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Public Perceptions of Extremism

Interim summary report

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1 Introduction and methodology

1.1 Study background

There is growing concern in the UK that extremism is increasing, but there is a lack of consensus about what it looks like and how we should tackle it. To address this, the Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE) commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to carry out a qualitative research study to further understand extremism, its consequences, and possible responses. Specifically, the study aimed to provide insight into:

- How the public define and understand extremism;
- How extremism manifests as views and actions;
- The boundaries around extremism i.e. when views and actions are considered extreme or not;
- How far the public's understanding of extremism aligns with two core definitions used by the CCE; and
- When a response to extremist views and actions is required, and what the response look like.

This research feeds into a larger study being delivered by the CCE, and fits within their first key theme, *public understanding of extremism*.

1.2 Methodology

This qualitative study involved 6 in-depth interviews with individuals working in counter-extremism and 10 focus groups (to date) with members of the public (fieldwork and analysis is ongoing at the time of writing). Fieldwork was carried out in 6 areas across England and Wales, selected by the CCE. The areas were chosen to ensure the research involved participants from a range of communities, captured a breadth of local experiences, and included areas which do and do not receive government support in tackling extremism.

This section details how the interviews and focus groups were arranged, carried out and analysed.

1.2.1 In-depth interviews with community stakeholders

Sampling and recruitment

Six in-depth interviews were carried out with seven individuals working in counter-extremism¹ (one interview per area). First, the CCE identified and contacted participants.

¹ This included Community Coordinators and Community Safety and Safeguarding Officers, whose roles include understanding local extremism and its drivers, building responses to threats that are present in the local community, and working to increase community cohesion.

Then, NatCen researchers took responsibility for further communication, arranging and conducting the interviews.

Carrying out the interviews

The interviews were carried out over the phone and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The main aim was to gather contextual information about the local area. The interviews explored a range of topics including: the manifestation of extremism in their community; reflections on how their community perceives the threat and presence of extremism; views on responses to extremism; and suggestions for the next phase of the research. The data collected was used to inform the development of topic guides for the focus groups and helped researchers prepare for the focus groups in that area.

As this is a summary interim report, findings from the interviews are not discussed here. They will however be incorporated in the full report of findings.

1.2.2 Focus groups with the public

Sampling and recruitment

Purposive sampling is a hallmark of high-quality qualitative research and underpins robust and generalisable analysis (in a qualitative sense). As such, the rationale in selecting focus group participants was to ensure diversity of coverage across certain key variables rather than to select a sample that was statistically representative of the general public. Sampling criterion captured gender, age, ethnicity and religion. Quotas were set to ensure that participants with relevant characteristics took part.

Community stakeholders supported participant recruitment by using their local networks and/or disseminating information on the research team's behalf, for people to contact NatCen researchers directly. It was made clear that participation was voluntary.

Participant characteristics were monitored throughout the recruitment and fieldwork process to ensure quotas were being met. Although diversity was achieved across the sample, there were challenges in meeting the planned criteria set for the focus groups in some locations. In these instances, criteria were relaxed. The number of participants per focus group was also lower than anticipated in some areas. The achieved sample to date is presented in Table 1. Area names and details about participants' ethnicities and religions have not been included to protect anonymity.

Table 1: Achieved focus group sample to date

Area	Groups completed	Characteristics (age and gender)	Participants per area
East	3	18-25, mixed gender (x2) 30-59, mixed gender	14
West Midlands	2	26+, men 26+, women	5
North East	2	20+, men 40+, women	8
North West	3	18-25, men 18-25, women 30+, women	15
Totals	10		42

Carrying out the focus groups

Focus groups were conducted by researchers in local community venues and lasted between 90 minutes and 2 hours. A topic guide was used to aid the discussion and ensure consistent coverage of relevant issues. However, the guide was used in a way that was responsive and tailored to participants' characteristics, views and experiences. This meant that the topics covered and the order in which they were discussed varied across the focus groups. Discussions were audio recorded using an encrypted recording device and transcribed verbatim, with participants' permission.

