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The Fraying Social Contract and its Implications for National Preparedness

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Hofenung Foundation, the funders of this work, for their support.

We would also like to thank all those who contributed to this report, including experts in crisis planning, resilience, extremism, counter-terrorism, national security, behavioural psychology and policing. The full list of contributors is included in the Annex.

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Crest Insights

Crest Insights is the in-house think tank of Crest Advisory, a purpose-driven consultancy dedicated to improving justice, policing and public safety. The team identifies and helps solve complex problems arising from crime, vulnerability and other social harms. We bring expertise, real world experience and a powerful sense of purpose to our mission - to make communities safer. Crest Insights does this by collaborating with organisations across the justice system and wider public sector, and with charities, academics and the private sector.

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Foreword

There is no doubt that we live in a turbulent and uncertain world. The National Risk Register lists 89 acute risks and the Chronic Risks Analysis describes another 26 longer-term, slow-burn threats. Since those documents were published last year, the international situation has become more threatening, so that we are probably closer to widespread war than we have been for over sixty years, with hybrid or grey-zone aggression by hostile nations already visible here in the United Kingdom.

Resilience against these risks relies on society being socially cohesive and the public having trust in the government and public authorities. Yet, the evidence suggests that the social contract between citizens and the government is in crisis. This is partly a consequence of greater economic insecurity, but it is also being exacerbated by malign actors, both foreign and domestic, fuelling division through misinformation and disinformation disseminated ever-more readily via social media. The erosion of public trust, the undermining of the social contract, and the way in which communities are being turned against each other are creating a real and present danger to the nation's resilience and preparedness at a time when, as a country, we need them most.

The government has published strategy documents intended to address these issues. These include 'Restoring Trust in Our Democracy', and 'Protecting What Matters: Towards a more confident, cohesive, and resilient United Kingdom.' These publications are welcome, but they are rather tentative, limited in scale, and fall a long way short of the comprehensive response required.

Embedded within the whole-of-society approach that the government is taking towards resilience is a requirement and an assumption that the public will play their part. Whether this can happen to the extent required depends on the strength of the social contract between government and society, and on the cohesion of our communities - particularly in a multi-ethnic and multi-faith country like the United Kingdom.

A breakdown of the social contract not only weakens our ability to build resilience against future shocks and other risks but also becomes a risk to our democratic society in and of itself. Fissures in the social fabric represent opportunities to adversaries whilst draining resources and attention from all levels of government.



That is why the National Preparedness Commission asked Dame Sara Khan with Crest Advisory to prepare this report with a series of recommendations. The government needs to act on these as a matter of urgency. Otherwise, as a nation, we are going to sleepwalk into a society where the divisions are unbridgeable, extreme views are normalised, and trust in the government, and indeed in democracy itself, suffers irreparable harm.

Lord Toby Harris, June 2026

Executive summary

A strong social contract - the relationship between citizens and their government - is fundamental to national resilience, underpinning social cohesion, democratic resilience and the ability of the United Kingdom to respond effectively to crises.

Indicators of social cohesion and democratic resilience suggest that the social contract in the United Kingdom is fraying. Evidence includes increasing distrust in politicians, government and public services, growing concerns about the state of democracy and declining levels of democratic participation. This fraying is also reflected in weaker attachment to a national identity, high levels of social division affecting minority communities, driven by perspectives on immigration, and a widely held belief that politicians do not do enough to facilitate integration and cohesion.

The fraying of the social contract is largely driven by economic inequality, the harmful impact of digital spaces and global political instability. Reliance on digital spaces, including social media, for social engagement reduces in-person interaction and connects people with extreme and polarising views in a largely unregulated environment - only recently has the Online Safety Act been introduced to tackle this. Specific events, especially those which encourage a moral or emotional response, can act as flashpoints, raising concerns and making underlying tensions suddenly more visible.

Some aspects of the social contract remain strong. There is support for the principles of our democracy, perceptions of fair elections, strong trust in local communities, pride in Britain's cultural contributions, and reasonably high levels of civic engagement, notably in times of crisis - for example, increased volunteering during the Covid-19 pandemic. Even so, there is a clear and immediate need to respond to weakening social cohesion and democratic resilience, particularly when considering the need to improve our preparedness for emergencies and crises - the subject of this report.

The fraying of the social contract presents extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors with opportunities to further undermine public trust and confidence in democracy and democratic institutions. Malign actors view the social contract as another form of critical national infrastructure that can be easily targeted. The aftermath of the Southport stabbings in 2024 demonstrates the ability of these actors to capitalise on social division and harmful narratives against democracy.

Malign actors exploit the fraying social contract by using digital spaces and traditional media to generate and amplify false and harmful content to sow further division, deepen mistrust and undermine democracy. They are exploiting emergencies and crises to pursue their long-term goals. This was evident in Poland in September 2024 when severe flooding across southwestern Poland triggered a 300 per cent increase in misinformation and disinformation. This is concerning as it means that there was a wide range of false or misleading information circulating at the time of the crisis, competing with crisis management plans, which tend to be based on the assumption that the public will listen to and believe the authorities and will respond positively and appropriately to their advice.

The role of misinformation and disinformation creates unpredictability during times of crisis. This presents immediate and chronic risks that could contribute to the further fraying of the social contract.

To address this challenge, the government must broaden its view of preparedness to include social cohesion and democratic resilience. It is unclear whether the government has put sufficient weight on actions to prepare for, respond to, and recover from crises with social cohesion and democratic resilience in mind. Social cohesion and democratic resilience must be integrated into preparedness and crisis planning at a government level and within Local Resilience Forums (LRF), with clear ownership and responsibility - this includes building our understanding of tension hotspots in our communities and how these are exploited by actors in times of crisis.

Recommendation 1: Social cohesion and democratic resilience must be viewed as essential components of national resilience and preparedness to address the ongoing threat from malign actors seeking to exploit vulnerabilities through misinformation and disinformation.

Recommendation 2: Building and maintaining social cohesion and democratic resilience requires sustained cross-departmental commitment and investment, not only as a key consideration in preparation for crises, but as part of our national infrastructure - essential to the functioning of our society.

Recommendation 3: The government should establish a more systematic approach to understanding where and how crises could create opportunities for social division, disorder, and democratic harm.

We must tackle this threat with technology. Technology enables the creation and spread of misinformation and disinformation but it also represents a key tool for countering it. The government and key institutions, such as the BBC, need to be able to recognise, challenge and, where necessary, remove harmful content during crises - including that of bad-faith actors who currently largely fall outside of legislation. We must also be aware of the threat across media domains, including deepfakes, chatbots, private messaging and traditional media, tailoring our response accordingly.

Recommendation 4: The government should invest in digital technological capabilities to identify emerging threats, detect problematic content at scale and support crisis response and communications.

There are gaps in the extent to which misinformation and disinformation can be adequately addressed through existing extremism, foreign interference and online harms frameworks. The spreading of misinformation and disinformation during a crisis has the potential to make unfolding emergencies worse and cause physical and emotional harm. Current legislation, including the National Security Act and Online Safety Act, is not designed to address the cumulative, fast-moving effects of UK-user amplified misinformation and disinformation in real-time. Similarly, the Public Order Act has

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no applicability for the negligent or good-faith spreading of misinformation. As such, there may be opportunities to close these legislative gaps and ensure that the actions of malign actors are addressed, while acknowledging the degree of severity and intentionality.

Recommendation 5: The government should review how to update existing legal frameworks to appropriately address misinformation and disinformation during crises.

The social contract is two-way, and the public must have a defined role during crises - individual responsibility and citizenship are core to preparedness. Drawing on whole-of-society preparedness models from countries including Finland, Sweden and New Zealand, the public must be made more aware of the significant threat posed by misinformation and disinformation and their own responsibilities at times of crisis. This includes funding media literacy and broader critical thinking education to prepare individuals and communities for various crisis scenarios. Members of the public must be clear not only on the role of the government in preparing, responding and recovering from crises, but also on the importance of their own role.

Recommendation 6: The government should devise and promote a whole-of-society approach that involves individuals, schools, businesses, and public institutions in strengthening resilience.

In times of crisis, we must use the assets at our disposal to be more effective communicators and counter misinformation and disinformation by malign actors. While there are established government responses in emergencies, for example, through the Civil Contingencies Act, erosion of the social contract means that the public does not always trust messaging from authorities. Alongside government messaging, the government should identify and maintain connections with trusted voices who can communicate effectively with different communities in crises.

Recommendation 7: The government should consider how journalism and public service broadcasting, including reporting on local democracy, are bolstered, with clear roles in challenging misinformation and disinformation, particularly in times of crisis.

Recommendation 8: The government should ensure media platforms and Local Resilience Forums have comprehensive crisis communication protocols to counter misinformation and disinformation. These protocols should be underpinned by strong, ongoing relationships with community groups, the voluntary sector, and wider civil society, which should be developed and sustained as part of routine preparedness and resilience activities.

Recommendation 9: Communication should explicitly acknowledge the likelihood of misinformation and disinformation being spread in crises and provide the public with practical advice and access to trusted information sources.

Crises present an opportunity to learn and improve our response to crises and malign actors and resist further fraying of the social contract. Crises will happen and malign actors will seek to take advantage of these moments. Faced with this reality, we must continue to focus on building and

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investing in social cohesion and democratic resilience, including supporting communities and taking lessons forward into future planning.

Recommendation 10: We should use crises and emergencies as an opportunity to rebuild the social contract and trust in democratic institutions in the affected areas and more widely.

Recommendation 11: Following crises, the government, led by the central directorate/Cabinet Office and working with relevant partners, including LRFs, should consistently undertake a review of the role that misinformation and disinformation played in the crisis.

Introduction

This report assesses the state of the social contract, social cohesion and democratic resilience and what this means for national resilience and preparedness. We are especially interested in how extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors might take advantage of a fraying social contract at times of crisis to cause further harm by widening divisions and undermining trust in institutions. These actors are increasingly diverse, and their ability to exploit crises presents a new challenge to central and local government, the emergency services and resilience planners. In a recent example, during flooding in Poland in 2024, disinformation from Russia and Belarus spiked by around 300 per cent, including false claims that flood defences would be ineffective, undermining the government response.¹

Recognising that similar threats could emerge in the United Kingdom, this project examined several plausible crisis scenarios with experts to understand how malign actors might seek to exploit them, how prepared the United Kingdom currently is to respond, and what further action is needed to strengthen national resilience.

The National Preparedness Commission (NPC) commissioned Dame Sara Khan, with Crest Advisory, to prepare this report and develop a series of recommendations. The report is informed by an evidence review of open-source material, 12 semi-structured interviews with experts, and two expert roundtables. This engagement informed the development of plausible crisis scenarios presented in Section 3, validated the evidence review findings, and shaped the recommendations. Our full methodology is included in the Annex.

¹ Włodarczak-Semczuk, Anna. “[Fake news from Russian, Belarusian services spiked during floods in Poland, minister says](#)”. *Reuters*. (2024).

Section 1: Social cohesion, democratic resilience and our social contract

The social contract

The social contract commonly refers to the relationship between the people and their government - it is a dynamic relationship. Citizens consent to be governed, abide by laws and contribute to society through civic participation and taxation. In return, the state is expected to provide security, deliver public services, and uphold rights and freedoms.

The social contract is continuously renewed, and even challenged, through the actions of the government, institutions and citizens. This dynamic nature means that the social contract can be strengthened or weakened by social, economic and political changes. It can also become a target for malign actors seeking to undermine democracy, erode trust in how we are governed, and exploit existing grievances.

Today, the social contract is widely understood through a socioeconomic lens. In return for their contribution, the public expects overall improvement in how society functions and their quality of life.² Economic equality plays an important role in sustaining these expectations. Inequality can lead certain groups to feel that they contribute to society without receiving a fair share of its benefits and with little confidence that their situation will get better, fostering resentment, divisions and disengagement.³ Where basic needs are not met, such as access to housing, healthcare and education, perceptions that the state is failing to uphold its obligations can weaken the legitimacy of the social contract.

Alongside economic fairness, security and the safeguarding of democratic principles are central elements of the social contract.⁴ The public accepts the authority of the state on the expectation that politicians and policymakers act transparently, remain accountable and represent the interests of the majority.⁵ Contemporary interpretations of the social contract emphasise that everyone's basic needs should be met as a matter of right rather than a privilege, and the state must provide security and uphold democratic principles.⁶ Where confidence in governance, democracy or public services declines, the social contract can weaken. Such conditions create opportunities for malign actors to

² Abdallah, Saamah., Barberà Mas, Erick., and Saujot, Mathieu. "[Unfulfilled Promises? The state of the social contract in the 21st century.](#)" *Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations*. (2026).

³ Arslanagić-Little, Phoebe., and Fredricks, Laurence. "[The Anti-Social Contract, Renewing Our Social Contract.](#)" *Onward*. (2025).

⁴ Abdallah, "[Unfulfilled Promises? The state of the social contract in the 21st century.](#)"

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Coote, Anna. "[Rebuilding the UK's social contract](#)". *IPPR Progressive Review*, 30:2. (2023).; Pendleton, Andrew. "[Imagining a new social contract.](#)" *New Economics Foundation*. (2019).

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further undermine trust, increase social division and challenge the legitimacy of the democratic government.

Democratic resilience and social cohesion

Our democracy, and its principles, survive on its resilience. A resilient democracy is able to withstand, adjust and recover from unresolved problems, challenges or attacks on the democratic system.⁷ Perceptions that the social contract is not delivering can lead to society being seen as unjust, ultimately weakening democratic resilience.⁸ Democratic resilience is further undermined if politicians and policymakers are not transparent, held accountable or seen to be representative of the majority.⁹ If people lose faith in democracy and its processes and institutions, there are opportunities for extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors to further cause harm by undermining institutions and deepening social division, particularly in times of crisis.

Social cohesion refers to how we, the public, live together in a diverse democracy and negotiate differences of opinion and values in pursuit of the common good.¹⁰ Social cohesion manifests in various ways, including the ability to provide a positive and shared vision for our country and a sense of belonging for all, which fosters mutual support and community. It facilitates the strengthening of relationships between individuals, communities and groups and between citizens and the state.¹¹ Social cohesion in the United Kingdom is being weakened by a range of internal and external threats, including the cost-of-living crisis, increases in misinformation and disinformation, the rise of unregulated technology and polarising geopolitical events.¹²

The current state of the social contract in the United Kingdom

Over the last decade, the social contract in the United Kingdom has frayed, reflecting a broader trend across Northern and Western Europe. A nationally representative survey conducted by More in Common (May 2023) found that over half (62 per cent) of respondents agreed with the statement ‘the social contract in Britain is broken’ and a recent poll showed that almost three-quarters (72 per cent)

⁷ Merkel, Wolfgang. “[What is democratic resilience?](#)” *Democratization*. (2025).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Abdallah, Saamah., Barberà Mas, Erick., and Saujot, Mathieu. “[Unfulfilled Promises? The state of the social contract in the 21st century.](#)” *Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations*. (2026).

¹⁰ Khan DBE, Dame Sara. “[Threats to Social Cohesion And Democratic Resilience: A New Strategic Approach.](#)” *Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities*. (2024).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

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of the public are concerned about the state of democracy.¹³ More in Common polling shows that only 8 per cent of the public believe that Britain's best years are ahead of them.¹⁴ Furthermore, a report examining the social contract across Europe found that only 20 per cent of the British public feel that the United Kingdom is moving in the right direction, the lowest figure of all countries reviewed.¹⁵ Other analysis found that the social contract in Northern and Western Europe has been declining since 2019. Even in this broader downward trend, the United Kingdom performs relatively poorly compared to other countries in Europe, ranking only 17th out of 31.¹⁶ Dame Sara Khan's 2024 Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience concluded that without an effective government response, the United Kingdom risks a "slow erosion" of democratic rights and freedoms.¹⁷

To understand the current state of the social contract in the United Kingdom, we focus on five measures associated with social cohesion and democratic resilience. These are:

- trusting others
- recognising the legitimacy of institutions and democracy
- associating with a national identity and having a sense of belonging
- being tolerant
- having local connections and demonstrating civic engagement/participation

Indicators of the social contract

Trust

Trust is central to the health of our democracy and our social contract. Public trust in politicians, confidence in the resilience of institutions and belief in the ability of democratic processes to solve problems and represent the public's interests are fundamental to the legitimacy and stability of democracy.¹⁸ Trust also fosters a greater sense of belonging and cohesion.¹⁹ Without trust in others, polarisation deepens and division widens, and without trust in the state, institutions lose legitimacy, which impacts democratic resilience and the social contract.

¹³ The Electoral Commission. "[Public attitudes to elections and democracy: 2025 findings.](#)" *The Electoral Commission*. (2025).

¹⁴ More in Common. "[Social cohesion: A snapshot.](#)" *More in Common*. (2025).

¹⁵ Abdallah, "[Unfulfilled Promises? The state of the social contract in the 21st century.](#)"

¹⁶ Abdallah, Saamah., Barberà Mas, Erick., and Saujot, Mathieu. "[Unfulfilled Promises? The state of the social contract in the 21st century.](#)" *Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations*. (2026).

¹⁷ Khan DBE, Dame Sara. "[Threats to Social Cohesion And Democratic Resilience: A New Strategic Approach.](#)" *Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities*. (2024).

¹⁸ Merkel, Wolfgang. "[What is democratic resilience?.](#)" *Democratization*. (2025).

¹⁹ Khan DBE, "[Threats to Social Cohesion And Democratic Resilience: A New Strategic Approach.](#)"

Trust in politicians

Trust and confidence in politicians in the United Kingdom are low and declining. A recent Electoral Commission survey found that only 14 per cent of respondents trust politicians.²⁰ A degree of mistrust - understood as a certain level of scepticism towards the 'other' - in government can be positive, as it ensures politicians are held to account. However, significant levels of distrust - a firmly held negative opinion that the government is completely untrustworthy - have negative consequences for both social cohesion and democratic resilience, and it is distrust that appears to be increasing.²¹ The British Social Attitudes surveys show that public confidence in government has significantly declined over time. In 1986, only around 10 per cent of respondents reported "almost never" trusting governments; in 2024 this had risen to 46 per cent - the highest level ever recorded by the survey.²² An expert we interviewed suggested that public trust is continuing to decline as low levels of trust have triggered a "democratic doom loop". The cycle begins with declining public trust in authority, which undermines the perceived legitimacy of institutions. As a result, authorities struggle to effectively govern, which further erodes public trust and increases the attractiveness of alternative actors or narratives.

