Welsh Parliament
Equality and Social Justice Committee

Co-operation over Conflict
Wales must Act

October 2025

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About the Committee

The Committee was established on 23 June 2021. Its remit can be found at:
www.senedd.wales/SeneddEquality

Current Committee membership:

Committee Chair:
Jenny Rathbone MS
Welsh Labour

Mick Antoniw MS
Welsh Labour

Jane Dodds MS
Welsh Liberal Democrats

Altaf Hussain MS
Welsh Conservatives

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Sioned Williams MS
Plaid Cymru

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Terminology

An explanation of terms and language used in this report.

Social cohesion: Our inquiry adopts the definition set out by Dame Sara Khan: Social cohesion is concerned with how we live well together in a diverse democracy and how we peacefully navigate disagreements for the common good, despite the differences among us.[1]

Far-right: Our inquiry adopts Hope not Hate's definition of a blanket term used for groups to the right of mainstream politics. It is also the terminology used by many of our witnesses.

Freedom-restricting harassment: intimidating, threatening and abusive forms of harassment that are directly causing people and organisations to censor themselves or avoid exercising their democratic rights out of fear.

Migration and Resettlement lead: government official who oversee support for sanctuary seekers in Wales.

Asylum Seeker: a specific legal term. An asylum seeker is a person who has fled their home country and has applied for asylum in another country, but whose application has not yet been processed or decided. They are "seeking asylum," which is the legal right to seek protection in another country from persecution. A person remains an asylum seeker until their claim is either accepted (and they become a refugee) or rejected.

Sanctuary Seeker: a broader, more compassionate term that is not a legal status. It emphasizes that a person is looking for safety and protection, or "sanctuary." City of Sanctuary UK and others prefer this term because it focuses on the person's humanity and their need for safety, rather than their immigration status. It can be used to describe asylum seekers, refugees, and other people who have been forced to migrate, regardless of their legal standing.

Disinformation: the deliberate creation and/or sharing of false information with the intention to deceive or mislead.

Misinformation: the inadvertent sharing of false information.

[1] Dame Sara Khan, The Khan Review: Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience (March 2024)

Chair's foreword

A crisis of trust in politics to resolve a crippling cost of living crisis amidst diminishing public resources is adding fuel to a tinder box of discontent which threatens to undermine our democracy.

Flags were traditionally used to unite people in a common cause; now they have become interpreted as symbols of division, intimidation and threats of violence.

Democratic discourse is an imperfect, messy business but the alternative is decision making by brute force where the biggest bully imposes their will on the rest of us.

As elected politicians from four political parties, it is our duty not to run away from these challenges but identify solutions to damp down this smouldering bonfire of dissatisfaction and mitigate against malign attempts to fan the flames of division.

Dealing with misinformation that is easily amplified on social media requires the leadership of governments locally, nationally and across the four nations.

We gathered plenty of evidence about the far-right's attempts to offer simplistic solutions to complex problems, including ones which undermine the rule of law. This has caused front line workers fearing for their own safety and that of those they seek to support.

Wales has strong foundations of cynefin and croeso to draw on. Our report contains many good examples of people coming together to resolve conflict, helping each other in difficult times, and strengthening community cohesion.

We must act now to prevent whole communities going up in flames.

Co-operation over conflict: Wales must Act.

Jenny Rathbone MS
Chair of the Equality and Social Justice Committee

Recommendations and conclusions

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government should establish an Expert Group on Social Cohesion to devise a set of immediate, medium- and long-term actions. The group should bring together representatives from local government, police, cohesion teams, the third sector, Strategic Migration Partnership and those with a lived experience to develop those actions. We suggest this work mirrors the urgent approach the Welsh Government took to the cost-of-living crisis. It is hard to overstate the urgency of this work, and we expect the government to move with unprecedented speed to implement this recommendation. The Expert Group should be established by mid-November and report before the end of the year. The work of the Expert Group on Social Cohesion should include:

- Developing a national overarching social cohesion guiding principles document, similar to the Nation of Sanctuary '10 principles'.
- Adopting a framework for measuring social cohesion and monitoring the work of the community cohesion programme, considering the work of Oldham Council.
- Reviewing funding for the cohesion teams, agreeing what is needed beyond March 2026.
- Enabling new and improved opportunities for sharing best practice nationally across the public, private and third sectors. This could include the development of a best practice guide. ..... Page 31

Recommendation 2. The Welsh Government must move forward at pace and take action to protect community spaces. The Committee's findings support the introduction of a Community Right to Buy and should be considered together with the Community Assets Commission's report expected in the Autumn. The Welsh Government should update the Committee on the next steps by the end of 2025.....Page 39

Recommendation 3. The Welsh Government should assume a leadership role for dealing with misinformation and disinformation. This should include:

- working in collaboration with local authorities, community cohesion teams and the third sector, ensuring greater awareness of resources and guidance available and co-ordinate consistent messages.

- commissioning the HateLab Dashboard or a similar monitoring service to highlight flashpoints or concerns which require action and resources.
- exploring the work undertaken by Oldham Council to address misinformation and disinformation. ..... Page 44

Recommendation 4. In response to the increasing threats to social cohesion from the rise of extremist views and activities, the Expert Group on Social Cohesion should pinpoint the challenges this poses for Wales and identify best ways to tackle far-right activities which can create division and ultimately lead to community disturbances which we saw in Llanelli. ..... Page 53

Conclusion 1. . Our report provides an important spotlight on the challenges in Wales, the opportunities to strengthen cohesion and examples of good practice. Given the increasing urgency of threats to social cohesion and the work taking place at a UK level, we expect the Cabinet Secretary to provide an immediate update to the Senedd on the outcomes of this collaborative work by the four nations. This should include an update on the Plan for Neighbourhoods, the recently announced Pride of Place funding and the meeting with the four nations and any other relevant actions the Welsh Government is taking. ..... Page 15

Conclusion 2. Unfortunately, the latest analysis of the socio-economic duty suggests more work is needed to support implementation. Given the prominence of the duty in the Cabinet Secretary's evidence we suggest the Welsh Government reflects on the evidence of the EHRC and update the Committee on the actions it will take following its review. ..... Page 34

Conclusion 3. The increasing challenges relating to declining trust in politicians and institutions means actions to boost democratic health in Wales need to be taken at pace. The Welsh Government should prioritise its work to involve citizens in decision making through deliberative democratic methods. It should continue its work with experts on democratic health and the Future Generations Commissioner to ensure those working across the public sector have the skills and resources to support effective participation and involvement. ..... Page 41

Conclusion 4. All politicians should act responsibly when addressing issues relating to sanctuary seekers. The Welsh Government must provide clear leadership in how it communicates such messages and create dialogue with the general public, particularly those who have concerns about the accommodation of asylum seekers and the use of hotels. Accommodation for asylum seekers will continue to be needed across the UK. The Welsh Government should continue to

collaborate with the UK Government to pilot alternative housing and to avoid the use of hotels, but it must always do this through consultation, engagement and communication with local authorities, the third sector and local communities.
..... Page 50

1. Background

The Equality and Social Justice Committee agreed to explore the issue of social cohesion in light of rising tensions within communities in Wales and elsewhere in the UK. Unaddressed, isolated incidents could lead to mass civil unrest. In the absence of a robust evidence base on social cohesion we sought to understand the challenges faced, the impact on relationships in communities, and between citizens and the state. Our report, Co-operation over Conflict: Wales must Act, sets out the key threats to social cohesion and the urgent actions needed to build on the positive work already taking place to strengthen the cohesiveness of our communities.

1. We gathered evidence via a written consultation, focus groups, round table discussion, visits to community projects and oral evidence sessions in person and on Zoom. Full details are available in the Annexes.

2. The key questions we considered – known as terms of reference – are available in Annex 1. Further background to the inquiry is available on the inquiry webpage.

3. Our sincere thanks to all those who contributed to our work.

Social cohesion in the UK – a tinderbox of division

4. The killing of three young girls in Southport in July 2024 led to community disturbances and riots in over 35 locations in England and Northern Ireland.[2]

[2] British Future, Belong and Together Coalition, After the Riots (September 2024)

5. Public outrage at this heinous crime soon degenerated into the targeting of Muslims, asylum seekers and visible minorities in the worst outbreaks of civil unrest and violence in the UK for decades. These incidents, driven by misinformation and rising anti-immigrant sentiment, have raised concerns about cohesion across the UK and brought this issue into sharp focus.

6. Following the riots leading experts warned that without action, future violence is likely.[3] The summer of 2025 saw civil disturbances and protests break out again, mainly in England and Northern Ireland, targeting hotels housing asylum seekers. In Wales protests took place outside a hotel in Rhoose, Vale of Glamorgan and to oppose possible plans to provide accommodation for asylum seekers in Mold, Flintshire.

7. On 13 September 2025, over 100,000 people attended the so-called 'Unite the Kingdom' rally in London organised by the far-right. With 26 police officers injured, four of those seriously, there has been widespread condemnation of the violence and hateful rhetoric.

8. On the same day, a 'stop the boats' protest was held in Newtown, attended by around 400 people, whilst about 200 people gathered in a separate rally to show support for sanctuary seekers. While protests of this nature are concerning, the counter protest demonstrates that many in Wales do not share these concerns and welcome sanctuary seekers and value their contribution to our society.

9. The attack on a Manchester synagogue on 2 October was an act of terrorism during which three people died, including the attacker, and several others were injured. This has further heightened community fears, with police increasing presence in public spaces, outside synagogues and other places of worship to provide reassurance and protection.

UK Government actions to strengthen cohesion

10. In March 2021, Dame Sara Khan was appointed as the UK Government's Independent Adviser for Social Cohesion and Resilience as part of government action to tackle extremism. The Khan Review made recommendations to build resilience against extremism, understand its impact and better support its victims.[4]

[3] British Future, Belong and Together Coalition, After the Riots (September 2024)
[4] Dame Sara Khan, The Khan Review: Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience (March 2024)

11. The report highlighted significant challenges threatening social cohesion and the wellbeing of democracy. These include disillusionment with democracy and distrust of institutions and political elites. The Khan Review highlighted that extremists and other malign actors exploit these tensions to breed further division:

> *"The reports and reviews of the last 20 years have focused predominately on the racial and religious tensions and clashes between white majority communities and ethnic or religious minority communities. While this is an important area to consider, cohesion can break down along many other fault lines, such as political affiliations, protected characteristics, class and the holding of certain beliefs and opinions. Similarly, we also need to consider tensions at an intra racial and intra-religious minority level."*[5]

12. The Review highlighted a phenomenon called '**freedom-restricting harassment**', which it argues has become widespread, corroding social cohesion and democratic rights and freedoms.

13. The 2024 report called on the UK Government to radically rethink how it tackles extremism and protects democratic resilience. It warned "*the current winds of extremism, polarisation and democratic disruption combined with social and economic issues may cause even more unrest.".* In order to prepare for these challenges, it recommended overhauling the way the United Kingdom builds and delivers social cohesion.[6]

14. In June 2025 the UK Government announced measures to support social cohesion in its 'Plan for Neighbourhoods' with £1.5 billion programme over the next decade. It outlines a blueprint to bring communities together, and funding for 75 locations to improve living standards and give people more of a stake in their future. The proposed investment in Wales includes Barry, Cwmbran, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhyl and Wrexham.[7] On the 29 September the UK Government announced £214m new funding for Welsh communities, including £35m for Wales' 22 local authorities to use over the next two years. to improve neighbourhoods and restore pride. The 'Pride in Place' funding is focused on empowering communities to

[5] Dame Sara Khan, The Khan Review: Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience (March 2024)
[6] Dame Sara Khan, The Khan Review: Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience (March 2024)
[7] UK Government, Plan for Neighbourhoods: prospectus (June 2025)

decide on how the money should be spent.[8] However, the details of how this work will align with Welsh Government work on cohesion is not yet known.

