

1. Title Page

Prevent, Channel, and Safeguarding Against Radicalisation in England and Wales: A Social Work Perspective.

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II. Abstract

Since its inception in 2003 and first publication in 2006, the Prevent strategy of England and Wales has been divisive, with concerns raised about the over-emphasis on Muslims. Critics believed the strategy would result in surveillance and securitisation, with the most vocal critics I describe as the “anti-Prevent camp” seeing Prevent as fundamentally flawed and needing to be withdrawn. Contrasting this is the “pro-Prevent camp”, often composed of politicians and right leaning thinktanks, who are staunchly defending of Prevent. Conceptually this study provides a critical history of Prevent in four ‘waves’, unpicking the arguments of both camps in the process to see which views can be evidenced and stand up to scrutiny. A key issue in all discourses around Prevent and Channel is a lack of primary data to provide any meaningful conclusions. This study makes an original contribution to knowledge though its qualitative approach that used semi-structured interviews with participants who have attended Channel panels, which are the multi-agency operational arm of Prevent where referrals are adopted for bespoke support. The research sought to understand the issues presenting at Channel, how practitioners conceptualise them, and how effective the safeguarding interventions devised by panels are. Through Thematic Analysis, four themes were identified in the data and the study concludes with recommendations, highlighting the hostile environment experienced in recruitment for the research and subsequent challenges for future research. Despite these challenges, the study presents an original contribution, a rare usage of primary data, and a balanced criticality towards the conceptual and practical issues in Prevent and Channel.

III. Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed:

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Since 2013 I have achieved Bsc Psychology, Msc Forensic Psychology, MA Social Work, and I am now working towards this PhD in Social Work, all at University of Gloucestershire, with a brief stint elsewhere to gain Counselling qualifications. However, Social Work has been where I found a home and as I have stated in my MA Social Work dissertation from 2020 and am happy to do so again, University of Gloucestershire has been more than a place of study for me. I would like to thank the wider community, from the social work team, the academic and administration staff, the chaplaincy, and especially the students from all disciplines and from all across the World. You are the lifeblood of the university.

vii. Personal Preface

This PhD is about Prevent, Channel, and safeguarding against radicalisation, but before I proceed into the thesis, I believe it worthwhile sharing something about my own experiences and influences that brought me to this work. Many British people will have some memories or understandings of a period of history in Northern Ireland known as ‘The Troubles’, approximately between 1968 and 1998. For many people this will have been through hearing about this on the news, and more recently there have been television series’ such as *Derry Girls* or *The Fall* (Stacey, 2024). Having been born and raised in Derry at the tail-end of The Troubles, I want to begin by reflecting on some experiences that have shaped my approach and understanding of radicalisation.

One of the most vivid and earliest memories I have of encountering terrorism as a child was on our annual trip to the ‘Oul Lammass Fair’ in Ballycastle, traditionally held on the final Monday and Tuesday of August each year, a fair which began as essentially a cattle market but grew to include live country music and various shops and stalls. After my sister parked her car nearby and we walked towards the fair, I heard a mother and her very young son who were coming in the opposite direction and he curiously said to her, “mammy, what’s a bomb-scare?” This was said within earshot of my family, but it did not resonate with us at that point. That this question did not phase us is a clue as to the context. When we walked further ahead, we found the fair had been blocked off by the police at the last minute due to a bomb threat (Morris, 2001), finally contextualising the young child’s question. I do not remember the specific police on this occasion, but I remember armed police and armed vehicles throughout my childhood to the extent that I was shocked when discovering this not to be the case in England and their police stations were accessible to the public and not surrounded by

barbed wire and high walls (see Appendix A). Colloquially in my youth we referred to such incidents as “bomb-scares” rather than ‘bomb threats’. The reason this incident is notable is that as a child of around ten years of age, I had already internalised such incidents and language to the degree that, like many people from Derry, desensitisation had set in and bomb-scares were a regular feature of daily life, normalised to the extent that they became a minor inconvenience to which we merely grumbled about being late home rather than fearing a threat to life. For instance, that day we departed Ballycastle and proceeded to the Giant’s Cause way and the Carrick-A-Rede Rope Bridge, giving no further thought to the bomb-scare and potential threat to life. It was only upon researching this incident that I discovered the bomb was attributed to loyalist paramilitaries as it was difficult to keep up with such events, particularly as a child, such was the frequency that I could forget who was responsible and instead our family humorously recalls the highlight of that day being my brother shaking the rope bridge as my sister was halfway across.

As a young man I have another vivid memory around ten years later where I was with some friends in a Derry pub that specialises in Irish music. One of my friends looked at his phone then casually said “a bomb just went off” at a hotel less than two miles from our location (BBC, 2010). My response was, “is that right, aye?” before we continued with our night as planned and enjoyed the drinks and music. This may seem like I am making light of serious incidents however I see this as typical of Irish and especially Northern-Irish culture wherein our acute humour has allowed us to address and persevere through such issues (The Irish Rovers, 1995). There are undoubtedly many more events I have safely compartmentalised, but I raise these specific incidents as insights into my perspectives and lived experience that I am bringing to this study. The journey of normalising the extreme and then learning to recognise this has been

a long journey and not yet complete, relevant for the current study as we grapple with attempts to normalise extremism in the modern context.

Although I moved to England in 2013 after living in Derry for the first 23 years of my life, I still make frequent visits to Derry. Appendix A includes some pictures taken in February 2024 during one of my several trips home that year, shown to demonstrate the atmosphere of division still tangible in Derry but applicable to wider Northern Ireland. Having grown up there, the visible divisions were (and still are) part of my daily lived experience but in England people are often surprised to learn that, while Northern Ireland is much more peaceful since 1998, the division has had a lasting effect and occasional flare-ups, with a further two photos sourced online (see Appendix A) to demonstrate the lived experience of growing up there.

Worth mentioning is one such brutality being the tragic death of Lyra McKee in 2019 because of a stray bullet believed to have been fired by the 'New IRA' (BBC, 2019). Not having known Lyra prior to this, discovering her journalism work made her death all the more tragic with the difference she was making, highlighting such horrifying statistics such as how more people's lives since 1998 have ended through suicide than were killed in conflict during The Troubles (McKee, 2020; 2021). This would indicate a connection between radicalisation and issues such as mental health, politics, and socioeconomic contexts. As I was born at the tail end of The Troubles, I find it helpful to reflect on our post-1998 era of Northern Ireland where I saw some acquaintances follow a path of radicalisation whilst others sank into addiction or suicide, ultimately all being paths of self-destruction. Lyra's work has been helpful in aiding my own understanding given she has written about the wider social context and effects such as inter-generational trauma, showing me that the 'paths' mentioned above are more complex than single issues such as addiction or sectarianism.

I have highlighted Lyra McKee as an example of one of many articulate and intelligent writers from Derry and Northern Ireland (McVeigh, 2021) to raise a further point around class and opportunity. To the best of my knowledge, I am the first of the Lynch family to qualify as a social worker and to progress as far as studying at a doctoral level. I do not meet many people from my working-class background who have progressed to level eight (doctoral) in the UK education system. While there are many factors underlying this, I have raised it to highlight this being where much of my motivation comes from - an agency to thrive despite barriers and setbacks. The further significance of this is that my lived experience saw me grow up in an atmosphere of division where radicalisation was commonplace before the term became popularised in media and research, meaning the endorsement and presence of violence was not unusual, for example, 'shooting by appointment', a typically non-fatal planned attack seen as a punishment from paramilitaries where the target must attend or risk the shooting becoming fatal (Ferguson, 2019).

'Radicalisation' was a term unfamiliar to me until at least the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, becoming synonymous with terrorism I had not known of before but kept hearing called "Islamism" rather than the Northern Irish terrorism I was familiar with. The axiom of 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter' is well-known, but in Northern Ireland this has been a sincere epistemological challenge that I have been grappling with for most of my life. Being raised as a Northern Irish Catholic creates assumptions about my positionality regardless of my currently held beliefs. My name 'Cathal' appears derived from 'Catholic' and is inescapably Irish. My usage of the term 'Derry' instead of 'Londonderry' implies similar. This can cause a perceived political connotation in the dichotomous division of Northern Ireland and associated terrorism of the IRA (Irish Republican Army), UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), and various other

groups (Crangle et al., 2022). What this means is that the stigma faced in recent years by Muslims as a result of 9/11 and violent jihadism resonates with a Northern Irish person who in everyday situations still (and is happy to) spend time discussing the wider context of Northern Ireland and deconstructing associations between religion, nationality, and radicalisation.

This preface is to note that although this study is not an autoethnographic piece, since embarking on this PhD I have been regularly challenged on my own position in reconciling what I saw and experienced in Northern Ireland and some parallels across the UK and further afield. While I would not consider myself radicalised at any point due to my repulsion of the horrific harms brought about by violence, I find an appreciation of understanding radicalisation as multi-faceted and contextual, informed by my lived experience of political grievances and sectarian undertones. While I also have a background in psychology and counselling, I also have a distaste for Freudian approaches to counselling after training in this model in 2017/18, however this personal preface has drawn me to Jungian concepts of *Shadow* and *Archetypes* (McLeod, 2024), which have recently resonated with me when reflecting on The Troubles in Northern Ireland and the work of Lyra McKee that have helped me 'own' this experience rather than assume a stance of positivism where I detach myself from it. Celebrated Irish author *James Joyce* is famous for the expression "hemiplegia of the will" (Walzl, 1961) that is similarly congruent with this, wherein what I have experienced in Derry is this hemiplegia (meaning 'paralysis') where many have normalised the presence of paramilitaries and lack of faith in democracy with a sense that things will never change, which to some extent I experienced acquiescence with until I departed Ireland in 2013. Since then, continuous reflection has taken place, but

this study has caused me to reinterpret the influence my Northern-Irish upbringing has had and how it can be uniquely valuable to this study.

Researchers are not apolitical, and neither am I. I believe in the aspirations of Northern Ireland to reunify with the Republic of Ireland but more importantly I do not believe in achieving this through violent means or bringing harm in any way. Similarly, whilst a committed Catholic, I believe in the peaceful co-existence with the Protestant or any other faith, a view analogous to social work that strives for equality and social justice. I emphasise at this point this is a personal stance that could offend or repulse some, whilst for others that would be an ecumenical matter. Therefore, I would reemphasise the harmonious intent in making important distinctions between politics, religion, and extremism. Northern Ireland has shown me the conditions of how people are radicalised, and I can see why violent jihadism or right-wing extremism grips people, but I also abhor their destructive and toxic methods – political violence offers no real solutions. In this research I am bringing a unique voice by combining my profession of social work experience and doctoral research training with my Northern Irish activism and upbringing, achieving social solutions for what are social problems through the medium of social work.

viii. Thesis

Chapter 1) Introduction

This research is a qualitative study on Prevent, Channel, and safeguarding responses to radicalisation across England and Wales. In introducing the study, I will provide a context that introduces the concept of radicalisation and the Prevent strategy as two key focal points, with Channel being the primary focus. This will demonstrate the importance of each element to the study and its focus on the practitioners who attend Channel Panels. I will then highlight the originality of the study and the aims of addressing gaps in the literature and primary research. Finally, I will establish the structure of the study and remaining chapters of this text, alongside some commentary on the role of social work and reflexivity in research.

Radicalisation is defined by the UK government as "the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism" (Home Affairs Committee, 2012). Much like the term 'terrorism', this concept has faced many epistemological and operational challenges, such as who is most qualified to define it, or how it can possibly be 'measured', which includes debates around cognitive radicalisation versus behavioural radicalisation (Kundnani, 2012; Maskaliūnaitė, 2015; McDonald, 2018). The proceeding chapter will allow for an in-depth analysis of the emergence and evolution of the concept of 'radicalisation' as a way of grouping together and capturing particular phenomena. The UK government's 2023 CONTEST publication states that between 2018 and 2023:

"nine terrorist attacks have been declared in the UK; these incidents killed six people and injuring 20. Twenty-four UK nationals have been killed in eleven attacks overseas. Since March 2017, our agencies and law enforcement disrupted 39 late-stage terrorist

plots in the UK. These have included the targeting of public figures, such as MPs, specific communities and events, such as Pride, and public locations, such as iconic sites in London...In addition to the personal and societal costs of terrorism, the wider economic costs of terrorism are significant. The five terrorist attacks which took place across the UK in 2017 are estimated to have cost up to £172 million in direct costs” (HM Government, 2023b: 14).

This definition is significant for the way it situates radicalisation as a process that can lead to terrorism, and it is in this context that the risk posed by terrorism makes it a priority for government policy. In the UK, the counterterrorism strategy, known as CONTEST, comprises four pillars, namely Prevent, Pursue, Protect, and Prepare (HM Government, 2006). As seen above, terror attacks are defined by their deadliness whilst also bringing financial costs, instilling fear, and undermining democratic institutions in the UK. This demonstrates the severe impact of terrorism even when fatalities may be much smaller than areas such as gendered violence, where an estimated 120-150 women are killed each year by men (NIA, 2025), or deaths on British roads, which were 1,695 in 2022 (RAC, 2023). However, unlike radicalisation these statistics do not attract as much media or public attention or cause widespread panic, which is a key goal for terrorism.

The turn of the millennium saw a pivotal terror attack in the form of 9/11 and subsequent attacks across Europe that garnered interest in understanding ‘homegrown’ terrorists who were citizens of the countries they targeted (Silber and Bhatt, 2007). This saw Prevent being established in 2003 as part of CONTEST with the aim of:

“Tackling disadvantage and supporting reform – addressing structural problems in the UK and overseas that may contribute to radicalisation...Deterring those who facilitate terrorism and those who encourage others to become terrorists...Engaging in the battle of ideas – challenging the ideologies that extremists believe can justify the use of violence, primarily by helping Muslims who wish to dispute these ideas to do so” (HM Government, 2006: 1).

The specific reference to “Muslims” would be the beginning of allegations of Islamophobia which have persisted throughout the twenty-plus years of Prevent’s existence (Busby, 2024) and will be addressed in depth in the following chapter.

In 2007 Prevent established its operational arm in the form of ‘Channel’, the name given to the multi-agency panel that would oversee Prevent referrals that are assessed as in need of further support or oversight due to a risk of radicalisation (HM Government, 2012b). While Prevent has received much media, political, and academic attention, Channel has not had the same treatment and much less is understood about how it operates beyond government publications such as ‘Duty Guidance’ (HM Government, 2015). While secrecy is necessary for national security, the pitfalls of such gaps in literature is that rigorous analysis and accountability are at best unknown and at worst non-existent, which also prevents opportunities for learning which as I will put forth in this study which do not jeopardise aforementioned national security.

1.1 A Social Work Perspective

While Social Work has had previous involvement in addressing radicalisation in the 2000s (Guru, 2008; Hutson, Long, and Page, 2009), it was the Prevent Duty of 2015 that brought Social Work directly under the jurisdiction of Prevent with national

uniformity as a result of the Counterterrorism and Security Act 2015. Section 26 of this Act states that a “specified authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”. This also means education, health, or any other sectors within a Local Authority have an obligation under this legislation. In the proceeding chapters I will consider the arguments in favour and against this duty as it has unsurprisingly caused substantial division as to whether areas such as social work should be involved in this at all and if radicalisation is indeed a safeguarding matter or should remain under the jurisdiction of counterterrorism agencies (Kundnani, 2021; McKendrick and Finch, 2019).

In addition to a valuable role in frontline practice, I advocate that social work can be equally as valuable when engaging in radicalisation research. There are several challenges in this area that a social work can bring an invaluable perspective to. Across Prevent’s lifespan, prominent social work research in radicalisation has not cast it in a positive light (McKendrick and Finch, 2017; 2019), so the current research aims for a balanced critique and voice to social work research as well as practice. Secondly, it has been argued that social work has undergone a ‘de-intellectualisation’, removing the emphasis of theory and research in favour of intuitive practice (Roose, 2024). This has been my experience of frontline practice both on placements as a student social worker and the Assessed and Supported Year of Employment (ASYE) as a newly qualified social worker (Gloucestershire County Council, 2025), inspiring me to return to academia and make this original contribution to knowledge that can better link theory to practice.

Further to the above, there are strengths social work can bring to this field which I argue will be beneficial. Especially within children’s social work, a child-focused approach is engrained in the nature of modern social work, emphasising the voice and

vulnerability of a child. In the context of Prevent, we can argue the benefit of this from the increasingly younger referrals Prevent is receiving which will be explored in the literature review and throughout the study. This inherent vulnerability ties into much of Prevent and Channel's work, with debates around vulnerability and agency coming to the fore, debates which social workers have long been grappling with, placing a social work perspective in a good place to approach this in the context of radicalisation. This leads to the multi-agency working at the heart of Channel, again something shared by social work where our multi-agency work is a core process from child protection to mental capacity and best interest decisions. Furthermore, as stated above regarding de-intellectualisation of social work, this research presents a valuable opportunity for me as the researcher to evidence the value of social work research carried by social work values (BASW, 2023b), aiming to further establish a role for social work in addressing radicalisation and making their place in Channel an invaluable one.

At this point it may be prescient to note the scope of this research. CONTEST is comprised of Prevent, Pursue, Prepare, and Protect, however the boundaries between these may not always be sharply delineated. This is observed such as in legislation like s58 of the Terrorism Act 2000 which establishes an offence whereby a person "collects or makes a record of information of a kind likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism". This means a person may have, in the eyes of the law, committed an offence but arguably there remains an opportunity for early intervention work involving social care. This would likely hinge upon the lack of a violent act resulting in a custodial sentence. This places the interest of this research solely within Prevent, the first 'P' of the CONTEST strategy. This is an important delineation when reading and digesting this research given that as the researcher, I have a background in various social care roles and not specifically counterterrorism,

yet I and others argue that this is what makes social work a valuable presence on each Channel panel (Marret, Feddes, Mann, Doosje, and Griffioen-Young, 2013).

1.2 Originality

Despite being a comparatively young and controversial concept, the concept of 'radicalisation' unsurprisingly saw a surge of interest in the post-9/11 world. Yet some notable gaps remain which this study aims to make an original contribution to. Primary data has been notably lacking in researching radicalisation (Silke, 2008), particularly with frontline practitioners responding to it as part of their roles and in the pre-crime space. Considering issues around confidentiality and national security, much of this is understandable but leaves radicalisation and Prevent in a quandary that McLaughlin refers to as "a glaring lack of empirical studies" (2024: 222). When studies are identified they can bring some welcome challenge to tackling radicalisation but also risk adding to the voices seeking to undermine Prevent's work (Pettinger, 2020: 981; Manzoor-Khan, 2022). This study is an intervention to engage with these challenges, as it aims to provide originality through gathering primary data by interviewing participants who have attended Channel either as standing members or when requested to such as when a person allocated to them was referred to Prevent. Recruitment of participants in particular is given specific attention in Chapter 3 due to the extent of challenge faced and the implications of this for research and practice.

In addition to the originality brought through the gathering and analysing of primary data, the study aims for a conceptually original contribution also. With Prevent being controversial from its origins, a subsequent schism can be observed that polarised authors into two camps that I refer to throughout this study as 'anti-Prevent' and 'pro-

Prevent' (McKendrick and Finch, 2019; Jenkins, Perry, and Stott, 2022). The result of this I have found to be that constructive and negative criticism of Prevent becomes flawed as the overarching goals of each camp can take precedence in seeking the abolition of Prevent or dismissing useful critique. The current research aims to navigate a middle path between each camp for a critical analysis of Prevent whilst making use of primary data to develop social work and wider interventions to safeguard against radicalisation. A social work perspective reinforces child-focused practice and social contexts where children are increasingly becoming involved in radicalisation whilst social work demonstrates an appreciation for multi-agency working.

1.3 Structure of this study

This study was initiated as a PhD Studentship at the University of Gloucestershire, being a three-year project between 2022-2025. This entailed an extensive journey into the field of radicalisation resulting in the current thesis, and this thesis takes the reader on this journey, with this chapter concluding by guiding the reader on the remainder of the thesis. This introductory chapter has described the context of this study, including the significance of radicalisation and the need for original primary research.

Chapter 2's literature review is an expansive chapter which covers a vast amount of literature necessary to contextualise the study and bring analysis to concepts such as radicalisation. It begins by unpicking the origins and controversies with the Prevent strategy, defining four pivotal moments in its evolution that I find to be significant and distinguishable. This is a large task in itself that I find necessary due to the polarising nature of Prevent so that there is a critical balance in reviewing the literature when

considering the fundamentals of Prevent and controversies around Islamophobia and securitisation. This is followed by an overview of Channel panels, Intervention Providers, and the scant literature available, before embarking further into the literature around radicalisation as a concept, safeguarding and practice wisdom, and finally the evolution of radicalisation. This evolution is also expansive in considering the annual statistics published by Prevent and their limitations. It also addresses challenges in comprehending the significant factors identified in the literature contributing to radicalisation, such as the role of mental health and the internet, both proving challenging for professionals to navigate and respond to. Chapter 2 then concludes by stating the research questions selected from identified gaps in the literature.

Chapter 3 details the method section, explaining the qualitative design adopted, use of theoretically inflective thematic analysis, and the barriers faced in data collection and participant recruitment. Attention is also given to ethical considerations, the role of Artificial Intelligence, and my own positionality as indicated by the personal preface.

Chapter 4 is a presentation of the analysis in the form of four themes, namely “Navigating the Ideology, Vulnerability, and Susceptibility Trifecta”, “Safeguarding – Something New or Something Old?”, “Angry Young Men - Gendering Radicalisation”, and “The Multi-faceted Nature of Radicalisation”. These themes follow from the gaps identified in the literature review and subsequent research questions, providing insight into what is presenting at Channel, how it is being understood, and how successfully it is being addressed. Chapter 5 proceeds into to a discussion section to consider the extent to which the themes address the three research questions in more depth by addressing each research question in turn, which is a more ‘traditional’ approach to presenting findings despite it being a qualitative piece (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 132).

Chapter 6 is the concluding chapter will be able to weave together the study's purpose, originality, challenges and limitations to emphasise the importance of the social work perspective, alongside the findings and their implications. Notably this section concludes with five recommendations for further policy, education, and practice which arose from the gaps and issues identified throughout the study. These are aimed to be actionable and, whilst written from a social work perspective, are still compatible with Prevent, Channel, and the variety of professionals involved.

A final note on the structure of this study is that as a social work piece, a reflexive stance is taken throughout the study, recognising the role of myself as a researcher making active choices throughout. This will be recognisable in the use of the first-person and will aid transparency as it will be my voice and 'self' throughout the research, which I and other authors argue that this subjectivity is a key facet integral to research (Braun, Clarke, and Hayfield, 2021a) but also highly compatible with a social work perspective. This will be explored in more depth within the methodology section but may be helpful to be aware of throughout the study.

Chapter 2) Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Despite radicalisation and Prevent being relatively 'young' concepts their literature is vast and broad, presenting an unfeasible task to review every article or publication thus far (Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey 2012: 20) requiring a selective approach to highlight persisting debates and knowledge gaps before embarking upon the current study. With the current study having a focus on Channel it becomes necessary to concurrently contextualise and review literature that has evolved with Prevent, the core strategy that began in 2003 and established Channel in 2007. This is not a minor task, with there being at least four 'pivotal' points in the evolution of Prevent worth noting with relevant literature to review before progressing to consider Channel, where the specific gap lies for the current study. Prevent has not emerged from a political vacuum, with there being controversy from the beginning but notably in 2015 when a duty was created in law for Local Authorities to identify and respond to concerns of radicalisation, including social work. The current study presents an opportunity for an intervention in these debates and controversies in an effort to bring critical balance to literature that can be quite polarised, a gap in the literature itself which this section aims to contribute towards.

With Prevent and Channel contextualised amidst the sociopolitical backdrop and the literature critically reviewed, the literature review then turns to the concept of radicalisation, itself considerably controversial and containing persistent conceptual and operational debates. While it will be beyond the scope of the current study to settle debates or controversies, a critical review of the literature brings an appreciation of the breadth of the concept as it has attracted literature in areas such as psychology,

sociology, and philosophy, in addition to social work. Indeed, for social workers the concept can be particularly unfamiliar to them (Cowden, Robinson, and Lynch, n.p.), thus I draw upon the concept of 'Practice Wisdom' to consider how social workers and similar professionals may draw upon existing experiences, particularly relating to safeguarding, and apply these to help them work within the unfamiliar territory of Prevent, Channel, and radicalisation.

Finally, the literature review returns to the concept of radicalisation to consider how it has evolved since academic interest surged following the attacks of 9/11. The review is aided by a critical approach to Prevent's published statistics which provide insight into the changes and increasing complexities seen in terms of ideology and radicalising material, considering facets such as the internet and mental health, constructing the foundations for the current study to take an original approach with research questions aimed to capture such nuances and complexities experienced by practitioners and how they respond to radicalisation.

2.2 The Prevent Strategy: Origins, Evolutions, and Controversies.

In this section, I begin by establishing the context in which Prevent emerged from. This is important to understand why and how it became the most controversial and divisive aspect of 'CONTEST', the UK government's overarching counterterrorism strategy, leading to stances broadly supportive or against it and a lack of nuanced or balanced analysis which I aim to add. I unpick these stances to weigh up the evidence and consider the association of Prevent with Islamophobia or right-wing extremism (RWE). I do this chronologically, critiquing the evolution of Prevent in four 'waves', following the work of Rappoport (2003), Thomas (2020), and Walker (2024). Whilst Rapoport's

four-wave concept has received substantial critique for its breadth (Millington, 2024), I aim to explicate the evolution of specifically Prevent in a concise manner similar to Thomas (2020) rather than radicalisation or terrorism as a whole. This leads to the final section exploring the influence of recent political discourses and RWE concerns with those overseeing Prevent such as government ministers and an independent reviewer, acknowledging the unpredictable terrain for the future directions of Prevent.

The ground from which Prevent sprouted was febrile and tense. With the first Prevent strategy conceived of in 2003 and officially published in 2006 (HM Government, 2006), it emerges from the backdrop of arguably the most famous terror attacks of 9/11, 7/7, and other attacks such as the Madrid train bombing of 2004. This had also followed not long after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, marking the end of the Troubles in Northern Ireland since 1969 that saw over 3000 deaths (Holland, 2014). Yet, the 9/11 attacks brought nearly 3000 deaths in a single day (Richards, 2023). Alongside the tragic loss of many lives of these attacks, backlash would also arise in terms of US and UK roles in foreign policy prior to 9/11 but even more vociferously afterwards, such as a demonstration police regarded as the biggest ever at the time (BBC, 2003) in opposition to military action in Iraq as part of the US President's 'War on Terror'. The UK being a close ally to the US throughout drew particular criticism for the flawed intelligence used to join the invasion of Iraq (Taylor, 2014). Add to this the reported human rights abuses at Guantanamo Bay of suspected terrorists (Tayler and Epstein, 2022), with one detainee being a member of the Deghayes family, one of the most controversial cases of radicalisation which will be explored in more depth in the fourth section of this review. Flawed intelligence, human rights abuses outside of Britain, and other factors in the name of fighting terrorism created the conditions for Prevent to become a symbol of secrecy and surveillance as it sought to tackle particularly those

radicalised as citizens of Britain, similar to the concerns of other European countries at the time (Coolsaet, 2019: 30). Thus, Prevent's emergence from the 'War on Terror' saw it and the term 'radicalisation' intertwined with protest and misdirection (Doherty and Kiley, 2023); all of which contributed substantially to the polarised reception it garnered from the beginning; which will be explored further below.

Prevent is one strand of the UK Government's four-pronged approach to counterterrorism (known as 'CONTEST'), with the remaining three being Pursue, Prepare, and Protect (HM Government, 2023c). This study has a primary focus on Prevent with some references to Pursue also. With Channel being the operational arm of Prevent, it is important to contextualise the study in reviewing the literature around Prevent, its origins, developments, and controversies. Prevent has proven divisive and there appears to be largely two trains of thought. The first I call "anti-Prevent", referring to critics who disagree with Prevent often at a fundamental level, particularly those who would like to see it abolished entirely. The second camp I summarily refer to as "pro-Prevent" as they tend to unwaveringly defend Prevent. While not every commentator or critic will fall into this dichotomy, there appear to be substantial and vocal participants in each camp. My aim here is for a fair and balanced critical analysis whilst bringing my own perspective. What I mean by this is that, like the pro-Prevent camp, I believe in the fundamental aim of preventing radicalisation and wish to safeguard vulnerable people. However, this is not unconditional, and similar to the anti-Prevent camp, I want to address valid concerns such as Islamophobia and securitisation but do not agree with completely abolishing the strategy. Prevent, like any program, will encounter flaws and conceptual issues, yet I find it attracts a disproportionate amount of attention and, should we dispense with it, the first thing we

would have to do is rebuild it, as I find it an essential component in safeguarding vulnerable individuals, a functioning democracy, and general public safety.

Thomas (2020) distinguishes Prevent's evolution through milestones such as the first iteration in 2006 being 'Prevent 1' (HM Government, 2006) and the next substantial paradigm shift being 'Prevent 2' in 2011 with a turn towards safeguarding and non-violent extremism (HM Government, 2011). I aim to build upon this to distinguish two further Prevent milestones, namely 'Prevent 3' in 2015 with the introduction of the Prevent Duty (GOV UK, 2023b) as this provoked a very strong reaction from academics and the media. I also conceptualise 'Prevent 4' as beginning in 2023 with the publication of the Independent Review and the increasing prominence of extreme right-wing narratives in politicians associated with Prevent (GOV UK, 2023a; Shawcross, 2023). This is where I will limit the remit of the current study as data collection took place in late 2023 and a more thorough analysis can be conducted within this context. Given the developing nature of Prevent alongside political, media, and academic interest, it would be beyond the scope of the present study to expand the remit beyond this timeframe as the emphasis of the research is on Channel and safeguarding.

2.3 Prevent 1: Reacting to 9/11 and 7/7

Prevent emerged during a shift from The Troubles in Northern Ireland (1969-1998) to the terror attacks that included the Twin Towers in the USA on September 11th, 2001, and the 7/7 attacks in London. This led to a clear emphasis on an urgent need to respond to the threat of Al Qaeda both in policy and from the media:

“The measures rushed through parliament last year under the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act 2001 had helped build a coalition against Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network by tackling Britain's ‘perceived inability to deal with certain terrorists’” (Gillan, 2002).

This is also acknowledged in the first strategy, published in 2006, stating, “the UK experienced repeated domestic terrorist attacks because of the long-running troubles in Northern Ireland. The principal current terrorist threat is from radicalised individuals who are using a distorted and unrepresentative version of the Islamic faith to justify violence” (HM Government, 2006: 1). The complexities and uniqueness of the Northern Irish context contributed to the Prevent strategy excluding Northern Ireland (PSNI, 2022). This strategy acknowledges CONTEST as having begun in 2003 with the four strands of Prevent, Prepare, Protect, and Pursue (2006: 1). Alongside this are substantial terror laws such as the Terrorism Act 2000 and Terrorism Act 2006. Within legislation such as these we can see the nascent elements of Prevent such as s58 of the Terrorism Act 2000 pertaining to documents and information that a person may hold being considered a breach of terror law, which whilst could be recorded as a crime, also indicates a ‘pre-crime’ space preceding violence which would become the focus of Prevent.

‘Prevent 1’ made an explicit statement about violent jihadism by seeking to tackle the radicalisation of individuals though:

“Engaging in the battle of ideas – challenging the ideologies that extremists believe can justify the use of violence, primarily by helping Muslims who wish to dispute these ideas to do so” (HM Government, 2006: 3).

This explicit reference to the faith of Islam and its Muslim followers was amidst a context of the invasion of Afghanistan in 2003 by the Bush and Blair governments, the 7/7 attacks of London in 2005, and their general 'War on Terror' (Bayoumi, 2021). This led to misperceptions across Europe and America of Islam becoming associated with extremism, with Prevent being wedded to this misperception from its earliest days. This is despite the 2006 strategy attempting to add nuance by stating that the terrorist threat is from "radicalised individuals who are using a distorted and unrepresentative interpretation of the Islamic faith to justify violence" (HM Government, 2006: 6). However, this did little to quell ensuing controversies and associations between Islam and terrorism, associations which have persisted to haunt Prevent to the current day (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2022).

There are several key arguments that have connected Prevent to Islamophobia which should be brought under analysis. An early and consistent criticism of Prevent is found in the work of Arun Kundnani, who, drawing on previous theory by Laquer, argued that: "The thrust of these accounts was that terrorists and those perceived to be their ideological fellow travellers in Muslim communities were unreformable and no political or economic change could stem their hatred. Only overwhelming force would be successful against this new enemy: thus, the greater evil of terrorism justified the lesser evil of 'shock and awe' in Iraq and incarceration at Guantánamo" (Kundnani, 2012: 4).

This evolved from Kundnani's earliest writings on Prevent, where he argued that Prevent has done more harm than good (Kundnani, 2010), such as by placing responsibility on Muslim communities as a whole for Islamist radicalisation. Questions are also raised around Prevent being seen as a vehicle for the British government to

“impose political or religious opinions on its own citizens”. This includes criticisms of foreign policy, all of which are important to engage with, though it also raises a question of critiques doing more to further negative perceptions of Prevent rather than support positive change. Furthermore, imposing political or religious belief operates as a two-way street, given that advocates of fundamentalist Islamic approaches that include violence such as Anjem Choudary were infamous for seeking Sharia Law and a clash between West and East (Casciani, 2018), giving way to an argument that distinctions need to be drawn between Islam as a religion and extremism espoused by controversial figures. I find that authors such as Kundnani emphasise the role of the government in attempting to shape conceptions of Islam, whilst giving less or no discussion to authoritarian or fundamentalist versions that can be both violent and non-violent.

Of note is a seminal tome ‘The Muslims Are Coming!’ (Kundnani, 2014: 14). Despite a lack of critical analysis of the text (Kapoor, 2014; Martin, 2015), the scope of the current study does not afford thorough analysis and several core arguments replicate the wider anti-Prevent camp’s stance, but several aspects are noteworthy. The text covers both counterterrorism work and Prevent, essentially conflating the four strands of CONTEST (Kundnani, 2014: 16). In an early discussion of preventative measures, a comparison is drawn with the film ‘Minority Report’. While this is in a section critiquing models of radicalisation, the wider context of the text casts Prevent as surveillance and securitisation, meaning the comparison implies a myth that Prevent has dystopian aspirations to criminalise rather than safeguard. While much critique is well-evidenced and persuasive, particularly around foreign policy and accountability in counterterrorism, I argue for a different stance on Prevent as will be seen throughout this research.

Kundnani also takes aim at the concept of radicalisation at a fundamental level, seeing it as a proxy for Islam, implying that policymakers and counterterror work views radicalisation as something that is exclusive to Islam. Kundnani would continue to reassert these objections to the basis of Prevent as systematically targeting Muslims, going as far as arguing radicalisation as a concept was devised in response to 9/11 specifically to demonise Islam (Kundnani, 2009; 2015). This is an argument that has seen notable challenge in the downplaying of terror attacks fuelled by Violent Jihadist (VJ) ideology and a struggle from those on the left to accept criticism of VJ as anything other than Islamophobia, a pitfall Kundnani has befallen (Assiter, 2019: 292). The supposed demonisation of Islam can be shown to have demonstrably weakened over time given that recent Prevent statistics demonstrate a prevalence of Right Wing Extremism (RWE) referrals compared to Violent Jihadism (VJ) (GOV UK, 2024b). He also argues that scholars are incentivised to downplay ‘macro’ factors such as foreign policy, which Meleagrou-Hitchens (2022: 14) has argued as bordering on conspiracy rather than substantiation. This is further argued by Cowden and Picken (2019), who note that Kundnani seeing VJ as a reaction to Western governments betrays an implicit endorsement of ‘the anti-imperialist’ nature of jihadist politics or being “right but for the wrong reasons” (Cowden and Picken, 2019: 101). When VJ proponents are found across several continents and are known for murdering Muslims who do not abide by their fundamentalist or extremist approaches, the claims of Western imperialism as the primary source of VJ do not hold up.

More recently Kundnani has restated a firm anti-Prevent stance:

“The government’s Prevent policy, which rests on this flawed account, should be ended. Prevent collapses mechanisms designed to safeguard children and young people into the structures of counter-terrorism surveillance. Rather than expect social

workers and teachers to become surrogate national security investigators, a better approach is to strengthen longstanding safeguarding procedures with the resources needed for effective delivery” (Kundnani, 2019).

The ‘flawed account’ Kundnani refers to is that counterterrorism operates on elite assumptions about root causes. While it appears that Prevent and the remaining three Ps of CONTEST are conflated at times, the purposes of this research are to focus on Prevent and when commenting on Prevent, Kundnani has valid but incomplete arguments. From 2010 to 2019 funding available for children’s services had been cut by over £2bn (Action for Children, 2020), meaning Kundnani is right to highlight longstanding safeguarding procedures should be better-resourced, However where I would disagree is the implication that this would make Prevent obsolete, as there are different forms of safeguarding in practice. What is also lacking is evidence of teachers or social workers seeing themselves as ‘national security investigators’ when working under the Prevent duty. Social workers and teachers could have a greater role in Prevent than depicted in theoretical articles written by those in the anti-Prevent camp, such as Faure Walker (2022). Instead, I argue for social workers and teachers to partly comprise the safeguarding measures alluded to by Kundnani which include Prevent, with the remaining CONTEST strands and counterterror agencies being responsible for surveillance and other intrusive measures. What seems to get lost in these arguments is that Prevent shares a sphere of operation similar to youth work focused on preventing exploitation or gang recruitment (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2022), areas where teachers and social workers already play vital roles. Whilst Kundnani (2021) has moved towards an abolitionist stance towards national security (albeit specifically in the US context), his stance on Prevent and wider counterterrorism is consistent, in that “terrorism and counterterrorism are mutually constitutive” (Sardoc, 2022: 129),

despite also writing it should not “only be conceived as a mechanical reaction to imperialist aggression” (2022: 129), making for a confusing stance.

