

COMMUNITY BRIEFING
**RESPONSE TO THE
SOCIAL COHESION
STRATEGY**

June 2026



Community Response to the Social Cohesion Strategy

A briefing for Muslim organisations, civil society groups, community leaders and policymakers

This briefing has been prepared by MLegal, drawing on discussions with civil society organisations, experts and academics working in this field. It explains the Government's social cohesion strategy, identifies key concerns for Muslim and marginalised communities, and supports communities to navigate the emerging policy landscape with confidence.

Executive summary

The Government's social cohesion strategy, *Protecting What Matters*¹, presents itself as a plan to strengthen pride, belonging, integration, safety and resilience. It includes some measures that communities may welcome in principle: investment in local areas, youth provision, security for places of worship, funding for anti-Muslim hate-crime reporting, employment support, faith literacy, investment in local media, and stronger action against hate.

However, the strategy also carries serious risks. Its language on cohesion is closely linked to counter-extremism, Prevent, national security, enhanced institutional monitoring, immigration control, charity regulation, policing, university oversight and local risk assessment. For many Muslim organisations and civil society actors, this creates a familiar concern: policies said to protect communities become tools for managing, monitoring and disciplining them.

The strongest community concern is that the strategy treats social cohesion as something to be achieved through compliance and control rather than equality, trust, rights and justice. It risks making Muslim civic, religious, charitable and political life more conditional on state approval. It may also affect other marginalised communities, including migrants, refugees, racialised communities, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, young people, student activists, faith communities, and those engaged in lawful political dissent.

This briefing does not argue that cohesion is unimportant. Communities want and thrive under safety, trust, neighbourliness and equal participation. The issue is whether the Government's strategy will build those outcomes or whether it will deepen suspicion, centralise power and narrow the space for independent civil society.

The key message is practical: communities should not wait for the strategy to be implemented around them. They should understand the policy, monitor how it is applied locally, protect independent institutions, record harms, use legal safeguards, engage where useful, and challenge overreach early.

¹ [Protecting What Matters: Towards a more confident, cohesive, and resilient United Kingdom - GOV.UK](#)

1. What the strategy is trying to do

The strategy is organised around four broad themes:

1. **Confident communities:** pride in place, investment in local areas, youth and community spaces, local media, cultural and sporting events, citizenship education, Religious Education, faith and belief literacy, and protection of religious heritage.
2. **Cohesive communities:** integration, English language, migration management, asylum hotels, hate crime, anti-Muslim hostility, antisemitism, race equality, and community resilience.
3. **Resilient communities:** counter-extremism, Prevent, the 2024 extremism definition, charity regulation, campus relations and freedom of speech in universities, online harms, platform regulation, policing and new disruption powers.
4. **The road ahead:** a new Social Cohesion Taskforce, ministerial oversight, annual reporting, and a Social Cohesion Measurement Framework.

On paper, the strategy says it wants people from different backgrounds to live together safely, build trust and share a sense of belonging. In practice, much of the detail sits in systems of monitoring, risk assessment and enforcement.

The strategy is therefore best understood not simply as a neutral cohesion plan, but as a securitised integration agenda. It is not only concerned with neighbourly relations or local trust-building; it also creates a framework through which government, councils, universities, police, regulators and public bodies may define risk, determine which organisations are to be treated as legitimate partners, and thus shape the future of community leadership.

2. Why communities are concerned

The central concern is not one isolated policy. It is the combined effect of several policy tools:

- the 2024 extremism definition²;
- Prevent and university compliance³;
- local cohesion risk assessment tools⁴;
- police and national security involvement in local cohesion work⁵;
- enhanced Charity Commission powers⁶;
- state-backed reporting mechanisms for anti-Muslim hostility;
- the appointment of a Special Representative on anti-Muslim hostility;
- the anti-Muslim hostility definition;
- youth and community funding streams;
- neighbourhood boards and local governance structures;
- online monitoring and platform regulation;
- annual State of Extremism reporting.

