



Policy interventions to strengthen social cohesion

Introduction

In response to growing concerns about social polarisation and division in communities in Wales and the UK more widely, the Senedd Equality and Social Justice (ESJ) Committee launched an [inquiry into social cohesion](#) in late 2024.

[The Committee's final report](#) emphasised the urgent need for policy action by the Welsh Government and other stakeholders. On this basis, it recommended that an independently chaired Expert Group on Social Cohesion (EGSC) be established to develop short-, medium- and long-term actions to strengthen cohesion ahead of the 2026 Senedd election.

In 2025, the Welsh Government asked the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) to provide focused evidence support to the EGSC to inform their work in identifying these actions. To do this, WCPP undertook an evidence review on social cohesion interventions, responding to the following research questions:

1. What policy and practice interventions are effective in promoting and strengthening social cohesion?
2. What potential policy actions for Wales are indicated in the evidence on social cohesion interventions?

The review uses the 2021-2026 Welsh Government's working definition of cohesion, which states that 'cohesion is the extent to which people in a community treat each other with respect, get along and participate to ensure everyone can access their human rights and fulfil their potential.' (Welsh Government, 2026, n.d.).

Methods

A pragmatic, rapid approach was adopted to review a large volume of evidence within the EGSC's compressed timescale. We prioritised academic literature submitted to the ESJ Committee's inquiry, alongside evidence shared by members of the EGSC through a call for submissions. We also conducted a review of existing evidence syntheses on interventions to promote social cohesion. All sources were screened against our inclusion criteria, resulting in 28 studies being included in the final review.

Key Findings

Policy and practice interventions to strengthen social cohesion

A wide range of interventions show positive effects on different aspects of social cohesion. However, the variation in intervention types, their effectiveness across different contexts, and how their outcomes are measured, make it challenging to compare study findings and draw conclusions about what works best. Additionally, the evidence highlights the influence of broader societal context in shaping cohesion outcomes and the potential for interventions to have unintended consequences. This indicates that *how* an intervention is designed and delivered may matter as much as *what* the intervention involves.

Given the substantial variation in study designs, outcomes, and social cohesion sub-dimensions examined across the evidence base, the following findings are presented by intervention type:

- **Contact interventions:** these approaches are based on the idea that

bringing people from different social groups together, under the right conditions, can increase acceptance of diversity by reducing prejudice (Hatch et al., 2025). Overall, the evidence shows that contact interventions can improve attitudes towards a range of groups (Hatch et al., 2025; Hsieh et al., 2021), especially when combined with educational elements (Banas et al., 2020; Bartos et al., 2014). However, contact that occurs online, via videos, or virtual reality, shows mixed results and can even increase prejudice (Hesketh et al., 2023). Studies are also often conducted in controlled settings like schools, raising questions about how well the findings translate to real-world contexts.

- **Education, knowledge and training interventions:** education and awareness raising interventions are widely used to promote social cohesion across different groups (Orazani et al., 2023). Providing structured information about an 'outgroup', for example by explaining the specific challenges they face, can reduce prejudice towards specific groups (Hatch et al., 2025). Anti-bias programmes also show positive effects among children (Slobodin et al., 2023; Stefaniak et al., 2020). However, the overall evidence on education and awareness-raising interventions shows smaller impacts than those seen in contact-based approaches (Paluck et al., 2020). Some reported impacts may be overstated in smaller studies (Paluck et al., 2020), and differences in study design make it difficult to assess the relative effectiveness of different approaches (Slobodin et al., 2023).
- **Volunteering interventions:** studies consistently show a positive, bi-directional relationship between volunteering and cohesion outcomes, whereby strengthening volunteering

promotes social cohesion and vice versa (Abrams et al., 2023a; Davies et al., 2024). However, formal volunteering through organisations – which is more common among already advantaged groups – produces greater benefits for social cohesion than volunteering informally (i.e. outside organisational structures) (Horsham et al., 2024). This raises concerns that volunteering initiatives may unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities (Abrams et al., 2023b).

- **Place and space interventions:** interventions that recognise the role of community infrastructure in improving social relations and community wellbeing (e.g., community hubs, neighbourhood design, and nature-based initiatives) have been shown to support social cohesion by bringing together different social and generational groups, strengthening community networks, and fostering trust and belonging (Social Value Cymru, 2025; Bagnall et al., 2019; Fatehrad et al., 2024). However, barriers to participation, including financial constraints and safety concerns, are also highlighted (Fatehrad et al., 2024). Some interventions may also have unintended negative consequences for cohesion, such as exclusion (Bagnall et al. 2019, 2023).
- **Cohesion strategies and programmes:** evidence from Wales and the wider UK suggests that investing in coordinated cohesion strategies and programmes strengthens cohesion at a local level (Lalot et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2013). Improvements in social cohesion are also seen in local authorities that set ambitious cohesion targets (Andrews et al., cited in Cairns et al., 2022). The effectiveness of coordinated approaches depends heavily on the availability of both dedicated capacity within national and local

government and institutional support (Robinson et al., 2013).

