

Quakers in Britain submission to the Women and Equalities Committee call for evidence on community cohesion

Introduction

Quakers in Britain are a faith group committed to peace, equality, truth and sustainability. We believe there is something sacred in everyone and we put our faith into action through our local, national and international work. Our national church and charity support 18,000 Quakers who worship in 456 local meetings across Britain.

As Quakers we work together with people of other faiths to build community resilience and positive interfaith relations. We are founder members of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, and we are members of the ecumenical bodies in each nation. Until its closure under the previous government, we were active members of the Inter Faith Network for the UK.

Quakers see peace and cohesion as more than opposition to war and physical violence. It is a comprehensive approach to living in the world, which includes living in ways which strengthen community resilience and handling conflict in nonviolent ways. We seek to develop authentic, supportive connections within the communities in which we live, connections which help us to address issues before they spiral into deeper conflict.

We are deeply concerned that society is experiencing increasing division and are alarmed by racially targeted violence, the growing influence of the far right and the mainstreaming of racist and anti-migrant narratives. The racist riots in 2024 had a devastating effect on minoritised communities and Muslim communities in particular.

Community relations are now ever more impacted by overseas events and disinformation. Increasing violence in the Middle East since October 2023 is the backdrop for a growth in both Islamophobia and antisemitism in the UK. These pressures combine with public service underinvestment and severe economic inequality to make the work of social cohesion and good faith relations more challenging.

In this challenging context it is vital that the UK government develops a community cohesion strategy that learns from and supports best practice from faith groups and wider civil society.

What are the primary barriers and threats to community cohesion?

The UK is highly unequal and austerity has stripped away vital social infrastructure.¹ This has proven to be fertile territory for the far right to sow racist resentment against 'out groups' such as migrants and asylum seekers.

Public spending cuts have had a very direct impact on social cohesion at a national and local authority level, with community and interfaith cohesion initiatives closed and teams disbanded.

Over the same period, our democratic institutions have not consistently embodied the high standards of truth and integrity that the public expect from them. In the last few years issues of public trust, accountability and propriety in public office have been brought under the national spotlight. 57% of people now have low or no trust in Parliament.²

The far right has taken advantage of declining trust in democracy, austerity and rising economic insecurity to create and spread narratives (often emanating from mainstream media) that divide people along nationalistic, cultural or ethnic lines. These divisive narratives seemingly have greater purchase because mainstream political parties are struggling to offer compelling visions of hope, connection and progress.

Since the beginning of the latest cycle of violence in the Middle East in October 2023, there has been an increase in both Islamophobia and antisemitism in Britain. Violent events, both at home and overseas can cause deep resentment and have been weaponised to sew further division along ethnic and religious lines.

Deliberate misinformation has been amplified through social media feeds and shared on partisan messaging groups. In the aftermath of the Southport attacks disinformation spread by far-right actors used platforms to provoke targeted violence.

We are so concerned about the impacts of harmful social media content that Quakers in Britain took the decision to disengage from X (formerly Twitter) in December 2024.

The current regulation of digital communication is not compelling social media platforms to consistently and effectively eliminate harmful, racist and hateful content.

¹ The Equality Trust, The Scale of Economic Inequality in the UK, <https://equalitytrust.org.uk/scale-economic-inequality-uk/>

² Office for National Statistics, Trust in government, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/trustinggovernmentuk/2023>

What can be done at a local and national level to improve community cohesion?

We support calls for the UK government to publish a national social cohesion strategy and provide funding to implement it.³

A new national cohesion strategy should learn from the failures of previous 'culturalist' approaches that have overplayed the tendencies of minority groups, in particular Muslims, to segregate themselves.⁴ An overemphasis on assimilation would be counter-productive and risks downplaying the importance of uprooting far right and racist narratives.