² [New definition of extremism \(2024\) - GOV.UK](#)

³ [Key principles of Prevent \(accessible\) - GOV.UK](#)

⁴ [Protecting What Matters: Towards a more confident, cohesive, and resilient United Kingdom - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

The strategy's proposal for an annual State of Extremism report warrants serious scrutiny. The precursor to any formal reporting mechanism has been watchlists devised by RICU and circulated across government departments. Formalising this approach through annual reporting does two things: (a) it removes the secrecy surrounding methods that have already been operating, and (b) it risks institutionalising an arbitrary list that determines which Muslims are treated as legitimate partners and which are cast out of civic and policy life entirely.

Although each measure is presented in the language of safety, cohesion or accountability, their combined effect may be to create an infrastructure capable of monitoring, filtering and shaping Muslim and marginalised community life. The risk is that cohesion becomes a language through which the state decides who is a trusted partner, who is a risk, who can speak for Muslims, which organisations receive funding, which events are allowed, which charities are investigated, and which forms of Muslim civic and political engagement are considered legitimate.

3. The strategy's main contradiction

The strategy says Muslims face growing hostility and need protection. At the same time, it embeds counter-extremism measures that are likely to fall heavily on Muslims.

This contradiction matters.

On one side, the Government recognises anti-Muslim hate, supports a reporting helpline, promises funding and proposes a Special Representative. On the other, it describes Islamist extremism as a major threat, expands Prevent-related expectations, strengthens institutional monitoring and encourages public bodies to avoid conferring legitimacy on groups labelled 'extremist'.

The result is that Muslims are treated as both vulnerable and suspect. A serious anti-Islamophobia approach should protect Muslims from hatred, discrimination and institutional bias. It should not simultaneously expand the frameworks that have contributed to Muslim communities being over-scrutinised and under-protected.

4. Why the term Islamophobia matters

A major concern is the Government's use of "anti-Muslim hostility" rather than Islamophobia.

The phrase "anti-Muslim hostility" may capture some direct acts of abuse, threats, harassment, vandalism and hate crime. However, it does not fully explain how anti-Muslim prejudice is formed, normalised and sustained before it leads to discrimination and ultimately reaches the level of hostility or criminal conduct.

Islamophobia is necessary because it captures the broader process through which Islam and Muslims are constructed as dangerous, alien, inferior, suspect or incompatible with society. It is not limited to individual hatred. It can operate as religious bigotry, racial bigotry and, most often, a complex interplay of both: racialised religious bigotry.

This matters because Islamophobia operates across three connected domains:

Othering: stereotypes, prejudices and public narratives that demean, demonise or dehumanise Muslims.

Discrimination: direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, victimisation, institutional discrimination and structural exclusion.

Hostility: hate crime, incitement, threats, abuse and aggravated offences.

“Anti-Muslim hostility” focuses too narrowly on the third domain. It may help describe some overt acts of hostility, but it does not adequately capture the othering and discrimination that create the conditions in which hostility becomes possible.

Islamophobia can operate through:

- media narratives that portray Muslims as threats;
- political language that associates Muslim identity with extremism;
- workplace cultures that marginalise Muslim staff;
- school policies that treat Muslim identity as a problem;
- policing practices that over-scrutinise Muslim expression;
- charity regulation that treats Muslim giving as suspicious;
- public discourse that treats Muslim advocacy as disloyal or divisive.

This is why "anti-Muslim hostility" is not enough. Hostility sounds like active aggression. Islamophobia also includes unconscious bias, institutional indifference, stereotypes, racialisation, microaggressions and structural exclusion. Without naming Islamophobia, policy may respond only to the visible act of hate while leaving untouched the narratives, assumptions and institutional and social practices that produce it.

Islamophobia and racialisation

Islamophobia is often both religious and racialised. Muslims are targeted not only because of belief, but because of names, dress, skin colour, language, ethnicity, family background, or assumptions about appearance. People who are not Muslim can also be targeted because they are perceived to be Muslim.

This is important because UK law has historically treated some racialised religious groups as racial or ethnic groups, while Muslims have often been treated only as a religious group. That creates gaps in protection. Anti-Muslim harm does not always fit neatly into either “race” or “religion” categories because it is often both.

A community response should therefore continue to use Islamophobia where it is accurate. The term helps communities name the full problem, record it properly, and challenge it across all three domains: othering, discrimination and hostility. It also helps resist any policy approach that treats anti-Muslim harm as only a matter of isolated hostility rather than a wider pattern of racialised religious bigotry.

