

Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Community Cohesion, HC 981

Tuesday 24 June 2025

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Members present: Florence Eshalomi (Chair); Maya Ellis; Mr Will Forster; Joe Powell; Sarah Smith.

Women and Equalities Committee Chair present: Sarah Owen.

Questions 1 - 28

Witnesses

I: Imam Ibrahim Hussein, Chair, Southport Mosque; Jabeer Butt, CEO, Race Equality Foundation; Baroness Shaista Gohir OBE, CEO, Muslim Women's Network UK; and Carrie Alderton, CEO, Faith & Belief Forum.

II: Dame Sara Khan, Author of the Khan Review; Carly Walker-Dawson, Interim Co-CEO, Involve UK; and Professor Ted Cantle CBE.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Imam Ibrahim Hussein, Jabeer Butt, Baroness Shaista Gohir OBE and Carrie Alderton.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. I am Florence Eshalomi, and I am Chair of the Committee. Can I ask our Committee members to introduce themselves, please?

Maya Ellis: I am Maya Ellis. I am the Labour MP for Ribble Valley in Lancashire.

Sarah Smith: Sarah Smith, the Labour MP in Hyndburn, also in Lancashire.

Joe Powell: Joe Powell, MP for Kensington and Bayswater.

Mr Will Forster: Will Forster, Liberal Democrat MP for Woking in Surrey.

Sarah Owen: Sarah Owen, the MP for Luton North, but I am guesting



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here in my capacity as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee. Thank you, Chair, for allowing me to guest.

Q2 Chair: Thank you. As we are approaching the one-year anniversary of last year's summer riots, this session is going to focus on what the Government can learn to help strengthen community cohesion and how we will work with community leaders, faith and charitable organisations who all played a crucial role in the recovery and rebuilding after the riots.

The second part of this session will focus on key recommendations that the Government may be able to look at to prevent further riots. Can I ask our guests to introduce themselves this morning? I will start with Jabeer.

Jabeer Butt: Good morning, everyone. I am Jabeer Butt, Chief Executive of the Race Equality Foundation. We are a charity that co-produces evidence-led solutions to tackling systemic racism.

Imam Ibrahim Hussein: Good morning, everybody. I am Ibrahim Hussein, the Chairman and the Imam of Southport Mosque.

Baroness Shaista Gohir: Good morning. I am Shaista Gohir. I am the CEO of the Muslim Women's Network UK, which is a national charity.

Carrie Alderton: Good morning. I am Carrie Alderton from the Faith & Belief Forum. I am the interim CEO. We are the biggest interfaith organisation in the country. We work across schools, universities and communities to build a connected, supported society where people of different faiths, beliefs and cultures have strong, productive and lasting relations. We believe that the future has to be built together by people of all beliefs across diversity and difference in order to make sure that intolerance and hate have no place in our society.

Q3 Chair: Thank you. Before we begin, I want to remind members and the witnesses present that the House has agreed not to discuss any legal cases active in the UK courts. I would therefore ask everyone to avoid discussing any legal cases that might currently be live in the courts, including appeal cases connected with last year's summer riots, or the recent riots in Northern Ireland.

We may make statements of fact about the circumstances of the unrest, about the number of people arrested, charged, and sentenced, and about the behaviours exhibited during the events. However, we should not refer to specific individuals who have been charged or who are awaiting trial or engage in any discussion or speculation about any current live cases.

I want to start with quite a broad question to you all this morning, just to hear a bit more about your different organisations and your work. This is an opening question to you all around what you and your organisations experienced of the riots last year. I will start with Carrie.

Carrie Alderton: Thank you. The riots instilled fear among our staff members and the communities that we work with and, of course, across



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Muslim and racial minority individuals across the country. Many people felt unsafe and confined themselves indoors for a number of days. This is what we have heard from a lot of our community members and through our research as well.

We also work a lot in schools; I don't know whether you have heard this phrase before, but RE in our circles is often referred to as the dumping ground for controversy in other subjects. Where people cannot discuss or do not feel comfortable to discuss controversial issues, those questions are taken to the RE classroom. We had a lot of requests and concerns coming in from our school partners, saying that they were struggling to cope with the impact and they needed help.

Since RE has been chronically underfunded and has the smallest number of specialist teachers—I think it is only about 53%—they felt really burdened with the responsibility of addressing the riots and its roots and they felt ill equipped to do so. Lots of schools were shutting down the conversation. I mention this because schools are the heart of our communities, and often they are seen as the places to address some of the issues going on at home and in the community.

We surveyed communities across England and Scotland to find out how people had been affected or why they were involved in the riots, as part of our interfaith restorative justice project with partners Why me? and Interfaith Glasgow. We thought it was important to survey people who had been involved in the riots and who had been affected. The findings can be found and are summarised in our 2024 "UK Summer Riots: Restorative Responses and Interfaith Instincts" report.

We found across our work that public discourse has become more polarised since the riots, pushing the limits of what is socially acceptable, shifting the Overton window or the range of ideas considered acceptable in public discourse. Some of the community members I spoke to yesterday told us that they found this to be the professionalisation of the far right. Through platforms like GB News and the Reform Party, far-right views have become more and more mainstream and more and more acceptable to talk about, and there is not as much pushback to the left and the more hopeful views about diversity in our country.

Baroness Shaista Gohir: Very quickly, probably within a week or two of the riots, we started to get negative comments on our Facebook. I will read a few out, "British people have had enough". "Yes, the protest, not the riots have affected me. I am much happier. Muslims cannot get me online. Cannot easily be tracked. Muslims are murderous savages, and life is threatened by them all". "We need to stand up to this invasion", and it goes on and on. That is what we were faced with in terms of Facebook comments.

We also wanted to speak very quickly to our members around the country about how they were feeling. They reported changing their behaviour. Some reported they started to work from home. Others talked



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about not using public transport. We noticed that more Muslim women had started to go on walks to be healthier after covid or during covid and, whether on their own or with friends or in groups, they stopped doing that. Muslim women started to change the way they dressed. Instead of wearing a hijab, they wore a hat.

There was one example. Because we are a helpline, we had brought somebody in. They had been rescued from a DV situation, and she and her children ended up being placed in a predominantly white area. Within a week she was subjected to threats and vandalism of her property. It got so bad that the police had to move her again for her safety. Imagine: she has had to be moved twice for her safety.

What is interesting is that it got us thinking as well. We talk a lot about antisocial behaviour. That antisocial behaviour also had a hate crime associated with it, a racially and religiously motivated hate crime. I know that the police will log both, but it will be interesting to find out how much of this antisocial behaviour has that hate crime link to it, because if we know the statistics we can know where the hotspots are that are undermining community cohesion. I don't know whether that data is available, but I asked a written question yesterday; if there is anything that comes up, and to find out about the link, I will pass that on.

What then happens when your freedom of movement is restricted in that way—although it is self-imposed, it is for a reason—is that your freedom and your human rights are being breached. The other interesting thing was people reporting that when they were in their workplace, their colleagues and management were not asking them how they were feeling, particularly in those areas where the riots were taking place. People were talking about, "Oh, yes, it was hot over the weekend, and I had a barbecue". Some of their colleagues had riots in their areas or a shop had burnt down on their road and, even when they had mentioned it, it was not really acknowledged.

One woman was due to go to a work meeting in another city where the riots had taken place—a Muslim woman who wears a headscarf. Her organisation did not think, "Perhaps we shouldn't be sending her there. It could be on public transport to this area and putting her at risk". So, she had to speak up and say, "I don't feel safe. I don't want to go". Those are some of the experiences of our organisation but also Muslim women across the UK.

Q4 **Chair:** Imam Hussein, obviously we saw the media reports afterwards where the mosque was targeted and the children's centre near Southport, where the attack occurred. What was your experience of the riots?