15. In her evidence, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Trefnydd and Chief Whip (Cabinet Secretary) referred to a meeting between the four-nations *"to look at shared definitions, measurements of frameworks and cohesion related matters across the UK."*[9].

Building an evidence base on social cohesion in the UK

16. Understanding the wider context of social cohesion is essential for addressing the underlying issues that contribute to division and have led to civil disturbances.

17. In September 2024, British Future, Belong and the Together Coalition, published a paper 'After the riots' which sets out a 12-point plan of policy proposals to address what it calls a "*vacuum on communities policy*".[10]

18. A new cross-party Commission, established in January 2025, aims to engage with people to improve social cohesion.[11] In July the Commission published its foundational report which provides a snapshot of connection, division, and community life across the UK. It sets out the challenges and threats to community life in Britain, breaking these down into long-term trends which have weakened community connections (declining community infrastructure, declining trust in institutions, and growing inequality) and the new emerging threats (mismanagement of immigration, cost of living pressures and social media-driven extremism). The report states:

> *"These forces are converging into something altogether more dangerous - leaving the UK sitting on* ***a tinderbox of disconnection and division****."*[12]

19. It argues there has been no real effort to develop a sustained, long-term strategy to tackle root causes and has only been addressed when tensions flare.

[8] UK Government Pride in Place Impact Fund: prospectus (September 2025)
[9] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 12 May 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 83
[10] British Future, Belong and Together Coalition, After the Riots (September 2024)
[11] The Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion
[12] British Future and the Belong Network The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK (July 2025)

20. Building on the report's findings, the Commission has embarked on a UK-wide national conversation to hear directly from people about how they experience connection and belonging, and what they want to see change.

21. In July 2025, the organisation More in Common, published its *Shattered Britain* report which looked at the values which act as dividing lines in 2020s Britain, based on 'seven segments' within the British population. The research aims to explore how we can best live together and identifies four drivers of what it describes as the current *"malaise"* and "*dissatisfaction with the status quo in Britain:*

- *a crisis of trust in politics and our institutions;*
- *an exhaustion with both politics and the struggles of day-to-day life;*
- *a rising sense of threat and insecurity; and*
- *falling confidence in politicians' control or ordinary people's ability to control what happens in their own lives."*[13].

Our View

The Welsh Government is responsible for community cohesion. However, several levers of influence related to cohesion are not devolved. These include immigration, policing, criminal justice, media and internet regulation. Decisions taken in each of these policy areas have an impact on social cohesion in Wales.

If we are to address these challenges and support social cohesion, collaboration between the UK and Welsh Government is vital. We are encouraged by the UK Government's commitment to invest in cohesion in Wales through its 'Plan for Neighbourhoods', Pride in Place funding and the Cabinet Secretary's meeting with the UK Government to discuss social cohesion. However, there is an urgent need to do more to align policies across the four nations and develop a coordinated response to issues which undermine social cohesion across the UK.

In light of recent events the Welsh Government needs to take responsibility for ensuring collaboration across all policy areas, including those which are not devolved. If we are to prevent further disruption and disintegration across Welsh

[13] More in Common, Shattered Britain (July 2025)

communities, the Welsh Government must provide strong leadership and a strategic approach to address these challenges across our nation.

Conclusion 1. . Our report provides an important spotlight on the challenges in Wales, the opportunities to strengthen cohesion and examples of good practice. Given the increasing urgency of threats to social cohesion and the work taking place at a UK level, we expect the Cabinet Secretary to provide an immediate update to the Senedd on the outcomes of this collaborative work by the four nations. This should include an update on the Plan for Neighbourhoods, the recently announced Pride of Place funding and the meeting with the four nations and any other relevant actions the Welsh Government is taking.

2. Social Cohesion in Wales

The Welsh Government, local authorities and the third sector are taking action to strengthen social cohesion in Wales. Their evidence highlights a range of policies and programmes and a wealth of community projects which have sought to strengthen cohesion. However, the government's overall strategy does not reflect the most recent challenges; nor does it include a robust evidence base to capture whether current efforts are having an impact.

22. Throughout this inquiry, community groups, public and third sector organisations working to support different communities, and the Welsh Government have highlighted examples of what is being done every day in Wales to ensure people and communities get on well together.

23. Wales did not experience anti-migrant disturbances during the summer of 2024 seen in England and Northern Ireland. However, no detailed analysis to understand why that is the case has yet been undertaken. The Welsh Refugee Council and Sanctuary Coalition questioned whether this is because "*Wales has done a better job at social cohesion, but also that the far-right is less organised and/or that the anti-racist opposition is well-cemented within Wales.*"[14].

24. Both noted however, that the 2024 summer riots had an immediate impact on their staff and their ability to operate. One member of staff recalled being "*anxious for the community I work with, and I could see first-hand how scared they were to leave their homes/accommodation.*"[15].

25. Since then, Wales has also seen anti-migrant protests and disturbances in Rhoose and Mold during August 2025 and Newtown in September 2025.

[14] Written evidence, SC24, Welsh Refugee Council and Sanctuary Coalition Cymru
[15] Written evidence, SC24, Welsh Refugee Council and Sanctuary Coalition Cymru

26. Currently, the National Survey for Wales tracks three key indicators of community cohesion. In her evidence the Cabinet Secretary referred to data from the last collection in 2021-2022 which showed that two-thirds of adults (64%) agreed with all three of these measures of community cohesion:

- people in the area from different backgrounds get on well together;
- people treat each other with respect and consideration; and
- they belong to the local area.

27. Since taking this evidence, the latest survey data shows the proportion agreeing with all three measures is now 58%, six percentage points lower than in 2021-22. The change was affected primarily by fewer people saying that they feel they belong to their local area: 79% in 2021-22 compared with 73% in 2024-25.[16]

28. This decline in community cohesion is mirrored in the evidence we heard. The WLGA says, although data suggests a majority of people from different backgrounds get on well together, hate crime and threats to social cohesion "*are ever-present and are linked to Welsh, UK and global political developments around immigration, refugees, race, conflicts and extremism.*"[17].

29. Wales Safer Communities Network reported a rise in incidents of discrimination, with community members across Wales "*feeling the need to justify their sense of belonging within their education setting, workplace or just as part of their community.*"[18].

30. Race Council Cymru and Wales Safer Communities Network highlighted an increase of hate crime and hate speech (not all recorded) particularly against LGBTQ+ individuals, religious minorities, and asylum seekers.[19] Professor Ted Cantle said:

> *"Race and faith have become linked to a much broader political identity that is not only anti-migrant, anti-asylum seeker, anti-Muslim,*

[16] National Survey for Wales headline results: April 2024 to March 2025 (August 2025)
[17] Written evidence, SC32, Welsh Local Government Association
[18] Written evidence, SC29, Wales Safer Communities Network
[19] Written evidence, SC1, Race Council Cymru; Written evidence, SC29, Wales Safer Communities Network

> *but is also anti-politics, its anti-elite, it's anti-rules-based democracy and it's misogynistic."*[20]

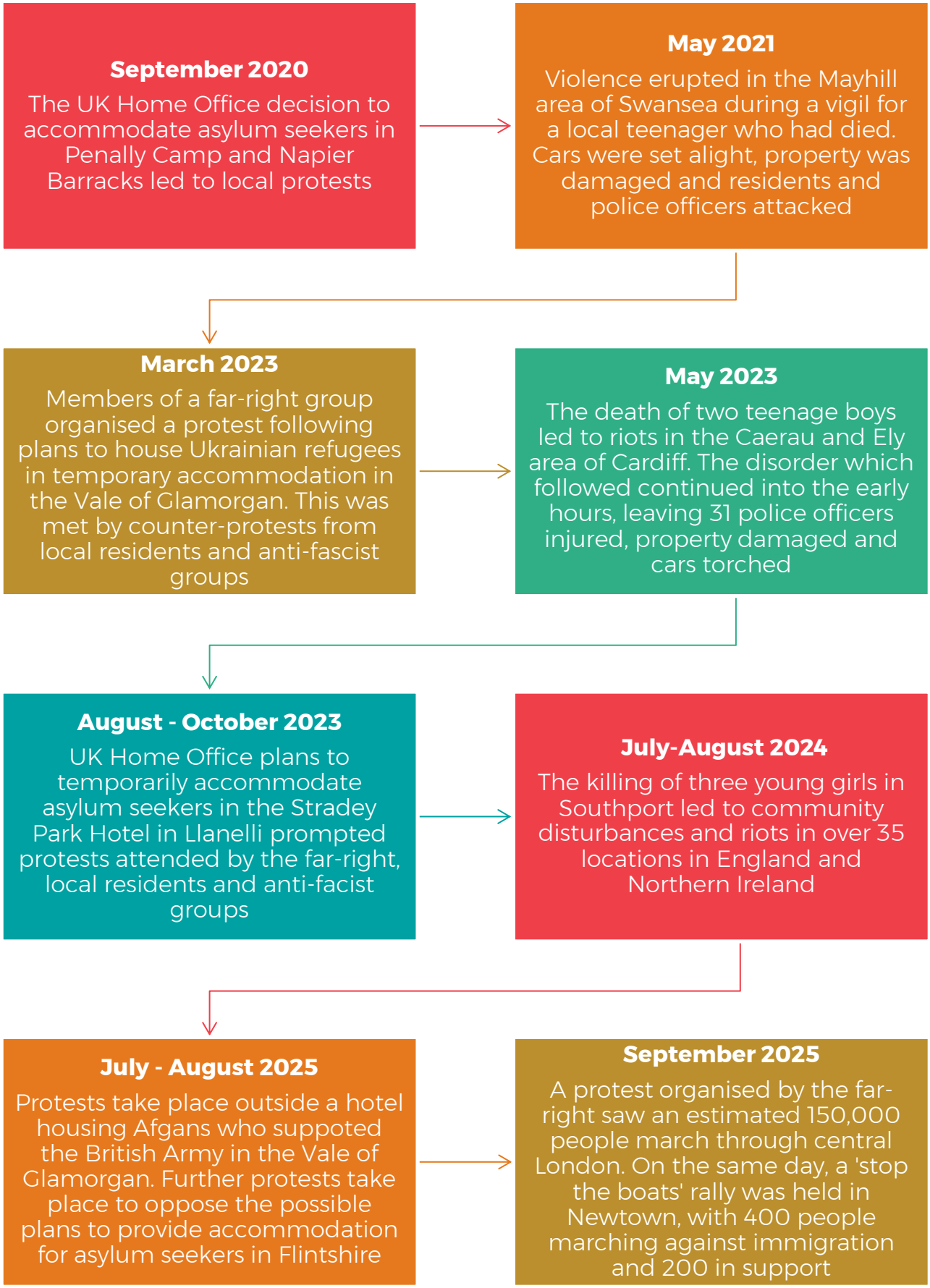
31. Dame Sara Khan emphasised the declining levels of social cohesion, declining levels of civic engagement, and the "*stark warnings about growing levels of disillusionment with democracy, distrust in our democratic institutions. Forty years' worth of time series data has shown that this is a clear trajectory that is downward that we're just not doing enough to prevent or reverse."*[21]

