Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i'r Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ar gyfer yr ymchwiliad i Gydlyniant Cymdeithasol

This response was submitted to the Equality and Social justice Committee on the inquiry into Social Cohesion

SC 10
Ymateb gan: Tîm Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig & Ieuenctid Cymru
Response from: Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team Wales (EYST)

Written evidence submitted by Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team Wales.

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EYST Wales is an award-winning Wales-wide charity established in 2005. It aims to support ethnic minority young people, families and individuals living in Wales to contribute, participate and feel a valued part of Wales. It does this through a range of services targeted at ethnic minority young people, ethnic minority families, refugees and asylum seekers, and also the wider public. EYST Wales coordinates the All Wales Black Asian Minority Ethnic Engagement Programme, a project funded by Welsh Government, to gather the views and experiences of Black Asian Minority Ethnic people living in Wales. The aim of the project is to improve the evidence base on which to positively influence public policies and services to better reflect the needs of Black Asian Minority Ethnic communities. As such EYST Wales is well placed to respond to this consultation to support the committee in its scrutiny of social cohesion in Wales from the perspective of the minority ethnic community in Wales.

In Wales, where diverse ethnic communities coexist, social cohesion is critical in ensuring that all individuals feel safe, included, and empowered to participate fully in society. EYST Wales welcomes the Welsh Government commitment to continue funding the community cohesion programme into 2026 and its strong commitment to achieving the aims of the All Wales Ant-Racist Action Plan (2022). Investment into implementing these policies promotes harmony and builds resilience in communities, providing them with a bank of trust and social connection which can be drawn on during times of social unrest.

TOR 1. 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.

Hate

An increased climate of intolerance, racism, and misinformation, particularly against minority ethnic groups, is undermining social cohesion in Wales. An increased climate of fear, fuelled by hate speech and far-right activity, has created an environment where minority ethnic individuals increasingly feel unsafe in the community, limiting their access to fully participate and benefit from Welsh society. Despite significant progress in tackling hate crime and supporting victims, through initiatives such as the Hate Hurts Campaign and the Wales Hate Support Centre, far-right groups have played a significant role in spreading misinformation and inciting hatred against ethnic minorities, often using social media as a platform. The unchecked dissemination of hateful rhetoric has amplified existing prejudices, leading to an increase in racism and discrimination in the community.

In 2024, there was a significant rise in both verbal, physical and online attacks targeting ethnic minority communities. Instances of racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia have become more prevalent in public spaces, including violent assaults on the streets, verbal abuse, and attacks on individuals' religious attire, such as headscarves. A striking example of this occurred in August 2024 during a reflection session for the minority ethnic community revealed that individuals, including families, had experienced heightened levels of racial discrimination, including verbal attacks and surveillance in public spaces. The most recent available Hate Crime figures for Wales also reflects this, as religious Hate Crime increased by 21% by October 2024. The national picture across our services in Wales tells us that hate, and the conditions leading to increased hate, are present in every local authority where we operate, and that the community underreports these incidents.

Misinformation in Public Life

Elected members in Wales have, at times, contributed to a culture in which racial discrimination is permissible. Misinformation in public spaces contributes to perpetuating myths and stereotypes about minority groups, reinforcing the idea that they are outsiders or threats to national identity. It also asks the question of how widely our elected members support and collaborate measures that support diverse communities. Given that Wales will hold an election in 2026, we are concerned that the current progress in equality in Wales may be impeded without strong cross-party consensus, both in the chamber and in public life. We welcome proposals for increased accountability in the Senedd for elected members and hope to see this implemented within public life.

Barriers to services

The importance of English language proficiency in supporting integration is well-documented. The Casey Review (2016) emphasised that language skills are crucial for enabling individuals, including sanctuary seekers and English as a second language speakers, to integrate into society. Proficiency in English allows these individuals to build social connections, navigate public services, and gain greater independence. It is a fundamental tool for fostering inclusion and ensuring that minority ethnic communities can fully participate in their local communities. Challenges remain in aligning service provision with the unique needs of sanctuary-seeking individuals. The lack of flexible childcare options for part-time ESOL learners is just one example of how current policies may not adequately address the needs of this community. Without addressing these barriers, the ability of sanctuary seekers and ESOL learners to feel truly part of the community remains limited, undermining the goal of fostering a socially cohesive and inclusive Wales.

