

Home Affairs Portfolio
Department of Home Affairs
Additional Estimates Hearing – February 2025

KEY BRIEF

Topic: Social Cohesion and Office of Community Cohesion

Responsible Deputy: Deputy Secretary Executive, Sophie Sharpe

Key Top Lines

- The Department is deeply concerned by the growing incidence of hate crimes and prejudice in Australia, at a time when social cohesion is under increasing pressure, particularly from the local consequences of conflict in the Middle East.
 - o There is no place in Australia for hatred or discrimination of any kind – whether it is antisemitism, islamophobia or any other form of violent extremism.
- The Office of Community Cohesion (the Office) drives social cohesion policy and program delivery across the Commonwealth, States and Territories, local government and civil society.
- Home Affairs has contributed to new measures the Government has announced since October 2023 to support Australian communities affected by the conflict.
 - o Across government, this included initiatives to combat racism, hate speech and the spread of misinformation, enhance mental health and wellbeing support, and targeted grants programs to support communities and social inclusion. Since then Home Affairs has received an additional \$13.9 million to support social cohesion outcomes including the reparation of Torah scrolls and support for a Jewish museum.
 - o The Department funds many activities to support affected communities, largely through our grants programs.
 - Refer to the Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs Division (CMAD, Sneha Chatterjee) for further information on these grants.
- The Department's support to social cohesion spans our responsibilities on community engagement, reliable and trustworthy service delivery, multicultural affairs, national security and information and communication.
 - o The Office is working with stakeholders across Government to determine what more can be done to strengthen social cohesion, and support communities affected by recent antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents.

Handling Notes:

- *The Secretary will lead on the Department's approach to social cohesion.*
- *Deputy Secretary Sharpe will lead on the establishment of the Office of Community Cohesion and democratic resilience.*
- *For questions on national security aspects of the ongoing Hamas-Israel and the broader Middle East conflict, see NSR group (Nathan Smyth).*

- *Refer the following questions to Immigration Group (Emma Cassar):*
 - *support to Australian Palestinian, Muslim and other communities*
 - *social cohesion community projects, including grants*
 - *Special Envoys for Antisemitism and Islamophobia*
 - *the Department's response to visa holders who incite violence*
 - *community engagement and sentiment*
- *New measures announced by the Government since October 2023 to support Australian communities affected by the conflict are managed by a range of Commonwealth agencies. Specific questions on the range of measures should be referred to the relevant portfolio for response.*
 - *For questions on the Protecting Australians Online Measure, refer to NSR Group (Nathan Smyth).*
 - *For questions under the same measure regarding the eSafety Commissioner, refer to the eSafety Commissioner.*
 - *For questions related to improving community safety (Executive Council of Australian Jewry), refer to the Attorney-General's Department.*
 - *For questions related to mental health and community wellbeing, refer to the Department of Health and Aged Care.*
 - *For questions related to wellbeing in Jewish and Islamic schools, refer to the Department of Education.*

Key Points

- Australia's social cohesion is under pressure.
- Scanlon Institute's 2024 report highlights that Australia's social cohesion has remained stable over the last 12 months, but is below its long-term average.
- Social cohesion is cross-cutting. Responsibility for the drivers of social cohesion are found in many policy portfolios, across jurisdictions, and also beyond government.
- The Office of Community Cohesion was established in the Department to drive greater coherence across government efforts to strengthen the cohesion of our diverse, democratic society.
 - I am also engaging Secretaries across the Commonwealth in support of the office – we collectively recognise the challenge and complexity in this effort.
 - I am grateful for the strong support of my colleagues who also recognize this is not an issue that Home Affairs, or indeed Government alone, can seek to manage.
 - Amongst the challenges, there is an opportunity to highlight and celebrate the many great strengths of Australian society, from our stable and growing economy, the support of universal healthcare through Medicare, to the continuing world-leading levels of support and appreciation for our multicultural society, even though concerns about the level of migration from year to year.

