Hate crime action plan

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Summary

In March the Home Office published a cross-departmental plan to tackle hate crime setting out the strategic direction the Government wishes to take to address this issue.

This briefing will explore what the Government’s ambitions are when it comes to tackling hate crime, looking in particular at:

- The different types of hate crime highlighted by the plan
- The key objectives of the plan and their relevance for local authorities
- The wider policy context
- The reaction from organisations in this sector.

As well as elected members, the briefing will be of interest to a broad range of officers, including those involved in community safety partnerships, equality officers, disability practitioners, community cohesion officers and anti-social behaviour teams.

Overview

Challenge It, Report It, Stop It sets out the aims of the Coalition to tackle hate crime in all its forms. The document announces little in the way of new measures but it does provide an overview of all the activity either already underway or proposed by various Whitehall departments. The plan calls on all Government departments to support councils, the police and other local agencies to meet three key objectives:

- Challenging the behaviours and attitudes that foster hatred and encouraging early intervention to reduce the risk of incidents escalating
- Encourage more victims to come forward and report hate crime
- Improving the response to hate crime by better identifying and managing cases.
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Briefing in full
According to Equalities Minister Lynne Featherstone - and in line with the Government’s wider approach to localism - the lead on hate crime needs to come from frontline practitioners, as it depends on a comprehensive local knowledge of victims, offenders and communities.

The Government’s role will be to support these locally-led efforts by providing a clear and consistent message on the importance of tackling hate crime, collecting and presenting data at a national level, encouraging and highlighting examples of best practice and giving victims better protection under the law.

Hate crime, according to the Government’s definition, is any criminal offence perceived to be motivated by hostility or prejudice based on a personal characteristic. The five main types are: disability, race, religion, gender-identity and sexual orientation although the plan notes that crimes motivated by other factors such as age, gender or appearance, should be taken equally seriously.

Police forces in England, Wales and Northern Ireland recorded more than 48,000 hate crimes in 2010, of which the majority were race offences (39,311). These figures may, however, only represent the tip of the iceberg; hate crime is hugely under-reported because victims are either fearful of further abuse if they come forward or believe that the authorities won’t take them seriously.

The plan provides a blueprint for the Government’s role over the next three years to help set a national direction and support local efforts to combat hate crime. It is divided up into three key areas: prevention, increasing reporting and improving the operational response to hate crime.

Preventing hate crime
This section sets out the steps being taken by the Government to prevent hate crime from occurring by challenging the bigotry and prejudice that foster hatred. These include:

- Publishing an analysis of hate crime data as a supplement to the British Crime Survey.
- Working with schools and voluntary sector partners to increase the resources available to help tackle bullying in schools.
- Developing a new cross-Government Disability Strategy, which will include action on changing attitudes and behaviour.
POLICY BRIEFING

It also sets out its aims on early intervention to minimise the risk of incidents escalating. Of greatest relevance to local authorities are plans to place Safeguarding Adult Boards on a statutory footing by the end of the year. This is intended to increase the awareness, detection and prevention of abuse of adults in vulnerable circumstances. It is not a new measure however and was originally announced by the Care Services Minister Paul Burstow last May.

The Government’s response to the Winterbourne View case – due this summer - will also incorporate measures to improve the protection of people with learning difficulties in care and ensure the system is better able to respond to potential cases of abuse.

Increasing reporting and access to support

The Government wants to make it easier for victims of hate crime to come forward and report offences, in part because more effective monitoring will enable ministers to develop a better understanding of the scale, severity and causes of the problem.

For councils, the most relevant measures set out in the plan to improve reporting are:

- The Home Office and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) will be working with councils, police forces and housing providers to improve the handling of public calls about anti-social behaviour so that hate crime victims can be better identified.

- The Home Office will be collecting best practice examples of work carried out by Community Safety Partnerships to tackle hate crime. These will be published in the autumn.