32. Stakeholders referred to incidents in the past five years which highlight the tensions present in some Welsh communities; anti-migrant sentiment and socio-economic challenges which, if not addressed, run the risk of undermining social cohesion.[22]

33. The Welsh Government recognised that our inquiry into social cohesion was timely, recognising that the threats to social cohesion are "*deep and profound*".[23]

[20] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 118
[21] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 5
[22] Notes from Social Cohesion stakeholder event - 17 March 2025
[23] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 12 May 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 7

Figure 1 A timeline of key events in Wales and UK



Political leadership

34. Dame Sara Khan was clear that the language used by politicians and Government, and what she deemed the use of culture wars, have exploited tensions for political purposes at the expense of social cohesion.[24]

35. During discussions with stakeholders, it was argued that politicians need to lead difficult conversations with communities and articulate a clear, democratic vision.[25] Professors Abrams and Cantle highlighted the importance of the government taking a lead co-ordination role.[26]

36. Those who have been tasked with supporting people seeking sanctuary in Wales back the Welsh Government's commitment to a Nation of Sanctuary; but they advocate more proactive communication, with politicians assuming a lead role to counter disinformation and misinformation.[27]

37. In light of recent harassment and abuse targeted at voluntary sector organisations who provide support to sanctuary seekers, Eleri Williams from Building Communities Trust (BCT) called for elected members to "*put strong statements of support*" for the work of the sector and condemn the hate they are facing.[28]

38. The Wales Safer Community Network would like to see:

> *"a Welsh Government Framework, with supporting communication strategies and strengthened guidance for local delivery that ensures local and national working is aligned."*[29]

39. Local authorities also call for clear leadership from the Welsh Government at times of unrest, ensuring consistent messages are communicated by national and local elected representatives.[30]

40. Following the protests provoked by a proposal to accommodate asylum seekers at Stradey Park, the community organisation Llanelli Unites highlighted concerns about the process of recovery when no 'identifiable public body' was

[24] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 78
[25] Notes from Social Cohesion stakeholder event - 17 March 2025
[26] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 95
[27] Notes from Social Cohesion stakeholder event - 17 March 2025
[28] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 31 March 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 95
[29] Written evidence SC 29 Wales Safer Communities Network
[30] Written evidence SC21 Housing Services, Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn

leading this work, or accepting responsibility for the work to take place and this has left a *"void which is often filled by far-right and other groups"*.[31]

41. The leader of Monmouthshire Council, Mary Ann Brocklesby, emphasised the leadership role local authorities must play in building community cohesion, *"not from a point of reaction but from a point of inclusion, collaboration and prevention."*[32].

The 2009 Cohesion Strategy

42. In 2009, the Welsh Government published a Community Cohesion Strategy which identified local authorities as being best placed to take action to promote cohesion. Further action plans were published in 2014-16 and 2016-17.

43. Hope not Hate, the WLGA and others recommend that the Welsh Government update the strategy with a focus on prevention, to reflect on the significant events that have taken place since its last update in 2016-17.[33]

[31] Llanelli Unites Conference Report, January 2025
[32] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 169
[33] Written evidence, SC 32, Welsh Local Government Association

Figure 2 Welsh Government legislative and policy frameworks

44. Professor Abrams noted the current strategy "[…] *lacked a coherent approach to building social cohesion. Instead, the emphasis seemed to be on ameliorating tensions and less so on building a resilient social infrastructure."* He emphasised the need for a preventative approach to engage with people to address concerns before they lead to any incidents of public disorder.[34]

[34] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 161

45. Eleri Williams from BCT said the focus needed to shift from "*mitigating or ameliorating the negative harms that come from discrimination and prejudice*" to a preventative approach by building social infrastructure and social capital.[35]

46. Dr Cordery-Bruce, WCVA, said

> *"there's an opportunity to build those key and pivotal relationships while the going is good, and then, when things do go awry, the communities are in a stronger position to respond positively."*[36]

47. The WLGA called on the Welsh Government, local government and the third sector to collaborate on setting the objectives of a national strategy; or refresh the current approach to reflect the latest challenges to social cohesion. They argued that local authorities and the third sector are best placed to work with their communities to identify specific local priorities.[37]

48. Both WCVA and BCT recommend the development of a communities policy which is cross-sectoral and co-produced. BCT has undertaken community consultation on this, and WCVA explained a community strategy would not just cover community cohesion:

> *"[…] but a broader sort of range of areas such as community resilience, which looks at your volunteers, your energy and grid capacity, storm recovery, and all of those things that are so important to communities. And also looking at community services and equal access."*[38]

49. The Cabinet Secretary does not see the need for another strategy but acknowledged the need to "*perhaps refresh*" and make what already exists "*more transparent*". However, she highlighted that the Welsh Government is working on developing a co-produced communities policy, which aims to support the First Minister's objective of thriving and connected communities.[39]

[35] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 31 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 17
[36] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 31 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 36
[37] Written evidence, SC 32, Welsh Local Government Association
[38] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 31 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 67
[39] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 12 May 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 96

The Community Cohesion Programme

50. The Welsh Government's major intervention for supporting cohesion is the Community Cohesion programme established in 2009. It operates across all 22 local authorities in Wales and is divided into eight 'cohesion regions' which provides a pan-Wales framework to respond to the needs of local communities.

Figure 3. A map of Cohesion Teams areas

51. The Cohesion Teams, expanded with additional funding from 2019, deliver a range of activities, including monitoring community tensions and fostering good relationships. Each year the Welsh Government co-produces a regional workplan with local government and monitors progress quarterly.

52. The 'After the Riots' report, identified the Cohesion Programme as an approach offering useful lessons for England.[40] In her experience of working across the UK, Jacqueline Broadhead of Inclusive Cities referred positively to the role of the community cohesion leads, who provide leadership which is not replicated in many English local authorities.[41]

53. During our third sector stakeholder event, several issues emerged:

- Inconsistency across the regions, with some regional cohesion leads being very pro-active and others less so. The North Wales and Mid Wales regions were viewed positively.
- A lack of clear objectives, transparency, and information about the programme. An independent review in 2021 was not published.
- A lack of clarity about any monitoring framework, and whether the programme is aligned with other equalities plans.[42]

54. Migration and Resettlement Leads said that although cohesion teams are working well following 'lessons learned work' in response to protests in Llanelli, some organisations felt the community cohesion team could have taken a more proactive role. One lead suggested this may be a good opportunity to re-evaluate their current role to improve their effectiveness. It was argued they could be more strategic, for instance by developing a closer relationship with the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership.[43]

55. The Cabinet Secretary referred to the positive work undertaken by the Community Cohesion Teams across Wales, including their role in monitoring community tensions, working collaboratively with local authorities and the third sector and sharing good practice. One example given was the Diverse Together Conference held in April 2025 by the North West and North East Community cohesions regions to listen, learn, and share good practice.[44]

56. Whilst the Independent Review of the Community Cohesion Programme in 2021 was not published, the Welsh Government said that the report was "*in favour of maintaining many aspects of the programme, praising the flexibility to deal*

[40] British Future, Belong and Together Coalition, After the Riots (September 2024)
[41] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 31 March 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 169; Inclusive Cities supports 12 UK cities, including Cardiff and Newport, and their local partners in achieving a step-change in their approach towards integrating newcomers to the city.
[42] Notes from Social Cohesion Stakeholder event -17 March 2025
[43] Roundtable discussion with Migration and Resettlement Leads - 24 March 2025
[44] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 12 May 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 12

with emerging issues and the regional structure.". Its recommendations resulted in some changes including longer-term three-year funding from April 2023.[45] It is, however, troubling that the Welsh Government has only committed to fund this programme until March 2026, when there will be a need for stability and strategic direction throughout and beyond the election period.

57. The Review also instituted a small grants scheme, which is administered by each region and awarded to third sector organisations and partnership projects tailored to local communities. According to Ynys Môn Housing Services the scheme can have a significant impact assisting grassroots organisations to empower people to become more involved in their own community.[46]

Measuring social cohesion

58. Professor Dominic Abrams argued the case for measuring social cohesion:

> *"Being able to measure social cohesion helps gauge how connected communities are. It can identify tensions and threats to cohesion, inform the development and impact of programmes aimed at improving community relations, highlight areas needing improvement…"*[47]

59. His work identified gaps in current measures used to assess levels of social cohesion and argued that they need to cover the five elements of cohesion: identity and belonging, social economy, social responsibility, cultural memory and tradition, and care for the future.

60. The Cabinet Secretary referred to the Annual Well-being of Wales report[48] (informed by the National Survey of Wales) which provides context and an assessment of progress towards community cohesion in Wales.[49] She also noted a local informal network of intelligence provided through the community cohesion co-ordinators.[50]

61. Inclusive Cities argued the National Survey for Wales does not provide a framework for what 'good' would look like in an area.[51] Professors Cantle and

[45] Evidence Paper for the Inquiry into Social Cohesion, Welsh Government
[46] Written evidence, SC21, Housing Services, Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn
[47] Written evidence SC26, Professor Dominic Abrams
[48] Evidence Paper for the Inquiry into Social Cohesion, Welsh Government
[49] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 12 May, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 82
[50] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 12 May, Record of Proceeding, paragraph 55
[51] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 31 March, Record of Proceeding, paragraph 37

Abrams agreed there is a need for a more robust approach to monitoring tensions and the Migration Leads said that there are gaps in data sharing and an inconsistent approach to tension monitoring across Wales. They argue that more data on a local level could inform a more targeted approach.[52]

62. Dame Sara Khan emphasised the importance of measuring social cohesion but noted that it can be difficult. However, she highlighted examples of where this had been done; for example, a social index developed in Australia.[53] She also flagged the efforts by Oldham Council to effectively measure cohesion.[54]

Oldham Council has developed a 'thriving communities index' to measure the strength of cohesion up to a ward level; this granular detailed information informs appropriate responses when tensions arise. Their assumption that areas of Oldham which have experienced high levels of deprivation for many years, would be where cohesion was the lowest. This was not the case. This demonstrates that many factors impacts whether social cohesion is declining or increasing, and the drivers are not always socio-economic issues.[55]

The role of the voluntary sector

63. The voluntary sector and community groups play a crucial role in supporting social cohesion. They work alongside the public and private sectors, but are often better informed about local needs, and are trusted by the community.[56] Stakeholders identified several examples where groups have intervened in response to incidents to address community tensions:

- ACE – Action in Caerau & Ely (a community developed charity run by residents of Ely and Caerau in Cardiff). The WCVA and several stakeholders say the charity played a crucial role in the aftermath of the 2023 Ely riot. The charity interviewed 1,200 residents, it gave them opportunities to share their thoughts, dispelling myths about the area they live in which contributed to the Community Action Plan. The plan was created in collaboration with Cardiff Council, South Wales Police

[52] Roundtable discussion with Migration and Resettlement Leads - 24 March 2025
[53] Professor Andrew Markus, Mapping Social Cohesion November 2021
[54] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March, Record of Proceeding, paragraph 37
[55] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March, Record of Proceeding, paragraph 30
[56] Notes from Social Cohesion Stakeholder event -17 March 2025

and Cardiff and Vale Health Board. ACE played an invaluable conciliatory role as a mediator for residents of Ely and Caerau.[57]

- The Phoenix Centre (a Swansea-based development trust) played an important role in promoting social cohesion and community resilience following the Mayhill riot in 2021. The voluntary sector was not, however, invited to formally contribute to the public sector's response to the riot, which was seen as a missed opportunity.[58]
- Llanelli Unites (a voluntary group set up in the aftermath of the Stradey Park Hotel protests) played a vital role in bringing the community together following the riots. In November 2024 its "Healing the Divide" conference got organisations working with the community. Its report sets out the actions needed to rebuild and bring the community together.[59]

64. Inclusive Cities said that community groups are best placed to undertake this work and command "*trust on the ground*".[60] The WLGA believes that community groups and organisations are the "*bedrock of enabling social cohesion efforts*."[61]

65. Dr Lindsay Cordery-Bruce told us that no plan for social cohesion:

> "[…] can progress without a thriving, well-resourced and well-connected voluntary and community sector, and I think that provides one of the enablers for how we pull communities together and instil that closeness that we're aiming for … A true partnership between local authorities, the voluntary sector and the communities themselves is one of the tickets out of this."[62]

66. In written, oral evidence, focus groups and Committee visits, many highlighted voluntary sector led community projects which are bringing people and communities together, often attempting to address complex issues and tensions. This following case study is a positive example of what can be achieved when organisations work collaboratively with the community. The Committee

[57] Written evidence SC27, WCVA
[58] Written evidence SC27, WCVA
[59] Llanelli Unites, Conference Report, January 2025
[60] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 31 March, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 158
[61] Written evidence, SC32, Welsh Local Government Association
[62] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 31 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 3-6

visited Cae Fardre in Church Village, Rhondda Cynon Taf, to see the transformation of the estate.