There is an increasing perception among the public that politicians are dishonest, self-interested and disconnected from the concerns of ordinary people, and not fulfilling their obligations within the social contract.²³ The Electoral Commission found that over half of respondents (54 per cent) felt that those elected do not care about "people like them" and recent survey results show that 59 per cent of the public would "almost never" trust politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner, with only 36 per cent trusting the government to do "what is right".²⁴ Furthermore, nearly three quarters (74 per cent) of respondents who took part in a nationally representative survey (May 2023) stated that they were not confident that politicians could solve the country's biggest issues.²⁵

This decreasing confidence and growing disconnect between the public and politicians are trends not unique to the United Kingdom. A recent report exploring the state of the social contract across Europe found that only 27 per cent of Europeans trust their political institutions, while only 26 per cent felt

²⁰ The Electoral Commission. "[Public attitudes to elections and democracy: 2025 findings.](#)" *The Electoral Commission*. (2025).

²¹ Khan DBE, "[Threats to Social Cohesion And Democratic Resilience: A New Strategic Approach.](#)"

²² Park, Alison., Bryson, Caroline., Clery, Elizabeth., Curtice, John., and Phillips, Miranda. "[British Social Attitudes 30.](#)" *National Centre for Social Research*. (2013); Curtice, John., Scholes, Alex., and Chabdu, Aisha. "[BSA 42 | Britain's democracy: A health check.](#)" *National Centre for Social Research*. (2025).

²³ Puddle, Jake., Rutter, Jill., Rolfe, Heather. "[The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK.](#)" *British Future*. (2025)

²⁴ The Electoral Commission. "[Public attitudes to elections and democracy: 2025 findings.](#)" *The Electoral Commission*. (2025); Curtice, John., Scholes, Alex., and Chabdu, Aisha. "[BSA 42 | Britain's democracy: A health check.](#)" *National Centre for Social Research*. (2025).

²⁵ More in Common. "[May 2023 Polling Tables.](#)" *More in Common*. (2023)

that they had a political voice.²⁶ However, the figures in this survey were even lower in the United Kingdom, with only 21 per cent trusting political institutions and 23 per cent feeling that they have a political voice.²⁷

Trust in institutions

Trust in institutions also appears to be declining. The Edelman Trust Barometer has recorded declining levels of public trust in government, business, the public media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the United Kingdom in recent years, with levels of trust falling from 57 per cent to 44 per cent over the last ten years.²⁸ This is supported by YouGov polling conducted since 2003, which shows that trust in the BBC has fallen significantly over the last decade. In March 2003, 81 per cent of the British public reported trusting BBC news journalists "a great deal" or "a fair amount", compared to 38 per cent in July 2023.²⁹

There are also high levels of dissatisfaction with public services; half of the British public reported being dissatisfied with social care (49 per cent) and the NHS (51 per cent), indicating that the social contract is perceived as not delivering for an increasing number of people.³⁰ Data suggests that dissatisfaction is primarily associated with access to care, rather than the quality of care received. For example, while 51 per cent of the British public reported being satisfied with the quality of NHS care, only 23 per cent were satisfied with the time it takes to get a GP appointment and the proportion who were satisfied with the length of time it takes to get hospital care was even lower at 14 per cent.³¹ Despite high levels of dissatisfaction with access to NHS care, research has found that 96 per cent of the British public reported having no unmet health needs, suggesting that the service is meeting basic needs, even if public expectations are not being fully satisfied.³²

Public perceptions of crime highlight rising concerns about safety alongside dissatisfaction with the police. Ipsos polling conducted in 2024 found that over three-quarters of the British public (79 per cent) felt that crime and anti-social behaviour were a "big problem", with 61 per cent believing that crime in the United Kingdom had risen in the previous 12 months. A study exploring public attitudes towards the police across England and Wales also found that the majority of the public do not believe

²⁶ Abdallah, Saamah., Barberà Mas, Erick., and Saujot, Mathieu. "[Unfulfilled Promises? The state of the social contract in the 21st century.](#)" *Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations*. (2026).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Edelman Trust Institute. "[2026 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report: Trust Amid Insularity.](#)" *Edelman Trust Institute*. (2026)

²⁹ YouGov. [Trackers - Trust.](#) *YouGov*. (2015).

³⁰ Taylor, Bea., Lobont, Cyril., Dayan, Mark., Merry, Leonora., Jeffries, Danielle. and Wellings, Dan. "[Public satisfaction with the NHS and social care in 2024: Results from the British Social Attitudes survey.](#)" *Nuffield Trust*. (2025).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Abdallah, Saamah., Barberà Mas, Erick., and Saujot, Mathieu. "[Unfulfilled Promises? The state of the social contract in the 21st century.](#)" *Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations*. (2026).

that their local police force meets minimum standards of behaviour and performance, nor do they feel that they share their values.³³ Furthermore, YouGov polling shows that trust in both senior police officers and local officers has fallen considerably over the last decade. In July 2024, only 44 per cent of the British public reported trusting senior officers compared to 72 per cent in March 2003. Over the same period, trust in local officers fell from 82 per cent to 54 per cent.³⁴ When compared to other countries across Europe, the United Kingdom performs relatively poorly on perceptions of safety, with 27 per cent of the public reporting that they face the problem of crime, violence or vandalism in their local area, more than double the European Union average (12 per cent).³⁵

Legitimacy of institutions and democracy

The public also appears to have concerns about the current state of democracy in the United Kingdom; however, British people remain faithful to our democracy and the principles that underpin it. Recent polling found that 72 per cent of the public are concerned about the state of democracy.³⁶ This is supported by the most recent British Social Attitudes Survey, which found that only 19 per cent of the public think the system of governing Britain needs little or no improvement, while over half (60 per cent) are in favour of changing the current electoral system.³⁷ Furthermore, more than three-quarters (78 per cent) of those who took part in an Ipsos poll were concerned about acts of violence throwing the country into chaos and more than a third (38 per cent) agreed with the statement that “mob rule is replacing democratic rule in Britain”.³⁸ Political engagement has also declined, with voter turnout in the United Kingdom falling significantly since 1997. In the 2024 United Kingdom general election, turnout was 58 per cent of the eligible electorate, with turnout falling below 50 per cent in 55 parliamentary constituencies. This compares to 90 per cent in 1950, indicating a substantial long-term decline in electoral engagement.³⁹ This is also lower than the average voter turnout in the European Union, which is around two-thirds (67 per cent) of eligible voters.⁴⁰

However, despite this concern, our democracy does appear to be healthy by some metrics. Two-thirds (67 per cent) of people of voting age agreed that they have a duty to vote and 93 per cent of the British public perceive elections in the United Kingdom to be fair - higher than the European Union average

³³ Bradford, Ben., Weirich, Christine., Rowlands, David., and Crawford, Adam. “[Public confidence in the police: using opinion survey data to explore the current ‘moment’ in British policing.](#)” *Policing and Society*. (2025).

³⁴ Difford, Dylan. “[Who do Britons trust to tell the truth?.](#)” *YouGov*. (2024).

³⁵ Abdallah, “[Unfulfilled Promises? The state of the social contract in the 21st century.](#)”

³⁶ The Electoral Commission. “[Public attitudes to elections and democracy: 2025 findings.](#)” *The Electoral Commission*. (2025).

³⁷ Curtice, John., Scholes, Alex., and Chabdu, Aisha. “[BSA 42 | Britain's democracy: A health check.](#)” *National Centre for Social Research*. (2025).

³⁸ The Electoral Commission. “[Public attitudes to elections and democracy: 2025 findings.](#)”

³⁹ Local Government Association and Belong Network. “[Common Ground: Building Cohesive Communities.](#)” *Local Government Association*. (2026).

⁴⁰ Merkel, Wolfgang. “[What is democratic resilience?.](#)” *Democratization*. (2025).

of 82 per cent.⁴¹ In fact, the World Values Survey (WVS) 2022 found that over the last two decades, support for democratic principles has increased, rather than declined, amongst the British public. In 2022, 90 per cent of the British public thought that democracy was a very or fairly good way of governing, compared to 76 per cent in 1999.

National identity and belonging

While British people feel more connected to their own communities, they show a poorer sense of national identity. Without a sense of belonging and without acceptance of difference and diverse identities, democracy loses its social foundation and begins to erode.⁴² In the United Kingdom, feelings of belonging and a sense of connection to others vary significantly across different levels of geography, with the public often reporting strong attachment to their immediate neighbourhoods, while feeling more disconnected at a national level.⁴³ More in Common polling conducted in 2025 found that nearly three-quarters (71 per cent) of the public trust their neighbours ‘a lot’.⁴⁴ Similarly, 62 per cent of respondents in the Community Life Survey 2023/24 stated that they belonged very or fairly strongly to their neighbourhood and 81 per cent agreed that their local area is somewhere people from different backgrounds get along.⁴⁵ Yet these relatively positive local figures sit alongside lower levels of cohesion at the national level; the More in Common poll found that nearly half (44 per cent) of the public stated that they sometimes ‘feel like a stranger in my own country’.⁴⁶

Furthermore, recent data shows that public perceptions of Britain tend to be negative. Polling conducted by the National Centre for Social Research in 2023 found that about half (49 per cent) of the British public agreed with the statement that ‘they would rather be a citizen of Britain than of any other country in the world’ and even fewer (42 per cent) agreed with the statement that ‘Britain is a better country than most other countries’.⁴⁷ Despite these relatively low levels of national attachment, pride in British culture is comparatively higher, indicating that while national identity is declining, pride in certain aspects of Britain remains strong. In 2023, over three-quarters of the public stated that they felt pride in Britain’s achievements in arts and literature (79 per cent) and sports (77 per cent).⁴⁸ In

⁴¹ Abdallah, Saamah., Barberà Mas, Erick., and Saujot, Mathieu. “[Unfulfilled Promises? The state of the social contract in the 21st century.](#)” *Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations*. (2026).; Curtice, “[BSA 42 | Britain's democracy: A health check.](#)”

⁴² Merkel, [What is democratic resilience?.](#)”

⁴³ Puddle, Jake., Rutter, Jill., Rolfe, Heather. “[The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK.](#)” *British Future*. (2025)

⁴⁴ O’Geran, Louis. “[This Place Matters: A social connection map of Britain.](#)” *More in Common*. (2025).

⁴⁵ Department for Culture, Media & Sport. “[Community Life Survey 2023/24: Neighbourhood and community.](#)” *GOV.UK*. (2024).

⁴⁶ O’Geran, Louis. “[This Place Matters: A social connection map of Britain.](#)” *More in Common*. (2025).

⁴⁷ Curtice, John., Scholes, Alex., and Chabdu, Aisha. “[BSA 42 | Britain's democracy: A health check.](#)” *National Centre for Social Research*. (2025).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

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contrast, the proportion who are proud of the way democracy works in Britain and Britain's economic achievements is much lower, at 53 per cent and 44 per cent respectively.⁴⁹

Recent trends also show a shift towards more inclusive ideas of national identity, with increasing emphasis on people contributing to upholding the social contract rather than coming from particular backgrounds.⁵⁰ The proportion of people who think that being born in Britain is important to be regarded as 'truly British' has fallen from 74 per cent in 2013 to 55 per cent in 2023. In contrast, the proportion of people who believe that respecting British political institutions and laws is important has remained steady over the same period (85 per cent to 86 per cent).⁵¹

Despite this, research conducted by the National Centre for Social Research comparing public attitudes in the United Kingdom with the United States found that the British public is less supportive of immigration and less positive about diversity than their American counterparts.⁵² Nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of people in the United States think that their openness to people from around the world is essential to national identity, compared to just under half (49 per cent) of people in the United Kingdom. Similarly, while 64 per cent of Americans think that diversity strengthens society, only around half (49 per cent) of the British public agree.⁵³ In fact, immigration is commonly identified as a key source of tension in the United Kingdom. Recent Ipsos polling found that 61 per cent of respondents identified immigration as the greatest source of division, an 11 per cent increase since February 2018.⁵⁴

Tolerance and polarisation

Public perceptions of social division are widespread, though they have remained broadly stable in recent years. An expert we interviewed stated that tolerance of others and their views is important for maintaining the social contract. There is considerable support among the British public for the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion. Public opinion research from More in Common, the University of Oxford and the UCL Policy Lab found that half (52 per cent) of the public think that diversity, equity and inclusion are a good thing.⁵⁵ However, this represents a decrease since 2023 when 62 per cent reported thinking that it was a good thing.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² National Centre for Social Research. "[People in the UK prefer a tougher approach on immigration compared with the US, but Americans more conservative on social issues.](#)" *National Centre for Social Research*. (2025).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Skinner, Gideon. "[A year on from Southport and subsequent riots, 8 in 10 continue to say Britain is divided.](#)" *Ipsos*. (2025)

⁵⁵ Rajah, Anouschka., Soutphommasane, Tim., Stears, Marc., and Tryl, Luke. "[Finding Common Ground.](#)" *More in Common*. (2025).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Research by the Policy Institute at King's College London has found that over the last 30 years British people have become much more comfortable living next to people from historically marginalised groups. For example, in 1990, 10 per cent of the British public stated that they would not like to have people from a different race as neighbours, but by 2022 this had fallen to only 1 per cent. Over the same period, the proportion of the British public who reported that they would not like to live next to homosexuals fell from almost a third (31 per cent) to 4 per cent.⁵⁷

Despite this, evidence indicates that many people in the United Kingdom experience discrimination. According to the Evidence for Equality National Survey (EVENS) in 2023, almost one in six people experienced racial discrimination from their neighbours, but this rose to one in two for Black people and one in three for Gypsy/Traveller people. Public polling also more broadly reflects high levels of societal division, with more than three-quarters of respondents in a nationally representative survey conducted by More in Common in 2024 stating that the United Kingdom felt 'somewhat' or 'very' divided.⁵⁸ Recent Ipsos polling found that 81 per cent of the British public believe that society is divided, while 68 per cent believe it is more divided than it was ten years ago. These figures have changed little since 2018, when they were 85 per cent and 73 per cent respectively, suggesting that social division is an ongoing issue rather than a recent deterioration.⁵⁹

Political attitudes, however, are also becoming increasingly polarised. The most recent British Social Attitudes survey shows growing divergence between supporters of right- and left-wing political parties. For example, between 2020 and 2025, the two groups became much more divided over taxation. In 2020, they had very similar views on tax cuts, with only a 3 per cent difference between the proportion of right- and left-wing supporters who supported tax cuts. By 2025, this gap had widened substantially to 19 per cent. Similar trends are evident on immigration, with right-leaning voters becoming more negative and left-leaning supporters becoming more positive, pointing to a hardening of ideological differences across the political spectrum.⁶⁰

Local connections and civic engagement

The United Kingdom has high levels of interpersonal trust and civic engagement. A study exploring the state of the social contract across Europe found that over three-quarters of the British public (79 per cent) demonstrated high levels of trust in others. This was higher than the European Union average

⁵⁷ Duffy, Bobby., May, George., Hewlett, Kirstie., Wright, James., Stoneman, Paul. "[Love thy neighbour? Public trust and acceptance of the people who live alongside us.](#)" *The Policy Institute King's College London*. (2023).

⁵⁸ More in Common. "[August 2024 Polling Tables.](#)" *More in Common*. (2024).

⁵⁹ Skinner, "[A year on from Southport and subsequent riots, 8 in 10 continue to say Britain is divided.](#)"

⁶⁰ Curtice, John., Scholes, Alex., and Chabdu, Aisha. "[BSA 42 | Britain's democracy: A health check.](#)" *National Centre for Social Research*. (2025).

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of 62 per cent and is supported by the Office for National Statistics Opinions and Lifestyle Survey 2025, which found that 67 per cent of the public reported high trust in most people.⁶¹

Civic engagement in the United Kingdom has also remained relatively high, demonstrating a strong commitment to improving conditions and supporting others. In 2024/25, two-thirds (67 per cent) of the public reported participating in any volunteering, civic engagement or social action activity in the previous 12 months, and two-thirds also reported having given money to charitable causes in the last four weeks. For those who had reported participating in volunteering, the biggest motivator was to ‘improve things/help people’, with nearly half (49 per cent) of volunteers citing this as their key motivation. There is some evidence that this desire to contribute strengthens during times of crisis, as seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, when volunteering and community participation reached high levels.⁶² For example, in the first ten months of the pandemic, 12.4 million people stepped forward to offer support via WhatsApp groups, mutual aid groups or formal volunteering initiatives.⁶³

However, the public does not feel that politicians are facilitating this collective spirit. Polling by Ipsos found that over half (58 per cent) of respondents thought that politicians are doing a bad job at encouraging people from different backgrounds and beliefs to get on well together, and More in Common polling found that nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) want more to be done to encourage integration.⁶⁴ Furthermore, research conducted by Ipsos and The Policy Institute in 2023 found that 62 per cent of people agreed that politicians invent or exaggerate culture wars as a political tactic, compared to under half (44 per cent) in 2020.⁶⁵ This indicates that while the public is willing to connect across their differences, they do not necessarily feel supported to do so by those with political power.

What is driving the fraying of the social contract?

The fraying of the social contract in the United Kingdom is driven by interrelated factors, including socioeconomic inequality, declining trust and confidence in public institutions, and the increasing use of technology and digital spaces. These factors reinforce one another, weakening social cohesion, reducing trust in government and in people perceived as different to oneself, and undermining the

⁶¹ Abdallah, Saamah., Barberà Mas, Erick., and Saujot, Mathieu. “[Unfulfilled Promises? The state of the social contract in the 21st century.](#)” *Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations*. (2026).; Office for National Statistics. “[Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: April 2025.](#)” *Office for National Statistics*. (2025).

⁶² Ehsan, Rakib and Mansfield, Ian. “[A Portrait of Modern Britain: Ethnicity and Religion.](#)” *Policy Exchange*. (2024).

