

## Equality and Social Justice Committee Inquiry Social Cohesion

### Introduction to the WLGA

The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) is a politically led cross-party organisation that seeks to give local government a strong voice at a national level. We represent the interests of local government and promote local democracy in Wales.

The 22 councils in Wales are our members and the three fire and rescue authorities and three national park authorities are associate members.

We believe that the ideas that change people's lives, happen locally.

Communities are at their best when they feel connected to their council through local democracy. By championing, facilitating, and achieving these connections, we can build a vibrant local democracy that allows communities to thrive.

**Our ultimate goal** is to promote, protect, support and develop democratic local government and the interests of councils in Wales.

#### **We'll achieve our vision by**

- Promoting the role and prominence of councillors and council leaders
- Ensuring maximum local discretion in legislation or statutory guidance
- Championing and securing long-term and sustainable funding for councils
- Promoting sector-led improvement
- Encouraging a vibrant local democracy, promoting greater diversity
- Supporting councils to effectively manage their workforce.

**As the Employers organisation for local government in Wales, the WLGA also works to ensure the vital contribution made by local government employees to improving the social and economic health of their communities is protected, and to maintain positive industrial relations within our workforce.**



## Social Cohesion

### Background

- The WLGA welcomes the Committee's decision to hold an inquiry into Social Cohesion. Local government is uniquely positioned as the tier of democracy that is closest to the citizens of Wales, and the extent to which social cohesion sits the heart of local policymaking, service delivery and local democracy cannot be exaggerated.
- The WLGA recognises that, as noted in the background to the Committee's inquiry, Wales faced significant and damaging social unrest in 2021 and 2023 at Mayhill, Swansea and Ely, Cardiff. A lack of social cohesion underpinned those events, linked to familiar public policy challenges around poverty, social exclusion and distrust between citizens and public bodies.
- As noted by the Committee, the wider context around social cohesion includes the 2024 rioting in England (and Northern Ireland), driven by anti-immigration sentiment and a combination of deep-seated tensions and online misinformation. Hate crime incidents, inspired or encouraged by the rioting in England, did occur in Wales.
- Wales also witnessed far-right political mobilisation in 2023 around the Home Office decision to utilise the Stradey Park Hotel, Llanelli, to house asylum seekers. Opposition to the plan, due to the location and broad use of the hotel as a community resource, also included mainstream political parties, a wide range of community members, and the local authority. But the local situation which developed following the announcement of use of the hotel to accommodate asylum seekers, which included a number of public disorder offences, arose as a result of the lack of communication, information and engagement with local communities, contributing to a lack of social cohesion and an increase in tensions.
- In all of the cases referenced above, Welsh councils were heavily impacted by unrest but were also at the forefront of rebuilding community trust, cohesion and safety. Evidence which will be presented in this submission demonstrates that Welsh councils play both a **leadership response** role in the multi-agency approach to tackling the outcomes of poor social cohesion, and a **preventative role** in maintaining community and social cohesion by instilling pride, unity and positive community relations in localities.
- *A Wales of cohesive communities* is one of the seven goals referenced by the Well-being of Future Generations Act, and more generally remains a core purpose of local government, being embedded naturally in the concept of ward-based Councillor representation, community leadership and the provision of core local services to our communities.



- Our evidence reflects lessons from Welsh councils in maintaining social cohesion positively, and in responding and leading the multi-agency approach to resolving the different types of unrest that have manifested as a result of societal challenges in Wales.
- The WLGA hosts the Wales Safer Communities Network (WSCN) and the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP), contributing to local government expertise and co-ordination in relevant areas, that is, working closely with Community Safety Partnerships and asylum, resettlement and migration lead officers. Their evidence should be considered in conjunction with this WLGA corporate submission.
- Our evidence focusses mainly on the first two Terms of Reference set by the Committee for the inquiry.

