After the riots:

Building the foundations for social cohesion

Policy priorities for cohesion and resilience

September 2024

Executive summary

The killing of three young girls in Southport on 29 July 2024 sparked acts of violence and disorder in over 35 locations around the UK. The targeting of Muslims, asylum seekers and visible minorities made these the worst outbreaks of racist violence seen in the UK for decades.

This paper sets out what happened, examines some of the causes of the disorder and, most importantly, recommends the key elements that should be included in the Government's strategic response, as it seeks to build and strengthen the foundations of social cohesion in the UK. If we fail to take the opportunity to strengthen these foundations, we risk recurring episodes of the kind of disturbances we have seen, and increased polarisation and social conflict in future.

The paper sets out 12 policy recommendations. Out of these, three key priorities emerge:

1. The Government must put in place a long-term, cross-departmental national social cohesion strategy.

2. Councils and combined authorities should be charged with the responsibility to deliver local cohesion strategies with support and some additional resources to do so.

3. Social media companies need to be held to account and required to do more to control the spread of mis/disinformation and hate speech.

In the immediate term, we also need to take urgent steps to ensure that asylum and refugee accommodation does not become a focus for community grievances and extremist activity, by addressing local pressure points. We also suggest that the Ministry of Justice should pilot restorative justice programmes bringing those convicted of criminal offices associated with the riots together with mosques and refugee-led organisations.

A national cohesion strategy should include supporting the role that schools and colleges have to play in boosting young people's resilience to online misinformation and extremist narratives and providing greater opportunities for connecting with peers from different backgrounds.

More generally, it should boost support for programmes and initiatives that increase social connections between people from different backgrounds. It should recognise that sport in particular, but also art and culture, can play important roles in this and in creating shared identities.

The strategy must also address how we tackle prejudice and hate crime, and this should include a clear working definition of, and closer attention to, anti-Muslim prejudice.

We also need to address how we begin to rebuild trust in our institutions and build democratic resilience. We suggest a Speakers Commission that could provide a deliberative forum for this important national conversation.

1 What happened?

The Southport killings sparked sporadic acts of violence and disorder in over 35 locations around the UK (primarily in England and Northern Ireland). The targeting of Muslims and asylum seekers in particular – and minorities in general – made these the worst outbreaks of racial violence in the UK for decades.

This was the most serious disorder in the UK since 2011. While only around a quarter as many people (up to 4,000-5,000) took part directly, there was a considerably broader geography than in 2011. These were primarily one-off flashpoints, with the exception of more sustained disorder in Northern Ireland. There was narrow participation in lawful and non-violent street protest, with a handful of events of several hundred people. Yet, within these, scenes in areas such as Belfast, Tamworth and Rotherham saw considerable targeted violence, destruction of property and cases of attempted murder and arson.

There was much wider online engagement than real world engagement with the disorder, the protests and the counter-protests.

Counter-protests were, by contrast, large and predominantly peaceful. They were largely a hopeful sign, but there have also been arrests and prosecutions for inciting violence by counter-protestors. There were gatherings (eg. Bolton) where groups sought direct confrontation/clashes with each other, or where counter-protests turned into disorder in the absence of far-right protests (eg. Birmingham).

Such examples are used to fuel narratives about the inevitability of conflict and claims that the media/political focus is failing to recognise "both sides" or policing it asymmetrically and unfairly.

Wednesday 7 August was celebrated as a day when counter-protest was dominant. Around 15,000 people took part in counter-protests. The announcement of plans to incite violent attacks in 40 places was primarily a violent fantasy which hoped to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This demonstrated how, in the heightened atmosphere of disorder, online threats and rumours could generate widespread fear across dozens of towns and cities. This was amplified in the national media and by online word of mouth, primarily by those horrified by the threats and determined to oppose them, as well as by a smaller group excited by the prospect of violence. A total of around 150 protestors took part in half a dozen, mainly lawful, protests at a minority of the advertised locations. The threat of widespread vigilante violence did not materialise.