The Cae Fardre estate in Church Village, built in the late 1960s, comprises a mix of social housing, private rented properties, and privately owned homes. Over time, it became a hotspot for crime, anti-social behaviour, and organised drug activity. At its peak, South Wales Police recorded 766 visits to the estate within a twelve-month period (2022). Residents were fearful of walking the streets, refuse collections were suspended due to worker safety concerns, and police patrol vehicles were damaged, including one car being set alight.

The estate's layout, with concealed alleyways and poor lighting, provided conditions for criminal behaviour to flourish. Community confidence in reporting crime was low, with fear of reprisal and lack of trust in authorities widely reported.

In mid-2023, a partnership was established between Trivallis, South Wales Police, Rhondda Cynon Taff Council, the Community Safety Partnership, South Wales Fire and Rescue Service and local Councillor. Together, they launched the 'Clear, Hold, Build' strategy which introduced a phased method to tackle entrenched issues, combining enforcement, environmental design, youth engagement, and community empowerment. The key stages involved:

- a coordinated multi-agency enforcement to address criminal activity, repossessions, direct work with parents of children involved in anti-social behaviour, demolishing garages and blocking alleyways used for drug runs,

Figure 4 Garages demolished to improve safety and tackle anti-social behaviour. Photographs courtesy of Trivallis.

- bespoke community patrol strategies involving Housing Officers, Community Wardens, and South Wales Police to increase visibility and reassurance. CCTV

cameras were installed. Youth intervention programmes were delivered in the community and crime awareness sessions in local secondary schools.

- Trivallis gifting a property to establish a community hub run by trained volunteers three days a week. This offers a range of services including a food pantry and delivery service for isolated residents, Toastie Tuesday and Chip Butty Friday; Money advice, mental health drop-ins, first aid, health and safety, and cooking classes; Clothes swaps, community gardening, free family trips; men's sessions. The Hub volunteers established a constitution, laying the foundation for formal charitable status to sustain future funding.

Feedback from volunteers reflects positive change:

"I let my children go out to play now."

"The hub gives me something to look forward to."[63]

67. Many stakeholders expressed concern around the funding available to support the voluntary sector. The Cabinet Secretary highlighted that £25.8 million is provided for third sector infrastructure, which includes the WCVA and the Council for Voluntary Service, from 2025 to 2028. There is also an uplift of three percent for voluntary organisations with a commitment to three-year funding cycles. This is backed up by the Welsh Government's Code of Practice for funding the third sector.[64]

Our view

We heard worrying evidence which suggests tensions are rising; left unchecked, these could lead to widespread civil unrest.

The National Survey of Wales provides a snapshot of community cohesion but does not provide the depth of knowledge that enables us to measure cohesion and what is happening at a community level. We know that there is good work going on in many communities across Wales. The Cae Fardre example highlights how a proactive and co-ordinated approach can transform communities. However, this needs ongoing commitment and involvement from a range of agencies.

[63] Committee visit to Cae Fardre
[64] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 12 May 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 126 &127

The Welsh Government and organisations across the public and third sectors have developed solid foundations to build and strengthen social cohesion. The cohesion teams play a vital and important role in building capacity and developing actions to address challenges and build cohesion at a local level. The evidence we heard does not suggest a complete overhaul is needed, but a strategic oversight at a national level is lacking. This is key to effectively addressing both immediate issues and the long-term challenges that communities face.

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government should establish an Expert Group on Social Cohesion to devise a set of immediate, medium- and long-term actions. The group should bring together representatives from local government, police, cohesion teams, the third sector, Strategic Migration Partnership and those with a lived experience to develop those actions. We suggest this work mirrors the urgent approach the Welsh Government took to the cost-of-living crisis.[65] It is hard to overstate the urgency of this work, and we expect the government to move with unprecedented speed to implement this recommendation. The Expert Group should be established by mid-November and report before the end of the year. The work of the Expert Group on Social Cohesion should include:

- Developing a national overarching social cohesion guiding principles document, similar to the Nation of Sanctuary '10 principles'.
- Adopting a framework for measuring social cohesion and monitoring the work of the community cohesion programme, considering the work of Oldham Council.
- Reviewing funding for the cohesion teams, agreeing what is needed beyond March 2026.
- Enabling new and improved opportunities for sharing best practice nationally across the public, private and third sectors. This could include the development of a best practice guide.

[65] Welsh Government, Wales Expert Group on the Cost of Living Crisis, Recommendations (2023)

3. Underlying threats to social cohesion

Long-term structural challenges as well as current issues threaten social cohesion in Wales. Many Welsh communities are grappling with economic inequality and poverty. A decline in social capital and democratic health, along with diminishing local services and resources, leave these communities vulnerable to exploitation by malign actors who seek to sew division. Tensions can explode particularly where resources are scarce.

Amplified by disinformation on social media and far-right activity in Wales, action is urgently needed to ensure the cohesiveness of our communities.

Economic inequality and poverty

68. Several stakeholders noted the links between economic inequality and social fragmentation. Race Council Cymru and Ted Cantle recognise that economic inequality creates an environment where threats to social cohesion can flourish and take hold. Wealth inequality, poverty and low social mobility can feed resentment and community tensions.[66]

69. Amnesty International highlights the findings of the National Survey for Wales, 2021-22 which they claim identifies "*a trend towards increased community cohesion as deprivation in the area falls.*"[67].

[66] Written evidence SC01 Race Council Cymru; Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 180
[67] Written evidence, SC19, Amnesty International

70. When discussing the reasons behind the Ely riots in Cardiff in 2023, Leader of Monmouthshire Council Mary Ann Brocklesby referred to "*decades of entrenched multigenerational poverty.*"[68].

71. Hope not Hate and others emphasise that economic insecurity and perceptions of scarce resources being unfairly allocated threaten community cohesion.[69]

72. Several organisations, including Race Council Cymru and the Bevan Foundation, highlighted the importance of minimising the impact of poverty on migrant individuals and families. The Welsh Refugee Council and Sanctuary Coalition Cymru are clear that integration is hindered when sanctuary seekers' basic needs, such as healthcare, food, housing, and legal aid are not met.[70]

73. A third sector stakeholder discussion highlighted the lack of awareness and understanding of the trauma and challenges experienced by migrants, such as those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) including lack of access to benefits or free school meals for secondary school children.[71]

74. Dame Sara Khan argued that the relationship between socioeconomic issues and social cohesion is not clear-cut, and there is no definite consensus within academic literature. This was evident in in Oldham's work to develop the 'thriving communities index'.[72]

75. The Welsh Government say they are tackling socio-economic inequality through the Socio-economic Duty which since 2021 requires the Welsh Government and other public bodies to consider the impact of their decisions on those who experience socio-economic disadvantage. The EHRC recently explored the experiences of duty bearers in Wales and Scotland and found "*widespread understanding of the socio-economic duty but differences in experiences of implementation in duty-bearers, who say they need more support including training, guidance and knowledge sharing*".[73]

76. The Welsh Government highlighted delivery of its targeted and universal programmes to alleviate financial pressures and help maximise income, citing

[68] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 170
[69] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 94
[70] Written evidence SC 24 Welsh Refugee Council and Sanctuary Coalition Cymru
[71] Notes from Social Cohesion stakeholder event - 17 March 2025
[72] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 30
[73] Welsh Government Evidence Paper for the Inquiry into Social Cohesion, 28 April 2025

initiatives such as Universal Primary Free School Meals, the Schools Essentials Grant, Flying Start and the Childcare Offer.[74]

Our view

The recent Poverty in Wales 2025 report confirms that poverty in Wales is deepening.[75] The majority of our evidence emphasised the damaging effects of poverty and inequality on social cohesion; others told us it was just one of a range of factors.

We have regularly raised concerns about child poverty, the squeeze on living standards brought about by increases in the cost of living and the impact of No Recourse to Public Funds.

Whilst the Welsh Government lacks some of the powers to address poverty and inequality in Wales, it must ensure it remains focused on delivering programmes which effectively alleviate poverty and reduce financial pressures facing communities.

We remain unconvinced of the impact of the socio-economic duty, yet the Cabinet Secretary referred to it as part of their strategy to tackle social cohesion.

Conclusion 2. Unfortunately, the latest analysis of the socio-economic duty suggests more work is needed to support implementation. Given the prominence of the duty in the Cabinet Secretary's evidence we suggest the Welsh Government reflects on the evidence of the EHRC and update the Committee on the actions it will take following its review.

Challenges facing local communities

77. Many stakeholders expressed concerns about the funding available to do this work. In the context of local authority funding cuts the WLGA call for dedicated resourcing to enable local authority-led approaches, which can target potential problem areas to focus on prevention based on local intelligence.[76] The third sector highlighted that developing and supporting community cohesion requires investment of time and resources to build trust and relationships, networks and knowledge and understanding of the community.[77]

[74] Welsh Government Evidence Paper for the Inquiry into Social Cohesion, 28 April 2025
[75] Joseph Rountree Foundation (2025) Poverty in Wales 2025
[76] Written evidence SC32, WLGA
[77] Notes from Social Cohesion stakeholder event - 17 March 2025

78. The Nuffield-funded research by London South Bank University identifies "*the importance of places and opportunities to foster social cohesion, including places where people can come together to connect and solve problems*" in developing community connectedness. They express concern that the provision of community meeting places is currently in sharp decline.[78] Participants in focus groups also emphasised the importance of places which foster supportive communities, expressing concerns about the loss of community centres and local allotments.

The Caia Park Partnership

The Committee visited Caia Park in Wrexham, one of the largest housing estates in Wales, with a population of approx. 12,000 people / 3,000 households. Caia Park has experienced tensions in the past, notably the riots in 2003 following clashes between local residents and Iraqi Kurdish refugees. A lot of work went into bringing the community together including equality training.

The Caia Park Partnership Ltd (CPP) was established by residents in 1998. It is a community-led social enterprise and registered charity. It currently employs 60 people; many have grown up in and live in this local community. Some staff took part in activities as youngsters, gained experience from volunteering and were supported to gain relevant qualifications; they now deliver services to support their own community. This bottom-up model of development is integral to the success of CPP; staff understand their community's struggles and people trust and support their local organisation.