At the outset it was stated that I seek a ‘critically supportive’ stance towards Prevent. Therefore, rather than contributing to further polarisation, it is important to identify substance in the above arguments. For example, Thomas (2020) has pointed to Prevent’s early funding being distributed in proportion to areas of the highest Muslim populations. Viewed like this, it creates an opening for accusations of Islamophobia, but what receives less attention from these critics is how the early Prevent goals had an emphasis on community work and funded many local Muslim groups, ranging from food festivals to basketball and cricket clubs (Murray, 2010). Yet eventually Maher and Frampton (2009) would deliver critique of the community-funding focus of Prevent 1 as led by the Labour government, stating examples including that “£25 million is therefore being made available for national schemes aimed at this goal from April 2008 to March 2011. Over the same period £45 million will also be provided to local partnerships to tackle extremism” (2009: 28). This was alongside critique of the “vague” criteria in selecting which groups to fund. A further key controversy leading from this, in that whether Prevent was therefore being used as tool of surveillance and securitisation (Cowden and Picken, 2019), which will be explored as part of Prevent 3 where this became further inflamed.

Indeed, Prevent opened itself up to accusations of having funded groups that at best lacked tangible outcomes or at worst were later identified as holding extremist views (Maher and Frampton, 2009; Murray, 2010). Yet again there are two strands to this situation, one which would indicate Prevent had either had this particular aim backfire or another could argue would have been correct to monitor these groups. Of note at time are some of the groups that could be identified who received funding. Abdul Haqq

Baker received funding from Lambeth Council but was also chairman of Brixton Mosque, notably Salafist in nature (Maher and Frampton, 2009: 38). Baker claims that the 'pure' form of Islam taught by Salafists is an antidote to extremism, yet the attempted 'shoe-bomber', Richard Reid, notably attended Baker's mosque yet later still attempted a terror attack (Dutta, 2015), being one of numerous examples highlighted by Maher and Frampton (2009) where funding decisions were questionable at best and the assumption that non-violent extremism would assure non-violent expression came under heavy scrutiny.

2.4 Prevent 2: The Turn to Safeguarding

While there was some vocal criticism of Prevent initially, outlined above, the recency and salience of attacks such as 9/11 and 7/7 likely minimised opposition publicly and politically. Notable examples include the aforementioned 'shoe-bomber' in 2001 and the prevented attack of 2006 that sought to target seven airliners headed to America, the latter of which if not foiled would likely have surpassed the impact of 9/11 (Dodd, 2009). This would have made any opposition to Prevent easy to dismiss and less scrutiny likely on the emphasis on Islam. Furthermore, as detailed in Prevent 1 around non-violent extremism, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government elected in 2010 brought with them a focus on non-violent extremism, what I refer to as a 'turn to safeguarding' due to the changes discussed below.

The evolution to 'Prevent 2' as theorised by Thomas (2020: 12) represents the newly elected government of 2010 and the Prevent Duty of 2015, however I would argue the latter as 'Prevent 3' and will address so due to the significant changes brought in and ensuing controversies. The 2010 elections saw Labour replaced by a coalition

Conservative and Liberal Democrat government. While a change of government commonly begets a change in policy, the incoming government stated the Prevent programme inherited was flawed (HM Government, 2011: 1), as the coalition government sought to extend the reach of Prevent to non-violent extremism also. While this iteration of the strategy was able to identify areas of concern such as Right Wing Extremism (RWE), it still fell prey to specifically naming an Islamic threat:

“Muslim communities as a whole are more ‘vulnerable’ to radicalisation than other faith or ethnic groups” (HM Government, 2011: 7).

These words carried forward the core issue haunting Prevent to the present day. Despite a paradigm shift to viewing radicalisation as safeguarding issue involving vulnerable people (though with differing terminology), we find the above quote on the same page. The use of the term ‘vulnerable’ in this context seems to be misleading, implying that being Muslim is a vulnerability when it could also enhance feelings of community and belonging, therefore being resilient rather than vulnerable. This juxtaposition of an exerted lexicon to expand beyond Islamism only to single out Muslim communities is rather puzzling in its contradiction. Tied to this was an independent review of Prevent was commissioned at this point (Carlile, 2011), prefaced by its author stating that, “I strongly support it” (2011: 3), words that would also have a haunting effect in their conflict of interest in ‘independent’ reviewing of Prevent. The focus on Islam and questionable independence of the review sowed the seeds for further controversies.

This was likely further influenced by the aforementioned notable report by Policy Exchange (Maher and Frampton, 2009), an influential right-wing policy advocacy group, which while reiterating an emphasis on Islamism, also advised refraining from

funding community groups (2009: 82). The most pivotal and highly influential recommendation of this report would be a focus on non-violent extremism (2009: 64). Also notable during this same time period was the attack on the British MP Stephen Timms by Roshonara Choudhury, a young female claiming to be inspired by Al-Qaeda (Dodd 2010). This is significant as it was regarded as the first attempt at political assassination in Britain in the name of Al-Qaeda (The Standard, 2012), meaning the mainstream focus would have been amenable to the violent jihadist form of radicalisation, with Prevent following in tow. More significantly were factors beyond religion. As Hasan (2010) notes:

“it is absurd to pretend that Islamist radicals would be able to brainwash young, impressionable Muslims – even simpletons like Choudhry! – without the help of real-world and undeniable grievances like Iraq, Palestine, Kashmir, etc, which cause so much anger, resentment and disillusionment.”

As Hasan notes, the Iraq War, itself a product of the New Labour government, played a substantial role in the radicalisation of Choudhry as she referenced the MP having voted for war in Iraq during her published police interview (Hasan, 2010). This raises uncomfortable but crucial questions around the role of the State in radicalisation (Korkut, 2021), which will be explored further in ‘Prevent 4’. It became clear that Choudhry, the attacker of Stephen Timm’s MP, had accessed the preaching of Anwar al-Awlaki through both YouTube and her local library (Gardham, 2010), after which there was a clampdown of such material. Of further note is another point highlighted by Hasan:

“She is, for example, ignorant of the specific Quranic verses that she claims inspired her horrific and cowardly attack on Timms – “the main chapters about it are chapter .

. . chapter eight and chapter nine, I think,” she says, pathetically. In fact, there are no verses in the Quran which justify such brutal, vigilante attacks on innocent civilians. Suicide bombings for example, are un-Islamic.” (Hasan, 2010).

Whilst lacking confidential information about Choudhry, what is apparent in available details is that she was a young person vulnerable to radicalisation, which arguably could have been prevented.

Around the time of Choudhry’s attack, the turn to non-violent extremism coincided with a turn from viewing radicalisation as solely a security concern but also a safeguarding concern. What this meant was that rather than seeing those radicalised as active agents and architects of their own destructive trajectories, instead radicalisation underwent an epistemic shift to view it as a process that can affect vulnerable people regardless of religion, background, or psychopathology, a stance already put forth in academic writing by this point (Horgan, 2009; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). The advantage of this paradigm shift in understanding radicalisation is that it allows for less deterministic and simplistic understandings, sparking a social model of early intervention rather than reactive criminalisation. This is most poignantly demonstrated in the tragic case of the Deghayes family in section four.

2.5 Prevent 3: The Prevent Duty

Section 36 of the Counterterrorism and Security Act 2015 mandated Local Authorities to give due regard for individuals at risk of radicalisation, essentially placing a legal duty on Authorities to identify and respond to radicalisation concerns. This has become known as the “Prevent Duty”, revised as of 2023 (GOV UK, 2023). Given the established controversies around Prevent detailed above, this unsurprisingly

escalated criticisms and negative press exponentially. Despite its continued framing as a safeguarding responsibility, it has been met with vocal opposition, particularly in the education sector (Versi, 2017), where the term describing a “chilling” effect became a buzzword (Ullah, 2023), as Prevent is accused of silencing critical debate and carrying implications for free speech. Again, a key critic includes Kundhani (2015), however several other vocal critics emerged at this point who would remain prominent (McKendrick and Finch, 2017; Heath-Kelly and Strausz, 2019; Faure Walker, 2022). While the scope of this study is to Channel specifically, meaning it will be unfeasible to address every and all concerns with Prevent, we will examine some key issues persisting in regard to Prevent 3.

Those in opposition to the Prevent Duty were often opposed to Prevent conceptually also. The Open Society (2016) released a report that was very damning in its opinion of Prevent, stating it would be the cause of human rights violations and securitisation of free speech (Open Society, 2016: 4). The Open Society argues these issues manifest in issues such as erroneous referrals and overrepresentation of Muslims which leads them to question their place in British society (2016: 6), a concern not without foundation. This is also an early example of the term ‘chilling’ emerging as the report describes, “the case studies and interviews in this report suggest that Prevent has created a significant chilling effect on freedom of expression in schools and universities, and undermined trust between teachers and students” (2006: 5). This alleged “chilling” continues to emerge in recent reports such as that by Amnesty International (2023), who describe Prevent as having “had a ‘chilling effect’ on the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association and peaceful assembly” (2023: 11). One of the earliest usages of the term was in 2011, also relating to higher education (Miller, Mills, and Harkins, 2011: 405), while its use has continually arisen in

the years since (Lister et al., 2025; Busher, Choudhury, and Thomas, 2019; Zedner, 2021; Holmwood and Aitlhadj, 2022). What is notable about these arguments is how Muslim communities are uniformly presented as if all will be in agreement and view themselves as a victimised group, with scant acknowledgement that a contributor to any 'chilling' effect will be VJ attacks, again arousing Assiter's (2019) review of Kundnani's (2012) text that scrutiny of such attacks should not be considered Islamophobic.

Rather than pursuing nebulous concepts of 'chilling' effects, those seeking to hold Prevent accountable would find more tangible evidence such as a recent Freedom of Information request by the Open Rights Group (2024). Their report on this indicates both a concerning lack of transparency in how data is handled within Prevent and raises concerns that data can be stored and shared beyond what one would typically expect. Their report gives examples such as a six-year-old having their data held by Prevent due to the father's refusal to engage with Prevent (2024: 2). There is a particularly important issue here worth addressing below in terms of accountability. While this applies to counterterrorism work in general, it creates a conundrum in that trust can play a key role in effective relations through transparency and openness, yet CONTEST necessitates classification of information and intelligence, an impasse that research such as this hopes to make workable.

The above indicates a lack of accountability in Prevent and wider counterterrorism work. If we compare this to Social Work, which is regulated by Social Work England (SWE), we can see that concerns and hearings are in the public sphere alongside a register of who currently holds a social work licence (Social Work England, 2024). Whilst publishing counterterrorism officer details such as this would infringe national security, there remains questions of who conducts scrutiny and accountability unless

a case leaks or comes to the attention of mainstream media. This was recently seen with the exposure of ‘Stakeknife’, a British spy who operated in the IRA and has not been prosecuted for reported murders which appear to have been overlooked due to intelligence he supplied to the State (Carroll, 2024). While this is an extreme case and departs from Prevent, it demonstrates the same underlying issue of accountability facing Prevent and the other strands of CONTEST. While the methods chapter will go into further detail (and see appendices), I found it problematic the levels of reluctance to engage in my investigation into the frontline work of Prevent and Channel. There is a lot we do not know and much we cannot know, yet we are expected to place trust in institutions which have shown a capacity to breach this trust and operate outside of the law. If Prevent is to continue its work, we need to establish this trust. Perhaps if some form of trust and accountability could be assured, it would remedy much of the anti-Prevent material discussed here.

As a social worker, it is important to consider perspectives from allied professionals in the Prevent duty, particularly the NHS. The critiques reflect those in other fields in that securitisation is seen as a risk:

“But vulnerability, under the Prevent Duty guidance protocols, is no longer a formal state of reduced capacity (like care and support needs); rather, “vulnerability” is extended to potentially cover the entire population. Anyone, with or without care needs, can be the subject of a Prevent safeguarding inquiry. How is this interference in a person’s agency justified, before the criminal threshold is reached?” (Heath-Kelly and Strausz, 2019: 93).

Here, I would reverse Heath-Kelly’s latter statement in that intervention (rather than interference) is what is crucial to prevent a person reaching a criminal threshold at all.

The statement implies that the criminal threshold need be met before intervention, which would be highly problematic considering Prevent's role includes safeguarding, and to safeguard is to act before harm takes place. This statement is further contradictory if we consider child protection (which can include protecting a child from radicalisation). Both the Care Act 2014 and Children Act 1989 make it clear that we should act when a risk is present and harm to be likely, which would emphasise the layer of protection afforded by the pre-criminal space that Heath-Kelly takes exception to. Added to this is that in 2024 19% of children in care were under a s20 agreement, meaning at least one parent has voluntarily signed their child into care in contrast to the 75% on care orders issued by courts (GOV UK, 2025). This raises the issue of agency and choice in parents seeking out support, which is applicable to Prevent with its role being consent-based. Therefore, the argument above regarding 'unjustified interference' reflects poor safeguarding and understandings of the role of social work.

This reiterates a common issue with perceptions of the remit of Prevent as it is vastly different from the even more opaque work carried out by Prepare, Protect, and Pursue. This conflation is visible in later writings (Melhuish and Heath-Kelly, 2022), which while raising important conceptual questions on the epistemology of radicalisation and terrorism, it is important to draw a distinction between the two as I will do in this research.

Other analyses by Heath-Kelly (2013: 396) venture into familiar arguments of viewing Muslims as a suspect community and issues around surveillance (Heath-Kelly, 2017) which are addressed elsewhere in this section. An important aspect to note is that despite the concerns raised of turning the NHS into a tool for surveillance, Prevent statistics for March 2023 show just 9% of referrals coming from the health sector, compared to 39% in the education sector (GOV UK, 2023e). The health percentage

means 606 people were referred to Prevent from the health sector, which is dwarfed if we compare to the estimated 587,970 concerns of abuse raised during 2022-23 in NHS data (NHS England, 2023), bearing in mind the latter number includes only adults in England. Therefore, these comparatively minute numbers of Prevent referrals do not suggest that Prevent has added a lens of surveillance in the NHS or that healthcare workloads are being encroached upon by counterterrorism work. Arguments such as this ask us to believe that the NHS has become an apparatus for surveillance without supporting evidence and when the evidence is examined as I have done here it suggests the opposite is true.

However, an important critique is raised about the adequacy of training in this area in the form of a two-hour DVD (Heath-Kelly and Strausz, 2019: 98) yet this level of training is not unusual amongst a plethora of front-loaded e-learning that many health and social care roles entail, with Social Work being a relevant example (University of Gloucestershire, 2024). Practitioners cannot be experts in every topic, which is where a Prevent Lead, Designated Safeguarding Lead, and similar roles exist to inform practitioners and minimise flawed referrals, meaning that practitioners need not be seen as ‘informants’ but another lens of safeguarding.

Similarly, a notable commentary emerging at the time of ‘Prevent 3’ came from a former teacher practicing in a substantially Muslim area at the time the Prevent duty was introduced, consistently arguing that Prevent promotes rather than prevents violence (Faure Walker, 2017; 2019a; 2022). A key argument hinges around the silencing of debate issue:

“classrooms that had previously been a hive of lively and often heated political debate fell silent. This silencing of political debate was troubling, as I had often found it to be

an effective foil to potential violence. Previously, children who had expressed racist views found, through discussion with their peers, that they had more in common than divided them. Teenagers who had expressed a desire to engage in conflict abroad had found that I shared their concerns for Western imperialism, and this had resulted in us writing to our MPs instead of them buying a plane ticket” (Faure Walker, 2019:487).

Resembling the critique by Kundnani, what is noticeable also are concerns around foreign policy, yet it is often not clearly distinguished between a critique of government policy and support for VJ. As a social worker one of my aims is for people to make informed choices, whilst I would expect the role of a teacher to be similar, in this case educating students that we can criticise foreign policy without supporting terrorism, or that radicalisation is not simply a result of being critical of ‘Western imperialism’. For evidence of this we can consider cases such as Aqsa Mahmood, who seemed more preoccupied with destroying the ‘kuffar’ (a derogatory term for Muslims deemed to be apostates) than the role of Western governments (McDonald, 2018).

However, the silencing of debate is an issue prominent in the literature, however the same author also has a helpful rebuttal for this:

“my vocal opposition to PREVENT resulted in a mechanism by which the silencing embrace of the strategy was resisted, as my students were empowered to share their concerns about the strategy they reengaged in political debate in the classroom” (Faure Walker, 2019:509).

Elsewhere in this research I have argued that perceptions of Prevent can be additionally obstructive in implementation of it than flaws discussed thus far. The above statement would support this, since as a teacher, the Prevent duty would fall on the author to report any concerns around radicalisation, meaning there is no reason

to fear Prevent when professionals can distinguish between safeguarding concerns and political opinion, again a position suited for a teacher as stated above. Perhaps a deeper issue with this would be the confidence and competence of professionals to understand and perceive this distinction correctly, as discussed by Cowden and Picken (2019: 110). Furthermore, especially at present, professionals such as teachers should be supported by staff such as a Designated Safeguarding Lead or a local Prevent worker where informal discussions can take place, negating unnecessary Prevent referrals. While Faure Walker's work is valuable in understanding language contributing factors to radicalisation, casting Prevent as a contributing factor itself may have the countereffect of damaging Prevent's reputation and ability to engage with communities due to the wide reach of his writing such as in *The Guardian* (Faure Walker, 2019b).

Undermining claims of a "chilling" effect are methodological issues, particularly with evidence that does not align with what authors claim. Even when primary data is collected, it is largely around perceptions of Prevent and rarely from those who work within it, with some of the most salient research being the most negative (Prevent Watch, 2024a). Prevent Watch aim to support people impacted by Prevent, on their website describing themselves as challenging Prevent and "the environment of fear that it has created". While I would disagree with there being an environment of fear, I would acknowledge and regard as serious the cases cited, such as a person referred to Channel against their knowledge and being spoken to by someone identifying themselves as a 'Safeguarding Officer' but would later emerge as a Prevent worker, with no risk shared other than being Muslim, itself of course not a risk (Prevent Watch, 2022). These kinds of incidents link what the discussion around accountability above explored and demonstrates areas Prevent can improve upon.

While Prevent Watch (2024b) appear to provide criticality and challenge, other research appears more firmly driven by an anti-Prevent focus. This can lead to instances such as one report using a statistic of “59% of students said they’d never heard of Prevent, yet many of those then expressed opinions about it, from an apparently non-existent knowledge base” in an attempt to evidence their own negative perceptions of Prevent (Scott-Baumann, 2020), despite a sample that is neither informed nor qualified to speak on the topic. It is rare for a study to have primary data and rarer still for it to include voices from within Prevent, yet this has not stopped journalists, academics, and other authors from making claims about Prevent that lack supporting evidence or can contain contradictory evidence as seen above.

Curiously absent from recent discussions is that the Prevent Duty is not the first incarnation of a duty to refer radicalisation concerns, with Ofsted’s Common Inspection Framework pre-dating the Prevent Duty (Dresser, 2018), or as Meleagrou-Hitchens (2022: 1) points out, pre-crime work has existed for generations in deterring youths in particularly away from risks such as gangs, drugs, and exploitation. This is perhaps best summarised by Nazir Afzal, former Chief Prosecutor for the North West of England:

“The thing that struck me most was these were still children. You know. I have children of my own and just because you are 14 or 15 you can’t make informed choices. And the perpetrators were in their 40s 50s - you know, my age - and they clearly knew better” (Scheerhout, 2017).

Although he was referring specifically to the Rochdale scandal, the comparison to radicalisation is strong when examined through the lens of safeguarding and exploitation and was pivotal in obtaining prosecutions of the exploiters and challenging

the stigma of the exploited. Much of the above leads me to posit the notion that a lot of the criticism of Prevent is based less on the premise of Prevent, but on what it represents to the anti-Prevent camp: the continuation of a neoliberal agenda rooted in a context of British colonial history (Andrews and Skoczylis, 2022: 419; Finch et al., 2022: 17; Kundnani, 2023), and more recently, austerity (Heath-Kelly and Strausz, 2019: 107). In the foreword to the 'People's Review of Prevent' (Holmwood and Aitlhadj, 2022), Professor Gearty concisely denotes this:

"As a society we cannot continue to allow this drift towards authoritarian homogeneity, a culture where only the inclinations of the powerful are allowed to enter into the political fray" (Holmood and Aitlhadj, 2022: ix).

As suggested above, I would proffer the argument that perceptions of Prevent have strayed some distance from current practice, with some academics but particularly the media playing a powerful role in (mis)shaping these perceptions. Notable headlines carry strongly negative views of Prevent, such as, "Prevent Gives People Permission to Hate Muslims: It has no place in Schools" (Quarashi, 2016), "Reforming the Prevent strategy won't work. It must be abolished" (Nagdee, 2019), or "Prevent doesn't stop students being radicalised. It just reinforces Islamophobia" (Scott-Baumann, 2020). The authors of these headlines are able to highlight noteworthy issues raised here, such the handling of data by Prevent and the focus on Islam in Prevent publications, however also interpret high numbers of Muslim referrals as evidence of Prevent itself being Islamophobic and maintain discussions at the level of perceptions rather than actions taken by Prevent, manifesting in sensational and misleading headlines. At the other end of the debate, the most notable headline could be, "David Cameron says government should defend its counter-terrorism strategy" (Syal, 2022). This is problematic given that the former Prime Minister has overseen the expansion of

Prevent and the development of the Prevent Duty but is also associated with the 2016 EU referendum, after which a spike of hate crimes rose by 41% in July 2016 compared to July 2015 (Full Fact, 2016), an increase too steep to disregard as confusing correlation and causation. This casts Cameron's support for Prevent uncomfortably close to Ebner's concept of reciprocal radicalisation (Ebner, 2017), meaning Cameron has likely contributed to the very radicalisation he claimed to prevent.

Added to the issue of 'anti-Prevent' headlines are cases of outlandish and ludicrous referrals exploited by the media which in turn delegitimise Prevent. Such examples are also not difficult to find, such as a boy being referred after a professional mistook him saying "giving arms" instead of "giving alms" (Taylor, 2021). Within this article, further ridiculous examples are given such as the four-year-old Muslim child stating, "cooker bomb" instead of "cucumber" and another child writing he lived in a "terrorist" house instead of "terraced". Furthermore, the article states, "Attiq Malik of Liberty Law Solicitors, representing the boy's family, called for the Prevent programme to be scrapped and said it was simply not working", giving the article an overall strong anti-Prevent stance and lacking critical discussion. For example, it is mentioned that the aforementioned referrals were sent in by teachers and nursery staff, very likely being knocked back when they reached a Prevent practitioner yet Prevent is held responsible for these misjudged or overly cautious referrals. As highlighted above, while we can demonstrate tangible issues of Islamophobia (Monetta, 2024), Prevent is left with polarising figures such as David Cameron and Michael Gove to publicly defend it (Seddon and Casciani, 2024), whilst other substantial critique can attract less publicity such as that of Sara Khan (Siddique, 2022), Nazir Afzal (Scheerhout, 2017), or Karima Bennoune (2013). Due to a number of key anti-Prevent voices comprised of academics, journalists, and other organisations (Kundnani, 2009; 2015; Faure

Walker, 2022; McKendrick and Finch, 2019; 2020; Prevent Digest, 2024; Prevent Watch, 2024) and their reiterated assertions, I would argue have resulted in a self-reinforcing cycle, perpetuating perceptions of Prevent as Islamophobic despite improvements and advances made by the strategy.

What can be frustrating about divisiveness of debates around Prevent is that constructive arguments and criticism can get lost amidst calls for abolition. For example, the VAF (Vulnerable Assessment Framework), is described as “used by Channel projects to guide decisions about whether an individual needs support to address their vulnerability to radicalisation and the kind of support that they need” (HM Government, 2012: 2). It does this by operationalising vulnerabilities as engagement, intent, and capability. Within these categories are a total of 22 factors such as feelings of grievance, dehumanisation of an enemy, and criminal capability. Knudsen (2020) provides an overview of the development of the VAF and ERG22+, challenging epistemologically to what extent such constructs can be measured and the risks of expanding such tools beyond their original target groups. Valid scrutiny of claims that Prevent uses evidence-based tools such as the VAF based on the ERG22+ are regularly raised by the anti-Prevent camp such as CAGE (2016), who point out that the ERG was published in 2011 and based on participants convicted for terror offences related to Al-Qaeda, therefore raising questions of validity and generalisability when applying such a tool to right wing extremism (RWE), self-initiated radicalisation (SIR), or other community populations. A similar argument is raised by Holmwood and Aitlhadj (2023), however their challenge on empirical grounds becomes muddled amidst conflating Prevent with Pursue:

“most assessments in the pre-criminal space are delivered by non-professionals up until the Prevent referral stage, when it is then the business of counter-terrorism,

individuals who are trained in and concerned with national security and not individual safeguarding” (Holmwood and Aitlhadj (2023: 76).

I have explored the 2011 turn to safeguarding by Prevent and it can be seen below that the composition of Channel panels includes social workers and safeguarding professionals, making the above argument less effective than if it had focused on methodological issues instead of focusing on the broader agenda of the anti-Prevent camp. However, core criticisms of methodological issues and secrecy of empirical bases have largely been unresolved by Prevent and Home Office. Shawcross’ recommendation for a Prevent Assessment Framework to replace the VAF (Shawcross, 2023) remains unclear what changes this will entail, meaning accusations of Islamophobia and unscientific methods may continue to arise and remain valid criticisms (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2022: 3). Such criticisms as these I find more fruitful and constructive than abolitionist arguments which can be dismissed by harm and deaths through terrorism when examined by policymakers despite epistemological concerns. There are strong epistemological grounds to hold debate and challenge around Prevent and this seems like the most constructive arena, using a vehicle of evidence-based approaches. Although I raise concerns about the meaningfulness of the change from VAF to PAF, it was arguably brought about by critiquing of the evidence rather than promoting of our own ideologies and as a tool used in everyday practice it remains a more evidence-based measure of Prevent’s effectiveness.

Another constructive criticism where I can also draw common ground is with critics highlighting the role of social work:

“We should add at this point that we are not hostile to the idea of young people needing to be protected from attempts by radicalisers to incite participation in a war abroad,

engage in terrorist acts or become Jihadi brides, but it needs to be seen within traditional social work parameters that emphasise a thorough examination of the internal and external factors in the lives of the individual, their families and their community. We are really concerned that locating the issue purely within individuals is reductive, and fosters a culture of individual responsibility that could increase rather than decrease the possibilities for radicalisation” (McKendrick and Finch, 2014: 314).

I would reverse this argument to put forth that social work is ideally placed to engage in Prevent work as social work values and frameworks strive for what the authors are asking. My concern would be that social workers disengaging from Prevent would have the feared effect of minimal exploration of a person’s context and a consideration of a strengths-based approach, for example, something this study sets out to understand. Similar to Kundnani’s (2009) emphasis on radicalisation being a manifestation of foreign policy which should be acknowledged as a contributing factor, Prevent does not have to be focused purely on the individual and can consider contextual safeguarding (Johnston and Akay, 2023). However, shelving concerns around the individual risks ignoring ideological factors as seen in the case of the Deghayes family discussed above.

Ultimately, Finch et al (2022:123) provide a helpful summary of their stance:

“McKendrick and Finch (2016) argue that PREVENT represents a securitised turn in social policy, moving services such as social work, education and health away from the liberal, emancipatory origins towards a more sinister, intelligence gathering role on populations seen to be ‘risky’ or ‘dangerous’”.

While aspects of this have been addressed elsewhere, their concept of securitisation is worth noting. Securitisation theory states that this process involves a figure in a

position of authority convincing audiences that a particular issue represents a threat (Jarvis, MacDonald and Whiting, 2024). There is evidence of this in the lack of transparency discussed above with Prevent and in Prevent 4 I will examine the dangers of political influence, although this argument begins to falter when examining the evolution of Prevent referrals where RWE ideologies have overtaken Islamist referrals, something acknowledged by an authoritative figure in David Cameron's foreword in a significant report (Jenkins, Perry and Stott, 2022). Aradau (2018) has also argued that "securitisation theory seems to have become an impediment to critical research rather than useful equipment" (2018: 300). Added to this the voluntary nature of Prevent, I would also diverge from McKendrick and Finch's (2016) view of seeing it as securitisation. Indeed, it raises a question of whether staunch opposition to Prevent has discouraged any possible collaborations and trusting relationships with Prevent to achieve more primary research based on Prevent work, as indicated by Aaradau (2018) and my own experience of this study.

It does not help that recent Prevent guidance which signposts to a government website to use a national referral form (HM Government, 2023c: 13), links to the relevant webpage but contains no national referral option at the time of writing (GOV UK, 2024a). Fortunately, this is rectified in practice as professionals are likely to have a Designated Safeguarding Lead as a colleague or may be aware of their local Prevent Coordinator or Channel Chair, but this likely creates frustration for most professionals who are unlikely to have such knowledge.

Prevent and Islamophobia

Much of the most prominent and notable literature on Prevent are centred on concerns of Islamophobia within Prevent, which deserves special attention in understanding.

This argument hinges on the perception that Prevent unfairly or disproportionately targets Muslims, a key argument made in the seminal text by Kundnani (2015). Drawing comparisons to Steven Spielberg's 'The Minority Report' movie, Kundnani challenges the notion of a 'pre-criminal' space and the assumption of a jihadist ideology being the driver of radicalisation (2015: 16). Yet, strong opposition to this can be recognised. As Cowden and Picken (2019) emphasise, Kundnani sees radicalisation as a reaction to social and economic factors rather than ideology, yet Bhatt (2014) points out that the VJ fuelling Islamist radicalisation, namely Salafi-Jihadism, is "not only a system of ideas but an aesthetic and cultural universe of meaning" (Bhatt, 2014: 27), meaning the role of religion and ideology should not be dismissed. In fact, it has been highlighted that a significant citizenship survey from 2010 showed that Hindus had higher rates of accepting violent extremism in the name of religion than Muslims (Mythen, Walklate, and Peatfield, 2016: 188), which lends support to scrutinising the emphasis on Muslims at risk of radicalisation.

While claims of Islamophobia are central to most publications by the anti-Prevent camp, lacking are critical discussions of the roles played by those claiming to represent Islam and be the voices of a 'global Ummah'. As Cowden and Picken further state, "while these movements gain support and recruits by interpolating economic, political, and social crises, they do so through a specifically religious language of salvation and virtue, in which acts of violence are justified in very specifically theological terms" (Cowden and Picken, 2019: 102). To dismiss the role of ideology here is to be in denial of the influence of fundamentalist scholars such as Sayyid Qutb (2002), whose legacy drew connections to Osama Bin Laden and the 9/11 attackers, however a notable scholar on the life of Qutb argued that in "contrast to Qutb, however, murderous purpose, more than simple contempt, animated their outlook" (Calvert, 2018: 291).

Meanwhile, Dhaliwal (2019) notes the tendency for human rights and anti-racist groups to downplay the presence of supremacist ideologies such as some prisoners in Guantanamo, presenting them as victims being harassed by security services (Dhaliwal, 2019: 7). This brings me to an important point where I argue that Jihadist movements are not simply products of 'Islam', rather they political movements of RWE (right-wing extremism). For example, the Iranian Koranic scholar and writer Navid Kermani has described Salafi-jihadism as a travesty of the 'multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural Orient' and a form of 'religious fascism' which is destroying Islam (2021). In other words criticism of jihadist movements is criticism of a violent authoritarian version of Islam, which itself seeks to destroy the heterodox history of Islam. In addition to this wider political point, Prevent's own published statistics show just 11% of referrals in 2021/22 were concerned with VJ (GOV UK, 2024), making allegations of Islamophobia in Prevent unconvincing and weak in evidence. In order to move our critique of Prevent forward, such nuances need to be accounted for.

Further to the above, I find that equivocally positing that Prevent is either Islamophobic or is not to be unhelpful as the media and even scholars can be found expressing dichotomised stances that it must be 'one or the other' rather than acknowledging the flawed history of Prevent and its evolution to the present paradigm (Busby, 2024). It is not helpful to dismiss where mistakes have been made, whilst it is also unhelpful to only cherry-pick 'successes'. While there have been issues around extensive surveillance techniques targeting Asian communities (Dawar, 2010), a regular assertion brought against Prevent is the disproportionate number of Muslims referred, such as 65% in 2017 compared to their 5% makeup of the population at that time (Ullah, 2023). A statistic like this should be an invitation for dialogue and critical debate, but the divisiveness of Prevent seems to result in discussion becoming

uncompromisingly polarised on either side. I have observed little acknowledgement of a report noting 90% of terror-related deaths between 2005 and 2020 to be a result of VJ (Jenkins, Perry and Stott, 2022), albeit the report itself stirs controversy with David Cameron writing the foreword.

Meanwhile the Independent Review challenged a demonstrable rise of RWE referrals that have consistently exceeded VJ referrals in recent years (Shawcross, 2023), which will be examined in more depth below. Islamophobic concerns are not baseless but have been frustrated by a lack of critical discussion, including the disproportionate referral of Muslims relative to VJ and terror-related deaths. Those with concerns around the targeting of Muslims and ‘chilling’ effect of Prevent would do well to not dismiss observations such as violent jihadists like ISIS killing more Muslims opposed to their version of Islam in Eastern countries than Christians in the West (Bennoune, 2013), alongside attempts to present more palatable forms of Salafism that can still lead to violent jihadism (Cowden and Fourest, 2021: 185).

To summarise the debates and controversies within Prevent thus far, I want to re-emphasise the need to acknowledge what anti-Prevent and pro-Prevent camps get right and wrong. When the anti-Prevent camp bring critiques regarding Islamophobia, securitisation, and a lack of accountability, there is merit to be found. What I argue as wrong are calls for Prevent as a whole to be abolished, whilst some authors take this a leap further, with one author notably stating that “it is not enough that we repeal all counterterror laws” (Manzoor Khan, 2022: 57) and that “scrapping Prevent is not enough then” (2022: 76). Arguments such as these bring to mind the expression of ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’, as this study aims to analyse the work of Prevent and Channel that has likely supported many individuals away from radicalisation and subsequently prevented many potential terror attacks, which would

not be possible without counterterror laws and a specific strategy such as Prevent. Richard Reid, known as 'the shoe-bomber', would be an example of this as legislation since his attempted terror attack would have made him much more likely to be identified prior to the attempted attack, which was only avoided due to his shoe being too wet to ignite (Counter Extremism Project, 2025). The pro-Prevent camp show a resistance to engage with constructive criticism and independent research, often taking the opposite stance which I will explore below and as part of my data collection issues. Whilst the pro-Prevent camp lack consistent counterarguments, they can point to published statistics that show an increased focus on RWE and the number of people supported by Channel, each one potentially being a prevented terror attack, showing a strong need for Prevent to continue.

2.6 Prevent 4: Independent Review and Extreme Right-Wing Influences

While I aim to present Islamophobic concerns in Prevent as largely historical in origin, this aim becomes undermined as we turn to publications such as the Independent Review of Prevent (Shawcross, 2023). This review was always going to prove controversial, however the first appointment of a reviewer accused of lacking independent scrutiny (Bowcott, 2019), followed by delays and the eventual appointment of a reviewer reputed for anti-Islam remarks (Grierson and Dodd, 2021), jeopardised an opportunity for a critically independent review that could have addressed the arguments discussed above. The appointing of Shawcross by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson is particularly notable due to his association with the *Heritage Foundation*, *Project 2025*, and the right-wing manifesto of Trump and Vance in the USA (Wendling, 2024). This was amidst a period where Prevent saw further

accusations of lacking accountability (Mullah, 2024) and being weaponised politically under possibly the most controversial Home Secretary in recent years (Casciani, 2023) who eventually was ejected from her role due to increasingly inflammatory comments and far-right associations (Finnis, 2023), reprising Ebner's (2017) concept of reciprocal radicalisation discussed above.

A notable downside of such controversy and subsequent boycotts (Amnesty International UK, 2023) is that genuine critical discussion risks going unheard or dismissed. It is beyond the scope of the current study to dissect the review in its entirety (see Allen, 2023; Skoczylis and Walker, 2023). Instead, I cast my attention to two key elements that are relevant to the present study. The first is the claim that "Prevent is carrying the weight for mental health services" (Shawcross, 2023: 8), with the second being the assertion that "Prevent has a double standard when dealing with the Extreme Right-Wing and Islamism" (Shawcross, 2023: 7). These claims are interconnected but I will expand on both below.

There has been ample discussion and misperception in the latter half of the 20th century around the role mental health plays in radicalisation or terrorism, with a gradual shift away from viewing terrorists as mentally ill, to recognising the increased prevalence amongst 'lone actors' (Corner and Gill, 2015). We may have reached another pivotal moment in understanding radicalisation as the Independent Review notes the prevalence of mental health issues being focused on when cases are passed to Channel from Prevent, including a concern that this mechanism could be used to expedite cases amidst high waiting lists (Shawcross, 2023: 62). This is a claim that could be supported by prominent media articles describing how children's mental health services have denied support to many in need due to being overwhelmed by demand (Campbell, 2023), in addition to UK A&E departments showing such a strain

that approximately 250 people a week are reported to lose their lives as a result of delays in accessing treatment (Gallagher, 2024). The impact of this is that desperate practitioners and families can be motivated to over-emphasise or prioritise radicalisation concerns to achieve support for more urgent needs such as mental health, something that will be explored in the current research. The curious omission following this concern is that Shawcross recommends alternative services but places little responsibility on the government to provide these services (Shawcross, 2023: 63), instead allowing Channel to be blamed for accepting and managing such cases when they may be best placed to handle these cases.