### **Committee ToR 1**

**The Committee will 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.**

- Social cohesion presents a unique challenge to Welsh councils. The underlying data suggest a country where the clear majority of people feel that people of different backgrounds get on well together, treat each other with respect, and feel that they belong to their local area<sup>1</sup>. Community life across Wales in all of its diversity usually proceeds peacefully and respectfully, from the experience of Welsh councils. But the uniqueness of the social cohesion challenge is that on those occasions where social cohesion breaks down, it can do so dramatically and damagingly in the form of unrest and rioting.
- Hate crime related threats to social cohesion are ever-present and are linked to Welsh, UK and global political developments around immigration, refugees, race, conflicts and extremism. Those factors did not result in any Welsh occurrences of the recent riots, but have led to extremist incidents including at protests, which did at times turn violent, and also in the form of hate crime. Councils were alert to the possibility of riots in Wales during the English disorder in 2024, co-operated with the police to monitor conditions locally and engaged with local communities, including Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and asylum seekers and refugees.
- Good social cohesion can help prevent and reduce the impact of incidents in the hate crime and extremism 'space', although due to the individualised nature of incidents and perpetrators it can be difficult to assess the success of social cohesion policies. Online radicalisation across extreme political and religious ideologies affects individuals, who may not participate in community life. But Councils clearly understand from their daily role in Welsh

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<sup>1</sup> [Wellbeing of Wales, 2024: a Wales of cohesive communities \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)



communities that resilient, strong and safe communities can prevent wider support from being mobilised around extremist narratives or behaviours.

### *Social Unrest- Mayhill and Ely*

- Large-scale social unrest occurred at Mayhill, Swansea in 2021 and at Ely, Cardiff in 2023. The community tensions involved were not related to race, immigration or linked narratives which currently and rightly are receiving serious attention (including elsewhere in this evidence), but were related to a breakdown of trust between some residents and the authorities (in the widest sense). It is important that the role of youth exclusion, frustration and anger, poverty, and lack of opportunities is fully understood as a contributory factor to undermining social cohesion. The two cases cited have different explanations and factors, although in both cases improving community cohesion is part of the solution.
- The Mayhill riot in May 2021 led to eighteen people being imprisoned, seven police officers being injured, substantial damage to the property of Mayhill residents, and a climate of fear and violence erupting following a vigil. Swansea Council, South Wales Police and the Police and Crime Commissioner undertook an independent joint review of the events, concluding that underpinning factors included “the effects of Covid lockdowns, social media narratives, criminal behaviours, socio-economic dynamics, and reactions to the tragic death of Ethan Powell”<sup>2</sup>.
- A summary of the Independent Learning Review reflected on the need for community development and investment without creating a causal link to the incident, stating “Highlighting the need to improve the physical environment and invest in the development of the community arises clearly from the learning review, but this need have no causal link to the incident”<sup>3</sup>. This statement means that there is a risk that disorder can be driven by criminality directly. Community engagement and development is best seen as a way of improving underlying cohesion and as part of recovery following incidents of unrest.
- The Ely riot in May 2023 likewise resulted in dozens of arrests, injuries to police officers and some damage to property. In this specific case the factor of distrust in police from some local residents emerged following the tragic deaths of Kyrees Sullivan and Harvey Evans. Those events are subject to an IOPC investigation and the WLGA will not comment here on policing related matters while that continues.
- However, Cardiff Council and the Welsh Government recognised immediately that the Ely and Caerau communities required greater engagement and targeted resources via a Community Action Plan, which was published in 2024<sup>4</sup>. The Action Plan draws upon the area’s positive attributes and is

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<sup>2</sup> [Mayhill disturbance Independent Learning Review | South Wales Police](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Mayhill disturbance Independent Learning Review | South Wales Police](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Community Plan for Ely and Caerau 2024](#)



shaped by local residents, with the Council the key enabling and delivery body.