1.2.3 Analysis

The interview and focus group data were managed and analysed using Framework, a case and theme-based approach to qualitative data analysis developed by NatCen (Spencer et al., 2013). Sub-group analysis has been carried out where possible and highlighted in the report where appropriate.

As this is qualitative research, the prevalence of views and experiences cannot and should not be estimated. Rather, the value of qualitative research is in revealing the breadth and nature of the phenomena under study (Lewis et al., 2013).

Verbatim interview quotations are provided in this report to highlight the key findings and issues in participants' own words.

1.3 Report outline

This summary report presents the emerging findings of the research carried out to date, and are subject to change and refinement following additional focus groups and in-depth analysis. The chapters are presented as follows:

- Chapter 2: Understanding and defining extremism;
- Chapter 3: Extremist views and actions;
- Chapter 4: The boundaries of extremism;
- Chapter 5: Responses to extremism; and
- Chapter 6: Conclusions.

2 Understanding and defining extremism

This chapter outlines participants' understanding of extremism and their views on how others understand it. It concludes by exploring participants' understanding of the definitions of extremism identified in the CCE's Terms of Reference (CCE Terms of Reference, 2018).

2.1 Participants' understanding of extremism

2.1.1 Overall understanding

Participants found extremism challenging to define. This was in part because extremism was considered subjective in some ways and felt to cover a wide range of views and actions.

'Extremism is such a strange word and it has so many connotations that I don't think we probably appreciate the breadth of the word extremism.'

Instead, some participants expressed their understanding by giving examples of what they considered extreme. These included events such as the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017 and English Defence League (EDL) protests. For others, understanding centred on:

- **Views or actions that fall outside 'accepted norms':** this understanding of extremism was in line with the government definition, which understands extremism as beliefs and actions that fall outside of mainstream or moderate values (see section 2.3.1). This understanding was more commonly discussed in relation to extremist *views* rather than *actions*. Participants described how those with views that fall outside of the 'norm' often believe that their view is 'right' and try to force their view onto others.
- **Causing harm:** extremist individuals, views, or actions were seen as aiming to cause some type of harm to others.
- **Spreading hate:** some participants understood extremism as views and actions that spread hate about other groups, based on that group's perceived culture, religion or identity.

2.1.2 Extremism versus terrorism

Younger participants in particular used the terms 'terrorism' and 'extremism' interchangeably. In these cases, understanding of extremism was often limited to actions of violent Islamist extremism.

Other participants suggested that although the terms are linked, there are key differences between the two. Extremism was felt to cover a wide range of beliefs and views, including extremist or 'extreme' views. Terrorism was associated with being the action or outcome of extremist views.

'So, extremism comes before the terrorism stage. It's the difference between if you decide to act on that, you become a terrorist, or you decide to express yourself in a lethal manner, you're an extremist.'

Some participants noted a shift in terminology, with the term extremism being introduced more recently than terrorism, which has been used for longer. For example, older participants said that they had been exposed to the term extremism recently but had not heard or used it when they were growing up in the 1970s and 1980s when the IRA were active. As such, they recalled the IRA being described as a terrorist group.

2.2 Views on how others understand extremism

Participants felt there was a lack of understanding about extremism among the public, mirroring their own challenges defining it. They felt that when hearing or discussing the term, 'most people are going to say extremism is terrorism'. Participants also thought that others automatically link extremism with religion, specifically Islam.

'I find that a lot of people still think that extremism is suicide bombing. That's what I always feel. If you ask a young person what is extremism they'll say, 'All those that go around killing others' and I think the word 'extremism', when you use it, people always assume we're referring to Muslims killing others.'

Some Muslim participants equated extremism with violent Islamist extremism and described how these thoughts existed within some Muslim communities. Generally, participants highlighted how media narratives underpinned and reinforced these perceptions among the public.

A view among some participants from northern areas was that there is a 'division' in the way that extremism is perceived at a national level compared to a local level. It was felt that the national perception focuses on Islamist extremism, while the local perception focuses on the Far-right.

'I think it's different nationally from how it is locally because if you think of extremism nationally you think about the Manchester bombings. You think about suicide vests don't you? You think of that kind of extremism coming from – we'll call it a Muslim community for now. But when we think locally about extremism, it's Far-right white extremism that we have [...] It's more from the white community that we have extremism and the racism.'

