

Community Cohesion

Committee name	Residents' Services Select Committee
Officer reporting	Fiona Gibbs, Stronger Communities Manager
Papers with report	None
Ward	All

HEADLINES

This report aims to provide an update in relation to the work being undertaken in Hillingdon to build stronger communities, promote community cohesion and manage the risk relating to extremism. It also outlines work undertaken in meeting the aims of the Government's Prevent duty, under the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 and the Government's counter terrorism strategy CONTEST.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Residents' Services Select Committee:

1. Notes activity undertaken to build stronger communities and promote community cohesion particularly in light of the challenges emerging from national and global events, a national rise in hate crime and threats from extremist influence and the impacts on local communities.
2. Notes the activity that has been undertaken during the past year in relation to delivering against the Prevent duty.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1. Building stronger communities

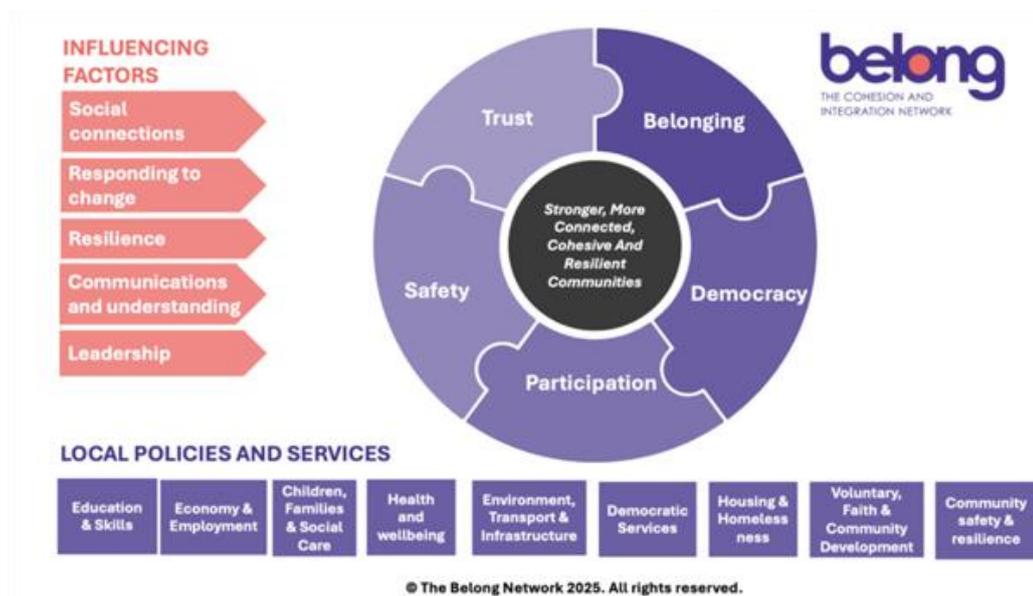
1.1 What is community cohesion?

Community cohesion is not a precise term and can be interpreted in many ways. Broadly speaking it is about creating a sense of belonging, valuing diversity, tackling inequalities and promoting interaction to develop positive relationships within a community.

Recently "Belong" (commissioned by the LGA) published their report into community cohesion. They recognised that, whilst there have been successive initiatives and reports commissioned by the Government since 2001, there has never been an official government definition of social cohesion. However, there is some consensus that it is a social glue or the 'ties that bind' us together in communities and wider society. It involves subjective conditions such as inter-personal trust, a sense of belonging, mutual support and shared values (*Common ground – building cohesive communities report by Belong for LGA Jan 2026*).

To help inform the Council's approach to community cohesion, Belong's Model of Social Cohesion draws on research and practice to explain what makes communities strong, connected, and

resilient (Figure 1.1).



At its core, social cohesion aims to build stronger more connected and resilient communities. This is shaped by 5 interrelated conditions:

- Participation
- Belonging
- Democracy
- Trust
- Safety

These core conditions are influenced by relevant policy and service areas at the local level. They provide the essential environment for social cohesion and for communities to thrive and underscore the need for a joined up and holistic approach across all council services and with partners and communities.

1.2 Prevent and countering extremism

The aim of Prevent is to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism and was placed as a duty on local authorities under the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015.