According to the most recent update from the National Police Chiefs Council, the police made a total of 1,280 arrests from 29 July to 30 August in connection with the disorder, with 796 charges being brought.[1] Those cases continue to be processed through the courts: the Ministry of Justice confirmed on 16 August that 460 of those charged had appeared in court, with 99 having been sentenced.[2]

2 Attitudes and responses to violence and disorder

Initial studies of public responses from YouGov and More in Common[3] present a similar picture:

There was widespread opposition and condemnation of the violence and disorder

Some 85% of people oppose the violence and disorder – 75% do so strongly.[4] A majority (55%) express opposition to non-violent protests, though a third support this.

There is a majority consensus that much of the disorder was racist violence

Indeed, half of those supporting the disorder see it was racist in motivation (along with a broader majority of those opposed to it).[5]

The oxygen for violence and disorder came from a longer tail of tacit consent

Small numbers of people (below 4,000-5,000 people) were directly involved in acts of disorder, but there was wider participation and engagement online.

- 2-4% of people were strongly supportive of the violence and disorder – expressing strong support, pride and elation.

- 7-10% of people say that they supported the disorder itself (in representative polling).

- 10-15% of people feel more represented by the protests and disorder than by those involved in local clean-up efforts.[6]

Gender, politics and worldview are more important than class or geography in tacit support for violence and disorder

Men were twice as likely as women to express support for disorder, with 10% supportive and 82% opposed. Women opposed the disorder 88% to 5%. Supporters of the Reform party were three times as likely (21%) than average to express support for disorder, though 76% opposed it. Some 29% of Reform voters felt that the disorder "represented the view of most Britons (12% of public) while 62% rejected this.[7]

By contrast, demographic factors (class, age, geography) were marginal rather than significant in expressing support for the disorder

- There was 7% support from ABC1 and 8% support from C2DE respondents, with 2% of each group strongly supporting disorder.

- YouGov reported 10% support in the north of England, compared to an average of 7% support across England, and similar levels of support in Wales and Scotland (which did not see similar outbreaks of disorder).

There were contested argument about the role of "legitimate concerns" in protest and disorder

A mainstream minority of people – a quarter to a third of the public – saw broader non-violent protest as primarily driven by "legitimate concerns" (though a majority of the public reject this characterisation of non-violent protest during the disorder).[8] There were some lawful gatherings that were not violent or disorderly, but there was little evidence of "mainstream protest". A large mainstream segment would be hypothetically supportive of such protests.

3   Understanding the causes of disorder

A range of different economic, social and political factors came into play and fanned the flames of hatred and disorder sparked by the Southport killings. There is a contested policy, political and media debate about the relevant priority and weight to put on a range of factors.

Media reporting and analysis of the initial convictions suggests that a majority have previous criminal convictions. Metropolitan police commissioner Sir Mark Rowley said that around 70% of those arrested in London had previous convictions for serious offences, including weapon possession and violence.[9] Many appear to have been attracted by the opportunity for violence, while some have commitments to racist views, and sometimes extreme racist movements.

The Southport killings led to sustained efforts by protestors to target two groups with no direct connection to the killing itself: asylum seekers and Muslims. This continued when the identity of the suspect was known, alongside somewhat less intense attempts to make this a broader issue about migration, integration and multiculturalism, since the suspect was the UK-born child of migrants to Britain from Rwanda.

Social media has changed the way we interact with each other as well as being a conduit for hatred and misinformation. The rapid pace of **mis- and disinformation** generated a more permissive environment and oxygen for disorder. More effective platform policies, capacity or regulatory frameworks might curb the spread of misinformation. Education about online information can reduce susceptibility to misinformation (but may do so more readily among those with more trust in the authorities and in mainstream media sources).

Mis/disinformation is generated, believed and shared primarily because of **fears, threat perceptions and prejudices** towards the out-groups who were targeted. People are socialised towards condoning or participating in violence by messages about the scale of the existential threat to their group by an out-group and by optics/messages suggesting out-group violence is inevitable. Images of shock events and narratives about reactions to them can generate mirrored fears across groups, enabling a symbiotic recruitment of people willing to back extreme arguments or groups. A strategic response needs to address in-group and out-group relationships, and threat perceptions and prejudices about different groups.

