**The Committee is calling for written evidence. Further information can be found on the <u>consultation webpage.</u> The closing date is 14 February 2025.**

In line with the Terms of Reference the Committee will explore:

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**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.**

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The <u>Wales Strategic Migration Partnership</u>/WSMP works across Wales and the UK with a wide range of partners on the delivery of UK Government humanitarian and visa schemes. Currently priority schemes include asylum dispersal, refugee resettlement, the Hong Kong BN(O) Visa Scheme, National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, Ukraine, and ESOL.

**Key issues impacting community cohesion (migration-related)**

**Narratives**

- There are increasing issues around mis/disinformation and **Freedom-Restricting Harassment** (see Hong Kong* below and end note).
- The national political and media narrative about migration can negatively increase tensions and impact community cohesion.
- Wider international and political and **geo-political issues** also impact negatively, including online narratives.  These issues have local impacts and contribute to an environment of hostility and intolerance.
- The online space played a significant part in the tensions and riots that followed the Southport murders.   Many Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities reported feeling unsafe during this time and highlighted a lack of communication from leaders in civil society in Wales.

**Asylum dispersal**

- **The UK has operated a successful model of community-based asylum dispersal since circa 2001**, led by councils and the private sector, with funding for integration and tailored support provided by local authority (LA) teams working with third sector partners. In recent years, the model has changed to a private sector led model and LAs have had less control or oversight of delivery.
- The UKG policy of full dispersal introduced in 2023 means that all UK local authorities are now mandated to receive asylum seekers, who are now accommodated in 20 LAsin Wales.   Where asylum seekers are accommodated in more rural areas, there is less availability of specialist services and support, but it is a mixed picture: there are many success stories where councils have worked well with the private provider to welcome and integrate asylum seekers into local communities and connect them to key services.
- However, while good progress has been made, the aim to achieve equitable dispersal and reduce pressures on major towns and cities has not yet been

fully achieved and the Home Office has had to rely on **hotels or other contingency sites** as demand for accommodation outstrips supply.  In many areas, the use of hotels has now become the focus of community tensions.

- The lack of equity of dispersal means that in some places there continue to be **concentrations of asylum seekers** in areas with the cheapest housing/social deprivation, meaning there may be heightened cohesion risks.

- It is recognised that LAs have a degree of oversight and control over accommodation procurement requests and where they raise cohesion concerns, often the private sector accommodation provider has not proceeded with procurement. However, there have been occasions where LAs have not been listened to when feeding back **reasonable and evidence-based concerns** about the potential for cohesion issues in relation to the procurement of asylum accommodation.

- There is no provision for **community engagement** in the asylum accommodation contracts, and the lack of engagement has contributed to tensions and disinformation around asylum hotels.

- **Access to services and support for asylum seekers and migrants who are destitute/have no recourse to public (NRPF) funds is patchy**, and many migrants live for months if not years in limbo, unable to regularise their immigration status (in part due to lack of access to legal advice).  They may be vulnerable to exploitation and living in communities already impacted by cost-of-living crisis and poor community cohesion. (Local authorities are working together to develop internal responses to people with NRFP and Welsh Government have offered funding to LAs to use NRPF Connect data system).

**Role of Local Authorities**

The Sarah Khan Review states that *'many of the cohesion risks I identify are chronic, insidious and often sit below the radar; the impact of which is not actively measured or even fully appreciated.'* While the Khan review applies to England, many of the report findings and recommendations *may* be applicable in Wales.  The Khan review concluded:

- *Local authorities were struggling to manage evolving threats to community cohesion amid a lack of resources, expertise and capability.*

- *On the front line, local authorities are struggling to prevent, manage and contain the impact of conspiracy theories, disinformation and extremist activity, which is undermining social cohesion and, in some cases, causing democratic disruption.*

- *Many local authorities lack the capability, expertise and resources necessary to deal with evolving cohesion threats. Not enough consideration has been given in supporting and improving the capability of local authorities and practitioners to respond effectively.*