This leads into a more conceptual debate wherein I ask the question of whether and how easily ideologies espousing such violent and authoritarian approaches can be delineated from mental health concerns. I have discussed previously how radicalisation does not happen in a vacuum, with practitioners such as social workers and also journalists observing as such (Cowden, 2022; McDonald, 2018; McDonald-Gibson, 2022). This debate has been frustrated by various agencies such as the media, government, and police. For example, in 2022 the response to a petrol bomb attack on an immigration facility in Dover was condemned as police hesitated to declare it a terror attack (Weaver and Dodd, 2022). This arguably may be no coincidence with the perpetrator being a white male, aged 66, whilst former UKIP leader Nigel Farage proclaimed the perpetrator as a “lunatic”, directly implying mental instability as an issue rather than an ideology fuelled by narratives portraying an ‘invasion’ of asylum-seekers housed in hotels which has been compared to Nazism (Salter, 2023). Contrasting this with the disturbing Southport attacks, where the same political leader condemned the response for delaying a declaration of a terror incident (Francis, 2025), there is a collision of reasoning in referring to the white attacker

unknown to any services as a “lunatic” yet not acknowledging vulnerability factors in the under-18 black attacker known to education, social care, police, and Prevent (for further analysis of the Southport killer, see Cowden, Lynch, and Robinson ,2025). While it is tempting to draw a comparison between both attacks in terms of severity, this is less helpful in understanding the attackers themselves and the wider social context the incidents happened within and allowing for better prevention in future. More recently there has been some mainstream acknowledgement of the complexity posed by the relationship between mental health and radicalisation (Lithgow, 2024), such nuances can get lost in political discourses and the media, while this study aims to focus in practitioners rather than commentators.

Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right-Wing

In 2017, Cowden and Singh stated that “the shift in political discourse away from liberal multiculturalism toward a language of ‘social and community cohesion’ laced with a neoliberal logic, has created a dangerously divisive polity, and that those who have promoted this policy have no idea of how to solve the problems they have themselves created” (Cowden and Singh, 2017: 270). While the authors expressed concern about the implications of such political discourse, few would likely have predicted how the political narrative would quickly shift further to the Right, with Prevent becoming a battleground for such views. While a detailed explication of this will be beyond the scope of this study, an overview will be helpful for understanding the current context of Prevent and the work of Channel.

Outlined above we can see a turn to safeguarding and the Prevent Duty emerging under the coalition government led by David Cameron from 2010 through a context of a rising threat from ISIS. It is emphasised by Cowden and Singh that there have been

ample attacks on migrants and minorities who are upheld as scapegoats by increasingly right-wing figures for economic issues (Cowden and Singh, 2017: 282). Whilst racism and xenophobia have an extensive history, I would pinpoint 2012 as the beginning of a mainstream slide to the far-right with the Home Secretary's infamous "Hostile Environment" speech (White, 2022) that became widely recognised as demonising immigrants and refugees.

In 2013 a forged letter warning of an Islamist extremist takeover of Birmingham schools was sent to Birmingham City Council. This would become known as the 'Trojan Horse Scandal' due to it later being identified as forged, leading to accusations that it risked stigmatising Muslims further (Perry and Stott, 2022: 17), with Prevent being dragged into the discourse as MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development) stated that "the 'Trojan Horse Affair' heightened Islamophobia in the education sector and helped shape the Government's counter-terrorism strategy, particularly through the introduction of the statutory PREVENT duty in 2015". However, a critical debate was lost amongst a media frenzy, as Cowden and Singh have pointed out that an extremist takeover was a fabrication, but fundamentalist practices were reported that showed intolerance (Cowden and Singh, 2016: 280). Furthermore, Perry and Stott (2022) detail the scandal further with some revealing evidence such as:

"Ofsted found that a female governor at Darul Uloom Islamic high school in Birmingham was forced to sit in a separate room during meetings and had to talk through an open doorway. The governors said that this was their usual arrangement. Another school's library contained literature with extremist and sexist views, including a book that said that women made unreliable witnesses" (Perry and Stott, 2022: 32).

As seen above, on one hand the scandal was weaponised by the anti-Prevent camp to delegitimise the Prevent Duty as evidence of further securitisation and Islamophobic intrusion (Holmwood and O'Toole, 2018) while government responses repeatedly quoted 'British values' (Mend, 2017). Of note also is that one of the key authors above progressed in allying themselves with the 'Peoples Review of Prevent', one of several publications demanding that Prevent should be withdrawn (Holmwood and Aitlhadj, 2022). Measured analyses such as Cowden and Singh (2017) were bypassed in the furore and one of the key recent rebuttals has come from the right-leaning thinktank Policy Exchange (Perry and Stott, 2022), which mentioned above has links to politicians such as David Cameron and Michael Gove, making it rather concerning that polarisation was fuelled by the media and politics rather than a balanced analysis.

From this period to the end of 2023 there have been seven appointees as Home Secretary. These include Sajid Javid, appointed in 2018, who infamously stripped Shamima Begum of her citizenship as a reaction to the media attention when she was found at a refugee camp in 2019 (Siddique, 2024). Following this was Priti Patel, appointed in 2019, who again took an arguably reactive stance in the wake of the murder of David Amess MP by a person referred to Channel as she claimed it should be 'revamped' (Turner, 2022). Further to this, she accused immigration lawyers of having a 'leftie' agenda which was preventing the removal of illegal immigrants. This accusation was then stated by the Bar Council as being responsible for a knife attack on a law firm not long afterwards that was driven by far-right ideology (Bachelor, 2020). Therefore, it should not be dismissed the influence that a Home Secretary can have on policy and the general public. The response to Shamima Begum was particularly curious given that many other Britons who joined ISIS in Syria had been able to return home (Dearden, 2017), with the far-right knife attack being a lot less likely if not for

politically sensationalist language about ‘leftie’ lawyers. This shows a worrying trend of elected and mainstream politicians engaging in far-right narratives. However, this issue appeared to worsen as I examine below.

First appointed in 2022, Suella Braverman I would argue has done more to normalise extreme right-wing narratives than any other member of parliament since 9/11. Finnis (2023) provides a clear overview, but several instances are worth mentioning relevant to Prevent and this study. As Home Secretary, inflammatory comments became widely published, such as alleging asylum-seekers (whom she also described as an “invasion”) pretended to be gay to obtain refugee status in the UK, that sleeping rough was a lifestyle choice, multiculturalism had “failed”, and that pro-Palestine demonstrations were “hate marches”. This led to accusations that her comments fuelled far-right violence seen on Armistice Day in 2023 (Bland, 2023). Further to this, the Home Secretary is among colleagues such as Miriam Cates MP who used the term ‘Cultural Marxism’, denoted as a far-right conspiracy theory (Walker, 2023), a term used before Braverman was made Home Secretary (Walker, 2019).

While the above raises grave concerns about the appointment and conduct of cabinet ministers and politicians, it creates a more worrying impact for the Prevent Strategy. Given the myriad issues and controversies raised in response to the Shawcross (2023) review of Prevent, that the government so quickly and unequivocally accepted the report’s recommendations also gives rise to scepticism about the integrity of the report and government response (Skoczylis and Walker, 2023). The presence of increasingly far-right narratives in roles aimed at preventing radicalisation can take Prevent in a concerning direction, given Shawcross’ accusation of there being a double-standard between Islamist and extreme right-wing radicalisation. From the evidence examined

here, it would appear the double-standard is with denying the mainstreaming of far-right narratives (Lowles and Mulhall, 2024).

It is at this period at the end of 2023 that I draw a boundary in the scope of understanding Prevent's origins, developments, and debates. I have reconceptualised Thomas' (2020) notion of three distinct periods in Prevent's evolution. It is important to understand the context of Prevent before progressing to researching the work of Channel as this thesis aims to do. I have analysed the emergence of Prevent in 'Prevent 1' before denoting the significant shift towards a safeguarding model in 'Prevent 2'. The Prevent duty of 'Prevent 3' was such a significant evolution that I argued it deserves individual focus, whereas 'Prevent 4' is where I make an argument for the further politicising of the Prevent strategy, particularly by politicians known to express far-right or controversial views and associations. It is highly likely that revisiting this in future would identify a milestone for 'Prevent 5' and beyond whilst the anti-Prevent and pro-Prevent camps will continue debating with a compromise or agreement looking highly unlikely. In clarifying my own stance, I have found it invaluable to analyse Prevent at each state of this evolution. There have been many influences from the government itself to media attention, a paradoxical imbalance of scrutiny versus accountability, and national or international events that spark further implications for Prevent. I find it most helpful to unpick each of these issues and weigh up the evidence to aim for a balanced critique that encourages the evolution of Prevent in a manner that improves how we safeguard those vulnerable to radicalisation and to allow for a reasonable level of accountability, emphasising the work that Prevent *does* rather than what is *said* about it, all of which this study aims to address.

2.7 Channel: The Operational Arm of Prevent

Channel is the main focus of this study and it can be seen from the previous section the complex and divisive context Channel has emerged from before it could actually gain a footing in preventing radicalisation. In this section I explore the emergence of Channel from Prevent and its piloting towards eventual statutory footing. This section explores how referrals are made and received by Channel alongside the unique roles of 'Intervention Providers' allocated by Channel and the lack of primary data to help understand Channel's work, which this study aims to address.

Channel was established in three stages; it was piloted in 2007 and expanded in 2012 before gaining a statutory footing as part of the Prevent duty in 2015 (GOV UK, 2023c). This meant that every Local Authority was obligated to have a Channel panel under s36(1) of the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 (CTSA 2015). Parallel to this, it is demonstrable in several documents how the role of safeguarding was prominent in 2012 and 2015, being prioritised early in the guidance (HM Government, 2012b: 2015), however by 2023 similar safeguarding material would be found instead in the final pages of the guidance (GOV UK, 2023c), with 'susceptibility' becoming the selected nomenclature rather than 'vulnerability', in line with the Shawcross (2023) review discussed previously.

Originally chaired by the police, the Local Authority now chair panels, sometimes merging panels when authorities have smaller caseloads to maximise resource efficiency, as seen with areas such as Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, under s41(3) of the CTSA 2015. While each panel generally will have standing members indicated by Schedule 7 of CTSA 2015, there is not an exhaustive list of who may be invited, given the unique potentials of each referral. Common attendees include health and social

care staff such as social workers or mental health nurses, education staff, youth workers, probation, and counterterror officers. This is where the current research finds a foothold, as my colleagues and I at the University of Gloucestershire seek to emphasise the benefits of a multi-agency approach, particularly where social work is involved but may not have always held a consistent voice and representation.

When a Prevent referral is received, a gateway assessment is conducted by a specialist police officer, known as a chief officer of police under s36(3) of the CTSA 2015. However, this was amended to include a designated professional from the Local Authority such as a Prevent Coordinator or Prevent Lead depending on the needs and funding of the local area. Should the individual referred be deemed vulnerable to radicalisation, the referral progresses to the local Channel panel. As discussed above regarding the Vulnerability Assessment Framework and ERG, this process has its critics (CAGE, 2016), whilst the government place emphasis on the voluntary nature of Channel and Prevent in general (GOV UK, 2023d).

Given the lack of a single profile of a terrorist or radicalisation pathway, it is curious what vulnerabilities or responses Channel work with, particularly given that the range of professionals attending resemble any number of multi-agency meetings such as a strategy meeting called by a social worker to establish if the threshold for s47 of the Children Act 1989 necessitates action. An indication of this is provided by case studies within the duty guidance. One of these describes a child vulnerable to radicalisation at school, with interventions based around education, social care, and mental health support, leading to a revised care plan and oversight from an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) (GOV UK, 2023c: 17). A similar case study follows this where another child is referred via school and prevented from travelling while pastoral care was offered and police sought to identify the radicalising party (GOV UK, 2023c: 26). Both

of these case studies involve radicalisation concerns, yet agencies involved and primarily responding are not dissimilar to typical safeguarding mechanisms such as the aforementioned strategy discussions, raising a question of what Channel adds to the process, yet social workers have historically lacked confidence in this area (Preston, 2021). What appears to be unique are the references to Intervention Providers, which will be explored below.

Channel is complicated by most information relating to it being published by the UK government, with much of Channel's work being undisclosed beyond annual factsheets that largely began to be published after 2015 (GOV UK, 2023d), offering limited insight. This comprises much of the impetus for the current research because what this also means is that practitioners involved in the day-to-day operations of Channel are not having their experiences shared. Some of this is arguably a common result of expected gaps between research and practice, whilst on the other hand in the course of this study Home Office has taken a worryingly authoritarian stance towards academic research. This is confounded further by prominent government figures voicing disregard for academics, with an infamous example being in 2016 where the Justice Secretary stated that "people in this country have had enough of experts" which he later claimed referred only to economists (BBC, 2017a), by which point I would argue that the damage had been done. I find it not a coincidence that the 2023 Prevent Duty guidance specifically states that practitioners must not participate in research beyond what is approved by Home Office (GOV UK, 2023c: 56), which will be explored further in participant recruitment. This highlights not only an urgent gap in research but also purposefully placed barriers in closing those gaps, which in turn raises questions about the credibility of any government-published research, creating a further need for research that includes balanced critical analysis.

2.8 Intervention Providers

The key distinction with Channel is their authority to commission Intervention Providers (IPs). The Prevent Duty guidance has a concise description of this role:

“IPs are ideological and theological specialists. They are experienced in assessing ideological drivers, possess a high level of understanding around radicalising extremist narratives, and have the ability to counter them. They receive comprehensive training to support their roles through the IP professionalisation programme. IPs are also subject to a rigorous recruitment process and must receive ministerial approval to work on the programme” (GOV UK, 2023c: 49).

A key facet of this research is what interventions are provided and how effective they are, meaning the IPs will be of particular interest. From the available descriptions such as the above, it appears that IPs engage in vital applied work, yet evidence of this is difficult to find beyond that published by government bodies. For example, ACT (2024) is a website dedicated to supporting Prevent and Channel wherein there are statements from IPs and case studies, which while believable and likely, are also likely curated by the government and excluding of sensitive information that could give more insight into the IP role.

Thornton and Bouhana (2017) provide one of the exceedingly rare insights into Channel and IPs as they managed to interview some IPs and Local Authority workers involved in Channel. Their research revealed that the credibility and effectiveness of IPs were at times questionable, training for staff was unpredictable, and hostility towards Prevent was a barrier found in practice when working with some schools or colleges. The limitation is that they were only able to acquire six participants who had

directly worked in Channel and their experience ranged greatly (2017: 10). This was also conducted at a time when the Prevent duty was beginning to come into effect, making for a very different context than the current research, however the results of their research should not be dismissed.

Research such as Weeks (2018) examines the role of mentors within the Channel context, considering issues such as IPs becoming stigmatised within their communities due to being funded by the government. It is one of the few pieces to quantify that Home Office have 58 IPs registered, with 3 being RWE and 55 being VJ specialists, many expected to be 'formers', however Home Office unhelpfully declined to comment further (Vallance, 2016). As can be seen, these figures are dated and seem unlikely to be representative of post-pandemic shift described further below. Research such as this often spread themselves thin in that they look at the pre-criminal and post-criminal space which I find to be two very different contexts with both lacking sufficient primary data for an in-depth analysis strived for in this study.

In a similar vein, Papatheodorou (2023) more recently analysed the role of 'formers', in that those who were part of an extremist terrorist group but are now working in P/CVE (preventing and countering violent extremism). The analysis raised some concerns that, while formers can be useful, the unregulated space they operate within also means that many can claim unfounded expertise and work for the goal of profit (2023: 223). While we can take solace in that Home Office do not rely solely on formers when recruiting IPs, we also lack the information and evidence to be assured that their approval of IPs is thorough and balanced. In a prolonged era of austerity to drive down public expenditure alongside well-publicised spending scandals (Conn and Lews, 2022), we have good to reason to be sceptical about the quality of IPs and value independent scrutiny. In social work there are a plethora of tangible outcomes to

measure the successes of our work against, while in Prevent we are largely left with the dichotomy of whether a person progressed to a terror offence or not, in itself an unreliable metric for judging the work of Channel but also an unfair underrepresentation of the work undertaken by many practitioners and agencies.

Whilst Prevent provided a very controversial platform for Channel to be its operational arm, it appears almost the entirety of the discourse and controversy has remained in the field of Prevent, with Channel indirectly referred to:

“This sounds like an official "intervention provider" - usually a theologian - but neither the police nor the Home Office will confirm if this is true” (Casciani, 2022).

This is in a news report on the murder of Sir David Amess, a Conservative MP attacked by Ali Harbi Ali, who attributed his act of murder to the MP voting for airstrikes against IS in 2014. The silence by police and Home Office above in the wake of the abhorrent murder is curious, leaving room for speculation such it being an attempt to protect reputation after negative media attention has been brought to Prevent multiple times prior, such as the Manchester bombing of 2017. The aftermath of this attack revealed Salman Abedi had been referred to Prevent previously with no further action decided, again the article possibly referring indirectly to Channel (De Simone, 2022). The previous section discussed at length the issues of secrecy within Prevent and these evidently extend to Channel to a greater extent. Whilst much opacity is a necessity of national security and safeguarding, it leaves Channel and Prevent open to criticism for a lack of independent scrutiny where the agenda is academic rather than political. This places the current research as both original and necessary to provide insight into how Channel works to safeguard people against radicalisation.

Of note is that these IPs seem to be distinctly a resource of Channel yet also appear to be the unique model of intervention to Channel. Case studies and examples provided by Prevent training and Channel Duty Guidance highlight the role of 'social' solutions in addressing cases, such as housing and mental health care (GOV UK, 2023c). On one hand this is accounting for diverse factors that may influence a person's risk of radicalisation, yet it also highlights wider gaps in provisions across England and Wales, whilst also making me question how further and more creative tools have not become known, again a gap this study seeks to address.

In this section it has been examined how Channel came into existence as a pilot scheme in 2007 before being launched across England and Wales in 2011, with the additional Prevent duty in 2015 drawing in additional professionals across all Local Authorities. Like Prevent, Channel has its divisions, controversies, and secrecy. To borrow the words of a former Prime Minister, this creates a 'hostile environment' before I begin to engage in any research and presents a series of pitfalls to navigate. Existing research into Channel is scant or visibly from the anti-Prevent stance, with one notable piece of primary research's concluding sentence being "We know Prevent's shit, we know it's highly problematic, but it's not gonna go away. And even if you got rid of it, it would still come back in another form" (Pettinger, 2019: 981). Therefore, I should reiterate the motivation for this research is to provide academic critical analysis with a view to further the efforts in preventing radicalisation. This means largely agreeing with Prevent's overarching aims but not uncritically accepting every policy change and challenging reactive political decisions. I hope that the critical analysis thus far demonstrates this, as I have explored the origins and controversies of Prevent, through to more recent muddying of the waters by increasingly far-right political interference with the program. I would like to think I have given both acknowledgement

but also fair critique to anti-Prevent and pro-Prevent voices, recognising valid challenges and flawed reasoning along the way. This is not a debate that will reach its conclusion here, particularly as I turn my attention next to the emergence of radicalisation as a concept.

2.9 Radicalisation: Conceptual Issues and Debates

This section takes us from Prevent and Channel to the concept of radicalisation which, much like Prevent, has been a topic of extensive debate and disagreement. I begin this section by acknowledging the origins of the term and its evolution or 'journey' from a term associated primarily with violent jihadism (VJ), before progressing through notable tensions throughout the radicalisation literature. This will include the role of mental health, lack of empirical data, potentially outdated literature, the role of ideology, and the assertion that the term itself being allegedly rooted in Islamophobia, similar to Prevent's origins. I then acknowledge the work of Cowden (2022), Khosrokhavar (2017), and McDonald (2018) as suitable prisms through which to conceptualise recent emergences and trends in radicalisation, whilst also maintaining a balanced critique by including the work of significant authors such as Kundnani (2012).

The term 'radicalisation' encompasses many extant and historical conceptual, operational, and epistemological debates. While it will be beyond the scope of this study to bring finality to any of the debates and controversies, it is important that I contextualise the understanding of radicalisation that will be applied to this study and excavate the debates and controversies to make transparent the approach of the research. It will be important to understand the emergence of the term and various

understandings as it has evolved from a rarely-mentioned concept prior to 2001 to arguably the most contested concept in the field of terrorism over two decades later, giving rise to questions of valid claims to expertise McLaughlin (2014) and whether what we do not yet know remains vast and concerning (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010).

It is well known that the term 'radicalisation' saw a sharp increase in use after the events of 9/11, as Western States grappled with understanding and responding to violent jihadism (Sedgwick, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 2006). One of earliest uses of the term at this time appears to be in 2002 in response to two Dutch-born young men being radicalised and subsequently killed in Kashmir (General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), 2002: 5). In the AIVD report, recruitment and radical views are mentioned before describing the recruitment as a "radicalisation process" (2002: 6). From here it is possible to lose oneself in a scattergram of seminal publications by Western bodies, such as from the European Union (2004), the New York Police Department (Silber and Bhatt, 2007), and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP, 2009). Of course, around this there is also the first public Prevent strategy in the UK (HM Government, 2006), which although published in 2006 has succeeded an unpublished (at least publicly) version in 2003.

While this piece is not primarily aimed at analysing the origins of the term, its origins hold epistemological significance that have implications for modern research. As indicated prior, I aim to maintain an epistemological boundary between radicalisation and terrorism, with the current research concerned with the former and not the latter. The working definition of radicalisation applied here is the UK government's definition of "the process of a person subscribing to extremist ideology. This can include legitimising support for, or use of, terrorist violence" (GOV UK, 2023c). This distinguishes radicalisation as someone being at risk of progressing to committing a

terror offence from someone who has already perpetrated a terror offence (usually violent in nature) and therefore comes to be regarded as a terrorist. There can be grey areas in this which I will address in the next section, but as a social worker I uphold the values of our profession as detailed by the British Association for Social Workers (BASW, 2023b). This means prioritising aspects such as risk assessment and safeguarding, valuing early intervention and upholding human rights. I state this to distinguish from aforementioned assertions that see radicalisation as synonymous with surveillance or securitisation.

Controversy and debate become an inevitability in an area such as radicalisation. One such area of controversy is the very definition of radicalisation. As I am operating directly with Prevent and Channel, it follows that their definition should be central, but this does not mean uncritical acceptance. Since 2001, definitions have proliferated to the extent of a seemingly endless debate, leading to some to regard it as “one of the great buzzwords of our time” (Neumann and Kleinmann, 2013: 360) or a “fashionable expression” (McLaughlin, 2024: 1). It will be helpful at this point to consider three significant examples of how radicalisation has been defined to demonstrate the enduring epistemological tensions:

“the process of a person subscribing to extremist ideology. This can include legitimising support for, or use of, terrorist violence” (GOV UK, 2023c).

“Radicalisation is a process by which individuals, groups, large publics become increasingly accepting of violence for a cause. Terrorism is an end point, while radicalisation leads to it” (Moskalenko and McCauley, 2020: 4)

“an individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarisation, normal practices of dialogue, compromise and tolerance between political

actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favour of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict-waging. These can include either (i) the use of (non-violent) pressure and coercion, (ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism or (iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes. The process is, on the side of rebel factions, generally accompanied by an ideological socialization away from mainstream or status quo-oriented positions towards more radical or extremist positions involving a dichotomous world view and the acceptance of an alternative focal point of political mobilization outside the dominant political order as the existing system is no longer recognized as appropriate or legitimate” (Schmid, 2018).

The latter definition stands out as the most elaborate and the question it brings to mind is what it offers that the former two definitions do not. Schmid agrees with Bötticher (2017) in that “radicalism can be situated on the edges of democratic consensus while extremism lies outside” (p. 76). Schmid is aiming for a definition that encompasses historical (specifically European) radicalism and extremism. This offers an advantage of drawing the narrative away from associations between radicalisation and a sole focus on VJ as discussed above, yet it also could be unwieldy and impractical for use in frontline practice. Indeed, in presenting these three definitions in the order that I have, each one appears to elaborate upon its predecessor yet still returns to a process taking place before acts of terror. Schmid expands this to war crimes and other forms of political violence, but again that may be less helpful in contexts such as Prevent and Channel.

From Sedgwick’s (2010) tongue-in-cheek “what goes on before the bomb goes off” to Schmid’s (2018) unwieldy 150-word definition, a universally agreeable definition of radicalisation at this point appears adrift in an epistemological quagmire. As will be

seen throughout this study, the evolving nature of radicalisation could mean that any definition is ephemeral at best, which may favour the concise and unspecific definitions which appear to have this common ground wherein I argue that we can identify a process prior to a person committing a violent terror offence. Beyond this there appear to be an infinity of factors and pathways too numerous to be encapsulated within a single model, theory, or definition (Hafez and Mullins, 2015; Kruglanski, Belanger, and Guaranta, 2019; Moskalenko and McCauley, 2020). Peels (2024) emphasises a need to combine monist, pluralist, absolutist, and relativist approaches found in the literature and this is congruent with the stance taken here.

Acknowledging such limitations and challenges should not mean we simply dispense with all theories and models pertaining to radicalisation. It is worth observing how radicalisation models have evolved since 2001 to aid understanding, whether we are viewing radicalisation as a staircase (Moghaddam, 2005a), a conveyor belt (Walklate and Mythen, 2018: 218), as two pyramids (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017), as three pillars (Kruglanski et al., 2019), or any of the possible 23 models identified by De Coensel (2018). It is beyond the scope of this study to chart a critical chronology of these models or a general history of radicalisation as a concept, but two notable examples will demonstrate the use and challenges with these models.

“Terrorists are made, not born” was stated by Moghaddam (2005b: 1039) and he conceptualised a narrowing staircase to describe how a person is radicalised further at each step until they reach a point of a terrorist act. This model is inspired by the role of psychological processes and identity. Given the year of publication, it was also notably inspired by VJ, limiting its use in recent years. Some notable strengths of the model, however, is Moghaddam’s assertion that most people will not progress to the fifth floor that begets an act of terror, recognising the same phenomenon at present

where it is still understood that most radicalised individuals will not resort to acts of terror. Furthermore, Moghaddam recognised the danger of younger people being radicalised and the need for prevention but not for policy to be “driven by immediate political demands rather than by scientific understanding” (2005a: 168), something I have discussed in a previous section as being an issue twenty years later. Being an older model it is unsurprisingly more likely to be sought by researchers, with notable criticisms such as the presumed linearity, in that an individual gradually ascends upwards rather than skipping stairs, for example.

Kruglanski et al (2019) put forth a model they describe as the ‘*Three Pillars of Radicalization*’, or “the 3N theory of radicalization: the individuals’ needs, the narrative to which they are exposed, and the networks in which they are embedded” (p. 1). A key aspect of this model or theory is the quest for significance – to matter and have respect. In a later section I will detail recent ideologies of concern for Prevent, but a quest for significance resonates with many of these. A further benefit of this model is that it encompasses aspects such socioeconomic tensions or political oppression that can be risk factors in radicalisation. Paradoxically, the strengths of the model are what I also find to give rise to two issues with the model – it is descriptive, and it is all-encompassing, to the point of duplicating existing knowledge. This arguably provides a helpful amalgamation of knowledge, however examining the 3N theory of needs, narrative, and networks, I see a symmetry with the engagement, intent, and capability trifecta found in the Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF) of the Prevent strategy. For example, the ‘intent’ aspect of the VAF directly states a “desire for status” (HM Government, 2012a: 2) akin to significance quest theory. In the ambition to understand and safeguard against radicalisation, I argue caution needs to be

exercised not to further muddy an area that is already fraught with controversy, uncertainty and disagreement.

In examining models, definitions, and the wider radicalisation literature, I note several themes that will orient the current research in terms of where previous and current research have left gaps and addressing these themes will better balance brevity with analytical depth.

Firstly, profiling individuals, particularly in regards to the role of mental health, has seen a journey from fixation to dismissal to re-emergence. For decades there was a notable search for a terrorist 'profile' which portrayed terrorists as 'others', perhaps psychopathic or otherwise mentally unstable (Bhui and Bhugra, 2021; Shortland, 2021: 30). This connection between viewing the radicalised as unstable in some way still surfaced in post-9/11 contexts, such as 2014, when the British Prime Minister made a statement when referring to ISIS, that "they are not Muslims, they are monsters" (Chappell, 2014). Whilst such a statement can be seen as a vehicle of political sensationalism, this may have inadvertently touched upon disproven conceptualisations of terrorists as being unstable individuals (Doering, Davies, and Corrado, 2023) but also indicates a qualification on who is and is not a Muslim, known as 'takfirism' (Swinhoe, 2021). Having said that, the role of mental health has re-emerged in recent years in radicalisation discourses, as authors note the simplicity of historical research and how radicalisation itself has evolved to include categories such as lone actors (Corner and Gill, 2015; 2018) and autism seems to be an emerging trend in research (Al-Attar, 2019; 2020; Walter, Leonard, Miah, and Shaw, 2021). Other research has directed attention to similarities between violent jihadist and right-wing extremist radicalisation (Gambetta and Hertog, 2016; Koehler, 2019; 2021). While it is generally accepted that we cannot universally profile radicalisation or terrorism, the

interconnecting roles of ideology, theology, and mental health remain in need of further research alongside structural factors (Rottweiler and Gill, 2022), however the points further below explain our limitations on understanding this.

Secondly, there is a lack of primary data to progress the theoretical to the empirical. McLaughlin (2024) calls this “a glaring lack of empirical studies” (p. 222), also highlighting a lack of certification as to who can lay claim to expertise in the field of radicalisation (p.157). Silke (2008) noted that this equates to around one percent of publications apply systematic interviews, although Koomen and van Der Pligt (2016: 239) later noted that there had been some but limited improvement upon this. This raises a dilemma which I will address throughout this study, since primary data will be the concern of national security and even when made accessible does not guarantee publishing outside of restricted government access. This lack of primary data undoubtedly hinders academic research, with some of the most notable publications containing primary data made possible by journalists with the freedom and pitfalls that journalistic approaches entail (Ronson, 2014; Lavin, 2020; Moaveni, 2020; McDonald-Gibson, 2022). Further to this, when primary data is collected, often it will use university students (Scott-Baumann, 2020), laypersons, (Jarvis et al., 2024; Sikkens, van San, and de Winter, 2018) or members of political groups not associated with violence, such as the American Republican party or Black Lives Matter (Bélanger et al., 2022). Therefore, I believe a realistic step forward for research may be those who work with those at risk of radicalisation and may be more sympathetic to the need for academic research.

Thirdly, the publication of many models was notably years and in some cases decades ago. Although radicalisation is a ‘young’ area of research it is also fast evolving similar to the Prevent strategy itself. Radicalisation models conceived of in the wake of 9/11

have a primary focus on violent jihadism, such as Borum (2003), Moghaddam (2005), or Wiktorowicz (2005). Horgan's (2005) seminal text extends its focus to the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland but broaches the epistemological barrier beyond radicalisation into terrorism. More recent models such as the Attitudes-Behaviours Corrective (ABC) model (Khalil, Horgan, and Zeuthen, 2019; Khalil and Dawson, 2023) have shown a capacity to be more fluid and flexible with an empirical basis, whilst models such as the three pillars (Kruglanski et al., 2019) risk becoming so broad that they become descriptive, striving to account for every possible factor and route to radicalisation. Other models have such an all-encompassing taxonomy that the level of knowledge required is unwieldy or conflicting, such as models combining psychology, medicine, and neuroscience (Decety, Pape, and Workman, 2018). Models such as these can have explanatory power retrospectively but lack an applied basis for the likes of Channel practitioners from disciplines such as social work or policing. This means a substantial level of caution needs to be exercised when conceptualising radicalisation, particularly in recent contexts where we see a stronger presence of the extreme right wing, social media, and COVID-19 in radicalisation narratives (Cowden and Yuval-Davis, 2022) alongside the extant violent jihadism. Knowledge produced by research needs to be more beneficial to Channel practitioners.

Fourthly, the role of ideology remains under debate, as does the concept itself in a vein resembling radicalisation (Ackerman and Burnham, 2021; Carter, Ahmed, Albayrak, and Van Nuys, 2023). The previous section noted that Shawcross (2023) argued that a refocus on radical ideology would be of benefit to Prevent and other authors proffer explanations for its significance in radicalisation (Carson and Turner, 2024; Zimmerman, 2024). Other authors such as Clubb and McDaid (2019) have argued that a lack of a direct role between ideology and behaviour should not cause

us to dismiss its value to understanding radicalisation. Holbrook and Horgan (2019) argue that “ideology can serve a variety of different purposes for those becoming involved in terrorism and that the activities it informs go beyond participation in violence per se” (p. 3), drawing the emphasis on a need for nuanced understandings for ideology’s role in radicalisation rather than terrorism. The evolution of ideologies will be examined further in a later section but for now it is important to understand how it adds complexities in attempt to understand radicalisation considering it is an already complex term with a rich history (Althusser, 1971; Freeden, 2003).

Fifthly, a shadow cast over the entire concept of radicalisation is the assertion that it is by its origins Islamophobic (Kudnani, 2012). This is highly wedded the previous section discussing similar assertions that Prevent is also Islamophobic. Again, I argue that it is possible to identify instances of this being the case, which again circumvents the uncomfortable statistic of most terrorist deaths in the UK between 2005 and 2020 being due to violent jihadism (Jenkins, Perry, and Stott, 2022), creating an inevitable association between radicalisation and violent jihadism. The more curious aspect of this is that the term ‘radicalisation’ was rarely found in political or media discourses prior to this, notable particularly in its absence around Northern Ireland where political violence escalated between 1969 and 1998 (Lynch, 2023). However, in a report by the BBC after former IRA commander Martin McGuinness resigned from the Northern Irish government, there is a notable statement:

“The young McGuinness was drawn to the civil rights movement, radicalised by discrimination and murder on the streets of his city and caught up in the riots” (BBC, 2017c).

In this we see the use of 'radicalisation' by a mainstream media outlet, albeit retrospectively, to political violence pre-dating the violent jihadism associated with the events of 9/11. Given that there is also an aforementioned tangible fall in referrals to Prevent regarding violent jihadism through the 2010s yet still alongside a consistent definition of radicalisation, I argue that there is a need to move forward from the shadow of Islamophobia, with my selected term of violent jihadism' epistemologically distancing radicalisation from Islam.

Of note is how Martin McGuinness was radicalised by what he saw on the streets of Derry, as Kundnani has questioned if there is an "eagerness to downplay political factors, even when the data suggests otherwise" (Kundnani, 2012: 13), whilst further criticising the focus on the individual and not their contexts. While this will be addressed further in section four where I examine the changes seen in radicalisation since Prevent began publishing statistics, it is worth noting that this is indeed a gap in research highlighted by Kundnani and one that the current research aims to add an understanding of, as I aim to explore how practitioners conceptualise the forms of radicalisation that they are faced with, which will not shy away from analysing the role of agency or structural factors, particularly given my own person experience outlined at the beginning.

From the above we can see that radicalisation is an increasingly broad and porous concept, meaning it will require scope for this study. From a social work background a safeguarding lens follows, drawing us to early intervention and vulnerability. This is pertinent for Prevent, where we see a fundamental aim of preventing radicalisation which we can equate to early intervention, alongside a recent challenge on the role of vulnerability as highlighted by the Shawcross (2023) report, which argues for a lexicon of 'susceptibility' instead and was discussed in the previous section.

This draws us to some important aspects of radicalisation to be considered for this study. Despite the breadth of debate and disagreement, I argue there are some key aspects commonly found in radicalisation concerns. Cowden (2022) highlights some important fundamental features, those being Manichean thinking, social media anti-heroes, a hatred of democracy, and violent misogyny which we will return to throughout the study. However, also mentioned is McDonald's (2018) argument that while we typically think of radicalisation as something 'done to' a vulnerable person, instead we should see it as "a social process, full of exchanges, communications and shared emotions" (p. 10). This is also examined by Khosrokhavar's (2017) approach of "a sociology of subjects within a context of globalization" (p. 16), with several important aspects to consider in the radicalised persons, namely as humiliated and victimised individuals who are members of a group under assault, such as the 'global Ummah' being under threat from the West (p. 16-17). In examining cases such as Shamima Begum (Sandord and Durbin, 2022), Aqsa Mahmood (Cowden, 2022), or the Deghayes family (Townsend, 2020), we can see evidence of the above, demonstrating a tension between structure and agency alongside a need to comprehend the role of vulnerability.

While Khosrokhavar (2017) and McDonald (2018) have their work primarily focused on violent jihadism, both show a development towards the emerging right-wing extremism, violent misogyny, and the role of the internet, with Cowden (2022) applying a social work lens useful for this study. McDonald asserts a significant observation that aids in an analysis that seeks to understand but move beyond violent jihadism:

"What is striking is the extent of themes that are shared by jihadist and far-right violence: racial disgust framed within an imaginary of purity and impurity; a desire for death of the self within a desire to fracture the real through the scale of violence; the

vertigo of power associated with the discovery of hidden conspiracies and knowledge; fascination with the sublime, expressed in terms of attraction and repulsion. Humour plays a similar and fundamental communicative role in both jihadist and far-right extremism. Historically these themes have played an important role in far-left violent extremism as well” (McDonald, 2018: 43)

Furthermore, Khosrokhavar and McDonald have an empirical basis for their work based on primary data combined with well-publicised cases, whilst Cowden, Robinson, and Lynch (n.p.) have noted the lack of confidence in social workers when presented with radicalisation concerns, giving an impetus to the present study having a social work perspective. Overall, the works of Khosrokhavar, Cowden, and McDonald are valuable both for furthering understandings of radicalisation and as an aid to the current study.