5. The Government's anti-Muslim hostility definition: what to watch

The Government's non-statutory definition includes three main elements:

1. intentional criminal acts, including violence, vandalism, harassment or intimidation, directed at Muslims or those perceived to be Muslim;
2. prejudicial stereotyping of Muslims as a collective group with fixed negative characteristics, with the intention of encouraging hatred;
3. unlawful discrimination intended to disadvantage Muslims in public and economic life.

There are some useful elements. The definition recognises that people may be targeted because they are, or are perceived to be, Muslim. It also recognises that assumptions about dress, names, appearance or ethnicity can be part of anti-Muslim hostility. This is important because it acknowledges how racialisation works, even if the term is not explicitly used – and where it is acknowledged and recognised by Government, hopefully; it can also be meaningfully addressed by the state and its institutions.

However, the definition has serious weaknesses.

The intent problem

The definition repeatedly requires intention. This creates a high threshold. Intent is almost invariably impossible to prove, and any definition that makes it a precondition for recognising harm renders remedial action unworkable in practice. Much discrimination does not arrive with a confession of malice - it operates through institutional indifference, unconscious bias, and systemic exclusion. Requiring proof of intent excludes the vast majority of how Islamophobia is actually experienced. It is also worth noting that this threshold does not apply to other forms of racial or religious hostility: neither anti-Sikhism nor antisemitism carry an equivalent intent requirement. Muslim communities are therefore placed at a distinct and unjustifiable disadvantage by a definition that demands a standard of proof that exists nowhere else in comparable frameworks.

For example:

- a recruitment system may disadvantage applicants with Muslim names;
- Muslim employees may face repeated jokes about terrorism or fasting;
- a school may apply a uniform policy in a way that disadvantages Muslim girls;
- a public body may consult selectively and exclude independent Muslim organisations;
- a university may restrict a Muslim student event because it is seen as controversial.

In many of these cases, the harm is real even if the institution denies intent. Equality law often recognises impact as well as intent. A definition that focuses too heavily on intention may fail to capture the tacit, routinised ways Islamophobia is experienced.

The free speech imbalance

The guidance around the definition gives strong reassurance that criticism, ridicule or insult of Islam may be protected. Free expression matters and lawful criticism of religion should not be criminalised. But the balance matters too.

If the definition narrowly defines anti-Muslim hostility while broadly emphasising what is protected, it may fail to guide institutions on how to identify and address Islamophobia in practice. Communities should therefore push for implementation guidance that explains

discrimination, racialisation, institutional bias, microaggressions and structural harm, not only criminal hostility.

This is especially problematic because many expressions, associations or behaviours treated as concerning within Prevent and extremism frameworks are lawful; the issue is therefore not only criminalisation, but the use of policy, risk assessment and institutional pressure to restrict lawful expression and participation.

6. Extremism: the highest-risk part of the strategy

The most serious concern is the embedding of the 2024 extremism definition across government and frontline partners. Communities should also note that the 2024 extremism definition was introduced at the end of the previous Government and has not been subject to the level of detailed scrutiny that would be expected for a concept capable of shaping public-sector engagement, funding, university decisions and civil society participation.

The strategy says extremism includes the “promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance” that seeks to “negate rights”, “undermine liberal democracy”, or create a “permissive environment” for those outcomes.

The phrase “permissive environment” is especially concerning. It is broad and unclear. It could be used to treat lawful speech, association, events or organisations as risky even where no criminal threshold is met. This sits within another contradiction at the heart of the policy: protecting freedom to criticise religion, specifically Islam whilst policing Muslim speech under vague notions of “radicalising influences”. The former ignores the permissive environment in which anti-Muslim bigotry is enabled; the latter presupposes risk in relation to Muslim communities. The result is a double standard on the exercise of free speech.

The framing of “malign foreign influences” has become increasingly prevalent in government discourse, particularly since the intensification of tensions around Iran and the wider Middle East. There is a real danger that political decisions masquerading as national security judgements will effectively narrow and ‘domesticate’ the range of permissible Muslim advocacy on foreign policy by rendering issues or actors as “malign” and ‘hostile’ to national interests. This framing has potency of disproportionately impacting Muslims given their ethnonational diversity, and risks opening another front of securitised monitoring whilst simultaneously constraining legitimate political expression on foreign policy matters.

