

Sara Khan's speech at Leeds Council

Thank you Shaid for inviting me and to Leeds Council for hosting this event.

I've had wonderful feedback about the last 2 days, and I hope we can continue to see more events like this.

As a born and raised Yorkshire lass it's always wonderful to be back up north.

Someone remarked to me the other day that the tea is much stronger up north.

I replied: "Ah yes, that's because Britain's finest tea is from the north. Of course, I'm referring to the one and only Yorkshire Tea. Where no other tea compares!"

It's not just the tea that is stronger either.

Some of the most resilient and no-nonsense counter-extremists are from up north too. So, I mean it when I say: "More power to us Northerners!"

As much as I would like to spend the next 20 minutes talking about the many virtues of the north of England, I must focus on the challenge of hateful extremism.

The role of councils and civil society in challenging extremism is vital. They are not necessarily the same role, but they are certainly complementary.

Local councils are on the front line of countering extremism. Civil society groups are often the first to spot emerging tensions within their area and communities. Local councils are often the first to respond when incidents break out. Both civil society and councils are often the first to see the devastating impact extremism is having in their areas too.

The work that you all do together is crucial to countering extremism. And your work is vital because the challenge of extremism continues to endure in our country.

We are seeing Channel referrals for far right extremism now account for nearly half of all referrals for the first time ever.

Last year saw the biggest far right marches in a generation, many of which will have been in the cities and towns that you represent.

Prosecutions for inciting racial hatred are at their highest since recording began.

This year alone we've seen a 10% rise in hate crime and a further rise in antisemitic and anti-Muslim incidents.

Tech companies find themselves in a never-ending battle of removing and

taking down hundreds of thousands of pieces of extremist content online.

Islamist extremists continue to persist; often targeting other Muslims.

Other forms of extremism are also beginning to garner significant concern such as far left hateful extremism directed at Jews.

I've also heard about hateful extremist activity within other minority communities – often directed at other minorities or towards members of that same community.

I've also heard frightening evidence from farmers targeted by animal rights extremists.

And as the Commission's work shows, extremists, whether far right, Islamist or other, are seizing on and exploiting local tensions in our towns and cities to cause division, to spread their disinformation and extremist propaganda in an attempt to recruit, normalise and mainstream their views. These activists are organised, active and often effective.

Victims are often targeted because of who they are or what they believe. Individuals from ethnic, racial or religious minorities are targeted as well as women, LGBT people and those who hold differing political views. The active attempts to diminish pluralism, normalise hateful narratives, which often include making the moral case for violence, demand an urgent response.

Inaction therefore is quite simply not an option especially when we recognise the wider harm extremist activity is causing.

Our research, the first of its kind, has shown that the harms of extremism are wider than terrorism and include:

- social division and intolerance
- crime, violence and harassment
- censorship and restriction of freedom
- the undermining of democracy
- economic harms
- mental health and wellbeing

Why would we therefore not counter extremism?

Yet unfortunately, some do make this very case despite the devastating impact of extremism. Counter-extremism is itself often viewed in a negative light, is perceived to be controversial and those working in this field, whether council officials or indeed local civil society groups often find themselves in the face of abuse. Some who oppose counter-extremism work even go as far as suggesting erroneously that counter-extremism work is a racist endeavour.

Prior to my role as Commissioner I spent over a decade running a counter-extremism NGO and I was always struck by these 2 parallel challenges.

The need to counter the harmful activity of extremists – and challenging those who call for an end to counter-extremism work – while ensuring that

counter-extremism work is rooted with a clear objective in line with civil liberties so that distrust and opposition do not arise which could hamper vital counter-extremism efforts.

But quite frankly something needs to change. We need a new way of thinking about extremism that helps us make sense of it all and that's what I'm here today to talk to you about – how the Commission's work provides such clarity.

About 18 months ago I was appointed to head up the independent Commission to review extremism and current counter-extremism efforts in England and Wales.

My Commission is committed to engagement, evidence and impartiality.