Britain has significant inequalities in wealth and power, with many in society feeling their voices are not heard by political leaders. There is declining trust in many countries in democratic institutions, including in confidence in governments to manage migration. People in some communities have felt a loss of civic pride caused by town centre decline and loss of traditional industries.[10]

Parts of the UK have experienced rapid demographic change caused by immigration but have received little government support or guidance to address pressures on public services or to promote integration. The post-Brexit period has seen a softening, overall, of public attitudes to immigration, reflecting that the EU referendum had a cathartic effect in showing opportunities for democratic voice.[11] 'Taking back control' also presented policymakers and the public with the dilemmas of control, with significant support for migration in the NHS, social care, international students and elsewhere. But the visible lack of control over asylum in the Channel, and a heightened political debate about failed efforts to 'stop the boats,' have seen a moderate hardening and polarising of attitudes over the last two years.[12]

The geography of sporadic outbreaks of disorder is correlated both with socio-economic disadvantage in general, and with patterns of the recent dispersal of asylum-seekers in particular. The handling of asylum accommodation and dispersal – including the breakdown of communication between Home Office and local authorities, with no preparation and little attention to cohesion risks – has been a simmering issue. It presents probably the most imminent potential risk of disorder flaring up again this summer in response to other national or local incidents.

The moral oxygen for disorder comes from a broader group, of around 1 in 10 people, who sympathise with the disorder and offer tacit consent for violence, as legitimate or retaliatory. This vocal minority identifies as a "dispossessed majority" group of decent citizens, though this self-perception is broadly rejected by most people. This group holds undemocratic views, including latent racialised grievances, which they self-perceive as common-sense views about fair/unfair treatment. This group believes it reflects mainstream opinion but gets ignored due to the biases/capture of media, political elites favouring minorities, migrants and 'woke' causes.

This mixes somewhat-diluted traditional far-right themes - mainly now the assertion of dominance of inverse racism over traditional racism – with a diffuse cocktail of post-Covid, climate and other conspiracies. These are not views especially associated with socio-economic or geographic disadvantage and their geographic spread is fairly even across UK nations and regions.[13]

This group expresses and holds conflicted views about violence and disorder. For example, the large "Unite the Kingdom" rally on 27th July 2024, led by Tommy Robinson and Laurence Fox, saw organisers place considerable emphasis on peaceful protest, moderate drinking and cooperation with the police, with much emphasis on the unfairness of characterising those attending as "far-right", racist or violent. There were just two arrests. The attendees were overwhelmingly drawn from those who believe the post-Southport disorder was justified and primarily the fault of the government and the police. There were 121 arrests at a smaller, disorderly Whitehall protest on 31st July, with similar organisations and advocates.

4 Tests and challenges for a government response

The government should have a unifying narrative that seeks to address the whole country, across geographies, ethnic groups and worldviews.

The Government should avoid having parallel, segmented messages addressing concerns about the pace of immigration to a majority/conservative group and the fear of racist violence to ethnic and faith minorities and the liberal left. This requires a clear distinction between challenges of hatred, prejudice and extremism and the legitimate calls for democratic change (social, economic, cultural) in British politics.

The government should engage and respond to legitimate concerns, legitimately expressed – <u>not</u> because of the disorder and violence, but because of the message and mandate of the general election for change. To talk about 'legitimate concerns', we need to be clear about what is illegitimate in a democratic society.

The government should set out how the political system can make more visible and accessible opportunities to participate in the legitimate democratic debate about the choices we make on managing migration and integration. There are 'legitimate concerns' about how a democracy handles the pressures and gains of migration and social change, and about keeping racism, prejudice and violence out of our democratic debate. A legitimate debate about migration and integration would address both sets of concerns.

The Government has set out that it intends to bring immigration down during this parliament, while continuing to welcome the contribution of immigration to Britain – to our NHS, our economy and our society. It should have more proactive and visible plans to show how the economic contributions from migration are used to handle the pressures of population change on public services, and a clearer account of what makes inclusion and integration work, nationally and locally.