Why this matters

Extremism language can become a gatekeeping tool, affecting not only security policy but also equal participation in public, civic and institutional life. It can affect:

- who public bodies meet;
- who receives funding;
- which charities are investigated;
- which university events go ahead;
- which speakers are allowed;
- which student societies are scrutinised;

- which community organisations are treated as legitimate;
- which Muslim voices are excluded from policy spaces.

The danger is not only formal sanctions. The greater risk may be informal exclusion: cancelled events, refused meetings, frozen partnerships, reputational smears, funding barriers, risk assessments and self-censorship.

Communities should insist that any extremism-related decision includes:

- clear written reasons;
- evidence, not suspicion;
- equality and human-rights assessment;
- protection for lawful political expression;
- an appeal or review route;
- safeguards against discriminatory application.

7. Prevent, safeguarding and universities

The strategy makes universities and educational institutions key sites of implementation, particularly within its Prevent, extremism and safeguarding agenda. It strengthens monitoring of Prevent compliance, external speaker management and the expectation that universities assess speech and events that may contribute to a “permissive environment” for radicalising influences.

This raises serious concerns for Muslim students and student societies. In practice, universities may become more cautious, restricting events, rejecting speakers, demanding additional paperwork, or treating Palestine-related advocacy, foreign policy discussion or Muslim political expression as a cohesion or extremism risk. This is not because the strategy explicitly names those forms of expression as risks, but because broad Prevent and extremism frameworks have historically created chilling effects around lawful Muslim political expression, particularly on contested issues such as Palestine, foreign policy and criticism of government.

The risk is that universities move further away from education, debate and academic freedom, and more towards compliance, risk management and discipline. There is also a need to scrutinise how these expectations sit alongside the Higher Education Freedom of Speech Act 2023 and the appointment of a Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom, particularly where universities are encouraged to restrict or risk-assess lawful speech, speakers or student events.

Community guidance for students and student societies

Muslim student groups should:

- keep clear records of event approvals, restrictions and communications;
- ask for written reasons where events are delayed, restricted or cancelled;
- request the policy basis for any decision;
- distinguish clearly between legal duties and institutional caution;
- build alliances with civil liberties, faith, anti-racist and student union networks;

- prepare template responses on lawful expression, academic freedom and equality duties;
- record patterns, not only individual incidents.

The burden of monitoring and resistance should not fall primarily on student bodies. Sector bodies also have a vital role. The Office for Students (OfS) and academic unions such as the University and College Union (UCU) should be actively monitoring university decisions for discriminatory practices against Muslims, and students should feel able to escalate concerns to those bodies where university processes fail them.

Universities should not use cohesion language to suppress lawful political expression. Controversial debate is not the same as extremism.

8. Schools, curriculum and home education

The strategy includes proposals on citizenship, national history, Holocaust education, digital literacy, Religious Education, racist abuse, exclusions, teacher workforce diversity and home education oversight.

Some of this may be useful. Communities need strong citizenship education, media literacy, religious literacy and action against racist abuse. However, the strategy does not go far enough on structural anti-racism. It talks about teaching "our nation's history" but does not clearly commit to teaching migration, empire, colonialism, race, Islamophobia, slavery, resistance, or the contribution of communities of colour to Britain. A cohesion curriculum that avoids these topics may promote a narrow idea of belonging rather than a truthful and inclusive one.

The strategy is also unclear about implementation. Many secondary schools are academies or free schools, with different curriculum obligations and greater freedom over Religious Education provision. A national cohesion curriculum or faith-literacy agenda may therefore be difficult to implement consistently unless the Government explains how it applies across different school structures.

Home education

The strategy proposes more oversight of home education, including mandatory local authority registers of children not in school, parental notification when children are home educated, local authority consent before some vulnerable children can be withdrawn from school, mandatory meetings with parents in pilot areas, and local authority powers to consider the home and wider learning environment when assessing suitability.

Safeguarding matters. However, home education oversight may disproportionately affect communities who already mistrust schools because of racism, bullying, unmet SEND needs, Islamophobia or cultural misrecognition. The education analysis specifically raises concerns about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, who may rely on elective home education because of discrimination in schools. Community commentary also identifies the need to support Muslim parents and educators navigating home-schooling provisions.