### *Social Cohesion, Hate Crime and Extremism*

- As is clear from the Committee's understanding, the wider climate around the negative discourse on immigration and direct attacks on accommodation for asylum seekers during the 2024 rioting represents a generational challenge to integration and social cohesion in Wales and other western democracies.
- Key issues in this 'space' also include refugee resettlement. It is worth clarifying that a series of successful refugee and migrant resettlement projects have either been completed or are already underway in Wales, for example, for Syrians, Afghans and Ukrainians, where existing communities have welcomed new arrivals and supported the integration process. The WLGA helps co-ordinate the role of Welsh Councils in those programmes, including through the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership.
- But the events around Stradey Park, Llanelli, demonstrate how far-right political mobilisation took place following a Home Office decision to close the business and utilise it to accommodate asylum seekers while their claims were to be determined. Crucially, the decision was not only contested by extremists but was against the wishes of the Council and many members of the local community. Social cohesion was cited by the Council as being at risk due to the unsuitable scale and nature of the site. Without revisiting the whole series of events, the lack of engagement between the Home Office and the Council – despite the best efforts of the local authority – resulted in an unsuitable site being considered for use. This created a platform for ill-feeling, extremist protest (and counter-demonstrations) and some arrests around aspects of that protest. Investigative reporting by the BBC suggests that the events provided a platform for radicalisation of individuals and their movement into Llanelli in order to protest<sup>5</sup>.
- Responding to Stradey Park related matters cost Carmarthenshire Council (and Dyfed Powys Police) a significant amount of working hours, and the authority has since worked to rebuild trust between the local community, the Council and government more generally. Earlier and proactive engagement from the UK Government around the siting of asylum hotels, recognising the leadership role of Welsh Councils and their local valuable knowledge of site and community suitability, is essential as resettlement projects continued to be planned across Wales. The mantra that 'Councils know best' about conditions in their local areas should be recognised, so that social cohesion can be maintained by integrating new residents into the community via schooling, access to services and amenities.
- The final decision to not proceed with use of the hotel, due to safety concerns of people placed on the site, while ultimately the right decision, means that significant community tensions have been created unnecessarily and could

<sup>5</sup> [BBC investigation exposes 'far-right' group in secret filming - BBC News](#)



potentially have been avoided should earlier engagement and discussion with the council occurred.

### *Targeted Interventions*

- In terms of the Committee's interest in interventions to 'target specific groups of people, geographical areas or particular key issues', Welsh Councils would appreciate an emphasis on:
- Resourcing preventative local authority led approaches that can be targeted at specific local communities, based on local intelligence.
- Continued, proactive and responsive national leadership on integration, counter-extremism and cohesion.
- An awareness that continued reduction in non-statutory local government services will disproportionately impact the socio-economic groups where Welsh social disorder has most recently occurred: these services include leisure, play, youth services and the appearance of open spaces and the built environment.
- Respect-based recognition and more positive narratives from the UK Government Home Office on the specific matter of refugee resettlement schemes, accepting that examples of good practice exist as well as high-profile failings.
- For all public bodies, including Welsh Councils, to listen to and be guided by local residents in their decision-making, seeking to empower them and promote social inclusion.

### **Committee 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.**

### *Local Authority Leadership and Preventative Approaches*

- Welsh Councils perform a **leadership response**/role to instances of local disorder, often being physically first responders as Councillors and officers, in a direct police liaison role, and in leading post-disorder clear-up and repair activities around housing, highways and maintenance and the environment. Along with the Police, Councils are the public bodies with the greatest stake in community safety. Swansea Council was cited by the Welsh Government for





its role in providing emergency support to local residents, and for leading on community recover<sup>6</sup>.

- Following both the Mayhill and Ely disorder, the respective Councils mobilised community development packages, securing additional government funding for targeted local interventions. This has included the delivery of new sports pitches, housing improvements, enhancements to the local environment, and increased access to employment support. In both cities the investment packages included the directly affected community and the neighbouring area, recognising the interconnected urban nature of those cases. Those investments mitigate some of the impacts of spending cuts to other services and help promote social cohesion and pride in the local area.
- Welsh Councils also undertake a **preventative role** in maintaining community and social cohesion, as part of multi-agency working alongside the police and the third sector. Because much of Welsh life takes place in cohesive and peaceful communities, social cohesion is often hidden in plain view as a daily reality. But Welsh Councils generally believe that access to community amenities, prevention of visible business and built environment decline, enabling regeneration, and support services such as youth work and education play important roles in promoting social cohesion and increasing community resilience. These services, often non-statutory, are usually provided by local government but Welsh Councils can also play a co-ordinating role in mobilising funding streams for the third sector, working with business and higher education.
- The Safer Communities Network states that “Cohesive communities that are well connected are more resilient to change, and people are kinder to each other. It leads to individuals and communities being trusted and empowered to do the things that matter, and they have good access to public bodies involved in Health, Education, Housing and Community Safety. Community cohesion describes the ability of all communities to function and grow in harmony together rather than in conflict”<sup>7</sup>.