I have visited 20 towns and cities; held a series of workshops, roundtables and interviews with experts, activists and critics; and ran a call for evidence receiving nearly 3,000 responses.

I gathered evidence from inside and outside government – including publishing work from 17 academics.

Our findings were published last month in the report "Challenging Hateful Extremism."

I wanted this report to address head on some of the key challenges that exist in counter-extremism work.

Firstly, the conceptual challenge of extremism.

When I started my role, the phrase I often received from well-wishers was: "Good luck with that!"

And it's not difficult to understand why.

As many of you know, when you discuss extremism, you hear a lot of different interpretations.

The E-word is also often misused, especially in these politically febrile times, to label opponents or to even shut down debate. It's not surprising therefore that some are sceptical about the E-word.

But I don't think that this is enough of a sound argument to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Who can deny, for example, the presence of Islamist and far right extremist groups – and the harm they are having, not only in our country but globally?

On the contrary I see it as the Commission's job to get rid of some of that ambiguity and to ensure that counter-extremism work is proportionate.

And that's what we have done in this report.

Firstly, we have shown that extremism is not confined to a single race, religion or ideology. Concerns were raised about the growing threat of the far right, far left, Islamist and other forms of religious extremism and even

animal rights extremism.

Nor is extremism solely limited to violence; it also includes what has traditionally often been understood as non-violent extremism. This is a confusing term I've never liked because I think it hides the true harm of what we actually mean. Outside of terrorism and violent extremism, we have identified what we call hateful extremism:

Behaviours that can incite and amplify hate, or engage in persistent hatred, or equivocate about or make the moral case for violence

That draw on hateful, hostile or supremacist beliefs directed at an out-group, and that cause or are likely to cause harm.

It is my view that countering hateful extremism requires the greatest attention and focus if we are to be successful in reducing the extremist threat.

Yet having reviewed the current counter-extremism approach including the government's counter-extremism strategy, it is clear to me that a complete overhaul is required in our counter-extremism approach.

And this brings me onto addressing the second challenge that I sought to address in my report – what does a counter-extremism approach look like?

Well, it requires a vision for a start: one where together we uphold our democratic way of life in a peaceful, plural and inclusive society that opposes intolerance;

Where people exercise individual liberty but also take personal responsibility in promoting equal citizenship;

And where communities and institutions robustly challenge and resist extremism, supporting those affected by it.

A counter-extremism approach should be victim-centred and human rights-based ensuring a proportionate response.

Freedom of expression must be defended and protected; but it is a qualified right and can be limited. To date there has been little discussion of the victims of extremism; how extremists target them and the resulting abuse, harassment and curtailment of their rights; or the wider consequences to a democratic society.

A counter-extremism approach should also be much more effective in challenging extremist propaganda, narratives and disinformation – and crucially counter-extremism requires taking a stand and being proactive.

As Albert Einstein famously said: "The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it."

I think this describes counter-extremism.

Inaction is quite simply not an option.

I want to talk about the important role of councils in challenging hateful extremism. I've seen some excellent initiatives and work by local authorities.

The LGA submission to our call for evidence highlighted the damage that it's doing to our communities and local businesses, which have to deal with the impact of increasingly hate-filled public demonstrations on their doorstep

In the north this threat manifests itself in a number of ways.

Whether it be increased far right marches in our towns and cities or hateful extremists exploiting tensions in our communities around the introduction of relationships education as we have seen with activists from the Islamist extremist group Hizb-Ut Tahrir.

Hateful extremism isn't just a lofty concept, it helps us make sense of behaviours we are seeing in our local area and communities. One such case that demonstrates this is Sunderland.

We show how local, national and international far right activists seized on local tensions, organising and attending 13 marches in 13 months.

They spread anti-minority disinformation and conspiracy theories online and offline, amassing hundreds of thousands of views to normalise hate and recruit others to their cause. Stephen Yaxley Lennon in conjunction with Rebel Media for example promoted one campaign which amassed 100,000 views.

Social division, attacks on Asians and mistrust of the state were some of the harms.

What happened next showed a real step-change in developing innovative solutions to complex problems.