The phrase "sufficient socialisation" and participation "in life in the UK" must therefore not become a culturally biased test of whether families are acceptable or sufficiently integrated.

A significant omission from the strategy's approach to both education and online safety is any engagement with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child⁷. The UNCRC provides a robust legal framework for children's rights to education, protection from harm, participation and access to information. Communities and advocates should push for the UNCRC to be explicitly referenced in any statutory guidance or framework affecting children's education, welfare and online experience.

Communities should also monitor wider education and safeguarding reforms, including proposals connected to children's data, digital identifiers and cross-agency information sharing. These measures may affect how information about children and families is collected, shared and used across schools, local authorities and safeguarding bodies.

What parents and education advocates should do

- Ask local authorities for clear written policies on home education assessments.
- Request equality impact assessments for any local implementation.
- Document discriminatory assumptions or culturally insensitive practice.
- Build local parent networks for advice and support.
- Push schools to address racism and Islamophobia so families are not forced out of mainstream education.
- Insist that anti-racism, racial literacy and religious literacy are included in teacher training.

9. Charities, mosques and civil society organisations

The strategy proposes stronger Charity Commission powers to respond to extremist abuse, including trustee suspension and charity closure powers. It also refers to faith security training programme, local partnerships, funding streams and community programmes.

Genuine abuse of charities should be addressed. But Muslim charities and mosques already operate in a climate of heightened suspicion. They can be affected by:

- politically motivated complaints;
- hostile media narratives;
- banking de-risking;
- due-diligence barriers;
- reputational attacks;
- allegations linked to Palestine or international relief work;
- regulatory pressure;
- fear among trustees and donors.

Even weak allegations can have serious consequences. A charity may lose funding, donors, bank access or public confidence before any finding is made.

Practical steps for charities and mosques

Charities, mosques and community organisations should:

⁷ <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

- review trustee roles and governance documents;
- keep accurate minutes and decision records;
- strengthen financial controls and due diligence processes;
- maintain speaker, event and safeguarding policies;
- prepare a complaints and media response protocol;
- document any discriminatory banking or de-risking issues;
- seek legal advice early where allegations arise;
- avoid informal engagement with regulators or public bodies without records;
- coordinate with other Muslim charities to identify patterns.

The aim is not to retreat from public life. It is to build resilience so organisations can operate independently and confidently.

10. Muslim leadership and state-approved intermediaries

The strategy may reshape Muslim civil society through new posts, funding streams, youth initiatives, reporting bodies and official engagement structures.

The proposed Special Representative on anti-Muslim hostility could be useful if genuinely independent, community-backed and able to challenge government. But if appointed without meaningful Muslim community input, the role risks becoming a mechanism for managing Muslim concerns rather than addressing them.

The same applies to reporting bodies, local cohesion groups and funded intermediaries. If the state chooses a narrow set of acceptable Muslim voices, independent organisations may be pushed aside.

What communities should insist on

- Transparent appointment processes.
- Community accountability.
- Plural representation across race, gender, age, theology, geography and political viewpoint.
- Inclusion of independent and critical Muslim organisations.
- No exclusion for lawful criticism of government policy or foreign policy.
- Clear separation between victim support and counter-extremism monitoring.

Muslim communities should not allow representation to be narrowed to those most convenient and least critical of government.

11. Hate crime, policing and public order

The strategy relies heavily on police to tackle hate crime, public order, extremism, online hate, places of worship security and local crisis response.

This raises a difficult issue. Muslim communities need protection from hate crime, intimidation, vandalism and far-right violence. Many also experience policing as inconsistent, politicised or discriminatory.

The problem is two-sided:

1. **Under-protection:** anti-Muslim hate may be misclassified, under-recorded, poorly investigated or not treated comparably with other forms of hate.
2. **Over-policing:** Muslim political expression, especially around Palestine, may be treated as suspicious, extreme or public-order risk.

This creates distrust as communities may feel unsafe reporting hate while also fearing criminalisation for lawful expression.

Reporting and data control

The strategy supports national reporting mechanisms, including a government-backed helpline. Reporting support is important, and communities should have access to safe, trusted and accessible routes for recording anti-Muslim hate and discrimination. At the same time, communities should avoid becoming dependent on a single state-linked reporting route.