⁶³ Johnstone, Catherine. [Civic Mobilisation Learning from the NHS & Care Volunteer Responders \(NHSCVR\) programme.](#) *National Preparedness Commission*. (2025).

⁶⁴ Skinner, Gideon. “[A year on from Southport and subsequent riots, 8 in 10 continue to say Britain is divided.](#)” *Ipsos*. (2025); More in Common. “[Social cohesion: A snapshot.](#)” *More in Common*. (2025).

⁶⁵ Duffy, Bobby., Gottfried, Glenn., Hewlett, Kirstie., Skinner, Gideon. “[Woke vs anti-woke? Culture war divisions and politics.](#)” *The Policy Institute King’s College London*. (2023).

perceived legitimacy of the state. Collectively, these developments can place increasing strain on the social contract by eroding the sense of mutual obligation and shared purpose between citizens and government.

Socioeconomic factors

A range of socioeconomic factors has contributed to the fraying of the social contract. The 2016 Casey Review highlighted how some groups, such as young Black men and Pakistani and Bangladeshi households in deprived areas, suffer greater economic disadvantage and social isolation.⁶⁶ These disparities fuel societal divisions, undermine social cohesion by eroding trust between different groups, and consequently increase polarisation.⁶⁷ Economic disadvantage can also limit social participation as individuals lack the time or resources for community activities. This limits opportunities for interaction, thereby decreasing social cohesion and a sense of belonging.⁶⁸

Inequality also harms democratic resilience. Wealth inequality - the unequal distribution of assets amongst individuals or families - increases the influence of lobbyists on the political process by concentrating wealth amongst a small segment of society, enabling it to exert disproportionate influence over policymaking. This reduces transparency, erodes public trust and confidence in government and can contribute to diminishing political engagement and participation, ultimately weakening the stability of the political system.^{69 70}

An increasing perception amongst Britons that they are unable to improve their lives is also contributing to the erosion of the social contract and undermining confidence in government.⁷¹ This feeling seems to be particularly strong amongst young people, with only one in four 16 to 29 year-olds believing that hard work and talent will get them far in life.⁷² This feeling of powerlessness is driving a lack of optimism for the future of the United Kingdom, with over a third (39 per cent) of Britons believing that Britain's best years are behind them.⁷³ The public recognise that socioeconomic factors

⁶⁶ Casey, Dame Louise. "[The Casey Review: A review into opportunity and integration](#)". GOV.UK. (2016).

⁶⁷ Crepaz, Michele. and Worthy, Ben. "[Cleaning Up Politics: What Would Better Lobbying Regulation Look Like?](#)" *Parliamentary Affairs*. (2024).

⁶⁸ Ibid; Puddle, Jake., Rutter, Jill., Rolfe, Heather. "[The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK.](#)" *British Future*. (2025).

⁶⁹ The [Wealth Gap Risk Register 2025](#) is an online resource developed by the Fairness Foundation that collates evidence on the impacts of wealth inequality, how to reduce it and mitigate its impacts, and public attitudes.

⁷⁰ Crepaz, "[Cleaning Up Politics: What Would Better Lobbying Regulation Look Like?](#)"; Puddle, "[The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK.](#)"; Curtice, John., Scholes, Alex., and Chabdu, Aisha. "[BSA 42 | Britain's democracy: A health check.](#)" *National Centre for Social Research*. (2025).

⁷¹ Tryl, Luke., Hodgson, Ed., Rajah, Anouschka. and Stowers, Sophie. "[Shattered Britain.](#)" *More in Common*. (2025).

⁷² O'Halloran, Jamie., Harris, Ellie., Morjaria, Avnee. and Carleton, Conor. "[Britain's broken social contract: Young people have lost faith in their future.](#)" *The Institute for Public Policy Research*. (2026).

⁷³ More in Common. "[Social cohesion: A snapshot.](#)" *More in Common*. (2025)

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are driving the fraying social contract, with 23 per cent of Britons identifying inequality as a cause of the social contract breaking down.⁷⁴

While socioeconomic factors have a significant impact on the social contract and democratic resilience, the 2024 Khan Review highlighted how this relationship is not one-way but symbiotic. Socioeconomic conditions shape levels of cohesion, but at the same time, cohesion itself also influences long-term socioeconomic outcomes. As a result, improvements in one can strengthen the other, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle.⁷⁵ This demonstrates the interconnected and compounding nature of the social contract and its key determinants, highlighting the need for holistic government responses that address multiple factors in combination.

Public trust and confidence

As well as being indicators of the fraying social contract, public trust and confidence can contribute to the problem, leading to a disconnect between the public and the state. Research examining the loss of trust in politicians in the United Kingdom over recent years found that the public is less trusting of politicians if they perceive the government to have failed to deliver on key policy objectives or they feel unrepresented by the two main political parties.⁷⁶ A forthcoming report by Dame Sara Khan found that among people who said the social contract was broken, the top reasons were governments not delivering on promises, politicians not being trustworthy, and governments being unable to protect borders.⁷⁷ Trust in institutions is also impacted by the public's experience at a local level. A recent study exploring the link between place, trust and political behaviour found that political trust decreases when the public perceives their local neighbourhood as being neglected or in decline.⁷⁸

If the public loses confidence in the ability of governing bodies and public institutions to effectively represent their interests and meet their needs, this can reduce democratic participation.⁷⁹ In turn, this can undermine the legitimacy of institutions, erode shared norms and values, and increase the appeal of extremist or non-democratic alternatives.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Khan DBE, Dame Sara, and Goodwin, Matthew. "Britain under Strain: The Broken Social Contract, Democratic Distrust and the Mainstreaming of Extremism." (July 2026).

⁷⁵ Khan DBE, Dame Sara. "[Threats to Social Cohesion And Democratic Resilience: A New Strategic Approach.](#)" *Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities*. (2024).

⁷⁶ Seyd, Ben. "[Is Britain Facing a Crisis of Political Trust?](#)" *Political Studies Association*. (2024).

⁷⁷ Khan DBE, Dame Sara, and Goodwin, Matthew. "Britain under Strain: The Broken Social Contract, Democratic Distrust and the Mainstreaming of Extremism." (July 2026).

⁷⁸ Carstens, Jens. "[Place, trust and vote : How the geography of discontent undermines democracy.](#)" *Centre d'études européennes et de politique comparée*. (2026).

⁷⁹ Puddle, Jake., Rutter, Jill., Rolfe, Heather. "[The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK.](#)" *British Future*. (2025)

⁸⁰ British Future. "[Written Evidence From British Future \[CCI0028\]](#)." *UK Parliament*. (2025).

Increased use of technology and digital spaces

The rapid advancement of digital technologies - particularly social media platforms and artificial intelligence - has impacted the social contract. Increased reliance on social media for social engagement reduces physical interaction while also connecting people with extreme and polarising views in largely unregulated digital spaces. This weakens physical social ties and intensifies polarisation.⁸¹

The growing use of technology has also increased exposure to online hate and misinformation and disinformation, exacerbating societal divisions and amplifying the spread and visibility of conspiracy theories.⁸² The nature of online platforms allows harmful content to spread rapidly and widely, enabling local tensions to quickly escalate to a national and international scale, often resulting in long-lasting effects on community relations.⁸³

Digital technologies not only contribute to the fraying of the social contract but also make the process of repairing it more difficult. Zintl and Houdret suggest that technology enables the social contract to evolve more rapidly, as information and opinions spread faster, allowing attitudes to shift more quickly.⁸⁴ This reduces the time available for policymakers to respond effectively to emerging challenges, making renegotiations of the contract harder. Additionally, they argue that the increased use and reliance on digital technologies have expanded the scope of the social contract by introducing a transnational dimension that extends beyond national borders. This was supported by a foreign policy expert who highlighted how increased use of technologies and digital spaces has meant that it is easy and cheap to scale information to a global level while at the same time tailoring it to the hyper-local context. This further complicates responses by making it less clear where the geographic boundaries of the social contract lie and who it applies to.⁸⁵

An unpredictable world

The factors described above - socioeconomic inequalities, declining trust and confidence in institutions and fellow citizens - can erode the social contract over time, while the increased use of technology and digital spaces has the potential to accelerate this erosion. However, specific events can act as flashpoints, raising concerns and making underlying tensions suddenly more visible. More in Common (April 2025) suggests that eight in ten people believe the world is becoming more dangerous, noting

⁸¹ Puddle, "[The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK.](#)"

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ British Future, "[Written Evidence From British Future \[CCI0028\].](#)"

⁸⁴ Zintl, Tina. and Houdret, Annabelle. "[Moving towards smarter social contracts? Digital transformation as a driver of change in state–society relations in the MENA region.](#)" *Mediterranean Politics*. (2025).

⁸⁵ Reuter, Christian., Hughes, Amanda. Lee., and Buntain, Cody. "[Combating information warfare: state and trends in user-centred countermeasures against fake news and misinformation.](#)" *Behaviour & Information Technology*. (2024).

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concerns about foreign affairs, terrorism and the unpredictability of world politics.⁸⁶ These flashpoints tend to cluster around issues that already carry significant public anxiety, where a specific incident confirms or intensifies pre-existing grievances. They are typically characterised by a strong emotional or moral public response, rapid spread of information online, and a perceived or actual failure of the government. Rather than creating new divisions, these flashpoints expose and deepen those that already exist.

The 2024 summer riots illustrate this. The triggering event, the Southport attacks, had no direct connection to asylum or immigration, yet the rapid spread of disinformation about the identity of the suspect, coupled with a widespread belief that the truth was being withheld from the public, directed public anger towards asylum accommodation, resulting in disorder across towns and cities. The lasting impact of this disorder on social cohesion is evidenced by Ipsos polling conducted in July 2025, a year after the riots, which found that immigration had become the greatest source of tension among respondents - a 9 per cent increase from the pre-Southport poll in June 2024, replacing differing political views as the primary source of tension.⁸⁷

Where is the fraying social contract felt most strongly?

Some sections of society are more vulnerable to experiencing the impacts of a weakening social contract. In particular, this includes rural communities, individuals facing economic or social disadvantage and young people. This can manifest in people supporting insurgent or anti-establishment political movements who promise a different society which meets their expectations of the social contract.

Rurality

Research conducted by British Future and the Belong Network found that those living in rural areas often feel less positive about national cohesion due to a lack of community spaces and lower social contact.⁸⁸ The government's Pride in Place Strategy highlighted how, over the last decade, many local communities have lost community spaces, such as libraries and pubs.⁸⁹ Despite rural communities

⁸⁶ Tryl, Luke., Hodgson, Ed., Rajah, Anouschka. and Stowers, Sophie. "[Shattered Britain: Making sense of what Britons want in a country that feels broken.](#)" *More in Common*. (2025).

⁸⁷ Skinner, Gideon. "[A year on from Southport and subsequent riots, 8 in 10 continue to say Britain is divided.](#)" *Ipsos*. (2025)

⁸⁸ Puddle, Jake., Rutter, Jill., Rolfe, Heather. "[The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK.](#)" *British Future*. (2025).

⁸⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. "[Pride in Place Strategy.](#)" *Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government*. (2025).

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being more affected, they are often neglected by decision-makers, with government policy largely being focused on more densely populated urban areas.⁹⁰

Socioeconomic status

Deprivation weakens people's relationships with both their communities and the state. Focus groups facilitated by British Future and the Belong Network found that participants from more deprived areas were more likely to report poor community relations, driven by high population turnover, crime, time pressures and fewer opportunities to socialise.⁹¹

Financial hardship also undermines trust in institutions. In the British Social Attitudes Survey 41, 72 per cent of respondents who were struggling financially said that they 'almost never' trust politicians, compared to 49 per cent of those living comfortably. A Policy Exchange report found that individuals who are struggling financially also had the lowest levels of satisfaction and confidence in the police and criminal justice system, and the largest "toughness gap" between what they expect from the justice system and what they feel they receive.⁹²

Recent polling similarly suggests that perceptions of a broken social contract are more prevalent among those facing financial hardship. Two-thirds (66 per cent) of those who are financially struggling believe the social contract is broken, compared with 56 per cent of those who are very financially comfortable.⁹³ However, this relatively small gap between these groups suggests that concerns about the social contract extend beyond economic deprivation and are shared across socioeconomic groups.

Age

Young people are more vulnerable to disengagement from their communities. Research conducted by British Future and the Belong Network found that only a quarter of 16- 24-year-olds believe that many people in their neighbourhood can be trusted, compared to 41 per cent across all age groups.⁹⁴ Feelings of national belonging are similarly weak, with only 19 per cent of 18-30 year olds reporting that a sense of Britishness was important to their identity, against 40 per cent of the general population.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Puddle, "[The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK.](#)"

⁹¹ Puddle, Jake., Rutter, Jill., Rolfe, Heather. "[The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK.](#)" *British Future*. (2025).

⁹² Spencer, David. and Tait, Alexander. "[A Portrait of Modern Britain: Crime and closing the 'Toughness Gap'.](#)" *Policy Exchange*. (2025).

⁹³ Khan DBE, Dame Sara, and Goodwin, Matthew. "Britain under Strain: The Broken Social Contract, Democratic Distrust and the Mainstreaming of Extremism." (July 2026).

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Brown, Lara. and Mansfield, Iain. "['A Portrait of Modern Britain': Youth Repairing the Intergenerational Contract.](#)" *Policy Exchange*. (2025).

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It has been suggested that this disengagement by young people from the social contract is a result of their inability to reach key life milestones, such as home ownership and having children, which have historically anchored people's sense of having a stake in society.⁹⁶ When the state is perceived as unable to deliver on these foundations, the social contract can lose its meaning.

Political affiliation

Supporters of insurgent or non-mainstream political parties appear to demonstrate heightened vulnerability to disengagement from the social contract and dissatisfaction with existing political institutions. Recent polling conducted by More in Common found that 83 per cent of Reform UK supporters and 67 per cent of Green Party supporters believe the social contract is broken, compared to 61 per cent of Britons overall. Research indicates that Reform UK voters demonstrate a heightened tendency to perceive social and political decline. They are also more likely to believe that things in the United Kingdom are getting worse, with 94 per cent holding this view, compared to 42 per cent of Labour voters.⁹⁷ Furthermore, a survey conducted by Policy Exchange found that Reform UK voters are less satisfied with the NHS and the police, and more likely to believe health experts are trying to control their lives compared to supporters of other political parties.⁹⁸

The legitimacy of the government is also more contested among Reform UK voters than among voters of other political parties. More in Common polling conducted in 2025 found that a third (33 per cent) of Reform UK voters believe that Britain's system of government is not a democracy, three times higher than the proportion of Conservative voters (11 per cent) and four times higher than the proportion of Labour voters (8 per cent).⁹⁹ This frustration with the current system among Reform UK voters is evident in further polling, which found that Reform UK voters are more supportive of leaders who are willing to break the rules. A third (33 per cent) of Reform UK voters agree that the United Kingdom needs a leader who is willing to break the rules, compared to 16 per cent of Conservative voters and 9 per cent of Labour voters.

Conclusion

The social contract is fraying, particularly evident in distrust of politicians and government and declining trust in institutions and public services, as well as concerns about the state of democracy and falling democratic participation. British people report weakening connections to a national identity and high levels of social division that affect minority communities, often intensified by perspectives on

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ More in Common. "[Voting Intention & Trackers \(17 - 20 April\)](#)." More in Common. (2026).

⁹⁸ Power, John., Marsh, Zachary. and Phillips, Sean. "[A Portrait of Modern Britain: Health - The Public's Priorities for the NHS](#)." Policy Exchange. (2025).

⁹⁹ More in Common. "[Shattered Britain polling tables \(July 2025\)](#)." More in Common. (2025).

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immigration. There is also a belief amongst the public that politicians do not do enough to facilitate integration and cohesion.

However, the evidence also points to some strengths. Strong local relationships, civic participation, and examples of collective action during times of crisis demonstrate that the foundations for a stronger social contract remain in place. The challenge for the government is to rebuild trust, strengthen social cohesion, and harness existing civic engagement to improve the UK's preparedness and resilience to crises.

Section 2: The threat posed by extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors

Malign actors will seek to engineer or exploit crises to destabilise the United Kingdom and advance their own agendas. This pattern can be seen across a range of recent incidents. For example, in the aftermath of the stabbing of Stephen Ogilvie in Belfast in June 2026, footage of the incident was widely shared on social media and was accompanied by false images of the victim.¹⁰⁰ The attack became the focus of a narrative about the so-called “back door” to Britain, which was rapidly amplified online. The subsequent spread of this online content has been associated with disorder in the city, including attacks on property and violence directed at immigrant communities.

Similar dynamics were observed following the Southport attack, where extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors sought to use the tragedy to use and amplify misinformation and far-right messaging and organise and encourage protests and rioting around the United Kingdom. Bad-faith actors were able to escalate a local tragedy into a national crisis. This evidences the willingness and capability of such actors to either exploit crises or engineer responses to events that divide communities and undermine public confidence in our democratic institutions and processes.

The current threat posed by extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors

Over the last ten years, the threat to the United Kingdom posed by extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors has grown in both scale and diversity, and the nature of the threat has evolved in ways that make it harder to identify and counter. There has been an increase in and diversification of extremism in the United Kingdom. In 2024/25, the number of referrals to Prevent was 8,778; this was the highest number of referrals to Prevent in any year.¹⁰¹ The range of ideologies and movements posing a threat has also expanded, encompassing far-right extremism, Islamist extremism, Incel subculture, and increasingly, individuals displaying ‘mixed, unstable or unclear ideology’. This can be seen in the recent popularity of ‘com networks’ - online networks of predominantly teenage boys seeking to inflict harm and engaging in a range of criminality without a unifying ideology.¹⁰² There has

¹⁰⁰ Syal, Rajeev., and O’Caroll, Lisa. “[Belfast knife attack suspect: what we know about Hadi Alodid and his route to the U’.](#)” *The Guardian*. (2026); Sky News. “[Belfast knife attack victim’s family says sharing of false information is ‘deeply distressing’ after second night of disorder.](#)” *Sky News*. (2026).

