

Devon and Cornwall Police and Crime Panel

21st November 2025

OFFICE OF THE POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER

Briefing note: Community cohesion

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Community tensions have a significant impact on the wellbeing of individuals and communities, and public authorities must work together to address these tensions, promote cohesion and ensure that everyone living and working in our communities feels safe and connected.

1.2 Our society is becoming more polarised. Both locally and across the country, communities have experienced an increase in tension. In August 2024, widespread unrest and violent disorder broke out in many towns and cities across the county, including in Plymouth, following the traumatic murders of three young girls in Southport in July of that year.

1.3 Organised demonstrations over the summer from anti-immigration and far right groups, anti-fascist counter demonstrations, pro-Palestinian groups, transgender rights groups, gender-critical groups, and others, along with the displaying of – and the response to – St George's Cross and Union flags in public places has brought into sharp focus the tensions, and surfaced underlying divisions present in our communities. Yearly increases in hate crime have been reported both locally and nationally, and the terrorist attack on a synagogue in Manchester last month resulting in the tragic loss of two lives, has increased feelings of fear and uncertainty amongst many communities.

1.4 Local authorities have a significant role to play in tackling inequalities, building resilient communities and preventing extremism and hate crime. Through the Localism Act 2011, local authorities are afforded a general power of competence which empowers them to promote community cohesion by undertaking projects and activities to improve their area's social, economic, or environmental well-being, without needing to find a specific law for each action. The Commissioner works alongside leaders in local government as do the police, to support this endeavour.

1.5 As well as upholding the law, preventing crime and pursuing justice, police forces have a key role in protecting and reassuring communities. Police and Crime Commissioners can use their convening role to bring community safety and criminal justice partners together to ensure that work in this area is joined up.

1.6 Devon and Cornwall have a long track record of welcoming refugees and those who are fleeing conflict and seeking asylum and is proud to do so.



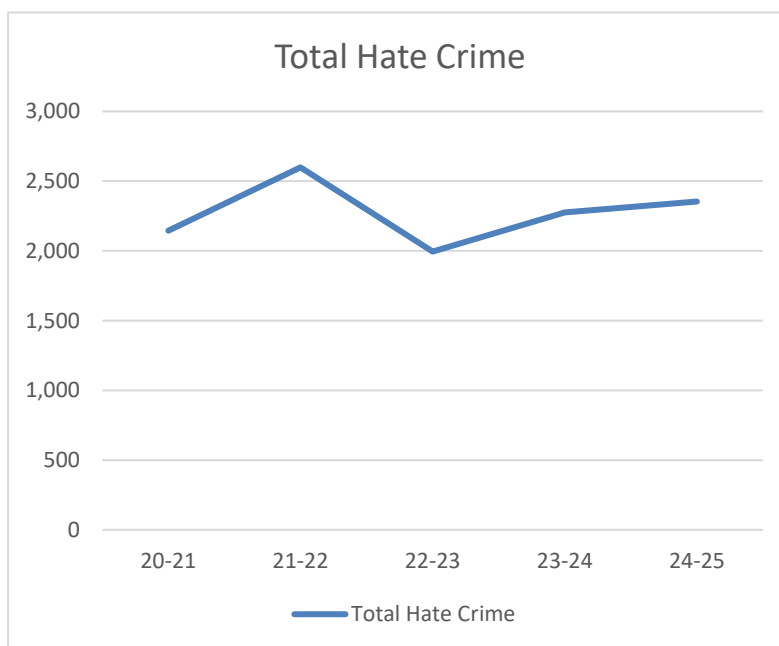
2.0 Hate Crime

2.1 In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the agreed definition of a hate crime is any criminal offence which is perceived by the victim or any other person to be motivated by hostility or prejudice towards a person's:

- race or perceived race
- religion or perceived religion
- sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation
- disability or perceived disability
- transgender identity or perceived transgender identity

2.2 Devon and Cornwall Police also recognise and record crimes motivated by hostility or prejudice towards a person's sex or gender as hate crimes. Crimes motivated by other forms of hostility or prejudice (i.e. age, alternative subcultures etc) can also be recorded as hate crime.