Imam Ibrahim Hussein: Well, my experience was that I found myself right in the middle of a riot, which we had absolutely nothing to do with. We were devastated, of course, for the families and their loss. We should have been concentrating on supporting them and being helpful to them, but instead we found ourselves right in the middle of a riot that left us



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with—how can I say—confusion. We were confused, “Why are we being attacked?”

Of course, on that particular morning I had so many calls from friends and people who said, “There are a lot of nasty things. It is on social media, and something is going to happen tonight, so be careful”. I had to get in touch with the police and tell them, “This is what we have, and this is what we are fearing”. Of course, that night it was over the top. Maybe we expected people protesting or doing something, but we found ourselves right in the middle of a big riot. They were determined to come and burn the mosque and burn anybody who was in it.

Obviously, this was our initial experience, but one of the most hurtful things is the slogans that my colleague here has just been mentioning, “We want our country back. We want our freedom. We will get rid of this lot”, and what was even more hurtful was the slogan, “Who the F-word is Allah?”. There was so much hatred, which is unwarranted, and we did not understand where all this was coming from. This was our experience.

Of course, what followed was a lot of fear in the community. The people who come to the mosque were wondering, “Should we come or not?” This is the fear that we endured during the whole thing. We are hoping that we have left that behind us, although things are not all that rosy.

Q5 **Chair:** Thank you. Jabeer, what do you believe were the main causes of the riots last year?

Jabeer Butt: It is easy to get caught up in a conversation about right-wing thuggery as being the driver behind it, but the reality is that many of the drivers are much more long-standing, particularly the persistence of racism as well as the use of the persistence of male violence. Those two things come together to see not only the obscene act of the murder of the three young girls, but what followed. Lots of men tried to claim that they were protecting the women and girls in their communities, but they were actually using violence to perpetrate further fear, further acts of violence that was damaging.

It is important to recognise that we had three phases in our response. Initially, we reached out to lots of the communities we work with. You may know that we are one of the leading providers of a parent education programme called Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities, which often operates in some of the poorest communities in the country.

A starting point for us was to put our messages to those parents to reassure them, and so on. We had responses from that. One parent got in touch to say, “I’m off to Margate with my kids tomorrow. Should I still go?” You are left in that situation thinking, “Well, what is the answer?” Do you say, “Yes, you should go because that is the right thing to do”. Or do you say, “Actually, things are so worrisome, don’t go” and so on. We were dealing with that.



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More importantly, we then started to liaise with our voluntary sector colleagues as well as local government colleagues to try to understand what was going on. We are a member of the Alliance for Racial Justice. There are around 16 national race equality organisations. One of the questions we raised was, "Who is in touch with the Government? Who is speaking to the Government?" Shockingly, for us, none of us had been approached; not a single one had been approached. Eventually, I think on the Friday of the riots, we were told that there had actually been a meeting on the Wednesday but none of us had got an invitation. That worried us, particularly as we had reached out to local government. We had asked the Mayor of London to say something reassuring, and he did, and so on. So that was a worry.

We then moved on to the longer-term issue, which is about trying to understand not only the drivers but perhaps what we can do to prevent it from happening again, because we were quite clear that it was likely that events would spark off again. While we did not predict Ballymena and Larne, it was not a surprise to us either and we certainly were not surprised by what happened on Friday night at the Islamic Centre in Belfast as well. It is part of a longer-term trend because we are not taking national action. Hopefully, what the Committee does in trying to garner national action to address both racism and male violence is going to be a key part of the response.

Q6 Sarah Smith: Would you also point to some of the other longer-term causes being increasing levels of inequality, and particularly in parts of the country where there are such huge levels of inequality between different regions and different parts of the country as well as between communities and within communities themselves? Do your research and discussions point potentially to that also being one of the longer-standing cause? Alongside that, do you think we do not have integration right, and that that has left communities that live alongside each other not having that understanding of each other?

Jabeer Butt: Inequality is a key driver. Analysis that *The Guardian* published suggested that seven of the 10 poorest areas in the country were areas where riots did take place. I think that there is clear evidence of that, particularly when that inequality is weaponised and mobilised: "The reason you are experiencing these hardships is because of that group there" and that finger-pointing that tends to be a part of it.

I am not sure it is an issue of integration. I think that is a trope that does not have much evidence behind it. If we look at places like Bradford, where there were no riots, you have to say, "Really poor communities, living from hand to mouth often, yet that did not happen there".

We heard from speakers from Bradford that one of the key things they have done since 2002 is to invest time, energy and effort to build up trust and communication in the different parts of the local community, whether it is the police, the local authority, the health service, or the mosques, churches and so on.



Because that trust had built up, when the rumours spread about particular marches or particular groups turning up during that week, it was quickly sent upwards, but also messages came downwards about, "We're going to take action to ensure that nothing happens in those areas". That reassurance came through, and it was believed because that trust had taken place. I am not sure it is integration. Inequality clearly is a part of it, but if we undermine the structures that are able to respond to it, we are going to struggle.

Q7 Sarah Owen: Thank you, Jabeer. That is very much what I would say happened in Luton, where I represent. We have had our problems with the far right, and we have a diverse community, but it is that speed and that trust, when the local authority, the police and the community leaders work together to ensure that that does not happen. But it is an active choice to do that. How do we standardise that approach in Luton and that you talked about in Bradford, that trust and that speed of action? How do we standardise that across the country so that we ensure that we are much more proactive rather than reactive?

Jabeer Butt: We have to take the lessons around social cohesion and neighbourhood belonging and forget about this thing that we have developed called community cohesion. The World Health Organisation has been quite clear that those places where social cohesion—particularly built around belonging to neighbourhoods—is fostered and developed, end up being places where, even when there is inequality, people tend to get along because they actually see themselves as being in the same boat rather than believing the reason they are in one boat is because of others, and so on.

That social cohesion requires us to be able to have those conversations. Bradford invested lots of time and energy to develop those conversations and had done it over a period of time. Because if you say tomorrow, "Let's talk to the community in Luton" or "Let's talk to the community in Ealing or Walthamstow", the likelihood is the first reaction you are going to get is, "Why now? We have been here for so long, why is it that you suddenly want to talk to us now?"

You have to invest that time and energy, and you have to be transparent. You have to stick to the words that you are actually going to take action, and so on, because there is that Dutch proverb, isn't there, that, "Trust arises at a walk but leaves on a horse". When you lose it, it is actually very difficult to bring it back.

Baroness Shaista Gohir: I just want to add that I do not think we should have to be in the situation where we have to react with speed. We should not have these situations in the first place. Inequality is a part of the story and that has been weaponised. There are public figures who, rather than actually dealing with inequalities, are scapegoating people and that has been happening over a period of time.



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The National Police Chiefs' Council reported, "Actually, it was disinformation on social media", but that has been happening over a period of time, and I would say in more recent times. I would say there is probably three phases. First, it was around Brexit, 2015-16, when there was a lot of negative narrative about Muslims and migrants. Then from 2020 onwards, just after Boris Johnson was elected, there were particular Conservative politicians who, as time went on, were negative about migrants and Muslims and that negativity was normalised.

Then there was another phase, I would say, when Elon Musk took over Twitter towards the end of 2023, when the moderation was almost non-existent and a lot of people were put back on the platform who had been banned from the platform. On top of all that, the previous Government did not do anything to challenge those negative narratives. In fact, those negative narratives were being normalised by the politicians themselves.

To date, the code of practice for politicians has not been strengthened and then Labour was in Opposition. I have to say that I expected Labour to be more vocal in challenging some of those counter-narratives, and they were not that vocal. When it came to, say, antisemitism they were very vocal but, in comparison, despite this rise in hatred, I felt there was a silence, really.

To sum it up, it would be the combination of politicians, public figures, social media platforms, who sit in the comfort of their home and say these inflammatory words, and they put three types of people in harm's way. Most of them were white males, working class, who ended up getting themselves into trouble and are now in prison. Then there were the police, who were put in harm's way because of those words and, thirdly, Muslims and those who were perceived as Muslim being subject to hatred, all because of people who were either hiding behind social media or were public figures. We know who they are, but nothing is being done to challenge them.