Before closing this section, it is worth revisiting Kundnani (2012) to note a complexity around radicalisation theory suffering from being intertwined with state goals (p. 8) and assertions that the study of radicalisation has had a strong individualistic focus, averse to discussions of structural inequalities. Above I have unpacked the radicalisation literature to note some gaps and have found some congruence with Kundnani as the previous section on ‘Prevent 4’ has highlighted recent government influences and how much of the critique of Prevent and by extension radicalisation emerges from a backdrop of neoliberalism. I emphasise this to demonstrate the balanced analysis this study strives for, as despite earlier critique of anti-Prevent authors, they are rarely simply ‘wrong’ and I would also highlight case studies used in the Channel guidance (GOV UK 2023c) that refer to housing and mental health support as a means of safeguarding against radicalisation, which are indicative of structural issues, however government publications are highly unlikely to cast a negative light on wider policies

of the government itself, adding to the urgency of need for original research such as this that lacks government influences without taking an openly hostile position that leaves research open to the same methodological flaws.

Despite its comparative youthfulness, the field of radicalisation has developed to the point of great depth and complexity but also finds a potential for confusion and disagreement. Initially emerging as a term from the Netherlands following the events of 9/11, there have subsequently emerged a plethora of theories and definitions of radicalisation. Academics, journalists, politicians, and many other commentators are embroiled in perpetual debates from the conceptual to national security. While these epistemological debates show no signs of cessation, I aim to contribute to make an original contribution to the knowledge of radicalisation by building upon the themes identified above from the radicalisation literature through the use of primary data to understand how practitioners within Channel conceptualise and respond to radicalisation. Following this section, I will examine the role of safeguarding and social work within radicalisation before turning to the forms of radicalisation evolving in recent years.

2.10 Radicalisation and Safeguarding

In this section the emphasis is placed on the role of safeguarding, as I begin by contextualising the convergence of social work, radicalisation, and safeguarding. I draw parallels between social work safeguarding in area such as child criminal and sexual exploitation (Gloucestershire County Council, 2024) and county lines (NSPCC, 2023) with those concerns in radicalisation with an emphasis that social work has a role to play in all three areas. I chart the role of radicalisation as it is shaped through

the four 'waves' of Prevent to consider that despite less emphasis on vulnerability social work still has a valuable role to play, particularly in navigating the tension between structure and agency. I then move the discussion forward to consider that unlike 'traditional' safeguarding such as with protecting children from abuse, neglect, or various adverse childhood experiences (Quigg, Wallis, and Butler, 2018), there is a dearth of theory and evidence directly applicable for Channel practitioners (especially social workers) to depend on. Considering time pressures in our social work roles, I conclude this section by putting forth the concept of 'practice wisdom' as a means for practitioners to draw from existing knowledge bases to apply to working with radicalisation, re-emphasising the applicability of the social work role in safeguarding against radicalisation,

In my conceptualising the evolution of Prevent as the four waves of Prevent, we saw that 'Prevent 2' was a turn to safeguarding and 'Prevent 3' as the third wave which brought us the Prevent duty that formalised the role for social workers to respond to concerns of radicalisation. At first glance social work and radicalisation may seem like odd bedfellows given that Prevent is one strand of Britain's counterterrorism strategy and social care, yet I draw attention to part of the International Federation of Social Workers' definition of social work originally published in 2014:

"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people" (IFSW, 2024).

Aspects such as social change, development, and cohesion are of great interest to social workers as we strive to enhance the outcomes of children, families, and individuals across a breadth of social contexts, insomuch as aiming for those we work

with to be healthy participants in a healthy society. Viewed from this perspective, in this section I aim to further the case for social work having a positive role to play in the work of Prevent and Channel whose goals would be in alignment with social work. Encompassing all of this and I argue what binds together Prevent and social work is the concept of safeguarding, which I will combine with the concept of ‘practice wisdom’ (Sheppard, 1995) to theorise how social workers may be operating in and making sense of an unfamiliar field and how this orients the current research.

Pierson and Thomas (2010) refer to safeguarding as “the work of organizations and their personnel in taking all reasonable measures to ensure that the risks of harm to an individual’s welfare is prevented” (p. 459), whilst the Children Act 2004 and ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’ (GOV UK, 2023f) mention aspects such as promoting best outcomes and preventing the impairment of mental or physical development. From an adult safeguarding perspective, it has been described as “about working alongside adults to solve problems, to challenge discrimination, to give the same right of access to protection that all citizens can claim and to enjoy the same quality of life” (Spreadbury and Hubbard, 2019: 1). Rights, protection, positive outcomes, and multi-agency working are themes running through these and the majority of discourses around safeguarding (e.g. Lindon and Webb, 2016; Doel, 2023), and it is this that I argue is the starting point helpful for social workers and other professionals in responding to concerns of radicalisation, in contrast to the criminalising approaches applied (and usually necessary) in other areas of counterterrorism.

Longstanding perceptions of social work see safeguarding roles as the ‘bread and butter’ of social work, as child protection tends to be the most common depiction of what social workers do (Calhoun, Lightfoot, Okamoto, Goodenough, and Zheng, 2020:

381). Whilst we know that social work roles encompass children, adults, elderly, palliative care, forensic, disability, and safeguarding to name a few (Butler and Hickman, 2011), I would argue the aforementioned is an understandable perception given the propensity for child deaths to become high-profile in the media where social services were involved, such as Victoria Climbié (GOV UK, 2003), Peter Connelly (GOV UK 2010), Daniel Pelka (GOV UK, 2014), and recently Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson (GOV UK, 2022), causing social work to be mostly associated with high-profile child deaths rather than the plethora of support functions such as safeguarding against radicalisation. Therefore, as indicated by the research title and questions, it is important to demonstrate the potential of social work in extending the concept of safeguarding to concerns of radicalisation.

Meleagrou-Hitchens (2022) highlighted issues of drugs, gangs, and other criminal involvements that we would have little issue in viewing under a safeguarding lens and notes the parallels when applying a similar stance to radicalisation. In a similar vein, movements away from viewing younger people involved in county lines as criminals but instead as potential victims have been welcomed by academics and practitioners (Koch, Williams, and Wroe, 2024). Extending this to issues such as grooming, exploitation, and human trafficking (Piotrowicz, Rijken, and Uhl, 2017), and comparing to cases such as Shamima Begum (Khan, 2022) or the Deghayes family (Townsend, 2020), brings both an epistemological and practical challenge beneficial to social workers in how we conceptualise our roles as safeguarding against radicalisation. Of note is that this is not a new revelation, as a former chief crown prosecutor has made a similar argument as far back as 2015 when many people were travelling to join ISIS, highlighting that “We need to bring in different faces and organisations” (Afzal, 2015), one of which I argue is rightly social work.

This leads to the statement I put forward as such that the second wave of Prevent brought us to identifying radicalisation at earlier points, and combined with the third wave which includes the Prevent duty, we have arrived at a point where social work logically finds a place around the table within Channel. The pre-crime and non-violent aspects are arguably better addressed with a safeguarding approach (Heesh, 2022). While the Shawcross (2023) review which led the fourth wave of Prevent appears to walk this back somewhat, I argue we can maintain a safeguarding stance whether we view radicalisation under a secondary lens of vulnerability or susceptibility.

In terms of what this may look like in practice, a safeguarding lens I argue seeks intervention anywhere from the earliest signs of radicalisation prior to the committing of a terror act. Indeed, this can be beneficial in considering nuances in legislation such as that of s58 of the Terrorism Act 2000:

“he collects or makes a record of information of a kind likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism...he possesses a document or record containing information of that kind...the person views, or otherwise accesses, by means of the internet a document or record containing information of that kind”

Of note also is that 58(3A) includes a “reasonable excuse” for accessing such material as being for academic research, as it would be paradoxical to investigate and understand phenomena which we are denied access to, something I address throughout this study. That being said, it also creates potential dilemmas for practitioners such as social workers and police in navigating a grey area such as a person exploring material on the internet and discerning the intent behind this. I would posit that this reinforces the role of social work in preventing criminalisation where a safeguarding response may be both more effective and rights based. For example,

many texts fall under s58 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and this paradoxically can provoke curiosity in a person to seek a text out and see why it has been banned, referred to in pop-culture as the 'Streisand Effect' (Masnick, 2005). Rather than simply proceed to prosecution, a multi-agency assessment involving police and social care at Channel can understand if this was indeed curiosity or in the process of sharing knowledge discover that other evidence indicates a risk of radicalisation and a need for support, with either outcome being more optimistic than a criminal record that could do more harm than good.

This draws my attention to a longstanding dichotomy of interest across many fields such as health, social care, crime, and of course radicalisation, with that dichotomy being structure versus agency. Hays (1994) notes the contested nature of defining concepts such as 'structure', describing it as "patterns of social life that are not reducible to individuals and are durable enough to withstand the whims of individuals who would change them" (p.60). An example pertinent for the current study may be online communication, in that an individual may browse the internet and send or receive communications, but the internet has become an engrained part of modern life I argue it persists with or without the individual's participation. Hays (1994) then sees agency as "a continuum from the structural reproduction...to the structural transformation"(p.64) which for the sake of brevity I summarise as the choices made by individuals when engaging with and adjusting the structures. Discourses around structure and agency are numerous and historic (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977; Berger and Luckmann, 1966), so for the scope of the current study it is important to appreciate how this can help us broach a key facet of safeguarding, as authors such as Pilgrim (2020) and Bhaskar (2016) emphasise the need to transcend such dualisms and take a stance of structure *and* agency.

A stance of structure *and* agency is also put forth by McDonald (2017) as discussed in the previous section and is worth noting here. A safeguarding perspective can assume that those radicalised are victims of a similar fashion to gangs, trafficking, or other exploitation. While such cases undoubtedly exist, there are ample that leave room for and attract much debate, particularly as we examine young people approaching adulthood. The case of Shamima Begum was touched upon in the previous section and attracted much media and political debate (Phillips, 2024). Aged fifteen at the time of her departure for Syria, her age became a topic of discussion in terms of her responsibility and consensual choices; in social work we would potentially consider Gillick competency to understand a young person's capacity (NSPCC, 2022), while many would also argue about the role of psychosocial factors (Global CT Institute, 2024), particularly those specific to Shamima such as the internet and peer influences (Moaveni, 2020). With this case as an example, it raises an argument that where both structure and agency play a role, there is either an earlier point of intervention via safeguarding or lessons to be learned in hindsight also in regards to safeguarding, ultimately demonstrating the value brought by the addition of a social work perspective.

Before moving to discuss 'practice wisdom', a case study can demonstrate the benefits of a safeguarding approach and the dangers of it going wrong. Previous sections have referred to the Deghayes family where much of this went wrong and many opportunities were missed alongside a general mishandling of the case (Townsend, 2020). The tragic and arguably avoidable outcome of this family's experiences of safeguarding (and lack of) was that sons Abdullah, Jaffar, and Amer were radicalised locally in Brighton before the former two died fighting in Syria, whilst another son,

Abdul, was killed by a drug-dealer and their father was more recently jailed for calling for jihad-by-sword in England (BBC, 2022).

Some elucidation on the Deghayes case is necessary to identify how later safeguarding mechanisms implemented by Prevent may have prevented the tragedies faced by the family. The uncle of the Deghayes children, Omar, was arrested in 2002 and spent two years in Guantanamo Bay where he reported torture leading to the loss of sight in his right eye despite not being charged with a crime. The family moved to Saltdean in Brighton in 2008, but the children were subjected to racist abuse at school and the local neighbourhood to the extent that Sussex police had intelligence that the National Front set up a local chapter specifically to target the family (Townsend, 2016), and their father stated that police inaction was radicalising his sons, a curious statement given the father's own actions which I will explore next.

By 2010 the children were on a child protection register due to injuries reported due to their father attacking them with electrical cables, however his arrest did not lead to imprisonment despite future breaches of his bail conditions and children disclosing he told them to write letters stating they wanted to drop charges against their father (Townsend, 2016). While their father claimed his actions were based on discipline, he also stated that his son died as a martyr (Malik and Taylor, 2014), and it is this fundamentalist justification which appears to have been missed by social services at the time. As Cowden and Picken note, that one child travelling to Syria under the guise of humanitarian work was assumed to be true (Cowden and Picken, 2017: 112). It is not simply the gift of hindsight that allows us to challenge this. It is evident that professionals involved were not separating Islam and Violent Jihadism as supported by the children's father and the mosque they later joined. This combined with the

numerous racist incidents experienced by the family as a whole show substantial risks of radicalisation that were not fully connected together by professionals.

To summarise the unfortunate trajectory, the boys would band together with other local youths and form a gang for protection, resulting in local violence and the police viewing them as the source of crime whilst social services were aware of unhealthy living conditions, overcrowding, and missing children being found at the family home (Townsend, 2020). In September 2012, Jaffar, 14, was found drunk and angrily talking about Allah, yet no Prevent referral was made. The Deghayes boys were not discussed at the first Channel meeting in Brighton, 2013. Then the boys showed a decrease in crime as they turned to religion and began attending a mosque attached to a gym (Townsend, 2020), which police and social services misinterpreted as a success of their tackling gangs and by 28th September 2013 appeared to have little concern for the family. However, by 15th October, Amer Deghayes had travelled to Syria, yet authorities had little knowledge of this and denied Amer from Channel when they did.

The Serious Case Review (SCR) for the Deghayes siblings is worthy of particular analysis here in identifying missed opportunities for safeguarding (Brighton & Hove Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2017). SCRs in themselves can be frustrating in that they consistently identify themes of poor communication between agencies or absences of the voice of the child across several decades, yet these same issues continually arise in recent years still (Morgans and Garstang, 2020). This is visible in historic SCRs such as that of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003), 'Baby P' (Sellgren, 2010), and various iterations of 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (GOV UK, 2023f). While these were raised as issues with the Deghayes case, of note in the SCR for the Deghayes siblings is 'Finding 12':

“Do practitioners in Brighton & Hove have sufficient curiosity, knowledge and skills to explore the role of culture, identity, gender, religion, beliefs and potential divided loyalties experienced by some children and families?” (Brighton & Hove Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2017: 63).

This is the only section of the report that also engages with concepts such as Salafism, albeit passingly as it gets just one mention (2017: 68). As Cowden and Picken (2019: 113) noted, practitioners seemed to fail to connect these beliefs when understanding risk, yet even the SCR focuses on identity, the need for belonging, and the role of trauma. Although it does encourage the development of knowledge, more emphasis could be placed on the implications of ideologies and claims to religion amidst a social and political context the Deghayes found themselves in. This is evident in the scaling back of professional involvement once the Deghayes siblings and their network took to attending a gym and a mosque, as professionals took this to mean they had turned to religion without scrutinising what this really meant, focusing on conventional metrics of petty crime and gang activity (Townsend, 2020). An alarming aspect is the review noting that professionals lacked knowledge of the siblings’ plans to travel (Brighton & Hove Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2017: 72) despite one sibling having already visited Syria under the guise of humanitarian aid and made other journeys to Libya (BBC, 2017b).

The synopsis outlined above and the serious case review (Brighton & Hove Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2017) leave no doubt about a litany of safeguarding failures and disjointed communication between police, social services, and counterterror agencies. Turning back to Prevent, the key argument I raise here is that not only was a turn to safeguarding a positive step for Prevent, but it’s failure to be adopted consistently and quickly across agencies led to omissions and

misinterpretations that did more to nurture the radicalisation of the Deghayes children than prevent it, with police downgrading risk due to a lack of offending and the social worker being forced to close their case against his will (Townsend, 2020), shutting down multi-agency working that is key to safeguarding. It is these kinds of issues that have also not helped the association of Islamophobia with Prevent given the role that racism and VJ played.

Making sense of the above is demanding. Even though social workers operate comfortably within safeguarding frameworks, applying this to radicalisation can require extensive research and access to knowledge which creates challenges for social work practitioners. At the outset social work peer-reviewed academic research may be lacking, while of note is that frontline practitioners, notably in social work, will lack the time and space for participation in research as either a consumer or contributor, with frontline demands such as workload and turnover being notoriously high (Kulakiewicz, Foster, Danechi, and Clark, 2022). This then raises a question of how practitioners may be approaching this area and making sense of it particularly since the introduction of the Prevent duty, to which I put forward the concept of 'practice wisdom' as an explanation.

2.11 Practice Wisdom

In Social Work academia we see a noticeable gap between theory and practice, leading some authors to argue for a better alignment of ontology, epistemology, and axiology within Social Work (Smith, McCulloch, and Daly, 2024). This may potentially be the case within Channel also, given the lack of primary research highlighted in previous sections which leads us to a question of how practitioners within Channel are

responding to concerns of radicalisation, how they come to understand it, and where they draw their knowledge from. These epistemological questions are of particular interest to this study, and whilst lacking primary research, some theories and concepts can be of relevance, particularly that of 'practice wisdom'. Practice wisdom is yet another 'messy' concept, as it has been described as difficult to articulate as a form of knowledge using objective scientific language and therefore is difficult to investigate (Barker, 1999). Being traced back to Boehm (1958), who also referred to it as "assumptive knowledge" (p. 11), but did not explicate further, so in this section I aim to achieve an understanding of practice wisdom and its potential contribution to this study.

In the varying definitions and labelling of practice wisdom throughout the 20th century we can look to Rein and White's (1981) statement of "science makes knowledge, practice uses it" (p. 36), suggesting a linear and direct relationship between theory and practice. This was heavily challenged as a positivist stance and a rich debate is evident in the later decades of the 20th century (Feinstein, 1967; Feyerabend, 1975; Newton-Smith, 1981), until authors such as Sheppard (1995) and Scott (1990) argued that a combination of understanding cognition, qualitative approaches, and clinical supervision better encapsulates practice wisdom (p. 564). In this sense it appears that Scott is conceptualising practice wisdom as experiential and collective or constructed knowledge, based on varying interpretations of the phenomena of interest. We can make sense of this in modern social work, defined by its multi-agency emphasis and the highlighting of failures in serious case reviews substantially linked to a lack of information-sharing (GOV UK, 2010) as an example of the role played by multi-agency approaches. This gives weight to an understanding of practice wisdom qualitatively as

something achieved experientially and involving some degree of constructionism (Burr, 1995).

More recent discussions of practice wisdom can lead us to fields such as psychology, with a concept of 'practical intelligence' described as "the ability to apply one's intelligence in practical, everyday situations...it is the aspect of intelligence that requires adaptation to, shaping of, and selection of new environments" (VandenBos, 2015: 817), or as "A form of intelligence that is characterised by the ability to deal effectively with real-world problems and difficulties as they arise. It does not necessarily correlate with more abstract forms of intelligence" (Hayes and Stratton, 2022: 282). The latter reference to abstract forms of intelligence is prescient as it denotes the controversial history regarding intelligence conceptually which I want to acknowledge (Tyson, 2011) but is not within the scope of the current study to fully address. Recent authors within social work have similar views, such as Tsang's (2008) concept of Kairos, meaning "the right action has to be taken in the right place, and at the right time" (p. 131), while Cheung (2016) emphasised that is not the same as 'common sense' (p. 619).

Returning the focus to the basis of the current study, I put forth the concept of practice wisdom as a means to conceptualise how practitioners, particularly social workers, may be operating and understanding their work within Channel and safeguarding against radicalisation. Social work has a rich history of applying practice wisdom, identifiable though often not named in key educational texts (Dix and Howells, 2022; Payne, 2021; Thompson, 2024), and it is this that social workers are likely applying when working within Channel. Practice wisdom gives social workers the ability to work in a way familiar to them (qualitatively and multi-agency) but in a field of safeguarding less familiar to most social workers (radicalisation). However, as argued above, these

elements equip social workers to have a valuable input into the work of Channel in the absence of rigorous primary research, a gap which this study aims to address. Key in addressing this is understanding how radicalisation has evolved since the first Prevent strategy to understand the recent context that social workers find themselves responding to, which I will turn to in the next section.

2.12 The Evolution of Radicalisation

A prior section has considered how radicalisation has evolved and been contested conceptually, but for the final section of this chapter, I aim to chart how radicalisation has evolved as a phenomenon, particularly since Prevent began publishing statistics from the Home Office. These have been published as far back as 2015, so my analysis will focus from 2015-2023 as this was the most recently published statistics at the time of writing. With the evolution of radicalisation, I will examine how what primarily began as a way of tackling violent jihadism has now given way to radicalisation that can be difficult to conceptualise, bringing with it epistemological challenges as Prevent faces violent jihadism and right-wing extremism amongst other singular ideologies but also mixed ideologies that can be difficult to ascribe a label to. This is where I will also explain the terminology selected for this study to describe certain aspects of radicalisation as these have also been the subject of debate. Finally, I will acknowledge the increasing role of online influences in radicalisation and the less predictable or coherent risks as a result before presenting the research questions shaping the study.

Previous sections explored and analysed the origins and theories of radicalisation in terms of taxonomical and epistemological debates (e.g., Wiktorowicz, 2005; Moghaddam, 2005; Silber and Bhatt, 2007; Sageman, 2011; Hafez and Mullins, 2015;

Dawson, 2017) alongside the sociopolitical context of the four waves of Prevent I have put forward, expanding upon Thomas (2020). However, a key facet of this study and the originality it draws upon is to understand the manifestations of radicalisation in terms of what Channel practitioners are encountering, particularly recently, an area of research lacking both in terms of independent academic scrutiny and the collection and analysis of primary data. Therefore, in this section I will expand upon this to examine the presentations of radicalisation in the post-9/11 period until the modern day with some mention of historical influences where relevant. This time period has been chosen to give the study a feasible scope, given that radicalisation can arguably be traced back centuries if not further (Moskalenko and McCauley, 2020: 22). With the focus of the current study being Prevent and Channel, which came into existence in 2003 and 2007 respectively, it is helpful to narrow the scope of the study by beginning with their published data to understand the different presentations of radicalisation emerging through the late 2010s until recent times, giving an understanding of what practitioners within Channel will have been trying to address and what they may encounter in future.

Seeking to use the published data of Prevent serves us with several immediate problems addressed throughout this study, namely accessibility and accuracy. Home Office (2017) have accessible data for Prevent available only as far back as 2015, in line with the Prevent duty of the same year. This means that the data is at best incomplete but not without value since it presents the strongest source to observe trends and anomalies across almost a ten-year span. For example, referrals may not have gender or age recorded, whilst a person can also be referred to Prevent several times in the same year, however the latter especially does not substantially alter the statistics and Home Office (2023a) state that this is typically captured. Using these

publications I have compiled the two tables below as a platform for this analysis (Home Office, 2018a; 2018b; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2023b).

Year	Total Referrals	Males (Not all referrals specify)	Age <20	Age 15-20	<14	Referred to Channel	Adopted by Channel
22-23	6817	6125	4322	2203	2119	1113	645
21-22	6406	5725	3731	1902	1829	1486	804
20-21	4915	4316	1398	1398	961	1333	688
19-20	6287	5154	3423	1864	1559	1424	697
18-19	5738	4991	3343	1549	1563	1320	561
17-18	7318	6356	4114	2135	2009	1314	394
16-17	6093	4971	3487	1817	1670	1146	332
15-16	7631	5925	4274	2147	2127	1072	381

Table 1: Published Prevent statistics showing some basic demographics and cases referred to and adopted by Channel.

Year	Vulnerability but no CT	RWE (ABC)	VJ (ABC)	MUU (ABC)	High CT Risk - No Ideology (ABC)	Vulnerability - No ideology (ABC)	Conflicted ideology (ABC)	Other (ABC)	School Massacre (ABC)	Incel (ABC)	Unspecified (ABC)
22-23	2505	1310 (296)	781 (115)		5 (0)	2505 (69)	1214 (103)	112 (23)	159 (18)	69 (3)	8 (1)
21-22	2127	1309 (339)	1027 (156)		5 (1)	2127 (101)	1020 (120)	100 (18)	154 (38)	77 (23)	0
20-21		1229 (317)	1064 (154)	2522 (205)				100 (12)			
19-20		1387 (302)	1487 (210)	3203 (697)				210 (58)			

18-19		1389 (254)	1404 (210)	2169 (19)				776 (78)			
17-18		1312 (174)	3197 (179)	1982 (12)				827 (29)			
16-17		968 (124)	3704 (184)					725 (24)			696
15-16		759 (99)	4997 (264)					702 (18)			1173

Table 2: Prevent statistics focused specifically on ideologies. ABC = Adopted by Channel.

While the most notable aberration would be the year 2020-21, this is explained when considering education providers as being regularly responsible for the highest proportion of referrals and 2020 being the year most education took place at home during lockdowns amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Home Office, 2023a). Therefore, younger people who comprise the majority of referrals were not being seen and as readily identified and therefore referred to Prevent. What is more relevant for the current section is the consistency of the ages and gender of those referred, and the seemingly inverse relationship between referrals concerned with violent jihadism (VJ) and those with right-wing extremism (RWE).

Before progressing, it is also important to address terminology particularly where I depart from the nomenclature of Prevent and explain the rationale for this. Firstly, VJ (violent jihadism) has been purposefully selected to represent a form of radicalisation which has any links, tenuous or central, to a distorted form of Islam. Writings such as those of Sayyid Qutb have provided a platform for this (Qutb, 2002) and there is debate as to the role of Qutb in Osama Bin Laden's 9/11 attacks (Calvert, 2018). However, I wish to make it imperative from the outset that VJ does not represent Islam any more than the likes of the Klu Klux Klan represent Christianity (Brown, 2018; Khan, 2021). As Cowden (2016) states, this avoids "a binary of representation" where "you are either for or against 'Islamophobia'". This is the rationale for a term that does not incorporate 'Islam' anywhere in its title as I find this furthers stigmatisation of Islam and Muslims in general, a common critique of Prevent and Channel that I discussed in a previous section (Bloom, 2023: 115). While I am not an Islamic scholar, I argue there is ample accessible knowledge of Islam that allows for the time-pressured social worker or similar professional to distinguish between Islam as a religious ideology and radicalisation leading to terrorist acts allegedly committed in the name of Islam.

The concept of 'jihad' has featured prominently in discussions of these extremist distortions of Islam, hence its application here, attempting to alleviate the stigma of Islam being associated with terrorism (Kundnani, 2015). 'Jihad' does not appear to be a consistently defined term, with definitions ranging from a 'struggle' to live out life as a good Muslim, to 'holy war' to "defend Islam, with force if necessary" (BBC, 2009). Bonner (2006) sets out a premise for a more thorough analysis:

"At one end of this spectrum, anti-Islamic polemicists use jihad as proof of Islam's innate violence and its incompatibility with civilized norms. At the other end of the spectrum, some writers insist that jihad has little or nothing to do with externally directed violence. Instead, they declare jihad to be a defensive principle, or else to be utterly pacific, inward-directed, and the basis of the true meaning of Islam which, they say, is peace." (p. 1)

It is with the above in mind that I accept the prefix of 'violent' when discussing this form of radicalisation that aspires to violent ends, with the aim of further demarcating Islam from radicalisation. While this may resemble terms such as 'Salafi-Jihadism', Cowden (2022) notes that most Salafists are non-violent and therefore allows a religious rather than terrorist undertone. Henceforth, references to this will be violent jihadism (VJ) unless quoting directly from another source.

Explicating Right Wing Extremism (RWE) may be more challenging than VJ. There have been many terms used to describe this aspect of radicalisation, from far-right, extreme right, right wing extremism, alt-right, and several others. For the sake of this research, a universal label will be chosen, that of Right Wing Extremism (RWE), with the rationale being that while we can argue for demarcations, the overlap and ambiguity within this form of radicalisation would make the time spent less productively

at a time when Prevent referrals show a predominantly mixed ideology as the most common type of radicalisation concern (GOV UK, 2023c).

Given the variety of terminology, defining what RWE is can be a challenge, so I will specify it to include the following but not be limited to: aspirations for white supremacy and a hatred of the establishment, democracy, and women (Cowden, 2022). Antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and a belief in a conspiracy theory of 'White Replacement' is also commonly found (Bhatt, 2020), with the latter discussed in a later section dedicated to conspiracy theories. There is a notable overlap with other terms such as populism and fascism (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Passmore, 2014), however these terms appear less helpful given their conceptual debates and pejorative use in the media (Garcia, 2017; Marantz, 2024). It is important at this juncture to also highlight the potential confluence of right-wing views with RWE and the need to distinguish between them. In this case I refer to the discussion on VJ where it is emphasised that the focal point here is the risk of progressing to or supporting of terrorism. This I believe helps us refocus our efforts away from, for example, a person who has a stance of anti-immigration versus a person who seeks to harm asylum-seekers and may progress to doing so without intervention.

Much like VJ, there is a lengthy history that can be drawn upon to connect to modern RWE that will not fit within the scope of this study. Also, like VJ, there are a number of seminal texts where analysis can begin to understand their influence on modern radicalisation of an RWE nature. Perhaps the most famous of these is *The Turner Diaries* and its lesser-known sequel, *Hunter* (Macdonald, 1978; 1989). *The Turner Diaries* in particular depicts the USA in a future where the Jewish have orchestrated a ban on guns and white people are being suppressed by blacks, having their homes raided in search of guns (1978: 2). Overall, the text depicts everything mentioned

above when describing RWE, charting the radicalisation of the protagonist and concludes with a suicide terror attack (1978: 205), something closer to future VJ terror attacks than the author likely intended.

Drawing the discussion to Prevent and Channel, we can now analyse the dovetail in VJ and RWE statistics. It would be tempting to conclude that RWE threats must be increasing whilst VJ threats are diminishing, supported by widespread news of ISIS losing almost all held territory in Syria by 2019 (BBC, 2019). As seen in previous sections, this was strongly challenged by the Independent Review of Prevent (Shawcross, 2023). Shawcross argued that recognising RWE radicalisation had broadened whilst VJ had narrowed, referring to it as a “double standard” (p. 7), yet I would argue even this does not reach far enough to capture how nuanced radicalisation and reporting of it has evolved since 2001. Europol (2020) highlights a fluctuation of RWE concerns across Europe since 2010, Berger (2016b) has evidenced the increased prevalence of RWE on Twitter since 2012, albeit from a US context, while some Channel practitioners have discussed managing RWE cases before 2011 (McCann, 2019: 39). Notably we have seen the Prevent duty in 2015 and the first proscribed RWE group in 2016 (GOV UK, 2019), also the same year Jo Cox MP was murdered by the RWE terrorist Thomas Mair during the EU referendum campaign (BBC, 2016). In addition to this high-profile cases have been identified where issues of gender and neurodivergence are noted (Warrell, 2024; Robinson, 2025). Such high-profile events make it logical for increased RWE referrals given the raised awareness, much like the high profiles of 9/11 and 7/7 led to the creation of Prevent and accusations equivalent to Shawcross “double standard” comment which are haunting Prevent to this day as I discussed in the previous section. In essence,

tangling with this ethical dilemma I argue may have distracted from the evolution of radicalisation in more recent years which I will detail below.

While there is much to discuss regarding the RWE-VJ nexus evident in Prevent statistics and wider debates (Perliger, 2012; Koehler, 2016; Maher, 2016; Parkinson, 2020), I would argue the ‘fringes’ of the statistics tell us more about how radicalisation as evolved in recent years, as portrayed by the second table above. What is immediately observable from the table above is that around half the cells are lacking data. This is due to how Prevent approaches taxonomy and categorisation of data. Categories such as ‘MUU’ were brought into use but later abandoned, with it being noticeable in the data that MUU had been accounting for an unwieldy array of ideologies, vulnerabilities, and risks. Added to this are issues in accuracy of recordings, for example an initial referral for RWE concerns may be identified as ‘Conflicted’ by Channel but statistics may not reflect as such. Despite this evolution in how statistics are gathered, categories are arguably still broad, and more information could be needed on what specifically are the presenting issues at Channel panels. For example, vulnerabilities present without a counterterror risk could be grouping together any number of vulnerabilities from learning needs to exploitation or coercion. Again, it is worth noting less than ten years of statistics are available publicly, however this allows for a manageable amount of data without the need for complex or expensive statistical packages for analysis. So, while there is high value in analysing the Prevent statistics, it is important to bear in mind its limitations also.

My attention is drawn to the most recent years between 2021 and 2023, where for the first time Prevent has created separate categories for ‘incel’ and ‘school massacre’ ideologies. Much has been written about these ideologies as they appear to be primarily influenced by famous cases in American and Canadian counterterrorism. The

term 'incel' refers to 'involuntarily celibate', with origins that had nothing to do with radicalisation and resembled more of a support group for those having difficulty achieving an intimate partner and the issues associated with this (National Capital FreeNet, 1997). However, this term gradually became coopted as part of the 'manosphere', a term given to a loosely connected network and ideology of male empowerment that often intercedes with violent misogyny and anti-feminism (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

The most pivotal example of this would be Elliot Rodger in 2014, who killed six and wounded thirteen people in a shooting spree in Isla Vista, California (Zimmer, 2018). Rodger would then be heralded by the online community as type of idol, 'the supreme gentleman', and be linked to further violent misogyny and murders such as Alek Minassian in Canada in 2018 (Miller, 2023). In the context of Prevent, it would appear to be the actions of Jake Davison that proved pivotal, who killed six individuals in and near his home in Plymouth in 2021, including his mother, a random six-year-old girl, and himself (Sparks, Zidenberg, and Olver, 2022). It could be argued as no coincidence that the following year's Prevent statistics specified a category of 'incel' for the first time and had the highest proportion of referrals being offered Channel support (23 out of 77), albeit this is a small number in relation to the 804 cases adopted by Channel overall (Home Office, 2023a). This has drawn criticism, as Pearson states "misogyny has always been there; for academia and policy to recognise this only when incels emerge shows complacency and cynicism" (Pearson, 2024: 66). Given the seven years between Rodger and Davison's attacks and the increasing attention around incelism (Donnelly, Burgess, Anderson, Davis, and Dillard, 2001; Nagle, 2015; Tait, 2018; Taylor, 2018; Meiering, Dziri, and Foroutan, 2020), it gives the impression that Prevent has lagged behind understanding the risk posed by incel radicalisation.

There is room for an argument that referrals for these concerns would previously have been included in other categories such as MUU, however this still indicates risk has been underestimated given the high proportion of incel Channel cases adopted by March 2022, which in turn may be argued as a reactive approach given 2023 statistics show only 3 out of 69 referrals were offered Channel support compared to 23 out of 77 for 2022.

As indicated above, incel radicalisation is particularly concerning within the wider context of gender and its role in radicalisation. In the Prevent milieu we can see most referrals where gender is recorded are male. While this has attracted much attention from academics particularly in understanding incels (Furl, 2022; Zimmerman, 2022; Vink, Abbas, Veilleux-Lepage, and McNeil-Willson, 2023), other research has highlighted the heavy emphasis on women and violent jihadism (Cook, Herschinger, de Leede, and Andreeva, 2024) and prominence of biases and assumptions such as seeing women's roles as victims or passive alongside a consistent lack of primary data (Jacques and Taylor, 2009; Andreeva et al., 2024). Similar to Pearson (2024), these authors challenge the focus on equating gender with women and that we need more nuance to appreciate the complexity of gender in radicalisation. I would add to this by returning to the rich literature of 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland (BBC; 2013; Burack, 2024; Campbell, 2016) and by highlighting the similar gender imbalance found in areas such as domestic abuse (Adshead, 2024) and suicide (Schumacher, 2019). This highlights gaps in our understanding of gender and while this study's central focus is not gender, it will be able to make a contribution to this gap in knowledge.

As we approach the modern day it cannot be ignored the transformative role that the internet has played in the evolution of radicalisation. Huseyov (2024) goes into detail on this, particularly regarding ISIS, who were well-known for targeting younger people

with online content which proved effective. As, Whittaker (2022) describes, “this concern is relatively straightforward: online extremist content (both propaganda and peer-to-peer communications) can persuade vulnerable audiences to share terrorists’ worldviews and potentially engage in violent activities” (p. 6). Prensky (2001) used the term ‘Digital Natives’ to describe younger generations who have had access to forms of media since birth such as television, radio, and especially the internet, compared to the practitioners and educators who have had to adapt as ‘Digital Immigrants’. The internet aspect of Digital Natives appears to be highly significant given the increasing research and awareness available regarding radicalisation online via avenues such as social media, gaming, and conspiracy theory websites (Winter et al., 2020; Whittaker, 2022; Schlegel and Kowert, 2024; Cottee, 2022; Littler and Lee, 2020) as well as the increased online activity during the COVID-19 pandemic that saw issues such as anti-vaxxer and conspiracy theories becoming enmeshed within RWE concerns (Cowden and Yuval-Davis, 2022; Spring and Wendling, 2020; Butter, 2020; Camus, 2018). Indeed, the risk posed by the internet is not unheard of or even new in terms of radicalisation, as Weimann (2004) stated that a “scan of the Internet in 2003–4 revealed hundreds of websites serving terrorists and their supporters”. The effect of the internet, particularly social media and children, has attracted the attention of governments and the media (Booth, 2024; Ofcom, 2024), however safeguards implemented have faced criticism (Landi, 2025; Steinberg, 2025) in an area that some authors have referred to as the ‘jungle of the unregulated’ (Appazov, 2017) or simply ‘the law of the jungle’ (Molnar, 2021). What this means for safeguarding against radicalisation is that the internet is going to be something practitioners are likely to find themselves at a disadvantage with given the omnipresence of the internet since birth

for many young people and the potential for ‘self-initiated radicalisation’ (Sandford, Davies, and Khalil, 2024).

This leaves us with a complex picture in terms of how radicalisation has evolved which would go beyond the scope of the current study to fully explicate. While physical demonstrations and in-person meetings still take place, we appear to be seeing an evolution towards online sources of radicalisation that are not as tangible or as linear in terms of ideology, leading us to what McCann (2019) referred to as “supermarket extremism”. While it has been long recognised that there is not a single profile of a terrorist or a single pathway to being radicalised, this appears more pertinent at present. There does not exist enough primary research to indicate what practitioners, specifically within Prevent, are being presented with and how they are able to respond. Given the complex evolution of radicalisation outlined here, it will also be pertinent to understand how practitioners are conceptualising the forms of radicalisation they are presented with, particularly as I approach this from a social work base where practitioners are more likely to be unfamiliar with Prevent and radicalisation, therefore lacking the specialist knowledge privileged to those who work more directly with or research the work of Prevent and Channel.