The partnership has a holistic approach to community development. It works with the community and partner organisations to identify needs and provide activities, services and facilities based on their feedback.

The CPP hub provides a range of clubs for young and old, including cookery, parenting, gardening, a men's health group, youth clubs, housing advice, meals on wheels and a lunch club for the elderly. It also organises events to bring people together as a community.

CPP runs 3 childcare nurseries which provide Flying Start provision and daycare for 80-100 children and a dementia daycare centre and emphasise the with benefits of intergenerational approach.

[78] Written evidence SC16 Nuffield Foundation

The CCP focus on young people includes Mentoring for 8–18-year-olds and progression pathways for 16–24-year-olds not in education or employment. They emphasise that a youth club can be a lifeline for some young people: providing food, support and sign posting, to address concerns around anti- social behaviour and drug use. After undertaking work on equality with young people, some minority ethnic young people now feel welcome.

Feedback from a Parent Support Mentor:

> *"I found it really rough here when I was growing up, I want to make sure that young people growing up here today don't have to struggle."*[79]

Nurturing community spaces

79. Research carried out by Building Communities Trust finds that "*[f]or most people in Wales living in disadvantaged areas, it also means living in areas lacking in community infrastructure*".[80]

The Wales Community Assets Index and Wales Community Resilience Index

Building Communities Trust research on the relationship between deprivation and community infrastructure in Wales. It found a strong and consistent link between deprivation and low levels of community infrastructure. Areas identified as "Less Resilient Areas" (LRAs) face compounded challenges of socio-economic disadvantage, poor connectivity, and limited civic assets.

Two new indexes were developed:

- Wales Community Assets Index (WCAI) – measures civic assets, connectivity, and community engagement.
- Wales Community Resilience Index (WCRI) – combines WCAI with the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) to assess overall resilience.

This research reveals that communities with fewer places to meet, a less engaged and active community and poorer connectivity to the wider economy, experience significantly worse social and economic outcomes compared to communities possessing more of these assets. 102 communities were identified as Less Resilient Areas (LRAs), suffering from both high deprivation and poor infrastructure. Gurnos,

[79] Committee visit to Caia Park
[80] Building Communities Trust 'Wales Community Assets Index' (September 2023)

Trefechan and Pontsticill in Merthyr Tydfil ranks number 1 for lack of resilience and lack of access.

It is worth noting that 5 areas ranked among the least deprived 20% on the WIMD, are among the most deprived 20% in terms of community infrastructure: These include Llantwit Major and Rhoose and the Airport in the Vale of Glamorgan; both experienced protests against the housing of sanctuary seekers.[81]

80. The Social Enterprise Stakeholder Group said:

> "At a time when publicly-owned community assets are at risk of being sold off, and without the same level of rights for communities with regards to privately-owned assets in Wales as in Scotland, it is more important than ever that there is a step change in Wales that sees communities empowered to take on vital public assets to use them as key, inclusive community spaces that foster community cohesion."[82]

81. A place-based approach is key to fostering meaningful interactions between sanctuary seekers and host communities, according to Oasis who collaborates with local organisations to bring communities together through sports, arts, and cultural initiatives.[83] Hope not Hate supports the view that creating community identity is "*really hard to do that without anchoring it to a place.*"[84].

82. During a visit to Railway Gardens in Cardiff, the Committee saw the importance of a place-based approach, which provides opportunities for people from different groups to meet. The space hosts a range of activities, including a weekly Good Sheds group where people can "*talk, share and make things*". A positive partnership has been developed between Railway Gardens and Oasis, an important asylum seeker support group located nearby. Oasis and Railway Gardens worked together to plant a garden of sanctuary, which is a safe space to meet together, and increase understanding of the challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees.[85]

[81] Building Communities Trust 'Wales Community Assets Index' (September 2023)
[82] Written evidence SC18 Social Enterprise Stakeholder Group
[83] Written evidence SC05 Oasis
[84] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 109
[85] Committee Visit to Railway Gardens

Figure 5 The Good Shed, Railway Gardens

83. The Future Generations Commissioner, the Institute of Welsh Affairs and others concerned about the impact on social cohesion of a shrinking number of public spaces are advocating for the introduction of the community right to buy.[86]

84. The Cabinet Secretary said that a Community Asset Commission will be reporting in Autumn 2025. She revealed that a community asset transfer best practice guide has already been developed and referred to a positive example of Cymunedoli Cyf in Gwynedd buying buildings to support community initiatives and the local economy.[87]

Our view

The steady decline of places and spaces for people to meet is troubling. We heard clear evidence of the value of people being able to come together within communities, which fosters feelings of belonging and unity. Community spaces are vital for a range of needs, such as hosting play groups, food banks, warm hubs or language lessons. Faith organisations, including Cytûn and the Good Faith Partnership, said community spaces provide a broad range of activities and services to support local communities.

Over the past decade, local authorities have faced significant funding cuts which have resulted in a loss of many valuable community assets. Communities have taken action to address these issues themselves, but they face barriers in doing so.

[86] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 64
[87] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 12 May 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 90

The Welsh Government must ensure that communities can use a simpler process to take over key community facilities.

Other parts of the UK have rights – there is the Community Right to Buy in Scotland and the Community Right to bid in England. We are disappointed with the lack of progress in Wales. It is essential to strengthen and support our communities across Wales to be able to acquire local assets to save them for future generations.

Recommendation 2. The Welsh Government must move forward at pace and take action to protect community spaces. The Committee's findings support the introduction of a Community Right to Buy and should be considered together with the Community Assets Commission's report expected in the Autumn. The Welsh Government should update the Committee on the next steps by the end of 2025.

Democracy on trial

85. Dame Sara Khan expressed concerns about growing levels of disillusionment with democracy and distrust in our democratic institutions. In December 2024 she published a second report which concluded that decreasing societal and democratic resilience is contributing to a permissive environment which extremists can exploit.[88]

86. Professor Cantle agreed. He said whilst there is a higher level of trust in politicians in Wales compared with England, it is lower than in Scotland; he cautioned against complacency.[89] The 2024 Life in the UK: Wales index demonstrates that since 2021 the health of democracy has been in decline in Wales.[90]

87. Experts on democratic health acknowledged the links between social cohesion and democratic health and reported that Wales is "*being left behind when it comes to deliberative democratic methods.*"[91]. Professor Matt Ryan highlighted examples in Brazil and British Columbia where innovative methods have been used.[92]

[88] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 5-7
[89] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 118-20
[90] Written evidence SC07 Carnegie UK
[91] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 20
[92] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 23

88. In January 2025, the Welsh Government set up an Advisory Group to explore innovative ways to increase understanding of democracy. Joe Rossiter said that Wales is in a position to be in the "*vanguard of delivering some of these methods*". But in the context of limited financial resources, local government too often lacks the capacity to deliver deliberative democratic methods. While there are positive attempts to improve the democratic deficit, like funding a democratic engagement grant pot of £400,000, Joe Rossiter highlighted the lack of communication about the outcomes of this work.[93] The Welsh Government published the Innovating Democracy Advisory Group's work programme on 30 September 2025.[94]

89. Dr Anwen Elias made the point that despite involvement being one of the ways of working included in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, ten years on we are behind the curve in how we involve citizens in decision making.[95] The Future Generations Commissioner criticises the lack of progress regarding involvement; this is, backed up by the Auditor General.[96] Carnegie UK echoes the need to "*empower public bodies with the skills and support necessary to embed this approach effectively.*"[97].

90. Dr Elias states that one of the biggest challenges is to get politicians and civil servants to "*understand that these different ways of doing politics—so, developing policy of implementing democracy—can bring added value not just in terms of policy outcomes, but broader added value in a social sense in terms of people's understanding of democracy, their engagement with the democratic process, and the way that they perceive their role as a citizen in society.*"[98].

91. The Cabinet Secretary emphasised the need to build trust in democracy and referred to recent examples of action including funding the Politics Project in schools, the 'Access to Elected Office Fund' for disabled people and new inclusion initiatives in the Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act 2024.[99]

92. The Welsh Government provided further information about the Democratic Engagement Grant which allocated £658,000 to support democratic

[93] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 21 & 36
[94] Welsh Government, Innovating Democracy Advisory Group: work programme, September 2025
[95] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 26 &69
[96] Written evidence, Letter from the Future Generations Commissioner
[97] Written evidence SC07 Carnegie UK
[98] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 18
[99] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 12 May 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 113

engagement and supported 22 organisations to deliver 27 projects across Wales, to reach a diverse range of people and communities.[100]

Our view

We have heard how the lack of influence or agency is a critical factor with adverse consequences for social cohesion. The decline in the health of democracy should alarm us all. Ensuring that everyone has a stake in where they live and feel well represented in decision-making processes is essential for fostering a cohesive society (as well as better outcomes).

Despite the ambitions of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, we are disappointed that of the five ways of working, public bodies have not made much progress on involvement.

Conclusion 3. The increasing challenges relating to declining trust in politicians and institutions means actions to boost democratic health in Wales need to be taken at pace. The Welsh Government should prioritise its work to involve citizens in decision making through deliberative democratic methods. It should continue its work with experts on democratic health and the Future Generations Commissioner to ensure those working across the public sector have the skills and resources to support effective participation and involvement.

Social media, misinformation and disinformation

93. Dame Sara Khan, EYST and others raised concerns about the growth of disinformation and misinformation and the ease at which conspiracy theories are spread via social media. Dame Sara added that challenging the spread of misinformation on social media is very difficult. She cited how disinformation spread about the attacker following the Southport murders, claiming he was an illegal immigrant and Muslim, neither of which were true.[101]

94. The Migration and Resettlement Leads explained how they are struggling to deal with increasing misinformation and disinformation, Freedom- Restricting Harassment, and divisive national and international debates on migration which are impacting on their work on the ground.[102]

[100] Letter from Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government 08 May 2025
[101] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 03 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 14
[102] Roundtable discussion with Migration and Resettlement Leads - 24 March 2025

95. The surge of disinformation and misinformation has had a significant impact on the voluntary sector. The relentless attacks on the Welsh Refugee Council (WRC) after a video of school children discussing Nation of Sanctuary values was distorted to incite hate, was raised by the Welsh Refugee Council, Oasis and third sector stakeholders. The online abuse and threats this generated, forced the WRC to close its doors for three days to protect the safety of staff, trustees and the people they support.[103]

96. The Bevan Foundation said that a "*climate of fear persists around activities to support migrants or attempts to change policies to promote rights or inclusion.*"[104]. Whilst it has been directed at those who support asylum seekers and refugees, the third sector stakeholder discussion highlighted that other groups such as the trans community are increasingly targeted on social media.

97. The Cabinet Secretary says that in response to increasing divisive rhetoric online, the Welsh Government has provided information to partners about how to deal with misinformation and disinformation. This includes sharing the RESIST 2.0 and the Wall of Beliefs toolkits produced by the UK Government. They have also developed a misinformation toolkit for community groups and For the Record, which is an open resource to fact check and clarify claims made about Welsh Government policies.[105] There is also information and resources for school staff, learners and their families through its Hwb education platform.

98. The Welsh Government has made attempts to engage with social media platforms and working with Ofcom. However, powers regarding social media are not devolved and the Online Safety Act 2023 enforcement powers only commenced in March 2025.