2.3 Hate crime accounts for approximately 2%¹ of all recorded crime in Devon and Cornwall. In Devon and Cornwall there were 1,995 hate crimes recorded by the force in the 12 months to August 2023. In the 12 months to August 2024 there were 2,276 hate crimes recorded, an increase of 14.1%. In the 12 months to August 2025 2,354 hate crimes were recorded, a further increase of 3.4% when compared to the previous year. A five-year comparison, from the beginning of September 2020 to the end of August 2025 is shown in the graph and table below.



(Source: Devon and Cornwall Police)

¹ Devon and Cornwall Police recorded crime, 12 months to August 2025



Years	Total Hate Crime	% Change	
20-21	2,146		
21-22	2,599	↑	21.1%
22-23	1,995	↓	-23.2%
23-24	2,276	↑	14.1%
24-25	2,354	↑	3.4%
Grand Total	11,370		

(Source: Devon and Cornwall Police)

2.4 The most frequently recorded hate crime offence type is 'racial related' hate crimes and this offence type saw an increase of 9.4% or 114 crimes when comparing 12 months to August 2024 to 12 months to August 2025. Significant percentage increases were also seen in hate crime offence types 'religion or belief related' (+13.1% or 21 crimes) and 'disability related' (+10.6% or 37 crimes) when comparing the same period.

2.5 Hate crime is widely understood to be vastly under reported nationally. The reasons for this are complex and wide ranging but this is likely impacted by reduced public trust and confidence in policing and in other statutory bodies by many communities, as well as victims fears of repercussions of reporting. Recent increases seen in police recorded hate crime may reflect a real increase in hate crime occurring, but increases could also reflect increased reporting.

2.6 Whilst Devon and Cornwall Police has seen a recent increase in recorded hate crime, the force has also seen increases in total recorded crime. Recorded crime increased by 5.6% when comparing the 12 months to June 2025 with the 12 months to June 2024.

3.0 What are Devon and Cornwall Police doing to address community tensions, and how are they working with local authorities?

3.1 Devon and Cornwall Police continue to work with communities, local authorities and wider partners to promote community cohesion and tackle community tensions.

Community engagement and support

3.2 The force's diverse communities' engagement officers work across Devon and Cornwall with the aim of breaking down barriers and building trust, confidence and understanding with communities who are often marginalised and with those who have historically lacked confidence in policing. Engagement officers work with communities to build relationships and provide trusted points of contact for communities who might otherwise disengage from policing. Engagement officers regularly attend advocacy groups, prayers at places of worship, and multiple cultural and religious events throughout the year, maintaining a visible presence and source



of support to communities, partners and other stakeholders.

3.3 Building relationships and connections in this way means that engagement officers can identify risks and tensions within communities at the earliest opportunity, often enabling them to prevent the escalation of tensions and harm. Engagement officers are also able to work with communities to promote a better understanding of hate crime and encourage reporting, including through third party reporting methods, which can be used by victims who do not have the confidence to report to police directly.

3.4 These long term, trusted relationships with communities enable engagement officers to reach out to communities and stakeholders following national and international events, such as the terrorist attack on a synagogue in Manchester in October. Engagement officers were able to reach out to the Jewish community, visit places of worship and provide a message of reassurance and support, whilst simultaneously reaching out to the Muslim community, where there were also safety concerns within the community.

Protests and demonstrations

3.5 In the planning for and management of protests and demonstrations, the police must balance the rights of groups and individuals to have their voice heard effectively, with the rights of local businesses and residents who can experience excessive disruption and sometimes threats to safety. If police reasonably believe that a protest may lead to serious public disorder, damage to property or serious disruption to the community, police forces have powers available to impose conditions on protests and demonstrations, including controlling the route, and limiting the duration and location of protests.

3.6 In advance of demonstrations, Devon and Cornwall Police undertake significant tactical planning, engagement with event organisers, key stakeholders and community leaders, including local councillors, to ensure that the force is in the best position possible to deliver their core responsibilities of the protection of life and property, the prevention of crime and bringing offenders to justice and preserving order to maintain the King's peace.

3.7 The two opposing protests which took place in Exeter on 25th October 2025 brought around 850 people into the city centre. Similar protests in Plymouth took place on 26th October with around 200 people present. The significant planning, which included conditions being imposed on both protest groups, extensive engagement with event organisers and a proportionate police presence at both locations on the day, resulted in minor disruption to the community and very little disorder, with only one arrest being made.