In weaving the previous sections together, this study is notably weaving together tense and divisive topics. Prevent itself has had what social workers might call a ‘challenging upbringing’, having to respond quickly to terrorism crises, evolve through four waves in the space of 20 years, and be managed by an ever-increasing turnover of government ministers and Prime Ministers in this period. Reactionary politics only serves to further stir division such as seen with Shamima Begum’s case. Careful analysis is needed to base decisions on reliable evidence, with accountability and balanced analysis necessary to navigate the divisive history of Prevent. There needs

to be analysis of Prevent and Channel's work that is not joined at the hip with Home Office and the UK Government.

The concepts of radicalisation and safeguarding are also experiencing their own conceptual challenges such as debates around structure vs agency and being vulnerable vs susceptible to radicalisation. These epistemological debates have the potential to persist for decades, while the literature explored here shows that a safeguarding approach not only can work but is necessary given the convergence of many issues involved with radicalisation, from mental health to exploitation and the internet. None of these factors are sufficient in isolation to explain radicalisation yet are continually found throughout the literature such as the radicalisation journeys of Aqsa Mahmood, Elliot Rodger, or Shamima Begum as discussed above.

Add to the above that social work and many other agencies have been entering the field comparatively recently and arguably not entirely willingly. While professionals may find themselves uncomfortable or unfamiliar with this new territory, I find it hard to disagree that no less than a multi-agency approach is critical in safeguarding against radicalisation, and that as professionals it is indeed safeguarding that we are practicing. Safeguarding is more than protection or intervention. Safeguarding is understanding the context in which a person exists. In a prior section it has been shown that such safeguarding and context would have been critical for cases such as the Deghayes family where the context and the nature of their environment are key to understanding how radicalisation happened and where safeguarding went wrong. If there is no single pathway or profile to terrorism then the same logic applies in understanding the evolution of radicalisation, bringing a further challenge for researchers and practitioners to keep up to date with an evolving phenomenon that is both new and unpredictable in how it develops.

The above helps situate the current study and what it aims to achieve. There is an identifiable gap in published research around Prevent and Channel, particularly that of frontline practitioners' experiences in understanding and responding to what is currently presenting at Channel. Given the competing and often conflicting ways of comprehending radicalisation at an epistemological level, there is also a need to understand how Channel practitioners are able to define and respond to referrals accepted into Channel. Finally, a gap persisting is knowledge on how Channel specifically intervenes with the cases presented and to what extent safeguarding interventions in particular are effective. The application of primary research gives the study notable originality and navigating the topics and arenas outlined above contribute to this originality through a critical and academic scrutiny from a social work perspective. This research brings together conceptual analysis and empirical research in an area fraught with tension and division, creating the possibility for further tension and division regarding the findings which will be considered throughout the study.

2.13 Research Questions

Having considered extensively the literature regarding safeguarding against radicalisation, notable gaps have been highlighted throughout the literature reviewed. From the need for balanced critique to the conceptual level to a lack of primary data at the empirical level, there is much that this study offers in terms of originality. More specifically, this study will focus its original contribution on examining the following three research questions:

- 1) What are the presenting issues that Channel Panels are dealing with?
- 2) How does Channel conceptualise the forms of radicalisation they are dealing with?
- 3) Are the safeguarding interventions which Channel devise working effectively?

Chapter 3) Method

This section sets out the methodology, methods, and research design. There is a key emphasis on data collection, participant recruitment, and the challenges encountered. The eligibility criteria for participants are included, followed by ethical considerations and the context for the study. Ontological and epistemological considerations are explored and as a piece of social work research, positionality and reflexivity are discussed to acknowledge my background and motivations in undertaking the research. Finally, the use of a theoretically inflective thematic analysis guided by Thomas (2006) and Braun and Clarke (2022) has been applied as the method of data analysis for this study.

3.1 Study Design and Originality

An inductive qualitative design was selected for the current research. The research questions focus on an interest in what issues are presented, how they are conceptualised, and how effective safeguarding approaches are. The study seeks to explore this by analysing the experiences of practitioners within the Channel panels. These were questions best explored with a qualitative approach which can appreciate the nuances of seeking answers to research areas such as radicalisation and safeguarding rather than quantitative concepts such as generalizability or between-group differences. Currently there exists quantitative research within radicalisation generally in the UK due to Prevent publishing statistics such as annual referrals (GOV UK, 2023), meaning there is a greater need for a qualitative understanding that this research aims to provide. The research adopts an interpretivist paradigm and uses an

inductive approach which contributes to new qualitative experiential knowledge in under-researched areas of Channel and safeguarding against radicalisation.

3.2 Data Collection

The research adopted semi-structured interviews to gather data. Conducting research interviews is the most common tool used in qualitative data collection (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). Conducting a research interview is not a simplistic matter of asking questions to receive answers. Care is required to deal with issues such as bias, language, and ethical issues (Memon and Bull, 1999) which are reflected on in the context of the research.

At its core and regardless of type or context, an interview is designed as a professional conversation where a participant shares their experiences and perspectives on a topic devised by a researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This benefits this research as I am interested in learning from practitioners what they are experiencing in relation to the research questions of the project. Whilst research interviews are typically pre-defined with a set of questions or prompts, I found that adapting and rephrasing these as interviews progressed was quite useful. This is not unusual practice, given that the purpose of qualitative research is to embrace the fluidity not afforded to standardization and uniformity found in quantitative approaches. As social workers we pride ourselves in tailoring our work to meet the needs of the individual and in this case, I was tailoring the work to remove barriers in eliciting rich and meaningful data.

3.3 Participant Criteria and Recruitment

Target participants for the study were practitioners involved with Channel. As a multi-agency process it sees collaboration between relevant services within a Local Authority. Such practitioners include social workers, police, probation, health, youth workers, as well as other related professionals as required by the specific circumstances of each case. Whilst there are practitioners such as a Channel coordinator who will be standing members of each panel (GOV UK, 2020), some practitioners may attend for a brief period such as a social worker with a young person on their caseload who has had concerns of radicalisation identified. This study included a range of practitioners to allow for a breadth of experience relevant to the study. For example, a Channel coordinator's insight is likely to differ from a social worker who has attended only a few panels and observed how this affected their own relationship with the individual, as well as potentially observing longer term outcomes for the individual. A further reason for this inclusion was the expected difficulties in recruitment, which is explained further below.

In terms of recruiting participants, a variety of mediums and routes were explored. An initial approach involved a 'snowball' method, wherein participants and occasions signposted me to further relevant participants such as colleagues and acquaintances (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). What this looked like in execution was that generally a Local Authority appoints a Prevent lead worker and a Channel chair. Such workers are ideal participants, with the addition that the Prevent lead were also aware of relevant workers in their geographic area who are regularly involved in Channel panels such as police or social workers. Barriers existed such as developing rapport at a time when statutory workers are likely receiving more emails than ever due to remote working, so reaching participants was understandably not anticipated to be straightforward.

Therefore, strategies were employed that included searching through LinkedIn, a website which could be described as a professional social media, where professionals create profiles detailing their qualifications, roles, and experiences. This afforded the use of search terms such as “Prevent lead”, “Safeguarding lead”, and “Channel chair”. Upon identifying a potential participant an introductory message was sent with a letter of ethical approval granted by the university and a letter of information about the study attached. These messages were kept brief and accessible to avoid overwhelming the recipient or being perceived as a seller or advertiser of a product or service. The introductory message gauged interest in the study and suggested an introductory video call on Microsoft Teams to explain further and assure the participant of eligibility, anonymity, and confidentiality.

In addition to this, a list of Local Authorities across England and Wales was compiled to target a representative sample across rural and urban areas of England and Wales. Websites for each Authority were identified and these websites were explored until an email address was found related to either safeguarding, social care, or general enquiries. Similar to the approach with LinkedIn, a generic email was sent requesting to be signposted to a local Prevent lead or Channel member. The emails and LinkedIn messages were not standardised to prevent being perceived as spam or impersonal, as well as attempting different strategies to see what worked, such as shorter messages and less formal language.

3.4 Recruitment Challenges

Myers and Newman (2007) note the possibility of difficulty in accessing participants, which had been envisioned for the current research, with professionals expected to be

understandably guarded about information relating to radicalisation. The police especially have faced much scrutiny and attention in the media in recent years with their being accused of having a culture of misogyny, racism, and homophobia (Wright, 2022). Whilst this refers largely to the London Metropolitan Police, national coverage can impact a national reputation, as seen in the response social workers nationally face since the death of Baby P (Jones, 2014). Add to this the concept of national security and it is understandable that practitioners experience reluctance to speak to researchers around radicalization. This may differ between practitioners and roles, however, with there being a recognition of the role practitioners such as social workers having valuable input for research but lacking the capacity or resources to participate (McLaughlin, 2012). Furthermore, social workers specifically may have been more motivated to participate through identifying with me as a social worker, or other practitioners having a positive perception, trusting relationship, and passion for research.

Recruitment became even more challenging than expected, as a persistent barrier to recruitment was the hesitation of professionals, particularly those with close links to Home Office. Many requests sent via email would not receive a response or would be met with gatekeeping, with several professionals stating off-the-record that Home Office actively discouraged participation in research. A regular experience was a participant showing interest or provisional agreement to participate but then being directed by management or Home Office not to participate, sometimes without an explanation (see Appendix D for written responses). Some of this is understandable given the danger to the security of a person's role in taking part in research without authorisation from line management or Home Office, however the authorisation process remained a mystery throughout recruitment, with my emails being forwarded

and then not being responded to. In turn, some of this will be understandable in terms of not receiving responses at all given the workload of professionals whereby time to participate in research may be an unrealistic luxury, yet it could be argued this is more reason to participate and have their voices heard. The impact of this could be that those taking part in the study could have been much more motivated to do so. This can be both positive and negative for the research, as participants can be motivated by recognising the importance of research and bringing valuable experiences, whilst also there being a possibility of political motivations, although again it can be argued as valuable data. While I had the privilege of professional networks, social work registration, and borough councillor status to convey trust, severe challenges in recruitment remained.

The response from one participant who later withdrew from the study is of note (see appendices), as they pointed towards Channel guidance published in October 2023 (HM Government, 2023a). Within this there are two sections relevant for the current research:

“187. Channel chairs and panel members do not participate in external research linked to their Prevent role, except in exceptional circumstances. This applies to Prevent policy staff, IPs, Prevent co-ordinators and Home Office staff. In some cases, the Home Office may offer to provide written input to a research project instead of participating in interviews or other data collection methods. These written submissions will be co-ordinated by the Home Office and will be provided on the understanding that the content is likely to be published in any research output.”

“188. Exceptional circumstances are defined as those where the research would fill a priority evidence gap for the Home Office, where the research design is robust and

high quality, and where the research team has a track record of producing high-quality, published research. All new research requests must be considered by the Home Office” (P. 56).

The above two sections describe what the guidance has to say on participation in research. Published in October 2023, it coincided with a notable drop in participation and increased cancelations and withdrawals. This is further evidence of a government directly creating a barrier to research. Although Home Office offers to “provide written input” or assess research for “a priority research gap”, neither of these were experienced in my communications with them. Given the paucity of available research on Channel, this is alarming at worst and suspiciously opaque at best. There was not an offer for any possible collaboration nor a demonstrable assessment of the research or my competence as a researcher despite participating in the highest level of qualification available in UK higher education in addition to already being qualified up to level seven in Social Work, Counselling, and Forensic Psychology. Paragraph 188 states that “a track record of producing high-quality, published research” would be desirable. My most recent level seven publications across Forensic Psychology and Social Work were awarded first-class status whilst all supervisors throughout my time in academia have a longer track record of high-quality research across many disciplines, meaning Home Office could not have assessed me appropriately or had simply dismissed me outright, both of which risk hindering rather than helping when safeguarding against radicalisation. Of note in the appendices are the numerous occasions where I was wished well in my research in the same instance as being denied cooperation, creating a confusing rationale and logic.

This closing down of research avenues entirely creates a concerning precedent and arguably feeds into an unhealthy atmosphere of fear, as participants were clearly

concerned about implications of their participation. Government hypervigilance is evidently leading to a paucity of direct research which is likely to carry a paradoxical detriment to Home Office since shutting down research is counterintuitive in preventing radicalisation. More research and evidence are needed when evolutions and shifts in radicalisation can be seen, yet in personal communications, an elected politician described Home Office as having “raised the drawbridge” whilst a frontline professional stated “it’s hard to get Home Office to engage on anything” when discussing the current research privately with me. In earlier sections it is noticeable that anti-Prevent stances have the highest visibility in the social science discussions, yet making my stance clear during recruitment still faced barriers. It is difficult not to consider the reality that there are some resistances to accountability in the counterterrorism spheres.

Hypervigilance and concerns about security are not without basis in high-profile areas such as immigration and counterterrorism. For example, journalists may pose as academics or other interested parties, as seen with journalists infiltrating discussions on the UK Rwanda immigration policies (Bychawski, 2024). In addition to this, discussed earlier are notable ‘anti-Prevent’ voices who have involved Prevent practitioners in research historically (Kundnani, 2009: 9), with a positionality unlikely to concede positive aspects of Prevent. This makes it less surprising that Home Office have become increasingly suspicious of researchers not under their employment, despite it causing issues such as a lack of transparency.

There is a persuasive argument on the transparency brought about by transgressions of governments, creating a need for investigative journalism where they may be covering up failures or corruption. This was highlighted in early 2024 when an immigration chief argued his contract was terminated due to his raising the alarm over

security issues (Hughes, 2024) and in April 2024 it emerged that 60 staff were dismissed across a two-year period for issues which include bullying and harassment (Taylor, 2024). This is highly congruent with my experiences of recruitment and the fear expressed by participants over concerns for their roles and the attitudes perceived from Home Office. Such a high-profile termination would surely serve as an example to other staff alongside the secrecy of 60 dismissals going unpublished until a Freedom of Information request. This increases the imperative for safeguarding the anonymity of my participants given the demonstrated risk taken by participating in this research (Bancroft, 2024), a risk that could extend to me as a researcher in my future trajectory should this research attract negative attention.

The current research is original by focusing on Channel, an area which is lacking in research, yet Home Office's lack of response would suggest they do not see it as a "priority evidence gap". Prominent politicians such as Cabinet Ministers were reached out to in order to establish trust, however the outcome of this was to be signposted back to Home Office (see appendices) despite their non-engagement being why I approached senior politicians in the CJS in the first place. This is an issue that will require some navigating in future for the benefit of those vulnerable to radicalisation. Whilst transparency in such an area can never be completely possible, issues such as Home Office advising before obligating staff not to engage in research are concerning and counterintuitive. Whilst trust and ethics are vital when researching this area, it would benefit both government and society if a channel was available to make research such as this more feasible. In short, for trust and robust research to be established, there needs to be an opportunity to do so.

Of note is that most data was collected between August and November 2023, at which point it was decided to cease active recruitment due to the issues discussed above.

Two further participants were interviewed in 2024, late in the study but included due to the valuable data provided, demonstrating practical and methodological challenges of this area of research. Although a snowballing recruitment technique is common in research (Silverman, 2022), this became a hazardous method and was abandoned early in recruitment, as several participants would participate or express interest only for a colleague or manager to give them cause for concern, leading to withdrawal from the study. This occurred despite the reassurances and professionalism shown to participants as an experienced researcher and registered social worker. Each participant was offered a virtual meeting to informally discuss the research beforehand and this was always successful, establishing trust between the participant and me as a researcher. It was mostly a colleague of theirs who had not met that would discourage participation, meaning once again that a thorough assessment had likely not been undertaken.

Pearson (2024) raises a valuable and potentially alarming insight from her research. Similar to me, she noted that “People working in countering extremism projects, who I initially thought might help me as gatekeepers, didn’t or couldn’t. So, instead, I met key respected leadership figures within movements in an attempt to access their circles and gain a sort of legitimacy” (2024: 76). While we are fortunate to have the valuable analyses of works such as this, it further demonstrates my arguments elsewhere in this thesis. Unsurprisingly, what then follows is researchers turning to avenues which can be of risk to them as there are scant alternatives for data collection. For example, Pearson describes encounters at RWE protests:

“men grabbed and hugged me, or otherwise touched me in familiar ways—for instance, putting their hat on my head or pulling me towards them by the belt loop of my jeans. They did this without seeking permission and without warning. I am not

unassertive; however, I needed interviews and did not want to ‘make a fuss’, even if at times I felt both ambushed and compromised, particularly given the ubiquity of cameras at demonstrations and my own negative feelings about such intrusions.” (Pearson, 2024: 81)

One could argue for the agency of researchers in taking risks, yet I would argue that as Pearson discloses herself to be a white middle-class female, it is imperative and understandable to have a passion in understanding and preventing extremism that contains violent misogyny and denigrates the human rights of women globally when unsatisfactory progress appears to be happening at a global scale, leaving women to use what little power and privilege they have to make a difference. I would argue further that it is concerning that such researchers are being shut out of making positive contributions in these areas.

Many researchers and journalists have attempted to circumvent this by obtaining data from online forums, particularly those inclined towards inceldom (Bates, 2021; Lavin, 2020). While online platforms and chatrooms can provide some valuable data and analysis, the proliferation of researchers in this area now leaves me questioning not only the saturation of such data but also methodological concerns. Many of these internet communities have been infiltrated with journalists and researchers, many of whom tend to be female (Osuna, 2023; O’Malley and Helm, 2023), creating a question of authenticity where researchers may be capturing the views of other researchers posing as incels. Furthermore, those using incel forums are likely aware of the presence of journalists and researchers, which can carry implications of an aversion to the forums, social desirability, or being increasingly inflammatory as a response (Sparks, Zidenberg and Oliver, 2022). A method gaining popularity in this area is netnography, used by student and career researchers (Maaranen, 2022), which can

help address the methodological issues I have raised. While such issues may seem unlikely, it is notable that a participant in my research noted their surprise that they observed quite hateful and vitriolic comments online but when they met the individual concerned, they found him to be meek and vulnerable, meaning that we can appreciate the insights gained from researching online forums, but these serve to evidence the need for original practice-based evidence which I have sought for this study.

The recruitment period was a time of substantial turbulence for the current government with the Conservative conference of that year bringing unfavourable media attention to then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (Maddox, 2023) and then Home Secretary Suella Braverman (Cecil, 2023) and her eventual dismissal. What this meant for the current study is that Home Office leadership, particularly the Home Secretary, may have been hypervigilant towards further unfavourable press at a period where a General Election proved to be a matter of months away, although one may argue that a sense of political turbulence and crisis has become normalised in recent years. This lack of engagement was despite my assurances of the research integrity and support of safeguarding against radicalisation, yet this did not prove effective at a time of political instability.

A lot of space has been given to discussing issues in recruitment because I want to emphasise the significance and implication of this as I do not think it can be overstated. Recruitment was never expected to be easy or lucrative, but what I have put forward above about the fear experienced by participants and the attitude of Home Office is worrisome. As an outsider I can only imagine the atmosphere and working conditions experienced by practitioners working closely with the government which sounds like dealing with constant uncertainty and a revolving door of ministers making high-level decisions in areas they have little experience in. The barriers created to distance

independent research are the same barriers limiting progress in preventing radicalisation. My commitment to safeguarding the anonymity and trust placed in me by my participants I hope demonstrates my commitment to improving our overall efforts to prevent radicalization through this rare opportunity to collect and analyse primary data.

3.5 Participants

Sixteen participants were recruited from Local Authorities across England and Wales. Scotland and Northern Ireland were excluded due to alternatives to Channel being in operation there, with Northern Ireland in particular having a more complex and opaquer context of counter-radicalisation specifically around paramilitaries that has rarely arisen in England or Wales since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. In total, sixteen participants were recruited for the study, nine of which stated they were female and the remaining seven male. Seven participants were registered social workers, with some having specialist roles such as AMHP (Approved Mental Health Practitioner) and EDT (Emergency Duty Team). Five participants were Channel Panel Chairs, two Counterterror Officers, one Designated Safeguarding Lead, and one Wellbeing Officer, the latter two roles being within higher education. In total, 661 minutes of data was gathered, averaging to 41 minutes interview length per participant. Transcribed, this became 317 pages of data, averaging at approximately 20 pages per participant. All but one participant had attended at least one Channel panel, with their data being included due to the congruence with other participants and the extensive experience of multi-agency working with CT officers attending Channel panels, bringing added value to understanding what interventions the education sector applies since the

largest cohort of Prevent referrals are from education (GOV UK, 2023d). Due to the above discussion around challenges of recruitment, extensive safeguarding measures were implemented to preserve the anonymity of participants and uphold the integrity and professionalism of my status as a researcher. This means careful consideration was applied in safeguarding identifying information. This can prove particularly challenging as specialist work such as Channel means locations and roles may be limited to one or a small number of Local Authorities. For example, although most Channel panels will be comprised of police, health, social care and education, some panels can have unique attendees and practitioners such as Intervention Providers (IPs) are often unique to the Local Authority. Given the scope of the study being England and Wales, this also meant careful consideration was given to language such as local slang, since despite all participants being English speakers, dialects and colloquialisms vary regionally. Therefore, quotes and references throughout will have been redacted or anonymised accordingly. Whilst this is common in research (Silverman, 2021), I carry extensive vigilance for participants in my research and the above discussion gives me great concerns for the implications for participants should they be identified, meaning extensive measures to prevent this can be justified. Given the issues outlined above, participants engaged in this research at a risk to their roles and reputation, in turn placing great trust in me and I would like to uphold this trust as mutual.

3.6 Context of the Study

This thesis is the result of a three-year studentship. During this time there have been developments and changes in the field of radicalisation and counterterrorism. I have

strived to engage with ongoing and emerging debates around radicalisation, however the data collected will not give me the scope to address every emerging facet of radicalisation discourses. All data was collected in 2023 and 2024. As indicated above, 2023 was also the year that saw the publication of an independent review that was originally due in 2019, alongside new Prevent Duty guidance for practitioners, the latter of which caused specific issues for me that are detailed above. This meant that only during my final interviews had the October 7th Hamas attack taken place in Israel and therefore incidents such as this and beyond 2023 will not be referred to in the dataset. The originality of this study is key, and the analysis will bring understanding and insights useful for future research and practice whilst maintaining a feasible and cohesive study.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Given the highly politicised nature of the topic researched, critical reflection is crucial in the context of interviewing. The researcher and the participant are not passive automatons objectively requesting and disseminating information, with it noted that by adopting a social work stance of working to bring about change, research becomes inherently political (Roose et al., 2015: 1031). As researchers we bring our 'selves' to our research, with beliefs and characteristics having a potential influence on the research. For example, in the current research being a male researcher could have had various impacts. While social work in general finds males to be a minority of practitioners outside of management roles (Galley, 2014), research roles until recent decades were androcentric. This meant that current research carried a risk of reproducing patriarchal traditions, whilst appealing to said tradition could find

perceived credibility from participants. The study saw a balance in participants identifying as male and female, allowing for an examining of transcripts to detect gender influences, any of which will be elaborated upon in the results.

From an ethical perspective, an aspect of interviewing of note is online interviewing. Before the pandemic beginning in 2019 (Liu, Kuo, and Shih, 2020), virtual interviews were mentioned passingly in textbooks as an alternative method of data gathering rather than a primary tool (Braun and Clarke, 2013), with some later advocating for it being of equal value (Salmons, 2016; Braun, Clarke and Gray, 2017). There is a growing body of research that the data gathered could be of equal or arguably uncompromised quality when conducting interviews online (Breakwell and Timotikevic, 2020; de Villiers, Farooq and Molinari, 2021; Hannah, 2012). Given how much university study has shifted to online learning and researching (Yu, Liu, Tang and Wu, 2021), we can expect this body of research to develop and improve online data collection. This makes online interviews applicable for the current research. Moreover, as we are researching practitioners across England and Wales, there are ample justifications for the use of online interviews. One is that as we work in a time where emergencies are frequent in practice which lead to cancelled appointments, it would not be cost-efficient nor environmentally friendly for a researcher to be insistent upon face-to-face interviews. An added benefit of virtual interviews could be that they lessened the impact of a phenomenon known as the 'Hawthorne Effect' (Perera, 2023), which causes a person to change their behaviour as a result of being observed. With a virtual interview, a participant is notified when a recording starts but unlike interviews recorded in person, there is not a physical Dictaphone or recording device visible throughout the interview. The impact of this may not be observable, but it serves as an argument in favour of virtual interviews for research.

The pandemic has arguably expedited a necessary paradigm shift and normalized virtual communications (Blackford et al., 2021). Given that the current research is interested in Local Authorities across England and Wales who conduct Channel Panels, the geographic impact of virtual interviews makes them too advantageous to dismiss. Transcription of interviews is one of the most time-consuming aspects of qualitative research (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011), with travel being potentially of a similar scale, meaning the elimination of travel benefitted time, cost, and environmental impacts. Furthermore, where there would have previously been concerns with computer literacy, the normalization of virtual meetings (Nicklin et al., 2022) has afforded many a grasp of technology that at least would mean it is not a common barrier to be expected in the current research. While issues such as connection and audio issues inevitably arise, solutions such as rescheduling meetings and availing of different equipment are a lot more achievable when compared to pre-pandemic issues of travelling long distances, miscommunicating times, and devices running out of battery (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Although interviews are the most common qualitative tool (Silverman, 2021), that does not leave them free from pitfalls or conceptual issues. Anonymity is a significant concern for many participants, with online interviews containing the additional identifying element of video as well as audio recordings (Rutanen, de Souza Amorim, Marwick and White, 2018). Participants were notified that only the researcher and supervisors will have access to this data to encourage them to share their experiences as much as possible. From an ethical perspective, it is important to protect the assumed trust in academia where practitioners can be confident researchers are competently conducting research that does not create risk for the individual and their role or bring harm to the reputation of fields such as Social Work.

While some researchers find interviews to be a positive way of gaining rich data (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey, 2020), Myers and Newman (2007) argue that it can be artificial, intrusive, and time-pressured, creating the risk of inaccurate data. The latter pitfall could also be an argument in favour of further research, as it is widely recognised that research is not a flawless and value-free process, meaning research beyond the current project would be both expected and welcomed where it can elaborate and improve. This could also be countered with the aforementioned acknowledgement of anonymity, giving participants freedom to express their thoughts and experiences rather than create an expectation of what they 'should' say, which would be a visible issue when speaking with journalistic media.

Whilst virtual contact became normalised as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there remains a question of its efficacy compared to traditional in-person interviews for research. Much research such as Weller (2017) advocate for the benefits of virtual interviews but this research was conducted before the pandemic was declared. This debate is likely to continue for some time (Carignani and Burchi, 2022), but for the current study some reflections can be made. One participant made a humorous remark about checking I was "not a robot", which may have been light-hearted ice-breaking but gave pause for thought in that trusting someone one has met in person would likely be a lot more forthcoming than a brief encounter online. Given the power of non-verbal communication such as mirroring and posture to bring a sense of calm (Stafford, Bond and Culley, 2020), it leads me to consider if in-person contact would have resulted in less attrition, as we may under-estimate the effect of 'small-talk' and general conversation that would normally take place before and after a meeting which builds trust and connections.

As indicated earlier, this research project was carried out by a social worker. This means that Social Work values influence the research (BASW, 2023a), and in particular, values such as allowing for an individual to have their voice heard and rights recognised are at the core of this work. This can range from individuals perceived of at risk of radicalisation, their families, and the professionals or agencies involved. The research project as a whole is informed by social work values and adopts a social work perspective. What this means is taking a transparent approach in acknowledging that the views of the author will influence the study, as arguably happens across all research (Berg, 2004), and PhDs are defined by original contributions inevitably influenced by their author (Rugg and Rugg, 2010), meaning said influence is not necessarily a negative element of the research.

Leading on from this, the research is inherently political since radicalisation as defined previously can include both endorsing of political and religious violence. Indeed, Berger (2018) has noted that terms such as radicalisation, extremism, and terrorism, are always politically freighted in that a value-free definition could be regarded as impossible, which is the stance I am concurring with. This means the study has a risk of being weaponised or being perceived as controversial, much like UK Prevent program being seen as controversial. Prevent was founded by a Labour government in 2003 before being inherited by the 2010 coalition government, whilst the Liberal Democrats later pledged to scrap the program if elected in 2017 (BBC, 2017d). This means the conclusions the research has arrived at will be of interest to parties across the spectrum of Prevent opinions and religious beliefs. The stance taken here is that Prevent, like any program, is imperfect at best but that improvement should be sought rather than abandoning it completely. Confidence and clarity will be needed in the

findings and there is the possibility of needing to be prepared to defend them in both academic and political arenas.

Bhui and Bhugra (2021:4) note that there is a risk of misinterpretation and unintended offence when researching an area such as radicalisation. Studying a phenomenon does not mean endorsing the acts or beliefs contained within. This can be seen in highly sensitive areas such as radicalisation or sexual offences (Crighton and Towl, 2021), yet to understand and tackle such issues they need to be studied and academics are well-situated to do so without excusing or justifying criminal acts. Therefore, ample wordage has been spent in this section to practice reflexivity and to 'own' my perspective and the research as Braun and Clarke (2023: 1) emphasise. This is aided by the ethical process of the University of Gloucestershire and supervisors who have been qualified to at least doctoral level, whilst responsibility for the interpretations, influences, and stances taken throughout this research remains with me as the author and researcher.

A significant note in terms of methodology and ethics is that researching radicalisation inevitably involved exposure to politically extreme opinions but also to potentially traumatic material. This ranged from written articles, interviews and encountering graphic material online such as extremists posting their acts of terror online in the case of the Christchurch shootings in New Zealand (Sharma, 2019). Allam (2019) notes the possible impact of this, from retaining vivid graphic imagery to desensitisation, the latter of which I have experienced first-hand in late-2023 after a memorable training session I had delivered voluntarily to colleagues at Rethink Mental Illness. After delivering material I was very familiar with, the manager insisted that the team take a break before continuing with the remaining agenda for the meeting. It did not resonate with me until later that attendees were thrown by the material presented which I had

become desensitised to. This became a learning point for me in safeguarding both my own sense of empathy and ensuring those around me are briefed sufficiently and afforded an exit at any time from training sessions.

Pearson (2023) discusses in detail where researchers have found themselves in receipt of trolling and death-threats or exposed to extremely violent imagery such as executions and gender-based violence. The present research afforded some protection in the sense that participants were professionals working with Channel rather than working directly with those who have been radicalised or de-radicalised, however Pearson also notes that junior researchers reported higher levels of suffering compared to more senior researchers, meaning it was an issue to be aware of for the present research and beyond completion. Having said that, Cottee notes the burnout effect of prolonged study in this area to the extent it depleted his motivation to write a finished piece (Cottee, 2022: 144). The true impact of extremist media and material can be unpredictable in content and impact on viewers. Having been a recent frontline social worker there is likely an assumption of resilience, however the resilience required in working with children and families may be different from the resiliency when coming into contact with recordings of events such as a mass shooting. Combined with the expected challenges of doctoral research, reflexivity played a key role in responding to issues of burnout or vicarious trauma throughout, or should they arise afterwards also.

Influenced by Pearson (2024), I would also like to advocate for the role of empathy in the methodology of this research. Pearson highlights how the dehumanising and demonising of the radicalised is detrimental to preventing radicalisation, since it 'others' the individual, a factor which likely contributed towards radicalisation in the first place. The media have a role to play in this social construction through sensationalist

headlines using terms such as ‘beast’ or ‘monster’ (Cleave, 2023). While such headlines and terms are often employed by highly biased media outlets colloquially referred to as ‘rags’ or ‘red-tops’ (Baker, 2021), their influence is identifiable such as the correlation between ‘The Sun’ and their backing of future winners of general elections in the UK (Worrall, 2015). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that societal attitudes towards radicalisation may lack the empathetic approach put forth by Pearson.

The role of empathy in this research leads to a reminder that the radicalized are human and not alien. It may bring comfort to professionals or laypersons to see radicalisation as something that happens to ‘them’ and not ‘us’, while I would argue this is both untrue and unhelpful. There are countless biographical narratives depicting how ‘normal’ people of varying ages have found themselves incited to hatred and immersed in extremism, with many succeeding on a journey to deradicalisation (Moaveni, 2020; McDonald, 2018; McDonald-Gibson, 2022), where Prevent and Channel can play a crucial role.

To understand radicalisation, I argue we need to understand a person’s ‘story’, meaning a person’s background and life holistically. Indeed, since radicalisation definitions largely hinge around radicalisation being a process, I argue this process and a person’s story are likely inseparable, particularly when considering theories such as Bourdieu’s habitus and Althusser’s (2014) ideology. Furthermore, Mudde (1996) argued that the discourses found within extremism can be shared by mainstream parties in power, meaning extremism does not require a chasm of difference from everyday experience. This makes a social work approach ideally situated to research safeguarding against radicalisation with our humanistic values, understanding of

vulnerability factors, and systemic approaches, to take an empathic perspective without condoning extremist views or terrorist acts.

3.8 Ethics and Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence can be traced back to at least 1950, with Alan Turing being referred to as the “Father of Artificial Intelligence” (Huawei Technologies, 2022: 5). However, the availability of ‘ChatGPT’ could arguably have been a turning point when it was released in 2022 (OpenAI, 2025). I am making a brief acknowledgement of this here as the role of AI brings advantages but also risks becoming very problematic such as in higher education where students are risking plagiarism from its use (Holmes, 2023). In my own experience of listening to students and marking assignments and dissertations, I have my own concerns about the influence of AI as both a shortcut and a detriment to students’ learning. The current study has been the largest study I have ever undertaken. Therefore, upon learning of emerging AI software since 2022 I made a conscious decision that it would play no role in this research as I find that it would leave me with a sense that the completed work would not be ‘my own’ and I would be jeopardising an opportunity for the learning experiences that come with completing a PhD. Even when searching for definitions or explanations of concepts I referred to traditional searches of the university library and search engines such as Google Scholar in an effort to ‘stamp’ this research as clearly being independently mine. As part of reflective work to add a visual element to my analysis, I used a word cloud generator (see appendices) however these have long pre-existed AI so I do not find they affect the originality of the study.

3.9 Ontological and epistemological considerations

This study captured the experiences and interpretations of practitioners working within Channel. Assumptions around knowledge and reality can be impactful when studying an area such as radicalisation and safeguarding given that we are engaging in debates around what radicalisation ontologically looks like and what evidence we accept as signs of radicalisation. Previous sections have addressed conceptually the debates of what is contested in terms of radicalisation. The oft-quoted adage of “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” could be seen as both pithy and unhelpful conjecture yet draws our attention to epistemological concerns of radicalisation.

With epistemological relativism comes an appreciation of the influence individuals and groups have on the production and acceptance of knowledge that is also historically and politically situated. This is helpful for managing an issue Bhaskar (2016) notes as the ontic-epistemic fallacy, where ontology is reduced to epistemology or vice-versa. As discussed in a previous section, this is pertinent for radicalisation where debates around safeguarding can hinge at the epistemological level and omit the ontological issue of harm. This creates an ontological position leaning towards realism yet is neither firmly realist nor relativist. The reasoning for this is that whether a risk, radicalisation process, or terrorism is labelled as such epistemologically, ontologically a process is taking place independent of us as knowers, yet unlike the aspirations of positivism, this process is not seen here as necessarily bound by observable universal laws and ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

The importance of ontology has been put forward by various authors in recent decades (Bhaskar, 1975; Houston, 2001; Benton, 2013) and its absence in significant writings on research (Crotty, 1998; Coolican, 2019) should be more concerning for

researchers, particularly in light of concerns raised for qualitative research by Braun, Clarke and Hayfield (2021a) which is discussed further below in regards to researchers being unclear or obfuscated in their theoretical approaches, leading to methodological issues within their research. Therefore, the current aim has been to have a theoretically declarative approach that is also theoretically inflective to include ontological concerns without reducing these to the level of epistemology.

Added to the above are concerns from a social work perspective. Social workers operate arguably at the intersection of many different fields such as health, law, finance, politics, and childcare. This places social workers in a strong position to appreciate the epistemic-ontic aspects of their roles and make valuable contributions to research, yet this could be argued as an area of weakness in execution given that a search of a popular website found 39 doctoral-level qualifications on offer for social work, compared to 325 for psychology and 1118 for medicine (Find A PhD, 2023). Social work degree courses can also vary considerably on the attention and capacity for research methods teaching (University of Bath, 2023; University of Bristol, 2023; University of Gloucestershire, 2023). Whilst the latter criticism can be applicable to many industries, social work has a notable issue with staff attrition and burnout (Hall, 2023), meaning a demand for frontline practitioners can influence institutions to maximise this output rather than research or other avenues. This study is privileged in its position to advocate for the role of ontology in research, congruent with social work values and reflexive practice (BASW, 2023b).

3.10 Positionality

A final consideration before progressing to data analysis is my position as a researcher. Historically, research has aspired for a sense of objectivity, usually under a positivistic paradigm that posits researchers as independent observers of natural and universal laws. This has come under heavy criticism, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century and to the present day (Bhaskar, 1975; Gemignani, Hernández-Albújar and Sládková, 2024), given that all research takes place within a social context and is conducted by individuals or groups with ideologies and agendas. As a children's social worker, this is an attribute we are trained to embrace in our practice via critical reflection and reflexivity (Rogers and Allen, 2019), grasping that our backgrounds, experiences, qualities, and personal values are all potential factors to benefit our work. Rather than allowing bias to roam unconstrained, I am adopting a stance of transparency, in which transparent reflexivity is argued as more beneficial to research than fallacious objectivity. In the personal preface I have detailed the role of my background in this research and the originality brought by it, while the support of two supervisors and tools such as a research journal helped address my concerns around bias, objectivity, and positionality.