¹⁰¹ Home Office. “[Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2024 to March 2025.](#)” *GOV.UK*. (2025).

¹⁰² Home Affairs Committee. “[Combatting new forms of extremism.](#)” *House of Commons*. (2026); Commission for Countering Extremism. “[Operating with Impunity: Hateful extremism: The need for a legal framework.](#)” *Commission for Countering Extremism*. (2021).

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also been an increase in extremism as a result of recent global events and challenges, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the global impacts of climate change.¹⁰³

Extremists have increasingly ‘intellectualised’ their rhetoric to appear more reasonable and appeal to a broader, more mainstream audience.¹⁰⁴ The use of social media, gaming platforms, influencers, and creative tools such as memes has made divisive narratives more engaging, particularly for younger audiences. The rise of technology has also made harmful content more accessible and prevalent. Online platforms allow extremists and bad-faith actors to operate simultaneously at a local, national and international level, while algorithms amplify harmful content and generative artificial intelligence has lowered barriers to its production.¹⁰⁵ ¹⁰⁶ The cumulative effect is that harmful content has become more prevalent, more accessible and more difficult to distinguish from legitimate discourse.

Experts who took part in a roundtable as part of this research highlighted how there is also an increasing threat from bad-faith actors who are spreading misinformation and disinformation purely for financial gain or to build online influence. This has emerged as the result of the monetisation of social media - the ability to make money through content on social media provides a motivation for generating or sharing content that will receive high engagement. This tends to be content that is highly emotive, divisive or exploits public uncertainty surrounding specific issues. These actors include influencers both within the United Kingdom and abroad, and proxies paid by hostile foreign actors. For example, during a period of violence in Leicester in 2022, Islamist influencers, mostly operating outside of Leicester, spread disinformation to grow their online influence.¹⁰⁷

There has been a rise in hostile foreign actors carrying out a range of hostile activities, including technological disruption, disinformation campaigns and kinetic attacks, often with the aim of sowing division, deepening mistrust and undermining democracy.¹⁰⁸ Commenting on the extent of the threat, an expert interviewed as part of this research stated that interference by hostile foreign actors in the resilience of the United Kingdom is happening “continually”. This aligns with recent threat assessments from UK intelligence, with the MI5 Director General Ken McCallum warning that hostile foreign actor activity is escalating and that MI5 is dealing with these threats “every day”, and that foreign hostile actors attempt to “sow the seeds of violence, chaos and division here in the UK”.¹⁰⁹ This has included

¹⁰³ Home Affairs Committee. “[Combatting new forms of extremism.](#)”

¹⁰⁴ Commission for Countering Extremism. “[Operating with Impunity: Hateful extremism: The need for a legal framework.](#)” *Commission for Countering Extremism*. (2021).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid; British Future. “[Written Evidence From British Future \[CCI0028\].](#)” *UK Parliament*. (2025).

¹⁰⁶ The Belong Network, British Future, and The Together Coalition. “[After the riots: Building the foundations for social cohesion.](#)” *Belong*. (2024); Home Affairs Committee. “[Combatting new forms of extremism.](#)” *House of Commons*. (2026).

¹⁰⁷ Bhatt, Chetan., Puri, Vedika., et al. “[Understanding the 2022 Violence in Leicester.](#)” *Better Together*. (2026).

¹⁰⁸ Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and Secret Intelligence Service. “[MI6 Chief says the “front line is everywhere” in first speech, as the UK faces new “age of uncertainty”.](#)” *GOV.UK*. (2025).

¹⁰⁹ Security Service MI5. “[Director General Sir Ken McCallum gives threat update.](#)” *Security Service MI5*. 2025.

increases in countries such as Russia, Iran and China attempting to manufacture crises in the United Kingdom by using proxies to carry out a range of kinetic and non-kinetic attacks, such as the arson attacks against properties connected to Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer. This increase has been linked to global events, particularly the invasion of Ukraine and recent escalations in the Iran-Israel conflict.¹¹⁰

As with the threat from extremists and bad-faith actors, the nature of the threat posed by hostile foreign actors has also evolved in nature, with a growing diversification in the types of attacks being carried out. In particular, there has been a rise in hostile states conducting disinformation campaigns designed to sow or deepen societal divisions or manipulate public discourse in order to undermine democratic values and processes.¹¹¹

An example of Russian interference is Operation Overload, which seeks to undermine public trust in institutions by impersonating credible sources. It also contacts researchers and fact-checkers to overwhelm them and divert their attention.¹¹² The seriousness of this disinformation threat from Russia was recently highlighted at an event in the House of Commons marking the launch of the report, 'Disinformation, UK democracy and attitudes toward Ukraine and Russia in the UK'. The discussion emphasised how countering the threat from Russian propaganda is now inseparable from defending democracy in the United Kingdom.¹¹³ There are also indications of Iranian involvement in conversations relating to Scottish independence - in 2025, after Israeli air strikes caused an internet blackout in Iran, social media accounts that had been posting hundreds of messages per week supporting Scottish independence or criticising the United Kingdom suddenly went quiet.¹¹⁴

There is also a rising threat of foreign interference from the United States. The United States' 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) has made it clear that the Trump administration intends to intervene in politics in the United Kingdom and Europe, ostensibly to preserve free speech and prevent political oppression.¹¹⁵ An article by RUSI has stated that this threat of foreign interference from the United States is significant, with the "potential to eclipse the Russian threat in scale and effectiveness".¹¹⁶ This interference was evident after the Southport riots - a report published by the US State Department

¹¹⁰ Schuurman, Bart. "[Russian operations against Europe since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine](#)." *Leiden University*. (2025); The Soufan Center. "[Hidden Warfare: Iran's Growing Dependence on Criminal Networks](#)." *The Soufan Center*. (2024).

¹¹¹ Home Office. "[Foreign interference: National Security Bill factsheet](#)." *GOV.UK*. (2025); Security Service MI5. "[Director General Ken McCallum gives annual threat update 2021](#)." *Security Service MI5*. (2021).

¹¹² Institute for Strategic Dialogue. "[Operation Overload's underwhelming influence and evolving tactics](#)." *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*. (2025).

¹¹³ Resilience and Reconstruction. "[Disinformation, Trust, UK Democracy and Ukraine: Full House in Westminster for Launch of Landmark Report](#)." *Resilience and Reconstruction*. (2026).

¹¹⁴ Johnson, Simon. "[Dozens of Scottish independence X accounts 'went dark' after Iranian internet blackout](#)." *The Telegraph*. (2025).

¹¹⁵ Barnett, Neil. and Lockhart, Eliza. "[The Emerging US Influence Threat to British Democracy](#)." *Royal United Services Institute*. (2026).

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

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raised concerns that interventions introduced by government officials in the United Kingdom after the Southport riots intended to “chill speech”. There have been recent instances where high-profile figures in the United States have deepened societal divisions through misinformation and disinformation in the United Kingdom. For example, in September 2025, Elon Musk addressed a far-right rally in the United Kingdom, warning the “reasonable centre” that “whether you choose violence or not, violence is coming to you. You either fight back or you die”.¹¹⁷ During the Belfast riots in June 2026, Musk used X to amplify calls for protest from anti-immigration activist Tommy Robinson, telling his followers that “only by protesting REPEATEDLY and LOUDLY will there be any change”. According to analysis from the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), posts by Musk and other prominent anti-immigration figures relating to the Belfast unrest received more than 115 million views, with Musk alone accounting for 64 million views.¹¹⁸ The CCDH concluded that Musk’s amplification had been “instrumental” in driving the visibility of this content, highlighting the ability of influential actors from abroad to shape public discourse and intensify societal tensions here in the UK in times of emergency.

Harmful content from extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors is becoming more prevalent, accessible and engaging. As exposure grows and content becomes more appealing, acceptance of divisive extremist narratives, conspiracy narratives and disinformation among the public is more likely. Research conducted in 2023 found that around one-third of adults in the United Kingdom believe in various conspiracy theories, including those related to the far-right ‘Great Replacement’ theory.¹¹⁹ The susceptibility of the public to misinformation and disinformation was highlighted by research carried out by the Alan Turing Institute which found that the majority of the public do not trust mainstream news, with 20 per cent saying they do not trust them at all, and 42 per cent saying they do not trust them very much, indicating a vulnerability to alternative media sources.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Siddique, Haroon. [“What did Elon Musk say at far-right UK rally and did his remarks break the law?”](#) *The Guardian*. (2025).

¹¹⁸ Le Monde. [“Elon Musk’s role was ‘instrumental’ in the Belfast riots, researchers say.”](#) *Le Monde*. (2026).

¹¹⁹ Duffy, Bobby. and Dacombe, Rod. [“UK Public Conspiracy Beliefs and the Role of Alternative Media.”](#) *Policy Commons*. (2023).

¹²⁰ Enock, Florence., Bright, Jonathan., Stevens, Francesca., Johansson, Pica. and Margetts, Helen. [“How do people protect themselves against online misinformation?”](#) *The Alan Turing Institute*. (2024).

Case study: Southport attack

The actions of extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors were demonstrated in the aftermath of the 2024 Southport attack, a knife attack at a Taylor Swift-themed dance and yoga workshop in Southport, England, in which three children were killed and several others were injured. The attack was followed by violence and disorder that spread across the United Kingdom, in part enabled by these actors. However, as well as violence and disorder, large numbers of the public mobilised to peacefully counter-protest, demonstrating how during crises there are also attempts by good-faith actors to bring people together and foster tolerance.

Extremist: On 29 July, in the hours following the Southport attack, a group called ‘Southport Wake Up’ was set up on the Telegram messaging app. The group organised the first protest in Southport, which subsequently escalated into a riot, and shared other protest locations - including a list of dozens of refugee centres. Within days, the group had grown to 14,000 members.

Charles-Emmanuel Mikko Rasanen, known as Mr AG, was an administrator in the group. Mr AG is a neo-Nazi who lives in Helsinki, Finland. He promotes the Nordic Resistance Movement, a neo-Nazi group that has been banned in Finland, and has links to Patriotic Alternative (PA), a nationalist group in the United Kingdom.

Mr AG played a key role in leading the chat and inciting disorder, including sharing a manual on how to commit arson, how to avoid the police, and encouraging violence against Muslims and Jews.¹²¹

Hostile foreign actor: Russian-backed actors appear to have used social media to amplify far-right narratives, with the aim of fuelling tensions, exacerbating disorder and increasing polarisation. This Russian-backed activity reportedly involved the use of bots to repeatedly like, repost and engage with divisive posts and to post polarising comments in order to trick social media algorithms into assessing an opinion as more widespread than it actually was. As a result, inflammatory content gained greater visibility and spread across social media, driving engagement from both supportive and opposing audiences, increasing polarisation.¹²²

There was also interference from non-state foreign actors, with social media accounts based in other countries contributing to the spread of disinformation following the attack. For example, in the hours

¹²¹ Thomas, Ed. “[BBC confronts neo-Nazi who gave UK rioters arson tips.](#)” *BBC*. (2024).

¹²² Morley-Davis, Joe. “[How Did Foreign Actors Exploit the Recent Riots in the UK?](#).” *Royal United Services Institute*. (2024).

after the attack an online Indian news website called ‘Upuknews’ shared a retweet of a LinkedIn post in which a Southport resident wrongly implied that his children witnessed the attack and called for the borders to be closed. ‘Upuknews’ described the LinkedIn post as “confirmed”, with the content receiving half a million views.¹²³

Bad-faith actor: On 30th July, taxi driver Andrew Robert McIntyre sent messages via Telegram on the ‘Southport Wake Up’ group encouraging others to participate in disorder in Southport. In one post McIntyre wrote "Rise Up English Lads. 8pm tomorrow St Luke's Rd Southport." while in another he wrote "Message to All ... Stand in our way, even if you're just doing your job ... prepare to fall."¹²⁴ McIntyre also participated in the violent disorder that broke out in the evening of 30th July. McIntyre was jailed for seven and a half years for encouraging violent disorder and criminal damage.¹²⁵

Good-faith actor: On Wednesday 7th August 2024, thousands of people gathered in towns and cities across England and Wales protesting against the spread of racism, hate and violence following the Southport attack.¹²⁶ Peaceful protestors assembled in locations where anti-immigrant protests had been planned, far outnumbering the extremists and bad-faith actors. They held up signs saying, “refugees welcome” and “stop the far right”.¹²⁷ Speaking the following day, Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Mark Rowley, stated that the success of the policing operation was partly a result of “the show of unity from communities”.¹²⁸

How do extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors exploit declining trust, weakened social cohesion and democratic fragility?

As well as making the public more responsive to misinformation, a decline in trust and confidence in institutions also increases engagement with the harmful content that is disseminated or amplified by extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors. This is because individuals may lose faith in

¹²³ Khan DBE, Dame Sara, and Crest Insights. “[Societal Threats and Declining Democratic Resilience: The New Extremism Landscape](#).” *Crest Advisory*. (2024)

¹²⁴ BBC News. “[Man who stoked Southport disorder loses appeal bid](#).” *BBC*. (2025).

¹²⁵ Merseyside Police. “[Man jailed for encouraging violent disorder and criminal damage](#).” *Merseyside Police*. (2025).

¹²⁶ BBC News. “[Anti-racism protesters come together after week of riots](#).” *BBC*. (2024).

¹²⁷ Warren, Jess. “[Anti-racism protesters gather to show 'unity'](#).” *BBC*. (2024).

¹²⁸ BBC News, [Anti-racism protesters come together after week of riots](#).”

official sources and look to alternative sources for information. This content includes hate speech, conspiracy narratives and disinformation, and aims to reinforce the feeling that no one is telling the truth.¹²⁹ Growing distrust then weakens the ability of authorities to effectively counter this content, creating a self-perpetuating cycle where the opportunities presented to such actors serve to further amplify their influence, thereby increasing the fragility of the social contract and democratic decline.¹³⁰

Furthermore, a lack of social cohesion or feelings of being let down by mainstream politics may result in individuals deliberately turning to alternative narratives and communities in search of identity, solidarity or as a means of protection against perceived threats.¹³¹ Research exploring the recent mainstreaming of extremism found that several of those interviewed who had joined extremist groups, including members of incel communities and white nationalist groups, stated that they had initially joined to find a sense of belonging and to combat feelings of loneliness, rather than for ideological reasons.¹³² Turning to alternative narratives as protection against perceived threats was evident during violence between members of the Hindu and Muslim communities in Leicester in 2022. An inquiry into the disorder found that divisions between members of the Hindu and Muslim communities escalated to widespread fear about the perceived enemy, which in turn led individuals to adopt narratives that promoted communal allegiance over civic solidarity.¹³³

The engineering of crises by extremists, hostile foreign actors, and bad-faith actors to undermine the social contract has also been observed in other countries. In September 2025, at least 19 Russian drones entered Polish airspace. An expert we interviewed explained how this kinetic attack was accompanied by coordinated information attacks that sought to undermine Polish support for Ukraine - in the hours after the drone incursion, social media accounts began spreading false pro-Russian narratives that blamed Ukraine for the incursion.

The role of technology

Technology plays a significant role in enabling extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors to exploit these opportunities across social media, private messaging, chatbots and traditional media. The rapid advancement of technology has fundamentally changed the information environment.¹³⁴ An

¹²⁹ Resilience and Reconstruction. "[Disinformation, UK Democracy, and Attitudes toward Ukraine & Russia in the UK](#)." *Resilience and Reconstruction*. (2026).

¹³⁰ Kahn DBE, Dame Sara, and Crest Insights. "[Societal Threats and Declining Democratic Resilience: The New Extremism Landscape](#)." *Crest Advisory*. (2025).

¹³¹ Hazimeh, Wisam., Pius, Wendy., and Al-Khraisha, Mohammed. "[The Failure of Europe's Social Contract and its Impact on the Rise of the Right Wing: Germany and UK Case Study](#)." *Jerash Journal for Research & Studies*. (2020); Home Affairs Committee. "[Combatting new forms of extremism](#)." *UK Parliament*. (2026).

¹³² Ebner, Julia. "[From Margins to Mainstream: How Extremism Has Conquered the Political Middle](#)." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*. (2023).

¹³³ Bhatt, Chetan., Puri, Vedika., et al. "[Understanding the 2022 Violence in Leicester](#)." *Better Together*. (2026).

¹³⁴ Röttger, Paul. and Vedres, Balazs. "[The Information Environment and its Effects on Individuals and Groups: An Interdisciplinary Literature Review](#)." *The Royal Society*. (2020).

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expert we interviewed highlighted how this has created opportunities for extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors as it has led to the decentralisation of media outlets and created a space for alternative actors to shape the narrative about what is happening in society. This has been exacerbated by the downsizing of traditional media organisations, driven by a continued decline in investment in the sector.

Technology enables the rapid proliferation of misinformation, disinformation and extremist content through a range of mechanisms, including the use of artificial intelligence to generate and circulate fabricated images widely on social media platforms, and through the use of bots and algorithms to amplify, repeatedly engage with and further disseminate misinformation and disinformation initially posted by other users on social media. Algorithms determine which content to display to users by ranking signals such as likes, comments, and shares.¹³⁵ This reliance on engagement metrics often results in the promotion of emotive or controversial material ahead of accurate content. As a result, a feedback loop is established that amplifies polarising narratives, increasing social media users' exposure to extremist content.¹³⁶ Furthermore, because users do not know whether the content they are seeing is being recommended by an algorithm, they are often less discerning than they otherwise might be. This can result in harmful content becoming mainstreamed. Extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors exploit algorithms by deliberately engaging with polarising and harmful content, particularly during times of crisis or emergency. This manipulation is intended to skew algorithms and push more harmful material into wider circulation. For instance, there is evidence that this tactic was employed by Russian-backed foreign actors during the Southport riots.¹³⁷

The way that individuals engage with technology is constantly evolving, and this influences the methods extremists, hostile foreign actors, and bad-faith actors use to exploit and generate crises. A 2025 Ofcom survey exploring the use of and attitudes towards media among adults in the United Kingdom found that active engagement with social media is decreasing, suggesting that in the long term, misinformation and disinformation on social media may become increasingly ineffective. In 2025, under half (49 per cent) of adults reported posting and commenting on social media, compared to 61 per cent in 2024.¹³⁸ Social media experts have suggested that this trend reflects a shift towards the public using more private spaces, such as group messages and direct messages, to communicate and share information.¹³⁹ This shift will bring new challenges, as highlighted by an expert we

¹³⁵ Queens University of Charlotte. "[Misinformation on Social Media: Social Media Algorithms](#)".