2.3 Definitions

The focus groups also aimed to explore participants' understanding and views of two 'models' of extremism identified in the CCE's Terms of Reference: the government definition and a social psychological definition (see below).

The definitions (and high-level summaries, to aid comprehension) were presented to participants towards the end of the discussion, so as not to influence early discussions of their own understanding of extremism. Views of the two definitions are discussed below.

2.3.1 Views on government definition

‘Extremism is the vocal or active opposition to our shared values. These include democracy and the rule of law, mutual respect and tolerance of other faiths and beliefs. We also consider calling for the death of our armed forces either in the UK or overseas to be extremism.’

‘[Domestic extremism is] the activity of groups or individuals who commit or plan serious criminal activity motivated by a political or ideological viewpoint.’

Summary: extremism as beliefs and actions that fall outside of mainstream or moderate values.

- **‘Shared values’:** participants discussed how values vary between individuals, across communities and over time. As such, participants questioned this aspect of the definition as it is unclear who these values are supposed to be shared by. This was felt to be particularly challenging in a multi-cultural society like the UK, as ‘everyone has a different ‘shared’ value’.
- **‘Armed forces’:** participants understood why the call for ‘the death of our armed forces [...] to be extremism’ was captured in the government definition, and some felt its inclusion was important. However, others considered it problematic.

‘If you happen to be fighting, if you’re of another nationality and you are fighting British forces overseas, then calling for their death may not be unreasonable because they are calling for yours. That would be war.’

2.3.2 Views on social psychological definition

‘Extremism refers to the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group.’

‘Both ideas and behaviours that are hateful towards specific ‘others’ and designed to undermine social cohesion.’

Summary: extremism as a response to threats (perceived or otherwise) to an identified in-group.

- **Extremism as a response to threat:** participants discussed how highlighting extremism as a response to an actual or perceived threat to the in-group² assumes that extremism is a ‘cause and effect sort of thing’. Some participants

² In social psychology, an in-group is a social group to which a person identifies as being a member. An out-group is a group with which that person does not identify.

felt that this did not convey the breadth of the term extremism, as extremism was not always a reaction to threat.

- **‘Perceived’ threat:** the inclusion of ‘perceived’ threats to an identified in-group was considered important as it acknowledges the subjective aspects of extremism (discussed earlier in the chapter).

2.3.3 Overall views on definitions

Participants agreed that the government definition was easier for the general public to understand, and that it was wide-reaching in the types of views and actions it included. The social psychological definition was seen as more confusing and ‘abstract’, with some participants struggling to understand it.

Among participants who understood both definitions, there was no consensus about which they preferred. Some suggested that both ‘serve a purpose’ and that elements of both definitions could be usefully brought together to form a new overarching definition.

3 Extremist views and actions

This chapter explores participants' descriptions of what extremist views and actions look like, with specific examples. It concludes with factors that participants identified as leading to extremist views and actions.

3.1 Extremist views and actions

Participants' descriptions of extremist views and actions were varied. Some spoke of 'forceful' views and 'violent' actions from people that followed specific ideologies or political positions. Examples given included Neo Nazism, the Far-right, Sikh extremism, and Islamist extremism, with some Muslim participants mentioning the Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Some participants gave examples of 'extreme behaviour' and/or extremism that did not align with formal definitions:

- Participants in one focus group gave examples of extreme behaviour that related to perceived political correctness, such as people not being able to fly particular flags, banning Christmas trees and a belief that the nursery rhyme 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' had been banned.
- In the same focus group, behaviour that could be deemed anti-social was described as extreme, including rudeness among elderly people and young people walking the streets 'looking for trouble'.
- 'Peaceful' extremism was raised by another group. Jehovah's Witnesses were considered 'extreme', as was the Extinction Rebellion because 'they're trying to impose their will on everybody else by causing disruption'.

A view that cut across participant groups was that people were 'allowed' to believe in a religion but that talking about their beliefs risked them being labelled 'extreme' or an extremist.