The local council and police worked tirelessly to counter these insidious narratives and demonstrate commitment to local residents by setting up public meetings where residents could voice their concerns to decision makers. The local print media played an important role in not sensationalising the issue and reporting on the facts.

Sunderland has a long road ahead of it to repair the damage done by these far right activists but I'm confident that they will continue to demonstrate real leadership in challenging these hateful extremists.

Whilst Sunderland have done a great job over the last 6 months, we cannot be complacent. Something like Sunderland can happen anywhere.

Hateful extremists look for and seize on local tensions...

And unfortunately, there's plenty of tension around.

No town or city is immune; and often these incidents can develop quickly over

a relatively short period of time.

But my tour of the country has also shown me that not every council knows how best to respond to these often-difficult challenges when they arise.

Some councils felt able to talk about some forms of extremism in their area, for example the far right, but found it uncomfortable to discuss others, for example, Islamist extremism, in fear of causing offence or a lack of understanding.

For the sake of victims and social cohesion we must move beyond this.

I have made clear in my report that having a consistent approach to tackling all forms of extremism is needed; we need to call out extremism wherever and from whichever section of our society it manifests.

Our report also gives an example of one council who did not take a more robust response to an extremist in their area, even after the High Court declared this individual, an imam of a mosque, to be an extremist who had spouted religious violence, antisemitism and other extremist behaviour.

Our case study showed, that despite the High Court's ruling, it appeared to be business as usual for this imam and a poor response from the council and civil society (including other faith leaders), contributed to a lack of an effective response in challenging his extremist behaviour and beliefs – and not challenging this is how normalisation happens.

We can and must do better than this if we are committed to countering hateful extremism.

Another key challenge increasingly faced by local councils is activist groups who unfortunately are misplaced in undermining counter-extremism.

We are around the corner from Bradford my home town, and, as many of you will be aware, earlier this year we saw the controversy with the Bradford Literature Festival – where speakers decided to pull out because some of the festival's funding included central government BSBT funding.

Some of the accusations levelled at the counter-extremism strategy included the claim that “taking counter-extremism money in any circumstances legitimises the strategy of the state which approaches Muslims as criminals” and that the “counter-extremism strategy relies on premise that Muslims are predisposed to violence and therefore require monitoring and surveillance”.

Islamist organisations like Cage and others have regularly promoted such views creating fear and distrust – and it is unfortunate to see an anti-counter-extremism lobby regularly peddle these false claims.

As one of the few people who has reviewed the government's 2015 counter-extremism strategy and criticised the current approach as unfocused, unnecessarily broad and at times confusing, I have yet to see any evidence of these unfounded claims.

These claims are, at best, a misrepresentation of the counter-extremism strategy and of BSBT, at worst they are dangerous.

Such false claims not only damage counter-extremism work but can help create a climate of hostility towards counter-extremists including the view that they are Islamophobic.

And I must address the abuse towards those who deliver counter-extremism work.

My report shows that counter-extremists often receive more abuse, often personal, racist and sexist I might add, than support – and this includes not only civil society groups that may operate in your local area but is often experienced by council officials, community and Prevent co-ordinators and even councillors.

Some have faced unacceptable vilification in an attempt to smear and silence counter-extremists – labelled as sell-outs, Uncle Toms, Islamophobic, a native informant, not a real Jew or Sikh, that they are part of a state-led conspiracy, are spies and so on.

I have been genuinely shocked at the scale of this abuse; our report shows that 78% of counter-extremists had experienced abuse, intimidation or harassment because of the work they do or for receiving government funding for counter-extremism work.

Not only does such abuse dissuade others from getting involved in counter-extremism work, it is contributing to a climate of censorship and is undermining this important work. Counter-extremists should not have to put up with such abuse as part of their day job. It's difficult enough countering the hatred of extremists – to then find yourself being targeted by the anti-counter-extremism activists.

The role of local councils is vital in this regard; to directly challenge such behaviour and these harmful narratives, while providing support to those who are countering extremism on the ground.

I know from my own personal experience that counter-extremism is often lonely and even dispiriting work.