We also support the following measures to improve community cohesion:

1. Restore and fund a national interfaith relations umbrella body

Quakers in Britain are devastated by the loss of the Interfaith Network (IFN) which was closed under the previous government. The IFN was an international exemplar of best practice, promoting dialogue and religious literacy that pro-actively alleviated community tensions.

We recognise that interfaith work across the complex faith landscape of Britain is not straightforward, but that a representative national interfaith body is an important building block in this landscape. Faith communities do not need protecting from each other, but spaces to build understanding and solidarity. This is especially important during a time of increased community tensions and high levels of Islamophobia and antisemitism.

Belief communities are also a vital resource that foster positive connections as well as countering hate and false narratives. An autonomous body built and supported by faith communities with government backing is needed to consistently embed dialogue that can help understand, prevent and mitigate possible tensions as they arise.

Alongside a national interfaith relations umbrella body, best practice would also ensure support for local interfaith networks. Whilst there are numerous positive examples of successful local interfaith dialogue, government support is needed to ensure its consistent viability throughout towns and cities in the UK.

³ Quakers in Britain hosted the national cohesion gathering in November 2024 led by Belong, British Futures, and Together. See 'After the Riots' for more analysis and detail on a national cohesion strategy https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/After_the_riots_report.Final_.pdf

⁴ Runnymede, Beyond Crisis; analysing responses to the racist riots https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/66f16005bbb560933efa6bf9_Runnymede%20post-riot%20policy%20response%20-%20FINAL.pdf

2. Introduce a national conflict resolution fund

Our Peacebuilding in Britain team accompanies practitioners working to build cohesion and address conflict. We note a context of increasing tensions and needs, alongside diminishing resources. Many practitioners we accompany spend as much (or more) time applying for funding than carrying out the community building work itself. A national conflict resolution fund would free up civil society practitioners to increase their capacity for cohesion work.

A conflict resolution fund/resource could support the work of those organisations with substantial experience of community-based conflict resolution and facilitate learning exchanges. It could also support action learning and participatory research about the barriers and threats to community cohesion. This could include developing understanding of the impact of social media on community cohesion, the role of the far right and related national policies and discourse, and the local impact of global issues.

3. Add a local authority cohesion ‘duty’ alongside adequate funding

Our direct experience mirrors the concern in the Khan review that local authorities are “struggling to manage evolving threats to community cohesion amid a lack of resources, expertise and capability”.⁵ Through our accompaniment work we have seen the impact of local authority cohesion teams being disbanded or hugely reduced.

A new local authority cohesion duty would require councils to play a more active co-ordination and leadership role, but public bodies must also be sufficiently resourced to build communities more resilient to division and polarisation. Without adequate and sustained funding, the cohesion duty risks becoming a tick box exercise.

Adequate funding would include the resources to work effectively and collaboratively with civil society, improve tension monitoring, undertake context/conflict analysis and conflict sensitive interventions, undertake cohesion impact assessments for policy and practice, tackle prejudice and hate crime effectively.

What examples are there of best practice which has positively impacted community cohesion?

As part of Quakers in Britain’s commitment to the Quaker Peace Testimony, our Peacebuilding in Britain work seeks to develop and strengthen responsive, creative, and transformative approaches to peace and conflict in communities in Britain.

⁵ The Khan Review: Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-khan-review-threats-to-social-cohesion-and-democratic-resilience>

In addition, below are best practice examples we are connected with:

Who is Your Neighbour? (WiYN?) is becoming a nationally recognised charity and is exploring how best to share its practice with partners.⁶ The organisation began as a local organisation operating in, around and in-between Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield. Their facilitators provide spaces in which people can speak about their experiences and listen to others do the same. In these conversations they welcome subjects that people can feel 'shut down' for raising - like race, immigration, culture, etc. and the changes taking place where they live. In WiYN dialogues, the aim for all involved is to hear nuance, think critically about simplistic stories that often dominate public spaces and divide groups into 'good' and 'bad', and to resist divisive narratives that fuel fear and hatred.