'There was this Christian guy he got in trouble for saying something about homosexuals [...] He's like, 'But that's my religion, it says it in the Bible, all I did was quote what it says in the Bible.' [...] So now I'm thinking [...] you're allowed to believe something, but you're not allowed to say it, and if you say it, you're extreme. But if you don't say it and you just believe it [...] then you're not.'

3.1.1 National examples

Specific examples of extremist acts which had been reported in the national media included the murder of MP Jo Cox in 2016, the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017 and, internationally, the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand in 2019.

3.1.2 Local examples

At the local level, there were concerns about Far-right extremism and examples were given of incidents that had given rise to local EDL demonstrations. The EDL was seen as Islamophobic and anti-immigration.

Wider Islamophobic incidents were also highlighted, taking the form of verbal abuse, inciting hate on social media (following the Sri Lanka Easter bombings in 2019), offensive graffiti and demonstrations about a mosque being built.

An example of Sikh extremism was also given, where a ‘mob’ threatened a local community member who had organised an event to foster positive relations between local Sikhs and Muslims. This action led him to cancel the event from fear of reprisal.

3.2 Factors leading to extremist views or actions

Participants identified a range of factors that could lead people to have extremist views or take extremist actions. These factors are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

- **Racism (individual and institutional)** was seen as ‘fuelling’ extremist views and behaviours. To this end, Brexit was described as a ‘symptom’ of institutional racism and having legitimised hate towards various groups.

Related to this, some national media outlets, social media platforms and specific high-profile politicians were felt to contribute to ‘breeding fear’ and ‘**fuelling hate**’, specifically Islamophobia and anti-immigration views. Some politicians were identified as having a ‘real capacity to propel hate’ due to the narratives they have used and the platform they have. Their actions were contrasted with those of Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, following the Christchurch mosque shootings. Spreading hate was seen to lead to extremism from the in-group towards the out-group, and also from the out-group in order to ‘express’ and/or ‘defend’ themselves.

‘Extremism is born when you push people over the edge [...] When you create the atmosphere, the climate, when you are continually banging on about a particular group of people or minority, you are literally pushing them towards extremist behaviour cos that’s what they feel they have to do to even be heard or defend themselves.’

- **Global events and politics:** Western military action in the Middle East – specifically the invasion of Iraq – was highlighted by some Muslim participants as having led to Islamist extremism, both overseas and locally.
- **Religious influence:** as discussed in chapter 2, some non-Muslim participants associated extremism with some interpretations of Islam. Some Muslim participants recognised this and described how Far-right groups such as EDL and Generation Identity believe that extremism is inherent to Islam and therefore all Muslims are extremists – a view they opposed.
- **Ignorance and not associating with a wide range of people,** specifically from different cultures and with different views, was seen as allowing extremist views to go unchallenged and become consolidated.
- **Lack of connectedness:** participants spoke of a **lack of cohesion** in their communities meaning that people do not feel a sense of belonging.

‘It’s community cohesion [...] I do feel that a lot of the local projects that used to take place which were a good way of bringing communities together – sports and local events that would be taking place – they’re not there anymore [...] and they were the core to bringing communities together.’

Participants also felt there was **disenfranchisement** in their communities where people felt they had no influence and are not being listened to by those in power. Participants in one focus group described how they felt the government had caused extremism through perceived acts of political correctness, such as ‘banning Christmas trees’ for example. Joining extremist groups was described as a way for people to feel empowered.

‘Really, the government, they’re causing these problems by what they’re saying, what they’re banning, what you can say, what you can’t say...’

In the case of Islamist extremism specifically, Muslim participants described how feelings of disenfranchisement left young Muslims susceptible to radicalisation.

‘These [Muslim] kids [...] it’s building up in their system, they’re going nuts some of them are and they’re thinking ‘I’m a nothing at home, I live a life without purpose or meaning and I can go to heaven on a one-way ticket and it’s fast tracked [...] All you need is an extremist recruiter, with a strong narrative, who is looking for someone vulnerable, susceptible [...]and] he generates that sense of belonging.’