The threat from terrorism continues to be significant and recent incidents in Europe as well as in the UK demonstrate the need to ensure a robust approach, not only in enforcement but also in prevention and protection.

Whilst there continue to be individuals willing to carry out violent attacks, there has also been a significant shift from radicalisation to extremism rather than terrorism attracting a wider following. Events since October 2023 and the unrest during the summer 2024, including around the elections, have changed the picture of what is being experienced.

Use of the online space to spread disinformation and escalate reactions and mobilise individuals has been a major development and has a real impact upon communities and community

cohesion.

The Counter terrorism risk profile identifies a complex and changing landscape, with one main influencer or ideology no longer dominant.

Threat from self-initiated terrorist attacks remains of most concern. Islamist-inspired attacks remain a significant threat, but the extreme right wing is ever emerging and increasing in influence. The online space and multiple platforms provide a complex and ever-changing picture with other influences including Incel, fascination with extreme violence and mass casualty attacks providing a new dynamic.

Throughout all these influences there are a number of common themes including: misogynistic views and homophobic, anti-government, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic and antisemitic attitudes.

There has also been an increase in numbers of young people being arrested for terrorist offences, which continues to be an ongoing trend.

Numbers of those with neurodivergence and mental health conditions are also increasingly present within Prevent referral cases. Whilst there is a need to be mindful that not everyone who is neurodivergent or has mental ill health is more likely to become a terrorist, it is noted that these factors can increase someone's vulnerability and susceptibility to being radicalised.

Emerging threats:

The focus moving forward is upon the increasing involvement and influence from state threats – this can be linked to cyber, social media – mis and dis information as well as offline. It is becoming more organised and far reaching. Therefore, countering state threats requires a new consideration for all agencies in countering terrorism and extremism, and implications for resilience and response planning.

Channel referrals and review:

Following the reviews held in relation to the incident in Southport and the murder of Sir David Ames, new guidance has been issued. This guidance is aimed at improving the management of referrals including those relating to fascination with extreme violence and mass casualty attacks.

1.3 Hillingdon Context

Hillingdon has become more diverse with many areas seeing the proportion of white and ethnic minority communities more evenly spread. At the same time the Borough is experiencing increases in the number of young people together with a growing older population.

The impact of economic pressures and squeezed resources on public services inevitably places a strain on families and communities as resources become reduced and access to support and services is limited. Threats from extremism and terrorism have increased and can cause conflict, tensions, prejudice and misunderstanding within communities.

Over recent months, there has been a noticeable increase in community tensions, protest activity, and visible street-based issues, including incidents relating to rough sleeping, hate crime, anti-immigrant sentiment, influence of global conflicts and wider community safety concerns. Many of

these challenges are being shaped by both local and national factors and global events, alongside wider social influences, including the spread of mis and dis information online and links with an increasingly complex extremism landscape, exploiting grievances and vulnerabilities.

The approach has been to understand what the community cohesion challenges are in Hillingdon and where in the Borough the risks to community cohesion are greatest. But it is also equally important to recognise where the positive contributions to community cohesion are taking place and to promote greater opportunities for building on those positives and underpin the resilience within communities. Improving knowledge of what works and what helps can reduce the risk and needs to be considered, such as:

- Strong local leadership (political, community etc)
- Strong communication activity/strategy to engage with local communities
- Visible local initiatives
- Developing a local sense of civic pride
- Uniting local people on issues affecting the Borough
- Strong partnership approaches to local solutions
- Community capacity building and a sustainable approach to community engagement and community development which is inclusive and embraces the diversity of the Borough.

2. What the Council is doing

The work of the Stronger Communities team supports the Council's aim "along with its partners, to create a strong and resilient community in Hillingdon, to counter extremism and hate in all its forms, while bringing communities together to promote cohesion and integration. To build a strong sense of belonging and pride where all people feel valued and included, whether living, working within, or visiting the borough."

This is delivered by –

- Managing and coordinating a partnership approach to building stronger communities.
- Leading on the implementation of the Prevent Duty, as set out in the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015.
- Supporting the local voluntary sector and community organisations, including faith groups in developing communities and community cohesion.
- Maintaining and developing community engagement and reach into Hillingdon's diverse communities as part of building stronger communities.
- Monitoring and management of community tensions with partners.