3.8 Over the last few months the force has managed several anti-immigration protests and counter protests outside the Hampton by Hilton hotel in Exeter, which is



currently being used by the Home Office to house asylum seekers. A dedicated neighbourhood officer has been embedded at the location providing community liaison and engagement since the hotel has been housing asylum seekers. When tensions surrounding the hotel increased and demonstrations began, the force brought specialist protest liaison teams to work alongside neighbourhood team, manage demonstrations and ensure the safety of participants, occupants and hotel staff. Neighbourhood teams continue to work closely with the hotel and the wider community to effectively manage remaining tensions.

Flying and painting of St George's cross and Union flags

3.9 Over the summer, both locally and nationally there has been an increase of St George's cross and Union flags being attached to street furniture and painted onto the road network.

3.10 Whilst Devon and Cornwall Police have received some reports related to flags, the role of the police in addressing these flags is limited. It is an offence under the Highways Act 1980, to affix items to lampposts or other structures on the highway without the consent of the highway authority, without reasonable excuse. It is also an offence under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to display a national flag (which is considered to be an advertisement) without the permission of the owner of the site it is on. The local authority has primary responsibility for enforcing both pieces of legislation and it is up to local authorities to decide how to deal with flags affixed to lampposts. The police will only remove a flag if there is a clear and evident risk to public safety or criminal damage, such as obstructing a view on a highway.

3.11 There is a role for policing where a local authority or other person makes a report to the police in relation to the affixing of flags to street furniture or the painting of the road network, where the police will seek to identify if any other substantive criminal offences (e.g. criminal damage, public order offences) have been committed, and record and investigate these as appropriate.

Tackling hate crime

3.12 Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) were introduced under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and bring together local partners (including police, fire and rescue authorities, local authorities, health partners and the probation service) to formulate and implement strategies to tackle crime, disorder and antisocial behaviour in their communities. All CSPs across Devon and Cornwall have a focus on hate crime, which includes prevention, promoting recording and improving community cohesion and feelings of safety.

3.13 Hate crime awareness week began on 11th October this year. This national week of action is held each year to encourage communities affected by hate crime, local authorities, police forces and other key partners to work together to tackle local hate crime issues. During this week the force promoted its Zero Tolerance to Hate Crime campaign through the local press and social media. The force also used



internal communications to ask officers and staff to use the week as a platform to engage with communities and to encourage victims and witnesses to report hate offences and remind officers and staff of the relevant policies and guidance available for hate crime, including guidance on recording hate crimes against officers and staff.

3.14 To ensure the police provide appropriate responses to hate crime and to enable organisational learning, the force holds hate crime scrutiny panels, where a sample of hate crime cases are reviewed, as well as hate crime reference groups, which examine the force's performance around hate crime. Both these groups include representation from the force's independent advisors, and they provide scrutiny, feedback and assurance to the force on the response to hate crime.

3.15 When victims of hate crime report to the police, over two thirds of victims are satisfied with the service that they receive. For the 12 months to August 2025, 69% of hate crime victims surveyed said that, when taking the whole experience into account, they were either fairly satisfied (14%), very satisfied (21%) or completely satisfied (35%). This victim satisfaction rate is in line with satisfaction rates for all crime which were also 69% for the same period.

4.0 What is the Commissioner doing to address community tensions in Devon and Cornwall?

4.1 The Commissioner's [Police and Crime Plan](#) aims to create safe, resilient, connected communities, where everyone plays their part to reduce crime. The Commissioner and her office continue to undertake a significant amount of activity in partnership with the force, local authorities, criminal justice partners and community leaders to better understand community tensions and promote community cohesion.

Working with local authorities and criminal justice partners

4.2 As Chair of the Local Criminal Justice Board (LCJB) the Commissioner brings criminal justice partners together to provide oversight and promote collaboration across the system. This is not yet a statutory partnership and is run on goodwill only.

4.3 The role that this partnership played in mitigating the impacts of disorder last summer is recognised by the Local Government Association in their forthcoming guidance on social cohesion, with a best practice case study describing our local partnership response:



In August 2024, Devon and Cornwall experienced significant public disorder, particularly in Plymouth. The violence, racism, and criminal damage that occurred prompted a swift and unified response from the Local Criminal Justice Board (LCJB). Recognising the importance of a coordinated approach, the LCJB convened an extraordinary meeting of strategic leaders across the criminal justice system. This led to the publication of an open letter to the community, condemning the violence and reaffirming support for lawful protest while rejecting criminal behaviour.