- **Mental health issues:** some participants described how mental health issues could mean that people end up acting upon their extremist views, who otherwise would not have done. People with mental health issues were also felt to be more susceptible to radicalisation.

3.3 Relationship between views and actions

Participants across the focus groups highlighted that extremist views need not result in extremist actions. For example, one woman described how she thought about pulling off Muslim women’s niqabs but would never actually do this.

4 Boundaries of extremism

This chapter presents participants' views on where the boundaries of extremism sit in relation to views, behaviours (both criminal and non-criminal), the perception of the target or victim of those behaviours, and environmental factors. It illustrates how participants view acts and behaviours that may not, at first, be recognised as extreme and how and why they cross that threshold.

4.1 Thoughts

Thinking anti-social or negative thoughts about other people and groups was not generally considered extremist. Participants discussed the importance of freedom of speech and democracy while also referring to positive aspects of political correctness.

'Personally, I think if we live in a democracy, freedom of speech, etc., then [...] I think we've got to define exactly what point does that become threatening to you? At what point does it become a problem?'

Participants discussed the importance of individuals being able to develop their own thoughts and beliefs about different groups. Thinking in a hateful way about specific groups was generally not condoned by participants and they agreed that prejudiced and discriminatory views were not appropriate in modern UK society.

'Views that will cause harm to other people, I don't think that's acceptable. I don't know. It's a fine line.'

However, some also suggested that if these ideas were kept to oneself and not shared, there was nothing fundamentally wrong with them. It was when these hateful or hurtful thoughts, predominantly in opposition to other religions, political beliefs or cultures, were verbalised that participants saw their extreme nature and potential for harm. However even then, some participants were reluctant to label this as 'extreme'. Rather, they felt that it was the added involvement of a group, and reinforcement of those behaving anti-socially by the group, that crossed the threshold into extremism.

'I think people with extremist views like their safety in numbers and are quite happy to voice their views, as long as they've got their pack around them. I've never seen a single person out on the street belting out extremist views or acting out, it almost seems that they have to have their gang around them.'

Once thoughts were verbalised and used to incite violent behaviour, participants felt that a clear threshold had been crossed and that these actions could be classified as extreme.

4.2 Behaviours

Aggressive and threatening acts against the person or their property were identified as extreme, when incited by hatred or dislike for other groups. Participants related any form of violence directed at people due to their ethnicity or religion as extreme behaviour. Some groups took this further and described how all forms of violence, regardless of their drivers or motivations, could be considered extreme. This included 'honour-based' violence, hate crime, domestic violence, gang-based violence, knife crime, and child sexual exploitation. However, participants did not necessarily think these behaviours constituted extremism, as they did not always affect perceptions of safety or fear of crime among their family and friends. For example, some participants discussed how the individual victim may be resilient and not intimidated by threats, and so this would not be

deemed as extremism. However, should the victim feel persecuted and fear for their safety, then this would clearly constitute extremism.

'I think we have had a lot of cases [in the local area] on the news, I can't really remember clearly but they had been arrested for terrorism, either for making bombs or something like that. I think now with everything that's happened in New Zealand, if I go to a worship place, I wouldn't feel as safe, peaceful and secure as I used to.'

Behaviour targeting an individual's values and ideals as opposed to their 'physical self' was seen as extreme. As discussed above, the significance of 'multiple' offenders perpetuating the act of violence was also highlighted. Participants felt that if a single individual was violent and their peers reinforced their anti-social behaviour through agreement or admiration, this would be categorised as extreme.

Actions perceived to be threatening, or meant to intimidate and change the victim's behaviour, were considered extreme. As discussed in section 4.1, it may be that those actioning their thoughts to instil fear in members of an out-group is central to the public's understanding of extremism. This notion of the victim as central in defining acts as extremism is important. If the behaviour was perceived to any degree as persecution based on the victim's values and ideologies, participants supported the idea that this, regardless of policy and legislation, should be considered extremism.

4.3 Criminality

Some participants felt that describing thoughts, acts and behaviours that do not break the law as 'extreme' could be an over-reaction, and could inadvertently lead to:

- A further blurring of the boundaries of what is known as extremism;
- Community members becoming over-sensitised to adversity in their communities;
- 'Real' victims not receiving the support they need; and
- Criminalising behaviour that may not have been criminal before.