99. The third sector is calling for swift action in Wales to counter hateful rhetoric, disinformation and misinformation. Tai Pawb stresses that there should be "*a priority for promoting social cohesion.*"[106]. Wales Strategic Migration Partnership said that further support and engagement is required to embed media and communications strategies.[107] During her work with local authorities across England, Dame Sara Khan said that the message was consistent:

[103] Written evidence SC24 Welsh Refugee Council and Sanctuary Coalition Cymru
[104] Written evidence, SC22, Bevan Foundation
[105] Welsh Government, For the Record
[106] Written evidence SC20 Tai Pawb
[107] Written evidence SC31 Wales Strategic Migration Partnership

> *"We lack the capability, we lack the resources, and we lack the expertise to understand how to challenge these threats to social cohesion, whether it's extremism, conspiracy theories, disinformation.*
>
> *The third sector stakeholder group were clear that this cannot be left to third sector and grass roots organisations."*[108]

100. Welcoming the Welsh Government's fact checker On the Record, Dr Cordery-Bruce cautioned against relying on this approach. She argued that "*people who are spreading the narrative won't necessarily see that as a credible counter-source. It's about finding the people in communities that they will listen to and also responding to misinformation as it comes out.*"[109]. It is essential to engage with communities and work with trusted voices to "*help us amplify the correct information*" according to Oldham Council and care should be taken to ensure false narratives are not amplified.[110]

101. The Cabinet Secretary referred to the work the Welsh Government has undertaken with the HateLab global hub for data and insight into hate speech and crime.[111] HateLab's Director Professor Matt Williams refers to studies which show a link between online hate speech and offline hate crime, with social media acting as both a "mirror" and "motor" for offline behaviour. In 2020 HateLab, in conjunction with academic and policy partners including Welsh Government, developed a dashboard that helps track and respond to misinformation in real-time, which was piloted within Welsh Government in 2020-21. Professor Williams states that the HateLab Dashboard will "*provide a valuable contribution to community tension monitoring*" and that this "*new source of intelligence will allow our regional community cohesion coordinators to gain insights from social media into emerging community tensions.*"[112].

Our view

Social media has precipitated a deluge of fake news, conspiracies and misinformation. Playing on fears, frustrations and prejudices, this growing trend threatens to undermine the foundations of our democracy. In Llanelli, Southport and elsewhere, we have already seen the negative impact this can have on social

[108] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 03 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 44
[109] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 31 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 75
[110] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 31 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 228
[111] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 12 May 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 52
[112] Written evidence SC33 HateLab

cohesion. We are concerned the response to date has failed to take these threats seriously enough. Responding to this growing challenge will not be easy and a clearer, coordinated and strategic approach backed up by sufficient resources is needed.

The example of the relentless online abuse targeting the Welsh Refugee Council, its staff and trustees as well as asylum seekers and refugees in January 2025 was disturbing. We heard that this was not an isolated incident and that online hate is increasing with far-right ideology circulating widely.

Whilst the regulation of the media and online platforms is not devolved, the Welsh Government has an important role to play and can mitigate the impact through working with schools, local authorities, the third sector and communities.

We welcome the development of resources such as the draft toolkit for community leaders and For the Record, but it is unclear what impact these are having and how these are shared and embedded. Public bodies and the third sector need to be able to access expert advice and guidance for developing positive and alternative narratives to promote resilience within communities.

Working proactively to enable communities to respond effectively is fundamental. We heard clearly that the lack of information about what was happening in Llanelli created a vacuum which was filled by disruptive and damaging voices.

Recommendation 3. The Welsh Government should assume a leadership role for dealing with misinformation and disinformation. This should include:

- working in collaboration with local authorities, community cohesion teams and the third sector, ensuring greater awareness of resources and guidance available and co-ordinate consistent messages.
- commissioning the HateLab Dashboard or a similar monitoring service to highlight flashpoints or concerns which require action and resources.
- exploring the work undertaken by Oldham Council to address misinformation and disinformation.

Attitudes towards sanctuary seekers and migrants

102. There is significant apprehension about attitudes toward those seeking sanctuary in Wales and migrants generally. Hope not Hate explain that levels of

financial security or insecurity can directly influence attitudes towards immigration and multiculturalism.[113]

103. Professor Cantle said that without more investment in public services and housing, substantial population growth is bound to generate community tensions.[114] Jonathan Downs of Oldham Council stressed the importance of giving people the space to have conversations and express their concerns about these challenges.[115]

104. A roundtable discussion with Migration and Resettlement Leads, presciently pointed out that the housing of asylum seekers in hotels, and wider geopolitical issues and narratives around migration can impact local communities and amplify community tensions.[116]

105. The increased hostility towards people seeking sanctuary was a concern in most of the evidence, from EYST, City of Sanctuary and others.[117] Third sector stakeholders shared troubling examples of racism and there was a general consensus that overt racism and hostile acts have reached toxic levels.[118]

106. Race Council Cymru expressed concerns about the rioting which took place across the UK during the summer of 2024 and reported:

> *"a resurgence of hostility toward refugees, echoing historical patterns of scapegoating during times of economic or social upheaval. These attacks were not isolated incidents but rather a culmination of growing anti-immigrant rhetoric, exacerbated by economic challenges, political polarisation, and sensationalist media narratives. In the years leading up to these events, political discourse increasingly framed refugees and asylum seekers as burdens on public services and threats to national security. This rhetoric, often detached from the realities of refugees' experiences, created an environment where violence became more likely."*[119]

107. The Welsh Refugee Council and Sanctuary Coalition Cymru welcome the bold vision of the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, but express concern about the

[113] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 89-95
[114] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 145
[115] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 31 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 193 -5
[116] Roundtable discussion with Migration and Resettlement Leads - 24 March 2025
[117] Written evidence SC10 EYST; SC08 City of Sanctuary
[118] Notes from Social Cohesion stakeholder event – 17 March 2025
[119] Written evidence, SC1, Race Council Cymru

"*lack of dedicated funding to turn ambitions into reality. Without sustained investment, grassroots organisations and community-led initiatives will struggle to implement meaningful change, increasing the risk of division and deepening existing inequalities.*"[120]. Others highlight the need for alignment across Welsh Government policies, and the need for guidance, resources and an effective communication plan.[121]

108. In February 2025 the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice reaffirmed the Welsh Government's vision to ensure sanctuary seekers are supported to enable them to contribute to Welsh life. She said the Welsh Government will be "*refocusing commitments*" on the Nation of Sanctuary and introducing 10 principles to help communicate what the policy means. The Chapter on Nation of Sanctuary in the refreshed 'Anti-racist Wales Action Plan' replaces the previous Asylum Seeker and Refugee Action Plan and other previous commitments.[122]

109. The Cabinet Secretary said that following the unrest triggered by the Southport murders, the Welsh Government made efforts to reach out to the third sector, particularly those supporting people seeking sanctuary. She recognised that "*we've got to help develop those tools... for our community leaders, so many of those at the forefront of supporting sanctuary seekers are in the third sector, many volunteers.*"[123].

Our view

There is multiple evidence of growing hostility towards sanctuary seekers, which is also affecting ethnic minority communities across Wales.

We welcome the Welsh Government's renewed commitment to being a Nation of Sanctuary and the introduction of 10 principles to help communicate and foster understanding about what this means; and its continued work to deliver the vision of an anti-racist Wales. Strong leadership from the Welsh Government is vital to embed this commitment and enable public bodies and civil society organisations to make this vision a reality. Increased and effective communication, support, guidance and resources will be required to facilitate buy-in from communities.

[120] Written evidence SC 24 Welsh Refugee Council and Sanctuary Coalition Cymru
[121] Roundtable discussion with Migration and Resettlement Leads - 24 March 2025.pdf
[122] Senedd (2025), Plenary Record, 11 February 2025
[123] Equality and Social Justice Committee 12 May 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 46

Urgent action is needed to provide opportunities for people to raise their concerns about levels of migration and their fears about the capacity of local services, particularly around housing. Creating space for discussion around these issues can also lead to improved understanding of the experience of sanctuary seekers, the challenges they face, and the skills they can offer.

We were encouraged by the Welsh Government's involvement in the 'healing the divide partnership' in Llanelli and it is our strong view that government needs to work in partnership with the local authority and those community groups who so far have been taking the lead.

Welsh politicians all have a responsibility to lead by example, to demonstrate compassion and understanding for people who arrive in Wales, often having experienced trauma and loss. We need to recognise the strength and resilience of people seeking sanctuary and the valuable contribution they can and do make to Welsh communities.

Accommodation of refugees and asylum seekers

110. The stock of available housing has not increased in line with population growth; a shortage of affordable and social housing and the competition for limited accommodation in the Private Rental Sector have all contributed to a housing market in crisis. This can be a flashpoint for division within communities which generate false perceptions that asylum seekers and refugees are getting preferential treatment.[124]

111. Since the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act local authorities in Wales have played a key role in the resettlement of asylum seekers. The UK Government policy of full dispersal was introduced in 2023 with all UK local authorities mandated to receive asylum seekers. The Wales Migration Strategic Partnership say that asylum seekers are now accommodated in 20 of the 22 LAs in Wales. Accommodation within Wales is managed by Clearsprings Ready Homes, a private company contracted by the Home Office.[125]

112. Stakeholders have cited the challenges arising from the full dispersal policy. These include a lack of knowledge and expertise about the asylum and dispersal

[124] Written evidence SC20 Tai Pawb
[125] Roundtable discussion with Migration and Resettlement Leads - 24 March 2025.pdf

process, rights and entitlements, and supporting people with No Recourse to Public Funds.[126]

113. Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn and others highlight that the widening of dispersal has been particularly challenging in rural areas, where there is less availability of specialist support from outreach organisation such as the Welsh Refugee Council, Migrant Help and the Red Cross.[127] Other barriers to accessing support include the lack of and cost of public transport, lack of access to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses, difficulties in accessing specialist legal advice and being very visible in less diverse communities.[128]

114. The Bevan Foundation said that it is "*vital that asylum dispersals are properly planned. Welsh Government and local authorities need to work in partnership with the Home Office, landlords, communities, and key services, to develop a strategy long before placement is agreed.*"[129].

Responding to the widening of dispersal areas in Wales

Housing Services in Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn have set up community hubs and drop-in services across Gwynedd, Anglesey and Conwy to support the roll out of asylum dispersal across northwest Wales. The Community Cohesion Team provides spaces for communities to come together in a supportive and respectful environment, as well as offering support, guidance and signposting to essential health care, housing, education services as, well as employment, welfare and immigration advice. Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn reports that all three Hubs are well attended every week and has become a core support for many.

Resettlement teams from across all three local authorities as well as the Community Cohesion team, representatives from Migrant Help, Welsh Refugee Council and Red Cross, local community groups, social workers and other local organisations meet monthly to discuss best practice, gain advice from each other and support each other with any difficult issues arising.[130]

115. The private sector's inability to provide sufficient accommodation to meet demand has led to the use of hotels in some places. Many stakeholders referred to the protests triggered by the Home Office announcement of the plan to

[126] Written evidence SC31 Wales Strategic Migration Partnership; SC 24 Welsh Refugee Council and Sanctuary Coalition Cymru
[127] Written evidence SC21 Housing Services, Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn
[128] Roundtable discussion with Migration and Resettlement Leads - 24 March 2025
[129] Written evidence SC22 Bevan Foundation
[130] Written evidence SC21 Housing Services, Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn

accommodate asylum seekers at Stradey Park hotel in Llanelli in the summer of 2023. Local opposition to the plan centred around the proposed re-purposing of an important community hub hosting weddings, celebrations, and local events, for emergency accommodation for asylum seekers.