Chair: Yes. I am just mindful of time. There is quite a lot that we still need to get through, so I am going to try to move on with our agenda items. We will bring you in later, Carrie.

Q8 Sarah Smith: In my wonderful constituency in Hyndburn, about 15% of my community are Muslim. We had this special moment in the horribleness of the riots when it was captured on video, people just coming out of the pub offering a hug to the Muslims who were going past because they wanted to make a presence in our town centre to make sure that the riots did not kick off, which fortunately they did not. I would love to hear more from the panel about what you have heard about how it affected British Muslims across the country last year and that first-hand experience from our Muslim neighbours.

Imam Ibrahim Hussein: My community are so worried. The kids come to learn in the mosque and the ladies come to pray, and the men are now making sure that they are escorted, or they stay at home because they



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are so worried. They are worried themselves. They do not know what is going to happen next.

Not so long ago I had a phone call from the police telling me that some of the far right were celebrating Hitler's birthday, or something like that. One of them was from Southport. They said, "We found leaflets and stuff like that and weapons". They were telling me, "Nothing happened, so you don't need to warn the people". But I feel that the people have to take that into consideration, and I keep telling them that every day: "When you are walking, coming to the mosque, you have to have your eyes open because you don't know what is going to happen behind your back or somebody passing by in a car or something like this".

There is a lot of anxiety, fear, and worries. People are saying, "Shall we come to the mosque or not?", or, "Shall we just forget about the lessons for now?" and so on. These are things that are actually happening to the Muslim community. Of course, we are a very small community in Southport. There are not a lot of Muslims there, so we are not really visible.

Chair: A close-knit community.

Imam Ibrahim Hussein: We are not very visible, but there is still a lot of hatred.

Baroness Shaista Gohir: I just want to add that, even if you are not in those areas where the riots were, Muslims are feeling traumatised. Others do not feel safe, but they are also made to feel that they are the threat to security and safety, and they are made to feel that they are not British and that they do not belong here. What is interesting is that among NHS staff who are treating people every day, there are a large number of Muslims working in the NHS. Interestingly—I don't know whether you know this fact—Muslims make up 6.5% of the population, but the proportion of doctors who are Muslim is 18% to 19%. They are getting hostility from the patients that they are treating, so that is going to impact integration. Integration, when it is talked about, is almost like a one-way street where Muslims have to integrate; but, actually, the feeling of hostility is a two-way street.

I want to give an example of my organisation. We get a silly email every few years, like a hate email, but we just dismiss it. Every few years we will get one. In Christmas and December time—and there was a lot of rhetoric going on at that time by politicians—suddenly we had a spate of several hate emails, which we had to report to the police. The police were not taking it seriously. We had to say, "No. We want this logged. We are being threatened." That has not happened to us before. We actually had one yesterday as well, so something has changed. We have had to take staff photos off our website. There is just mine on there at the moment. We have also had to take the sign off from outside of our offices.

Q9 **Sarah Smith:** To follow up on that, I would be interested to hear more



about how you think the mistrust of the police and local authorities can play a role in how and where those riots took place, but also in how we tackle it going forward. I guess there are two sides to that, aren't there, in terms of both sides—both communities, if you like—having that mistrust potentially? I would be interested to know more about that.

Baroness Shaista Gohir: We did a survey afterwards and Muslims really commended the police. They said that they thought that the police response was good, the community and the police responses coming together. I am in Birmingham, so we were not affected. There was disinformation and there were rumours that the far right were coming into Birmingham. That led to young Asian men coming out wearing face masks and getting themselves ready, so there was a little bit of trouble and they smashed some windows, but very quickly the community and the police defused that, and they apologised and said, "We will pay for the damage that we've done". You probably have more to say, I think.

Imam Ibrahim Hussein: I have a little story.

Chair: Can I bring Carrie in briefly?

Imam Ibrahim Hussein: Yes, of course.

Carrie Alderton: Thank you, Chair. If it is okay I am going to try to speak to the last few questions. I welcome what Shaista said about other communities and how they have been impacted as well; while it is important that we are talking today about the impact on Muslim communities and asylum seekers, and of course they were overtly targeted, I think that it would be irresponsible as an interfaith organisation if I did not mention some of the targeting that happened outside of these communities as well. For example, Sikhs, Hindus, and others shared fear at being mistaken for Muslim. There were anti-Semitic actions at some marches, and even white immigrants felt uncertainty about how welcome they are in the UK.

Some Muslims that we have been speaking to, some of our community members, are expressing frustration over the expectation that they must continually apologise for the actions of some of their community members. We have heard that people are in this double bind, especially in the last year. They fear that speaking their mind and talking about their experiences means they will lose their jobs. At the same time, they are facing so much more hate and fear than they have ever faced before. They are being silenced, and they are being sidelined.

Some of the perspectives that came up in our community listening circles, for example, were, "I felt scared seeing videos on social media. I was always hearing they"—the people writing—"might come here and might hurt us. We heard that when you were sleeping, they will burn your house down. My daughter did not feel safe in our new home. She worried we might get hurt at any time".



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I want to say at this point it is incredibly important that we listen to the diversity of experiences in Muslim communities and across faith communities and other communities in the UK and asylum-seeking communities. Muslims are not a monolith. Immigrants are not a monolith. Asylum seekers are not a monolith. It is vital that we listen to the diversity of the lived experiences, and I also think it is vital that we listen to the perspectives of the people who were rioting.

I want to come back to this point about inequality. Absolutely, we believe that the riots were not an isolated event. They were a culmination of long-term social, economic and political tensions. Factors include economic deprivation, anti-immigrant sentiment, and the nexus of xenophobia and Islamophobia.

I want to raise attention to what some of the people said to us in our research, which is that the tendency to categorise them all as far right or racist actually alienated them, particularly when they protest out of frustration rather than hate. We need to listen to their concerns and understand them. One of our respondents argued, "I was there because I feel like my community is ignored, not because I agree with everything that the others were saying." We will understand much better the complexity and the reality of what is going on if we listen to the complexity of lived experiences, but people having the opportunity to feel heard is also liberating and restorative.

Q10 Sarah Smith: Finally, before handing back to you, Chair, do you believe that the Government provided adequate support to communities after the riots? What role could the Government play in future going forward to help prevent more riots from occurring?

Baroness Shaista Gohir: I would like to say something on that. They were provided some local pots of funding, but you need a national action plan rather than just a sticking-plaster. For example, there was no action taken to increase reporting of hate crimes: 80% do not report hate crimes, so you do not actually know the scale of it. No action was taken to improve the safety of Muslim women, who are most vulnerable. Lots of money being made available to protect mosques; that is fine, but buildings are being prioritised over people. The code of conduct was not strengthened for politicians. The negative narrative was not challenged. The laws have not been strengthened. There seem to be no proposals to strengthen the laws, to bring hate crime under one umbrella. There have been recommendations by the Law Commission. There has also been no action to strengthen online safety. I know there was a Bill, but there are lots of holes in that. I do think all those actions need to be taken.

Jabeer Butt: I think the starting point has to be to call it for what it is, and if you do not do that you will come up with solutions that will not work. Too many Ministers, including the Prime Minister, have failed to talk about the racism and Islamophobia that drove those riots. If you do not identify that, you will struggle to come up with a solution that will work. Equally importantly, we are developing things like a resilience plan



and so on, which actually does not address some of the key issues that drove those riots and will probably end up seeing them repeated on our streets. There is very little attention being paid to male violence and those men seeing violence as being a legitimate and valuable way of achieving their aims and so on.

We have to develop a public health approach. It is odd to say this, but the serious violence strategy launched by the previous Government in 2018 was the nearest we came to actually having a public health approach to addressing serious violence. Unfortunately, it was never funded properly, it was never actually seen through, and we have never gone back to that. We have to see action at all those different levels, at a national level, at a local level and as at a relationship level if we are to try to bring about real change here. There is clear evidence that it works when it is done, but if we do not put the effort and money behind it, we will not see that change; we will end up seeing repetition again.