At this juncture I find it worthwhile to speak of the impact of COVID-19 also. I approach this research having left a role in social work practice, literally transitioning overnight from a frontline practitioner to a researcher. My time in social work has been with children in care and children leaving care, where I continue to work as a DSL (Designated Safeguarding Lead) rather than a social worker due to few social work roles being part-time. I highlight this as it is also related to my qualifying as a social worker in 2020 at the height of the pandemic and lockdowns experienced across the country and planet. This meant I experienced education during lockdowns when

everything quickly changed to virtual delivery and my placement ended prematurely. These experiences combined give me a sense of affinity and empathy for children colloquially referred to as “Covid kids” due to the substantial period of their childhood development being affected by the pandemic (Watkinson, 2023). Although aged 30 at the time, I graduated university and embarked on a professional role at great disadvantage. This disadvantage can have unpredictable effects. Unlike children, I had the resources and capacity as an adult to comprehend and navigate these barriers. Although one can naively consider us to be in a ‘post-Covid’ world, it brings me no surprise that my research has found it to be still problematic for young people, and I bring my own lens of understanding to the research from my own lived experience of this.

3.11 Data Analysis

The approach adopted for analysis was a theoretically inflective inductive thematic analysis (TA). While TA is commonly associated with Braun and Clarke (2006), they have noted the varieties of TA that have evolved and the necessary flexibility that makes TA a versatile tool for analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The theoretically inflective approach here drew upon key concepts and theories identified throughout the literature review and the negotiated research positionality discussed above and in the personal preface.

TA has its most famous origins in a seminal article by Braun and Clarke (2006) which has been recognized as one of the most highly cited articles of its kind (Clarke, 2018) and is often featured as the backbone of modern textbooks when discussing TA (Howitt, 2019: 153; Coolican, 2024). At its core, TA is the identifying and analysing of

patterns of meaning within the data collected, with the possibility of extending this to interpret various aspects of the chosen topic (Braun and Clarke, 2021). This was the most suitable tool for the current research with the research questions being oriented towards what Channel panels are experiencing across geographical areas at various times and how these issues are conceptualised. This also lends itself well to an inductive approach which was data-driven and theoretically inflective. TA was informed by the general inductive approach of Thomas (2006) who, alongside Braun and Clarke (2018a), note that many studies are neither purely inductive nor deductive in their approach. This applied to the current study, where the analysis took a data-led approach but will have been influenced by researcher assumptions and knowledge, taking on a theoretically inflective approach.

Braun and Clarke (2006) described the process of conducting TA as comprising of six steps: familiarization with the data, generating codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Thomas (2006: 241) describes five stages of inductive coding which proved useful also. A vital aspect to consider in analysis is that Braun and Clarke (2018a; 2018b) have written and spoken at length to emphasise that TA should not be rigidly following linear steps in analysis, nor should themes be passively emerging from the data, as these imply a positivistic approach to analysis. Although Clarke (2021) continues to emphasise the distance TA has from positivism, under my current philosophical underpinnings I have made an argument for the ontological basis of radicalisation to allow for a focus on the epistemological relativism involved in radicalisation discourses. So, while not committing to positivism, this research appreciates a realist leaning in that themes will not passively emerge, but there is a singular ontological reality that I see myself as interpreting from my own positionality outlined above.

Braun, Clarke and Hayfield (2021b) have noted that the lack of transparency in methods and theory risks producing an analysis with an incoherent or incompatible theoretical basis, making it important that the current study provides a cohesive methodology and acknowledges the 'messy' nature of research. I find myself in agreement with Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, as readings of both quantitative and qualitative research can often have me silently querying how results have been obtained and if alternative perspectives were considered. At the very least, I find it crucial to disclose one's positionality and make clear how the journey of research was carried out. To that end, the remainder of this section will explicate the steps I took in analysis to allow the reader to follow alongside rationale and decision-making processes.

An initial divergence from Braun and Clarke's guidance was that transcription of the interviews was achieved through the recruitment of a trusted service which should remain anonymous to protect the participants. This was selected rather than the researcher transcribing simply due to time and financial constraints such as the aforementioned recruitment issues and the study taking place at the onset of what became known as a "cost of living crisis" (Partington, 2023), meaning that I simply needed to work additional hours in other roles for financial stability.

Familiarisation of the data was then achieved through listening to the recordings whilst reading the transcriptions to correct errors or gaps. The combination of reading transcripts and listening to audio recordings was advantageous as it made the data more memorable due to intonation and other paralinguistic features that have been argued to complement the memorizing of material through a multitude of mediums rather than simply reading from a screen (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Ruscio, and Beyerstein, 2010). Braun, Clarke and Hayfield (2021a; 2021b; 2021d) emphasise the need for

familiarisation and to avoid a common pitfall of rushing to coding and identifying themes. This was addressed by making observations through inserting comments on Microsoft Word in transcriptions whenever something notable was detected (see Appendix C for examples). This would take the form of a sentence or prompt for later following up, to avoid the temptation to pre-empt coding but retain the valuable analysis by allowing it to be returned to later.

Data was familiarised and annotated after one read-through, then a second read-through saw codes labelled alongside a second reading of the dataset with sufficient time to prevent rushing the process. A substantial number of codes were first labelled, arguably being a constructive step as authors have historically indicated that coding should be inclusive (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), while in my own approach find it easier to 'prune' down too numerous codes rather than begin with a paucity of analytical substance as seen with the codes eventually amalgamated in Appendix C. An example of this process will be found in the appendices, but due to anonymity needs, transcripts cannot be reproduced in full. Braun and Clarke (2022: 52) emphasise coding can range from summative, to conceptual, and interpretive. In my analysis this also included observations such as my own reactions which allowed me to revisit the data in a subsequent re-reading to see if my reaction had analytical relevance and if there could be further interpretation.

Of note here is that Braun, Clarke and Hayfield (2021c) state a personal preference for printing transcripts and annotating manually. While there may be an element of subjectivity in such an approach, I find physical documents not only cumbersome but at risk of being misplaced, exposing me and my participants to potential data breaches. Further to this, I pride myself on sustainability, as does the University of Gloucestershire (2022) in their 2022-2027 Sustainability Strategy. Therefore, I opted

to retain transcripts in a digital format for Microsoft Word and use features such as comments, font colours, and highlights, visible in Appendix C.

While there are helpful tools for digital analyses emerging at the turn of the millennium (Bringer, Johnston and Brackenridge, 2006), they have been largely avoided for this project for similar reasons as stated for the use of AI, however I am open-minded at the role they may play elsewhere. This being my first and largest piece of original research to date, I found it more valuable to retain a largely traditional approach. Time pressures also meant that learning to use additional tools was time that could instead be spent on analysis and writing, given that as a PhD student I was also immersed in the social work team at UoG. This meant duties such as teaching and dissertation supervision alongside earning a liveable income in an increasingly challenging time.

Once coding was completed on a transcript, I copied all codes into a separate document to compile into a list. I then colour-coded these into groups where I could identify a pattern or meaning holding them loosely together, such as 'gender' or 'intervention strategies'. Once all codes were coloured, I then amalgamated them into new codes based on the colour-coding labels just mentioned. Grouping by meanings in this way allowed for connections between participants and the developing of themes. The appendices can represent this visually for an alternative explanation (see Appendix C).

When this process was completed for every transcript, I then returned to the document containing the amalgamated codes to see what themes I could begin identifying across the dataset. I found it tricky to approach each transcript with a blank perspective to avoid anchoring my coding around pre-emptive themes such as gender, however the prevalence and meaningfulness of these codes I do not believe to have hindered my

analysis. This allowed me to create tables where I could 'assign' data to each theme and code to quote my participants in the analysis, bringing meaning to the data whilst also making access to the data more fluid when selecting evidence to support my themes. A sample of this is included in the appendices but is truncated to minimise the risk of identifying the participant.

From the analysis, four themes were identified. The influence of the Shawcross (2023) report alongside the evolution of radicalisation noted in the literature review appeared to be prominent in participant experiences and I found that analysing the role of ideology became increasingly associated with the concept of vulnerability, which in turn circled back to Shawcross and his views on the role of ideology in Prevent work. Qualitative researchers such as Braun and Clark (2022) emphasise the importance of a narrative or 'story' being told in a qualitative analysis. With the data gathered, I could identify a coherent narrative that encapsulated what practitioners were experiencing at Channel, how they were conceptualising these experiences, and the implications for the work of Channel in terms of safeguarding interventions' effectiveness. Whilst the four themes are distinctly named, there is a conceptual coherence between them and the concise titles are an aspiration to what Braun and Clarke (2019) refer to as the 'central organising concept' that brings the theme together (2019: 593), although as seen in the first and last themes, there are several central concepts. In the next section I will present the analysis in the form of the four themes being addressed individually and supported by extracts from interviews. In presenting extracts, participants are quoted using a number for their names to aid anonymity. The chapter proceeding this will then address my research questions, before progressing to consider recommendations that can be justified and bringing the research to a conclusion, considering recommendations and implications for future research.

Chapter 4) Analysis

The previous section described how a theoretically inflective form of thematic analysis was applied to the data. This resulted in identifying in the data patterns of meaning, which Braun and Clarke (2022) refer to as ‘themes’. The analysis of the data led to me identifying four themes. Firstly, the trifecta of ideology, vulnerability, and susceptibility was evidently influenced by the independent review of Prevent (Shawcross, 2023), yet some participants stated that it has been a long-term debate within practice where RWE referrals have been visible long before statistics indicate, whilst practitioners have also been grappling with understanding referrals in terms of vulnerability and the agency available particularly with younger people. Secondly, this led to a quandary around safeguarding and whether this model of practice was best suited for Channel. However, practitioners were overwhelmingly in favour of safeguarding mechanisms as being critical and positive in their work. The role of Intervention Providers, however, was mixed. Most participants had positive experiences of effective work but acknowledged this not to be consistent across the entirety of Channel. Thirdly, the prevalence of males in referrals inevitably engages a discussion of gender, substantial enough that I found it requiring a separate theme to analyse and unpick. Along with some suggestions as to why males are so prevalent, there were some helpful challenges to practitioner and societal assumptions around the role of gender. Finally, there were several risk factors identified across most participants and in isolation they would be unlikely to raise concerns of radicalisation, but two participants helpfully used the expression “Perfect Storm” to encapsulate how a specific combination of these factors and an individual within a certain context would give rise to radicalisation concerns, making Channel a suitable place for that assessment to take place. However, caution is noted by several participants about a lack of support and

intervention elsewhere could cause referrals coming to Prevent that would be better addressed elsewhere.

4.1 Theme One: Navigating the Ideology, Vulnerability, and Susceptibility Trifecta.

As much of the study took place in the wake of the Independent Review of Prevent (Shawcross, 2023), it was not surprising that practitioners were still digesting and comprehending key recommendations from the review. In the data participants referred to how the report made them reflect on whether Channel work needs to be more firmly grounded in ideology rather than vulnerability factors, which in turn was complicated by the emphasis on susceptibility rather than vulnerability. This led me to identify ideology, vulnerability, and susceptibility as three interrelated phenomena, or ‘trifecta’ to be more concise. Throughout the analysis it was noticeable that a combination of the three would be referred to rather than any one in isolation, giving them conceptual and analytical compatibility.

Participants appeared to find ideology a useful starting point when describing what issues have been presenting at Channel panels. What often followed from this was a discussion around the shift seen across the years since statistics were first published by Prevent, while some participants had been working in Channel prior to this and were able to share experiences as far back as the late 2000s. When discussing how ideologies develop participants mostly took the discussion to understanding the complexities of vulnerability factors experienced by individuals and families, which in turn brought up discussions of recent changes to orient Prevent’s focus on susceptibility. This led to insights from participants on to what extent they agreed with

this focus how it has affected their work in Channel and understanding of radicalisation. The convergence and interrelatedness of ideology, vulnerability, and susceptibility in interviews with practitioners led to the naming of this theme as it was a prominent experience for participants and the three phenomena tended to arise together in discussion.

Antoine Destutt de Tracy coined the term 'ideology' in the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789, concisely referred to as the 'study of ideas' (Freeden, 2003: 4). While this study is not a conceptual study of ideology, I find it helpful to consider that the concept has went through varying interpretations since it was first coined. Authors such as Althusser, Marx, Habermas, and Bhaskar (Hartwig, 2007) alongside many others have contributed swathes of writings on ideology. This creates complexity in gaining a deeper understanding of the concept, as McLellan (1995) regarded it as the most elusive concept in all the social sciences. It was expected that practitioners would rely on understandings of ideology reflected in the Prevent statistics, particularly the Left-Right spectrum (Heywood, 2012). Many participants identified ideology as such but then explored the complexities of it with me:

"The far right is certainly a big category of concern. There's a range of different far-right cases. We've had a lot of white supremacy, neo-Nazi cases that are deeply concerned about the Great Replacement and whites being a minority in the West, and associating that with the Channel crossings, associating that with the lack of strong borders that they expected after Brexit, and they hold the government accountable for that.

A lot of antisemitism as well associated with that, so that's the sort of extreme right-wing cases that are associated with neo-Nazism, obsessed with Hitler and World War Two, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

We've also had a lot of far right, more the cultural nationalism. That's more associated with EDL-type narratives of the spread of Islam and the decline of the West, and more cultural arguments of the need to preserve Western civilisation from high levels of immigration, or Jihadist terrorism, grooming gangs etc., etc.

So those are the two most common far-right categories we have around the extreme right wing, and then that more broader cultural nationalism.

We have had quite a few people that are in that mixed, unclear, unstable or conflicted category. We've certainly had incels referred, involuntary celibates who have this entitled sense of grievance, they feel entitled to sex with women and are struggling with being a virgin or struggling with not engaging in romantic relationships" (Participant Twelve).

The above participant had been a Channel panel chair for several years, and their extract explicates upon ideology quite articulately, hinging around the Left-Right spectrum and showing an understanding of the nuances of RWE in that one individual affected by RWE could present quite differently to another. Some extremist ideologies may contain more prominent antisemitism whilst others are more concerned about immigration and 'ethnic purity', or an amalgamation of both. In addition to this, the participant indicates the impact of social context on presenting issues, such as politics, immigration, race, and vulnerability, of individuals. The majority of the participants shared similar experiences in terms of the breadth of ideology, with a notable convergence between what is seen in America:

“Yeah, and, you know, some of the ones that I’ve been present in, some of the meetings, people, sort of, in support of some of these people in America who’ve just gone out and shot random people, like in schools and stuff, stuff like that. Yeah, so those are the sort of sentiments that...and they’ve obviously got sympathy with that sort of thing, and I’m not as clued up as you, but, sort of, incels...they talk about that. More so the adults, though, rather than the younger people that I’ve spoken about over time. So, yeah, I think they’re more sophisticated, I think, sometimes, the adults. But, don’t get me wrong, sometimes the younger people are more savvy, I think” (Participant Ten).

“The current cases that we have tend to be quite right wing really, a lot of white supremacy cases in [LA]. We’ve just had a recent referral through actually today and that’s a young girl who’s been accessing far-right websites, involved in chat rooms online and that is all about racism, racism in school, very extreme content, school shootings. I mean from our perspective we’ve seen quite a few of them recently, that’s not one in isolation really” (Participant Six).

The above participants were a Channel chair and counterterrorism police officer, and they denote issues such as school shootings that may be surprising to see arising in Britain as causes for concern. It can be seen with P10 the reflexive challenge in the ideological shift which is also reflected in the Prevent statistics. The participant indicates that I am more “clued up”, which while possible, implies the participant is not feeling as informed or confident in handling emerging ideologies as they would like to be. The incel and school-shooter ideology is highly visible in the USA, manifesting in extremist murders and mass shootings, though largely of White supremacist ideology (ADL, 2024). This is reflective of what was discussed in the literature review as Channel appears to find itself in the midst of an evolution in conceptualising what

is presenting at panels, as the statistics themselves have recently shifted to replace the 'mixed, unclear, or unstable' (MUU) category with 'mixed ideology' and several others. Given the various roles of those involved with Channel, it is to be expected that participants will vary in how knowledgeable they may feel given extraneous factors such as how frequently they attend Channel, how closely their role is tied to it, and the volume or typology of cases presenting at a particular Local Authority.

When participants explored their experiences of understanding ideology, the narrative I identified in the data connects to wider political and conceptual debates, particularly the independent review, as this has framed much of the dialogue on ideology since its publication in 2023. The earliest interviews for this study were conducted later in the year after the review's publication, however most participants made reference to it in some way. The Independent Review of Prevent (Shawcross, 2023) had some controversial statements around the role of ideology:

"Prevent must address all extremist ideologies proportionately according to the threat each represents. However, my research shows that the present boundaries around what is termed by Prevent as extremist Islamist ideology are drawn too narrowly while the boundaries around the ideology of the Extreme Right-Wing are too broad. This does not allow Prevent to reflect accurately, and deal effectively with, the lethal risks we actually face" (Shawcross, 2023: 3).

While I have addressed the report, its responses, and misrepresentations in the literature review, participants also reflected on it with me and gave varied responses. I highlight the following extract as the data I have collected tells a nuanced story. All participants touched upon ideology to some extent whereas the independent review gave me the impression that panels had drifted away from it.

“I used to get a lot more Islamist sort of cases. It was always men, quite young men in their early 20s to 25, a lot of those sort of things, and a lot of their rhetoric was more on almost like an anger for society, maybe about where they’re placed at in society, so that’s kind of what led them into radicalisation. I used to get a lot of those, sort of like lost Black and Brown, early 20s men who had a corruption of Islam as their focal point and wanted that feeling of belonging.

But now it seems to be younger, a lot of younger, still boys – in my history I think I’ve only ever had two women – now it’s white and Black and Brown boys, school age, and joining Far Right, or just having very extremist views. Also, as well, we’re getting more misogynist, sort of Andrew Tate kind of rhetoric, which is what the Far Right have now kind of co-opted anyway. (Participant One).”

Here we have presenting issues at Channel which sound proportionate – a transition from Channel cases being predominantly VJ and recently more mixed ideologies involving RWE and violent misogyny, “co-opted” as the participant put it. This was consistent across the dataset, with some exceptions where a Channel’s geographical remit would be areas of higher BAME and recognised VJ risks:

“I think, yeah, there hasn’t been that many right-wing ones, I think, because of maybe the demographic of this area where we are. And it might be a case of... because, obviously, more people in mental health are, kind of, from the BAME community, aren’t they, for some reason? So, if you look at the stats for mental health, there’s probably a bigger... they’re overrepresented is what I’m saying” (Participant Three).

Despite the exceptional geographic area, the participant notes the well-known overrepresentation of BAME in mental health statistics (Buchanan, 2021), showing

that radicalisation does not exist in a vacuum and neither does ideology. To contrast this, another participant found concordance with the independent review:

“I don’t think it’s necessarily indicative of a surge in far-right extremism in the UK. It’s because, pre-2011, we weren’t looking for it on a systematic basis. Now, it’s very much baked into our training products. So, people at the frontline practitioner level, in policing, social workers, healthcare practitioners, teachers, they’re much more attuned than they were, you know, in 2010, for what kinds of things to look for. So, one, we’re looking for it, whereas we weren’t necessarily looking for it last time. They were coming on to our radar as cases, but there wasn’t a lot of proactive going out there, looking for them. So, that’s the first thing. The second thing is I think the way that far right is framed has been hugely expanded. And I know that William Shawcross highlighted this within his review of Prevent, to say that it’s interesting that, over the last kind of 10 years of so, the framing of Islamism has narrowed to this, I would say, too narrow a focus. And a lot of cases are looked at through the lens of religious kind of neo-conservatism, as opposed to someone who actually could be drawn into terrorism. So, I think they’ve got that phenomenon, and then, conversely, on the far-right side, a huge expansion of what we believe to be far right” (Participant Sixteen).

This participant speaks from both local and national experience as a Channel coordinator and overseeing the implementation of the Prevent duty. Contrary to most participants, they denote a lack of surprise at the RWE ideology gaining prominence within Prevent. Other authors have written about an RWE presence in Britain throughout the post-war period, from the National Front to the BNP (British National Party) and EDL (English Defence League), further evidencing what the participant has shared (Copsey and Worley, 2018).

When examining patterns of meaning regarding ideology in the data, I found that a linear and unequivocal picture could not be drawn as to which specific ideology should be of most concern. Analogous to the published Prevent statistics showing that unclear ideologies, known previously as “Mixed, Unclear, or Unstable” (MUU) and now simply “Mixed Ideology”, comprise the largest portion of referrals (Home Office, 2023b). While participants were more emphatic about the prevalence of RWE concerns, this was usually due to the stark contrast from VJ cases, and several participants reflected on what is presenting at Channel:

“So a lot of it is statistic driven, so they want you to make sure that you are making the right choice when you’re doing the first initial referral. And, a lot of times, you won’t know on that first... and that’s why a lot of them are clicked on that we do describe it as “mixed” because, at the time, we don’t know. We can’t hang our hat on something. But, within a while, if they go into the Prevent space and then they go into the Channel space, the more work that’s done with it, the more easier you then can change that from where it was, where you thought it was. “Actually, no. It’s right wing,” or, “No, it’s not. It’s this.”” (Participant Seven).

“It’s problematic because in terms of the Independent Review and the need to really understand or focus on ideology, the ‘mixed/unclear/unstable’ space is actually where a significant number of referrals are coming in clearly to Prevent and then on to Channel. They’re not solely locked into one ideology. The problem part of it isn’t that, it’s more that in the future those kinds of cases will need to be grounded in ideology. And if that’s not clear, where do they sit in terms of Channel Panels, because the direction from the Independent Review is very much around ideology-based cases. So in [Local Authority], yes, Islamist, fine, far-right extremism, fine. We’re getting a lot of cases also that come in that are... there is some kind of vulnerability, but it’s not

necessarily a CT one, but left unchecked, could become one. So yes, that's the sort of spread, if I'm honest, in terms of cases. Very little that would come outside of that in terms of left, left wing extremism, conspiracies, those things don't really tend to happen in a purist way on their own. So 'mixed/unclear/unstable' seems to offer the weight of cases that we're seeing, so it's challenging and it will be problematic" (Participant Eight).

What can be garnered from the above is that ideology is given a lot of concern by practitioners and not seen as 'another box' to be ticked. It also is demonstrably held and considered throughout the Channel process until the case is closed. Participant Eight above chairs Channel panels and notes that conspiracies and other concerns tend not to arrive at Channel in isolation in their experience, indicating that they are likely to be mixed or as part of RWE, the latter of which raises Shawcross' concerns about RWE becoming too broad. This is related to other concerns such as anti-immigration, which is unlikely to be sufficient for a Prevent referral, although Participant Nine experienced a small number of referrals dealing with the issue of housing asylum-seekers in hotels, while Participant Four makes the powerful point that missing one or two individuals who have not been referred could have fatal consequences. This has seen widespread coverage in politics and the media in terms of accommodating asylum-seekers in hotels (Singh, 2023), making it unsurprising that it appears as part of ideological concerns in Channel cases while raising questions about the role mainstream media play in radicalisation.

"We've had a few referrals about issues, people that have been protesting around it, not too many, but a few here and there. But that's just sort of fanned existing tensions in those areas or existing sort of usually right-wing nationalist sort of views sort of feeds into that again. Like we got a few years ago from Tommy Robinson and those

sort of groups where it just fans that. “Oh, they're getting hotels, they're getting treated better,” spinning it a lot. Obviously, the fake news of how much money they get and all those sort of things and yeah. But we're seeing that across the country. Like where I grew up, there's some there and there's just loads of hate being spewed, mostly by people that don't even live there, being a sort of target for groups to turn up to and protest even though they don't live anywhere near it” (P9: 105-111).

As previously stated, radicalisation does not happen in a vacuum and individuals cannot be separated from their social contexts. The participant above describes how existing tensions were “fanned”, with immigration and housing being common structural barriers faced across Britain. Where my analysis is taking this is that a thorough analysis of the role of ideology uncomfortably raises a mirror to the State that funds and guides Prevent and Channel yet also makes decisions in terms of how asylum seekers are housed and modern media makes this information more readily available, particularly in terms of cost (TLE, 2024). If anything, politics has the potential to frustrate the work of Channel and gives practitioners a sense of detachment or lack of support.

“I can tell you [about] people who got arrested for terrorism offenses, who if somebody had identified that concern...that would never have happened. So, I probably disagree with Mr Shawcross in quite a lot of what he's... but that's one where I would say, to me you want to see these referrals. You want them to come across your desk and let's make an assessment and close them. But there is going to be that one in 20, one in 30 that actually really does need some help and some support” (Participant Four).

What the participant above refers to is that there are those who ultimately were charged with terror offences that they believed could have been avoided had concerns

been identified earlier, which is the basis of Prevent. It is quite substantial amongst the criticisms of Prevent for 'false positives' and 'false negatives' in terms of referrals that the practitioner above is emphatic that safeguarding is more effective when information is shared by making referrals, allowing for an assessment and decision rather than families or workers feeling unsure or fearful of Prevent, or worse when the individual causes harm through an act of terror. This connects to an analysis of vulnerability and susceptibility, which has become an epistemological debate considering the government accepting the recommendations of the independent review. Several participants were interviewed around the time of the publication of the new Prevent Duty Guidance (HM Government, 2023c), so had varying interpretations and experiences of what this meant for their work.

"I mean, you've got to be now aware that it's not vulnerabilities that they are going to be focusing on in the next few months. It will be susceptibilities within the new Channel guide, Prevent guidance. Yeah, so, vulnerabilities are like people can, vulnerabilities can impact someone's susceptibility, but it shouldn't be this sort of trying to shift away from... it feels like they're trying to shift away from a lot of these mixed mental health, unclear cases as being the main space. That's what it feels like reading between the lines. It's sort of they want more the ideological stuff being addressed by Prevent, and then maybe those vulnerable people that are on the edge or not in any one box are in a different space maybe, but I don't know where that is. And that's something that the government and counterterrorism, Prevent, are going to have to look at going forward, I think... That's what it feels like" (Participant Nine).

This was a response to an interview question around the vulnerabilities that were becoming apparent at Channel. After speaking with this participant, I then amended the question to include both susceptibilities and vulnerabilities as I was concerned this

may have portrayed my knowledge not being up to date, tarnishing trust or confidence in me as a researcher. This is how I justify the identification of this theme, given that Participant Nine has been doing their own analysis to try and comprehend practical and political debates which appear to be driving the changes to Channel. As seen from Participant Four above, there are mixed responses to the conceptualising of vulnerability and susceptibility. On one hand there is an issue of further muddying of the waters by adding additional terminology, since both the independent review and new Prevent Duty Guidance make a case for mutual exclusivity that could be seen as ambiguous:

“A person’s susceptibility to radicalisation may be linked to their vulnerability. A person can be vulnerable if they need special care, support or protection because of age, disability, risk of abuse or neglect. A person’s vulnerabilities may be relevant to their susceptibility to radicalisation and to the early intervention approach that is required to divert them away from radicalisation” (HM Government, 2023a: 12).

On the other hand, what is notable about this statement is what Participant Nine hypothesised, in that the government could be seeking to narrow the remit of Channel to become less involved in cases where mental health could be the primary vulnerability rather than radicalisation, however in practice these issues may not be able to be separated easily. In the data I identify conflicting understandings of this:

“So, my view is, I think sometimes we base too much time on what a vulnerability is than the ideology, because if we’re going to sit in Channel with all these resources and talk about someone’s mental health, that can be done in an MDT, a multi-disciplinary team meeting. Why is it coming to Channel?” (Participant One).

“But basically, he was still in the in-patients setting but he’d gotten well again, and the psychiatrist said, “He wants a phone. He wants the internet. Are we allowed to give it to him?” I’m like, “Let him! It’s up to him. He can make unwise choices. Let him do what he wants to do! And also, the police have come and investigated him, so if he’s going to do it, that’s on him.”...So, again, why do they bring that to Prevent? They tried to bring that to Prevent. That’s not a Prevent case. This is a guy who’s unwell, who likes to use the internet in a reckless way to a point where the police have come and have made no charges. So, why is that sitting in Prevent, why is that in a Channel panel meeting?!” (Participant One).

Participant One is firm in their conceptualising of a specific example that maps onto the concept of a vulnerable person but not necessarily a susceptible person. Yet, there remains a question of police involvement benefitting from Channel oversight. I would agree with their former statement about it being managed fine via MDT, but since the police had become involved, the psychiatrist could find themselves reassured and better-informed had the case gone to Channel, even if assessed as not at risk, in-line with what Participant Four said above about having the reassurance it is indeed not suitable for the Prevent space. However, the data can only explicate what the participant has shared, and they may be privy to information reassuring them of a lack of risk and I am conscious to draw a line between interpretation and speculation.

The push from Home Office to focus on ideology in Prevent referrals and Channel cases could be an understandable but perhaps unrealistic goal, however what I would also highlight is that Prevent by definition is aimed at preventing radicalisation and understanding the root causes. Many of the participants spoke of a person’s ideology being unclear at first or the contemporaneous vulnerabilities and needs, with Channel being well-situated to comprehend the ideological aspect and guiding responses. In

other words, if the suggestion is to wait for ideology to become clear and tangible then there may be missed opportunities for earlier intervention which in turn has allowed a person's risk to escalate. We already have the Pursue strand of CONTEST for that jurisdiction (which many authors seem to conflate with Prevent), so allowing Channel to intervene as early as deemed necessary by panels could be more effective in preventing radicalisation, which Participant Eight above emphasises. There are also likely to be times when a case is too complex to discern the ideal point of intervention, as the example below highlights:

“there was some primary needs that needed to be met first before you even looked at looking at the extremism. Because that was almost, in that sort of Maslow's hierarchy of need, there were basic needs that needed to be met first. Interestingly he then was in a specialist placement, I don't think his mum... his mum wants him back, I think, but he's now on a care order, I think. And actually his whole, from being... he had quite hateful views. I think he's now identifying as female and stuff, so there was a lot of stuff...we've had a couple of those situations where people are also saying, I'm really worried about extremism, but I'm also worried about exploitation in terms of sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation” (Participant Two).

Earlier I referred to the interconnectedness of ideology, vulnerability, and susceptibility. Participant Two is a social worker which can explain why they connect the person's social context by making reference to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1999), which while has separate 'levels' in the hierarchy, in the case of radicalisation these levels could be argued as more fluid and overlapping. Identifying as female and having a breakdown of home relationships we would not see as immediate concerns of radicalisation, but again with context these vulnerabilities alongside concerns of hateful views and exploitation were clearly alarming for the Channel panel and this

case carried complexities that seemed impossible to distinguish radicalisation concerns from vulnerability and susceptibility, making it appropriate to be overseen by Channel. To expand on this, identifiable in the dataset for me was when participants referred to numerous specific issues presenting at Channel:

“sometimes certain presentations like neurodiversity and specific contexts, where there’s that fixed interest, there’s potentially challenges around social communication, there’s potentially a lack of belonging and spending a lot of time online. All these different things can make certain people getting drawn into, as I said, that sense of belonging with a specific community online.

So again, it’s very bespoke, very different for people but I would say belonging is probably the most obvious theme that if you dig down is quite important to a lot of them. Then you have specific emotional, psychological or mental health presentations that come up, like neurodiversity may be a factor.

A final comment really is sometimes we see a lot of trauma. So trauma is something that is really effectively utilised by extremist groups. They would acknowledge there would be really traumas and real scandals and events that they can exploit and monopolise. If it’s the far right, they will acknowledge how devastating the ‘grooming gangs’ or group sexual exploitation from Rochdale, Telford, etc., and they would say that the trauma is something that they would mitigate against, they’re the ones to stand up to the establishment, so the social workers, the police etc.

Equally, Islamist extremists will talk about the trauma of racism, the trauma of Western foreign policy and they exploit that and say again we’re going protect and mitigate against that.

People who've had a personal trauma of different factors that relate to what these extremist groups are talking about, could be susceptible to say actually, we do need to challenge this in a different way and maybe this group is going to speak for me and speak to the victims etc. The exploitation of trauma does come up a lot and people want to feel safe and be part of a group that challenges these bad things from happening again in the future" (Participant Twelve).

This lengthy but rich and meaningful data extract from a Channel chair who is a qualified social worker coherently encapsulates patterns of presenting issues at Channel that all participants touched upon. At a glance, one can identify conceptual issues in trying to distinguish between vulnerability and susceptibility when addressing issues such as neurodiversity, mental health, and trauma. This becomes further complicated when we consider the volume of referrals and convictions involving those aged under eighteen, legally recognised as children and seen especially by social workers as vulnerable regardless of circumstance. For example, the 2024 *State of Hate Report* found that between 1997 and 2016 there were six convictions for terror offences who were teenagers, but by 2023 this had risen to thirty-one (Hope Not Hate, 2024). While there is an argument that the expanding of terror legislation can explain this increase to some extent, we are still left with the dilemma of unpicking susceptibility and vulnerability. When dealing with children, this already problematic susceptibility concept I argue also risks negating the vulnerability of childhood. When exploring issues such as child exploitation and county lines, particularly in social work there would be less disagreement regarding the vulnerability and agency of a child, which I find should be transferrable to safeguarding against radicalisation.

In concluding this theme, I return to the Independent Review of Prevent as it has driven much of the political discourse and resulted in changes to policy since its release,

affecting how participants conceptualise the presenting issues at Channel. The review saw media leaks and reports prior to release, highlighting Shawcross' perception that VJ was conceptualised too narrow whilst RWE was too broad (Elgot and Dodd, 2022), hence the changes to statistics of Prevent reflecting this. In the analysis above I have found substantial contrasts to this perception through the gathering of primary data with practitioners working within Channel. Participants have consistently noted the transition to and emergence of RWE in the latter half of the 2010s as the ISIS Caliphate collapsed (Chulov, 2019) while RWE boiled under the surface of this and is now emerging globally (Toascano, 2023). Not only is Shawcross' attempt to deflect from this contrasting from practitioners working directly in this arena, but it also adds weight to the statements of those saying it is an attempt to politicise Prevent, significant in that one such statement comes from a former counter-terror chief (Dodd and Syal, 2023). While I can evidence Shawcross' claim that VJ has been the most lethal, due the frequency of fatalities in the UK between 2005 and 2020 (Jenkins, Perry, and Stott, 2022), this dismisses a very tangible emerging threat of RWE and the work that practitioners have been doing to prevent radicalisation in general, wherein many RWE incidents likely have been prevented:

"But the other thing is because of the space we're in and the space that this sits in, we don't get the opportunity to put out many good stories because you're then putting people's privacy, you can't really have some, not many people are going to come up and say, "Oh yes, I was engaging with terrorism. I've stopped." There's a few that come out and do it, but there's not many people you can really identify without risking them or them becoming a target or those sort of things. So, it's harder to share good news stories around these spaces rather than the bad news. Bad news hits the press and gets talked about" (Participant Nine).

“So now, everyone that voted for Brexit, that is anti-uncontrolled immigration, as opposed to anti-immigration, they’re being bracketed as far right. So, a lot of the cases that we see coming in are where...someone just goes to an EDL rally. Well, that, in of itself, is not a justification to refer someone to Channel, because there are a huge number of people that went to rallies. I mean, particularly the rally off the back of or in response to the murder of drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich. Lots of people attended that rally, to show their support and grieve for drummer Lee Rigby, that are not ideologically aligned with the far right” (Participant Sixteen).

Finally, while Shawcross demurred that RWE is defined too broadly compared to VJ, what we have seen in the evidence presented here is that VJ concerns are still being identified whilst RWE is not a singular or coherent ideology, spanning anti-State, anti-feminist or misogynistic, antisemitic, racist, Islamophobic and racist narratives amongst many others that justify violence against one, several, or all these groups. As Participant Sixteen noted, practitioners, the media, and laypersons bring their own ‘baggage’ which may heuristically class many issues under the rubric of RWE even for minor concerns such as attending a protest for Lee Rigby organised by the EDL. Yet it is notable how practitioners have shared their encounters with ideologies such as inceldom or mass shooters and the perpetuity of most referrals being male. There appears to be weight for Shawcross’ argument that more of Prevent’s work needs to be grounded in addressing ideological concerns, however the boundaries between this trifecta of ideology, vulnerability, and susceptibility are still being developed and understood by the participants of this study, with a final extract from Participant Sixteen arguing for this to show that this should be seen as an expansion rather than a restriction:

“I think some of us within this sector were talking about susceptibility rather than vulnerability years before this, because it feels more comfortable, because you can be susceptible and vulnerable, but you can be susceptible without necessarily being vulnerable, because I’m very cautious to remove agency from albeit a child, to make decisions” (Participant Sixteen).

4.2 Theme Two: Safeguarding – Something New or Something Old?

Outside of those operating in counterterrorism roles, the work of Prevent and Channel is likely to be unfamiliar to practitioners, particularly social workers. In the data, this took the form of participants exploring with me how they experienced this new way of multi-agency working and whether it was indeed new or resembling traditional safeguarding mechanisms, as mentioned previously by Meleagrou-Hitchens (2022) in the sense that early interventions with youth work and gangs arguably resemble safeguarding against radicalisation. The diversity of participants meant that there were some who had longer periods of working with Channel whilst others were brief interventions or roles acquired recently, allowing for varying perceptions of Prevent as a safeguarding mechanism. Participants discussed competing and complementary perspectives brought by having multiple agencies represented at Channel alongside some tensions around where responsibility lies and whose role is most suited for direct work, decision-making, and risk assessing. This discussion brought out the role of the IP (Intervention Provider), which potentially distinguishes Channel’s work from familiar safeguarding processes. I find that social work is synonymous with safeguarding and this follows from the previous theme in terms of understandings from vulnerability and

susceptibility perspectives may influence whether practitioners experience Channel as a safeguarding mechanism.