There should be more visible moments of parliamentary, political and public accountability for migration policy. This would help to communicate that "legitimate concerns" are about a right to have your voice heard, not a right to get everything you want. The government should listen with respect to its democratic opponents – but does not need to agree with some of the proposals made (and rejected) at the ballot box.

Responses to the riots should be a 'state of the nation' account, which puts in place the missing foundations for the long-term

A strategy focused narrowly only on the specific locations of sporadic disorder in 2024 would not help to sow the seeds for stronger connection, cohesion and resilience ahead of future unpredictable shock events. Rather, the government needs to articulate a 'state of the nation' account of core principles and approaches, that can be adapted for specific local challenges and priorities.

5   After the riots: policy priorities for cohesion and resilience

Addressing the underlying factors that fuelled the riots requires a focus on both **economic and social policy** at a national and local level.

The Government's immediate response to the riots must focus on the immediate risks to social cohesion. Currently, these include asylum and refugee accommodation and addressing online hatred and misinformation.

Addressing social divisions is a long-term challenge. The Government should have **a long-term vision** to address inequalities in wealth, power and voice, and to address the **policy vacuum on communities policy** with a strategic approach for social connection and community cohesion.[14]

There has never been a proper social cohesion strategy in England, despite four substantial policy reviews over the last 25[15] years and a number of Government policy commitments which were not fully implemented in practice.[16] After the July 2005 atrocities, preventing violent extremism became an explicit aim of social cohesion policy at a national and local government level. The 2019 Integrated Communities Action Plan[17] set out realistic goals but was derailed by the pandemic. Some of these earlier policies could easily be revised - for example, the duty to promote cohesion in schools, or the cross-departmental working group on social cohesion which met between 2017 and 2019.

Central government needs to provide **leadership and a policy strategy**, empowering local stakeholders to take action.

With this context in mind, we set out below twelve policy proposals to address the underlying factors that contributed to the riots.

1. The Government should publish a national social cohesion strategy and provide funding to implement it.

Challenge: The absence of national strategies in England and Scotland has meant that there has been little clarity about what is meant by cohesion and connection, or how government seeks to promote it. Social cohesion has not been prioritised in many local areas. The work of many government departments impacts on social cohesion, yet cross-department working has been sporadic.

Solutions: The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) should publish a long-term social cohesion strategy for England. The Northern Ireland administration and the Scottish and Welsh Governments should also update their strategies. The Welsh Government published a national delivery plan for community cohesion strategy in 2016[18] and provided funding for community cohesion staff based in councils. This approach offers useful lessons for England.

The Government should develop a cohesion strategy through consultation with local and regional government, public bodies, faith and civil society organisations, drawing together a detailed picture of the cohesion challenges facing the country, the effectiveness and adequacy of existing policy and practice, and proposals for new approaches at a local, regional and national levels. It should seek to publish the strategy approximately a year on from the recent disorder (i.e. in July 2025). Aims of the strategy should include:

- Increasing levels of social contact between people from different backgrounds.

- The ambition of universal fluency in English by 2030 and reducing other barriers to migrants' integration.

- Tackling prejudice and hate crime effectively.

- Empowering local leaders to take action: including councils, other public institutions, faith groups, civil society and business.

- Setting out the role for business, the public sector and civil society.

- Recognising the impact of rising population levels on public services and housing.

- Promoting evaluation and institutional learning.

The remit of many government departments has the potential to impact on social cohesion. Reconvening the cross-departmental group that met between 2017 and 2019 would be a first step in strengthening cross-departmental working. The Migration Advisory Committee should also expand its remit to provide the Government with independent advice on social cohesion issues raised by immigration.

The social cohesion strategy must be underpinned by clarity about the key indicators for connection and cohesion – and a commitment to developing a more robust and sustained evidence base and national monitoring framework to assess progress and better identify risks more proactively. Key to the new strategy will be building the right accountability mechanism, for example a measurement framework that is reported on to parliament, so that short term events cannot divert from the longer-term plan.