Sarah Smith: Carrie, you wanted to come in.

Carrie Alderton: Our communities were heartened to see the strong and swift response from police and Government to protect them and sentence rioters in the aftermath of the summer 2024. However, is this enough? We have noticed a lack of solutions outside of the criminal justice system and outside of securitisation of places of worship. Where are the opportunities for healing, repairing harm and relationship building? Where is the national outrage and an organised political response to tackle the root causes of Islamophobia and xenophobia? Why are the Government not projecting a more positive, hope-filled vision about the beauty and value inherent in living in a diverse society?

Instead—this is from my community members—the political message that sticks with us is that immigration will result in an island of strangers. We have seen that dehumanising language about asylum seekers makes us strangers. We have seen that Islamophobia and a lack of adequate responses to it—investment in dialogue and interfaith social action, community outreach, restorative justice, youth services and RE—make us strangers. In responding primarily through the lens of security and justice, just addressing the violence, the opportunity for community restoration and healing and identifying the root causes of the problems was missed.

We sidestepped the opportunity to reckon with the ideological, political and cultural context that produced the riots; therefore, society is left even more divided and the conditions are just as ripe for another riot to take place.

Chair: Thank you for that, Carrie.

Q11 **Joe Powell:** That is a good segue to the next part, which is some of the lessons that came from the community response that could be positive in terms of learning. We saw the very heartening response and the support



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from some parts of the community. I know in my constituency there was immediately an interfaith meeting at the mosque that brought faith leaders across from all faiths to gather and stand in solidarity with the Muslim community. What lessons do you think can be learned from that part of what happened last summer—starting with you, Imam?

Imam Ibrahim Hussein: I think we should support and encourage this opening up to the community. We would have loved in Southport to do that a long time ago, and we did communicate with Holy Trinity, Father Garner. He wanted to come and bring the community. He said, “We have never seen a mosque before; can we come?” That was about 10 years ago. About 50 of them came and had a good time, sat down, asked questions and had something to eat and something to drink, and they left very happy. Then they called us into the church, and we went to the church and we again got exactly the same treatment.

The same thing happened in the synagogue. Father Sidney, I think his name was, he was a lovely old Rabbi. He has passed away unfortunately now, but he also said, “I would like to come to the mosque. I have never been to the mosque, and I am an old man” and so on. We said, “Please come in”. He came and had a good time, and he invited us back. So we had this exact communication between us before, like 10 years ago. We would have loved to invite everybody or have an open day because there are a lot of open days offered throughout the year to invite people to the mosque. Our facilities do not allow for that, so we were shy of doing it because we cannot do much of that.

However, when the community came together in the morning after, it was heart-warming to see all this offer of support and love and messages and flowers and all this; it was absolutely heart-warming. We know our community are fine. We never had any problem with our community before. In Southport particularly, we have been there for about 30 years. In those 30 years we might have reported about three incidents to the police—in 30 years, three incidents. Now, since, we have had about six incidents since last year and we are not even at a year yet. Things are only increasing. Although the community is lovely, there are a few pockets there that have hatred in them, and we have to deal with that.

Baroness Shaista Gohir: I think we need more positive storytelling. We need initiatives that also challenge those stereotypes about Muslims and highlight the contributions that Muslims are making, because there is a lot of misinformation about Muslims that can then result in what we saw. Muslim Women’s Network, without any funding—we did not want to wait for funding—launched Muslim Heritage Month in March. That is all about highlighting the positive contributions that Muslims are making, men and women, through British history to the present day, across different sectors.

It cannot be just Muslims talking to each other; it needs mainstream organisations that have reach to be involved, so we then try to target social media companies like X and TikTok, football clubs. We had a



roundtable in Parliament with the Premier League and football clubs, and they highlighted and shared good practice about how they were reaching out and engaging with their local communities, bringing them together, so you get the integration, but also capacity building them.

That then helps with social mobility as well. We will try to highlight good practice on that website—Muslim Heritage Month has its own website, which is muslimheritagemonth.org.uk.

Carrie Alderton: We noticed the areas that had invested time in building interfaith relations—as Ibrahim was saying—were much more resilient to the riots and could come together much faster after them, in the same way that schools that had invested in building relationships with their local diverse communities were much more resilient and knew how to handle it.

I wanted to bring something to your attention; I am sure you all saw the image of Imam Adam Kelwick, who hugged the protesters outside of his mosque in Liverpool. I think that for a lot of us was an image that encapsulated the understanding and restorative approach that can come and be motivated by faith, the love that can be motivated by faith and the bravery that can be motivated by faith. I want to say that that did not come from nowhere. Adam Kelwick has been working for years behind the scenes with people on the far right, building these relationships, having the tough conversations. It is only because of that and his experience of that that he was able to show that bravery.

I want to say at this point as well, for a lot of faith traditions—including in Islam—justice and restoration are inextricably linked. There is so much that we can learn from our faith communities to help us to make sure that our communities in general are more cohesive.

Jabeer Butt: A lot of very important points there to build on, but I think a key thing we have to remember is the response of the voluntary and community sector at that time, both at a local and national level, often led not only on challenging the narrative, but what should be done to address it. We have to be thankful for that—the rebuilding of the Southport library, for example, where lots of the voluntary sector there played a part in that, and the rebuilding of the Citizens Advice Bureau in Middlesbrough, where again the voluntary sector played a key part in that.

What we have to do is create a situation where the fragility that many of those organisations currently face is addressed, and addressed at a national level as well as a local level. We cannot carry on relying on those organisations operating on a shoestring without being able to take the action necessary for them to address racism and the Islamophobia that we saw.

Q12 **Joe Powell:** A brief follow-up to you, Jabeer; this is also a recommendation from the Grenfell inquiry about local resilience and



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response. I totally agree with you; it has to go down to the local level. Do you think the Government centrally are doing enough to do that, to push down that resilience and response to a local level?

Jabeer Butt: Unfortunately not. I think that the effort that is being put into the development of the covenant seemed to suggest that the Government were serious about developing that partnership with the voluntary sector, but what we have seen of late is a lack of investment in that sector. For want of a better term, where is the money? If there is not money that is going to be put into supporting that resilience it will not make much of a difference.

Chair: Sarah, you wanted to come in.

- Q13 **Sarah Owen:** Yes, thank you. I have two questions. The first, Baroness, comes back to what you said at the beginning about the Facebook comments. What you described there was clearly anti-Muslim racism or Islamophobia. We have talked about how there is not enough necessarily in terms of strengthening the laws and the processes that should go to support tackling this. It is hard to tackle something that is not defined, and to do that in a standardised way. How is the definition work going around the Government's call for a standardised definition of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism?

Baroness Shaista Gohir: I am one of the commissioners on the group to try to come up with a definition. The work is ongoing and we are supposed to conclude that in the next couple of months, so I cannot say any more. The terms of reference are clear. I think there is some disinformation about that, which I do want to challenge, that it is blasphemy law through the back door—it is not that—or that it will prevent talking about grooming gangs—it is not that. I think that, if we come up with a definition that is accepted by Government that will help to challenge anti-Muslim prejudice and that will hopefully have a knock-on effect.

- Q14 **Sarah Owen:** Do you think it will help with the targeting of support as well and the targeting of where more work needs to go? Because as much as we have heard that most of the hate crimes are not reported or recorded, even fewer are recorded accurately, particularly given there is no standard definition.

Baroness Shaista Gohir: Yes, 80% of hate crimes are not reported, but this is not just about hate crime. There are lots of micro-aggressions that are being reported when you are accessing services or when you are in the workplace. I try to get data from Acas and the EASS helpline and I got written responses, which is on my written questions profile in *Hansard*. Only a small number of Muslims, by the looks of things, contact those organisations. If you go to an employment tribunal with a faith-based case and you are a Muslim, the chances of success are very low. I think what a definition could potentially help is in these other settings, not just for hate crime.