116. Some Migration and Resettlement Leads were of the view that the Welsh Government and others should have realised this would act as a catalyst for unrest, fuelled by outsiders with a completely different agenda. One said, "*it's almost as if they had a cigarette lighter and they were click, click, click clicking until it hit some dry grass and when it hit Stradey Park Hotel there was a lot of dry grass and it went up.*"[131].

117. The Welsh Government said that as "responsibility for justice and policing, counter-extremism, media and internet regulation and many other areas of law or policy" are not devolved, they are limited in their power to address the issues raised.[132]

118. Many called for an urgent need to work closely with the Home Office to develop future emergency responses. The WLGA and the Welsh Government evidence point to the exacerbating lack of information from the Home Office.[133] Other stakeholders agree that, in the absence of information and engagement with the community, a vacuum was created and exploited by the far-right to influence and escalate tensions.[134]

119. The third sector stakeholder group also raised significant concerns about the learning from Llanelli.

> *"Doing nothing is not an option anymore – it has to be active – cohesion has to become a verb not something that just is a nice to have. Llanelli is a microcosm in Wales – if that can happen in Llanelli, then it can happen anywhere in Wales."*[135]

[131] Roundtable discussion with Migration and Resettlement Leads - 24 March 2025
[132] Welsh Government Evidence Paper for the Inquiry into Social Cohesion
[133] Equality and Social Justice Committee 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 174 & 207
[134] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 163
[135] Notes from Social Cohesion stakeholder event - 17 March 2025

120. The Cabinet Secretary said that any anti-migrant attitudes in Llanelli were inflated by the chosen venue as a "*prize place for the people of Llanelli*" including the loss of jobs and cancelled events.[136]

121. The Cabinet Secretary said that the Home Office is piloting an alternative way of providing asylum accommodation and has visited modular homes in Cardiff. The Welsh Government has written to all local authorities encouraging them to take part in the pilot. She also assured the Committee that Clearsprings will not procure another hotel in Wales without consulting local authorities but highlighted it is not a devolved issue.[137]

Our view

Meeting everyone's housing and accommodation needs is a challenge in communities across Wales. The lack of planning and engagement by the Home Office in its approach to securing accommodation for asylum seekers, in Llanelli, is unacceptable. There was resounding criticism from the Welsh Government, local authorities, third sector and faith communities on the inadequacy of the Home Office's approach.

We strongly support the need for improved collaboration between the UK and Welsh Governments and local authorities on providing accommodation for sanctuary seekers. Although the assurances made by the Cabinet Secretary that a hotel will not be procured again without prior consultation in Wales to provide asylum accommodation are welcome, we note that this could occur again in the future, given this is not a devolved area.

Local authorities play a crucial role in the resettlement and support of asylum seekers, and we welcome the work undertaken by Cyngor Sir Ynys Mon to support the dispersal of asylum seekers.

Conclusion 4. All politicians should act responsibly when addressing issues relating to sanctuary seekers. The Welsh Government must provide clear leadership in how it communicates such messages and create dialogue with the general public, particularly those who have concerns about the accommodation of asylum seekers and the use of hotels. Accommodation for asylum seekers will continue to be needed across the UK. The Welsh Government should continue to collaborate with the UK Government to pilot alternative housing and to avoid the

[136] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 12 May 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 19
[137] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 12 May 2025, Record of proceedings, paragraph 19

use of hotels, but it must always do this through consultation, engagement and communication with local authorities, the third sector and local communities.

The rise of extremism and the far-right

122. In her oral evidence, Dame Sara Khan referred to an "*evolving and accelerating extremism landscape*" including far-right extremism, Islamist extremism and Incel (or Involuntary Celibate) extremism. She expressed concern that the UK currently lacks a strategy for dealing with this issue. She said:

> *"You're seeing what we call now 'salad bar' or 'pick-'n'-mix' extremism, which is where individuals pick and select from different extremist ideologies, often coming up with an incoherent extremist belief that's often used as what motivates them."*[138]

123. Several stakeholders, including the WCVA, say there is a worrying resurgence of the far-right in Wales,[139] The rise in far-right extremism across the UK is being driven by anti-immigration sentiment, online radicalisation, and growing hostility towards multiculturalism, with vulnerable communities and individuals being exploited by extremist groups.

124. Hope not Hate's work focuses on the organised far-right, the communities who are susceptible to them and the issues and policies which give rise to them. Their annual reports provide a review of far-right activity across the UK. Its 2024 Fear and HOPE report found:

- A record number of far-right activities and sympathisers were convicted of terror-related offences in 2023.
- The radical right is growing in confidence to push divisive, populist, anti-immigration, climate sceptic policies in British politics.
- Anti-migrant activism continues to dominate the far-right.
- The conflict in the Middle East has led to a huge rise in antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred in the UK, with the far-right divided on the issue.[140]

[138] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 3 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 42
[139] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 31 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 5
[140] Hope not Hate, Fear and HOPE 2024: The Case for Community Resilience, October 2024

125. Far-right activity in Wales has been visible through the recent anti-immigration protests. Llanelli Unites was established as a specific response to the "*activities of the Far Right and the rise in extremism, hate and racism which is still evident in Llanelli*."[141] While the Stradey Park Hotel is no longer a live issue, far-right activity in the area has continued, with recent messages targeting NHS workers from India and hatred spread beyond migrants towards the trans community, women and net zero.[142]

126. There is a need for further focus on the rise of the radical right in Wales and what drives this kind of mobilisation and support, according to Dr Anwen Elias and Llanelli Unites.[143] Whilst most of the research available is UK wide, understanding the extent of the challenge we face in Wales is key.

127. The Welsh Refugee Council and Sanctuary Coalition Cymru calls on the Welsh Government to carry out inquiries into anti-migrant sentiment in Wales taking into account what led to the rejection of far-right anti migrant efforts in Llantwit Major where resilient community groups, including the local football club and local church, challenged the far-right rhetoric.[144] The third sector stakeholder group said that counter protest overwhelmed the far-right group protest as a result of good local leadership.[145]

128. Hope not Hate research has identified that the far-right has latched onto multiculturalism and the idea that certain cultures pose a threat to British values. However, the latest census showed that most people in Wales identify with having a Welsh-only identity, and therefore the far-right narrative in this respect has less traction in Wales than in England. Hope not Hate say there are opportunities to marry the nation of sanctuary narrative with an inclusive Welsh identity that can form a counter narrative to the far-right.[146]

129. Wales Safer Communities Network and other stakeholders, emphasise how "*isolation and disconnection can happen in any community*" and the vulnerability of individuals who withdraw from society and seek other harmful influences. They note growing concern about the rise of other forms of extremism, such as individuals who self-proclaim as Incels.[147]

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[141] Written evidence SC04 Llanelli Unites
[142] Notes from Social Cohesion stakeholder event - 17 March 2025.
[143] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 47; Written evidence SC04 Llanelli Unites
[144] Written evidence, SC24, Welsh Refugee Council and Sanctuary Coalition Cymru
[145] Notes from Social Cohesion stakeholder event - 17 March 2025.
[146] Equality and Social Justice Committee, 28 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 98
[147] Written evidence SC29 Wales Safer Community Network

130. Dr. Andrew Thomas of Swansea University has found that the Incel community is significant; one online forum alone has almost 30,000 members. Whilst this is an online community, their ideology and misogynistic views are promoting violence against women as acceptable. Headteachers in Cardiff confirm that boys as young as Year 7 are showing signs of being influenced by this ideology.[148]

131. The Cabinet Secretary acknowledges the challenges. Whilst recognising that justice and policing are not devolved, the Welsh Government is liaising with the UK Government special interest group on countering extremism, the National Police Chiefs' Council's national community tensions and hate crime gold group and the need to "*educate them about what's happening in Wales.*"[149].

Our view

With the far-right actively involved in fuelling angry disturbances across the UK following the murder of three children in Southport in 2024, we have since seen their increasing activity in Wales. The damage wreaked by far-right agitators on communities like Llanelli serves as a reminder of the potency of this threat.

Given that justice, policing and counter-extremism are not devolved, effective collaboration between the Welsh and UK governments is essential to combat the increasing threat posed by the far-right.

We are concerned about the gap in our understanding about the threat posed by the rise of the far-right in Wales as well as any other form of extremism. We need to know how best to respond to the challenges our communities face, including identifying why disturbances happened in some areas and not others.

Recommendation 4. In response to the increasing threats to social cohesion from the rise of extremist views and activities, the Expert Group on Social Cohesion should pinpoint the challenges this poses for Wales and identify best ways to tackle far-right activities which can create division and ultimately lead to community disturbances which we saw in Llanelli.

[148] Written evidence SC03 Swansea University
[149] Equality and Social Justice Committee,12 May 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 53

Annex 1: Terms of Reference

The Committee agreed to explore:

- The key issues which impact social cohesion in Wales and consider whether interventions need to target specific groups of people, geographical areas or particular key issues.
- Examples of best practice and other interventions/needed to support social cohesion and overcome tensions. This includes understanding the role the third sector plays in supporting social cohesion and what barriers it faces, including funding.
- What support the Welsh Government provides to community groups and organisations and identify whether there are any opportunities to provide additional support. This includes examining the limitations and barriers which exist given some aspects of support for social cohesion are reserved to the UK Government (for example policing, media and internet regulation), and what action could be taken to overcome these challenges.

The Committee considered the wider context for community cohesion following targeted attacks on refugees and asylum seekers in communities across the UK during the summer of 2024.

Annex 2: List of oral evidence sessions.

The following witnesses provided oral evidence to the committee on the dates noted below. Transcripts or notes can be viewed on the Committee's website.

Date	Name and Organisation
03 March 2025	**Dame Sara Khan,** Former UK Government Advisor and author of the Khan Review (2024) **Professor Ted Cantle** Belong - Cohesion and Integration Network **Professor Dominic Abrams** University of Kent
17 March 2025	**Third sector stakeholder round-table event**
24 March 2025	**Migration and Resettlement Leads round table discussion**
31 March 2025	**Dr Lindsay Cordery-Bruce** Chief Executive,Wales Council for Voluntary Action **Eleri Williams** Building Communities Trust **Jacqueline Broadhead** Director, Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity and Migration Oxford / Inclusive Cities **Jonathan Downs** Corporate Policy Lead, Oldham Council **Kate James** Policy and Research Officer, Migration Yorkshire
28 April 2025	**Misbah Malik** Senior Policy and Engagement Officer, Hope Not Hate **Cllr MaryAnn Brockelsby** Leader of Monmouthshire Council and WLGA Social Justice Spokesperson **Joe Rossiter, Co-Director** Institute of Welsh Affairs **Dr. Anwen Elias** Reader in politics, Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University

Date	Name and Organisation
	Professor Matt Ryan Southampton University
12 May 2024	**Jane Hutt** MS, Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Trefnydd and Chief Whip **Andrew Charles** Welsh Government **John Davies** Welsh Government

Annex 3: List of written evidence

The following people and organisations provided written evidence to the Committee. All Consultation responses and additional written information can be viewed on the Committee's website.