Funding of £60 million should be provided to implement the strategy, with money made available to all councils in the local government funding settlement. A modest amount of annual funding of around £75,000 per council would enable all local authorities to develop local social cohesion strategies and capacity to monitor tensions. Higher levels of funding should be targeted at local authorities with significant cohesion challenges, and those identified as being at higher risk of disorder or support for extremism. The measurement framework set out by the strategy could also be used to identify areas at greater risk from a breakdown in social cohesion.

2. All combined authorities and councils should put in place local social cohesion strategies, with input from other public bodies, business, faith and civil society organisations and local communities. These strategies must address hate crime and extremism.

Challenge: While many local authorities convene Community Safety Partnerships, a relatively small number of councils have long term plans and programmes to address factors that cause social cohesion to break down and to deal with hate crime. Social cohesion is heavily influenced by place. As such, it requires local leadership and action by a range of local actors.

Solutions: Based on a national strategy and using guidance from MHCLG on content, aims and desired outcomes, all combined authorities and councils should develop local social cohesion strategies. This process should involve input from the public, faith, civil society, police, other public services and business.

Differences in local context mean that there will and should be differences in the priorities and content of local strategies. But all local strategies should look at ways to promote shared values and reinforce norms of decent behaviour, in ways that reach and resonate with all sections of society.

Each strategy should incorporate a tension monitoring scheme which constantly reviews local data, from a variety of sources, and guides short and longer-term interventions. The existing tension monitoring toolkits could be updated relatively easily and should incorporate a focus on the role of social media.

Local strategies must address hate crime and extremism. Alongside these plans, the Government should support the introduction of cohesion and conflict de-escalation training for all elected officials, including local MPs, councillors and Police and Crime Commissioners. It should also make sure that local public bodies uphold their duty to 'foster good relations', a duty required by the Equality Act 2010.

3. The Home Office, MHCLG and the three primary asylum accommodation contractors should make sure that asylum and refugee accommodation does not become a focus for community grievances and extremist violence by addressing local pressure points and promoting integration.

Challenge: After they arrive in the UK, asylum-seekers are housed in initial (reception) accommodation then moved into hotels, hostels, ex-military accommodation or community-based dispersal accommodation. Asylum housing is managed by three Asylum Accommodation and Support Contractors (AASC) and numerous sub-contractors. Accommodation tends to be concentrated in towns and cities in the Midlands and northern England, and in London. In June 2024 some 134 of the UK's 382 local authorities were housing fewer than 20 asylum-seekers[19] while 27 local authorities were housing more than 1,000 asylum-seekers in initial and dispersal accommodation and in 'contingency' hotels.

Hotels have been a focus of far-right activity long before the 2024 riots. The AASC contracts run until 2029, with break clauses. Since the start of the contracts there have been numerous delivery failures and criticisms of the system, including poor coordination and a lack of collaboration with other support agencies and with councils. There are many cases of asylum-seekers being moved to local authority areas without a council's prior knowledge. This has made it difficult for local authorities and civil society groups to address residents' questions and deal with tensions.

The Home Office is processing a large backlog of asylum cases and moving asylum-seekers out of hotels into other forms of accommodation across the UK, including former care homes and student accommodation. Without action to address social cohesion, this new Home Office strategy risks dispersing and magnifying anti-asylum hostility.

Solutions: Those who threaten asylum-seekers must bear the full force of the law. But past experiences show that where communities are consulted about dispersal accommodation and can ask questions, this process often unlocks public consent for asylum accommodation and offers of help. MHCLG, the Home Office and AASC contractors should work with councils to make sure that local communities are consulted about asylum dispersal. AASC contractors and sub-contractors should always inform local authorities well in advance of placing asylum-seekers in their area, and failure to do this should result in financial penalties.

Pressures on schools and health services need to be addressed and social cohesion should be a fundamental consideration in asylum dispersal. The Home Office, MHCLG and AASC primary providers should put in place a fairer dispersal system that taps into public goodwill to support asylum-seekers, of the kind seen with the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Integration should be promoted in dispersal area through welcoming hubs that crease social contact between newcomers and receiving communities, offering activities such as English language conversation clubs and sport, advice and mentoring.