2.1 Work with communities

In order to support community cohesion, officers have worked with, and built strong relationships with, Hillingdon's diverse communities and voluntary sector. This approach has involved supporting community programmes and networks which bring people together or build resilience. The Council's focus has been predominantly on young people, women, faith communities, and addressing inequalities, whilst also working across Council services and with other partners to enable and improve reach and engagement and access to services.

This has involved-

- Supporting local faith leaders in the development of the inter faith community network and supporting Hillingdon women's centre and other local women's groups to establish a women in the community network.
- Supporting the development of the Hillingdon LGBTQ+ network.
- Working collaboratively with health and community organisations during and post Covid to support health and well-being initiatives to address health inequalities.
- Working with Council services and other partners and voluntary sector to support asylum seekers and refugees and Hillingdon's diverse communities to promote integration and inclusion.
- Working with the Family hubs to engage with Hillingdon's diverse communities and mapping of community activity and resources that support children and families.
- Working with Brunel University and supporting their Civic University activities.
- Working with partners to deliver Hillingdon's junior citizens programme for Yr6 pupils.
- Working with local Police to manage community tensions and concerns.

In 2025 officers were successful in securing extra funding to support local work from the MHCLG through their Community Cohesion Resilience Programme and want to highlight this as an example of cohesion work, and the partnerships established with local communities.

Hillingdon's Programme was aimed at working with local organisations who were already working within local communities, delivering local cohesion priorities and outcomes and addressing emerging concerns relating to impacts of national tensions and global events.

Each project has a clearly defined purpose and is specifically targeted at identified cohorts. These beneficiaries were identified through local community demographics and understanding of local community cohesion pressures, including significant numbers of asylum seekers being housed in local hotels, an increasingly diverse community and inter faith dynamic, and known impacts relating to recent global events and national increase in antisemitism and islamophobia.

Women and LGBTQ+ communities were also relevant cohorts where community safety had been raised as a concern from the work already being undertaken with these groups.

The first project worked with REAP and Bell Farm to build upon the work they are already doing in the Borough in supporting asylum seekers and refugees with activities to foster cohesion, positive relations and resilience between long-term residents and new asylum and refugee arrivals in Hillingdon. By reducing isolation and increasing interaction among people with diverse experiences, the project aimed to create a more inclusive and supportive community.

REAP (Refugees in Effective and Active Partnership) are a Hillingdon based charity working with and supporting refugees and asylum seekers. The Council has worked with the organisation for many years, and they provide a crucial service for communities in Hillingdon in supporting cohesion and integration and raising awareness.

Bell Farm Christian Centre (BFCC) is a Christian Church and Charity that has a declared policy of working with other agencies to help meet the needs of the local community. Officers have also worked closely with the team at Bell Farm for many years. Bell Farm provides advice, information and care services including a foodbank, children's clubs and families support, older people's groups, classes, befriending and outreach activities and support for asylum seekers and refugees. Their services attract and support over 2500 beneficiaries each year. Bell Farm Christian Centre is situated in West Drayton.

Bell Farm has recently been successful in gaining funding from the GLA in partnership with other local voluntary groups, from the Loved and Wanted Programme. The Mayor of London and the National Lottery Community Fund have committed £1.8 million to build a network of community spaces across the capital. These Loved and Wanted Community Spaces will bring London's communities together and affirm that every Londoner belongs in the city. This programme will build upon the work Bell Farm already delivers for local communities and in fostering community cohesion and connections.

The project aim is to foster an inclusive, resilient, and cohesive community in the south of the Borough through BFCC as a Loved and Wanted Centre through engagement that brings people together to address social, cultural, and economic barriers, promote shared identity, and support vulnerable and newly arrived residents. The engagement target is 3000 people in person per year and online 2000 in 26 months.

Project two was aimed at supporting the newly founded Hillingdon LGBT+ Network. The goal was to harness the experiences and ideas of community members to move the Network forward, addressing the needs of LGBT+ residents in Hillingdon in ways that truly meet their needs.

The third project focused on women and was delivered by Hillingdon Women's Centre (HWC). The project aimed to empower marginalized women in the Borough by encouraging their participation and amplifying their voices.