¹³⁶ Burton, Joe. "Algorithmic extremism? The securitization of artificial intelligence (AI) and its impact on radicalism, polarization and political violence." *Technology in Society*. (2023).

¹³⁷ Morley-Davies, Joe. "[How Did Foreign Actors Exploit the Recent Riots in the UK?](#)" *Royal United Services Institute*. (2024).

¹³⁸ Office of Communications. "[Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report](#)." *Ofcom*. (2026).

¹³⁹ McMahon, Liv. "[Fewer UK adults posting on social media, Ofcom finds](#)." *BBC*. (2026).

interviewed who pointed out that the private nature of these online spaces will make it challenging for authorities to monitor, engage with or counter the narratives being disseminated.

In contrast, the use of AI tools, such as ChatGPT, Copilot or Gemini, has continued to rise. In 2025 more than half (54 per cent) of adults reported using AI tools, compared to less than a quarter in 2023 (23 per cent).¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, a 2026 report by the Centre for Emerging Technology and Security (CETaS) found that during recent crises, the use of AI chatbots to obtain information has been widespread.¹⁴¹ This increasing reliance on AI tools as sources of information creates new opportunities for extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors. The report by CETaS highlighted how, during recent crises, actors, including hostile foreign actors, have attempted to manipulate the information provided by AI chatbots to users in real-time, resulting in the amplification of inaccurate and harmful content.

The increased use of technology has also given a considerable amount of power to private actors who control digital infrastructure or systems. This power can, and has been, used to interfere in both the domestic and foreign policies of other states, with very little democratic accountability.¹⁴² For example, Elon Musk allegedly sabotaged a Ukrainian drone attack targeting Russian occupying vessels by cutting off the Starlink satellite internet service near Crimea. Furthermore, platforms such as X and Meta have substantially reduced their online safety operations, such as cutting fact-checking teams, thereby enabling the spread of harmful content.¹⁴³

Misinformation and disinformation

The use of online misinformation and disinformation has been a key factor in enabling extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors to deepen divisions and undermine democratic norms and values. Although primarily disseminated across online spaces, there is also evidence of traditional media contributing to this spread, whether through inadvertent reporting or intentional amplification.¹⁴⁴ A notable instance occurred in November 2025, when GB News aired an interview with President Donald Trump. The broadcast, which included various inaccurate assertions regarding climate change and energy, was subsequently found to be in breach of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code.¹⁴⁵ An expert interviewed as part of this research explained that misinformation and disinformation campaigns are designed to exploit human biases by producing content that is negative

¹⁴⁰ Office of Communications, "[Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report](#)."

¹⁴¹ Stockwell, Sam., Janjeva, Ardi., and McDonald, Broderick. "[Adding Fuel to the Fire: AI Information Threats and Crisis Events](#)." *Centre for Emerging Technology and Security*. (2026).

¹⁴² Seger, Elizabeth., Perry, Hannah. And Hancock, Jamie. "[Epistemic Security 2029: Fortifying The UK's Information Supply Chain To Tackle The Democratic Emergency](#)." *Demos*. (2025).

¹⁴³ McMahon, Liv., Kleinman, Zoe. & Subramanian, Courtney. "[Facebook and Instagram get rid of fact checkers](#)." *BBC*. (2025).; Hajjaji, Danya. "[Twitter reportedly makes more cuts to online safety teams](#)". *The Guardian*. (2023).

¹⁴⁴ Surawy Stepney, Eva., and Lally, Clare. "[Disinformation: sources, spread and impact](#)." *UK Parliament*. (2024).

¹⁴⁵ Ward, Bob "[Trump interview on GB News was full of falsehoods about energy and climate change](#)." *London School of Economics*. (2025).

or agrees with pre-existing beliefs held by the target audience. In recent years, this content has focused on trust in government and reinforcing psychological group boundaries.

Far-right groups and hostile foreign actors have also used disinformation to undermine democratic resilience by portraying the United Kingdom as a country that is in decline. This exploits individuals' fears of the state of the United Kingdom, particularly around the impact of immigration and safety. For example, new research found evidence that Chinese- and Russian-backed foreign actors have been sharing disinformation online that portrays London as a dangerous city. This disinformation includes AI-generated imagery that shows emotive content, such as an arcade machine in Croydon filled with knives.¹⁴⁶

The impact of this disinformation was recently highlighted by the Mayor of London, Sir Sadiq Khan, who, speaking at the Cambridge Disinformation Summit, said that the erosion of trust in the city of London and its institutions makes it “easier and easier for them [extremists] to twist online anger into offline violence”.¹⁴⁷ This has coincided with Sir Mark Rowley, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, raising concerns about the role of AI-generated disinformation in shaping public perceptions of crime and safety in London. Writing in *The Times* in January, the Commissioner warned that “despite claims circulated online, including AI-generated videos creating fictional violent scenarios, some commentators promote a narrative that suits them, regardless that the facts tell a very different story”, adding that “it is not a matter of opinion or messaging; it is what the data shows.”¹⁴⁸ Despite crime reducing, disinformation can skew public opinion on crime and safety. A YouGov poll found that 61 per cent of Britons consider London an unsafe place to live, a striking difference from the 63 per cent of Londoners who say the capital is safe.¹⁴⁹

Transnational influences

The transnational nature of technologies has expanded the reach of extremists and hostile foreign actors, enabling them to provide alternative sources of identity and belonging that can appeal to individuals whose attachment to institutions and sense of belonging in the United Kingdom has been weakened or is perceived to be under threat. For example, in the case of the violence and disorder that broke out in Leicester in 2022, polarising narratives from abroad situated local tensions within broader ideological conflicts involving India, Pakistan, Kashmir and Bangladesh.¹⁵⁰ The result was that the local tension became dominated by ‘imported’ narratives that emphasised differences and encouraged mobilisation, resulting in heightened perceptions of polarisation.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Kelly, James. W. “[Mayor warns of London 'disinformation blizzard'.](#)” *BBC*. (2026).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Rowley, Mark. “[We've made London safer but we will keep working.](#)” *The Times*. (2026).

¹⁴⁹ YouGov. “[Most Britons think London is an unsafe place to live – Londoners disagree.](#)” *YouGov*. (2026)

¹⁵⁰ Bhatt, Chetan., Puri, Vedika., et al. “[Understanding the 2022 Violence in Leicester.](#)” *Better Together*. (2026).

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Case study: The 2022 violence in Leicester

In August and September 2022, violent clashes occurred between members of Hindu and Muslim communities in Leicester.¹⁵² This disorder followed months of escalating tensions, beginning with the violent attack of an 18-year-old Muslim man by a group of Hindu youths on 22 May 2022.¹⁵³

An independent inquiry into the events concluded that the violence was driven by an erosion of trust between communities. This decline in cohesion was the result of multiple factors, including economic hardship, shifts in the demographic profile of the local population, and a failure of local leaders to address the escalating tensions. These divisions were exacerbated by transnational ideologies grounded in supremacist beliefs, which were disseminated by a range of foreign actors, including Hindu nationalists, prominent political Islamist influencers and Hindutva-aligned media. Their aim was to exploit the opportunities created by the division and disorder to advance their own political agendas and enhance their public profiles. The dissemination of these narratives contributed significantly to increased polarisation between groups.¹⁵⁴ Following the initial incidents, the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation acted as an ‘accelerant’, intensifying distrust and contributing to the escalation of violence.¹⁵⁵

The narratives being spread were more readily accepted due to weakened social ties and a lack of confidence in institutions. This was compounded by perceived failures in leadership; for example, after the attack on 22 May, police were involved, but no charges were brought against the suspects. This created resentment among some Muslim groups who viewed it as a hate crime that had gone unpunished. This illustrates how a weakened social contract provides opportunities for extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors to exploit crises, which in turn further erodes trust, increases division and creates a reinforcing cycle of instability.

Technology has also made it significantly easier for hostile foreign actors to exert influence across borders. For example, Elon Musk addressed crowds of over 110,000 people during a far-right rally in 2025 via video link, demonstrating how the global reach of technology allows hostile foreign actors to influence public opinion in real time without being physically present.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, the United

¹⁵² Gohil, Neha. “[Disinformation was ‘central accelerant’ in Leicester Hindu-Muslim clashes, inquiry finds.](#)” *The Guardian*. (2026).

¹⁵³ Bhatt, “[Understanding the 2022 Violence in Leicester.](#)”

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Vinter, Robyn., Gecsoyler, Sammy., Pidd, Helen. and Ahmed, Aneesa. “[Far-right London rally sees record crowds and violent clashes with police.](#)” *The Guardian*. (2025).

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Kingdom's reliance on technology originating from other states, such as the United States and China, creates further opportunities for interference and increases the risk of coercion.¹⁵⁷

Hostile foreign actors may also seek to exploit the state of the social contract in the United Kingdom through financial influence and interference in political processes. The Rycroft Review identified that this interference has two broad aims: to gain direct leverage over political parties and processes; and to attempt to create division and distrust among the wider public.¹⁵⁸ In a context of declining trust in government and institutions and increasing polarisation, such interference has the potential to heighten social and political tensions and further undermine the United Kingdom's democratic resilience. Moreover, perceptions that political influence can be bought, or that foreign actors can exert undue influence over the country's democratic processes, may contribute to further deterioration of the social contract and trust in democracy.

Conclusion

From misinformation and disinformation to financial interference, malign actors have a range of methods with which to further fray the social contract and undermine social cohesion and democratic resilience. Enabled by technology and the use of digital spaces and propagated by transnational influences, malign actors pose an endemic threat to our social contract and will exploit vulnerabilities at times of crisis.

¹⁵⁷ Corera, Gordon. "[How China really spies on the UK.](#)" BBC. (2025).

¹⁵⁸ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. "[The Rycroft Review: Report of the independent review into countering foreign financial influence and interference in UK politics.](#)" GOV.UK. (2026).

Section 3: Crisis scenarios

Crises are shocks, incidents, threats or challenges that result in harm to people, damage to the environment, or risks to national security. They often require a coordinated response from multiple sectors and organisations, particularly where statutory responsibilities under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 are engaged. Examples include terrorist attacks, major accidents, natural disasters and severe weather events, and public health emergencies.

Table 1: Crisis examples

Terrorism	Major accidents/ disasters	Natural disasters and severe weather	Public health emergencies
7/7 London bombings (2005)	Buncefield Oil Depot Explosion (2005)	Summer floods (2007)	Swine Flu Pandemic (2009)
Westminster Bridge Attack (2017)	Grenfell Tower Fire (2017)	Storm Ciara and Storm Dennis (2020)	Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2022)

These types of risks are exemplified in the National Risk Register and will be considered in the Community Risk Registers developed by local resilience partners (e.g. Local Resilience Forums). These risk registers cover scenarios and outcomes, key assumptions for those scenarios, their likelihood, impact, response capability requirements/controls and recovery.

Crises provide opportunities for extremists, bad-faith actors and hostile foreign actors. The stability of the United Kingdom and its democracy are being targeted by these actors, and we can anticipate that they will continue to exploit any weaknesses, whether these are crises or contested political issues. To understand the United Kingdom's level of national preparedness for crises and how the fraying social contract enables crises to be exploited, or even engineered, by malign actors, three possible crisis scenarios were developed by Crest and presented to experts in two roundtable sessions.

*Scenario 1: A natural disaster crisis***A natural disaster crisis**

A major flood affects a region in the United Kingdom. Rumours are spread online claiming that the government is concealing the true extent of the crisis, enabled by AI-generated content. This content includes fabricated images of submerged neighbourhoods that the government is apparently “hiding”. There is also fake footage of emergency supplies being directed to wealthier areas. Misleading information is circulated about evacuation routes and relief centres, which direct people away from genuine aid provided by the government.

The National Risk Register (NRR) includes flood risks as part of its assessment of significant potential acute risks to the United Kingdom.¹⁵⁹ Further details of this scenario were derived from evidence relating to a major flood that affected southwestern Poland in 2024. An expert interviewed as part of the research explained how misinformation and disinformation surged by 300 per cent after that incident, with bad-faith actors spreading disinformation claiming that hundreds of people were dead and that the Polish government was hiding the real number of casualties. There was also disinformation that provided inaccurate information about where the public could evacuate to and get help.

Experts who participated in the roundtable reflected that, broadly speaking, the United Kingdom is prepared for a flooding incident. Many local authorities, in collaboration with Local Resilience Forums (LRFs), have well-established flood management plans in place. Flood management plans include how local authorities prepare for potential flooding incidents, manage events on the ground when they occur and support recovery following the event.¹⁶⁰ However, some experts highlighted gaps in preparedness, specifically regarding the long-term response and the support provided to the most vulnerable groups in a crisis, for example, those experiencing high levels of economic deprivation.

Experts agreed that the key challenge in this scenario would be effectively countering the misinformation and disinformation being spread by malign actors. They highlighted that the fraying of the social contract has meant that government and institutions, such as the police and mainstream media, are no longer widely trusted sources of information. During a crisis, the public actively seeks out information in good faith to understand how to protect themselves and others. However, where trust in the government and official sources is low, people are more likely to turn to alternative sources of information that are less regulated and more vulnerable to false or misleading information.

¹⁵⁹ HM Government. “[National Risk Register 2025 Edition](#)”.GOV.UK. (2025)

¹⁶⁰ Local Government Association. “[Responses Guidance on responding to flood risk](#).” *Local Government Association*.

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Furthermore, experts reflected that reduced trust and feelings of safety make the public more receptive to information that reinforces their existing fears. They pointed to the example of the Oxford Circus panic in 2017 - when mass panic broke out on Oxford Street after an altercation between two men on a tube platform was falsely reported as gunshots - to illustrate how declining trust can increase this receptiveness and, in turn, generate a crisis in its own right.¹⁶¹ In this case, misinformation was able to generate mass panic because of heightened public fears about terrorism at the time - there had already been five high-profile terrorist incidents in the United Kingdom that year and the official terrorism threat level was 'critical', the highest level.¹⁶² The United Kingdom was in a febrile state, lowering the threshold for a public response to a perceived terrorist threat.

Experts suggested that the absence of robust measures to effectively counter misinformation and disinformation would also hinder the government's response in this scenario. They highlighted the need for the government to make greater use of technology to identify, monitor and counter false or misleading information, while noting that the capabilities at their disposal are not being used to their full potential. At the same time, experts recognised the challenge of removing harmful content, given that the government is almost entirely reliant on cooperation from platforms.

As well as highlighting key challenges in responding to this scenario, experts also discussed possible solutions. They agreed that to mitigate the impact of declining trust in government, work needs to be done to identify and maximise the visibility of those who are perceived to be trusted voices. An expert explained that using a public figure who is representative of the group being targeted by the misinformation or disinformation campaign is an effective way of countering it, with sportspeople or non-political celebrities in particular tending to be perceived as more trustworthy than politicians. The risk remains, however, that these individuals may be subject to manipulation by third parties or deepfake hoaxes. In relation to the technological measures that could be implemented to counter misinformation and disinformation, experts proposed using digital watermarking to verify the authenticity of online information and using AI tools to detect problematic content at scale. It was acknowledged that greater transparency is needed around the crisis protocols employed by platforms for the government to be able to effectively implement technological solutions.

Overall, there was agreement that the greatest risk in this scenario is not the flooding itself but the spread of misinformation and disinformation by malign actors. Experts suggested that the inability to effectively counter the misinformation and disinformation being disseminated would likely result in an escalation of the crisis in the short-term and, in the longer-term, an undermining of social cohesion and democratic resilience.

Participants highlighted that this risk is not adequately reflected in current national resilience planning. While existing frameworks such as the National Risk Register (NRR) assess the likelihood and potential

¹⁶¹ BBC. "[Oxford Circus: Platform 'altercation' caused tube panic.](#)" BBC. (2017).

¹⁶² Ibid.

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impact of a broad range of risks, there is limited accounting for the ways in which misinformation and disinformation can amplify emergencies. As a result, there is a gap in resilience planning as the information environment itself is not treated as a critical risk and its governance is not an integral component of crisis preparedness and response.

Experts noted that this gap is problematic given that misinformation and disinformation now have the potential to become major drivers of crisis escalation. Hurricane Helene in the United States in 2024 illustrates this clearly - the spread of misinformation and disinformation during the crisis not only undermined the effectiveness of aid provision and management but it also amplified divisions in society. Anti-Semitism increased as bad-faith actors spread disinformation that claimed that Jewish officials were withholding funds from Americans in order to redirect them to Israel.¹⁶³ Other narratives amplified divisive issues, such as support for the war in Ukraine, by claiming that the government did not have the funds to support those affected due to aid being sent to Ukraine.¹⁶⁴

Scenario 2: A constitutional or political crisis

A constitutional or political crisis

Hostile foreign actors, domestic extremists or bad-faith actors spread disinformation following a contested general election result in which no party wins a majority. Rumours are spread online about voter fraud, enabled by AI-generated content, e.g. images of broken or hidden ballot boxes in constituencies with close results, or footage of non-white 'family voting'. A day of action in protest at the 'stolen' election is organised by a populist party with demonstrations planned in central London and in constituencies the party had expected to win, which have community tensions along ethnic lines.

In the National Risk Register (NRR), an attack on the democratic processes of the United Kingdom is considered a significant potential risk.¹⁶⁵ This scenario was drawn from the NRR's risk assessment and evidence of previous interference in elections in the United Kingdom and abroad. This included interference during the 2024 General Election, when bot-like accounts linked to Russia employed methods to stir up confusion and provoke emotional reactions around key campaign issues, such as the war in Ukraine and immigration.

¹⁶³ Institute for Strategic Dialogue. "[Hurricane Helene brews up storm of online falsehoods and threats](#)." *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*. (2024).

