG for approval. It is up to the Neighbourhood Boards to decide how to spend this money. Funding will be released to local authorities in April 2026 to begin delivery of the plans.

Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales

The nature of community development and cohesion means that the administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have responsibility for many policy areas rather than MHCLG. Scotland does not currently have a community cohesion strategy, although it is the only nation that has a refugee integration strategy. The Scottish Government has published strategies to address hate crime and social isolation and loneliness (Scottish Government, 2018). It has also funded community-led projects to tackle hate crime and religious sectarianism.

The Welsh Government published its first community cohesion strategy in 2009, followed by action plans in 2014-16 and 2016-17. The Community Cohesion Programme, which built on the initial strategy is funded until March 2026, following an independent evaluation in 2021 (Welsh Government. 2021). Today, eight regional community cohesion coordinators are based in councils, working across groups of local authorities to deliver the strategy. The Welsh Government has also made funds available to faith and civil society organisations through a Community Cohesion Fund. The community and cohesion plan sits alongside other areas of work, in particular the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan and the Nation of Sanctuary commitment to asylum-seekers and refugees.

The national cohesion strategy means that every Welsh council has discussed community cohesion and has put in place local plans. The convening power of the eight community cohesion coordinators has enabled programmes to be developed and stronger partnerships between councils, other public services, faith and civil society (Welsh Government, 2012). The Welsh Government can also be held to account on community cohesion through the Senedd's Equalities and Social Justice Committee.

In Northern Ireland 'good relations' is used to describe initiatives that might be described as community cohesion elsewhere in the UK. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 places responsibility on public authorities to promote good relations between people with different religious beliefs, political opinions or from different racial groups. Councils employ good relations officers and there is a number of funded government programmes focused on good relations, such as PEACE PLUS and Safer Communities.

Learning from international approaches to community development and cohesion

The literature review also looked at policy and practice outside the UK. While this reflects national contexts, there is scope for learning from approaches in other countries. Community development is the mainstay of poverty reduction programmes across the world, funded by international NGOs, trusts and foundations, government and multilateral aid. Although local contexts are different, the approaches used by community development organisations in the Global South are similar to those used in the UK: targeted poverty reduction, asset-based community development and community organising. As might be expected, there is a large literature on community development. Some of this writing describes different approaches (see for example, McConnell et al Muia, 2019; Russell, 2022). Many evaluation studies have been published.

Asset-based community development as well as community organising were pioneered in the United States through work in deprived cities (Alinksy, 1971; McKnight and Kretzmann, 1993). Participatory budgeting was pioneered in Brazil more than 35 years ago. Residents were given direct control over portions of council spending. This approach was later used in some local authorities in the UK, for example, in Glasgow, Haringey and Salford. Evaluations of UK pilots show that it builds transparency and trust between citizens and government, (DCLG, 2011).

Community cohesion is a term that is **primarily used in the UK** and to a lesser extent in other **Anglophone countries** such as Australia and Canada. It is a rarely used policy term in the United States, where social capital, integration or community engagement are more common terms in policy and academic discourse. Nevertheless, there is practice that is relevant to the UK. Katwala et al (2026) describe integration and citizenship offices inside city governance structures in the United States. For example, the Office of Immigrant Affairs in New York City delivers a range of programmes that include language classes and civic inclusion. The independent think tank British Future and CitizensUK have been among the organisations that have argued for a similar approach in the UK, with combined authority mayors appointing deputy mayors for integration (Katwala et al, 2017).

Welcoming America is a civil society initiative to welcome migrants and refugees. Its Welcoming Cities programme has successfully involved business groups and chambers of commerce in projects to support the integration of newcomers (Broadhead, 2025, forthcoming). The involvement of business in integration and community cohesion programmes is something that has not been achieved in the UK.

The German government has published a National Action Plan on Integration which includes community cohesion targets. It convenes periodic integration summits, which bring government and civil society together to discuss and develop policy. These summits have been a focus for policy change – and an approach that could be adopted in the UK. Local Aliens Offices provide integration services to new migrants, ensuring a consistent approach in all parts of the country. Germany also passed an Integration Act in 2016 which set out in law the services that the state should provide, but also the duties expected of migrants to integrate (Casey, 2016). Countries like Sweden and Norway emphasise the role of high-quality, universal public services and shared social spaces in fostering cohesion, with targeted community cohesion policy focussing on the integration of migrants (Broadhead, 2021).

Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful is the Australian Government's most recent cohesion statement, published in 2017. This has been followed by the establishment of the Office of Community Cohesion within the Department of Home Affairs in September 2024. This office aims to strengthen community cohesion and democratic resilience in Australia by developing and funding programmes, in partnership with state governments, civil society and other relevant organisations. The decision to set up the Office of Community cohesion was partly a response to declining levels of political trust and public concerns about inequality and division highlighted in the biennial Australia Social Cohesion Index published by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute (2023).

Since 2001, an annual citizenship day is held every year on 17 September to reflect on the meaning and importance of Australian citizenship and what unites people. Citizenship Day also celebrates new citizens and the role citizens play in shaping the nation. These initiatives followed two independent reviews of citizenship conducted in 1994 and 2000, both chaired by Sir Ninian Stephen (2000). Both reviews stressed that Australian citizenship should be **inclusive, shared, and rooted in democratic values.** Australia is one of the few countries that has looked at how citizenship policy might support community cohesion.

Conclusions

This review of policy and practice highlights a varied faith and civil society sector conducting different types of work that relates to community development and cohesion. However, initiatives are often small-scale and local. Interventions are not always sustained, often due to funding challenges.

Local authorities have an essential convening and strategic role in relation to community development and cohesion. Some are doing high quality work in these areas. But as the 2001, 2007, 2016 and 2024 independent reviews suggest, local government practice is patchy. Community development and cohesion is often seen as an issue that is relevant to deprived or ethnically diverse urban areas, rather than different geographies.

Despite numerous policy papers and action plans over the past 25 years, successive governments have struggled to make sustained commitments on community cohesion. Policy has also tended to be reactive rather than proactive.

PART FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

As this evidence review shows, there is a large literature on community development and cohesion which draws from different academic disciplines. The size and breadth of the evidence base is an issue in itself for policymakers and practitioners, who may struggle to access, navigate, interpret and apply such a vast and varied body of information.

Not all academic research is accessible to policymakers and practitioners, which results in important insights being overlooked or misunderstood. The academic language used in some disciplines can be hard to comprehend, including for those for whom English is a second or third language.

From a UK perspective, there are some gaps in knowledge. As noted in Section One, there is no agreed or consistent measure of community strength or cohesion. This makes it difficult to compare different areas or measure change over time.

Understanding Society – the UK's flagship longitudinal survey – includes a wealth of data on community development and cohesion, but this remains unanalysed. Local authorities and central government possess much administrative data, but this is not always analysed from the perspective of community strength and cohesion.

There is a weak 'what works' evidence base on community development and cohesion. Many interventions are not subject to process or impact evaluations. Related to this, institutional learning is lost when staff move on – whether in central government, councils or in civil society. Policymakers, practitioners and academics need to find ways to capture institutional learning.

There is a lack of research into how cohesion dynamics differ between places and over time, for example rural versus urban areas. In a rapidly changing environment, there is also a need for more research on how online interactions affect offline social relationships.

While this is covered in the 2024 Khan review, there is a need for more research on the economic case for investing in community development and cohesion, through methodologies such as cost-benefit or social return on investment analysis. Creating the pre-conditions for economic regeneration, higher employment, reduced policing costs and better health outcomes could be strong arguments for sustained investment in community development and cohesion.

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