HWC held a series of storytelling sessions providing women with a safe space to share experiences and focused on the theme of violence against women and the patriarchy. Through these sessions they were able to bring women from different backgrounds together in a confidential and non-judgemental space where they felt comfortable being open and discussing topics that are not usually explored in their day-to-day work. Participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with many requests for more activities like this to take place.

Further to the specific programme funded through CCRP funding, and the work HWC do to support women in need or those experiencing domestic abuse, HWC support community cohesion and connection through their wider work including:

- The Women's Hub: this is a project created by Hillingdon Women's Centre through which they provide support to women-led community groups in Hillingdon. In addition to covering the cost of their venue spaces to ensure these groups can continue meeting and supporting women in their communities, the Council also hosts events to bring both group members and facilitators together. These groups are meeting specific needs of women in Hillingdon who are experiencing loneliness, isolation, mental health struggles, and often domestic abuse as well. It is important to not only fund these small groups, but to also create opportunities for them to connect and learn from each other.
- Positive Energy: this is a weekly group held at Hillingdon Women's Centre for over 5 years. The purpose is to provide a consistent, safe space for service users to connect with other women who have shared experiences. Many of their service users continue to attend Positive Energy sessions long after their support with one of the centre caseworkers has come to an end, as it provides them with an opportunity to get out of the house and make new connections. For many clients, coming to Positive Energy might be the only opportunity they have to leave the house each week. Topics and themes for the group vary

but are often focused on well-being, goal setting, self-care, meditation, reflection, and arts and crafts. Given the diverse nature of the client base at HWC, this group has a positive impact on a wider scale as it brings women together who otherwise would have been unlikely to meet.

Project four was to work with faith communities through the Hillingdon Inter Faith Community network (HIC). The aims of HIC are to bring communities together, enable friendships to develop, and promote learning through encounter and dialogue. The project included involving young people in interfaith dialogue, increasing the engagement of local faith leaders, and enhancing the involvement of women in the interfaith space.

They were able to bring people together from the different faith communities to engage in constructive topics and training surrounding social cohesion. These have included young people, women, lay and ordained faith leaders. They have also –

- Raised profile in the educational sector with interfaith resources.
- Produced videos of local places of worship as a resource for schools to help improve understanding of different faiths.
- Developed an exhibition about different faiths to take out to schools and enable dialogue with volunteers from different faiths.
- Successfully launched the Hillingdon Interfaith Community website to showcase past and upcoming events.
- Network Expansion: Increased database of faith leaders, community workers, and educators.
- Women's Circle: Established a new women's committee to amplify women's voices in interfaith work.
- Community Intervention: Engaged with primary schools to address religious division among parents and students.

In addition to the funded programme, HIC brings together faith leaders from across the Borough who are committed to improving inter faith relations and understanding. Other activities this year include:

- Addressing safety concerns:
- Providing a joint media statement linked to the protests around the hotels accommodating asylum seekers – calling for calm and tolerance.
- Delivering hate crime awareness sessions for faith leaders.
- Currently planning Counter Terrorism workshop with Police
- Involvement in the Making Hayes Safer initiative aimed at tackling youth violence and contextual safeguarding
- Health promotion and awareness: working with local health services to host health and wellbeing sessions across places of worship

These projects have enabled local community organisations to build upon and enhance their existing work and build an even stronger relationship with the local authority. As demonstrated, all the organisations continue to build upon the activities delivered for future work.

2.2 Managing community tensions

Officers work closely with the Police, partners and local communities to monitor and respond to

community tensions and concerns, utilising their relationships to help reassure and understand community impacts.

This year has witnessed a number of events that have caused tensions and concerns between and within communities. Hillingdon has not been immune to these influences. The conflict between Hamas and Israel continues to impact communities in the UK. Synagogues and Hillingdon's Jewish community have expressed their concerns at the rise in antisemitism. Working in partnership with Police, officers have met with community members and offered reassurance and support.

The increase in anti-immigrant sentiment and protests outside hotels in the Borough being used by the Home Office for asylum seekers and refugees has increased tensions and fear within some communities. The raising of flags contributed to some groups feeling targeted and not welcome. Schools have also raised concern about increased racist rhetoric and have sought advice and support.

Working closely with the Police, officers have supported a multi-agency approach, with regular meetings put in place to manage the concerns and provide a joint planned response.