Improving the response to hate crime

This section of the report focuses on the Government’s goals and actions for the criminal justice system so that operational responses to hate crime are made more effective and offenders are dealt with more robustly. It highlights the legislative changes that are being introduced – amendments to the Criminal Justice Act 2003 will ensure that murders motivated by hatred or hostility towards disabled or transgender victims have a sentencing starting point of 30 years, in line with murders motivated by race, religion or sexual orientation – as well as other measures in place to encourage better identification and management of hate crime cases among the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, prisons and probation.
It also calls on councils and other local partners to work jointly with the criminal justice system to bring offenders to justice by, for example, making available information on hate crime and local support services.

**Policy background**

Legislation concerning hate crime has been in place for a number of years – the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 created a number of racially and religiously aggravated offences and the Criminal Justice Act 2003 introduced harsher sentencing for offences motivated by a hatred of the victim’s sexual orientation. The Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 further strengthened the legal protection of victims targeted for reasons of faith or race.

The general consensus is that – due to these legislative changes and action at both a central and local level to combat hate crime, much progress has been made including significant improvements in prosecution rates. However the fact remains that hate crime, in all its forms, affects thousands of people and remains significantly under-reported.

In 2009, the previous administration published its own Cross-Government Hate Crime Action Plan in a bid to drive forward local action on hate crime. This document underlined the importance of multi-agency working and, in particular, encouraged Crime Reduction Disorder Partnerships to play a key role in tackling hate crime in their local area, calling on them to draw up action plans and to collate, analyse and disseminate data on hate crimes locally. This means that in recent years many of the now renamed Community Safety Partnerships have developed their own strategies to tackle hate crime. Unfortunately the potential role for these partnerships seems to have been largely overlooked by the Coalition government in its own blueprint, which only mentions Community Safety Partnerships once (in the context of sharing best practice).

**Comment**

*Challenge it, Report it, Stop it* has generated little reaction from either the media or organisations in the sector. Perhaps this is unsurprising given the lack of new funding and the fact that majority of the actions have already been announced.

As evidence of a strategic commitment at Government level to tackling hate crime, the plan has been broadly welcomed by practitioners however. User-led disability organisation ECDP says that the approach set out in the blueprint reflects many of the key concerns highlighted by its members in addressing hate crime. The organisation is calling on local authorities, police forces and other local agenices to ensure that the commitment demonstrated by the Coalition in drawing up the plan is reflected on the ground and in the everyday experiences of disabled people.
The plan has also been praised for its inclusion of specific actions on disability hate crime as part of a wider strategy. Agencies in the disability sector hope this will give greater prominence to disability hate crime among criminal justice agencies. In particular, the decision to conduct a review into the sentences of offences motivated by hostility on the grounds of disability has been welcomed by learning disability charity, Mencap, which has long advocated the need for specific offences for disability hate crime.

Co-ordinator of the Disability Hate Crime Network, Stephen Brookes, has warned that the emphasis on reporting hate crimes is let down by a failure to create a single approach to reporting. He believes there are currently too many approaches to reporting hate crime and he calls on the Local Government Association, the voluntary sector and the government to work jointly to ensure a single approach underpinned by minimum standards is implemented.

Inevitably in the current climate some organisations are voicing concern about the lack of resources available to help councils and other agencies prioritise action that addresses hate crime. Andrew Bolland at Stop Hate UK warns that implementation at the local level risks being jeopardised by a lack of funds. “Some areas demonstrate really effective multi-agency working between a range of agencies including police and councils. [But] there are other areas however where joined up working is not as advanced and in the last year we have seen changes to services for hate crime reporting impacted by financial cuts.”

Although the introduction to the plan highlights the ‘new landscape’ ushered in by the Coalition government, whereby local areas will be free to develop hate crime strategies that reflect local needs, from a local authority perspective, the plan offers little guidance or direction. The majority of actions target the police and other organisations in the criminal justice system and there also appears to be firm support for the voluntary sector’s role in this area – the focus on user-led organisations has been welcomed by disabled practitioners – but those in local government are likely to be disappointed at the lack of recognition of the role councils can play in addressing hate crime.

For more information about this, or any other LGiU member briefing, please contact Janet Sillett, Briefings Manager, on janet.sillett@lgiu.org.uk