Reference	Organisation
SC01	Race Council Cymru
SC02	Dyma Ni Befriending, Bangor
SC03	Swansea University
SC04	Llanelli Unites
SC05	Oasis
SC05	Cytûn (Churches together in Wales)
SC07	Carnegie UK
SC08	City of Sanctuary
SC09	Teesside University
SC10	Ethnic Minority and Youth Support Team Wales (EYST)
SC11	Age Cymru
SC!2	Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales
SC13	Pupils to Parliament
SC14	Building Communities Trust
SC15	Good Faith Partnership
SC16	Nuffield Foundation
SC17	Children's Commissioner for Wales
SC18	Social Enterprise Stakeholder Group (SESG)
SC19	Amnesty International
SC20	Tai Pawb
SC21	Housing Services, Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn

Reference	Organisation
SC22	Bevan Foundation
SC23	Carmarthenshire Council
SC24	Welsh Refugee Council and Sanctuary Coalition Cymru
SC25	Welsh Sports Foundation
SC26	Professor Dominic Abrams
SC27	Wales Council for Voluntary Action
SC28	Policing in Wales
SC29	Wales Safer Communities Network
SC30	Centre for Adult Social Care
SC31	Wales Strategic Migration Partnership
SC32	Wales Local Government Organisation
SC33	Hate Lab

Additional Information

Title	Date
Item 3 Paper to note 3.8: Letter from the Future Generations Commissioner	12 May 2025
Committee visit to Railway Gardens, Cardiff	08 April 2025
Committee visit to Caia Park Partnership, Wrexham	11 April 2025
Committee visit to Cae Fardre, Church Village, Rhondda Cynon Taf	08 May 2025
Llanelli Unites Conference Report	January 2025

Annex 4: Engagement summary

Welsh Parliament
Equality and Social Justice Committee

Social Cohesion
Engagement findings

9 June 2025

Background

1. As part of the Equality and Social Justice Committee's inquiry into 'Social Cohesion', the Citizen Engagement Team proposed a qualitative approach to engagement, comprising a series of focus groups.

2. This paper is based upon the contributions of 22 contributors from three Senedd regions, gathered during three focus groups held between 25 March and 3 May 2025.

3. Contributors were sourced through ACE (Action in Caerau and Ely), Indian Heritage Centre and Sunflowers Wales.

4. The engagement comprised two face-to-face focus groups and one online focus group (via Microsoft Teams). The format of engagement was largely comparable between sessions but varied slightly to meet the distinct needs of contributors.

5. Notes of each session are available to Members upon request. The following themes emerged from the discussions.

1. The meaning of social cohesion

6. At the outset of most focus groups, contributors shared their views on the meaning and importance of social cohesion. A wide range of definitions and interpretations emerged during discussions.

> *"Going back to the point of community cohesion, I see that as transcending race, gender and other barriers so we're all able to talk and share commonalities."*
>
> *Focus group contributor*

7. Several contributors broadly described the meaning of social cohesion as the ability to live harmoniously alongside one another while accepting and embracing differences.

8. One contributor elaborated on this, explaining that as a white male, he is not personally affected by many of the challenges facing other groups, but deeply values diversity, seeing it as both enriching and essential to society. This viewpoint was echoed by several contributors who maintained that social cohesion is not only about tolerance, but about celebrating the variety of backgrounds that contribute to the richness of communities.

Celebrating culture

9. This celebration of culture was a theme discussed during most focus groups. Ukrainian contributors explained that celebrating and honouring Ukrainian culture was an important way of strengthening identity and supporting mental wellbeing, particularly during a time of immense distress caused by the war in Ukraine. Whilst maintaining strong links with fellow Ukrainians in Wales was considered important, many were keen to emphasise the support from the communities in which they live. There was a strong desire among contributors to engage with Welsh society while maintaining their own cultural identities.

10. Similarly, contributors discussed the success of an event celebrating Indian culture, which featured sari draping, Indian tea making, and a classical dance workshop. Although most attendees were not of Indian heritage, the event was very well received.

Identity

11. The idea of identity and the importance of belonging within a community was also discussed during most focus groups. Some contributors shared personal stories to highlight how crucial it is to feel connected and supported by the places and people around them. For many, social cohesion goes beyond mere coexistence and involves fostering a sense of belonging, where individuals feel accepted, valued, and included in their communities.

> *"Someone said to me, who wasn't born here, that since they've lived here, they feel Welsh. This is where they feel at home. They feel safe, they feel welcomed. As far as they're concerned, they're Welsh. I think that's a feeling that people need to have. Not this 'us and them'."*
>
> *Focus group contributor*

2. Barriers to social cohesion

12. Most contributors discussed the challenges involved in building and maintaining social cohesion. The most commonly identified barriers during the focus groups are summarised below.

Transport

13. Several contributors emphasised the need for frequent opportunities for people to meet and connect, rather than sporadic one-off events. These regular opportunities for interaction were seen as crucial in fostering a sense of belonging and community. This was particularly the case for Ukrainian contributors who explained that building and maintaining social cohesion among the Ukrainian community in Wales was challenging, especially given the wide geographic dispersement and relatively small population.

14. This was exacerbated by the lack of reliable public transport, especially outside cities. Many contributors expressed frustration at how difficult it is to access cultural and community events due to limited or unreliable services. For example, some described two-hour journeys each way to attend weekly dancing groups, which they considered vital for maintaining connections. Others said the complete absence or significant limitation of service on Sundays, made it difficult to participate in weekend activities that support social inclusion.

Loss of community spaces

15. Contributors also discussed the impact of changes to community spaces. As an example, one contributor discussed the loss of allotments in his area, which he said were once considered a cornerstone of the community. In the past, large allotments served as self-sustaining community hubs where people supported one another in informal, practical ways, such as sharing food with families in need. These spaces encouraged a spirit of generosity and connection that many feel has been lost.

16. Places like the Dusty Forge community centre were praised as essential, providing a physical space where connections can flourish. One contributor also emphasised the importance of community spaces that offer support, particularly for vulnerable individuals and those who suffer with their mental health.

17. The increasing cost of community spaces, along with the decline in communal activities, were seen as contributing to the erosion of these tight-knit, supportive environments.

Financial barriers

18. Discussion about the costs of hiring, renting, or purchasing community spaces expanded into a broader conversation about the financial implications of organising and attending events, projects, and other initiatives. Financial support for venues was seen as essential to fostering greater cohesion and enabling meaningful interaction among diverse groups.

19. Contributors highlighted the importance of having safe and accessible spaces to gather, particularly for minority and migrant communities. Several areas such as Mayhill, Townhill and Port Talbot were mentioned as posing logistical (in terms of public transport) and social challenges (anti-social behaviour). Some contributors also queried how resources are allocated and how decisions are reached on local funding priorities.

20. Community-driven projects which rely on funding, were considered increasingly difficult to sustain, and sports facilities, which help keep young people engaged and reduce the risk of trouble, are seen as vital yet often underfunded.

21. Others discussed the financial pressures faced by many when it comes to attending community events or initiatives. Many said the increase in the cost of living and the cuts to benefits contributed to this and has left vulnerable groups in particular – who are often the least able to initiate change – feeling disconnected and unsupported.

> *"The costs of events are a barrier. People like to attend events but some can't afford to. The numbers at events can vary because of this. We do try and arrange free events where possible. For example, we run free yoga sessions."*
>
> *Focus group contributor*

Cultural shifts

22. Discussion also touched on broader shifts in how people connect. Contributors noted that the decline in opportunities to gather in-person has coincided with an increase in the use of digital communication. Some felt that this change in communication has led to a more isolated society. People are less likely to reach out or engage face-to-face, often opting to text or communicate on social media, rather than make phone calls.

23. This shift in communication, combined with the reduction in community spaces where people could naturally come together, has made it harder for people to form the strong, supportive bonds that once characterised many communities in Wales.

24. In a different vein, some contributors explained that integrating with different communities can require a shift in cultural mindset - something that often does not resonate with, or appeal to some.

> *"For Indian and South Asian communities, getting integrated with the local community can be difficult sometimes, probably due to cultural issues. To belong to the local community some feel like they have to go to the pub, but that doesn't fit with them necessarily. But they do want to meet local people and get involved with their activities. Some are lucky - we have kids into sport, but not everyone has that."*
>
> *Focus group contributor*

Media

25. Contributors also noted the negative impact of the media, particularly in how issues like immigration are portrayed. Many felt the press oversimplifies complex issues, often focusing on one-sided, sensationalised stories that contribute to division and misunderstanding. This portrayal, some argued, leads to a separation of communities rather than fostering cooperation and understanding.

3. Positive social cohesion

26. Some focus group contributors shared positive experiences of how community support has played a significant role in helping them feel connected to their community.

27. One Ukrainian contributor described their experience living with a host family, who helped them integrate into the community. This family provided essential items for the contributor's child and introduced them to local baby groups and resources. The contributor expressed deep gratitude for the support, which allowed them to feel at ease and motivated to engage with community groups, attend English lessons, and explore job opportunities.

28. The sense of community and camaraderie created by third sector organisations was also highlighted as particularly valuable. Ukrainian contributors described attending events as an opportunity for them to relax, feel safe and speak their native Ukrainian language, which was considered especially important. Whilst contributors recognised the importance of adapting to their new environment and integrating into Welsh society, maintaining a connection to their homeland and language was equally important for their identity and mental wellbeing.

29. Some contributors explained that organisations like Race Council Cymru have allowed them to use spaces at venues such as Swansea Grand Theatre, where they gather and engage in activities. This has allowed them to keep their traditions alive, including sharing Ukrainian music with their children and participating in Ukrainian dancing, which was mentioned several times and considered very important.

30. Contributors also acknowledged the support from other local communities, such as the Polish community in Llanelli and the Turkish community in Swansea, who have been instrumental in offering assistance, including fundraising and sharing job opportunities. Interactions with these communities have created a rich, multicultural environment.

31. Contributors highlighted several initiatives that contribute positively to social cohesion, which included lunch programmes, men's groups and women's groups at spaces like St. Vincent's. Another example of good practice in fostering social cohesion was community garden projects, which encourages a mix of volunteers from different backgrounds. The shared experience of working on a common project, and witnessing the tangible results of that collective effort, was seen as a key driver of cohesion. However, some contributors noted that there is a gap in evening activities, leaving some feeling quite isolated at night.

32. Beyond physical gatherings, contributors also recognised the role of digital spaces in bringing people together. While social media often receives negative

attention, one contributor shared an example where a post about a child's stolen scooter led the entire community to offer support.

4. Solutions to barriers to social cohesion

33. When discussing possible solutions to barriers to social cohesion, some explained that this complex and often quite nuanced.

> *"Equality is a very big term, but what I'm looking for is equity. That is a more important space to be operating. The moment we say we want to change the existing system in the name of equality, that is where we have problems and where the nationalist sentiment creeps in and our own problems start. We should be aware of what we are trying to achieve. Even though we think and believe there is no class system here, it becomes an issue in economic classicism – this is where I would say awareness plays an important role. All of us who work in professional jobs are extremely comfortable where we work, whereas we can't stay the same when we're in the community. The moment people realise we're contributing, enriching, enabling, it's completely different. So if we can flip that and change the messaging so that people understand that it's because of people from different backgrounds who are supporting us in health, software, academia, that we have a community with cohesion, that changes the attitude.*
>
> *It's also about understanding culture not as a religion, but more socially. A lot of us Indians don't come from religious backgrounds, we come from cultural backgrounds."*
>
> *Focus group contributor*

34. Other contributors emphasised the importance of community-based initiatives that foster connections and support. Groups like Men's Sheds and local sports activities, both for children and adults, were highlighted as excellent ways to bring people together. Similarly, funding initiatives such as food banks, utility assistance and financial advice at local community hubs was considered important.

35. Whilst many contributors recognised that increased funding for community spaces and projects is difficult in a challenging economic climate, they maintained that without it, projects are left struggling to survive on minimal

resources. Some explained that the reduction in funding for community support services has led to a decrease in the available resources, despite growing demand. The uncertainty around short-term funding and the impact of closing community resources were significant concerns, as these cuts create a sense of instability.