3. Prevent Duty

As part of the Prevent duty refresh, the Home Office has updated its assurance process to help ensure that local authorities are delivering their statutory Prevent duty in line with the Prevent duty guidance. The Prevent duty toolkit for local authorities outlines the benchmarks Prevent delivery is measured against. The assurance process is designed for local authorities to assure themselves via a self-assessment that they are effectively delivering their statutory duty.

Home Office: Summary of Assurance Process 2024/25

The overall assessment of prevent delivery in Hillingdon is that the Local Authority continues to demonstrate an exceptional standard of delivery as an unfunded Prevent area. Despite the resource limitations, the borough consistently maintains strong and effective communication with local and regional partners, particularly through its contribution to funding bids and active participation in multi-agency meetings. Benchmarking performance has remained at a good standard throughout the year, reflecting a high level of commitment, organisation, and strategic focus.

Benchmarking is assessed against these areas:

1. Multi Agency Partnership
2. Local Risk Assessment
3. Partnership Plan
4. Referral Pathway
5. Training Programme
6. Reducing permissive environments
7. Communications and Engagement

These are assessed as 'not met', 'met' and 'exceeding'; Hillingdon was assessed as 'exceeding' in 4 areas and other areas were all 'met.'

Key areas of work

- i) The emergence of the growth of support for right wing extremism and other influences including Incel and fascination with extreme violence and mass casualty attacks.

Officers have ensured, through staff training, that agencies are aware of the potential influence and importance of safeguarding those who might be at risk from these emerging ideologies. Bespoke sessions are being delivered in collaboration with Counter Terrorism Policing colleagues.

- ii) Support to schools and further and higher education.

Officers are working with schools to raise awareness through staff training in order to identify those who might be vulnerable and to make the relevant referrals. Building resilience is also key, and the Council has introduced a programme working with young people to tackle hate and extremism and stay safe online; this remains a priority for the coming year.

Officers have provided all schools with briefings on how to have those difficult conversations, alongside guidance as to what makes a Prevent referral and what does not.

- iii) Vulnerability of those with a learning disability/autism and mental health needs

Trends emerging from local referrals received during the past year have highlighted an increase in vulnerability of those with a learning disability / on the autistic spectrum alongside those with mental health needs. The Council has been successful in securing funding from the Home Office to commission a programme of workshops as detailed below:

- Workshops for young people – particularly those with special needs, to identify and question online influence and understand extremism and risk of radicalisation and where to seek help and support.
- Workshops for parents/carers to be able to support young people to have discussions around extremist influence and ideology and identify online risk.

- iv) Safeguarding procedures and referral pathways

Channel is the multi-agency process for the management of cases relating to vulnerability to radicalisation and support of terrorism. The Channel panel in Hillingdon meets monthly and is currently chaired by the Council's Stronger Communities Manager (Prevent Lead). The deputy Chair is a Senior Manager from Children's services. Core members include social care, NHS, mental health services, and police, with other agencies attending as required.

- v) Training for staff

The Council provides support to local partners and agencies in delivering training and has provided training to more than 5000 staff across the Borough from within the Council, education (including schools, FE&HE), health, voluntary and other settings.

This programme is ongoing and promotion of Home Office e-learning modules as well as face to face training are provided across the Council's partnership working.

The Channel Chair and Deputy Chair and panel members also undertake regular training provided by the Home Office.

vi) Building resilience

As mentioned, the Council was successful in obtaining funding from the Home Office Preventing Radicalisation fund to deliver a series of workshops and awareness raising activity to build resilience to extremism and online influence, particularly for vulnerable young people. There are also workshops for parents/carers, to give them the confidence to put safeguards in place, recognise signs of radicalisation and seek support. This will enable those parents / carers to be able to identify concerns at an earlier stage and divert young people away from the influence of radicalisers, building resilience and reducing the need for referrals and Channel interventions. This is to build on a programme delivered in 2024 which was aimed at professionals and young people.

This current programme is due for completion by the end of March 2026.

PERFORMANCE DATA

Channel data published annually by the Home Office

RESIDENT BENEFIT

This work supports the Council's aim, "along with its partners, to create a strong and resilient community in Hillingdon, to counter extremism and hate in all its forms, while bringing communities together to promote cohesion and integration. To build a strong sense of belonging and pride where all people feel valued and included, whether living, working within, or visiting the borough."