In view of these concerns, it was felt that careful consideration should be given to the way extremism is discussed and responded to. As already mentioned, some participants immediately perceived extremism to be Islamist extremism, or violent actions undertaken by the Far-right, but they also saw specific forms of criminality as extreme. More will need to be done to disentangle these issues.

4.4 Perceptions of target group/victim

Participants suggested that target groups' or victims' experiences were key to defining an act as extremist. Doing so may remove the significance of contextual factors in defining the act (e.g. demonstration against immigration legislation) and places it solely on victims' experiences.

'But what if you're a member of this mosque and you're scared that people are doing vandalism; that then is inflicting terror on to you.'

This perception was thought to be defined by the target groups' or victims' feelings of security in their daily lives, and their access to safety and support where needed. When they could no longer carry out their routine activities, then what they were experiencing was perceived as extreme. Participants referred to several thoughts or feelings (of target groups or victims) that could identify behaviour as extremism:

-
- An underlying sense of anxiety and discomfort;
 - A persistent 'fear of crime'; and
 - A belief that they may experience reprisals for how they are dressed or behaving in public, leading to moderating their appearance or behaviour.

Some discussion focused on the cyclical nature of extreme behaviour in communities. As discussed in chapter 3, when specific in-groups act in an inappropriate or discriminatory way, this could lead to the target out-group retaliating, and therefore reinforcing the in-group's beliefs and behaviour.

4.5 Environmental factors

Participants described how extremism could depend on one's environment. They acknowledged that some of the examples they cited as extremism would not be considered as such in other countries. They stated that characteristics such as gender identity, which is a protected characteristic in the UK, could in fact be perceived as extreme in other parts of the world. They discussed how extremism may be driven by a desire for group inclusion. Therefore, individuals who had inappropriate thoughts may make the leap to acting out to gain recognition, approval and inclusion by the wider group.

Participants also discussed the importance of caregivers' influence and how the development of more pro-social and tolerant views could be perceived as extreme by authority figures in families and communities. An example was given of a child in a local community whose caregivers were known to have sympathies with Far-right groups. When the boy began to voice more tolerant and accepting views, his community were resistant because his values were not congruent with their own. This example provides some insight into the social psychological definition of extremism shared in chapter 2 and how perceptions of extremism can be influenced by individual perspectives and environments.

5 Responses to extremism

This chapter explores participants' views about when extremist views and actions require a response, and which agencies should be responsible.

5.1 Timing of response

Participants felt that extremism should be responded to when the words used incite hatred or violence, when the behaviour breaks the law, and/or when behaviours impact on victims' feelings of safety and security.

5.2 Agencies' responsibilities

Participants suggested the groups listed below should have a key role in tackling extremism at the national or local level. However, funding cuts were identified as a barrier.

5.2.1 Government

It was widely felt that the government's strategy for countering extremism was not working. Some participants spoke about how the government should 'lead by example' at a national level, and that it was unrealistic to expect cohesion in local communities when it had participated in military action in the Middle East. Similarly, individual politicians were felt to be perpetuating hate through their narratives. Participants felt this should not be tolerated and recommended harsh penalties such as losing their jobs.

'If anything [...], it's our politicians, and they need to go through training as to what needs to be uttered out of their mouth.'

5.2.2 Police

While the police 'can't arrest someone for talking about something', it was felt that earlier police intervention could be beneficial, to help stop extremist views escalating to behaviours. To this end a return to the police having greater visibility was suggested, including neighbourhood policing in local communities.

However, some participants were concerned that intervening too early could have the opposite effect and intensify extremist views, due to poor police-community relations and the police being seen as 'confrontational' at times. Greater stop and search powers were suggested by one group, though there was not consensus around this.

5.2.3 Schools

A culture of inclusivity in schools (across all demographics) was considered critical. Some Muslim participants described it as ironic that the 'No Outsiders' programme was being taught to Muslim children who constantly feel like outsiders in their local communities³. Furthermore, Prevent was criticised for focusing on Islamist extremism.