- *Local authorities lack accountability in improving and protecting social cohesion. Even under existing statutory duties for example the Public Sector*

*Equality Duty (s.149 of Equality Act 2010), public bodies are required to 'foster good relations' between differing groups of people. Yet this is not being adequately implemented by local authorities or assessed adequately by the Equality Human Rights Commission. There also continues to be a 'culture of fear' among some local authorities, where they are not prepared to have the necessary and difficult conversations.  (Khan, p.20)*

- The WG funded Community Cohesion Coordinators play a vital role in supporting LAs, who face significant and evolving challenges in responding to cohesion risks.  However, given the findings of the Khan Review, **more work is needed to understand the extent to which Welsh local authorities are equipped to identify and manage community cohesion issues in the current context**, and what they would like to see in place to better support their role. Given LAs' duty to promote good relations, it is key to obtain an in depth understanding of the current cohesion risks and responses, and the framework and tools they have to manage cohesion issues.  This is particularly important in view of the capacity and resource limitations LAs are facing.

**Examples of best practice and other interventions/needed to support social cohesion and overcome tensions.**

**Best practice**

- **Policial leadership from Welsh Government** related to Wales as a nation of Sanctuary.
- Ongoing Welsh Government funding of **Community Cohesion Coordinators** operating across Wales, who played a vital role sharing intelligence with partners during the protests at Stradey Park.
- **Welsh Government mis/disinformation toolkit** (currently in draft form).
- The UK wide, local government led '**Tackling asylum refugee and migrant hate crime and harassment'** forum.  This is attended by up to 100 members from across the UK. Councils are able to share intelligence about asylum hotels, cohesion and hate crime, and share best practice.
- **The WSMP chairs and enables multi-agency work across Wales**, in which Issues around cohesion and community tensions are identified and risks escalated, feeding into relevant national Wales and UK structures.
- The WSMP and partners have shared lessons learned  in relation to the operation of hotels/contingency sites in Penally and more recently, in Llanelli, in collaboration with Home Office, Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association, Dyfed Powys Police, Carmarthenshire County Council, Hope not Hate, Croeso Llanelli, Furnace Action Committee and local residents.
- The lessons learned and recommendations for improvement focus on six key areas: identification and procurement of contingency sites; engagement and communications; partnership working and information sharing; policing; impacts and recovery.

- Furthermore, a '**Healing the Divide' conference** took place in Llanelli in November 2024, with the aim to gather views on the causes of division in Llanelli, enable community leaders to understand the impact of the divisions and explore ways in which the community can work together to tackle hate. **Subsequently a report on the conference has been shared,** outlining a call to action for Welsh Government, Home Office, Carmarthenshire County Council and other partners. The key recommendations focus on formation of a Llanelli community cohesion partnership, recovery plan, communication and counter narratives.

- During the violent protests of last summer, the WSMP **developed two hate crime information leaflets,** one for agencies working with affected communities and one on safety and support for those that could be victims of hate crime. The resources contained a set of useful links and websites explaining what hate crime is, how to report it and where individuals that experienced it might seek support. The leaflet on safety and support for individuals has been translated into ten languages and widely shared.

- The WSMP facilitates an online [Hong Kong Welcome Hub](#) and funds a range of projects, including a drop in centre in Cardiff which provides social activities, advice and information for Hong Kongers. **This is a vital resource to enable Hong Kongers to meet and interact with service providers and local community groups**.

- **A 'Town Hall' meeting** was held in the Vale of Glamorgan last year, with the aim to update the general public on intention to use the St Athan site for Afghan arrivals prior to finding permanent homes. The MoD had already communicated extensively, on national and local media, but wanted an opportunity to meet the local community. The Town Hall format was used as a way of **preventing the spread of misinformation** and to reassure the local community. The MoD encouraged attendees to become their "ambassadors", sharing accurate information to clarify facts and avoid misinformation. It was attended by around 70 members of the public plus a range of officials the MoD, Police, LA, local Health Board, and the WSMP, and was successful in terms of community 'buy in' and understanding of the situation and plight of Afghans. This town hall and associated media strategy could provide a **model for similar community engagement work** related to asylum and resettlement.