I cannot emphasise how vital it is to show support to those whether within the council or in civil society who are experiencing such abuse.

And as someone who did come from a civil society background, I will say this: councils need to make sure they don't just go to the usual gatekeepers or those who shout the loudest or to those who claim to represent 'a community'. There is no monolithic community. You have a duty to hear from the diversity of views that exist and especially from victims.

So, what next for the Commission?

Well we have put forward a number of recommendations for government, public bodies, tech companies and civil society.

I am of the strong view that there needs to be clear distinctions between counter-terrorism, counter-extremism and integration/community cohesion work; all 3 are vital but all 3 are different and require different responses.

I am concerned that too often we talk about these issues as if they are one and the same; they are not, and our language and response need to demonstrate this.

We're due to get a response from the government in 3 months; but I suspect this will be longer with the upcoming general election and a new government.

But as extremism continues to persist, I'm not content to sit and wait for a response, that's why in the coming months the Commission will focus on our key priorities

Having provided the first step of a language, description and understanding of hateful extremism, the Commission is now working towards developing a working definition of hateful extremism.

We want to show that our definition works operationally, for the public and as a basis for improving the law. Thanks to those of you who attended our workshop yesterday, we want to hear your thoughts on how our definition works on the ground.

As we continue this work, I'd encourage those interested to reach out to the Commission, join our workshops and help us shape government policy from the ground up.

Secondly, we want to make sure that existing powers are applied consistently and appropriately. Although we haven't heard a good case for more powers, we have heard that existing ones aren't being applied to their fullest extent.

In the coming months I hope to undertake a review of existing legislation through the lens of hateful extremism, victims' experiences, and the abuse counter-extremists suffer, including online. We must make sure that we are using all of the powers we have at our disposal to counter hateful extremists.

Thirdly, in our report we recommended that the government set up a new taskforce to help everyone to become quicker to respond to incidents.

In the meantime, we're going to focus on connecting the local to the national.

In the coming months we will work with people in this room to identify emerging incidents, we'll facilitate discussions between people on the ground and experts who can offer unique insights. We'll support those affected on the ground to develop better responses.

I support the vital work of the Special Interest Group on Challenging Extremism and I will be keen to work with them closely, as they are with the Commission, in together developing effective, robust and faster responses to extremist incidents as they develop.

We will continue to produce research – in particular to understand better what we know to be effective in countering hateful extremism.

Next year we will provide an update of our work and share all of our learning.

We have a lot of work to do in the next few months to deliver these priorities and of course, you will all have a role too.

Local councils are at the forefront of challenging hateful extremism and, as many of you know, it's about upholding our plural and democratic way of life, about defending our diverse country which is made up of different races, political opinions, sexualities, religions and beliefs.

It is about having confidence in knowing what we stand for as a country: individual liberty, equal citizenship, fundamental freedoms; and standing up for them with conviction and pride.

This ultimately, and I cannot emphasise this enough, requires brave, bold and consistent leadership both from government and across civil society. Without leadership and a commitment in standing up for these values that defines our liberal democracy, we will not be able to counter hateful extremism that is so desperately needed.

Which is why yesterday – as we head towards a general election, I wrote to the leaders of the 3 main political parties calling on them to make a clear commitment to challenging hateful extremism.

I will be looking to see if our political parties, who seek to form the next government, understand the responsibility that falls on them to champion the work needed to counter hateful extremism. I would like to see a commitment within each political party's manifesto.

In my letter I wrote that “our country's current response to hateful extremism is weak, insufficient and often ineffective. In the interests of our country we need to do better”.

And how can we do better?

By recognising hateful extremist incidents far more quickly. By doing more to protect and support victims. By being more effective in challenging hateful extremists by using the right tools whether legal or otherwise. By everyone playing their part which includes recognising that inaction works in favour of hateful extremists.

We cannot turn a blind eye; to do so results in consequences advantageous to extremists.

I believe with our new approach – with greater clarity in our language – and by working together we can protect and promote a plural, peaceful and inclusive Britain.

Thank you very much