TOR 1. - Recommendations

- Expand Third Party Hate Crime centres in trusted organisations within minority ethnic communities. Engage with communities and educational institutions to raise awareness of reporting processes and provide opportunities for community input and lived experience to improve them.

- Implement targeted grassroots interventions to address social tension, complementing a Wales-wide approach to tackling hate and promoting cohesion. A coordinated national effort is key to ensuring peaceful coexistence across all communities.

- Fund positive action initiatives to provide pathways into public life. Previous programs such as Equal Power Equal Voice facilitated by EYST, WEN Wales, Stonewall Cymru and Disability Wales is one example of good practice.

- Political parties capture lived experience of underrepresented groups in the implementation Welsh Government guidance in supporting diversity inclusion for registered political parties.

- Supplement the Home Offices' 'Restart' scheme to extend childcare for part time ESOL learners who are sanctuary seekers through Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015) integration, one of five ways of working ensuring that all people, regardless of their background, can access services that improve their quality of education and life.

TOR 2. 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.

Anti-racist Practice and Training

Organisations like EYST play a vital role in intervening, raising awareness, and facilitating open dialogue to deepen understanding. By working closely with our partners, we provide anti-racism training, guidance, and support to both staff and students, helping to address discriminatory behaviours and promote inclusivity. Additionally, EYST provides support and advice for services aiming to strengthen anti-racist practice. This includes evaluating recruitment practices, training, accessible community education as well as partner projects with prisons, schools and community groups. It is paramount that this work continues in order to support long-term social cohesion in the public sphere and the community.

Meaningful Community Engagement

Community engagement initiatives play a crucial role in providing a safe space for groups and organisations that feel vulnerable or are experiencing the impact of tensions within the community. In Wales, these efforts are especially vital in addressing issues such as racism, inequality, and social unrest. For instance, during the social unrest last summer, EYST Wales organised a session titled, 'Our Stories, Our Strength: Reflecting on the Riots'. This session created an opportunity for minority ethnic groups, alongside members of the wider community, to share their personal stories and express their feelings in the wake of the racist riots. It also allowed participants to seek support during a time of heightened tension. This session was not only a platform for reflecting on the traumatic events that had taken place but also an opportunity to foster a collective sense of resilience within the community. It enabled individuals to discuss their experiences, build connections, and strengthen relationships across diverse groups. The session played a critical role in raising awareness about how to report incidents of racism and hate crime, offering information about available support services, and highlighting key legislative protections, such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Long term engagement

EYST collaborates with partners to empower young people, helping them become active contributors to their communities. In 2018, EYST initiated a three-year project focused on building resilience among young people against challenges such as exploitation, religious extremism, and far-right radicalisation. This project, which operated across South Wales in partnership with South Wales Police, included a Youth Forum with three workshops led by police officers and youth workers. The topics covered were online sexual exploitation, Prevent policy, and Stop and Search procedures. Feedback from young participants included comments such as "Information on staying safe online" and "How to spot grooming," highlighting the value of such initiatives. The forum attracted double the anticipated number of young attendees, underscoring the demand for similar programs for minority ethnic youth across Wales. Although the project has concluded, the partnership has continued to thrive, with further engagement events and summer placement opportunities offered to ethnic minority young people. These initiatives help foster increased diversity within the police force and the overall community.

Community Collaboration

EYST promotes a collaborative approach that encourages community groups to unite, fostering connections between individuals who may not have otherwise had the opportunity to meet. A prime example of this is the partnership between the EYST Northeast Wales project, operating in Wrexham and Flintshire, and the Caia Park Partnership, Wrexham. Together, they organised a cross-cultural Halloween and Diwali celebration, providing an inclusive space for young people from various communities to interact and learn about one another's cultures. The event featured a range of activities as well as collaboration with a local dance group. Additionally, the group is planning to participate in the Llangollen International Eisteddfod 2025 and has worked with the Portuguese-speaking community to organise sports days. This collaborative effort demonstrates the power of community engagement to promote understanding, inclusivity, and cultural exchange.

By collaborating with a range of partner organisations—including schools, sports organisations, and community groups—we aim to foster meaningful engagement, enabling communities to connect, share, and learn from each other. This approach aligns with the Welsh Government's commitment to promoting equality and social justice as outlined in The Well-being of Future Generations Act, Prosperity for All.