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ HM Government. "[National Risk Register 2025 Edition](#)". *GOV.UK*. (2025)

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Experts were broadly of the view that the United Kingdom is more resilient to election interference than many comparable democracies. In particular, experts highlighted how the United Kingdom's Joint Election Security and Preparedness Unit (JESP) is effective at improving domestic systems' ability to counter interference throughout the election cycle and that these processes have been promoted with European allies as examples of best practice. Furthermore, experts suggested that the public may be less receptive to false and misleading information disseminated in this scenario due to the high levels of public confidence in core democratic principles - 93 per cent of the British public perceive elections to be fair.¹⁶⁶

However, others suggested that there is a risk of being complacent about this scenario, especially given the risk that this scenario could lead to violent protests. Experts highlighted that while foreign interference in democratic processes is often part of a long-term strategy that develops over several years, the current government response can be reactive - focusing on countering the threat in relation to specific political events, such as general elections.

Despite suggestions that the public would be less receptive to the misinformation and disinformation being spread in this scenario, there was agreement that countering the spread of harmful content remains a challenge. In particular, experts highlighted the role that text-based AI services have played in disseminating misinformation and disinformation during election periods. For example, on a single day during the 2026 Scottish pre-election period, more than one third (34 per cent) of responses to relevant prompts across five text-based AI services (ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Google AI Overviews, Grok and Replika) contained factual errors. These errors included a made-up expenses scandal and giving the wrong election date.¹⁶⁷ Experts explained that the lack of regulation of these online spaces makes it challenging for the government to counter the threat.

In terms of solutions, experts recommended making greater use of communication methods that have been shown to be effective during election campaigns, such as leafleting.¹⁶⁸ It was suggested that the government could use these methods to create clear and accessible information resources explaining democracy, how it works, the records of political parties, election results and the factors that contributed to those results. Experts also proposed introducing training and support for teachers on how to facilitate conversations in schools about democracy, politics and media literacy. They argued that this would help to build resilience against misinformation and disinformation related to democratic processes. As an example of good practice, experts highlighted Finland's long-term, cross-sector investment in media literacy and critical thinking. These skills are embedded throughout the education system, across subjects and educational stages, helping individuals to critically evaluate

¹⁶⁶ Curtice, John., Scholes, Alex., and Chabdu, Aisha. "[BSA 42 | Britain's democracy: A health check.](#)" *National Centre for Social Research*. (2025).

¹⁶⁷ Hancock, Jamie., and Moores, Azzurra. "[One third of information provided by chatbots during the election was incorrect, finds cross-party think tank Demos.](#)" *Demos*. (2026).

¹⁶⁸ Williams, Richard. and Khan, Shehnaz. "[Online election campaigns not replacing leaflets.](#)" *BBC*. (2026).

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information, distinguish facts from fiction, and develop the necessary skills for informed decision-making and democratic participation.

Another example highlighted by experts is VIGINUM (the Service for Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference) in France.¹⁶⁹ Established in response to growing concerns about the impact of foreign information manipulation on democratic processes, VIGINUM is responsible for detecting and characterising foreign digital interference that may influence the public debate. In addition to providing the State with technical and operational capabilities against foreign digital interference, VIGINUM also contributes to informing the public and educating them about the media.

While Finland demonstrates the value of long-term investment in citizens' media literacy and critical thinking skills, France's VIGINUM illustrates the importance of funding technological capabilities to identify and counter organised disinformation campaigns by malign actors. Together, these examples suggest that strengthening democratic resilience requires both an informed public and government capacity to detect and respond to digital information threats.

Overall, it was suggested that while malign actor interference in democratic processes is already happening, the United Kingdom is, to a large extent, prepared to counter it. Experts reflected that this resilience is underpinned by a strong public commitment to democratic values. As a result, experts noted that for such a scenario to escalate significantly, the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation would likely require the involvement of actors who possess broader public trust and credibility, such as major foreign powers.

Scenario 3: A security crisis

A security crisis

A polarising political figure is killed, triggering a rapid and emotionally charged public response amidst uncertainty about responsibility or motivation. Extremists and bad-faith actors move quickly to exploit the crisis, amplifying divisive narratives and directing public anger. Extremist groups use the event to recruit, radicalise and mobilise, framing the assassination within their own ideological narratives and using it to justify further violence. Extremists frame the assassination as an attack on their way of life, mobilising their supporters and driving hostility towards minority communities.

¹⁶⁹ Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale. "[Les missions de VIGINUM](#)." *Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale*. (English translation accessed). (2026).

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The assassination of a high-profile figure is included as an acute risk in the National Risk Register (NRR). The NRR assesses this scenario as less impactful than the previous two scenarios, but more likely.¹⁷⁰ This scenario was developed based on insights from expert interviews, which discussed similar incidents in other countries, for example, the assassination of Charlie Kirk in the US, and how this would be likely to develop in the United Kingdom.

Experts participating in the roundtables stated that effective preparedness for this scenario relies on clear government communication, with many noting that current approaches could be improved. Consistent with the discussions relating to Scenario 1: A natural disaster crisis, experts highlighted that the absence of trusted voices to disseminate counter narratives to the public would be a key challenge. Furthermore, experts emphasised the need for the government to communicate quickly due to the speed at which misinformation and disinformation would likely spread. However, it was acknowledged that this pressure to communicate rapidly could create challenges for authorities, who would need to balance the need to provide timely public updates with the need to ensure information is accurate and does not compromise operational sensitivity.

Despite these challenges, experts suggested that the majority of the public would likely be more resilient to a crisis of this kind. Discussions highlighted how, following the Southport attack, small groups spreading hate and engaging in violence were far outnumbered by peaceful protestors. Experts argued that this demonstrates a widespread resistance amongst the British public to narratives that justify the use of violence in pursuit of a political aim.¹⁷¹

To further strengthen preparedness, experts recommended reviewing the protective factors that provide social and democratic resilience to crises of this nature. This would enable policymakers to more effectively direct efforts towards building resilience. Furthermore, to improve government communication, experts proposed clearer public guidance on the information that can and cannot be shared during a crisis.

Broadly speaking, there was agreement that such a scenario would be more likely to trigger a positive societal response, including collective mobilisation in support of democratic values and mutual tolerance. However, the limitations in current government communication strategies to counter divisive narratives spread by malign actors were recognised as a potential risk.

Conclusion

Across our scenarios, experts consistently anticipated an immediate and generally positive response to and management of these crises by emergency responders. In some cases, they also expected public support, with communities rallying behind response efforts. However, this confidence carries a risk of

¹⁷⁰ HM Government. "[National Risk Register 2025 Edition](#)." GOV.UK. (2025).

¹⁷¹ BBC. "[Anti-racism protesters come together after week of riots](#)." BBC. (2024).

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complacency regarding overall preparedness, particularly in underestimating the scale and influence of misinformation and disinformation.

The role of misinformation and disinformation introduces unpredictability across all the scenarios. It creates both immediate operational challenges and longer-term risks that have the potential to further erode the social contract. The reflections from experts on these scenarios raise important questions about how crisis planning and emergency management should better anticipate, monitor and respond to the spread of false or misleading information during crises.

More broadly, the weakening of the social contract over time must be viewed as a chronic, strategic threat. Addressing this challenge requires not only tactical measures to counter false and misleading information during crises, but also sustained, long-term strategies to strengthen public trust, resilience, and social cohesion.

Section 4: The challenge in preparing for and recovering from crises

Trust in politicians, government and other state institutions has declined and the social contract is fraying. Perceptions of economic and social fairness have weakened, and many people in the United Kingdom feel that they do not have a voice in decision-making, prompting a growing appetite for extremist narratives and ideologies. At the same time, the digital space is changing rapidly. Social media, text-based AI services and streaming platforms have transformed how information is created, shared and consumed, increasing the speed at which malign actors can supply and spread misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories.

Extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors seek to exploit these conditions daily - it is a persistent threat. Crises and emergencies represent high-value targeting opportunities when citizens and communities are at their most vulnerable and seeking information. It is these moments which transform an endemic challenge to our democratic way of life into an acute one with potentially serious long-term consequences, particularly for vulnerable people. Important questions must be raised about how fit for purpose our current approaches to counter extremism, social cohesion and democratic resilience are.

Countering extremism, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors in the misinformation/disinformation age

The United Kingdom's approach to countering terrorism, extremism, and related harms has evolved significantly - in particular, since the September 11 attacks in 2001 and the London bombings of 7 July 2005. While early responses focused primarily on preventing and disrupting terrorism, policy increasingly recognised the importance of addressing the wider social conditions that can contribute to radicalisation, including social exclusion, alienation, and community division. This broader approach was reflected in the **Counter-Extremism Strategy (2015)**, which emphasises the role of social cohesion in strengthening resilience against extremist influences. Although the Strategy was discontinued in 2021, recent policy developments, including the **Home Affairs Committee's inquiry into new forms of extremism**, indicate continued recognition of the need for a comprehensive approach to emerging threats.¹⁷²

More recent policy and legislative developments reflect growing concern about the role of misinformation, disinformation, and malign actors in undermining democratic resilience and social cohesion. The current government definition of extremism acknowledges that activity creating a permissive environment for harmful ideologies may contribute to wider security risks, although the

¹⁷² Home Affairs Committee. "[Combating new forms of extremism: Government Response](#)." *House of Commons*. (2026).

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relationship between extremism and misinformation remains only partially defined. At the same time, the **National Security Act (2023)** introduced new powers to address state threats and foreign interference, recognising that contemporary national security risks increasingly extend beyond acts of physical violence to include efforts to influence, manipulate, and destabilise democratic societies.

Alongside these measures, the **Online Safety Act (2023)** and subsequent media literacy initiatives have sought to address the online spread of harmful and false information. However, questions remain about the effectiveness of existing frameworks in addressing the activities of non-violent domestic actors, the interaction between domestic and foreign influence campaigns, and the broader societal impacts of misinformation and disinformation during times of crisis. The legislation and policies outlined in the table below illustrate the United Kingdom's evolving response to these challenges, highlighting both the expansion of regulatory powers and remaining gaps.

Table 2: Policy landscape related to countering extremism, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors in the misinformation/ disinformation age

Framework	What it covers	Gap it leaves
National Security Act (2023)	New offences targeting state-sponsored foreign interference; requires evidence of a “foreign power condition” for liability.	Does not address under-the-radar erosion of trust through disinformation. UK-based users amplifying foreign content are not covered.
Online Safety Act (2023)	Platform duties on illegal content; new offence for sending false information intended to cause non-trivial harm. Southport Inquiry found most of the post-attack misinformation would not have been covered.	Requires proof of intent to cause harm. Reckless or negligent sharing is not covered. Regulation of borderline content remains at the discretion of platforms.
Media Literacy Action Plan (2026–29)	Ofcom duty extended; £5m Common Ground Resilience Fund; £11.9m Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund; teacher training; public awareness campaign.	The funding scale is modest relative to the challenge. Reactive and prevention-focused; does not address real-time crisis disinformation.

Hypothetical scenario: Challenges in countering bad-faith actors spreading misinformation and disinformation during a crisis under current legislation¹⁷³

A serious violent incident occurs in a UK town. In the first few hours, verified information is limited while emergency services respond and the facts are established. The public seeks information through social media and messaging platforms, as well as through community groups and friends and family. There are genuine attempts to understand what has happened, but at the same time, unverified claims begin to circulate about the identity and motive of the perpetrator.

One widely shared post alleges that the perpetrator is an asylum seeker, however, the source of the claim is unclear. It may have come from a foreign actor or simply speculation from another online user. A UK-based user with a large following reposts the claim, stating that they have "heard this from a reliable source" and that "people have a right to know". The post rapidly spreads across platforms, reaching many people quickly.

Although the information is false, there is no clear evidence that the user knew it was false when sharing it or intended to cause psychological or physical harm. However, the post contributes to rising community tensions and hostility towards minority groups.

Table 3: Applicability of current legislation in this scenario

Legislation	Applicability
National Security Act 2023	The Act may be relevant where misinformation or disinformation is demonstrably linked to hostile state activity or foreign interference. In particular, liability would depend on meeting the Act's "foreign power condition", which requires evidence that the conduct is carried out for or on behalf of a foreign power or with their direction or assistance. In this scenario, although the false claim may have originated from a foreign actor, there is no clear evidence of coordination or direction. The subsequent sharing of the claim by a UK-based user is not covered in the Act.
The Online Safety Act 2023 and Ofcom's powers	The Act gives Ofcom responsibility for regulating online platforms and enforcing compliance with online safety duties,

¹⁷³ Crown, Giles. [“Mis- and dis-information in the UK and EU.”](#) *Taylor Wessing*. (2025).

including taking measures to address illegal content. In practice, most misinformation and disinformation will fall outside of the Act unless it meets a criminal threshold under defined categories of criminal content such as terrorism-related material or child sexual exploitation. The Online Safety Act does include offences relating to false communications, but these require proof of intent to cause non-trivial psychological or physical harm. Therefore, in this scenario, if the user shares information believing it to be true or without the required intent or recklessness, criminal liability is unlikely, even if the content contributes to public disorder.

Public Order Act 1986

In the Act, offences relating to stirring up racial hatred are subject to high legal thresholds designed to balance public protection with safeguarding freedom of expression. Liability requires intent to stir up racial hatred, or that the material is threatening and likely to stir up racial hatred. In this scenario, the reposted claim that the perpetrator was an asylum seeker may contribute to hostility towards minority communities and public disorder. However, it may fall short of criminal liability unless the UK-based user is shown to have intended to stir up racial hatred or suspected it was threatening, abusive or insulting.

This hypothetical scenario illustrates the relatively high legal thresholds required for criminal liability under existing UK legislation. While the National Security Act 2023 addresses foreign state-linked interference, and the Online Safety Act 2023 imposes duties on platforms regarding misinformation and disinformation, neither is designed to address the cumulative, fast-moving effects of UK-user amplified misinformation in real-time. Similarly, the Public Order Act 1986 targets intentional or clearly reckless spreading of information, rather than negligent or good-faith spreading of false claims, even where such content contributes to public disorder. The current legislative landscape is aiming to safeguard freedom of expression and avoid criminalising good-faith reporting in situations where facts are still being established. At the same time, it leaves a gap in effectively mitigating crises and subsequent harms that can arise in today's fast-moving digital information landscape.

Building societal resilience and preparedness

Alongside efforts to counter extremism, foreign interference and harmful online content, successive governments have increasingly recognised the importance of strengthening societal resilience and preparedness. While traditional security policy has often focused on the capability of the government and its institutions to respond to crises, there has been a growing recognition that resilience also depends on the preparedness of communities, local groups, and individual citizens. This reflects the understanding that the wide range of contemporary threats that the United Kingdom faces, from state-sponsored proxy activity to natural disasters, can only be effectively managed through a whole-of-society approach.

Table 4: Frameworks relevant to building societal resilience and preparedness

Framework	What it covers	Gap it leaves
National Security Strategy and Resilience Action Plan (2025)	Strategic framework for national security challenges; focus on domestic resilience; both documents emphasise the importance of the social contract to resilience.	NPC evidence found plans do not sufficiently focus on public understanding or engagement. Mechanisms to guarantee effective implementation are limited.
National Risk Register (2025)	89 acute risks identified; Chronic Risks Analysis introduced; provides the basis for government and Local Resilience Forum (LRF) emergency planning.	Not an integrated resilience framework. Does not incorporate social cohesion or democratic resilience as risk factors. Responsibilities for prevention and recovery remain dispersed across multiple organisations.

There are questions as to the extent to which these policies have effectively translated into practice. Evidence submitted by the National Preparedness Commission (NPC) to the **Joint Committee for the National Security Strategy** highlighted several limitations. While the government recognised that improving national resilience requires greater public awareness of the risks and threats faced, the NPC argued that plans do not sufficiently focus on increasing public understanding, engagement or participation. Furthermore, concerns were raised about the lack of mechanisms to guarantee the

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effective implementation of resilience strategies.¹⁷⁴ As a result, there remains a gap between recognising the importance of whole-of-society resilience and truly embedding resilience-building behaviours across the public and communities.

Taking a whole-of-society approach to national resilience and preparedness requires not only considering the responsibilities of government and institutions but also the role that individuals and communities can play - this is the crux of the idea of a social contract. Experts engaged in this research highlighted the need for greater emphasis on individual responsibility, including how citizens can contribute to community resilience before, during, and after crises. Framing preparedness as a shared societal responsibility, rather than solely a government function, may help to foster a greater sense of collective ownership for preparedness and, ultimately, a more cohesive and resilient society.

International experience demonstrates that whole-of-society resilience can be embedded through integrated national frameworks that combine prevention, preparedness, response and recovery while clearly defining the role of communities and citizens. **New Zealand**, for example, has adopted the All Hazards Emergency Management resilience approach designed to respond to a wide range of crises from natural disasters such as the 2010-2011 Canterbury earthquakes, to acts of violence such as the Christchurch mosque shootings, and public health emergencies such as Covid-19. The approach is underpinned by the 4Rs: Reduction, Readiness, Response, Recovery. A key strength of the New Zealand approach is its continuous cycle where lessons learned from crises are systematically incorporated into future risk reduction and national preparedness measures.

Compared to New Zealand's legislatively embedded 4Rs model, the UK's approach remains relatively reactive to crises, with long-term prevention and recovery responsibilities dispersed across multiple partners rather than being integrated within a single emergency management framework. While the National Risk Register (NRR) identifies and communicates priority risks to government, businesses and the public, it is not itself an integrated resilience framework. Responsibilities for risk reduction, preparedness, response and recovery remain distributed across multiple organisations and in sector-specific policies, such as the National Cyber Strategy (2022), rather than being unified under a single resilience model with legislative teeth.

New Zealand's national preparedness arrangements are also characterised by strong local and community ownership. Emergency management is delivered through 16 regional Civil Defence Emergency Management (CDEM) Groups, which bring together local government, emergency services, health, and community groups.¹⁷⁵ The model places significant emphasis on communities being active

¹⁷⁴ National Preparedness Commission. "[NPC's written evidence on the National Security Strategy](#)." *National Preparedness Commission*. (2025).

¹⁷⁵ Civil Defence National Emergency Management Agency. "[About emergency management](#)." *New Zealand Government*. (Last updated 2025).