The Centre for Good Relations - use facilitation and dialogue to work through issues of contention and address social conflict. The centre focuses on a range of issues from sectarianism to protest. One example of their work in engaging with conflict is the successful 'Finding the Common Ground on Sustainable Upland Deer Management' project.⁷

The Peacebuilding Network UK and Ireland – supported by Quakers in Britain, this informal and unfunded network of practitioners engages in cohesion and related work to reflect, learn together, and support each other. This has provided crucial support in recent times of tension (such as the targeted violence in August 2024) and underpins the value of sharing learning and caring about the wellbeing of those engaged in conflict work.

Birmingham interfaith networks - Birmingham is a very diverse city and there is a long tradition of faith communities working together well with public bodies. Positive initiatives such as the City's Faith Covenant and Footsteps help build community cohesion.⁸ A local Quaker peacebuilder partly attributes the relatively low level of targeted violence in summer 2024 to the ongoing dialogue between faith groups and public bodies in the city.

Quaker meeting houses/faith buildings – Quaker meeting houses strive to be welcoming and are often seen as neutral places where people from all communities can come together. One example is Brighton Quaker Sanctuary group's cooking club that has successfully brought together a diverse group of people living in the

⁶ Who Is Your Neighbour? <https://whoisyourneighbour.org.uk/>

⁷ Finding Common Ground, Upland deer management project, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fjIAPLPy_AWW4APika3D-VNKcUkvxkU/view?pli=1

⁸ Footsteps, Faiths For A Low Carbon Future, <https://footstepsbcf.org.uk/>
Birmingham City Council, Council renews support for city's Faith Covenant, https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/news/article/1220/council_renews_support_for_citys_faith_covenant

community to prepare food, sit down and eat together.⁹ This has led to a strengthening of bonds which ripples outwards.

Countless faith communities play a similar role in providing inviting and publicly accessible spaces. These physical resources are increasingly vital for community cohesion where public spaces, particular in underserved communities, are scarce.

How should community cohesion be best approached in schools?

Integrity of relationships

In a socially integrated school, children and staff feel valued and can flourish. Families and local groups are well engaged and supported, and in turn their life experiences and wisdom feed into the school. Wider connections are made between the children and national and global issues. Teachers feel confident to explore controversial topics in ways that promote understanding, preparing their students for life as active citizens beyond school.

Schools can improve social integration by supporting children to build healthy relationships across different levels:

Personal: understanding themselves, nurturing wellbeing

Peer: developing strong relationships, managing conflicts constructively

School wide: building relationships across the school community

Society-wide: engaging with the big challenges faced by society.

This is the approach promoted in our impact report '*Peace at the Heart: a relational approach to education in British schools*'.¹⁰

Emotional resilience

Connecting well with others is vital. Research shows that strong relationships help young people grow in confidence and wellbeing. Those supported to cultivate empathy become less likely to assume socially toxic attitudes such as sexism and racism.

Following the pandemic and the proliferation in use of social media, children need more support with social interaction. They need to practice and develop skills such as perspective taking, reflection, affirmation and empathy. Well-facilitated, regular, circle time can be an effective way to support this at primary and secondary levels.

⁹ The Friend, Soul food: Helen Ledger & Kate Mackrell on how Brighton Friends are welcoming asylum seekers, <https://www.thefriend.org/article/soul-food-helen-ledger-kate-mackrell-on-how-brighton-friends-are-welcoming-asylum-seekers>

¹⁰ David Gee, Peace at the heart, <https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/peace-at-the-heart>

Schools should also offer young people safe but exciting projects as channels for their energy and creativity. This supports the development of healthy peer relationships and genuine friendships - important reference points which can help young people to recognise toxic contexts for what they are.