- Q15 Sarah Owen:** Thank you. My last question is to you, Imam. My Committee—the Women and Equalities Committee—is looking forward to coming to Southport to visit and to see some of the work there. You talked about the work with the Rabbi. Unfortunately, none of us will be here forever. How do we ensure that that relationship you had is not based solely on the personalities and the good will of the people involved in the community work, but in the processes, so that you know that when you are no longer the Imam of Southport Mosque, that you will be leaving it in hands that have the support around them to ensure the community work continues?

Imam Ibrahim Hussein: Of course, when I leave, I do not know what is going to happen, but at the moment I am with an interfaith group coming from all sorts of religious and non-religious communities, and we all try to meet once every month or two months or so. I suppose if I can introduce that to whoever comes after me, hopefully that will carry on.

I must say that we always had a very good relationship with faith leaders everywhere. We had absolutely no problem. People know that there is no conflict between us and the Jews and the Christians and so on. There is no conflict at all. Even for those who do not believe in God, we still have no problem with them. It is a personal matter. However, that should not stop us from sitting together and having a cup of tea or having a discussion and so on. We are hoping that this will be encouraged, and we can sit down with more.

Can I say very quickly that since this thing we had about three open days. We invited people and they all came, and they had a very good time. We had about 500 people coming through and they all loved it and said, "You should do more of this", but how can we do more of this when we have not got the facilities to do it?

- Q16 Maya Ellis:** I want to pick up on a point, Jabeer, that you raised that I found interesting around male violence and the role of that in these riots. I do not expect a scientific answer to this question, but I want to get a sense of what proportion you feel was the male violence as opposed to racism. Do you think it is 50:50 in terms of the causes and the things that came together, or would you say that this was a channelling of male violence that would have found any outlet—it might not have been racism, but another prejudice?

Jabeer Butt: The way I look at it is that it is the racism that was the driver behind it, but your choice of what action you would take was, "I will use violence to achieve my aims, because I do not think getting involved in politics or protesting will do it. I will use violence because I see it as being valuable and viable. It will achieve my aim, and I might get away with it as well". That is often the driver there. I think it is linked but it is not that you could choose one option as opposed to another. It is a way of achieving your aim.

- Q17 Maya Ellis:** Do you think racism is a starting point and then there is male



violence that drives that? I am interested because you described, Carrie, earlier about the frustration and I wondered to what extent we feel that there is that frustration and rage and it could channel through any route. It could be racism, but it could be domestic violence, or other things, too.

Jabeer Butt: It would not be a surprise to me if we discovered that a number of those people who were on the streets using violence, they also use it in their family and use it in their communities in other settings. That is the reason for focusing on male violence, because it is still being seen as being valuable and viable in many settings.

Q18 **Maya Ellis:** Would you agree that, as much as we have to tackle some of the underlying racism, we also have to tackle the underlying frustration and rage that gets channelled into that violence?

Jabeer Butt: It is not underlying frustration and rage; it is seeing that this is a way of actually achieving your aims. That goes through lots of things that we need to do and that is why we keep talking about a public health approach. We need to focus on how people start their lives, we need to focus on what happens in education, we need to focus on what happens in other settings when you go to a football match and so on; if we do not take action in all those settings, we will continue to see violence as being a valuable and viable tactic.

Chair: I am mindful of time, so I will bring Carrie in very quickly, and then you, Imam.

Carrie Alderton: I think it is important to note as well that people are feeling left behind. That does come back to the point we were talking about earlier around inequality. When people are in that position, when they are struggling daily, it is so easy for them to be radicalised and it is so easy for them to be subject to these much simpler narratives about, "Muslims are the problem; asylum seekers are the problem". That is much easier to say and to believe than the very nuanced and complex answer to inequality in this country.

If I could make a point—I will be very quick, sorry—about the longer-term strategies, it is important that we talk about how local authorities can partner with faith communities and with organisations that are experts in facilitation and dialogue skills as well. If that partnership is set up right, that is something that can live on throughout the generations and continue to support communities as they go.

My last point is around contact theory, which is what a lot of good interfaith work is based on. A prerequisite for contact theory is that we enter the room as equals. It is very difficult for us to do good interfaith dialogue, even though we still manage it, but simultaneously we need to be tackling the root causes of oppression and inequality in the country, otherwise it is difficult for us to come together on a level playing field.

Imam Ibrahim Hussein: I am desperate to say that the misinformation and false narrative that is spread all over social media comes with a high



cost—not just physical, but emotional and so on. I am desperate to say that the social media bosses and the companies that run it, they should be made personally responsible to foot the bill, and not the taxpayer.

Chair: I can say I agree wholeheartedly with you on that last point, which is one of the points I made when we were discussing the Online Safety Bill in the last Parliament. Until social media execs are personally liable, they will not take this seriously.

I want to thank you all this morning for the fantastic work across all your respective organisations. I think it is important that we continue to recognise that a lot of that work goes on with charitable donations and a lot of that work has not been funded over the last few years, so we do value it. Thank you for your insights this morning.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Ted Cante, Sara Khan and Carly Walker-Dawson.

Q19 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the second part of our Select Committee one-off session on community cohesion. I am Florence Eshalomi; I know some of our guests came in a bit later after the first session started, so I will ask my colleagues to introduce themselves, please.

Maya Ellis: Maya Ellis, Ribble Valley.

Sarah Smith: Sarah Smith, Hyndburn.

Joe Powell: Joe Powell, Kensington and Bayswater.

Mr Will Forster: Will Forster, Woking.

Chair: Thank you for coming before the Select Committee this morning. You would have heard some of the discussions in the first panel as we were talking about the response and what happened in the aftermath of the riots, which is coming up to a year very soon. We have a range of different questions we will ask this morning. I will hand over to my colleague, Maya.

Maya Ellis: Thank you very much for coming in today. You will have heard some of the responses so far and I know that you have all done a lot of work and research in this space. As an opening question I would like to hear from you: how do you think we are doing when it comes to social cohesion in the UK? How are we performing?

Chair: My apologies—I should have asked our guests to introduce themselves, please.

Professor Cante: I am Ted Cante. I have been working on community cohesion for about 25 years, since my report into the riots in northern



towns in 2001, in various capacities. I now advise Belong, which is the national charity for cohesion and integration.

Dame Sara Khan: Good morning, panel. My name is Sara Khan. I was the former counter-extremism commissioner, and after that in 2021 I was appointed by the Prime Minister to carry out a review into social cohesion and democratic resilience, which I published last year. I am doing a number of things at present, including being on the global board for More in Common, where we look at the issue of cohesion and democratic resilience in seven countries across the world and compare and contrast issues, a trustee for Demos, and lots of other issues that I will not bore you with.

Carly Walker-Dawson: Hi, nice to see you. I am Carly Walker-Dawson. I am interim co-CEO of Involve. Involve is the leading UK public participation charity. What we want to do is to build a more vibrant democracy where everyday people can have a say in how society works for us. We do that by delivering processes on the ground across all four nations in the UK. We also build the capacity of institutions and organisations and make the case for public engagement and decision making.

Chair: Back to you, Maya.

Q20 **Maya Ellis:** I am interested in how you think we are doing and performing, as it stands at the moment, in terms of community cohesion in the UK.

Carly Walker-Dawson: I think it is good to start with the big picture first of all. Last month, More in Common did some polling that suggests that about half of Britons feel disconnected from the society around them. That is quite significant. However, within that polling it is worth knowing that lower-income Britons feel significantly more disconnected and have less trust in their neighbours than those who are better off. Also Reform supporters and non-voters—probably unsurprisingly—are more likely than other voter groups to feel disconnected from society.