The Home Office and MHCLG should also examine ways to improve the asylum accommodation system and what to put in place when the AASC contracts expire in 2029. Post-2029 options include giving a greater role to councils and civil society organisations to organise housing, better packages of pre-decision and move-on support for asylum-seekers and strengthening users' rights and accountability mechanisms.

4. More pressure should be put on social media companies to remove content that breaches policies on hate speech and mis/disinformation.

Challenge: False claims about the Southport attacker were widely shared on social media and sparked the first protests. Loose groups of far-right actors then used social media and encrypted message services to urge followers to take violent action. There is a patchy and lax enforcement of platforms' existing rules on racism and other hate speech.

Solutions: The Government should continue to put pressure on social media companies to remove

harmful content quickly. This challenge is common across all western democracies and the Government should put this issue on the agenda at G7 meetings. Immediate objectives should be; improved content moderation; removal of illegal content; and the application of agreed standards on hate speech and extremist content that provide due protection for freedom of speech. Business has a role to play by leveraging advertising spend and public image concerns.

Government could collaborate positively with platforms to fund 'social media labs' that develop proposals about options and protocols for rapid responses to UK community tensions. Labs could convene experts in cohesion, communications and platform design to consider new solutions to online polarisation: such as developing an early warning radar for significant spikes in extremist activity, and strategies for tracking and flagging mis/disinformation during complex, fast-changing and live events.

With regard to enforcement, the Government should place an expectation on Ofcom to make full use of existing powers under the Online Safety Act 2023. This could include an expectation that Ofcom strengthens the first versions of the Illegal Content Codes of Practice and uses its new information gathering powers to launch an investigation into triggers and enablers of the disorder. In the longer term, the Government should review the adequacy of the Online Safety Act 2023 and consider the need for rolling amendments to legislation to stay up to date with emerging threats.

5. The Government should adopt a clear working definition of anti-Muslim prejudice and do more to build consensus on what should be defined as extremism.

Challenge: Anti-Muslim prejudice has a broader reach than most other forms of racism. The absence of an agreed definition on anti-Muslim prejudice makes it difficult to navigate the boundaries between legitimate criticism of religious practices and hate speech and prejudice. While the Government has defined extremism, most recently in March 2024,[20] this definition is still contested and is not clearly understood by those outside policy circles. In turn, this feeds into concerns about the erosion of free speech and inconsistencies in law enforcement.

Solutions: The Government should take steps to build consensus around its definition of extremism, inviting faith and civil society organisations to take part in open conversations about the definition and why it is important. These discussions should also involve young people.

There is no agreed definition of anti-Muslim prejudice. The last government committed to a process to build consensus on a working definition in May 2019 but abandoned this in 2022, having made little or no practical progress.

Work on this definition should be resumed as soon as possible. It should be led by the Ministry of Justice and involve Parliament, faith and civil society organisations and groups that focus on free speech. This could be informed by reconvening and reconstituting the Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group.

An effective definition needs to be legitimate with the broad majority of British Muslims; be understood to get the boundaries right by most of their fellow citizens; and be practically useful for those working in education, workplaces and civic groups as part of an effort to tackle every form of hatred and prejudice in a consistent way. Most people would agree that it is not Islamophobic to critique ideas from a faith or political perspective; nor to debate, in good faith, the challenges of identity and integration in Britain today. But they would agree that it crosses the line into prejudice to discriminate against Muslims for being Muslims; to hold all Muslims responsible for the actions of an extreme minority; or to have conversations about Muslims that would not take place in the presence of somebody from that background.

The clarity provided by a definition should then act as a foundation for concerted action against anti-Muslim prejudice, in ways that are effective with those sections of mainstream opinion who are more sceptical about British Muslims than other groups, and those least likely to experience real-life contact with

Muslims themselves.

The Government could also seek to appoint a senior advisor on British Muslims and should consider the need for effective reporting to monitor Anti-Muslim hate crime, including a review of the current infrastructure and the appointment of a body to undertake this work.

