

# Social Workers working with the Prevent Duty



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## Introduction

Since its inception in 2003, the Prevent programme has been contentious. For critics it represents a form of surveillance and the pathologisation of Muslims, it lacks transparency and relies on individualised responses to wider societal problems (Kundnani, 2014, Heath-Kelly, 2013). At the same time, the problem of the ongoing growth of both Islamist and fascist recruitment in the UK persists with Prevent the only government programme concerned specifically with preventative work in this area. In 2015 the introduction of statutory Prevent Duty designated anti-radicalisation work as a safeguarding responsibility, which brought it directly into the orbit of Social Work. While criticisms of Social Work's involvement in Prevent has been ongoing, there has been very little research which seeks to assess what social workers are doing when undertaking this work, or how social workers themselves feel about the work they are doing. Given the concerns around both the ethics and the effectiveness of the Prevent programme, these are important issues about which very little is known.

While working at Coventry University in 2019 the project 'Working with the Prevent Duty' was initiated to address these questions and to begin gathering data around the specific work being undertaken in practice around the Prevent duty. Ethical approval for the work to proceed was granted by Coventry University.

The full project I am seeking to undertake involves work on three different sites which allows a comparison of the work being done in localities with different levels of referrals. The 2017 Department for Education report *Safeguarding and Radicalisation* designated different areas as 'high,' 'middle', and 'low prevalence', based on the number of referrals received to Channel Panels. This piece of research follows this approach and it is my intention to interview social workers involved with this area of work in three different prevalence areas. To date the interviews for the high prevalence area are complete. So while the project as a whole is ongoing, the purpose of this Interim Report is to discuss the results of the interviews undertaken so far so as to allow feedback to be disseminated regarding the high prevalence site where I have carried out the first set of interviews.

The focus of this work was on the following questions:

1. Do social work practitioners believe that the Prevent Duty is appropriate to the Safeguarding role?
2. Do practitioners believe that the Prevent Duty covers all forms of Violent Extremism (for e.g. Far Right Neo-Nazi violent extremism as well as Islamist extremism)?
3. Do practitioners believe that the Prevent Duty is consistent with Social Work professional ethical codes?
4. What sorts of approaches and interventions are practitioners using when doing this work involving radicalisation cases which they consider to be effective.

The project involved a mixed methods anonymised questionnaire undertaken with Social Work practitioners working within the Birmingham Children's Trust during

November 2019 – February 2020. Contact was established through identification of key staff working in this area and arrangements made for interview with relevant staff

The questionnaire itself is divided into two halves – firstly a series of questions where respondents were asked to rate their responses to a series of statements about Prevent and their work in relation to this, followed by a semi-structured interview in which each respondent was asked further questions about their role including discussion of specific cases they had worked on.

### **Part 1 : Likert Scale questions**

The questionnaire began with a series of questions where respondents rated their responses to a series of questions:

1. Had the respondents had received training as part of their professional role? How did they rate this training?
2. Did respondents regard the work undertaken as part of Prevent as consistent with Social Work professional ethical codes and values?
3. Did respondents consider their work within Prevent as an extension of their existing safeguarding role?
4. Did the respondents see Prevent (both as an overall policy and in terms of their own experience of this work), as primarily concerned with Islamist extremism?

#### **Responses:**

1. **Training:** Every respondent had received training and when asked to rate this all apart from one rated this is useful or very useful.
2. **Social work professional ethical codes and values:** All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the work they carried out was consistent with social work ethical codes and values.
3. **Safeguarding role:** All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the work they carried out under Prevent was an extension of the safeguarding role as they were already carrying this out.
4. **Is Prevent primarily concerned with Islamist extremism:** All respondents disagreed that this was the case.

In this section of the questionnaire there was a high degree of uniformity in the responses to questions.

- All respondents had experienced training which almost all rated positively.
- All respondents saw the work they were doing as consistent with Social Work ethical codes.
- All respondents saw they carried out under Prevent as an extension of their existing safeguarding role.
- All respondents disagreed that Prevent was primarily concerned with Islamist extremism; i.e. they saw it as concerned with all forms of extremism.

### **Part 2: Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

Having done a thematic analysis of the interviews undertaken I analysed and identified four key themes

1. Prevent as a Safeguarding role – Similarities and Differences with the existing role
2. The role of training
3. The focus of Prevent
4. What approaches are most effective in this area of work?

**1. Prevent as a Safeguarding role – Similarities and Differences with the existing role.**

All respondents identified both significant similarities with other areas of safeguarding, while at the same time pointing to the distinctive nature of the work around Prevent. For example, a number of respondents pointed to the similarity between the grooming process as compared to areas such as Child Criminal Exploitation and Child Sexual Exploitation. However, they also noted that while the latter were primarily driven by financial gain for the perpetrators, work around Prevent contained an 'ideological' element which was distinctive.