We know polarisation is pertinent right now to many communities, and when thinking about what factors underpin that, a common theme that we hear time and again working with communities on the ground is that there is this feeling of scarcity, that there is not enough to go around. We touched on that in the first panel as well. On a local level especially, communities are divided based on real, entrenched inequalities, whether real or perceived, in jobs, social security, public services and housing. Community cohesion takes time and energy, it is a long-term venture and it does not work well in a scarcity mindset.

At Involve we did a deep dive on the topic of community cohesion in 2008, so 15 or 20 years ago, but we have not seen a real shift towards greater community cohesion since then. You would expect in over 15 years to have seen some progress, but the findings of that research are



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more alive now than ever. We have worked with communities for over 20 years, and we do not just go through organised voluntary groups or community organisations; we work with members of the public who are not engaged on a community or civic level. Back in 2006, the Government wrote a White Paper concerning the future of local government and it called for more participation to help to build cohesive and self-confident communities.

We work with lots of local authorities across the UK and the participation referred to in that White Paper only happens usually in an isolated or one-off way; it is not a culture. It is certainly not embedded, apart from certain notable exceptions like Camden council, Wigan or Barnet. Our participatory processes show the potential for community cohesion when you meaningfully involve people in decision making and show them the power that they can have. That can build trust, confidence and cohesion both between community members and between institutions and members of the public.

For example, recently London Borough of Waltham Forest held a citizens' assembly on neighbourhood policing. This was the first of its kind and it contributed to an increase in trust in the police. Anecdotally, we have been told that that increased relationship between the police and the council supported the actions that work with the community, including responses to the summer riots last year. These processes are shown to build community cohesion between the public and institutions and between communities, and we know where community cohesion is high—and there are some good examples of that—authorities are perceived as legitimate, and members of the public have more openness towards engaging with other people.

We need to prioritise more processes like that. There is not enough of it happening and, if we do not do that cohesion on a real grassroots level with people who are not organised already, then we will see more unrest and we will see more people showing dissatisfaction like they did last summer.

Q21 **Maya Ellis:** Sara Khan, to you: I suspect that we will have a theme that there has been lots of reports and lots of things that have been recommended and not happened. I know that you did one last year, so I am interested to see what you think has come out of that, if anything. But if we are not moving on, what do you think the blockers are? What is stopping us from getting this right?

Dame Sara Khan: To answer your first question, because I think it is pertinent, when I started up my review, that was something I wanted to understand: what is the state of social cohesion in the country? You would hope and expect the communities Department to be able to answer that question and you would hope and expect Whitehall as a whole to be able to understand that question. To my disappointment, there is no comprehensive framework to assess the strength or weakness of social



cohesion, whether nationally or regionally across the country, and there is no analytical capability.

That is a problem. When I carried out my review, I had to rely on bits of different cohesion indicators: not just the horizontal social cohesion indicators about how we got on with each other, but the vertical indicators where we look at the relationship between the state and citizens. My conclusion, in the absence of such an important framework that is desperately needed, was that in the UK social cohesion is declining. We are seeing declining levels of civic engagement, declining levels of volunteering and declining levels of social capital.

If we look at the issue around democracy—which I have to say gives me sleepless nights and it is the thing that I worry about the most—we are seeing chronic democratic decline in the UK. Over the past four decades we have seen growing levels of distrust of the Government, political parties, the media, and so forth. For traditional bodies that have normally held a lot of trust, whether it is the police, the courts or the civil service, that trust is declining very rapidly. We know that voter turnout is consistently going downwards. There are a whole range of different indicators that point to me that we are in serious trouble.

I do not think—as you touched on—successive Governments have treated this with the seriousness that it deserves. I do not think the current communities Department has grappled with my review in the way that it needed to be grappled with. When you look at the global trend, for example, the World Economic Forum’s report in January, said that the top 10 issues that democracies will have to struggle with include misinformation and disinformation, division in societies, civil liberties and the erosion of freedoms and so forth. Those are serious challenges coming down the pipeline.

We know that there are massive socioeconomic grievances. There is anger around immigration. There are a whole range of concerns. I do not think we are dealing with those threats to cohesion in a way that the Government should be, and nor are we dealing with building societal and democratic resilience to be able to withstand them. Whether those threats come from foreign state actors or domestic actors, I am afraid we are in a pretty distressing state, and I do not think successive Governments have grappled with this in the way that they should be.

Q22 Maya Ellis: We heard in the previous panel that a lot of this is based on an underbed of inequality. If we put some of the points you said there to the Secretary of State, I can imagine some of the pushback would be that their focus initially is on tackling those deep inequalities—investing in social and affordable housing, investing in our communities in that way. Do you think that is a fair argument, to say that this Government are focusing on those foundational bits before they may be doing this next step, or do you think it has to be done at the same time?



Dame Sara Khan: The challenge is you cannot look at this through a piecemeal and siloed approach, and I think that has often been the case. If we look at the summer riots, the Government should not have been surprised at all by the summer riots because all the warning signs were flashing red. I wrote about smaller scale incidences in local towns and cities across the UK that happened years before. If you look at the causes, there are a multitude of issues. There are socioeconomic issues, deprivation and poverty in half of the cities where the riots took place. There are cases where I think in 12 out of 20 places there was real concerns around disillusionment with democracy, low voter turnout and data like that.

You saw the impact of misinformation and disinformation and how that was fuelling people to riot. There was the involvement of far-right extremist actors, who for far too long in this country have been allowed to operate with impunity. On a separate point, I did a review that showed how that is the case and why the Home Office for successive years have not done enough to outlaw neo-fascist and neo-Nazi groups that are fuelling this activity. The reality is you cannot separate one factor from the other, they are all linked and joined together, which is why my recommendation to the Government said that you need to build this joined-up approach to dealing with it.

If you want to understand the causes and what is driving this, you cannot just go, "Right, well, we will put the extremism strategy inside the Home Office and we will put cohesion into the communities Department" because in reality, as I have seen over the years, that has led to siloed approaches where Government do not have that data.

Q23 **Maya Ellis:** Ted, how are we doing?

Professor Cantle: I absolutely agree with Sara on those points. We are in a very serious situation now. To add to the problems that I was reviewing in 2001, where we were mainly dealing with localised issues, we now have a very difficult international situation relating to democracy, conspiracy theories and the growth of social media. It is far more difficult to deal with the issues on the ground than it was 20 years ago. The fact of the matter is that we have had no cohesion strategy. We have never had an integration strategy. We have no resilience strategy. We have no analytical data to make a judgement about the risks, as Sara has already mentioned. There is even no local tension monitoring strategy. This is not done at the local level in the way that it was at one time; it has been abandoned.

There is a danger we just focus on the 2024 riots, but think about what happened in Leicester in 2022. That should have been stopped. It should never have happened. If there had been a proper local tension monitoring programme owned by the partners in Leicester, there would have been an intervention much earlier, and I would have said that is true of all the recent riots that we have had. It is a complete failure. It is negligence at the local level.



There is a huge amount to be done. There is so much by way of underlying conditions, which have been mentioned, the loss of social capital in working class areas, the deindustrialisation of many communities, the competition for resources. We have had a 5 million increase in population over the last 10 or 12 years, which has not been mirrored with an increase in resources or in housing. The consequence of that is that migrants get the blame for the additional competition, but it is the failure of Government. Did we not notice that the population was increasing? Did we not notice that the housing market was heating up? Did we not notice the competition for resources in every community?

Then, as Sara has also alluded to, we have had the problem of social media. I think we concentrate too much on controlling social media rather than recognising that we have lost other media. We have lost local news sources. We are seeing the closing down of radio stations and local newspapers. The authority of local, trusted communication resources is being completely lost. Added to that, the lack of trust in our political system means that social media has nothing to compete with. The authoritative sources have been completely undermined.

We are in a very difficult situation, and having seen four or five such reports after each riot, I am hopeful that this time, as Sara suggests, we will begin to have a new, comprehensive national strategy that is long term and cross-party and is agreed.