The design of these initiatives is community led and incorporates feedback through workshops and activities. For example, the EYST "Food Across the World" programme empowered individuals from diverse backgrounds to share and celebrate their cultural heritage. Support from the local community cohesion team enabled a banner of their work to be displayed in the community. This co-produced model ensures that the voices of local communities shape the development of activities, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment.

Volunteering

Volunteering plays a pivotal role in the third sector's contribution to social cohesion. Within our organisation, we focus on supporting minority ethnic individuals and/or sanctuary seekers, who are often new to the area and may experience isolation. Due to their immigration status, many of our volunteers are unable to work, this can have a detrimental impact on their mental health and overall wellbeing. We support volunteers by helping them develop new skills at their own pace, while tailoring our approach to meet the specific needs of each individual. This flexible support empowers volunteers and provides them with a sense of purpose as well as providing opportunities for training, personal development and a

chance to help others in the community. Furthermore, as these relationships are nurtured, they act as a bridge to other essential services, creating access to a broader network of support. This work helps to support the Welsh Government's Nation of Sanctuary Plan 2019 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which promotes inclusivity and the development of skills to foster personal and community wellbeing.

Additionally, we engage local young people in volunteering, offering them opportunities to support initiatives such as the Welsh Baccalaureate. By providing a safe space for young volunteers, we encourage positive community involvement while helping them develop valuable skills and contributing to a cohesive, supportive environment for all. This approach is in line with the Welsh Government's vision of creating a more inclusive society where young people are actively engaged in their communities.

Barriers - Short term funding cycles.

Short-term funding cycles present a significant challenge to our work, limiting our human resources and potentially having detrimental effects on the community if services end abruptly. The procurement process itself can be lengthy, and there is often a narrow window of opportunity to apply and make a compelling case for funding. As a result, staff members frequently spend excessive time navigating procedural requirements and monitoring obligations, often working beyond their contracted hours. This not only impacts their wellbeing but also leads to the loss of talented individuals as projects come to an end, affecting the overall quality and continuity of services. Funding constraints also hinder our ability to build long-term, trusted partnerships, which are essential for collaborative efforts such as joint bidding for future funding. This also limits opportunities for innovation, as the uncertainty surrounding project timelines stifles forward planning. There is concern that statutory services rely heavily on the expertise of minority ethnic communities but fail to provide adequate and accessible support once these projects end, leaving a significant gap in service provision. Additionally, we often face the challenge of being unable to accept new referrals towards the end of a project, creating further disruptions in service delivery and support for those in need.

TOR 2. Recommendations

- Engage with communities affected through trusted partner organisation. Session such as Our Stories our Strength provided an opportunity to disseminate anti-racist messaging and support from senior public leaders which served to strengthen a build trust between minority ethnic community and public services.

- A joined-up approach to consistent, long-term engagement with minority ethnic communities that works across public services, public service boards and local authorities.

- Local and regional cohesion plans recognise and prioritise fostering positive relationship building between community groups, providing opportunities to build connections that recognise existing inequalities through the Promoting Good Relations under the Equality Act 2010.

TOR 3. **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.

<u>Social media regulation</u>

We acknowledge the Welsh Government's efforts in addressing social media regulation, particularly in relation to combatting misinformation and promoting the education of young people about online harms. Given the rapid dissemination of misinformation, the challenges in tracing its source, and the algorithmic and automated nature of social media, such platforms are susceptible to promoting material irrespective of whether its content may or may not fuel division and hate.

For example, when a partner organisation advertised an inclusivity training session in 2024, comments such as the following were made:

- *''Divisive and racist in itself – promoting division and racism by prioritising black and 'other' perceived minorities''.*

- *''Thieves, murderers, blood-sucking parasites, all-round bad guy criminals leeching off our taxes''.*

These comments reflect the racist and dehumanising hate that ethnic minority communities face online daily. Even if these types of comments represent a small minority of people in Wales over time, the accumulation of such negative rhetoric can create a psychological burden, leading minorities to feel unsafe, even in well-integrated communities.

Engagement led revenue models used by social media platforms allows online groups and users promoting hate speech to be incentivised to create more harmful content and directly raise funds through sites such as Go Fund Me.