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participants rather than passive recipients of national government assistance and encourages citizens and voluntary organisations to play a defined role in preparedness and recovery.

The refreshed **National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Resilience and Emergencies** provide a nationally agreed framework to strengthen the resilience workforce.¹⁷⁶ Designed for use across sectors including local government and healthcare, they offer guidance and promote a shared understanding of resilience approaches and support the development of emerging roles such as **Chief Resilience Officers (CROs)**. The introduction of NOS and CROs reflects a broader recognition of the need to strengthen and modernise local resilience arrangements in response to an increasingly complex threat landscape.

While the United Kingdom has multi-agency **Local Resilience Forums (LRFs)** established under the Civil Contingencies Act (2004), these operate as non-statutory partnerships and rely heavily on the resources and goodwill of partners. The government's Evaluation of the 2021/22 Funding Pilot for LRFs highlighted significant disparities in local capability, with some LRFs operating with only a single dedicated officer and relying on partners for capacity.¹⁷⁷ The pilot itself was the first time that the central government provided direct funding to LRFs outside of specific emergencies. Recent research has found ongoing challenges with the consistency of approaches and capacity across LRFs, specifically in the context of weather emergencies; however, the findings may have wider applicability across other crises.¹⁷⁸ The same research found inconsistent public awareness of local resilience planning and noted that many LRF communication strategies remain quite reactive. Collectively, these structural and operational challenges may limit the development of a whole-of-society, locally embedded approach to resilience.

¹⁷⁶ National Preparedness Commission. "[National Occupational Standards \(NOS\) for Resilience and Emergencies.](#)" National Preparedness Commission.

¹⁷⁷ Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, "[Independent Report: Evaluation of the 2021/22 Funding Pilot for Local Resilience Forums.](#)" GOV.UK. (2023).

¹⁷⁸ Blake, Daniel. Mark., and Loud, Emily., and Brooks, Katya., and Petrokofsky, Carl., Thompson, Ross., and Jung, Agnes., Coleman, Paul. "[A qualitative study of local health resilience to adverse weather in England, UK.](#)" *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*. (2026).

Cumbria Resilience: Local Resilience Forum Trailblazer Programme¹⁷⁹

Cumbria has been awarded funding over a two-year period to deliver a pilot as part of the Local Resilience Forum Trailblazer Programme. The programme aims to strengthen local resilience through a whole-system approach by bringing together emergency services, local authorities, health, voluntary sector partners, and communities to improve preparedness, response, and recovery.

The programme includes the appointment of a Chief Resilience Officer (CRO) and Project Support Officer to provide strategic leadership and accountability on resilience planning within the Cumbria Combined Authority. Alongside investment in training and exercising, improved data and intelligence capabilities, the programme also aims to empower communities to play an active role in managing future risks. Community resilience will be supported by a Community Resilience Fund that will provide grants to community groups to help build their resilience and preparedness for responding to emergency events.

While the focus of this pilot is to improve resilience locally, it has the potential to generate learning and good practice that can inform resilience planning nationally and support a whole-of-society approach to national preparedness.

Other international examples suggest that a more comprehensive approach to societal resilience may be possible. The **Finnish** Comprehensive Security Model integrates government, businesses, civil society and citizens into national resilience planning.¹⁸⁰ National resilience and preparedness are treated as a shared responsibility, supported by education, public awareness campaigns, and voluntary training programmes. The Finnish National Defence Courses, for example, bring together influential individuals from different sectors to educate them on societal preparedness and crisis management.¹⁸¹ The aim is to strengthen networks across society and ensure that resilience is understood as a collective responsibility. This approach reflects the broader Finnish view that national preparedness not only depends on the government and institutions but also on the whole population. The United Kingdom's political and social context is different; however, the Finnish approach demonstrates the potential value of setting clearer expectations about the role that individuals can play in building societal resilience and preparedness.

Sweden has also adopted a similar whole-of-society approach through its Total Defence concept, which integrates military and civilian preparedness. An important feature of the Swedish model is its

¹⁷⁹ Cumbria Resilience. "[Appendix 1: Local Resilience Forum Trailblazer Programme Delivery Plan 2026-2028.](#)" (2026).

¹⁸⁰ Woolmore, Tom. "[Why Finland's Comprehensive Security model is so popular, and why the UK's 'whole-of-society approach' continues to be limited in scope.](#)" *National Preparedness Commission*. (2026)

¹⁸¹ National Defence University. "[Finnish National Defense Courses.](#)" *The Finnish Defence Forces*. (2026).

recognition that national resilience extends beyond physical threats to include the protection of the information environment. The Swedish Psychological Defence Agency was established to identify, analyse and counter external information influence directed at Sweden aimed at harming its interests. To support democratic resilience and the integrity of elections, the Agency has developed a dedicated public information page about the 2026 elections. The page provides situational overviews of information threats, guidance on identifying misinformation and disinformation, and educational resources on election interference, including examples from other countries.¹⁸² The web page also includes information about the risks posed by AI and the methods used by hostile foreign actors to influence democratic processes. The Swedish approach demonstrates how information security, public awareness and physical preparedness for emergencies can be integrated within a single national resilience framework.

In the United Kingdom the **Representation of the People Bill** intends to lower the voting age to 16. This represents an opportunity for the government to promote an understanding of democracy to younger cohorts and has the potential to strengthen democratic resilience.

Electoral Commission: Improving Democratic Education¹⁸³

Improving Democratic Education is a new project commissioned by the Electoral Commission. Following the government's commitment to reduce the voting age to 16, it aims to ensure that democratic education provision is delivered consistently across the United Kingdom, giving all young people the opportunity to learn about democracy, voting and elections.

The project has commissioned several expert organisations to provide support and resources and to deliver training to schools, youth settings and parents. This includes commissioning Shout Out UK to map media literacy provision and use the findings to co-design new resources and campaigns to build young people's resilience against misinformation and disinformation.

While primarily intended to ensure that education on politics is consistent and comprehensive, the project has the potential to improve media literacy amongst young people and increase long-term resilience to misinformation and disinformation.

Communications and trusted sources of information in crises

A key component of a whole-of-society approach to national preparedness is that the public has access to accurate, timely and trusted information in times of crisis. Having trusted information can influence

¹⁸² Psychological Defence Agency. "[Election Influence](#)." *Psychological Defence Agency*. (Published and accessed in 2026).

¹⁸³ The Electoral Commission. "[Improving democratic education](#)." *The Electoral Commission*. (2026).

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the public's behaviour, support an effective collective response, and help to prevent the spread of harmful misinformation and disinformation by malign actors.

The United Kingdom has established structures for communicating with the public during emergencies. Under the **Civil Contingencies Act (2004)**, local responders, including the police, fire and rescue, ambulance services, and local authorities, have responsibilities to warn, inform, and advise the public. These functions are supported by central government communications, including the **Government Communications Service (GCS)**, which provides crisis communications support across government. During major national emergencies, the **Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR)** directorate coordinates communications across government departments.

These structures provide a framework for crisis communications, but their effectiveness depends on public trust in the messaging. Throughout this research, experts consistently raised concerns about declining trust in government and traditional media. This matters for crisis preparedness because where trust in official information sources is low, the public may be more willing to seek alternative sources of information, including social media, online influencers, and community groups. While these sources of information can play an important role in sharing useful information, they can also increase vulnerability to misinformation and disinformation if inaccurate or harmful content is proliferated or amplified.

This suggests that effective crisis communication requires more than clear messaging at the time of emergencies; it also requires building and maintaining trusted communication channels before crises occur. Experts highlighted the importance of identifying and working with trusted voices that can communicate effectively to different communities in crises and periods of uncertainty. These can include faith leaders or voluntary organisations, who may be viewed as more trustworthy than national institutions. In addition, individuals directly affected by crises may emerge as influential and trusted voices. For example, following incidents of serious violence and public disorder, the families of victims, including Stephen Ogilvy and Henry Nowak, have publicly appealed for calm and urged communities not to respond with unrest or retaliation.^{184 185}

Such interventions can carry moral authority and legitimacy, demonstrating that effective crisis communication may depend not only on official government messaging but also on the ability to amplify credible, community-based voices that can reinforce social cohesion and resilience. As the range of threats to the United Kingdom continues to evolve, communications should be viewed as a key part of national preparedness rather than a response function in crisis situations.

¹⁸⁴ Logan, Rebekah., and Humphrey, Andrew. "[Family of Belfast knife victim say 'unrest is not welcome' as extra police brought onto streets.](#)" *BBC*. (2026).

¹⁸⁵ Seddon, Paul. "[PM accuses Farage of exploiting Nowak case and denies 'two-tier policing' claim.](#)" *BBC*. (2026).

Strengthening social cohesion and democratic resilience

Alongside efforts to strengthen national preparedness, governments have increasingly recognised social cohesion as an important aspect of national resilience. Strong social ties can help to build trust between communities, strengthen confidence in institutions, and thereby reduce the vulnerabilities which may be exploited by malign actors seeking to promote hostility and polarisation. Countering the current threats also depends on democratic resilience, including reinforcing the capacity of democratic institutions to withstand electoral interference and declining public trust.

The **Representation of the People Bill** aims to strengthen democratic processes and encourage democratic participation. The bill includes proposals designed to remove barriers to participation in democratic processes, such as provisions to enable automatic or direct voter registration. It also seeks to reduce malign actor interference in democratic processes by requiring unincorporated associations to ensure that any funds they receive for the purposes of making political contributions originate from a permissible source.¹⁸⁶

The government has aimed to strengthen cohesion by focusing on improving relations between communities and reducing social tensions. The **Integrated Communities Action Plan (2019)** sought to address barriers to integration, reduce mistrust and improve relations between different groups. However, concerns have persisted about the coherence and effectiveness of the government's approach to social cohesion. The **Khan Review (2024)** concluded that the government did not have a sufficiently strategic approach to maintaining social cohesion.¹⁸⁷ Similar concerns were raised by British Future and the Belong Network in 2025, who found that the government response to improving social cohesion was fragmented, patchy and reactive - tending to be triggered only after crises and flashpoints rather than as part of a sustained and preventative strategy.¹⁸⁸

More recently, the government has sought to place greater emphasis on belonging and local identity. The **Pride in Place Strategy (2025)** sets out a plan to provide people with more agency in rejuvenating their local communities with a view to instilling greater unity and social cohesion.¹⁸⁹ The strategy included a commitment to deliver up to £20 million of funding over the next decade into 75 areas across the United Kingdom.¹⁹⁰ The government's recent strategy, **Protecting What Matters: Towards**

¹⁸⁶ The Electoral Commission. "[Understanding the Representation of the People Bill](#)." *The Electoral Commission*. (2026).

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.; Khan DBE, Dame Sara. "[The Khan Review: Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience](#)." *GOV.UK*. (2024).

¹⁸⁸ Puddle, Jake., Rutter, Jill., Rolfe, Heather. "[The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK](#)." *British Future*. (2025)

¹⁸⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. "[Pride in Place Strategy](#)." *Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government*. (2025).

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

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a more confident, cohesive, and resilient United Kingdom (2026), further recognised the links between social cohesion, resilience, and national security.

Despite these developments, critics have highlighted how the government needs to embed connection and cohesion in policy, not just in place, and that there also needs to be a focus on ensuring communities feel safe, seen, and united, as well as proud.¹⁹¹ The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has similarly warned that significant numbers of disadvantaged neighbourhoods will not benefit from current funding approaches, potentially reinforcing existing inequalities and feelings of exclusion.¹⁹² The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Counter Extremism similarly argued that Protecting What Matters does not go far enough in responding to the scale of the challenge facing the United Kingdom. In its assessment of the Action Plan, the APPG noted that social cohesion and counter-extremism continue to be treated as largely separate policy areas, despite growing evidence that declining social cohesion, democratic resilience, trust in institutions, misinformation and extremism are increasingly interconnected. The APPG advocates for a more strategic and joined up approach, focusing on the whole of society approach to strengthening community and democratic resilience.¹⁹³

Table 5: Frameworks relevant to strengthening social cohesion and democratic resilience

Framework	What it covers	Gap it leaves
Pride in Place Strategy (2025)	Addresses barriers to integration; promotes belonging and local identity; £20m funding commitment across 75 areas.	The Khan Review (2024) found the approach lacks strategic coherence. British Future (2025) described it as fragmented, patchy and reactive, triggered by crises rather than sustained. Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlighted concerns that disadvantaged neighbourhoods risk exclusion from funding.

¹⁹¹ Fowler, Kelly. "[Pride in Place? This is the moment.](#)" *Belong*. (2025).

¹⁹² Hunter, Scott. and Ibison, Yasmin. "[Pride in Place: funding gaps and capacity challenges.](#)" *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*. (2026).

¹⁹³ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Counter Extremism. "[Policy Briefing: A Review of Recent Counter Extremism and Social Cohesion Policy Developments.](#)" *UK Parliament*. (2026).

Elections Act (2022) and Restoring trust in our democracy (2025)	Voter ID requirements; protections against foreign interference; Joint Election Security and Preparedness Unit (JESP) cited as European best practice.	While 93 per cent of the public perceive elections as fair, the current approach can be reactive, focusing on specific electoral events rather than long-term resilience.
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Social cohesion is a core attribute of national resilience and can be strengthened at moments of crisis when the response to that crisis and its recovery are good. It is also at these moments that social cohesion can most easily break down, however, pointing to the need for a sustained approach to strengthening social cohesion over the long term. This must be built on promoting trust in local leadership, improving public understanding of democratic processes, and providing the public with meaningful opportunities to contribute to their communities and have a say in decisions that affect them. Policies that promote social cohesion can strengthen not only communities themselves but also the resilience of democratic institutions and the United Kingdom’s overall ability to withstand crises and attempts at destabilisation.

Conclusion

Declining trust in government and institutions, social and political fragmentation, and the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation create opportunities for extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors. While recent policy developments indicate a recognition of the links between social cohesion, democratic resilience and national security, current approaches remain fragmented and often reactive. Building long-term national resilience to crises requires a whole-of-society approach that strengthens the social contract by building public trust, enhancing preparedness, improving media literacy, and fostering meaningful community engagement and democratic participation.

Recommendations

Preparing

Recommendation 1: Social cohesion and democratic resilience must be viewed as essential components of national resilience and preparedness to address the ongoing threat from malign actors seeking to exploit vulnerabilities through misinformation and disinformation. These components must feed into the assessment of risk, support contingency planning and inform communication with wider society and the general public.

The government should incorporate democratic resilience and social cohesion into the National Risk Register and recognise the threat of actors seeking to exploit crises by seeking to undermine them. This should inform risk scenarios and how the response would need to address these vulnerabilities. Previously, it has been recommended that the government establish a new centralised directorate inside the Cabinet Office to address democratic decline, strengthen social cohesion, build democratic and societal resilience and counter extremism and other related threats. Our research underlines the importance of establishing this directorate, particularly in the context of strengthening our response to crises and coordinating across government departments.

Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) should be mandated to review social cohesion and democratic resilience as part of their risk assessment, contingency planning, and communications planning, particularly addressing the threat of actors using misinformation and disinformation during crises. This responsibility should be clear within each LRF, potentially driven by the emerging role of the Chief Resilience Officer. This should include:

- Assessing levels of public trust in local democratic institutions and the emergency services
- Identifying existing community tensions and vulnerabilities that could be exploited in and/or exacerbated by a crisis
- Understanding the activities of malign actors, and how crises could be exploited to increase division
- Considering how misinformation and disinformation could spread locally, and planning for this
- Identifying and maintaining a good current understanding of local trusted voices

Recommendation 2: Building social cohesion and democratic resilience requires sustained cross-departmental commitment and investment as a key part of national preparedness. Investment should support initiatives that strengthen trust between communities, government and institutions, improve media literacy, support local resilience, and build individual, government and civil society capacity to respond to and counter misinformation and disinformation.

Recommendation 3: The government should establish a more systematic approach to understanding where and how crises could create opportunities for social division, disorder, and democratic harm.

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Previous reports have recommended building a comprehensive extremism, cohesion and resilience analytical framework and assessment capability. This should be led by the centralised directorate inside the Cabinet Office. Government policy should be informed by mapping social and political tension hotspots and establishing baseline measures of trust, cohesion and democratic resilience across communities. Such analysis could be used to identify emerging vulnerabilities and risks, directing resources and enabling targeted interventions, as well as equipping both national and local stakeholders to plan and respond to what has been identified.

Recommendation 4: The government should invest in digital technological capabilities to identify emerging threats, detect problematic content at scale and support crisis response and communications. This capability should be able to monitor evolving narratives, identify coordinated campaigns by malign actors to undermine the social contract, and support rapid responses to misinformation and disinformation. Standing capabilities should be scalable, such that additional resources can be deployed during crises (when information threats are likely to increase significantly) to review and potentially remove harmful content. Where necessary, the government should coordinate this activity. Countermeasures and crisis protocols should be developed for different information environments, including social media platforms, private messaging services, AI, and traditional media.

Recommendation 5: The government should review how to update existing legal frameworks to appropriately address misinformation and disinformation during crises, especially where such activity could threaten national security, public safety or critical infrastructure - this could also extend to actors who seek to engineer crises through disinformation. In particular, consideration should be given to how existing offences under the National Security Act 2023, Online Safety Act 2023 and Public Order Act 1986 apply in contexts where harm arises from the rapid, cumulative, and algorithmically amplified dissemination of misinformation and disinformation across multiple users and platforms.

The government should also consider whether current legislation is sufficiently able to address the risks from emerging technologies and communications, including AI-generated content, chatbots, private messaging, and other platforms, where misinformation can be spread quickly. Any reforms should strike the right balance between protecting public safety and national security in times of crisis and upholding freedom of expression.

Recommendation 6: The government should devise and promote a whole-of-society approach that involves individuals, schools, businesses, and public institutions in strengthening resilience. This should include media literacy education across all age groups, training and support for teachers, public awareness campaigns focused on responsible information consumption and sharing, promotion of initiatives that strengthen civic participation, critical thinking and democratic engagement. The government should strengthen local capacity to counter misinformation and disinformation by supporting trusted local voices, community leaders and organisations that can engage effectively with

local populations in crises. Local Resilience Forums should be provided with sufficient resources, guidance and training to coordinate these efforts and build trust before crises occur.