One respondent noted:

*...a lot of the signs that you've got to look out for with children who come under the whole Prevent umbrella are similar to the signs that you look for with children you're working with Child Criminal Exploitation and Child Sexual Exploitation...Prevent [is] all about radicalisation, children and young people coming to extreme...ideological views and the way that children...are coerced into it by the whole grooming process..*

Another Respondent noted that the work around Prevent had:

*... really broadened our knowledge in terms of how Prevent is part of our safeguarding day-to-day practice and the way that we interact with our families. And the work that we do is no different, really. However, it does kind of encourage social workers to research more about that particular group or family that they're working with.*

Another respondent noted:

*it's still that focus on your safeguarding and exploring those issues with families. I think it's looking at the safeguarding concerns is in a whole. I think Prevent is an additional part which connects to...radicalisation [and] extremist ideologies. So, it's kind of unique in itself.*

Respondents also noted that some of the distinctive features of Prevent referrals were the high profile which these had:

*... It's about the profile of these referrals. Because when looking to get these cases allocated, I impress upon the team managers of the teams that these cases need to be allocated ASAP*

Similarly another respondent noted that the high media profile of Prevent work complicated work with partner agencies such as schools:

*sometimes the fear factor gets to partner agencies so much. They're not actually thinking about having those conversations with parents...They're not exploring how they would work normally - it might almost stop their curiosity when they hear the word 'Prevent'.*

## **2. The role of Training**

Respondents noted how important training was given the complexity and range of cases which social workers are dealing with. Respondents noted that because of the 'ideological' element in the radicalisation process, it was important that Social Workers had training that allowed them to be aware of the shape of this.

One respondent noted that Prevent work involved:

*a different kind of element to social work that unless you've had that training or know what you're looking out for, it makes it difficult to... work with families*

Another respondent noted that practitioners walked a fine line in assessing cases in this area and that this made good training really important:

*We have to understand different religions. Is it extremism? Is it just a teenager exploring different things for their development or curiosity? Also dealing with families, they don't want to be labelled as terrorists so we have to be very mindful of that..*

In their discussions of relevant cases, respondents noted the range of patterns of radicalisation; so this could be situations where people are groomed online or through social networks and the family are entirely unaware that this is taking place, but also that there were other cases where family networks were closely involved in the process of radicalisation. This complexity of patterns needed to be addressed in training.

Respondents also noted that while a focus on vulnerability – such as mental health or learning disability – could be a key factor in the grooming process, that recruitment of individuals also took place where none of these factors were present. One respondent noted an example of radicalisation which took place in the case of an individual who was:

*very academic, no learning need or disability [and who]. comes from a very routine, very stable nuclear family.. Financially fine, [and] still there are people are being targeted.*

## **3. The Focus of Prevent**

I noted above that respondents rejected the idea that Prevent was primarily about Islamist recruitment and radicalisation.

One respondent noted:

*My experiences of working with Prevent have not been Muslim families, they've been white, British males. Social media has given the public the perception that it's all Muslims, it's not. And I think we fail to realise that it's every colour, every creed, every race, every ethnicity that can be groomed into extremism, radicalisation [and the associated] ideological perspective.*

Another noted:

*In my experience, there's far right, there's all different kinds of aspects of terror, not just originating with Islamists. The Prevent agenda, as I see it, should be looking at the whole area of terror.*

Another noted that in the early stages of her work with Prevent:

*a lot of the cases that were emerging were around Muslim radicalisation and extremism. Now, I guess, it's kind of less of that but more kind of far-right extremism in terms of the white communities. The cases that we're getting are very much about racism...or bigotry towards the Muslim community and racial attacks.*

Respondents were asked whether they believed from their experience that Prevent was discriminatory toward Muslims. Respondents noted that while they thought this perspective was present in communities, and that this contributed toward suspicion, in practice they did not believe this was the case. When asked whether they believe there was truth in the claim that Prevent targeted families who are economically deprived and discriminated against due to racism and Islamophobia, one respondent bluntly that in their opinion this was 'Rubbish'.

