Written evidence submitted by West Sussex County Council

This information speaks to two priorities of the inquiry:

- The barriers that prevent individuals from reporting hate crime, and measures to improve reporting rates.
- The type, extent and effectiveness of the support that is available to victims and their families and how it might be improved.

Following a comprehensive stakeholder-led review of our hate crimes information and support materials throughout 2015, West Sussex County Council identified a range of barriers to current reporting methods and ways of accessing support which emerged as significant underlying reasons for underreporting.

Broadly, these fall under two themes:

1. Lack of confidence and capacity in reporting – many of our residents either felt that they did not have sufficient knowledge and skills to report hate incidents and hate crimes, or felt that they lacked confidence in the authorities and organisations that might offer them support.
2. Concerns that the information provided about how to report and access support might be too generic, lack nuance, and be inaccessible to many audiences. In particular, we identified barriers to reporting for residents with learning disabilities, communication impairments, or whose first language is not English.

We developed an action plan accordingly which sought to address both facets, through an extensive process of awareness-raising, capacity-building and close working to promote confidence and also through redeveloping our materials and support to ensure accessibility and wider inclusion. We work closely with a Hate Incident Support Service, which we commission from Victim Support. This Service can offer free front-line support to victims and witnesses and can offer a range of support services such as counselling, support in reporting to the police, pre-trial support, and advocacy services.

We feel that this is a model which offers best practice to victims and witnesses and could be replicated elsewhere to ensure that victims and witnesses are able to access support quickly, from an impartial and well-respected organisation and one which is not associated with statutory services of law enforcement agencies. This helps to reduce emotional barriers to reporting. We have worked extensively with this Service and with community groups to promote what it can offer following this recognition and we have recorded a significant rise in reports over the preceding years as knowledge of the Service, and confidence in its offer, have grown.

A second focus of our work in this preceding year has been to develop new materials in accessible formats to ensure that we are able to offer information and access to support for disabled people who may be victims of hate incidents and hate crimes. We carried out an extensive review of our materials and support in conjunction with a number of disabled people and organisations, and with our Hate Incident Support Service, during 2015.

Accordingly, we have been working to design new materials and a core element of this work has involved working with disabled residents to ensure genuine, meaningful involvement and co-design so that the new materials are fit for purpose. This has involved organising and running focus groups to gather insight and feedback from those who are most likely to use these new materials.

To date, we have held a range of focus groups with learning disabled adults who use services for disabled adults across West Sussex. The purpose of these has been to ask
people if they knew about hate crime, what it means to them, how it might make them feel, and to think about where they would be most likely to obtain support and report an incident. We have used pictures, mood boards and a range of keywords alongside sign language and spoken conversation to stimulate discussions and to help us to shape appropriate language, images and presentation style. This is because we need to make sure that our new materials use identifiable language and imagery, and are therefore relevant and appealing as well as understandable, to help us to widen awareness about hate crime and what people can do about it if it happens to them. Involving people who know the answers to these questions is the ideal way to achieve this.

We have now developed new materials in conjunction with some of our disabled residents which have been tested and approved as significant improvements in the information available to support people who are vulnerable to experiencing hate incidents. This will be rolled out across the coming year.

Following this, we will be undertaking a wider accessibility review to redevelop new materials for other audiences who face similar communication barriers, including people whose first language is not English, people who have limited English, hearing impaired people, visually impaired people, and communities who have not traditionally engaged widely with statutory agencies and law enforcement. We have noted that this type of accessible information remains underused in England and Wales, despite its benefits in supporting vulnerable adults. We would suggest that this could be adopted as best practice in removing barriers to reporting, and enhancing the support available to victims and witnesses.

In relation to tackling Islamophobia, we have had preliminary discussions about developing a community-led and community-embedded Forum to tackle anti-Muslim hate incidents and hate crimes. This has arisen from the review of our materials and support mechanisms, in this case after we hosted a wide-scale community panel in Crawley to discuss hate incidents and hate crimes affecting Muslim communities in West Sussex. This identified very similar barriers to reporting, particularly a lack of confidence and trust in law enforcement agencies and a sense that non-statutory support which is community-led and community-embedded is a better way to work with victims and witnesses. We will be undertaking work with mosques, Muslim women’s community forums and Imams to develop more accessible materials, following the work with disabled residents: for example, we have already been advised that new materials need to stress the impartiality of the Service; refrain from using images; should use a range of community languages (and not all on one page which we have been told appears tokenistic – we need entire leaflets in a range of languages); and should be designed in conjunction with Muslim communities and representatives to facilitate a sense of ownership and engagement.

Community Safety and Wellbeing Service
West Sussex County Council