Recommendation 7: The government should consider how journalism and public service broadcasting, including reporting on local democracy, are bolstered, with clear roles in challenging misinformation and disinformation, particularly in times of crisis. High-quality local journalism plays a critical role in verifying information, countering misinformation and providing a trusted information source in crises. The Government recognises the challenge faced by local media in competing with alternative sources of information.¹⁹⁴ This challenge should be recognised with sufficient resources and by designating local news media, including the Local Democracy Reporting Service, as part of the critical national infrastructure.

The 2027 BBC Charter renewal should consider how public service broadcasting can contribute to social cohesion and democratic resilience, drawing on principles from Finland's Comprehensive Security Model. It should also consider a significant expansion of the Local Democracy Reporting Service to ensure more consistent coverage across the UK.

Responding

Recommendation 8: The government should ensure media platforms and Local Resilience Forums have comprehensive crisis protocols to counter misinformation and disinformation. These protocols should be underpinned by strong, ongoing relationships with community groups, the voluntary sector, and wider civil society, which should be developed and sustained as part of routine preparedness and resilience activities. This should include communications that enable responders to acknowledge incidents quickly, communicate what is known and unknown, and provide regular updates when information becomes available. Crisis communications strategies should also identify and use trusted voices, including local leaders, subject matter experts and community groups, who can help communicate to different audiences and reinforce important information and messaging.

Engagement with such trusted voices should be maintained and refreshed so they are prepared and equipped to support in crises. The government and Local Resilience Forums should make greater use of existing emergency alert capabilities, including geographically targeted alerts where appropriate, as part of a strategy to warn and accurately inform the public in crises. This use of alerts needs to be timely, including having protocols that permit the use of alerts quickly in rapidly changing situations.

Recommendation 9: Communication should explicitly acknowledge the likelihood of misinformation and disinformation being spread in crises and provide the public with practical advice and access to trusted information sources. Government, local authorities, and crisis responders should have access to pre-approved messaging templates that can be adapted in different crises that flag the use of

¹⁹⁴ Department for Culture, Media & Sport. [Amplify: The Local Media Action Plan](#). (2026)

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misinformation and disinformation to key audiences. These messages should be informed by behavioural science and could involve co-design with different demographic groups.

Recovering

Recommendation 10: We should use crises and emergencies as a 'reachable moment' to rebuild the social contract and trust in democratic institutions in the affected areas and more widely. Recovery should extend beyond restoring services and infrastructure to rebuilding public trust, confidence in institutions, and social cohesion. Following a crisis, the government should continue to communicate about the response, the actions taken to protect communities and the lessons learned for future crises. Where crises have been handled effectively, communications with the public should highlight examples of effective leadership and partnership working. This could help to bolster public trust in institutions and confidence in government. Examples of communities supporting preparedness and resilience should be highlighted to reinforce the important role that individuals and communities play in the whole-of-society model. Increasing trust in democratic institutions should be a specific success measure for recovery programmes and interventions.

Recommendation 11: Following crises, the government, led by the central directorate / Cabinet Office and working with relevant partners, including LRFs, should undertake a review of the role that misinformation and disinformation played in the crisis. This should include analysis of its impact on public behaviour, social cohesion, trust in government and institutions, and the effectiveness of the emergency response. Lessons learned should be incorporated into future resilience planning for crises. This should include updating the National Risk Register and local risk registers to reflect the vulnerabilities identified and learnings from crises. Mechanisms to share lessons learned and best practice across local and national partners should be established to strengthen the UK's ability to anticipate, mitigate, and respond to crises.

Annex

Context

This project was commissioned by the National Preparedness Commission (NPC). It was led by Dame Sara Khan with support from Crest Insights, the in-house think tank of Crest Advisory, to research the extent to which the UK's social contract has weakened and what this means for national preparedness and crisis response. It builds on both Dame Sara Khan's 2024 Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience¹⁹⁵, and Crest Insight's 2024 report Societal Threats and Declining Democratic Resilience: The New Extremism Landscape.¹⁹⁶

Methodology

The project comprised three phases:

- Evidence review
- Expert interviews
- Expert roundtables

Evidence review

The evidence review examined existing research and evidence on trust, democratic resilience and social cohesion in the UK, examining trends over time, drivers of decline, and variation across demographic groups and regions. The following questions are addressed:

1. To what extent has the social contract frayed?
2. What opportunities does this present for extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors?
3. What are the existing frameworks, strategies and policies to support resilience and national preparedness?
4. What would this mean for government response to a local, regional or national emergency?
5. What can be done to strengthen national resilience and preparedness?

To answer these questions, search terms were developed to identify the most relevant evidence. Searches were conducted using 'Google' and 'Google Scholar', alongside analysis of relevant datasets and media sources, including print, broadcast, and online media.

¹⁹⁵ Khan DBE, Dame Sara. "[The Khan Review: Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience.](#)" GOV.UK. (2024).

¹⁹⁶ Kahn DBE, Dame Sara, and Crest Insights. "[Societal Threats and Declining Democratic Resilience: The New Extremism Landscape.](#)" Crest Advisory. (2025).

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Research question	Search terms
To what extent has the social contract frayed?	"social contract" AND "frayed" AND "UK" "social cohesion" AND "current state" AND "UK" "decline" AND "social contract" AND "UK"
What opportunities does this present for extremists and bad-faith actors?	"social contract" AND "extremist" AND "threat" AND "UK" "disinformation" AND "extremist" AND "UK" "disinformation" AND "foreign actor" AND "UK" "hate" AND "extremism" "racism" AND "extremism" "misinformation" AND "bad-faith actors" "what" AND "bad-faith actor" "effect" "weakening" AND "social contract" AND "UK" "social contract" AND "effects" AND "UK" "mis and disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic"
What are the existing frameworks, strategies and policies to support resiliency and national preparedness?	"national preparedness" AND "UK" "national preparedness" AND "social cohesion" "divided society" AND "national preparedness" "counter-extremism" and "national preparedness" "social cohesion" AND "national preparedness" AND "UK" "social cohesion" AND "national preparedness" "national preparedness" AND "the social contract"

What would this mean for government response to a local, regional or national emergency?	“trust AND “transparency” AND “crisis response” “trust” AND “crisis” AND “response” “misinformation” AND “crisis” AND “response” AND “UK”
What can be done to strengthen national resilience and preparedness?	“measurements” AND “national preparedness”

Interviews

Twelve semi-structured interviews with experts in crisis planning, policing, resilience and national security complemented the evidence review. These interviews explored perceptions of the state of the social contract, social cohesion, and democratic resilience in the UK; and the opportunities this presents for extremists, bad-faith actors and hostile foreign actors to exploit crises; trends over time; protective factors; and examples of international best practice. Interviews also contributed to the development of plausible crisis scenarios to be tested in the roundtables.

Roundtables

Two expert roundtables were held in May 2026 to validate findings, refine the scenarios and develop recommendations. The first focused on scenario development and impact assessment. It brought together crisis planners, resilience experts, behavioural scientists and extremism experts to consider how the fraying social contract could affect the UK in different types of scenarios (see Section 3). The second roundtable focused on solutions, examining best practice from the UK and internationally and identifying practical ways to integrate democratic resilience and social cohesion into national preparedness arrangements.

Together, these three phases informed the analysis, findings and recommendations set out in this report.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the expert interviewees and the roundtable participants who generously shared their expertise. We would like to acknowledge the contribution of the following stakeholders:

- Nick Aldworth, Counter-terrorism expert and Former Detective Chief Superintendent
- Dr William Allchorn, International Policing and Public Protection Research Institute
- Katie Barnes, Executive Director of the National Preparedness Commission

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- Mary Calam, policing and public safety expert and former Director General of Crime and Policing Group
- Milo Comerford, Institute for Strategic Dialogue
- Polly Curtis, Chief Executive of Demos
- Dr Kate Ferguson, Co-Executive Director and Head of Policy and Research at Protection Approaches
- Lord Toby Harris, Chair of the National Preparedness Commission
- Sam Hartley, The Electoral Commission
- Daniel Hawkins, Cardinal Insights
- Professor Lisa Hollins, Executive Director at the British Red Cross and Commissioner at the National Preparedness Commission
- Sunder Katwala, Director of British Future
- Oliver Levinson, Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime
- Maria Lovegrove, Policing leader and former Head of Prevent
- Lydia Preston, Centre for Long-Term Resilience
- Matthew Redhead, Royal United Services Institute
- Alastair Reed, Centre for Peace and Security
- Professor Matt Ryan, Centre for Democratic Futures
- Chris Singer, Resilience Advisors Network
- Laura Smith, Co-director of the Bath Institute for Digital Security and Behaviour
- Wojciech Solak, Centre for Democracy and Resilience
- Ari Soonawalla, Say No To Disinfo
- Martha Turnbull, European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats
- Taimi Vilkkö, Embassy of Finland
- Sarah Ward, M&C Saatchi World Service
- Owen Weatherill, policing expert and Former Assistant Chief Constable
- Professor Scott Williamson, Oxford Centre for Democratic Resilience
- Rebecca Collins, Faith and Belief Forum
- Matthew Godwin, Senior Researcher at Hofenung Foundation

Definitions

Artificial Intelligence (AI): artificial intelligence (AI) refers to all logical and automated processes, generally based on algorithms, designed to reproduce, at least in part, human behaviour, such as learning, reasoning, planning, or creating.

Bad-faith actors: individuals or groups who deliberately amplify fear, grievance, or conspiracy narratives in order to heighten perceived threats between communities and mobilise social conflict,

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particularly during crises or sensitive events.¹⁹⁷ Although similar, they differ from extremists in that their actions are not driven by an ideology or belief system.

Chatbot: a computer program that simulates conversation with human end users. Chatbots are increasingly using AI techniques to understand user questions and respond to them.

Cost-of-living-crisis: the fall in ‘real’ disposable incomes - adjusted for inflation and after taxes and benefits - that the United Kingdom has experienced since late 2021.

Critical National Infrastructure: assets, systems, and networks essential to the functioning of a state, the disruption or destruction of which would have significant national security, economic, or public safety consequences. In the United Kingdom, assets, systems, and networks that meet certain criteria are designated as critical national infrastructure.

Deepfake: digitally created and altered content often in the form of fake images, videos and audio recordings.

Democratic backsliding: a gradual process by which a state becomes less democratic over time. It is usually intentional and comes about through the actions of democratically elected leaders. It is a form of democratic decline.¹⁹⁸

Democratic resilience: the ability of a political system to withstand and adapt to challenges, threats, and crises without compromising its democratic principles, institutions, or processes. This includes both the formal structures upheld by the state such as free speech, fair elections, and independent judiciary and free press; and also the democratic values held by individual citizens, including tolerance of each other and trust in democratic processes.¹⁹⁹

Demographic groups: a section of the population sharing common characteristics, such as age, sex, and ethnicity.

Disinformation: the deliberate creation and spreading of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead people, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain.²⁰⁰

Distrust: a firmly held negative opinion that others are completely untrustworthy.

¹⁹⁷ British Future. “[Written Evidence From British Future \[CC10028\]](#).” *UK Parliament*. (2025).

¹⁹⁸ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. “[The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise](#).” *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*. (2019).

¹⁹⁹ Cheeseman, Nic., Desrosiers, Marie-Eve., Cianetti, Licia. and Gehrke, Manoel. “[How to Strengthen Democratic Resilience: Five Lessons for Democratic Renewal](#).” *European Democracy Hub*. (2024).

²⁰⁰ Cabinet Office, and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. “[Fact Sheet on the CDU and RRU](#).” *GOV.UK*. (2023).

Emergency: an event or situation which causes or may cause serious damage to human welfare; the environment; or War, or terrorism, which threatens serious damage to security. This definition is set out in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

Extremism: the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to: a) negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or b) undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (a) or (b).²⁰¹

Extremists: individuals, groups or organisations who align with an ideology or belief system that is based on violence, hatred or intolerance.²⁰² As highlighted in previous research conducted by Dame Sara Khan and Crest, the ideology or belief system does not have to be coherent, with some extremists displaying 'mixed, unstable or unclear ideology' rather than subscribing to one specific ideology or belief system.²⁰³

Foreign interference: malign activity carried out for, on behalf of or for the benefit of a foreign power. It is intended to sow division, manipulate public discourse, bias the development of policy, and undermine the political system and national security of the United Kingdom.²⁰⁴

Great Replacement theory: a theory that suggests that white people are being replaced by non-white immigrants.

Hostile foreign actors include individuals, groups, or state entities that deliberately engage in harmful activities to disrupt, damage, or undermine security, infrastructure, or organisations. These can include proxies who take part in hostile or interference activities in other states on behalf of a hostile foreign state. These activities aim to: destabilise another state, for example by using disinformation to weaken the integrity of democratic institutions; neutralise perceived threats, such as assassinating dissidents or critics abroad; or achieve strategic benefits in the context of an active or shadow conflict, for example the targeting of weapons manufacturers who are supplying equipment to their adversary.²⁰⁵

Local Resilience Forums (LRF): multi-agency partnerships made up of representatives from local public services, including the emergency services, local authorities, the NHS, the Environment Agency and

²⁰¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, and Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities. "[New definition of extremism \(2024\)](#)." GOV.UK. (2024).

²⁰² Kahn DBE, Dame Sara, and Crest Insights. "[Societal Threats and Declining Democratic Resilience: The New Extremism Landscape](#)." Crest Advisory. (2025); Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. "[New definition of extremism](#)." GOV.UK. (2024).

²⁰³ Khan DBE, Dame Sara, and Crest Insights. "[Societal Threats and Declining Democratic Resilience: The New Extremism Landscape](#)."

²⁰⁴ Home Office. "[Foreign interference: National Security Bill factsheet](#)." GOV.UK. (2025).

²⁰⁵ Home Office. "[Foreign interference: National Security Bill factsheet](#)." GOV.UK. (2025).

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others. These agencies are designated Category 1 Responders with duties under the Civil Contingencies Act.

Malign actors: actors who are seeking to harm the United Kingdom and its social contract, including extremists, hostile foreign actors and bad-faith actors.

Misinformation: the inadvertent spread of false information.²⁰⁶

Mistrust: a certain level of scepticism towards the ‘other’.

Preparedness: a state in which the United Kingdom has the right mindset, capabilities, information and governance structures to deal with adverse events – whether foreseen or unexpected.²⁰⁷

Social cohesion: the extent to which the public live together in a diverse democracy and negotiate differences of opinion and values in pursuit of the common good.

Social contract: an implicit agreement between the people and their government about what each side provides to the other.

Southport attack: a stabbing attack at a Taylor Swift-themed dance and yoga workshop in Southport, England, in which three children were killed and several others were injured.

Southport riots: a series of violent, anti-immigrant, and Islamophobic disturbances that broke out in Southport, England on July 30th 2024 and spread to towns and cities across England and Northern Ireland.

Terrorism: The use or threat of serious violence against a person or serious damage to property where that action is designed to influence the government or an international governmental organisation or to intimidate the public or a section of the public for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause.

Toughness gap: the difference between how tough on crime respondents view the police as being and how tough on crime respondents want the police to be.²⁰⁸

Traditional media: media institutions and communication channels that existed before the internet, such as radio, print and television.

Wealth inequality: the unequal distribution of assets amongst individuals or families.

²⁰⁶ Cabinet Office, and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. “[Fact Sheet on the CDU and RRU](#).” GOV.UK. (2023).

²⁰⁷ National Preparedness Commission. “[Preparedness](#)”. *National Preparedness Commission*. (2026).

²⁰⁸ Spencer, David. and Tait, Alexander. “[A Portrait of Modern Britain: Crime and closing the ‘Toughness Gap’](#)”. *Policy Exchange*. (2025).

Unincorporated associations: an association of individuals who have come together to carry out a shared purpose. This could be as simple as two people who agree on how to work together towards that shared purpose.²⁰⁹

Limitations when looking at indicators of social cohesion and democratic resilience

It is acknowledged that this review has several limitations. First, key concepts such as social cohesion and extremism lack universally agreed definitions, which creates challenges for both measuring and comparing evidence across sources. Social cohesion in particular is shaped by a wide range of factors, and while this evidence review identifies and examines those most relevant to the social contract and national preparedness, it is not possible to address them all comprehensively. Where definitions are contested, we have adopted working definitions for the purposes of this review, as set out above. In the case of extremism, we have followed the approach noted in Dame Sara Khan’s 2024 Review, which similarly acknowledged the absence of an agreed definition.

Secondly, measuring the precise state of social cohesion is challenging. Although there is extensive policy and research on social cohesion, there is limited clarity about the state of social cohesion in the United Kingdom and the policy objectives associated with it. This is partly because social cohesion has not been defined or measured consistently during the last 20 years.²¹⁰ The government’s own review of social cohesion measures identified several key challenges, including a lack of available and granular sources; variation across sources in the level of locality assessed; and variation in the words, phrases or formats used to describe different aspects of cohesion.²¹¹ To improve understanding of cohesion, the review recommended that measures should reflect at least one of five key elements: identity and belonging; the social economy; meaning and mechanisms of social responsibility; cultural memory and tradition; and care for the future. To capture these elements comprehensively, it suggested five corresponding measures: trust; identity; local connections; prejudice and intergroup relations; and politics and social order.²¹²

As a result of these challenges, the picture presented in this review should be understood as indicative, drawing on the best available evidence sources rather than a definitive measure.

²⁰⁹ The Electoral Commission. “[Understanding the Representation of the People Bill](#).” *The Electoral Commission*. (2026).

²¹⁰ Abrams, Dominic., Davies, Ben. and Horsham, Zoe. “[Rapid Review: Measuring Social Cohesion](#).” *University of Kent and Belong*. (2023).

²¹¹ British Future. “[Written Evidence From British Future \[CCI0028\]](#).” *UK Parliament*. (2025).

²¹² Abrams, Dominic., Davies, Ben. and Horsham, Zoe. “[Rapid Review: Measuring Social Cohesion](#).” *University of Kent and Belong*. (2023).