**Interventions needed to support social cohesion and overcome tensions**

**Communications**

- **The Khan Review highlighted that Local authorities need to improve their ability to respond to conspiracy theories, disinformation and incidents of high tension and conflict**.  The Welsh Government mis/disinformation toolkit addresses some of the issues and solutions the Khan Review identifies.  The toolkit is a welcome development, but further support and engagement is required to enable media and comms strategies to embed key messages and ways of working into their public communications.

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See also 'interventions,' below.

**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.**

We are not aware of the full range of organisations funded to undertake cohesion work and the effectiveness of this; we would support some **mapping work** to be undertaken to better understand who is funded and identify gaps, given the importance of the sector in promoting cohesion, and that the Khan review recommends 'investment in social cohesion to improve long-term socio-economic conditions and social capital – this is also essential for the sustainable regeneration of areas that have fallen behind.'

It is likely that in Wales, we need to increase our collective capacity and resources to support social cohesion.

**Are Interventions needed to target specific groups of people, geographical areas or particular key issues?**

- It is reported that current available data on social cohesion in the UK is mixed and incomplete, and this **undermines attempts to undertake a conclusive analysis of the state of cohesion nationally or locally** (Khan report). In terms of designing interventions, it is important to first improve our understanding of what makes some localities susceptible to extremism and other threats which undermine cohesion (and what makes other areas resilient). **Improved data and understanding** are essential in allowing Welsh Government, local authorities and partners to adopt a more strategic approach and target interventions both generally and for specific groups, geographies or key issues.
- The Committee should consider specific issues related to **Hong Kongers, who are a relatively small but significant group of people** living in Wales (and the UK) who may experience a similar 'chilling effect' to those subject to *Freedom Restricted Harassment,* due to the fact that they are affected by widely reported incidents of **transnational repression**. This may impact on their ability to form social bonds, and, as Khan states, 'this form of harassment and resultant censorship is creating a chilling impact on freedom of expression and other democratic freedoms. [i]

China: Overseas students face harassment and surveillance in campaign of transnational repression - Amnesty International

Hong Kong offers rewards for arrest of six activists abroad - BBC News

**Online space/disinformation**

- The recent incident whereby Elon Musk retweeted a post critiquing the Welsh Refugee Council (January 25) caused widespread impacts to individuals (staff), refugees and asylum seeker clients of the WRC. **This type of activity damages cohesion and may have a 'chilling' effect on the sector and on their ability to promote Wales as a Nation of Sanctuary**-a policy which has been challenged and used to cause division.   This was not an isolated incident.  The Khan Review cites 'countless' examples of victims of this Freedom Restricting Harassment, some of whose testimonies are captured in the Review.  Given these issues, we support the following observations and recommendations:
  - ➢ Against a backdrop of rising social media use, disinformation and misinformation, it is imperative that **long-term and workable solutions are identified to neutralise the threats to community cohesion**.
  - ➢ Particular emphasis should be given to developing strategies to address disinformation:

**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.**

- The targeted attacks and wider protests of last summer need to be seen not as a one off but as the **culmination of migrant-related cohesion incidents in Wales and the UK**. In Wales, while we did not experience the level of violence during the summer riots, the riots in England were preceded by a growth in activity and protests at asylum sites, starting in Penally (2020) followed by the significant tensions at Stradey Park Hotel in Llanelli (2023). The protests at Llanelli went on for a protracted period and required significant policing efforts, with widely reported and long-lasting impacts on cohesion in the area.

**WSMP recommendations**

**Community spaces**

- There needs to be more focus on bridging gaps between communities so that people are not living 'parallel lives,' with availability of shared community spaces and funding for third sector to enable activities that bring different communities together. In communities where tensions have existed there is need to ensure dialogue takes place and the **development and investment in recovery plans**, where appropriate.