Q24 Joe Powell: Going back to your point about trust, however we measure it, we can see that this has happened in lots of western democracies. It feels like we hear these micro-examples—Carly referenced a couple, and in the previous panel we heard some of them—where trust has been rebuilt. People have invested time in relations, they have rebuilt social capital and so on and so forth. Why is it, if we have those small, isolated examples, that it can never rise up the political agenda enough to be a priority? Why does the democratic process and improving that not come alongside delivery? It feels like you have this question of, “If we deliver well, people will have trust and faith in Government again”, but we do not think about the planning and the process. How can those two come together better? Is it the strategy you are talking about, or does it need to be something else?

Dame Sara Khan: One of my recommendations was to say to Government there should be a social cohesion and democratic resilience strategy. You do not separate the two, because I think the two are very much linked. That is critical, and again you can read in the review what that strategy looked like; I spelled out quite clearly what needs to be done. I do not think it is the case that, if you improve people’s living and their ability to live well, that will necessarily fix the problem. It is much deeper rooted.

If you improve people’s economic situation it will definitely help, but I do not think on its own it will fix the problem. You are seeing the social contract breaking down, so to speak. From my conversations around this



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place and elsewhere, I do not think Government know what to do about it. I do not think MPs necessarily know what to do about it, because it feels like such a huge problem. Ted outlined the issue around the media. The trust around media is fraying quite significantly. If people no longer trust the courts, which is what we are now seeing, that is a real problem. It is why I am concerned that we will see this chronic democratic decline.

I do not think the Government, for example, have a definition of democratic resilience. They do not look at this issue. It should be linked to social cohesion because of the vertical indicators, but from what I understand I do not think there is any grasp of what we can do as a country to try to improve that level of trust among our constituents. How do we get people more engaged in democracy? How do we uphold the rights and freedoms that are so essential to our democratic way of life when we know authoritarian states are almost every day seeking to undermine that, and they engage in activity that seeks to erode social cohesion?

Let us be very clear: there is not a plan to deal with that, despite all these indicators pointing to a very concerning position. The question is: why is there no plan? Why have the Government, for example, not responded to the review that I published last year? Those challenges will only get worse. It is not the case that we will have a sticking-plaster approach, where every time there is a riot we will deal with it, because you are completely ignoring the root issues that are feeding those riots. For me the summer riots were symptomatic of all the wider issues around cohesion and democratic resilience. With respect to many of the Select Committees that are focusing on the riots, it is a much deeper-rooted issue that we are not grappling with and discussing.

Chair: I am mindful of time, if we can speed up on both our questions and answers.

Q25 **Mr Will Forster:** Thank you, Chair; I will try to do that. Please can you state what you think the key factors were that led to the summer riots, and how can grievances that communities hold against each other and us be prevented to stop outbreaks of violence in the future?

Professor Cattle: We have to distinguish the triggers from the causes. We are very much aware of the triggers for the Southport riots, and they have been endlessly discussed. We have to look at the underlying causes, as Sara has suggested. At the moment we have failed to come up with any resilience-building strategy. We have failed to have the tension monitoring in place to understand some of the drivers of grievances. It is very difficult to respond to grievances unless you have some data, some knowledge of what is going on at a local level and some tools to deal with those grievances.

There is not any capacity at the local level—well, there is some capacity, and you have heard some great examples of that from the earlier panel, but it is a very low-level capacity in most communities—to deal with the



scale of the problems that we are currently facing. There has to be investment in those trusted community resources who can begin to deal with some of the grievances and come up with responses over a longer-term plan. I would say that closing down debates about those grievances, closing down social media, is not the answer to this. We have to deal positively, robustly and realistically with those grievances. There is too much emphasis, in my view, on controls rather than tackling the underlying issues. Even though they will be painful, that has to be addressed.

Dame Sara Khan: To add to that point, which comes on to your earlier point about the obstacles, I spoke to local authorities when I was carrying out my review, when they were dealing with these smaller tensions that were happening, disturbances, riots, protests, race-based incidents and so forth. It was clear that they were struggling. They had no idea how to deal with the issues that were causing the breakdown of social cohesion.

I went to Barrow-in-Furness, for example, and many of you may be aware of the challenges that the town faced following the woman—I can't remember her name—who was convicted for perjury because she falsely claimed she had been groomed by an Asian grooming gang, and the complete uproar it caused in that area. I remember speaking to the local authority and the local MP who said, "We thought we could turn to central Government who would tell us how we deal with this issue, because all hell was breaking out in our area, and we don't know what to do with it. We were scared of putting something out there or saying something that might worsen it and agitate people even more". When they looked to central Government, they realised there is nothing there, because central Government does not know how to deal with it. Every local authority I spoke to was dealing with conspiracy theories, disinformation, elected officials suffering from harassment and censorship to the extent where it was harming the ability of local councils to carry out their democratic mandate—they were all struggling.

When I carried out the review, I wanted to understand what the challenge is. First, when I looked at the national risk register and the national resilience framework that looks at the threats to the UK, none of the stuff that we are talking about appears on the risk register or the national resilience framework that sits inside Cabinet Office. The Home Office does not look at this, the communities Department does not look at this, so it falls through this gap. One of the issues I looked at was, despite the fact that we have had 20 years'-worth of reviews, commissions, inquiries and everything else, there are what I call the three Ps that act as obstacles: policy, practice and politics.

To very quickly touch on those, because again it is all in the review, which you can read, there are serious failings on the policy and the practice side of cohesion. We do not even have a standardised understanding of social cohesion—the Government do not have that. There is also a real concern around the politics; politicians themselves



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can behave in a way that either undermines social cohesion and inflames tensions, or they can behave in a way that brings communities together and addresses those issues.

Q26 Chair: Do you think that gives licence to some of the bad actors, as it were, for their behaviour?

Dame Sara Khan: It definitely does. I heard from local authorities everywhere I went that, if they heard Cabinet Ministers using language or descriptions or speaking in a certain way, they felt that other people could use that. If our political leaders will not behave and act like leaders, why should anybody else feel the need to hold the moral bar, so to speak?

Carly Walker-Dawson: I will not get into all the root causes—a lot of people have touched on those already—but we know that the riots were an outlet for frustration with the system and distrust in institutions. It is important to speak to people on the ground about why people engage with these. Tamworth council hosted some honest conversations after the riots, and they found that disorder in their area was in part an expression of issues that people felt had not been tackled that are difficult to talk about on a local level. That can be effects of migration on small towns, experiences of people fleeing persecution in the UK, but also frustrations around the cost of living crisis.

It is important to centre trust within this. We know that public trust is at an all-time low. The OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions last year showed that people in the UK who feel the current political system does not let people like them have a say tend to trust the Government 41% less than those who feel like they have a political voice. It is important that we are tackling the root causes of these riots, but to do that we need people to be able to have a voice and have a voice in real decisions that impact their lives. If they have that ownership over decisions that are being made and they are considered meaningfully in decision making, then they can be part of the solution. No amount of communication or incentivisation will get people on board, so that is what we need to do.

We are also seeing this worrying shift over the last year or two in perceptions of democracy. Whereas previously they have said, “Well, democracy, we agree with it in principle, it might not be working too well and performing too well but we believe in democracy fundamentally”, we are seeing polling is shifting in the last year or two where people are saying, “I don’t think democracy is for us”. That is worrying. One in five among millennials and gen Z said they would prefer a strong leader without elections to democracy in the FGS Global Radar data last year. This is not something that can wait; it is something that has to be tackled straight away, and people need to feel like they are part of the decisions that affect their lives.

Q27 Mr Will Forster: I have two follow-ups, if I may. Dame Sara, could you



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give some more information about what comments you think politicians have made, which you worry that potential future rioters might have in their head to justify their actions? To the whole panel: the Children's Commissioner—who I have worked with a fair bit—said recently that online misinformation, racism or other right wing influencers were not the main reason why some young people participated in the summer riots. Do you agree with that?