- **Health and wellbeing interventions:** physical activity programmes, public health initiatives, and mental and physical health interventions have been shown to positively influence aspects of social cohesion, including sense of belonging, trust in others, and social relationships with the wider community. The evidence is strongest for a small number of well-evaluated interventions, such as the National Citizen Service, while findings for other approaches are more mixed. It is also unclear which approaches most effectively support community-level or individual-level change (Cairns et al., 2022).
- **Online interventions:** the evidence identified on interventions to reduce online harm largely focuses on their role in strengthening community resilience to extremism. In one study, removing harmful online content reduced the hatefulness of social media posts and offline hate crimes by limiting opportunities for collective mobilisation (Duran et al., 2025). Counter-speech, which involves responding to hateful speech in a way that challenges it, has also proven successful when it is empathy-based (Hangartner et al., 2021) and sent from high-follower white male fake accounts (Munger, 2017). Finally, a study examining direct outreach to individuals at risk of radicalisation revealed positive shifts in attitudes or a willingness for further engagement (Davey, Birdwell and Skellet, 2018). However, the lack of high-quality evaluations makes it difficult to determine the overall impact of online interventions on social cohesion (Hesketh et al., 2023).

Potential policy actions for Wales

While the evidence provides some useful insights, it remains difficult to draw clear policy recommendations for Wales. This is due to both the challenge of determining which interventions are the most effective and the presence of several key evidence gaps.

The studies we identified overwhelmingly focus on single-level interventions that target individuals, groups, or relationships between groups. There is far less evidence on the effectiveness of national, structural, or multi-level policy approaches, despite their potential to deliver greater impacts and clearer implications for policy action. Similarly, we found limited evidence on interventions designed to respond to acute community tensions, even though this has become an increasingly urgent policy concern in Wales and across the UK (Welsh Parliament, 2025).

Despite these challenges, the evidence highlights several areas for the Welsh Government and key partners to consider when identifying potential policy actions for Wales:

- **Intervene early in the life course:** interventions tend to be most impactful when introduced in childhood and adolescence as attitudes are still forming (Orazani et al., 2023; Hsieh et al., 2021). School-based programmes in particular have shown strong potential for reducing prejudice and strengthening relations between different groups. This highlights the need to consider how schools and other services for children and young people can be better supported to strengthen cohesion;
- **Incorporate elements of coproduction and codesign:** across studies, engaging community members in the design and delivery of interventions emerged as an important ingredient for success, resulting in wider benefits for community members and increased trust in public institutions (Orazani et al., 2023). Studies also emphasised the importance of engaging a diverse range of

community members, including those who are marginalised or seldom heard (Bagnall et al., 2023). Inclusive engagement could involve developing culturally congruent spaces (Fatehrad et al., 2024) and considering the need to develop trust with vulnerable communities (Daykin et al., 2021);

- **Develop universal interventions:** whilst co-design processes can increase engagement with interventions, reaching less-interested groups remains a challenge. Therefore, interventions which can be delivered more universally may be more effective at reaching individuals who would not otherwise engage with specific interventions (Orazani et al., 2023). Universal interventions like workplace-based education and awareness raising show strong potential (Hatch et al., 2025), particularly when combined with elements of contact interventions;
- **Strengthen the link between volunteering and cohesion:** evidence shows that while volunteering and cohesion outcomes can reinforce each other, this is not automatic, as the benefits of volunteering may be unevenly distributed across communities. This highlights a need for policies that explicitly address the connection between the two and that are more intentional about ensuring that volunteering interventions strengthen cohesion *between* groups, not only *within* them;
- **Invest in community infrastructure and neighbourhood design:** Bagnall et al. (2023) highlight the need for adequate investment in community infrastructure, supported by longer term funding and inclusive engagement. Cohesion outcomes should be fully considered in planning and neighbourhood design due to the risk of unintentionally excluding certain groups. This could include assessing the potential impacts of policies related to place and

space interventions on wellbeing inequalities and meaningfully involving communities (Bagnall et al., 2023);

- **Expand investment in coordinated strategic local action:** studies assessing the effectiveness of local cohesion strategies highlight that their findings support calls for expanding investment in coordinated local action. The evidence particularly shows the value in linking national funding for cohesion with investment in local capacity and strategic coordination. Implementing performance contracts that include ambitious social cohesion targets could also be a useful tool for policymakers seeking to improve cohesion outcomes;
- **Strengthen the evidence base for interventions to strengthen cohesion:** numerous studies recommend strengthening the evidence base for social cohesion interventions. This includes using more consistent ways of measuring cohesion and evaluating interventions over a longer period of time to help assess the longevity of impacts and establish causality. They also recommend measuring changes in behaviour rather than relying solely on self-report;
- **Address acute community tensions:** this appears to be an area where research on social cohesion interventions may lag behind policy making and practice. Policies and initiatives may already be implemented in response to emerging tensions, but often in circumstances that make formal evaluation more difficult. A consideration for the Welsh Government and other key partners here is how they can draw on other sources of evidence – for example, local good practice – to improve local and national responses to acute community tensions; and
- **Tackle online polarisation and mis-, dis- and malinformation:** evidence on

interventions to address online polarisation and the spread of mis-, dis- and malinformation fell outside the scope of this review, but is likely to be highly relevant to identifying potential policy actions to strengthen social cohesion in Wales.

Conclusion

This policy brief highlights both the potential and the limitations of the existing evidence base on interventions to strengthen social cohesion. While a wide range of approaches show promise across different settings, limitations of the evidence base mean that firm conclusions about what works best remain difficult to draw. Nevertheless, the evidence points to several policy areas for further consideration for developing policy actions to strengthen cohesion in Wales. Continued investment in high-quality evaluation will be essential for understanding which interventions are most effective, how they can be adapted for the Welsh context, and how national and local levers can work most effectively together. Strengthening the evidence base in these ways will help ensure that future policy to support social cohesion in Wales is both grounded in robust research and responsive to the evolving challenges facing communities.

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