The way reporting data is collected, interpreted and presented has significant consequences. It can shape public understanding of anti-Muslim hatred, influence policy priorities, determine where funding is directed, and affect which organisations are treated as authoritative voices for affected communities. For that reason, communities should protect plural reporting routes, including Muslim-led organisations, local third-party reporting centres, legal organisations and independent monitoring projects.

What communities should do

- Report incidents through trusted routes and keep independent records.
- Encourage victims to preserve evidence: screenshots, photos, witness details, police reference numbers.
- Track whether incidents are recorded as religiously aggravated, racially aggravated, both, or neither.
- Ask police forces for disaggregated outcomes data.
- Monitor local Independent Advisory Groups, CPS Racial and Religious Hate Crime Scrutiny Panels and police engagement boards.
- Challenge inconsistent policing of protests and public expression.
- Push for formal partnerships between police constabularies and trusted Muslim-led organisations at local level.

12. Local government and neighbourhood boards

A significant part of the strategy is likely to be delivered at local level. This includes neighbourhood boards, local cohesion activity, council partnerships, youth and community initiatives, faith-based projects, local media work, community funding, police engagement and local cohesion risk assessment tools.

Local implementation matters because it is where broad national policy can become day-to-day practice. Decisions about board membership, funding, consultation, risk assessment and local partnerships may shape which communities are heard, which organisations are supported, and how concerns about cohesion are understood in practice. This creates both risks and opportunities. The risk is that local structures may reproduce a security-led approach to cohesion, especially where local work is connected to Prevent, policing, national security expertise or central government risk tools. The opportunity is that local systems may

also be more open to scrutiny, engagement and practical influence before policies become embedded.

Local questions to ask

Communities should ask local authorities and relevant public bodies:

- Which neighbourhood boards, cohesion groups or local delivery structures exist in the area?
- Who sits on these boards or groups, and how were they selected?
- Are Muslim communities represented in a meaningful and diverse way?
- Are women, young people, migrants, Black communities, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, refugees and other marginalised groups represented?
- What funding is available under the strategy and what conditions are attached to it?
- Which organisations have received funding and what criteria were used to award it?
- What data is being used to assess local cohesion, risk or community tension?
- Has an equality impact assessment been completed?
- Are meeting minutes, membership criteria, funding criteria and decisions publicly available?
- Have local Muslim organisations been consulted in a meaningful way, including independent and grassroots organisations?

13. Online harms and far-right mobilisation

The strategy's "Securing online spaces" section includes measures on algorithmic risk, user control over online exposure, platform transparency, researcher access to platform data, media literacy, misinformation, harmful content monetisation and AI safety standards. The strategy frames these measures as responses to online hate, extremism and misinformation, and refers to crisis moments such as the Southport-related riots and the Leicester unrest to show how viral harmful content can destabilise communities.

These issues matter for Muslim and marginalised communities. Anti-Muslim hate, far-right mobilisation, disinformation and conspiracy narratives can spread quickly online and contribute to offline intimidation, harassment and violence. Communities therefore have a clear interest in effective action against online hate and harmful mobilisation.

At the same time, online regulation must be approached carefully. Measures designed to tackle hate, extremism and misinformation should not be used to suppress lawful political speech, Palestine advocacy, journalism, religious discussion, human rights work, or criticism of governments and states. The concern is not that online harms should be ignored, but that safeguards are needed to prevent discriminatory moderation, over-removal and unequal treatment of Muslim or racialised users.

The UNCRC⁸ also provides a relevant legal framework for the strategy's online safety provisions. Its standards on children's rights to protection, participation and access to information should inform any regulatory approach to online harms affecting young people,

⁸ <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

and communities should push for its explicit inclusion in any guidance developed under this strategy.

What to watch

Communities and civil society organisations should monitor:

- whether Muslim, Palestine-related or human rights content is being removed, restricted or down-ranked unfairly;
- whether far-right channels, networks and influencers are being treated with the same seriousness as other online threats;
- whether users are given clear reasons and appeal routes when content is removed or accounts are restricted;
- whether independent researchers can access platform data to study anti-Muslim hate, far-right mobilisation and disinformation;
- whether algorithmic systems are amplifying anti-Muslim, anti-migrant or conspiratorial content;
- whether media literacy programmes support children and young people to understand harmful content critically, rather than relying only on restriction or surveillance.