The incident highlighted the value of having an established strategic network capable of rapid mobilisation and response. The LCJB's actions were later recognised as best practice nationally.

4.4 Within 72 hours of the Plymouth riot occurring, four men were arrested, charged, convicted and imprisoned for taking part, sending a clear message to the public that this kind of criminal behaviour would not be tolerated in Devon and Cornwall. In total, 24 people were charged, with 23 people sentenced - 16 of these receiving custodial sentences.

4.5 The Commissioner also offered funding to Plymouth City Council following the riots to provide a restorative justice approach for the city, but this was not taken up.

4.6 'Addressing disproportionality' across the criminal justice system has been a priority for the LCJB since 2024. Work to deliver this priority includes commissioning a programme of work to identify gaps in data collection with the criminal justice system. The LCJB have agreed an action to understand the wider community impact following the disorder in Plymouth in summer 2024. Plymouth City Council have also commissioned a piece of work to understand the community impact and tensions, and the LCJB will receive and review the findings of this, which will inform the LCJB's own action in this area.

4.7 CCTV plays an important part in keeping communities safe and helping the force identify offenders. To support wider community safety the PCC has agreed the necessary investment to connect both Plymouth City Council and Exeter City Council CCTV infrastructure to Devon and Cornwall Police control rooms and Silver (tactical) rooms. This will give the police the ability to view live CCTV footage during critical incidents such as riots and civil unrest.

4.8 The Commissioner has also made available funding for parish, town councils and their equivalents and voluntary sector organisations to apply for funding to support investment in their CCTV infrastructure. Over 60 applications were made against a total funding pot of £125,000, (with a maximum of £10,000 per applicant). Applicants will be notified of the result early in December.



Supporting communities and victims

4.9 The OPCC contributes funding to support victims of crime, including hate crime. These services support everyone including people who have protected characteristics. People with lived experience or have similar backgrounds to those receiving the services are available to help. This means that the providers of these services can have a deeper understanding of victims' needs, build trust with victims and provide tailored support.

4.10 The Commissioner continues to invest in schemes and services which divert young people away from crime and antisocial behaviour, prevent criminal exploitation, and provide young people with the support they need to succeed and contribute positively to their community. The OPCC has invested £30,000 this year to match fund the Exeter City Community Trust's new programme for 11 to 18-year-olds called Change Our Path (COP) which hopes to tackle and reduce youth offending and help engage young people who are not thriving in school. A similar scheme to help prevent criminal exploitation of young people through mentoring and activities is also being provided through Plymouth Argyle. It covers the Torbay area and is part-funded by the OPCC through a grant of £30,000.

4.11 The OPCC also commissions an antisocial behaviour outreach service across Devon and Cornwall. The service provides targeted youth work to support young people who are involved in antisocial behaviour or at risk of becoming involved in crime, to build resilience and prevent harmful or criminal behaviour.

Holding the Chief Constable to account

4.13 As part of her holding to account role, the Commissioner meets regularly with the Chief Constable and continues to be fully apprised of all major events, demonstrations and other incidents affecting community cohesion. The police play an important role in supplying the facts to locally elected members in order to enable localised interventions online to stop incorrect rumours spreading.

4.14 In 2023 the Commissioner published the findings of her scrutiny inquiry which examined hate crime prevalence and the policing response in Devon and Cornwall. The Commissioner concluded that the police were working hard to tackle hate crime and provide a good service to the public, noting however that hate crime continues to be under reported and that issues such as lack of trust and confidence in policing were contributing to underreporting. Hate crime prevalence continues to be monitored and reviewed by the Commissioner's office.

4.15 Following the riots in Plymouth in summer 2024, the Commissioner's office published an insight report which considered the appropriateness of the policing response to the riots and any evidence of a 'two-tier' policing approach. The report concluded that in relation to the local policing of protests, civil unrest and riots, there was no substantive evidence that two-tier policing existed in the policing response to the disorder that occurred. The Commissioner's office produced this report in



advance of the Government's scrutiny. The report can be found here: [Two-tier-policing-OPCC-insight-report-2024-FINAL1.pdf](#)

Briefing note end

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