Dame Sara Khan: On your first question, when I carried out my review the most common issues that came up that people were sharing with me, and that came out through the public consultation, were when politicians talk about race or religion or immigration—those were the three that were the most frequent issues—and how they were discussed. For example, if the grooming gangs issue is discussed, which is a legitimate issue to be raised, if politicians are talking about Pakistani communities as if all Pakistani men are somehow guilty of this, or homogenising the language around Pakistani communities, that is incredibly dangerous and frankly stupid. It does not help anybody. That literally gives bait to extremists, white nationalists and others, who want to use that language to justify their ideological cause, to undermine social cohesion and in some cases to radicalise young people into terrorism.

Those are the three major issues that we have seen. Obviously immigration and all these issues are completely legitimate topics, and we should have a thorough debate about them, but I think politicians have extra onus on them to talk about them in a responsible way that does not inflame the issue and to be very honest about the issues. Dame Louise Casey's review last week about having a proper discussion about the ethnicity of perpetrators in grooming gangs is something I have been calling for for 10 years. It is absolutely needed, but politicians have to talk about in a very nuanced and careful way, so that we are honest and open about it, but we are not inflaming things. I do not think that is particularly difficult. I will leave the other question to my colleagues.

Carly Walker-Dawson: Thank you for the question on the Children's Commissioner. I found that report insightful and the action to speak to all those children involved. We have to remember these are children as well. What was interesting was that note about curiosity and that these young people wanted to be part of a community, and it is that mistrust and animosity towards the police.

We know that a lot of this involvement was grounded in mistrust but them wanting to engage in something—obviously this is not the right outlet that we would like to see—is something that we need to pick up on. How can we channel that wanting to be involved in something into different streams and different means? We know that youth services have been cut, we know that a lot of people are struggling on a material level, but how can we use those experiences to generate them getting involved—again, coming back to decisions around their lives—so they have an outlet for that frustration as well?



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Professor Cantle: Can I respond to the Children's Commissioner point as well? I agree that was probably not the direct cause, but there is an underlying issue with resilience of children and their understanding of these issues. Again, I think this is a failure of recent years. There is an existing duty to promote community cohesion in schools. That was enacted in 2006. Unfortunately, it was taken out of the Ofsted inspection regime by the last Government and it has never been inspected since, yet that duty would have contributed a great deal to building resilience in younger people.

I was recently in Sunderland where the FE college is doing a great job. They are in some ways dealing with the problems that they inherit through primary and secondary schools. A 17-year-old there pointed out that while there is a focus on physical safeguarding, there is no focus at all on digital safeguarding. This failure to address the problem at an early age—it probably should be addressed at preschool, never mind through the school period—is critical. My experience in the past, when I was appointed by the Home Secretary and worked in the Home Office for two or three years, was that DFES took no notice of that, and it took quite a long time to persuade them to introduce the duty to promote community cohesion.

We have to focus on the role of education through schools, through FE and HE as well, and build that resilience. There is a huge job to be done in educational terms, and at the moment I am afraid it is rather neglected.

Q28 **Joe Powell:** You probably already have started this, but are there any other recommendations you would have for a national strategy on community cohesion? Going back to a point you made, Dame Sara, what department should own it and who should be involved in developing it?

Dame Sara Khan: I put forward 15 recommendations, and we have not got enough time, so I do not necessarily want to answer that. There were a number of things. For example, I suggested a taskforce that deals with live incidents as they are happening, a cross-Department taskforce across Whitehall that would try to deal with some of those live incidents, as well as a strategy and what that would look like.

I also advocated for an office for social cohesion and democratic resilience, because, in all honesty, after more than 20 years'-worth of us banging on about social cohesion, I had lost confidence that Government could deliver on cohesion. I reached the conclusion that it is much better to have an independent arm's length body that measures social cohesion.

I started my review in 2021, and I think I had five different MHCLG Secretaries of State during that time, and in that time you had Ministers who cared about it and others who did not. For me, this issue is so important it should not be dependent on whether a Minister is interested in this policy area or not. The fact is that we do not have data or a good understanding of what works. I came to the conclusion that you need an



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office for social cohesion and democratic resilience that can inform and, regardless of what is happening out there in the political world and in the news cycle, can carry on with its work in a way that is ultimately needed.

There are a number of recommendations—I cannot remember what your second question was.

Joe Powell: It was about the Department; should it be in MHCLG? You have said it could be arm's length. If it was not arm's length, then—

Dame Sara Khan: I think I have answered that question and how I feel about it. There is nothing to date, from what I have seen—and I am continuing to have conversations with that Department—that has given me confidence to think they have even grappled with the report, or that they understand that. Why is it you still do not have a cohesion assessment framework? Why is it that you still do not have good evidence of the data that works? Why is it that, as a Department, you lack institutional knowledge because of constant civil service churn and turnover? It is incredibly frustrating.

Professor Cantle: I alluded to this earlier, that if it is sat in the Home Office, for example, it does not mean that other Departments will follow. The progress we made in the early 2000s was when John Denham, who was the then Minister responsible, set up an interdepartmental ministerial group with oversight. That gave ownership to all the other Departments, and we began to make real progress. I think it does not matter which Department it starts in, as long as there is that commitment across government. I do think, though, as Sara has said, that the most urgent thing is to set up some national unit oversight body that can work with local authorities, local police services and the voluntary and community sector in each area.

There is, believe or not, a national tension monitoring unit in place at the moment. They are doing a great job, but they have very limited facilities. They obtain 70% of their information from two national charities, virtually nothing from local authorities or at the local level at all. This is where we have to start. I would add to that that you then need to roll out the practice, the cohesion strategy, the integration strategy and the schools strategy, but it has to start with that clear, led strategy from the very top.

Dame Sara Khan: The other option is you have something that sits inside Cabinet Office that co-ordinates across all Departments and brings in the data from all different Departments. That is another option, because again if you look at the way national security is led from the Cabinet Office—

Carly Walker-Dawson: Yes, and the resilience.

Dame Sara Khan: —you could do something. Again, with a national resilience framework, it is democratic resilience, and that form of



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resilience is not included as part of that framework. Again, you could either create something as a parallel and data and resources can be shared, or you could have something like an outside arm's length body that deals with this and holds the Government to account.

Carly Walker-Dawson: A national strategy will only work if it involves people, in both its development and its implementation. People need to be done with and not done to. If this is seen as a top-down strategy that is being done to local communities, people will not engage with it. I think there is a real opportunity to centre engagement within this and for whoever is holding this to be a champion within that. We know if people are involved in setting the agenda, in terms of both decision making and implementation, we get better decisions, it builds trust and essentially it gives a strategy legitimacy.

For us, having that public participation grounded in it is important on two levels. The first is that it addresses imbalance so that more voices, not just the loudest ones in communities, are heard in decision making. The second is about building those meaningful relationships across different communities and groups. There is not a magic bullet for creating or sustaining community cohesion; it is something that has to be long term and place based. That is why, for us, it makes sense that it would be situated in MHCLG, but working closely with other Departments, because it will not work unless you are working on a local level with this. We know that each community has its own challenges and its own opportunities, so it cannot just be a national strategy. It needs to think about local areas and all the devolved nations.

Chair: I think it is fair to say there is a lot on the new Government's agenda and on their plate to deal with. However, what today's panel has highlighted is that this is a national issue that should be taken at the heart of government into the Government Departments, making sure there is focused funding so that we are looking at the whole issue around the social contract and community cohesion. As we draw this meeting to a close, it would be remiss of me not to remember the three girls who tragically lost their lives on 29th July—Bebe King, Elsie Dot Stancombe, and Alice da Silva Aguiar—as we come up to that first anniversary, remembering them and their families and the community in and around Southport.

Thank you to our guests for coming this morning and giving us some key areas to highlight and think about. I will bring this meeting to a close.