Communities should therefore advocate for a balanced approach: robust action against online hate and far-right mobilisation, alongside strong protections for lawful expression, political advocacy, religious speech and community organising.

14. Race equality, employment and socio-economic justice

The strategy includes some commitments on race equality, employment support and participation in the labour market. It says the Race Equality Unit will undertake engagement with diverse communities to understand the connection between public service delivery, inequality and social cohesion. It also commits to work with schools on racist abuse and exclusion disparities, and to research ways to improve the recruitment, retention and progression of ethnic minority teachers.

On employment, the strategy says the Government will support communities who are underrepresented in the workplace. This includes improving employment support for women, including where cultural barriers may affect access to work, and ensuring that the Jobs and Careers Service is designed and tested to meet the needs of diverse communities through trusted local settings.

These commitments may provide useful openings if they are implemented seriously, shaped by affected communities, and linked to measurable outcomes. However, the strategy's approach is limited. It focuses mainly on participation in work, employment support and engagement, rather than setting out a broader plan to address structural Islamophobia, racialised religious discrimination or socio-economic inequality.

For Muslim communities, employment inclusion cannot be separated from Islamophobia and wider inequality. Muslim workers may face barriers linked to race, religion, gender, class, migration background and perceived foreignness. In practice, this may include hiring discrimination, exclusion from informal workplace networks, assumptions about Muslim women and leadership, jokes or comments linking Muslims to extremism, lack of

accommodation for religious practice, hostility to religious dress, unequal pay or unequal progression.

Above all, the Government is still refusing to recognise explicitly that Muslims as a group are racialised and suffer as such in terms of othering, discrimination and hostility. The Government needs to address this urgently and amend current anti-racism laws accordingly. Without this, much of what Government says on equality will be seen as just empty words. A stronger cohesion strategy would address these structural barriers directly. Communities should therefore push for:

- race and religion pay-gap analysis;
- recognition of Islamophobia as racialised religious discrimination;
- extend the definition of race in equality law to include Muslims, alongside Jews and Sikhs;
- stronger protections against harassment, ie, anti-discrimination provisions;
- meaningful use of the Public Sector Equality Duty;
- fair access to work, retention and progression;
- use of community-held data and lived experience in policy deliberation and development;
- action on poverty, housing, health and education inequalities.
- annual reporting by employers on ethnic minority representation across boards, senior management and recruitment pipelines - including setting and publishing targets for senior management diversity - in line with the Parker Review's recommendations for FTSE 350 companies and the UK's 50 largest private companies.⁹

Cohesion cannot be built through labour market participation alone. It also requires action on the structural inequalities that shape whether people are able to participate in public, economic and community life on equal terms.

15. The Social Cohesion Measurement Framework

The strategy proposes a Social Cohesion Measurement Framework to create clearer and more consistent metrics for assessing cohesion locally. If designed properly, this could be one of the more useful parts of the strategy. Good data could help identify where communities are not receiving fair treatment, where trust in institutions is weak, and where local services, funding or policy interventions are failing to meet community needs.

However, measurement is not neutral. The way cohesion is defined, measured and reported will shape how problems are understood and who is treated as responsible for them. If the wrong indicators are used, the framework may end up validating government policy or blaming communities for low cohesion, while ignoring institutional discrimination, unequal treatment, structural disadvantage and the Government's responsibility for these.

The location and context in which data is collected also matters. For example, Prevent-related data may be shaped by targeted local areas, priority zones or particular institutional settings, meaning that the data may reflect patterns of surveillance and referral as much as genuine community risk.

⁹ <https://parkerreview.co.uk/reports/>

A credible framework should therefore be developed with affected communities and should include indicators that measure both community experience and institutional conduct. These could include measures across discrimination, representation, socio-economic outcomes and institutional accountability, such as:

Experiences of discrimination and exclusion

- experiences of Islamophobia, racism, racialised religious discrimination;
- hate-crime reporting, recording and outcomes;
- community perceptions of safety, belonging and equal treatment;

Institutional accountability

- trust in police, schools, universities, councils and public bodies;
- Prevent referrals and outcomes;
- charity investigations and regulatory outcomes;
- event cancellations and restrictions on lawful expression;

Representation and participation

- local representation and decision-making power;
- access to youth provision and community spaces;

Education and socio-economic outcomes

- school exclusions and educational outcomes;
- access to prestigious higher education institutions and degree outcomes for Muslim and marginalised communities;
- employment, pay equality, retention and progression;
- housing and socio-economic disadvantage.