Teachers were felt to have a key role to play in countering extremism, by promoting diversity and facilitating constructive dialogue about extremism and related issues. The importance of being approachable and positive role models to young people more

³ The 'No Outsiders' programme aims to teach children about characteristics protected by the Equality Act, including sexual orientation and religion.

generally was also highlighted. In contrast to this, some participants felt that schools should have a greater focus on discipline.

5.2.4 Religious leaders

Religious leaders were felt to have a key role to play in promoting cohesion and harmony in their communities, and a responsibility for their teachings to be safe and moderate.

5.2.5 Youth services

Participants (particularly in northern areas) spoke of the lack of services for young people, due to funding cuts. Positive and purposeful activities with other young people could potentially reduce the risk of radicalisation as well as providing an opportunity for young people to socialise with people they otherwise would not.

5.2.6 Community groups/members

Across the focus groups, participants highlighted the importance of a 'grassroots' response to extremism, so that members of the community are fully engaged in it.

Some Muslim participants stressed the importance of more funding for the third sector to use community 'brokers' to do intensive counter-extremism work with young Muslims. Participants from other groups discussed roles for 'community leaders' and 'community liaison officers' (a local council post).

It was felt that community members should take responsibility for challenging extremist views and reporting extremist incidents. However, barriers to reporting were identified, including scepticism that any meaningful action would be taken, as well as fear of reprisal.

'Everyone knows who's involved with that [extremism], but you don't want to be the one to go and report them because where's your protection when you get home? That's the biggest problem.'

Some Muslim women felt that more should be done to empower mothers to help them challenge their children's views and behaviour, if they were concerned that they were becoming extremist in nature.

6 Conclusions

The CCE commissioned this research to improve its understanding of public perceptions of extremism. The research aimed to provide insight into:

- How the public define and understand extremism, including how far the public's understanding of extremism aligns with two core definitions used by the CCE;
- How extremism manifests as views and actions;
- The boundaries around extremism i.e. when views and actions are considered extreme or not; and
- When a response to extremist views and actions is required, and what that response should look like.

In terms of understanding precisely what extremism is, community participants found the term unclear and ambiguous. Some did not know how it differed from terrorism, or to a lesser extent, other forms of criminality. They also had difficulty articulating precisely what makes a view or action extreme. Issues with both the government and social psychological definitions of extremism were raised, particularly the concept of 'shared values' in the government definition, as values were felt to vary between individuals, across communities and over time. Participants did acknowledge that extremism related to actions and behaviours that fell outside of society's 'norms', which aligns with the government definition.

Having anti-social or negative thoughts about other groups was considered broadly acceptable if they were kept to oneself – or, if verbalised, done so in a respectful way, rather than to intentionally cause harm or intimidation. Thoughts verbalised for this purpose crossed the line into being extreme. In terms of behaviours, any criminal offence that could incite fear in people; cause division between groups; or criminal damage motivated by factors linked to race or religion, could be extreme. There was some debate among participants about what constitutes extremist versus non-extremist crime; participants cited many forms of violence as extreme, but at times were unclear on the difference between these forms of criminality, and extremism.

The effect of extremism on the target group or victim was identified as important to understanding extremism. Participants acknowledged that people have varying levels of adverse experience and resilience. What should matter is how the experience of, for example, racism, makes the individual feel – including their personal sense of safety and security as well as feelings of cohesion in their community. Not feeling included or respected in their community, as well as being concerned about the threat of violence or victimisation, should guide how the government, authorities, third sector and public view extremism. This will be explored further in the full report of findings.

Participants across groups were consistent in their views that the government should do more in responding to extremism at the national and local level and provide more prevention and intervention-based services. This could include giving additional resource to communities and local organisations for grassroots programmes and projects. Positive and purposeful activities for young people vulnerable to extremist ideologies could potentially reduce the risk of radicalisation as well as providing an opportunity to socialise with people they otherwise would not, thereby promoting integration and tolerance. Finally, parents and teachers were felt to have a key role to play in countering extremism among young people, by promoting diversity and cohesion.