### *Supporting Social Cohesion and Overcoming Tensions*

- The need to overcome tensions is directly relevant to social cohesion in light of the climate around migration, refugee resettlement and hate crime. The WLGA is committed to working with the Welsh Government to implement its Nation of Sanctuary related commitments.<sup>8</sup>
- Welsh Councils worked with the Welsh Government on its *Community Cohesion National Delivery Plan* (2016-17). The plan ensured continued funding for eight Regional Community Cohesion Co-ordinations covering Wales and hosted by local government. Those co-ordinators had been in place since the Delivery Plan’s 2013 predecessor strategy *Getting On*

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<sup>6</sup> [Written Statement: Mayhill incident \(25 May 2021\) | GOV.WALES](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Community Tensions & Community Cohesion - Wales Safer Communities](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Councils at the heart of Wales’ nation of sanctuary - WLGA](#)



*Together*. The plan identified seven areas where outcomes would be improved namely hate crime, modern slavery, inclusion of Gypsies and Travellers, immigration, tackling poverty, mainstreaming cohesion and tension monitoring. Several Senedd Committees have recommended that this work should be updated and if the Welsh Government decides to do so, it is essential that the WLGA and Welsh Councils are involved at the earliest stage.

- The creation of the 2016-17 Delivery Plan, building on the 2013 *Getting On Together* community cohesion strategy, encouraged Welsh Councils to create local community cohesion plans and mainstreamed the concept with Councillors and officers. Funding attached to both strategies (approx. £500k per year) ensured that the Regional Co-Ordinators could designate officers to lead on specific cohesion challenges including issues facing the Gypsy and Traveller Communities, people with Protected Characteristics and victims of hate crime.
- The Regional Cohesion teams are currently in place, and in north-east Wales played a vital role in engaging with minoritised communities during the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>9</sup>.
- All 22 local authorities have a community cohesion team or service either working at the regional level or locally, depending on the decision of the local authority about where resources and capacity are best deployed. Activities undertaken across our Councils include connecting diverse communities to services, monitoring cohesion and community tensions, and liaison with police over those tensions and other issues.
- Rural social cohesion is a vital area of focus for Welsh Councils, and currently tends to be approached through a community vitality and affordable housing perspective. Measures to address what some of our member councils have described as the *second homes crisis*, utilising planning and taxation policy tools provided by the Welsh Government, seek to address cohesion on a socio-economic basis. On asylum seeker accommodation, Carmarthenshire Council has said that the “dispersal model of accommodation has worked well”<sup>10</sup>, leading to successful placements of people into local communities.
- Local authority community cohesion activity has mostly focussed on diverse communities and the refugee and migration policy area. Social cohesion is a wider picture not solely framed by race, and the socio-economic aspects of social cohesion are often targeted by a community development approach.

### Committee ToR 3

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<sup>9</sup> [Regional Community Cohesion Service for North East Wales \(Wrexham CBC, Denbighshire CC and Flintshire CC\) - WLGA](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Concerns raised over Home Office plans to house 300 asylum seekers at west Wales hotel | cambrian-news.co.uk](#)





**What support the Welsh Government provides to community groups and organisations and identify whether there are any opportunities to provide additional support.**

- The Welsh Government provides a significant amount of financial support to the third sector in order to enable activities which contribute to social cohesion. Welsh Councils always encourage local third sector groups to access as many diverse funding streams as possible. The WLGA believes that community groups and organisations are the bedrock of enabling social cohesion efforts, and it is no exaggeration to say that Welsh Councils work with these groups on a daily basis across the nation.
- We would argue that Welsh Councils are the best placed public bodies to distribute resources and support to community groups across the third sector, ensuring these services and support work in tandem with councils and other public bodies and facilitating good engagement and communication across many community groups, including those marginalised from society. This can be done regionally or locally.
- Opportunities to provide additional support should be pursued under a national strategic framework, co-designed with local government and the third sector and with delivery on the ground led by Welsh Councils, with any additional functions funded from **outside of the local government finance settlement** with additional funds.
- The Welsh Government, local government and the third sector should collaborate to set the objectives of such a refreshed national strategy, updated to reflect the latest challenges to social cohesion seen in Wales in 2021-2024. Once those objectives have been set councils should be free to approach their communities to identify specific local priorities.
- Relying on declining (in real-terms once accounting for spending pressures) council budgets to deliver the ingredients for social cohesion will risk creating conditions which help foster disorder, disenchantment and social exclusion.