Australian Government Response

- On 7 February 2025, the Parliament passed the toughest laws in Australian history against hate crimes that target the most serious forms of hateful speech, including:
 - new criminal offences for advocating and threatening the use of force or violence against a group, member of a group, or against a place of worship
 - mandatory minimum sentences for those that commit terrorism and prohibited hate symbols offences, and increased penalties for prohibited hate symbols offences to reflect the seriousness of that conduct.
- On 21 January 2025, the Prime Minister convened a meeting of National Cabinet, bringing together State Premiers and Chief Ministers to address the rise of anti-Semitic hate crimes.
- On 9 December 2024, the Prime Minister also announced AFP Special Operation Avalite to crack down on antisemitism, threats, violence and hatred towards the Australian Jewish community.
- In September 2024, Mr Aftab Malik was appointed as Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia in Australia.
- In July 2024, Ms Jillian Segal AO was appointed as Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism in Australia, and Mr Peter Khalil MP as Special Envoy for Social Cohesion.
- Additionally, the Government is delivering on a range of measures to address the recent rise in anti-Semitism, including:
 - introducing a landmark ban on the Nazi salute and hate symbols which came into effect in January 2024
 - criminalising doxxing – the malicious release of personal information
 - committing \$25 million for improved safety and security at Jewish sites across the country, including schools, in the weeks following the 7 October terrorist attack
 - funding an additional \$32.5 million for security measures for schools and synagogues.

Home Affairs' Social Cohesion Remit

- Social cohesion has been an enduring focus for the Department of Home Affairs.
- Home Affairs contributes to social cohesion through our many responsibilities:
 - **Trustworthy service delivery:** This is our most important contribution to social cohesion, by delivering with integrity, competence, excellence and empathy.
 - E.g. our Migration Program – visas, citizenship, settlement supports, translation/interpreting services; the ABF; NEMA.
 - **National security:** There are acute social cohesion threats that invoke our national security responsibilities.
 - E.g. cyber security; countering foreign interference; countering terrorism and violent extremism; providing protective security to high office holders.

- **Community engagement:** we engage with communities, communicate official messaging, listen to diverse perspectives, and pass on community feedback to government stakeholders.
 - E.g. onshore Regional Directors; Community Liaison Officers in all states and territories; community forums.
- **Multicultural affairs:** We have special responsibility for promoting multiculturalism.
 - E.g. community grants programs; support to communities affected by conflict/crisis in the Middle East; the Special Envoys for combatting anti-Semitism and Islamophobia; the Multicultural Framework Review.
- **Information and communication:** We ensure the accessible flows of information to communities and community leaders (who are champions of social cohesion), across the Commonwealth, to states and territories, and to the public.

The Office of Community Cohesion

- The Office works with Commonwealth agencies, States and Territories, industry, civil society and communities to identify practical approaches to improve social cohesion and promote better whole-of-government and whole-of-society collaboration.
- The Office provides a focal point for policy coherence, incident response and aligned policy, programs and practice.
- The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute identified long-term drivers that have an impact on social cohesion, including:
 - a declining sense of belonging, connected to deteriorating trust in one another and in our institutions
 - conditions of financial stress and inequality
 - strained acceptance of diversity, tolerance and respect, marked by enduring experiences of prejudice and discrimination.
- This research provided fundamental insights into the connection between democratic resilience and social cohesion outlined in the report *Strengthening Australian Democracy: A Practical Agenda for Democratic Resilience*. The report's findings are contributing to the Office's forward work plan for practical policy initiatives to strengthen social cohesion.
- The Office's key actions to date include:
 - Establishing a **Community Cohesion Incident Response function**
 - The Office coordinates actions, advice, and input from teams with responsibilities in the event of a social cohesion incident or crisis; and articulating the impact an incident has or could potentially have on social cohesion, and providing advice to the Minister on what can be done.
 - Establishing a **Rapid Response Team** to coordinate across Government to ensure aligned, coherent, and coordinated policy responses to hate incidents.