Another respondent responded to this same question stating :

*As somebody working in Prevent, it's important for me to reflect upon the negative aspects as well as the positive. Now, I see positive results. But because the general public, the media, potentially don't see the positive, the focus on the negative is where Prevent potentially hasn't helped a situation. I can certainly understand the argument where individuals might say, "I don't want anything to do with Prevent because of this argument."*

*Do we discuss cases where they're not appropriate for Prevent? Yes. Do they tend to be from solely ethnic minorities? Probably not.*

Another respondent noted that while Muslim families could be suspicious of social work involvement, they were at the same time aware of the dangers out there for their children and were very concerned about that:

*And a lot of the families cry out for help as well, you know, you could be sitting in there dealing with one matter and you will have built up a relationship with Mum and they might say, "Well actually, I'm worried about my child or young person." And it starts the dialogue.*

#### **4. What approaches are most effective in this area of work?**

The point about dialogue in the last comment evidenced the way respondents came back repeatedly to the importance of building relationships as the basis of doing this work.

*it's still about that relationship-based practice, you've got to find somewhere in that difficult conversation around that. Because ultimately, Muslim extremism isn't about Islam, it's about an ideology of something totally nothing to do with Islam. And I think it's about people's understanding of that and making people aware, I'm not here about the religion.*

One respondent talked about the way she had deliberately allocated case involving a service user involved in far-right networks to a very skilled Muslim social worker precisely because she wanted to give a message to her about diversity and tolerance:

*[The child's mother] didn't want the young person to be in any class with any person who was Muslim or Asian. It was about educating the child and the mum about, "Actually, this is what communities are like."...But Mum really turned it around [after] she was educated through direct work and the support available to her through the social work agencies,. But she was really apologetic to the social worker in the end as well, about having these views, although she never targeted the social worker but she felt she owed her an apology for her behaviour throughout the process and having these views. And she sent her a thank you card, which is really nice.*

A respondent talked about the way they worked with a family where a young mother gone to Syria and how they had to arrange care for the son within the remaining family members who were deeply shocked and profoundly hurt and upset regarding their daughter's departure:

*It took a few months for the family to really open up to us and allow us to be part of that family life and what it meant and for us to be able to go to the families and do visits. And everybody was very kind of worried about what it meant for them. So, a lot of people would shy away from meeting us. And it was about the stigma around being from a family that was radicalised.*

Another respondent noted the centrality of relationship building as the whole focus of the safeguarding work:

*It's about trying to get that relationship built and it's about safeguarding the children. If that child is being radicalised, we need to take action for the child's welfare as much as the government's to make sure nothing happens to the child, or young person*

## Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the above work I would like to offer the following points as the basis for ongoing discussion.

1. One of the key concerns that develops from the academic literature concerning social work involvement with Prevent is the argument that the implementation of this policy is discriminatory and racist toward Muslims (Heath-Kelly:2013, Kundnani: 2014) and is 'securitising' social work interventions (Stanley, T. and Guru, S, 2015, McKendrick & Finch:2017) and thereby is not congruent with social work values and ethical codes. By contrast this work suggests that respondents saw the work they were doing in the area of Prevent as fully congruent with social work ethical codes and values, while also seeing the importance of addressing issues of diversity, racism and racialisation in practice. It is significant that while these respondents were very much aware of these issues, their experiences offered no evidence to suggest that Prevent was racist or discriminatory.
2. Another key issue is that practitioners see the work taking place in the area of Prevent and Radicalisation as entirely appropriately situated within the safeguarding remit of Social Work. Rather than 'securitising' social work, respondents clearly identified the work as an extension of their existing responsibilities, albeit with distinctive features.
3. Regarding the distinctive features of Prevent work respondents noted two issues. Firstly the 'ideological' element of Islamist and Far Right radicalisation, which contrasted to the largely economic form of exploitation in Child Sexual Exploitation and Child Criminal Exploitation. Secondly the challenges of the work caused by its higher profile in the media, and the impact this had on the children, young people and families they worked with, as well as partner agencies, such as schools, who some respondents saw as alternating between downplaying concerns on one hand, and then over-reacting on the other. Respondents discussed experiences in working with Counter-Terrorist police, and while noting challenges overall felt these concerns had been able to be addressed effectively.
4. Training was seen by respondents as crucial to addressing all of these distinctive aspects of Prevent work, and respondents as a whole were very positive about their experiences of training received. Respondents noted that way that the sensitivities around this area of work meant that practitioners often walked a fine line in their work with families and young people, and that training and the development of practice beyond this were of crucial importance in addressing these issues
5. In terms of the models of effective practice respondents drew strongly on the model of Relationship Based Practice as the basis of effective work. The work described by respondents showed that while the process of forming relationships was complicated by mistrust, the stigma associated with the issue of radicalisation, and the often difficult and even traumatic experiences of families in this area of work, that with the use of their skills



and persistence, that they were able to form valuable and meaningful relationships with young people and their families.

I welcome any comments or further discussion you would like to offer around this. Please contact me on [hsx384@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:hsx384@coventry.ac.uk) if you would like to do this.

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