6. The Ministry of Justice should pilot restorative justice programmes, bringing those convicted of criminal offices associated with the riots together with mosques and community organisations.

Challenge: Over 1,000 people have been arrested since the riots, with judges now handing out the first prison sentences. Many of those charged have previous criminal convictions. When they are released from custody many may again receive little support to address their racialised grievances or propensity for violent behaviour.

Solutions: Restorative justice programmes have been successful in reducing re-offending as well as increasing community trust in the justice system. There are different approaches to restorative justice and there have been some small-scale UK pilots of using restorative justice to address hate crime. Community-based restorative justice brings offenders together with civil society organisations representing victims to discuss the impact of the offender's crime, agree on steps to repair harm and prevent further offences. In the case of those convicted after the riots, restorative justice also enables bridging social contract between the offender and organisations representing victims, reducing rigid stereotypes, prejudice and perceptions of out-group threat. Based on this evidence, the Ministry of Justice should pilot restorative justice programmes, bringing those convicted after the riots together with mosques and community organisations. Some of these pilots could include family members of perpetrators on a voluntary basis to help those convicted better to understand the wide-ranging impacts of their crimes.

7. The Department for Education should work with experts to develop curricular guidance and teaching materials to ensure children and young people have greater resilience to online mis/disinformation and extremist narratives.

Challenge: Children and young people (as well as adults) are exposed to fake news and local myths that can promote hate crime, violence or reinforce harmful far-right narratives. Schools and colleges often lack the resources and confidence to address polarising and controversial issues or to provide young people with the critical thinking skills they need to identify online misinformation.

Solutions: The Becky Francis review of the National Curriculum should be used as an opportunity to look at how schools and colleges involve students in debates about shared values. The Department for Education should then work with experts to develop teaching materials to boost children's skills in critical thinking, dialogue and conflict resolution, ensuring greater resilience to online disinformation and extremist narratives as well as local myths that reinforce prejudice.

The requirement for schools to promote cohesion should also be reinstated.

8. The Government should make it mandatory for school and college students to engage in activities that deepen their level of contact with their peers from different ethnic, faith and class backgrounds.

Challenge: Bridging social contact helps to reduce stereotyping, prejudice and threat perceptions, thus building greater inter-group trust and shared identities.[21] However, levels of ethnic, faith and class segregation in English schools are high in many areas and in free schools.[22] Many children do not get the

opportunity for sustained social contact with peers from different backgrounds.

Solutions: All school and college students should have the opportunity for social contact with peers from different ethnic, faith and class backgrounds. Schools and colleges should be able to decide the approach they want to take. This might involve linking classes in schools where the intake is different – an approach used by the Linking Network.[23] Alternatively, schools could share facilities such as playing fields, performing arts spaces or share teaching. Other options include bringing pupils from twinned schools together to undertake volunteering through a 'local' citizenship service offer. This work could connect with national events and programmes such as the Big Help Out, the Big Lunch and local grassroots initiatives that directly promote social connection and provide opportunities for volunteering. The Department for Education should evaluate the impacts of this work, to reward outstanding practice and contribute to a better evidence base on social cohesion.

9. The Government should fund community-based conflict resolution initiatives and programmes to increase inter-group social contact, using this work to build an evidence base on successful interventions.

Challenge: Across the UK, faith and civil society organisations have undertaken much good work to bridge social divides and address conflict and harmful behaviour. While there is a lot of energy at the grassroots, successful organisations often struggle for funds. There is a limited evidence base to help organisations design successful interventions.[24]

Solutions: The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should provide funding to a small number of strategically important faith and civil organisations involved in conflict resolution, promoting positive masculine behaviour, developing critical thinking programmes, strategic dialogue interventions, decentring activities[25] or work to increase levels of contact across social divides. The Government should also support work to involve a younger cohort of activists in inter-faith projects, increasing the reach of these programmes across generations. These projects should be evaluated, with this learning made available to organisations wishing to undertake community-based work on social cohesion.

10. Sport should be used to increase levels of social contact across divides and develop shared identities and norms of decent behaviour.

