

Preventing Extremism Together: Places of Worship Response of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities accepts that it is an unfortunate fact that monocultural groups can sometimes be breeding grounds for extremist views directed against the community at large and members of other groups in particular. We agree emphatically that the members of those groups and the communities of which they are part must be fully engaged if internal problems of violent extremism are to be combated effectively. Accordingly, we support the intention of this consultation to '*explore ways in which communities can be supported to address the problems of radicalisation and extremism in their midst*' and accept that these proposals are intended to assist rather than coerce communal leaders.

Although extremism can be promoted and flourish in any form of community group, and not merely in faith communities, it does have to be acknowledged, unfortunately, that a minority of people subvert the atmosphere of '*devotion and reflection*' in a few places of worship. However, we strongly support the view that '*the majority of worshippers regard any association between worship and extremist ideologies as deeply abhorrent*' and we therefore emphasise that legislation should not be such as to make that majority feel threatened for carrying out their daily activities.

We believe that measures restricting the rights and freedoms of individuals are not to be justified in terms of the power of the state to over-ride individual rights and freedoms. Restricting the rights and freedoms of the few is only justified in order to protect the rights and freedoms of the majority, and must be justified in those terms. If level heads fail, it is preferable that one person be dealt with by due process, and with the support of the community, than that the situation be allowed to develop where the whole community is stigmatised by its failure to deal with it.

A. How great a problem is the issue of places of worship being used to foment violent extremism, and how effective are existing measures and powers to counteract the problem?

We would strongly caution that measures addressing only one type of venue are unlikely to be successful in preventing the spread of violent extremism. A person, whether cleric or lay-person, may speak or act with equal authority whether in a place of worship or elsewhere – and perhaps to even greater effect if his/her audience resent the fact that they have been barred from meeting in a place of worship.

We do not believe that this should preclude legislative measures such as those described in sections 17-22, but we do urge that they should be extended to cover all public venues and emphasise that they should not in themselves be regarded as a solution to the problem of extremism. On the contrary, we believe that legislation which could be interpreted as implying that violent extremism is a feature of religion, or even that it is more prevalent in faith communities than in the general public, could

be extremely damaging to community relations, and could result in increased attacks on members of identifiable faith communities.

In respect of our own faith, we do not believe that there is a problem of Jewish people fomenting violent extremism either in synagogues or elsewhere. Jewish people are, however, frequently victims of violent racially-motivated attacks either on themselves or their property. For example, a few years ago the synagogue in Dundee has been daubed with racist graffiti, and more recently a firebomb attack was made on the synagogue in Edinburgh. On this occasion the device fortunately failed to detonate. The mosque in Edinburgh which was similarly attacked on the same night was not so fortunate.

We also believe that every effort must be made to ensure that the proposed measures do not stigmatise particular faiths or communities, and so fuel xenophobic or racist stereotyping of them, as has already regrettably been the case in some quarters since the terrorist attacks on New York and London. Certain sections of the media are regrettably particularly culpable in this regard, and we would urge that consideration be given to how this can be controlled.

The measures proposed are predicated on the presumption that an individual fomenting violence or extremism is doing so in defiance of his or her community and its leaders. We agree that this is likely to be the case, and recommend that a mechanism is put in place to ensure that this is stated explicitly whenever action under these proposals is reported.

B. What more could be done to support faith communities in preventing places of worship being used to foment extremism, short of taking additional powers?

We would wish to highlight the importance of non-legislative measures at the local level, such as the development of good relations and mutual trust between faith communities, the police, and other agencies, and also between different faith communities.

We do, however, support the view that legislation could '*enable those in charge of places of worship to take action if previously they have felt unable to do so*', and believe this to be as important an aspect of the proposals as '*lay[ing] down a specific legal challenge*'.

We reiterate our belief that, in general, individuals who preach violence do so in defiance of their community and its leaders. We accept that on occasion religious and communal leaders may experience difficulty in regulating the activities of particular groups within their community, and would benefit from the support provided by legislation when their own efforts have failed. We would expect the powers proposed in paragraphs 17-22 to be used only rarely, and do not anticipate that they would result in large numbers of cases coming before the courts. In our view public awareness that such powers exist would, in the majority of cases, provide adequate reinforcement to enable communal leaders to resolve issues without further external intervention.

Nonetheless such measures are unfortunately not always effective, and we accept the need for the law to intervene when all else has failed. Whilst we agree that new measures may be appropriate, we would point out that existing legislation addresses many of these issues, such as incitement to racial hatred, and that it is not always utilised to full effect. New laws which are not enforced add nothing to old laws which are not enforced, and we therefore urge that this should be addressed in conjunction with any new proposals.

C. What are your views on the legislative proposal contained in paragraphs 17-22?

We broadly support the proposals outlined in paragraphs 17-22 which seem to us to be reasonable and proportionate, but emphasise that they should only be used as a last resort after all other alternatives have been exhausted. We do have some concern that those involved in activities which foment violent extremism may not be amenable to direction from moderate communal leaders, and we are reassured by the information that communal leaders who have taken reasonable steps to prevent such activity continuing but who have not been successful in doing so will not be liable to prosecution.

We reiterate that there is no reason to single out places of worship and that the proposed measures should apply equally to other premises, including, for example, educational establishments, community centres, clubs, etc.

D. How is your place of worship defined in practice? Does it mean just the space used for preaching and prayer or does it include temporary meeting rooms or faith schools? Would similar powers be useful in respect of these places or other places which are not places of worship?

Jewish people can pray in any location, whether individually or in a group, but in practice the majority of congregational prayer services take place in a synagogue, although this may often be no more than a room in a private house.

In common with many places of worship of other faith communities, all the synagogues in Scotland provide on-site communal facilities such as classrooms, meeting rooms, offices, and function halls.

As we have already mentioned, the fomentation of violent extremism is not confined to places of worship and their environs, and we would urge that legislation is framed so as to include all public venues including those in educational establishments. It would clearly be ineffective for legislation to ban a particular activity in the place of worship itself whilst permitting it to take place in an adjoining hall or associated institution. Consequently, even if legislation is restricted to places of worship, we believe it to be essential that it should cover all premises attached or affiliated to them.

E. It is important that any power has appropriate safeguards. Application for a requirement order would require very senior authorisation in the Police, and would need to be confirmed by a court. Is this sufficient, or would further safeguards be appropriate?

Legislation to limit people's freedom to meet and share opinions should only be enacted and employed when absolutely necessary for the good of the wider community. It is imperative that the process should command the greatest possible public confidence, and we therefore believe that a requirement order should only be made by a judge, that applications should be made by the procurator fiscal rather than by the police, and that this should only happen after all other alternatives have been exhausted.

In summary

Although the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities does not believe that there is a particular problem of extremism in places of worship, we would strongly support the implementation of measures prohibiting the fomentation of violent extremism wherever it occurs, on the grounds of protecting the rights of others.

We repeat that measures should not be restricted to places of worship or to faith communities in general, and stress that every effort must be made to ensure that the measures themselves, or publicity arising from them, do not themselves exacerbate inter-communal tension by appearing to stigmatise any particular community. Above all, we emphasise that measures must be appropriate and proportionate, and that stringent safeguards must be in place to prevent even the suspicion of misuse.

Note: The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland comprising Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee as well as the more loosely linked groups of the Jewish Network of Argyll and the Highlands, and of students studying in Scottish Universities and Colleges.

We have consulted widely among members of these communities in the course of preparing this response.