**Asylum accommodation/contingency**

- Future asylum accommodation systems need to embed an **effective end to end** system which prevents people falling between gaps in services and support and impacting on integration and cohesion.

- **Lesson learned from the protests at Llanelli will need regular monitoring** to assess their implementation and how the recommendations inform work at a UK level on contingency and large sites.

**Structures and processes to support cohesion**

- **Ongoing political leadership from Welsh Government** related to Wales as a nation of Sanctuary is vital and more focussed work is needed to enable wider public services and civil society to 'own' and deliver this message.

- Welsh Government should consider the development of a **clear narrative and communications strategy to underpin the Nation of Sanctuary Plan** to support local communications and responses. Communications strategies should address issues related to understanding of the Nation of Sanctuary policy at a community/grass roots level.

- **Comms leads from public services should work together to develop and embed responses to evolving cohesion risks** in their comms strategies, with reference to the principles outlined in the WG Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan and the principles outline in the chapter about the Nation of Sanctuary vision, and the Welsh Government Disinformation Toolkit.

- **We support the view of the Wales Safer Communities Network that we need stronger Welsh Government leadership and UK Government Collaboration:** Issues such as online hate, migration policy, and policing fall under UK Government powers and require more collaboration to address these challenges at a national level.

- In the wake of evolving community cohesion risks, there is a need to ensure a **review of the structures and membership of national and regional/local structures in Wales to support social cohesion and overcome tensions**. Relevant forums include the Hate Crime and Community Tensions Board, PREVENT and Community Safety Partnership forums.   The Review should consider the extent to which migration related cohesion issues are fed into the wider context to prevent siloed working. WSMP, local government and all key partners should work together to collectively shape national policy and strategy around cohesion, and to ensure that there is the required x-government approach in the face of evolving risks.

- Welsh Government should consider the need for an **up-to-date community cohesion strategy and framework**, and analytical capability that assesses social cohesion and supports a strategic approach.  The framework should ensure effective oversight across Wales and the UK

- **There needs to be a consistent approach to tensions monitoring across local authorities**, and improved line of sight between tensions monitoring and the intelligence gathered by Community Coordinators - with strategic partners and local government- to inform an overall joined up approach to cohesion.

- As highlighted by the Wales Safer Communities network, while CSPs report clear escalation routes and good working relationships at times of crisis, **maintaining clear and consistent communication internally and externally is challenging**.  Concerted work should take place, led by the

Home Office working with contracted providers, Strategic Migration Partnerships, local government and public services to **consider lessons learned from violent protests (and preceding incidents) and to shape future emergency responses**. Particular attention should be given to communications for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants and wider BAME communities on staying safe and how to report hate crime.

**End note**

In writing this response, we have not had the capacity to capture and highlight the many positive aspects of cohesion in Wales and the extent to which, at a local level, there are vibrant, cohesive and inclusive communities. This is testament to the fostering of a welcoming culture (Nos narrative) and also to the work of a wide range of partners from local government to the voluntary and community sector and civil society. It is hoped that responses to this Enquiry, and indeed ongoing work, will capture some of the positives, in order to obtain a balance perspective.

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[i] The Khan report cites evidence gathered which 'reveals a wide-spread phenomenon of extreme forms of harassment leading individuals into silence, self-censoring, or abandoning their democratic rights. The Reviewer calls this **freedom-restricting harassment** (FRH), defined as when people experience or witness threatening, intimidatory or abusive harassment online and/or offline which is intended to make people or institutions censor or *self-censor out of fear.* The report highlights examples of FRH **(**FRH involves but is not limited to, acts of doxing, inciting hatred and violence against individuals and their families, sending death and rape threats, and other forms of threatening behaviour). It states that 'this form of

harassment and resultant censorship is creating a 'chilling impact' on freedom of expression and other democratic freedoms and that '**victims of freedom-restricting harassment suffer devastating impacts yet are often not treated as victims or offered the support they need'.**

The Khan Review: executive summary, key findings and recommendations - GOV.UK