<u>Clear and consistent Anti-Racist Messaging</u>

Welsh Government does provide clear anti-racist messaging, and we appreciate the support and engagement that senior leaders have provided especially during the events of last year. However, governance arrangements of non-devolved areas of government can delay this action, reducing its impact and can translate to the community as a perceived lack of action and support. At an engagement session, a councillor reflected 'we need action from the Welsh Government, not words, empty words'. At the same session, a minority ethnic participant stated that senior leadership and their colleagues at their workplace had made no mention of the riots and did not provide any support, 'there was no acknowledgement of what was happening'. Within criminal justice in Wales, leaders have shown good practice, many senior leaders engaged with the community and community organisations, yet this approach was not implemented across the board, underscoring the real need for Welsh Government to double down on their approach.

<u>Access to Transport</u>

Under the <u>Nation of Sanctuary Plan</u>, sanctuary seekers have benefited from the Welcome Ticket initiative, which provides financial support to assist with daily living costs. On average, the Home Office offers £49.18 per week in support, intended to cover essential items such as food, phone credit, and other basic needs. After these necessities are met, there is often little remaining for travel expenses, which is why the Welcome Ticket scheme has been vital in enabling individuals to access support services and engage with their local communities.

In North Wales, EYST Wales working in partnership with another voluntary organisation have reported concerns about the scheme's implementation, specifically regarding transport. Feedback from sanctuary seekers indicates that they were sometimes denied concessional travel or required to pay full fares. Additionally, many were subjected to negative remarks or felt uncomfortable showing their immigration card (Biometric Residence Permit etc.) when trying to use the concession. They shared that revealing their immigration status in public, particularly in the presence of transport staff and other passengers, felt dehumanising and made them feel vulnerable.

While the Welcome Ticket initiative has clear benefits, these experiences highlight a lack of understanding and support from both the local community and transport workers, which can undermine the scheme's effectiveness. The feedback suggests that, especially in North Wales, there is a need for better communication and awareness at all levels to ensure these initiatives work as intended. This reinforces the broader need for supportive frameworks that foster understanding and integration, as outlined in the Welsh Government's Nation of Sanctuary Plan. Discrimination, even in subtle forms, can hinder community cohesion and the successful integration of sanctuary seekers, highlighting the importance of educating communities and frontline workers to foster a welcoming environment.

TOR 3. Recommendations

- Welsh Government to continue to work vigorously with online platforms and Ofcom to regulate social media and prohibit the monetisation of hate speech and recommend that human moderators have specific knowledge of issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion.

- Raise awareness of the Anti-Racist Action Plan. Through our own practice we are aware that many organisations, businesses and community organisations are not aware of the plan and its aims. It is therefore essential that Welsh Government continue to partner with organisations providing them with adequate support and resources to realise the plans aims.

TOR 4. The Committee will also be considering the wider context for community cohesion following targeted attacks on refugees and asylum seekers in communities across the UK during the summer of 2024.

Sanctuary seekers

The riots in Southport in 2024 had significant consequences, notably an increase in racial bullying and hate incidents in schools, which extended into the wider community. While we saw counter-protests in cities and a proactive and organised response from police across Wales, the ripple effect had serious consequences for sanctuary seeking families and young people. Many young people began altering their routes to and from school, and despite efforts from educational institutions and support programs like the EYST Wales Right to Education project, many students experienced disruptions to their education. In some cases, students felt unable to return to school due to concerns about their safety.

For young people seeking sanctuary, the complexities of the asylum system, with families being moved frequently, often exacerbated this situation. Families were sometimes relocated outside their designated school catchment areas, further complicating access to essential support services. This disruption increased the anxiety and fear experienced by these young people and their families, profoundly affecting their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

As one young person from a sanctuary seeking background asked their parent last term, 'Where is safe for people like us?'. Many parents from minority ethnic backgrounds also reported heightened anxiety about their families' safety in public spaces. They shared concerns that they could no longer allow their children to play outside in parks or engage in normal activities, and that they were changing their routines to avoid potential incidents of hate.

TOR 4 – Recommendations

- Sanctuary seeking and minority ethnic young people to receive targeted and comprehensive support when transitioning to new schools, to help them settle and integrate into their new educational environments. Aligning Welsh Government policies such as the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010, which emphasise the importance of safety, well-being, and the right to an inclusive education, should guide further efforts to ensure these young people receive the care, protection, and stability they need.

- Schools to prioritise safeguarding and support systems to address racial discrimination more proactively, fostering an inclusive and safe environment for all students.