These indicators should not be treated as neutral technical measures. They should be interpreted alongside equality and human rights assessments, and should reflect the broader concerns raised throughout this briefing about institutional accountability, racialised discrimination and unequal access to power and resources. Communities should therefore ask for involvement in deciding what is measured, how data is interpreted, who controls the data, who has access to it, and how findings are used.

16. Sector-specific guidance

While many of the concerns raised in this briefing apply across communities, different sectors are likely to encounter the strategy in different ways. Mosques, charities, student societies, parents, schools and local civil society groups may each face distinct risks around funding, regulation, safeguarding, Prevent, data collection, representation and public engagement. The following guidance sets out practical steps that community institutions and organisers can take to protect their independence, strengthen accountability and respond effectively to local implementation of the strategy.

For mosques and faith institutions

- Strengthen governance and safeguarding.
- Keep records of security concerns and police engagement.
- Ensure faith security training programme support is protective, not surveillance-based.
- Avoid informal agreements that create monitoring obligations.
- Build relationships with other local faith groups while maintaining independence.

For charities

- Review trustee training and decision-making.
- Keep clear records of international work and due diligence.
- Document banking issues and de-risking.
- Coordinate with other charities facing similar problems.

For student societies

- Keep written records of event approvals and restrictions.
- Ask universities to identify whether concerns are legal, Prevent-related, reputational or political.
- Request written reasons and appeal routes.
- Build alliances with student unions and civil liberties groups.
- Check whether restrictions on student society activity are being applied differently from, or more harshly than, the protections available under university academic freedom and free speech duties.

For parents and schools advocates

- Monitor home education policies.
- Push for anti-racist school policies.
- Document Islamophobia and racism in schools.
- Advocate for inclusive curriculum and teacher training.
- Ask how schools are teaching mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs as part of their existing duties.

For local civil society groups

- Map boards, funding and decision-makers.
- Attend local meetings.
- Ask for publication of equality assessments.
- Build a shared local evidence base.
- Coordinate responses rather than working in isolation.

17. Immediate action checklist

1. Convene community briefings on the strategy.
2. Create a shared tracker of implementation commitments.
3. Map local boards, police forums, council structures and funding routes.
4. Strengthen governance in mosques, charities and community organisations.

5. Train student leaders and community organisers on rights and documentation.
6. Monitor university charters, speaker policies and Prevent guidance.
7. Engage local media to tell community stories and challenge harmful narratives.
8. Build alliances with other marginalised groups affected by surveillance and exclusion.
9. Publish periodic community updates on implementation and impact.

Conclusion

The social cohesion strategy raises many concerns, but may also create some useful opportunities, including funding, local investment, youth provision and stronger action on hate crime. However, it also risks increasing monitoring, risk assessment and state control over community life.

The response should be preparation, not panic or withdrawal. Communities should understand the strategy, protect independent organisations, continue to use the term Islamophobia, monitor local implementation, keep clear evidence, maintain different anti-Muslim hate crime reporting routes, and challenge overreach early. Genuine cohesion is built through equality, trust, safety, freedom and shared power, and public bodies should be held to that standard.

The strategy references the Casey Review¹⁰ but overlooks its most substantive recommendation. Recommendation 12 of the Review called on the Government to work with the Committee for Standards in Public Life to enshrine fundamental British values including mutual respect for those of different faiths and beliefs in the principles of public life, including through a new oath for holders of public office. This recommendation speaks directly to the question of whether public institutions are genuinely held to the standards they are meant to uphold, and its absence from the strategy is a significant omission that communities should raise in any engagement with government on this agenda.

Finally, it is worth noting a pointed irony at the heart of this strategy. Protecting What Matters itself refers to people who feel they have “lost a sense of control over their lives, their country and their community” as a driver of social fracture. Yet this is precisely how Muslim communities will experience the adverse implementation of this strategy - surveilled, excluded from legitimate civic life, and managed rather than heard. That irony should not be lost on policymakers, nor should it go unspoken by communities in their engagements with government.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-casey-review-a-review-into-opportunity-and-integration>