A social worker who had attended many Channel panels found their experience very similar to traditional safeguarding processes:

“It’s always the same. We go to a Channel panel meeting, we look at the issues, and it’s kind of like which agency is best placed to lead on it. That’s it!...[if] they have an ongoing mental health issue, so what happens that it tends to be mental health services who are the lead agency in it, or if the person’s school age, it’s the school, and then if they person’s adopted into Channel, they just tend to get an IP, an individual support person to help them with the de-radicalisation element” (Participant One).

The process described above reflects multi-agency meetings familiar to social workers and many other professionals with an example being a ‘strategy meeting’, where there is concern a child may be suffering or likely to suffer significant harm (Family Rights Group, 2025) and decisions made on actions to be taken and choosing the lead professional. While strategy meetings tend to emphasise police information-sharing followed by social care to be the lead professional, the above extract indicates more diversity.

Following on from this, other participants experienced Channel meetings of a similar format, where attendees tended to demonstrate an awareness of their limits and caution in stepping beyond their expertise:

“We’ve got one at the moment who’s 12. So, normally, I would refer for a children’s CNW specialist to attend because we just do adults. And then, from that, we obviously have the chair from the local authority. We have the police representative. We have the worker that’s working with the individual if they’ve given consent to be involved in

Prevent support...And we talk about the risks. We talk about each person's role and responsibilities into to context of support, so whether it be mental health. And then, they look at what they could put in place. And it's, kind of, overview and monitoring what's working well, what isn't working well, what the individual's expressed as what they want. We're explicit, obviously, about the consent and the rest of it when you're there and the confidentiality" (Participant Three).

Identifiable in this are traditional safeguarding mechanisms. Multiple agencies are represented, the role for each agency is ascertained, and it is discussed what intervention can be offered. It can be seen there is an emphasis on the person being a child and the need for consent, something many practitioners are likely to be alert to given that referrals to Prevent have increasingly involved younger people. Another participant emphasised this with the implementation of the Prevent duty in schools with children being more successful:

"I mean, there are some pretty vociferous anti-Prevent actors out there who stir a lot of misinformation, disinformation about Prevent...it was very clear from the things that were said about Prevent that no one had actually read it...So, I've seen particularly the education side, primary schools, secondary schools, still some work to do with further education, as in universities. But, I've seen, since we've got the statutory duty in place, a bit more of an understanding, because they've had to, now they've got a Prevent duty, go and read the thing, and understand that, actually, this is just about safeguarding, by and large. I mean, it's adopting the same systems, and processes, and ways of working that are done within kind of adults' and children's safeguarding" (Participant Sixteen).

In an earlier section I labelled an 'anti-Prevent' stance taken by a number of key figures and it appears this participant has experienced this from their own work despite experiencing it largely as a safeguarding role. From the data it can be seen that the concept of safeguarding was quite prevalent in the experiences of most participants at Channel, however Participant One experienced it familiar to the extent that it felt like just another 'talking shop'. This shares some congruence with the experiences of Participant Eight, who experienced the safeguarding mechanisms as arguably complacent or one-dimensional:

"One of our best attendees at Panel was the education psychologist. Because she would interrogate... yes, she had obviously an ed-psych background, but she would interrogate from her specialism. And I think that that's not common across all our partners. They don't bring their specialism and say okay, I'm a whatever, how do I interrogate another member of the Panel about what they're witnessing. That function tends to be done by Prevent professionals like myself, the education officer, the Channel supervisor, etc., not by people who bring that information. It just feels like a repository of another safeguarding meeting for some. I don't think they've shifted their thinking to say, what do I bring as a mental health practitioner or a safeguarding, that I could have a dialogue about this person within this... or the police actually, within this kind of framework. So that's the biggest issue. It's quite clinical in its own... sometimes pushing dialogue is quite hard (Participant Eight)."

Healthy debate and best use of specialist training or skills seemed less prominent in this participant's experience, where I am detecting frustration as they envision the potential that Channel can have. This is meaningful as this participant had spent over ten years being involved with chairing Channel panels and had extensive experience to draw upon. In a typical strategy meeting as a social worker, similar can be

experienced with each professional bringing a piece of the 'puzzle' and allowing the chair to 'fit' the pieces together to reach the point of seeking agreement from the panel to instigate s47 investigations and an action plan. Above it appears evident that the participant is also conscious of this and aims to improve it for more of a roundtable discussion rather than being seen as yet another meeting in a calendar. In my experience as a social worker in one Local Authority, I have attended multi-disciplinary meetings such as a strategy meeting, stability meeting, PEP (personal education plan), child in care review, HRPM (high risk planning meeting), MACE (multi-agency child exploitation), and potentially several other formats geared around wellbeing and safeguarding. It is not difficult to see how a practitioner could see Channel as yet another safeguarding meeting alongside many others in their calendar and a caseload of high-risk individuals or families.

Contrasting this, some participants indeed experienced Channel as a place for a roundtable discussion and healthy debate in understanding cases presented:

"I think within the panel itself, so within the standing panel members, I think there is a discussion around what's being presented. But I think people come from quite a similar lens. But there's a good, healthy debate and challenge, but it comes from possibly... it doesn't feel as if that's from a point of, like you can't resolve those. It's more about exploring it and you know, let's have a look at it through this lens or look at it through that bit. But I think there tends to be a bit more of a common understanding within standing panel members" (Participant Two).

Observable is that the participant refers to 'standing' panel members, which I understand as core members attending each panel in contrast to other participants who attended when their allocated case was referred to Prevent or when Channel

request that their agency be represented. This is where some contrasting experiences arose in the dataset with professionals attending Channel due to concerns arising with someone under their care:

“Well, we joined via Teams. Everything’s via Teams now, isn’t it? We were let in, and then we were told by the chair that they had received the referral form...A member of the team had briefly discussed with the panel the concern itself. So then, myself and [colleague]...We then gave a bit of an overview of the learner, the experience that we’ve had and where they are up to date, so a bit of a chronology there. There was a couple of very brief questions, just clarity on attendance and interactions with other peers. And then, after that, there was a handover to social care...They provided a little bit on the family. And then, we were thanked for our time and told that we would be updated soon. And then, we were told to leave the call. So we were in the call for possibly 10 to 15 minutes at most during the panel... I mean, from our perspective, both [colleague] and I came away from that, and we left the call and, kind of, looked at each other and said, “Oh, that’s it, then.” Yeah...it wasn’t quite what we were expecting. We were probably expecting to obviously present the case, as we did, but then for a much more roundtable discussion about any questions, but then also to be involved in the conversation around the support because, in this particular case, this is a young person who had history of turning down external agency support. So, to be involved in the conversation about how that could be offered, how it should be offered, what’s the best way of getting that learner to engage, we felt that that possibly would have had some use in that conversation. So it felt like... I would say that that bit felt like a gap, yeah” (Participant Fourteen).

This rich extract describes an experience which differs markedly from the other participants thus far. Multi-agency meetings have commonly been attended remotely

since the COVID-19 pandemic, which creates its own dilemma in that if participation would have been more meaningful in person, or whether the time and expense of travelling for a 15-minute participation would be too costly. While it is beyond the scope of this study to answer this dilemma, it is worth highlighting given the potential for expectations, doubts, and worries about attending a Channel panel for the first time and removing the 'mystery' from it that could be alleviated better in person. The above participant seemed to expect a longer and more demanding participation in Channel, so it leaves a question of how effectively non-standing members are engaged by Channel, bearing in mind standing members are less likely to have met the individual referred or have any relationship with them. Having said that, Channel are supplied with the Prevent referral and a 15-minute window could arguably be suitable when discussions are focused, and Channel members not having a relationship with the individual gives more weight for an appropriate person to take a lead role who may be a frontline practitioner, such as a social worker, carer, or an education worker.

The participant below was a social worker who had experienced only one Channel case across a career of nearly twenty years:

"...it could have gone really wrong if he wasn't known to mental health services...and I worked in mental health for close to 17 years. This was my first ever case...In the beginning, it felt a bit intimidating, to be honest, how they wanted the whole meetings quiet, and it felt a bit strange, to be honest...It felt different. It felt like secret service. Am I all right to say that?

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. Yeah. (Laughter)

RESPONDENT:

You know, I mean, am I allowed to say that? It felt like a secret service that... yeah, that's how it felt at the beginning. But yeah, it was okay. After a few meetings, it felt okay.

INTERVIEWER:

Which must look very strange for a social worker to be brought into that environment.

RESPONDENT:

Mm-hmm. It felt really strange. And I've been in the most... I'm an AMHP, so I've been in the most awkward situations. But this felt a bit odd" (P15: 150-200).

I included my own responses here to demonstrate my own application of humour and empathy in reassuring the participant, as they described Channel as intimidating and then asked me for permission to describe it as the Secret Service, which conjured up images in my mind of espionage movies such as *James Bond* (Fleming, 1953). This is in stark contrast to other experiences of recognising typical safeguarding mechanisms. Of note also is the participant believing their involvement being key to not criminalising the patient due to their extremism being a manifestation of psychosis, reinforcing a safeguarding lens. It appears that the participant became accustomed to the work quickly or perhaps began to recognise where social work was fitting into Channel:

"It was very anonymous. You know, it was very hush hush. The meetings were quite strange. It was just me and the psychiatrist and the Prevent team. Nothing we said there was recorded...We had really stringent rules around the meeting, really. Yeah, and when this guy came, the guy was moved from the ward to another part of the hospital where they met. Yeah. It was all very hush hush..."

“However, after I’d had a couple of meetings with them, it felt all right”.

The participant’s overall experience is that it seemed very strange and secretive at first, but their experience had changed by the time the patient had completed their work with Channel. Some explanations could be that the participant’s extensive experience made the work of Channel paradoxically more jarring due to it being new compared to the rest of the role being very familiar and not involving counterterrorism. It would seem that gaining experience of Prevent could dispel myths or concerns. The participant mentioned the patient being taken to a different area of the hospital to work with Channel, which seems appropriate if we consider a counterterror presence being identified by other patients who may have issues with psychosis or various traumas. The key takeaway from this I find is the relationship between the social worker and patient, ensuring that the extremism was recognised as a further symptom of psychosis whilst recognising the patient still could have caused harm due to carrying a weapon in public, all fitting under the rubric of a safeguarding lens. This was identified as a pattern that participants largely were able to identify safeguarding mechanisms being prioritised within Channel.

While participants largely found panels to be a constructive space for healthy debate and assessing of cases and risk, there were notable exceptions to experiences. Participant Fourteen’s experience above indicates finding themselves excluded from a lot of the conversation in Channel, whilst other participants found disagreement between agencies attending Channel:

“I think it’s about them homing in on the risk, so what some agencies might see the cases having more high-risk issues, other agencies don’t see it as high a risk, and that might just be due to the type of work they’re doing. The police, obviously, their

benchmark for high risk is totally different from, maybe, mental health cases. I can give you a semi-example. We have one where essentially as we know Prevent and the Channel process is essentially consent-based...So, we had mental health social workers working with someone, a Black Muslim guy, who had previously had a lot of bad experiences with the police, so he was not going to engage with the panel process and the police didn't have that much knowledge on him, but they were saying, "He's high risk. We need all this information." Essentially, we chose not to give them that information. Our mental health social worker, with my guidance, we chose not to give them that information because the risk that they were saying was occurring wasn't actually correct...They just had him down as a statistic" (Participant One).

Several factors appear to be at play here, yet I am taking the opportunity to highlight that much criticism of Prevent comes from an angle of securitisation and surveillance, yet this social worker was able to choose which information was relevant to disclose. Being just one example, it also shows the key difference played by a social work presence also. This can be an uncomfortable place for practitioners to be however, as earlier in the study I touched upon the lethality of VJ terror attacks between 2005-2020, yet there is also the concern of Prevent's accusations of Islamophobia and racism in the police. This can leave professionals in ethical dilemmas and participants' experiences note the police in particular struggling with the Prevent space:

"Yeah, it does feel like all agencies versus the police at times".

"as social workers, or even other health professionals or whatever, we'll look at the community person-centred, while the police are very more operational based on the law. But I also think the police struggle with this area because Prevent is the pre-criminal space, isn't it? It's the space before, the last chance before we then go into

the pursue, or whatever, stage of the strategy. So, I think, for them, they struggle because it's like, 'We can't actually get you on any charges in this space, but we still want to act like we can'" (Participant One).

"I think the only the only thing is the legal remit, sometimes, because, obviously, mental health, people think... they have a misunderstanding, an assumption, about what powers you have in the context of somebody who's got a mental health diagnosis. And then, the police can misinterpret, actually, what you can do to protect the public because they think you have similar powers to them. But, actually, you don't. So I think it's about legal remits and roles" (Participant Three).

I have noted the potential for a conflation between Prevent and Pursue, with it not being surprising that it creates a particular dilemma for police whose primary role is arguably seen as responsible for apprehending those who have committed crimes. Therefore, it is understandable that police may find themselves 'looking' for a crime whilst social workers aim to protect, while health workers seek to treat. A counterterrorism officer discussed this dilemma and what it was like from their perspective:

"... it's quite a difficult one for us because Prevent is 100% of my world, it's what I work in, it's what I do every day...I think as well, there's times where we capture everything that we know, we have to be quite guarded around intelligence and how we've come about information...And so you'll have people from other agencies asking questions in Panel that you can't necessarily give them the full answer to, or what you would want to do. And I think there's maybe a lack of understanding around that. So that's an area that probably causes some difficulties. People then think you're being deliberately obtuse or elusive with information with them, but actually you can't share

that certain piece of information because of intelligence gradings and stuff like that. So that's probably the main difficulty that you'd have, and trying to get that understanding across to somebody who doesn't work in that world is perhaps difficult at times" (Participant Four).

This presents a valuable perspective to consider that the discretion may be essential to counterterrorism work where live investigations can be linked and practice bound by the policies and values of each organisation. Comparable examples are prevalent in social work, where families may seek information about a child, but the child is 17 years of age and of capacity to deny disclosure or under a Full Care Order (giving the Local Authority primary parental responsibility) and the Local Authority make the same choice, creating the potential for frustrations between families and agencies. Similarly, I have experienced situations where information is sought regarding a victim of a crime but police can withhold information where it can jeopardise another case awaiting trial. Contrasting this, another participant had much more positive experiences in working with all agencies and particularly referenced the police when asked about different agencies have conflicting stances:

"Not here, no and not in [other LA], to be fair. Everybody who works on the Channel Panel are all really really good at understanding each other's perspective. I have not come across any agency conflict if I'm absolutely honest. Even if there is that little bit, it's more of a learning perspective than a... no, I think they've been really good, to be fair, of the panels that I've worked on, the people that have been on them have been really good".

"I think they're really good. Specifically, honestly, the police in [LA] from a Channel perspective, are really really good. [Individual] is absolutely brilliant at explaining to

people and sharing what their goals and their intentions are. I think [individual] is actually a credit to them because the Panel is very good, the general workforce needs some development (laughs). That's the politest term (laughter) (Participant Six).

What is noticeable from this is that the participant is complimentary to their experiences of the police but acknowledges that this is not going to be universal. Given their role is also unconnected to the police it reduces the likelihood of seeking to uphold the reputation of one's own profession.

It has been argued in previous sections that social work can make a valuable contribution to the work of Prevent and Channel under a safeguarding framework with the ability for social interventions before a person passes the threshold for criminality. The participant below demonstrates experience of this in practice and navigating the boundary between Prevent and Pursue. In mentioning the similarities to existing safeguarding processes, the participant emphasised the need to maintain Channel's distinctiveness:

"Yeah, absolutely and we get that, a core group, child protection conferences, blah blah, you know, and as I said, Channel make it very clear to the workers involved that Channel does not replace any of that. Because historically, less so now, but historically I've seen...this young person is in Channel, as if to say everything (laughs) is being solved in that space and it's not. And it's reminding ourselves constantly around what the purpose of Channel is. We do need the information around what else is going on, to make sure that we're being effective, we're avoiding duplication, blah blah. But it does give us that time and space to look at the VAF, to look at the information we've got and to try and work out what we need really.

But consent, engagement, absolutely key along the way. And looking at who is best to support with that because you'll know this, consent one month might change. Something might influence, something might come in, might change their view. Who have we got that can continually support and have the right conversations around what we're trying to do? That might be an IP, that might be a social worker. It depends on the case really" (Participant Five).

Participant Five above emphasises the usefulness of a multi-agency approach to help identify who would be the most appropriate for the lead role. A stance is also taken regarding the unpredictability of the cases given that Prevent is based on voluntary engagement for those referred. In another instance of helpful multi-agency working, Participant One was a social worker dealing with a case where a flexible and creative approach was very helpful to manage risk and support an individual accepted for Channel support when radicalisation was jeopardising her career:

"For instance, she wasn't able to engage with work because of all this stress around the case, so we did things like support her, we were still paying her. It was quite different because instead of it being an agency that led on it, it was actually her manager that led on the case and was reporting back to Channel. We were doing things like paying her even though she wasn't at work, we were putting her on [new location] because she was [at previous location] and that was re-triggering her past traumas which was leading her into that National Front sort of world. So, I guess that was something that was innovative in that sense, and then we were bringing that back to Channel and providing support in a very flexible and robust way. But that was a one-off. Most of it in Channel and in subsequent work is a talking shop" (Participant One).

What can be seen here is a measured response in that rather than having Channel take control and have primacy in decision-making, the lead role was allocated to a professional that had an existing relationship with the individual and would be more likely to see them on a regular basis. The approach in ensuring the individual still had a job and salary could be divisive, but the participant adds that disciplinary routes were considered but “within Channel we were advocating that we weren’t going to do that because we wanted to give her a chance to be able to still engage in work, which was very important to her. So, that was a way that we used Channel to make those decisions”, with there being an argument that unemployment would be more likely to add to the risk of radicalisation by removing income, independence, and a healthy routine or purpose in the person’s life. While this create an opening for criticism of creating surveillance in the workplace, it could also be argued that the benefits raised here would outweigh or disprove that surveillance was the primary goal, with multiple agencies sharing oversight and responsibility.

A question may arise around the purpose of Channel when social interventions and safeguarding processes familiar to professionals already exist. Previously I have examined the knowledge base needed to understand concepts such as ideology and radicalisation, but in distinguishing the work of Channel, most participants made reference to ‘Intervention Providers’ (IPs) and one participant gave a synopsis of the role of IPs as:

“So, here, we’ve got a kind of blend: I mean, one of the unique things in terms of the value add of Channel is the access that Channel has to theological and ideological intervention providers that are fully vetted by the Home Office. Channel Panel chairs are given visibility of a catalogue of these intervention providers that they can use for interventions. And they might not be appropriate for everyone, because everyone’s

journey into terrorism is unique. The value of Channel is the way that we can put together very tailored and bespoke intervention packages around that individual. So, it's not a template approach at all" (Participant Sixteen).

This is consistent with descriptions found in Home Office publications (Home Office, 2024) and the participant notes that they are not a panacea due to the individual nature of referrals. However, who specific providers are was not always disclosed and any that I approached as part of this research declined any participation as discussed in a previous section, but were spoken of positively by many participants:

"Yes, I think there's some real strengths in it. It does reflect other multiagency meetings...The additional tool really that Channel Panels have are intervention providers, IPs...So I think it does reflect the merit of a pretty robust safeguarding process...I think it reflects those merits but the additional tool of actually getting an intervention provider in is probably what makes Channel Panel a bit different, because obviously it's got that external service" (Participant Twelve).

"most cases, we'll look at intervention providers" (Participant Seven).

"Yeah, so we use the Home Office intervention providers quite a lot for this sort of work really. With young people, particularly with autism etc. we've got very good local links with IPs who actually luckily for us reside in our area, which does make it easy to get hold of them. There's problems nationally, I think, with availability of IPs. So we're very lucky to have one of those on our doorstep really" (Participant Four).

This would indicate that processes of safeguarding are upheld which pre-existed Channel, with a more recent aspect being intervention providers, although the IP role shows a lot of similarity to mentoring youth support work, which Meleagrou-Hitchens (2022) highlights the extant use of for tackling gangs and grooming. The latter

participant makes an unsurprising point in that IPs vary across England and Wales given that most appear to be small and local organisations with Prevent funding historically varying by ‘priority’ areas and the levels of radicalisation identified. For example, areas such as Brighton would have a very different experience for professionals where cases such as the Deghayes family drew national interest, therefore bringing increased resources and oversight. For example if this is compared to somewhere like Gloucestershire, where the most notable recent case involved a former UK intelligence officer who stabbed a US government employee with suspected gendered motives (Robinson, Iyengar, and PA Media, 2023), this means the case would not be eligible for Prevent and therefore it can be understandable that IPs are going to be more readily in areas where Prevent is in higher demand.

Whilst it can be seen that IPs are generally specialists and well-regarded, not every participant shared this experience:

“I think a lot of these individuals are quite isolated...a lot of interventions are very one-on-one and quite isolating interventions, and part of these themes that come out in Prevent are people who are isolated, who don’t have a sense of identity or self...And there’s no way of testing it out, because someone can just come with disguises, especially you have your IP who comes and talks to you every so often about your extremist views, you can just go into a territory of disguised compliance...Who’s to say that you’re really cured or deradicalized? Even though it takes several years, if ever, to do so, test it out, put them in settings and community settings where they have to engage with other communities that they have distrust for...My experiences have been quite minimal with them. I think some of it might be to do with protecting them, their identities, because I guess some of them used to be radicalised, weren’t they...But I’ve found them quite ineffectual in my experience. I’m not saying that that’s it for the

whole...With one person that I was working with, the one that was working with Tommy Robinson, she would be having phone calls with her IP, but her IP never turned up to any of the Channel panels. Or the IP would be emailing the police and saying, "I couldn't get hold of her this week." So, it was just a very ineffectual process. I've never heard anyone say that it's been quite transformative in that respect...I was shocked. This was really high profile, and when I used to go to Channel we never met the IP once. We just heard about them through the police" (Participant One).

From the above it can be seen that in addition to availability issues there are also practical issues with IPs. I share the concerns with the participant that the IP was not attending Channel and simply sending emails to the police, however in a frontline practice setting, reaching out to people can be unpredictable and it would make sense not to attend Channel if the update was simply going to be no update, yet it sounds like professionals were accepting of the disengagement and the consent-based ethos of Channel can make direct work unpredictable. The above extract is quite meaningful and provides a lot to analyse from an epistemological perspective also. I previously considered the challenges in conceptualising radicalisation and ideology, while this participant has raised a dimension of how we evidence meaningful progress in terms of 'deradicalisation'. This has been explored in the vast literature such as distinguishing between behavioural and cognitive aspects of radicalisation, with behavioural being much more obvious due to empirical evidence, which leaves a potentially uncomfortable scenario of not fully knowing a person is no longer a risk. Several participants mentioned the reassurance gained from multiple agencies assessing a case and finding the risk to be at a level where Channel is no longer needed. P1 again had relevant experiences of this that spoke from a social work perspective:

“I think a lot of it is risk-averse behaviour. I’m quite a positive risk person but, again, being a social worker, we’re used to being in the thick of it in very tense situations in people’s homes. We’re used to that positive risk-taking, but if you’re just sitting in an in-patient, controlled ward setting, your ability to tolerate risk is different, so you would push it further up, wouldn’t you?” (Participant One).

To intervene in a person’s life without consent requires legal powers, to be gained by strong evidence of risk and an intervention’s necessity. As a social worker this has been a learning curve in my early career, accepting and sitting with ‘the unknown’ despite societal or professional presumptions of what powers a social worker should have. In being a multi-agency panel, Channel unsurprisingly brought multiple perspectives to cases which the participants discussed and this became a meaningful pattern I found to be worthy of a theme as it encapsulated many other experiences discussed by participants. The pattern of adopting a safeguarding lens was consistent throughout with some deliberations between agencies on gauging risk and information-sharing. A unique aspect of Channel is the use of Intervention Providers, with participants having varying degrees of experience in their use. The IPs were generally a positive experience but one participant particularly questioned their effectiveness and another was lamenting the ‘postcode lottery’ nature much like many services across Britain. Overall, a safeguarding model is evident within Channel and promoted by participants, however several acknowledged this may also develop in a different directions and I choose to emphasise the social nature of many interventions which should retain a place for social work to continue to be involved in Channel.

4.3 Theme Three: Angry Young Men - Gendering Radicalisation.

When I examined the Prevent referrals since 2016 in a previous section there were notable changes across the years – the ages in referrals decreased, the ideological alignment saw RWE increase whilst VJ decreased, and taxonomical changes saw the retiring of the ‘MUU’ category and emergence of those such as ‘conflicted’ or ‘incel’. What remained stable throughout the years of Prevent statistics available was that males comprised most of the referrals where gender is recorded. This is not surprising to scholars and practitioners, yet while research has increasingly focused on this aspect of radicalisation, explanations for this have not come to concrete conclusions. I take inspiration from Pearson (2024) in this analysis as she takes on a nuanced perspective of gender and radicalisation as:

“a blind spot in mainstream radicalisation models. Women's radicalisation has been relegated to a sub-category, with gender a synonym for sex, further read as women's sex: an outlier variable in the radicalisation equation. Men are generally regarded as gender-neutral, their masculinity unconsidered. When gender is applied to men, they are exceptionalised and seen as deviant and toxic” (p. 63).

It is impossible for rigorous studies on radicalisation to omit the role of gender, so I adopted the “angry young men” element from experiences shared by participants so that I was more confident the theme was being identified in the data and not the interview questions as cautioned by Braun and Clarke (2022). First, I explored participants' immediate experiences of gender in Channel, followed by considering whether female radicalisation is a blind spot for practitioners, and how they navigated aspects such as structure and agency in perceiving women's roles in radicalisation.

While some participants had fewer experiences within Channel, all showed an understanding of radicalisation being male dominated at least statistically:

“I would say the broad demographics are vastly disproportionately males...nationally reflected as well in the data on Channel cases...disproportionately males under 30” (Participant Twelve).

“I’m representing mental health. They’ve all been male. Even the ones on there that haven’t got a mental health need, they’ve all been male” (Participant Three).

“normally your radicalised young people are males and the only dealing I have had is with a male. So I wonder whether there’s a dearth of focus on female radicalisation. Obviously in the news we had the three girls run off to Syria and things like that, and I wonder whether the response would have been different if they were male” (Participant Thirteen).

“I would say that the large percentage is male. The small percentage is female. And I think it’s because females are more secretive. They can hold something better than a male can. Males feel the need to get it out there. I think females are more savvy about what they’re going to say and how they’re going to say it and what it brings to them” (Participant Seven).

These are extracts from professionals across mental health, social work, and counterterrorism. Each participant was able to give varying insights into possible explanations as to why males are so prevalent, but the constant across all participants was that practice reflected the Prevent statistics. Participant Thirteen is considering perceptions of sex in terms of how risk is responded to in the case of Shamima Begum and her friends, Sharmeena, Amira, and Kadiza, while Participant Seven considers how males and females may differ in terms of expressing themselves. Other

participants experienced this quandary of discerning agency from structure which I will return to later, while participants also noted that gender was not an isolated factor in referrals:

“it’s angry men, or young people. They all seem to be really angry and upset with where their place is in society, or their presumption of where their place should be in society and not fitting into that. So, they’re people who are loners, who are isolated but also angry that they’re not able, that’s what we’re seeing. I never, ever hear any of them, they come from like a 2.4 happy family, where everyone’s engaged. There’s always some form of additional trauma that is now manifesting in this new Incel movement, or referral process, or being referred in, to a degree” (Participant One).

The anger mentioned by this participant helped to inspire the name of this theme and is meaningful due to its prevalence throughout radicalisation, however Participant One adds that “there’s a question about men and why is it they can only express emotions via being happy or violent, essentially” indicating an observable difference between males and females similar to Participant Seven’s comment about females being more secretive. While there is ample research around socialisation and the roles of nature versus nurture, some participants experienced uncertainty about the prevalence of males:

“I don’t know actually. The majority of people that we discussed in Channel tend to be male...white male...We did have a female, but they’re less frequent. The issue about gender has been more in terms of people’s beliefs against gender...And that’s where gender perhaps has come in of, like I say, about the Andrew Tate sort of...hatred towards other people, females being one. Somebody who is gay, so that homophobic sort of stuff...the people we’re discussing do tend to be, I think, more male. And I never

really asked about why that is. And I don't know the number of... I don't know what gets presented to the Prevent officers for consideration. That might be interesting. Are they screening people in and out, who gets referred in? I don't know. Do we tend to see it in males more than females because that's a training need, I don't know" (Participant Two).

"there's a teenager, and actually, one of them is a female, which I haven't come across, and I know I'm not very experienced in it. But, I haven't come across a young female with such vocal views" (Participant Ten).

Participant Two above reflected with me during the interview why it is that males dominate the referrals whilst Participant Ten acknowledged their inexperience with experience females being radicalised. Neither participant attempted to 'reach' for an answer and acknowledged this as something they simply did not know and considered it as a training need, which is a point worth considering as RWE referrals notably increased alongside increased awareness of it through training. The mention of Andrew Tate may evidence this, given that his social media reach seemed to become too great to ignore until reports emerged of his arrests (Rainsford, 2024), meaning many practitioners will have been sent briefings about his potential influence indicated by Participant Two stating "there was some guidance that went around about that" in reference to education providers receiving guidance about Andrew Tate's influence alongside "incel beliefs, that came up...that followed around the guy in Plymouth" in reference to the Jake Davison killings in 2021 (Carr, 2023), supposedly linked to an incel ideology. These, combined with my noting earlier that Prevent statistics distinguishing an incel category only recently, it is possible for an impression that Prevent and Channel may be 'catching up' as opposed to pre-empting trends in radicalisation. Having said that, Jake Davison did appear to display a connection

between his views and a risk of violence, while it appears violent misogyny has been raised as an issue consistently nationally and globally but it appears to have been too malignant of an issue to assign comfortably to one government department. In discussing ideology P16 noted that RWE referrals existed before 2011 but refocused training from the Prevent duty coincided with increased RWE referrals, so it may be that similar has taken place regarding Andrew Tate and incel ideology, bearing in mind the overlap with other forms of RWE.

Other immediate presentations between males and females were described by participants:

“Yeah, I would certainly say with the females that we’ve encountered, that have been referred in, have all been isolated. They’ve not been getting that support elsewhere. Whereas that’s not the common thread with males, it’s such a broad spectrum with males that come in. But perhaps that’s to be expected because we get so many more than we do female” (Participant Four).

This participant touches upon another ‘dark’ area of Channel’s work by which I mean the knowledge we may be lacking. Given that most referrals are male, it is possible for patterns and generalisations to be drawn, but with so few females it is difficult to discern meaningful differences beyond their gender. The participant notes that their experiences of female referrals have seen isolation as a recurring factor, yet this also occurs with males but is not exclusive to them so therefore it would not seem to be a deciding factor in risk of radicalisation. The participant shows caution not to assume any differences between genders or to hinge analysis on that sole characteristic. Participant Thirteen also made reference to this above when discussing Shamima Begum, with some participants also experiencing similar reflections on their practice:

“80-90% of the cases we’re seeing are still male. I think we have had some adopted Channel cases around, that involve females. And I think reflecting on this question, I do wonder whether the wider professional group viewed her in a different way...She had a particular interest in school shootings and Columbine and shared that rhetoric. And was left a little bit within her setting, in her education setting. We had to push for a more secure support mechanism for her. There was a lot going on for this young person. She did have an IP, she had an excellent relationship with her early-help worker. There was a lot of support and the Counter Terrorism policing did loads of work with her actually, which is quite unusual. There was a particular officer that she engaged with really well and so he continued to work with her. I just wonder on reflection whether if a young male was sharing the same rhetoric about shooting up schools etc. whether there would be a tighter grip, if that makes sense? And that might be inappropriate, equally, they might have gone down straight into a criminal route, I don’t know. But it was more of a...a very supportive environment eventually. But initially very limited reaction from the setting, if that makes sense? Whereas I wondered if it was a young male, because we’re talking plus-16 here, whether they would have reacted in the same way, I don’t know...Whether there’s, I don’t know, further work to be done in recognising the cohort, I don’t know. I do wonder, and I’m only basing it on that case, and in reflection, whether professionals react differently to young females as opposed to young males, I don’t know” (Participant Five).

This lengthy extract details the experience this worker at Channel had when overseeing a female case. In a vein similar to Participant Two, the participant reflects with me during the interview and shows trepidation over the approach taken with the role of gender. While there appeared to be effective support, perceptions of gender gave the participant pause for thought, considering that viewing a female as less

threatening could have led to practitioners avoiding a more criminalising approach. This is an experience familiar across crime at a general level (Holland and Prohaska, 2021) and within sexual offending (Beeby, Hobbs, Gross, Hayne and Patterson, 2021), where females can be seen to receive less punitive sentences than males when accounting for other contextual factors. While it is not possible to ascertain cause and effect, it is important to acknowledge this participant's experience and the imbalance of gender in statistics. Similarly, it can also be the case that a risk cannot be missed which does not exist in the first place, as described by another participant:

“But the vast, vast majority of what we’re seeing come through is male and if I’m honest, I’ve never had a Prevent referral for a female where I thought there was threat and risk of them going out and doing something. It was more the threat and risk of where it might eventually lead in the early part of those paths. The females that we have had that have come in have been more isolated. They’ve not had good friendship groups; they’ve not had much going on. Whereas that’s not a pattern with the males. We do get isolated individuals, but we also get young people who are the popular, cool kids in school who are going down the right-wing pathway. But with the females we’ve had, it has been pretty much people who are neurodiverse and isolated and then have gone to the online world to find their way, if that makes sense” (Participant Four).

This was the experience of a counterterrorism officer, meaning they would have had more information about cases than most professionals due to higher security gradings. For them to evaluate risk as minimal with females could have epistemic authority, although caution should be exercised in interpretation as this is the experience of a single officer. The officer notes a prevalence of neurodiversity and isolation, which will be explored in more depth for the final theme as there seem to be many factors overlapping with gender that raise a risk of overstating the role of gender.

Related to these discussions of female prevalence and perceptions of risk, participants also made reference to uncertainties around structure versus agency and the roles of females within radicalisation:

“...the ISIS sort of stuff is that women are sort of servant-y...The right wing, some of those groups are very sort of ‘women should be seen, not heard’ in some of their views, especially obviously the incels are ‘women are objects and should be used’, same with Tate. So, it does feel there's less space within the extremist groups for females to be more prominent, but you see the odd few come through. But I think sometimes they have to be then more extreme to make themselves more prominent. That's what we've seen in some of the sort of fringe groups, sort of a couple of people in the Britain First and those sort of spaces. The females in there are always quite outspoken because they appear to be trying to make themselves more, like ‘I am 100% in’ rather than most groups, most people that join probably can just sit in the back and be quiet. If you've got a woman there, they probably feel they have to be a bit more outward” (Participant Nine).

This is congruent with what Pearson described as radicalisation being a “project of masculinity” (Pearson, 2024: 35), as the participant above has experienced females needing to ‘prove’ that they belong in these radicalised spaces in ways that would not apply if they were male, with both VJ and RWE radicalisation appearing to reproduce the patriarchal ideology identifiable across many extremist groups. This is further seen with another participant's cases of female radicalisation wherein the female seemed to be at the centre of a lot of male attention:

“Interestingly, she has more male friends than she does female. She has a background of a difficult relationship with men, older men. And what came about as part of this, as

well, that... sorry, I should have said it earlier on. One of the themes is that she's also known to have online relationships, friendships... nothing more sinister than that, but online friendships with males from America, certain parts of America. So that's also then needed to be explored in terms of, "Well, what's the content of those relationships?"...But I think it's a young woman who is particularly vulnerable and seeking out male attention. Whereas, I think sometimes, the experiences with the boys, the males, is a little bit different in terms of their journey (Participant Fourteen)".

Of note here also is that the participant refers to the young person as 'vulnerable'. Given that their job role is safeguarding and not directly under Prevent or Channel, it is more tangible to see a conceptualisation of viewing radicalisation as a matter of exploitation rather than individual choice. While this participant's role was a setting specific to young people, participants generally experienced young ages of individuals being referred to Prevent and Channel which appears to overlap with concerns vulnerability and exploitation. The first theme discussed experiences of navigating the vulnerability and susceptibility spectrums but with gender I identified an added dimension in the form of structure versus agency, which I found to be a pattern of meaning in the dataset wherein practitioners attempt to navigate this grey area introspectively and with colleagues on Channel panels. P16 in particular spent substantial time with me reflecting on this, using the famous example of Shamima Begum for reference:

"And they were framed as vulnerable and groomed. Whereas, I mean, the interesting bit there, if it was three young boys, they would be immediately framed as terrorists, and yeah, 'Punitive actions needs to be taken, rather than support'" (Participant Sixteen).

Participant Thirteen also raised this above, showing that practitioners are reflecting on both professional and media portrayals of young people being radicalised and how this may be influencing practice. This participant adds depth to a basic gender comparison:

“And there was this real reluctance to talk about just how motivated they were. I mean, they stole money, they stole their passports. I mean, the trip they had to take required a lot of personal commitment to the cause. It’s not an easy journey, to get to ISIS-controlled territory. So, I suppose the risk for me is, if you’ve got a young woman that you’re framing as vulnerable and groomed, just by virtue of the fact that she’s a woman rather than a man, then you actually remove a lot of agency from that woman, because she could be a rational actor, making a choice, certain choices based upon the information that she’s gleaned” (Participant Sixteen).