Carr Manor Community School, Leeds

Carr Manor Community School prioritises regular time working in small circles called coaching groups, of about 10 students. Every child from reception to year 11 experiences a 'check-in' at the start of the week. The session allows all pupils to be informed of key events and opportunities happening in school, and to share updates from their weekends. On Wednesday afternoons, 'check-up' circles discuss PSHCE topics and topical events. On a Friday, coaching groups will meet for their last period to discuss their achievements from the week. It is also a chance for a community builder – pupils can have fun whilst developing relationships within the group. This ensures each child regularly practices important relationship skills and has a group of peers and an adult who know them well.

Students are also trained as restorative champions, able to help their peers regulate and deal with conflict. Permanent exclusions have been practically eliminated, and short-term exclusions dramatically reduced, against the national trend. This is significant for social integration because exclusions disproportionately affect the already most marginalised and degrade the life-chances of many young people.¹¹

Fostering global and local connections

Social integration is often associated with schools linking with other schools, either locally or globally. Technology is making strides in this area, providing exciting opportunities which can inspire global connections and responsibility. However, there is also a risk that featuring voices from the global majority in UK classrooms can exoticize or stereotype their experience.

Guidance is needed about how to use technology to foster global connections in a spirit of equitable collaboration, guarding against objectification or extractivism. This should draw on existing good practice, for example the 'Critical Dialogue Model' applied by STEKA Skills in Scotland.

At a more local level, trips and projects that feature 'exposure' to young people from different faith or class backgrounds are not a quick fix. These need to form part of a wide range of initiatives that celebrate and are sensitive to diversity of culture and experience. Where children from different schools/countries are brought together, the

¹¹ See video on Carr Manor's approach: www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsYkgeqhKs4

emphasis should be upon developing learning around a common theme, so that experiences can be shared and a culture of mutual learning fostered. All schools have aspects of diversity, and building a socially integrated school community must be a priority, foregrounding any external linkages.

Building anti-racist school communities

Education plays a critical role in tackling injustice and discrimination of all kinds, and schools must ensure that they are supporting their students through the curriculum and developing the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes to question racism wherever they encounter it. Many schools have been doing this sort of work for years; meaning there is lots of existing good practice to draw on.

Elizabeth Garret Anderson School (EGA), London

EGA began their 'Belonging' work in 2020.¹² They established an equalities panel consisting of members from across the school community. It came together to look closely at all aspects of school life to make sure everyone is respected, valued, treated fairly and protected. Parents were a key part of the process. Their journey has included:

- active recruitment of staff to better represent the diverse community
- workshops to all year 7s on the 'power of language' - exploring how language affects ourselves and others, developing shared commitments to promote change
- SPSHE curriculum from years 7 to 11 regularly covering issues on racism, islamophobia, unconscious bias, LGBT inclusion and gender equality
- staff training on scrutinising the curriculum at EGA and reviewing the curricula across the school.

Peace education through the curriculum

Issues such as war loom large for young people. Many have unfiltered access to world events, such as the current violence in the Middle East and Eastern Europe via smart phones. Some will have a familial connection and potentially even direct experience. Young people need help to process distressing events; otherwise, they can feel anxious and potentially alienated and resentful. For example, we have heard from many teachers that their playgrounds have been bitterly divided over events in Gaza. Often teachers didn't feel supported in how to help the children understand and process what they were hearing and seeing.

When potentially divisive and controversial issues have arisen at Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School, such as the situation in Gaza, and student concern over the

¹² See film about EGA: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoayYObzmkw

treatment of the Uyghurs, staff have felt confident to explore these issues with their students. They have invited in members of the community to share lived experience and held events with external peace education organisations. Their work on 'belonging' had established the building blocks for constructive dialogue.

Citizenship education is a powerful vehicle for peace education and there is an urgent need to strengthen its status and provide funding for the training of specialised Citizenship teachers.

Peace education approaches through other subjects, such as PSHE, RE, History and Geography can also help create safe spaces for exploration of difficult topics. Across the Peace Education Network, organisations such as Facing History and Ourselves UK, Solutions not Sides and Parallel Histories can support schools to help students process contested narratives and discover stories of non-violence that inspire hope and strengthen social cohesion.