Challenge: Support for football reaches across society, spanning political, social and ethnic divides. Sports clubs provide shared spaces for people of different backgrounds to meet and mix. As sources of local civic pride, football and rugby league clubs are also often viewed as being among the defining symbols of an area's heritage, capable of building powerful narratives about inclusive local identity.[26] Sports clubs also have an unrealised potential to disseminate anti-prejudice messages that reach and resonate with a broad cross-section of society as well as those most at risk of supporting far-right messages. The build-up to the UK and Ireland hosting the Euro 2028 football tournament offers a significant opportunity to catalyse programmes that can link nationwide narratives with sustained local work in local clubs and communities.

Solutions: MHCLG and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport should work with the Premier League, the English Football League, other governing bodies and local clubs to develop programmes of work that use sport to bring communities together, forged shared identities and address hate crime and prejudice.

11. The Government should work with employers and trade unions to make 'good work' a social norm and give greater societal recognition to jobs that do not require graduate qualifications.

Challenge: Many of the places where violence occurred have seen the loss of traditional industries that shaped the identities of towns and afforded them pride. Mining and manufacturing jobs have been replaced by insecure and often low paid forms of employment which have fed into perceived marginalisation, anti-elite sentiments and cultural anxieties. The post-16 education debate focuses on universities, but two-thirds of young people do not go to university. At the same time the vocational training system is in crisis: nearly 50% of those who start apprenticeships drop out before their completion and apprenticeship numbers have plummeted.

The Government is committed to addressing these issues through its 'breaking down barriers to opportunity' mission. But dignity in the workplace is not just about fair wages, working conditions or training, but also about the societal recognition, respect, and purpose that work provides to individuals. Where workers are treated with dignity, it enhances their sense of belonging and self-worth, which in turn strengthens the social fabric of communities. For those convicted after this summer's riots, sustained employment also reduces their chances of reoffending. The bonding and bridging relationships forged in workplaces can help to address racist behaviour.[27]

Solutions: The Government must turn its commitments on fair pay, job security and training opportunities into actionable policy, targeting the most deprived communities as a priority. It should work with employers and trade unions to lay out clear expectations about the characteristics of good work, encompassing fair pay, job security, workers' voice, opportunities for career progression and investment in training. Media campaigns and the honours system should also be used to recognise outstanding contributions made by people who do jobs that do not require graduate qualifications.

12. Parliament should support a Speakers Commission that considers how to rebuild trust in democratic institutions and community relationships.

Challenge: Grievances, misinformation and scapegoating thrive in situations where people feel they have no voice and there is distrust of democracy and its institutions. Just 60% of eligible voters took part in the 2024 General Election and some candidates faced severe harassment. While 70% of UK adults report that they generally trust most people, an Office for National Statistics survey showed just 27% of people trust the UK government and 24% trust political parties.[28] Prejudice and hate also fester where there are few or no opportunities for people to meet and mix with one another across lines of ethnicity, faith, age or politics.

Solutions: Politicians and policymakers need to consider how to give the public more of a voice in the decisions that affect them and the mechanisms to rebuild trust in democratic institutions. Major constitutional changes must be capable of securing cross-party and public support. Greater political attention must also be given to strengthening cross-community relationships and contact that foster trust and integration.

Parliament should support a Speakers Commission that considers how to rebuild social trust in democratic institutions and across all sections of our shared, diverse society. This should aim to be a 'national conversation' drawing on expert evidence, as well as involving the public through open surveys, town hall meetings and deliberative discussions.

Notes and references

[1] National Police Chiefs Council, 30 August 2024
https://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/arrests-and-charges-related-to-violent-disorder-continue

[2] Ministry of Justice, 16 August 2024
https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hundreds-more-people-continue-appearing-in-court-following-violent-disorder

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https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/research/what-do-britons-really-think-about-the-riots/

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https://www.britishfuture.org/publication/immigration-and-the-election-time-to-choose/

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See also Talk/Together polling.

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[16] Home Office (2005) Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society, London: Home Office.

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https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10195862/1/The%20Free%20Schools%20Experiment.final.pdf

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[28] Office for National Statistics Trust in Government statistics, available on
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