- Developing a whole-of-society **Social Cohesion Engagement Framework** to build a shared understanding of the roles and value of social cohesion. The Framework will also identify connections to foster and mobilise when needed.
- Conducting a **National Stocktake of Social Cohesion Initiatives** which identifies over 400 initiatives across the Commonwealth, States and Territories.
- Established a **Secretaries Steering Group (SSG) on Community Cohesion** to provide strategic advice and guidance to inform the whole-of-government approach to strengthening social cohesion efforts, and share best practise.
- Meetings with the **Special Envoys**: the Special Envoy for Social Cohesion, Special Envoy for Islamophobia and Special Envoy for Antisemitism.
- Worked with NSW Government to deliver the **Strengthening Social Cohesion conference** on 29 – 30 October 2024.
- The current priorities for the Office are:
 - Finalising the whole-of-society **Social Cohesion Engagement Framework** and developing and driving the **renewed strategic social cohesion policy narrative of community cohesion**. This will enhance delivering Home Affairs social cohesion outcomes, and coordinating across Commonwealth, States and Territories and whole-of-society capabilities to safeguard and strengthen social cohesion and democratic resilience.
 - Identifying and delivering **policy and program options** to address destabilising influences on social cohesion at the working level (rapid response team) and strategic level (Secretaries Steering Group).
 - Encouraging and enabling **information sharing, innovation and collaboration** across jurisdictions, sectors and countries to identify and scale best practice solutions; monitor and understand emerging problems and trends; and promote collaboration, shared responsibility and diversity of trusted champions of social cohesion and democratic resilience.
 - Continuing the work with the **Civic Engagement Youth Advisory Group** on improving civic engagement and scoping a broader youth reference group on social cohesion.
 - Continuing working with the **Museum of Australian Democracy** on a range of activities from mis- and disinformation campaigns ahead of the election to modernise democracy educational materials.
 - Continuing working with the **Resilient Democracy and Research Data Network** through the Australian National University to support baseline understanding and measurement of democratic resilience.
 - Continuing to collaborate with the Trust and Transparency Unit at the **Australian Public Service Commission** on measuring trust and satisfaction with Australian Democracy.

ASIO 2025 Annual Threat Assessment

- In his 2025 Annual Threat Assessment on 19 February 2025, DG Mike Burgess AM highlighted that while the conflict in the Middle East had not yet directly inspired terrorism in Australia, it has prompted protest, exacerbated division, undermined social cohesion, and elevated intolerance.
- DG Burgess further highlighted the growing incidence of antisemitism in Australia, and the concern that further incidents were likely to occur.
- DG Burgess also outlined how the constellation of threats facing Australia requires a whole of government, whole of community and whole of society response.
- The call to mobilise a coordinated approach to combat the threats posed to Australia's social cohesion is why Secretary Foster established the Office of Community Cohesion in September 2024.
 - The Office is contributing to the whole of government response.

Sky News Anti-Semitism Summit - 20 February

- The Department welcomes the efforts by Sky News and other speakers to host the Summit and discuss both problems and solutions. While not invited, we were represented by the Attorney- General the Hon Mark Dreyfus KC MP.
 - As many speakers highlighted during the event, we agree the issue of antisemitism is a pressing concern
 - We are aware of the suggested initiatives in the 15 Point Action Plan.
- The Summit highlighted the importance of collective responsibility for combating antisemitism, which was described as a deep societal issue contrary to Australian values.
 - All speakers emphasised the strong commitment from various leaders to combat anti-Semitism in Australia through legislation, and by providing greater support for the Jewish community.
 - Some speakers labelled the rise of antisemitism as a national security issue that requires a federal response, including stronger legislative and law enforcement measures.
- The Department will consider the concepts outlined in the 15 Point Action Plan, but note that not all of the recommendations fit within the remit of the Department.

Consultation

- Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs Division and the Group Finance Partner were consulted in the preparation of this brief.

Statistic and Financial Reporting Period:

Statistics Date Ranges – 2024 November Additional Estimates	
Since last hearing	1 October 2024 – 31 December 2024
Financial Year	1 July 2024 – 31 December 2024