This participant challenges assumptions of vulnerability particularly in the case of Shamima Begum because this assumption seemed to be predicated on her gender and few other factors entered mainstream discourses which could have contradicted this. A journalist has also charted the course of Shamima and her three friends, Sharmeena, Amira, and Kadiza, describing Sharmeena as the ‘opinionated’ member of the group (Moaveni, 2020: 106). However, what also has received less attention are factors such as Sharmeena attending a mosque where she is befriended by two female Muslims that supported ISIS in Syria at the time and Sharmeena began to follow the blog of Aqsa Mahmood, another well-known female supporter of VJ (p. 109). While this indicate greater agency than some media portrayals, other factors were identified with this group of females worth considering, such as Sharmeena having lost her mother to cancer around a year before leaving for Syria, followed by delays in reunification with her father who had delayed approval to enter Britain due to economic

barriers (p.106), adding a strong element of loss and isolation to Sharmeena's case, which Participant Sixteen also progresses to consider:

"And for me, it's very much centred around her case, because she is the kind of, the one we were all talking about. Was she vulnerable? Well, she was vulnerable by virtue of her age, solely. I mean, could she be a rational thinker that's travelled on her own volition? If she was 10 years older, would she be vulnerable? All these kinds of theoretical questions started being bounced around. And I think we landed on... I think some of us within this sector were talking about susceptibility rather than vulnerability years before this, because it feels more comfortable, because you can be susceptible and vulnerable, but you can be susceptible without necessarily being vulnerable, because I'm very cautious to remove agency from albeit a child, to make decisions"

While it is unsurprising for such a high-profile case to influence policy as the participant suggests, it is also of note that they said practitioners had already been navigating the quandary of vulnerability and susceptibility, as discussed in theme one, long before Shawcross (2023) drew attention to it at a time when the ages of those referred had been decreasing year-on-year. The same participant also stated that societal understandings and perceptions could be having epistemological implications:

"So, I think it's not just terrorist groups that have gendered perspectives on the role of women within the groups. But, I think we have societal gendered perspectives on what's comfortable for us, when we think about young girls being drawn into terrorism. But, I think the numbers of young women being involved are increasing".

In this I identified two points of note. One is the consideration that female referrals are likely to increase, but also the potential for public attention to influence counterterrorism policy. It has been discussed in an earlier section that the decision to remove Shamima

Begum's citizenship can be argued as reactionary politics, prioritising political gain over national security. While this research has a focus on what practitioners are experiencing within Channel, the wider Prevent and CONTEST policies can have a significant impact on frontline practice and there may be significant meaning in the participant indicating that as a society the idea of a female perpetrating terror attacks seems so abhorrent and implausible that the reaction would be more punitive as a result.

To conclude analysis of this theme I have selected a further extract as Participant Sixteen went into depth to consider why there is a prevalence of males, whilst other participants took a reflective approach or noted it left them feeling uncertain:

"Why is it a male phenomenon? Well, because... people have looked at this. I mean, my sense of the cases that I've managed is that it's that sense of almost religious duty. Men tend to be more task orientated, and sense of status kind of leans into those male traits of being the protector, of being the defender of a particular group of people. Well, you know, terrorist radicalisers lean into that in a big way, to say, "If you're unhappy about your lot in life, there's something you can do about it. It's your duty to do this, as a man." So, it's playing very much into that, again, social construct of what a man is, and the male role in not just society, but in smaller social groupings, within small, sometimes quite insular communities".

While the participant makes reference to religious duty, I find it additionally meaningful to consider the use of the term 'almost' and 'duty', as the participant has a breadth of experience in Channel from when VJ cases were most prevalent but appears to see a similarity in RWE and other forms of radicalisation such as the martyrdom of Elliot

Rodger by incels or the vanguardism seen in RWE and VJ to 'defend' themselves from an oppressor, all of which appears to play on a specific narrative of masculinity.

The final theme will also explore the role of the internet further, but it is worth noting here what another participant expects to see in future after several years of experience on Channel panels:

"I think young women are probably using the internet a lot more and I think they'll just be as susceptible to radicalisation as young men are, moving forwards" (Participant Six).

This participant shares the expectations of Participant Sixteen above. While research can indicate that younger males have substantially more screentime than females (O'Brien et al., 2021), this does not mean that female screentime is not of concern. ISIS infamously made use of social media to target both males and females as seen with Aqsa Mahmood (McDonald, 2018), whilst RWE groups appear to be savvier in recent years with social media usage particularly with the emergence of less familiar platforms (Collins, 2024), however the role of the internet means that female engagement with radicalisation is difficult to predict in the future. As can be seen from the exploration of this theme, radicalisation continues to evolve, whilst the prevalence of males has remained static and dominant at least in terms of statistics yet competing understandings of this leave sizable gaps in knowledge which primary research will be essential to fill. Participants note the role of anger, status, vanguardism, and particularly violent misogyny, whilst others warn against the fallacy of viewing them purely as vulnerable or lacking in agency and destined for roles in servitude (Moaveni, 2020). Pearson (2024) argues that radicalisation itself is "a project of masculinity" (p. 24) and the experiences of my participants appears to add weight to this claim.

4.4 Theme Four: The Multi-Faceted Nature of Radicalisation

To explain the name of this theme, I was conscious that at this point in our understanding of radicalisation across the wider literature it has arguably become somewhat of an adage that there is no single pathway to radicalisation and no single profile of a terrorist. While this was unsurprisingly reflected in the dataset, a myriad of factors was identified in Channel cases that participants experienced beyond gender and ideology as discussed in previous themes. Within the plethora of risk and vulnerability factors, some arose with identifiable consistency and meaning, particularly the role of the internet and neurodivergence. 'Digital natives' is a term a participant describes as how young people in the modern day have been exposed to the internet since birth, a claim that participants and I make due to our ages and professional roles. Neurodivergence (or neurodiversity) will be explained further below but generally is an umbrella term for conditions such as autism, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), and many others, while mental health is a well-studied aspect of radicalisation historically, with Brooks and Greenberg (2021) describing the evidence as "mixed" (p.8). This theme encapsulates how participants experienced these different combinations of factors alongside the wider contexts within which we live globally, conveying forms of radicalisation emerging that are more complex and giving practitioners more challenges in comprehending and responding to them.

'Digital Natives' is a term attributed to Prensky (2001: 1) to describe a generation of people to "have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video games, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age" (p. 1) and his concerns that this impacted their education alongside 'Digital Immigrants' who have had to adapt to these new technologies in their adulthoods. One participant took this definition a step further:

“I think we’re noticing that it’s a fairly stable young demographic, those that are, let’s say, more internet savvy. You’re under 19...at college downwards, they’re more, that phrase they use, they’re ‘digital natives,’ they’re online for everything. So why would they not be online for this sort of effort as well?...We did have a fairly healthy amount of adults pre-Covid, but that was because in that respect people had the assumption of travel. That just diminished, but referrals tend to be in that under-19 space. You sometimes get a few adults, but it tends to be young people that we see more often than not” (Participant Eight).

The participant associates ‘digital’ with specifically internet access rather than the media listed by Prensky’s original definition. While the concept of a Digital Native is still under debate (David, 2022; Reid, Button, and Brommeyer, 2023), I find it a helpful term to encapsulate something that two participants described in reference to the internet rather than general digital technology:

“...they’re constantly bombarding themselves with different ideologies online. So, but the predominant threat profile from all of the stuff that I’m seeing right now is a young man presenting with autism, autistic traits, a digital native. So, heavily engaged online, particularly the deep web, and with what we would frame as a mixed or unclear ideology, but I would frame as a composite ideology” (Participant Sixteen).

‘Composite’ is a term that reflects the ‘perfect storm’ chosen for this theme’s title, with being a ‘Digital Native’ as described by Participant Eight identifiable as a vulnerability factor. Most participants cited the internet as playing a substantial and pervasive role in modern radicalisation but also not the only factor or often not the most concerning factor, demonstrated by how prevalent social media and smartphone usage is compared to how few become radicalised due to this exposure with Participant Two

noting this further below. As the previous themes have discussed, radicalisation does not happen in a vacuum and one participant described further the multi-faceted nature of modern radicalisation:

“Over the last 18 months a number of young people disengaged from education and predominantly using the online space. So the use of platforms like Discord are coming out more within our referrals. Often known to Children and Family Services, but that might be because of our referral routes in [Local Authority]. So any Prevent referral comes through our safeguarding route. So it obviously goes to the Counter Terrorism policing unit, but at the same time it’s coming through our [multi-agency hub]...they’re also looking at the information in those referrals to see if there is wider support needed than just Prevent...Because often... I can’t think of one case where a concern about a vulnerability to terrorism is the only concern. There’s usually lots going on, domestic abuse, family breakdown, mental health, all those influences. Our geography is huge...I don’t think there is any area of [County] that hasn’t had a Prevent referral” (Participant Five).

It would be possible to quote similar extracts from many participants, so I have selected this articulate yet concise quote for the sake of brevity as the factors noted help demonstrate the multi-faceted nature I have been referring to. I have mentioned in an earlier section around the online space having a lack of regulation, existing as a ‘law of the jungle’ as described by Molnar (2021: 1122). As I raised this with participants, they were able to give both personal and professional experiences of it:

“the internet for young people... well, for anybody...is a challenge to your own emotional wellbeing, even as a stable well-formed rounded adult... So, for young people who are going through just growing up, let’s be honest (laughs), it’s hard

enough to get through teen years without having all sorts of different misinformation and all sorts of ideology put in front of you...like you say, it's not policed enough is it?...I mean as a parent...I'll be absolutely honest with you... the biggest challenge we had is music videos, magazines and movie stars...You had them to compare yourself to and then if you put your magazine down or turned the telly off you walked away" (Participant Six).

As mentioned earlier with Frensky's definition of a 'Digital Native', what this participant and others indicate is that it is specifically the internet but also the omnipresence of the internet that has become an increasingly concerning factor in radicalisation. As the participant above stated, televisions and magazines can simply be put down and walked away from, however it is now normalised that smartphones always reside within our grasp and are involved in everything from checking the weather to job-hunting, creating constant opportunities to feed information to recipients. Conversely, some participants also noted the ambiguous nature of exploring online content:

"that's one of the things that I think the social worker was debating, was saying, "Yeah, but because he's gone on there, I don't think that means that he really believes that way." So if you visited a website or a couple of websites, you've navigated around a chat room, is that really you being risk of being now, you know, radicalised or anything. Or actually are you just navigating your way around the internet and the fact that somebody says, "Don't do it," so if you go onto... if you go on the dark web or whatever, then there's something just, lots of kids are doing it. And I don't know whether we always get that sense...we debated this quite a lot actually" (Participant Two)

This participant also touches upon how little is known both about the potential danger and to what extent children are accessing radicalising material online. They do not go

as far to say that shielding them from such content could have the opposite effect of arousing curiosity further, however by debating it 'quite a lot' it also shows both a healthy discussion alongside uncertainty that Channel practitioners are dealing with considering that practitioners are likely to be Digital Immigrants rather than Natives. While specific statistics are impossible to ascertain, it is reported that most children in Britain owned a smartphone at age 12 by the time the first COVID-19 lockdown approached (Ibbetson, 2020). When we have increasingly younger people owning smartphones, accessing the internet and social media as globally we entered a pandemic that pushed work and learning further online, it brings an evolution of risk that perhaps many did not see coming, as many participants also reflected on the impact this period had on their work and experiences with Channel:

"I think Covid had quite an impact on the types of cases we're seeing. Pretty much everything we're seeing now has an online footprint and people have kind of been drawn down rabbit holes online perhaps, which is a bit of a change from what it was when I first came in, where it was a bit more broader spectrum and things coming from a variety of sources...we used to get referrals from job centres, members of the public, from the local police, based on what they'd encountered through conversation with people...I think it's the real increase in young people having spent large periods of time online, perhaps less checks going on, less coverage of what it is that they're looking at from parents. We're seeing a couple of more high-profile cases in [Local Authority] where kids who were just left in their bedroom and left to their own devices for hours on end, who kind of then gone down these rabbit holes. That kind of stuff has always gone on, but it feels like that's much more frequent and a much more common thing since Covid I'd say...we're still seeing the after effects of it now, some of the referrals that we're getting now, when you sit down and speak to these people,

it's behaviours that started during Covid, through change in their online behaviour, change in people's social dynamics and stuff like that. I think it's had a real huge impact. I think that view is shared by most people I work with in Prevent, that it was a bit of a line in the sand moment and a bit of a change for us" (Participant Four).

"I think the trajectory has broadly been more and more far right over the last year...a couple of years ago it was bit more evenly spread between far right and Islamist...A lot of the thinking around that as well in the Channel Panels and listening to different professionals, has been the impact of Covid. With Covid, you obviously had a lot of people in lockdown for months at a time, spent a huge amount of time online and the anti-Covid conspiracy theories around government lockdowns and challenging the BBC, challenging these institutions, that seemed to dovetail quite closely with some of the far-right movements that leapt on that conspiracy theory around Covid as well. I think that led to a lot of people being more susceptible maybe to some of these far-right narratives that previously, they weren't really exposed to...it opened the gateway to more people, I'd say, getting drawn into some of these more fringe ideas around the far right that previously they hadn't really been susceptible to...certainly the last year and a half has been lots of different people really struggling with mental health, struggling with managing to get back into school routine after lockdowns, struggling with friendships, all these different things came together with more and more people spending huge amounts of time online, particularly young boys, young boys isolated online, things like that" (Participant Twelve).

If we consider that lockdowns saw education move online it follows that children would have spent increasing amounts of time not only online but also potentially unsupervised as many parents would have worked from home during this period or may have been key workers or essential workers such as in supermarkets. In a typical

school day, children will potentially encounter multiple professionals including teachers, teaching assistants, additional needs or support workers, creating many opportunities for concerns to be picked up in casual conversation or even from overheard conversations between students or staff. A lot of human contact and the social element of this was stripped away during this time, removing the opportunity for identification and intervention. Both participants above note a combination of factors, with the pandemic being pivotal or perhaps acting as a catalyst. The participant above also noted that referrals historically would have come from places such as job centres or members of the public, which on one hand explains why referrals are getting younger but on the other hand leaving a question as to what is happening to those not being identified in places like job centres.

Radicalisation is rarely the reason why a professional such as a social worker is working with an individual but having the opportunity to explore a person's wider context can help identify these concerns early, making this multi-faceted nature important for professionals to understand. For example, I recall that as a student social worker during the onset of the pandemic and first lockdown in 2020, one of the strategies social workers were given was to stand outside a window of the child's home to see them as we spoke to them using our mobile phones. I found this level of contact with children to be very insufficient as a replacement for standard statutory visits (legally required visits to monitor their care plan) where I would be observing the child interacting with a home environment and viewing their bedroom, which is a mandatory element of statutory visits also. Understanding a young person's lived experience like this creates valuable opportunities for identifying risks particularly where an online aspect may be involved.

Participants above speak of behaviours that likely began during lockdowns which resonates with another participant's experience of the comparative isolation brought about through the internet:

"When I was younger, you would go out and play, wouldn't you? So, you had something to sort of snap you out of it and engage in society, but now you can spend 12 hours online, and with these algorithms people just continue to show you the same things that you're Googling and reinforcing your very small worldview. I think that's why we're seeing people who are more angry and who are more likely to be led into these extremist views" (Participant One).

Participants appeared to place substantial meaning on the effect of being increasingly online resulting in 'rabbit holes', 'silos', or 'echo chambers'. I noted above that through attending school or other typical experiences growing up, a person will encounter a range of people and therefore likely a diverse range of perspectives. This may be key where friends, family, or professionals such as teachers and social workers are involved, with critical thinking and challenging perspectives being key to our work. This is at odds with online platforms whose success depends on a person's commitment or repeated visits (known as 'traffic'), with diverse perspectives likely meaning diverse sources which would take a user away from the aforementioned platform that seeks to hold their attention. This phenomenon has gained the interest of researchers who have highlighted the internet as an unregulated space, akin to the 'law of the jungle' (Molnar, 2021: 1122), however also that the picture may be more nuanced as indicated by Participant Two noting that the internet should not be seen as holistically dangerous (Wolfowicz, Hasisi, and Weisburd, 2022). This is where vulnerability and susceptibility may play a role as indicated in the first theme, but also guidance or supervision for young people which will be referenced by participants below. Yet from the evidenced

found here there seems to be a loss of control of the online space given the surge of use during lockdowns and increasing access of younger 'Digital Natives' who on one hand are savvy in navigating and communicating via social media, whilst on the other hand seem to be vulnerable to radicalising material and lack safeguarding or supervision, with even professionals struggling to keep up.

In addition to the role of the internet, research has recently discussed a prominence of neurodivergence particularly in younger Prevent referrals, but I was taken aback at how prevalent it became in the dataset, experienced by almost every participant, with worrying implications for stigmatisation:

"Yeah, we're getting lots of cases with mental health struggles. Maybe potential ASD or neurodiversity issues, but a lot of them aren't diagnosed. We're still seeing a bit of the fallout from lockdown and the large amounts of time people spent online during that, especially young people" (Participant Nine).

"I mean we've always seen neurodiverse people referred into Channel, but I think the capability of neurodiverse people to interact with the internet is probably coming more to the fore now. People who have those issues who might have had good support networks around them, a lot of that stopped during Covid, and started spending hours and hours and hours online and then going down these rabbit holes as a key thing" (Participant Four).

"So, but the predominant threat profile from all of the stuff that I'm seeing right now is a young man presenting with autism, autistic traits, a digital native" (Participant Sixteen).

"...seeing that, neurodiversity a lot...I don't know whether it's ADHD or non-diagnosed...and the employment bit tends to be an issue as well. Sometimes, people

can't hold down the job...trying to manage their emotions, and anger, and frustration, and all of that entwined in it all" (Participant Ten).

"Young people, autism, a range of different issues, that's always existed. I think what we've seen over the last eight years is a broader awareness from professionals around Prevent. So we've definitely seen an increase in the number of cases. And appropriate referrals coming through, and that's probably around the training and understanding" (Participant Five).

"I'd say a huge percentage is either diagnosed or undiagnosed ASD. That seems to be the driver. Attached to that is mental health. There is always some form of mental health in there. Sometimes, it's an ASD and mental health. But the majority is either ASD or mental health. It's one of the two. That's where your vulnerabilities are" (Participant Seven).

There are several concerns arising from how Channel practitioners may be conceptualising neurodivergence. As seen from the above extracts, neurodivergence itself is a vast concept encapsulating an equally vast spectrum in terms of diagnosis and presentations, with diagnostic labels not always being welcomed by service users or professionals. That is not to mention also "undiagnosed ASD" which is further problematic as unqualified professionals risk making assumptions. Therefore, when discussing neurodivergence it would appear that no two professionals may even be discussing the same 'thing', making generalisations unhelpful and risking stigmatising neurodivergent groups.

Adding to the above, even where forms of neurodivergence can be confirmed the evidence in susceptibility to radicalisation remains unconvincing, as Al-Attar (2018) has noted empirical evidence is lacking to show any particular susceptibility to

radicalisation, instead arguing that it should be seen as a contextual factor (Al-Attar, 2020), similar to what I have identified in this theme as a complex and multi-faceted understanding of radicalisation presentation that cannot be reduced to isolated factors or a checklist of factors gained through practice wisdom.

I have chosen several extracts from the dataset in this instance to show that the frequency of factors mentioned in the sample shows a pattern of substantial meaning and just how consistently this arose across the dataset. The convergence of mental health issues, COVID-19 pandemic, and neurodivergence are notably experienced by participants highlighting several or all of these as concerns they are seeing at panels. This potentially creates a problem where Channel have been advised by Shawcross (2023) to place a greater emphasis on ideology, while the data here alongside extant literature indicates that the relationship between a multifaceted nature of radicalisation and the trifecta discussed in the first theme may often be too complex to give ideology primacy in whether cases are adopted at Channel or not.

Two participants indicate mental health and neurodivergence as emerging factors before the pandemic but it seemed to escalate with raised awareness during this time. With common traits of autism including social challenges, restrictive behaviours, and highly-focused hobbies (National Autistic Society, 2025), it can lead practitioners down a path of logic where, during a pandemic, vulnerable individuals are likely further isolated with more time online to focus on a hobby, wherein a 'recruiter' could draw their attention to radicalising material while social opportunities and safeguarding measures are fewer such as professionals from education or youth support. If we consider that autism and other conditions result in additional needs and resources, this is something that would have been exacerbated by the pandemic given that parents would have had fewer resources available to them and likely struggle to

understand the risk of radicalisation consequently of increased screentime. However, this is the same multifaceted issue faced by many young people with it being unclear but highly likely that more young people in similar situations are referred to Prevent who would not meet any diagnostic threshold for ASD, meaning concrete conclusions cannot be drawn other than to not isolate or stigmatise neurodivergence (Walter, Leonard, Miah, and Shaw, 2021).

Another participant highlighted a difficulty in seeking support with autism compared to mental health:

“And there is no treatment for Autism, is there? As in, there’s no mental health pathway to treat Autism...It’s a neuro thing...And the local authorities, in my experience, don’t have the most comprehensive service to support someone with Autism. It is a lot of voluntary organisation based. And the NHS diagnose, don’t they? So I think they’re moving a bit more wider. But, to be honest with you, the waiting list to be diagnosed with Autism is long enough as it is” (Participant Three).

This is notable as it demonstrates two key issues. One is that ASD in particular is not usually seen as a mental health need by services such as CAMHS, immediately closing off one of the most well-known avenues of support for young people in distress. The second is that a ‘postcode lottery effect’ is well established across many services, in that different Local Authorities will have varying support services, as another participant contrasts from the above:

“And we are lucky because, as I said, we’ve got an Autism specialist, and they can diagnose. So, where you would be waiting up to three years for a diagnosis, we can probably get that done within six to eight weeks. So it’s massive. And, for the people

that are being diagnosed, again, it's more than massive because they get the help that they need" (Participant Seven).

While a reduction from waiting up to 36 months to just two months is likely to be a life-altering impact for individuals and their families, , a risk here however could be what Shawcross (2023) highlighted in his independent review that there is a risk of under-resourced services causing radicalisation risks to be over-emphasised or misconceived when referring to Prevent as there is 'nowhere else to go', as Participant Sixteen has experienced:

"And the risk is...is that Channel becomes the only game in town. And you'll have people finding a very vulnerable young man who needs some services wrapped around him, some form of intervention, who talk up the things he's said, to get him over a threshold, so that he justifies the Channel intervention. Now, they're the ones that get, I think, largely weeded out when they get to the first stage, where it doesn't convert or it doesn't progress from a referral to a case" (Participant Sixteen).

It is worth an intervention here also in that this should be seen as a reflection of wider statutory services lacking resources at a national level, rather than the temptation to lament that Channel has luxuries or privileges. As the participant above states, the question should be why Channel is the "only game in town" instead of other 'games in town' being better equipped, with Channel being available where a concern of radicalisation persists or where the intervention could safeguard a miscarriage of justice, such as in 2018 where a young man spent 22 months in prison after detonating explosives, later found to be motivated by curiosity as his mother stated "I know they have to investigate, but autism is not terrorism" (BBC, 2020).

In concluding this theme, I return to the multi-faceted nature of radicalisation experienced by participants in this study, wherein people have been spending increasing amounts of time online under the backdrop of a global pandemic, suffering isolation and severing of many typical avenues of support and social opportunities amidst years of austerity. Additional factors contributing to this can include hindered education, mental distress, and a lack of a healthy routine. For the conclusion of this theme I will present the findings of the final interview question that sought participants' general experiences of factors that are exacerbating vulnerabilities and contributing to radicalisation. A meaningful experience that arose for some participants referred to parenting styles and modern society:

"I think the way that we bring our children up into society has changed. You used to have a parent at home and somebody at work and kids had someone there when they came home from school. We are now in a position where we can't afford to do that, so you've got both parents working, more often than not and if they're not, then you're privileged. That means that young people have a lot of time without parental oversight or guidance (Participant Six).

"You have conversations frequently with parents and it's, 'my 13-year-old is doing this on TikTok and I'm worried about it'...My brain is thinking, 'why on earth'...I think back to when I was 13, if something was a problem, then it got taken away from you... there seems to be this, you think, 'well have you thought about stopping them accessing TikTok then, if they can't use it responsibly'. But it seems like parenting is very different to what it maybe was 15-20 years ago. There's this entitlement...It just seems like that's just allowed to go on really. So that, I think the wider cause societally, is that people just got this constant need for information. I equate it to myself, I'm a football fan and on transfer deadline day I'm sat on Twitter, refreshing it every two minutes to

see, is there a new transfer or something happening, what's going on there. And these kids are doing that 10-fold, but with the right-wing and the sort of thing that they're picking up online and they're constantly searching out that new information. That's society isn't it now, people want that permanent pleasure, immediate gratification almost. I don't know how you tackle that. If you've got the answer, it would be good. (Laughter)" (Participant Four).

Oxford University Press named 'brainrot' as its phrase of the year for 2024, defined as "the supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material considered to be trivial or unchallenging" (Rufo, 2024). Combined with nuanced concerns around attention spans and social media (Duffy and Thain, 2022), this research aligns with what participants from Channel are reflecting on above. Added to this that it is well-known that a brain has limits on how much information we can store and attend to (Edgar and Edgar, 2016: 9), meaning the role of the internet could be increasing the susceptibility of people (particularly children) and exploiting this vulnerability akin to what recent nomenclature considers 'self-radicalisation' or 'self-initiated radicalisation' (Little, Ford and Girardi, 2021). Further to this we see limited access to support services, family networks not being robust, neurodivergence, and isolation, then it can be seen how none of these factors in isolation are sufficient to explain radicalisation or have a causal effect, yet the combination of factors with the time and social context seems to increase the risk dramatically. Participant Fourteen used the term 'triangulation' and gave an experience from working in a safeguarding role within education that saw them attend Channel and make Prevent referrals:

"one of the themes that we're finding...is that we're seeing more young people coming to us that are identifying as transgender, non-binary. And, coming back to the trend

we've talked about with Prevent cases and SEN, what we also see is a real... almost a triangulation of learners within that community that are also having real challenges with their mental health and their wellbeing and that are also neurodiverse in some way. And I think that's quite an interesting combination. It's just interesting that in more...well, in most cases, a learner identifying as trans or non-binary will also be being supported for mental health but also be on that SEN radar. And I think that there's a lot more work to do in that sense...I think that there's probably the same thing here with gender around Prevent because there's probably a lot of stuff that goes unnoticed. You know, the boys are more likely to talk... there's a whole thing at the moment, if you think about incel with Andrew Tate and things like that, the boys are much more likely, in their groups... because there are certain subjects that are more male-heavily dominated, motor vehicle, for example, or carpentry. When they're in their pack, they're more likely to speak up about things like that, which immediately then, we think, "Okay. You're now in our sights as somebody that we need to be monitoring and then having conversations with." Whereas, I think sometimes, the females are less likely to do that" (P14: 352-371).

To be clear, it should be noted that I do not believe the participant above is correlating being trans as a risk factor for radicalisation any more than I have emphasised above the need to prevent stigmatisation, but is reflecting with me on the multiple presenting and overlapping factors comprising the multi-faceted nature of radicalisation I have referred to in this theme, in that each of these factors presents a vulnerability which in a certain context could be preyed upon for many forms of exploitation, radicalisation being one of them. Similarly, it is well acknowledged that factors such as mental health or socioeconomic deprivation are not sufficient to be described as having a causal role in radicalisation, yet throughout these themes these social issues are experienced by

participants at Channel as described throughout these themes. Participant Sixteen helpfully summarises this:

“So, I think you’ve got a perfect storm there of people becoming less critically thinking, dividing into camps on an ideological basis, sheer abundance of extremist material, and people feeling that things aren’t working, because that’s all they’re seeing online. They’re just seeing a very, very negative...a bit of a malaise at the moment, where you’ve just got a lot of negativity out there. And that’s why radicalisers, if you want to frame that in that very broad way, are making hay while the Sun’s shining. I think local government lacks confidence in having difficult conversations with people. I think if you’re a critically-minded middle grounder, it’s very difficult at the moment, because increasingly, if you’re on social media, you get drawn into a camp of thinking, either one side or the other. And if you don’t, then you’re basically irrelevant. So, I think there’s been a bit of a caving away of the middle ground, and I think politicians, the media, academia have all played a part in that”.

Through a theoretically inflective thematic analysis I identified four themes relevant to answering the research questions and the next chapter will draw together to what extent the research questions have been addressed. While the Shawcross review brought controversy, participants have demonstrated experiences in navigating ideology, vulnerability, and susceptibility in practice long before the review was published. This then led to challenges in seeing radicalisation as a safeguarding matter and whether it is best addressed through a lens of safeguarding rather than just counterterrorism, with a reminder that Prevent is the pre-criminal space, unlike Pursue, Prepare, or Protect. While Channel brings specialist knowledge of radicalisation, I am left questioning what more there could be beyond Intervention Providers to make Channel more than ‘just another safeguarding meeting’, as a handful of participants

indicated. While males comprise most Prevent referrals, it appears there remain gaps in knowledge of conceptualising and understanding the roles of sex and gender. Finally, participants are experiencing an increasing complexity of cases that defy familiar taxonomies of Violent Jihadism or Right-Wing Extremism, instead finding a 'supermarket extremism' (McCann, 2019) and multi-faceted nature of radicalisation. In the final stages of this research I received an invite with two colleagues by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) to comment on the case of Axel Rudakubana (Cowden, Lynch, and Robinson, 2025), with this case demonstrating this again as politicians struggled to appraise the crimes as terrorism, with the overall complexity of the case giving doubt to whether it would have been better suited to Prevent, mainstream services, or a combination of both. Whilst media interests can seek simple answers, this study is showing how far from simple the problem is, never mind the solution. It appears cases will continue to present of a multi-faceted nature and providing the best support under the appropriate policy is going to be a challenge in future.

Chapter 5) Discussion

The focus of this study was Prevent, Channel, and safeguarding against radicalisation. To achieve its aims, three research questions were created following a review of the literature. The analysis of primary data resulted in identifying four themes which have been explored in depth within the previous chapter. The aim of this chapter is to return to the research questions and consider to what extent the study can address them:

- 1) What are the presenting issues that Channel panels are dealing with?
- 2) How does Channel conceptualise the forms of radicalisation they are dealing with?
- 3) Are the safeguarding interventions which Channel devise working effectively?

Each of these research questions will be addressed in turn to understand to what extent the current study addresses each question. While the study takes a substantive original approach through gathering primary data from Channel practitioners, the study can also provide an intervention into the current and historic debates, which the three research questions will also allow me to do. The first research question covers what practitioners have been experiencing at Channel panels in terms of the ideological bases of individuals, the influence of issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the internet, as well as wider vulnerability factors such as neurodivergence and increasingly younger referrals. The second question then addresses how practitioners comprehend what they experience at Channel and discusses wider debates such as agency, vulnerability and safeguarding, tying into the anti-Prevent aspersions which are largely not evidenced in this study. Finally, the third question examines the specific work of Channel and how effective practitioners have been finding it. This looks at the

role of Intervention Providers, social solutions, the roles and responsibilities of different agencies, and the contribution of social work specifically.

5.1 Research Question One: What Are the Presenting Issues that Channel Panels Are Dealing With?

From the analysis, there are several key issues presenting at Channel. The first has been a change in ideological bases of referrals, reflecting the evolution of radicalisation detailed in the literature review. The second is the underlying vulnerabilities that are linked to a person's radicalisation. The third is the issues of internet influences on individuals, the significance of which I argue necessitates a specific discussion. Finally, a consistent issue has been the prevalence of males in referrals, although this has also seen a shift in terms of age and neurodivergence. These issues will be discussed further below to understand in more detail what the presenting issues are that Channel panels are dealing with.

Although Prevent statistics are only publicly accessible from 2016 onwards, even those show how the issues presenting at Channel have changed from a gradual decreasing of VJ referrals dovetailing with increasing RWE referrals, consistently reflected in the experiences of participants in the study. However, this dovetail is not the only notable issue in terms of ideological concerns at Channel. The ideologies have evolved to become more complex and less categorical. The Prevent factsheets reflect this however this study has been able to draw out how what presents at Channel panels requires nuances and context to understand better which this qualitative approach can achieve to complement Prevent's quantitative publications. Participants in the study have demonstrated that many referrals now cannot be easily ascribed to

VJ or RWE, creating a potential for conceptual and practical difficulties for Channel practitioners. A participant noted that there was an emphasis on accurate statistics, meaning that practitioners can be inclined to use the 'mixed' categories and update it at a later stage if the ideology becomes more coherent. This could clash with the Independent Review which emphasised the need for ideology to be ascertained or established in referrals prior to support being offered, indicating that this may need to be gleaned before a referral is presented to Channel. A push towards identifying ideology could therefore be problematic and it is not clear whether breaking down the 'Mixed, Unclear, or Unstable' category resolves this issue.

While VJ, RWE, and other forms of radicalisation such as school shooter and incel ideology have been experienced by practitioners at Channel, a related issue with identifying ideologies is that a 'supermarket' approach (McCann, 2018) has become an issue Channel is dealing with. These comprise the largest section of referrals Channel and Prevent are dealing with and are comprised of individuals adopting pieces of various ideologies without a commitment to a singular label, apparently not seeking ideological affiliation in the way most were previously. Participants noted the presence of issues around conspiracy theories, anti-vaxxing, gender, racism and anti-immigration, or idolising concerning figures from Hitler to Elliot Rodger, so although such issues are linked to RWE, they lack the cohesion seen in previous years. This creates a challenge in terms of broadening the depth of knowledge required from practitioners and may make it unclear as to the risk in terms of likelihood of an individual being at risk of supporting or carrying out terror acts.

Participants also highlighted where referrals were not appropriate, often due to lacking an ideology or risk of one. For example, participants noted where concerns and referrals were raised for anti-immigration views or for those who had attended

demonstrations organised by known or convicted radicalisers such as Tommy Robinson. However, upon exploration of these referrals at Channel it was sometimes found that radicalisation concerns did not become apparent. While this can raise concerns about ‘false positives’ in Prevent referrals, it is contrasted by the confidence participants expressed in identifying these referrals and understanding why they were made, demonstrating empathy for why a concern was raised but participants also stated they would rather see a case signposted away from Channel than risk cases being missed due to ‘waiting’ for risk or ideology to become prescient. However, it would appear that some referrals are accepted to Channel which would be more appropriate for a different multi-agency setting, giving weight to the Independent Review, while at the same time the data suggests that the multi-agency nature of Channel means several practitioners are likely to identify such cases, particularly the chairs of the Channel panel as seen in this study. Additionally worth noting is that a person can hold far-right views such as being completely anti-immigration but without ascribing to terrorism or promoting violence, which is what distinguishes radicalisation and the role of Channel in assessing for risk of violence or enabling violence.

Alongside there is a tendency toward ideologies becoming less categorical, a potential issue in Channel is how rare it appears to be that ideology is present without contemporaneous issues from mental health to trauma. With the Independent Review there came a push to home in on ideological concerns and while some participants agreed, most noted that ideology rarely seemed to exist in a vacuum. This and the above issues in categorisation create an epistemological and taxonomical issue for Channel going forward. Ideology does not appear to be straightforward and easily identifiable at the point of referral, while other vulnerability factors can be of more concern and in need of prioritising. When examining high-profile cases such as the

Deghayes family in Brighton, it can be seen how vulnerability factors can ‘mask’ radicalisation concerns and cause professionals to focus on the most immediate safeguarding needs such as neglect, abuse, petty crime, and homelessness. Channel having oversight of cases such as this can allow for the right intervention at the right time, with participants expressing concern that some vulnerabilities left ‘unchecked’ could develop into radicalisation concerns. A particular complexity to be navigated by Channel is when ideological concerns can be established but other factors complicated this such as mental health or homelessness. Participant Two described a case where they experienced this but with complex cases it also means no two cases are likely to be the same.

Other factors that have become intertwined with radicalisation and being referred to Channel are cases of neurodivergence, the role of the internet, and that most referrals are male but have become increasingly younger. The previous chapter highlighted the multifaceted nature of radicalisation being prominent in participants’ experiences. The prevalence of neurodivergence is concerning as the majority of participants referred to it and unsurprisingly a related issue was trying to receive a diagnosis. Where neurodivergence was confirmed or suspected, Warrell (2025) has stated that they comprise one-quarter of those receiving support from Channel despite a prevalence of one percent amongst the general population. This is an alarming issue that needs further urgent research. Associations between neurodivergence and radicalisation tend to involve a person being ‘welcomed’ into a community who was likely feeling excluded beforehand, share a special interest, and encourage a face-value or black-and-white approach to understanding the world such as simplistic depictions of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’. Such understandings of neurodivergence and radicalisation have been

discussed in depth above and it is worth re-emphasising the need to avoid fallacious assumptions which risk stigmatising such broad demographic of individuals.

This is an issue that cannot be overstated given that it has arisen prominently such as in the case of Rhianan Rudd, an autistic young girl who was groomed by RWE at age 14 and died by suicide in 2022 at age 16 after being taken into care. While her inquest is ongoing at the time of writing, reports have suggested the signs of grooming were not given priority, making it likely that her neurodivergence made her vulnerable to grooming, with her autism in turn not being given more consideration in terms of vulnerability, seeing her criminalised as the youngest person to be charged with a terror offence at the time (Robinson, 2025). More recently and more controversially there was discussion around neurodivergence in the case of the Southport killer in 2024 (Cowden, Lynch, and Robinson, 2025). While it is not a case of autism being a predictor of radicalisation, indeed there needs to be clarity that prevents stereotyping, however the evidence is showing that it is one of several factors that can make a person vulnerable or susceptible particularly where grooming concerns are suspected. Therefore, the multi-faceted nature of radicalisation is in need attention and is as much a social issue as a counterterrorism issue when there are issues too numerous to conveniently fit into a single model of radicalisation.

Another facet, the influence of the internet, has been noted by Channel practitioners to be potentially the most concerning facet of radicalisation. With the internet having an increasingly fundamental role in our lives it is impossible to extricate most people from it in a world where smartphones are used for instant communication, shopping, job-searching, banking and many other common daily tasks. Yet there is clearly a problem of dangerous information and material responsible for radicalisation freely available online, which is being experienced at Channel by every participant in this

study and a well-known issue discussed in the wider literature. The Online Safety Act 2023 was expected to address much of this by obligating websites to undertake assessments and meet requirements, however the Act has come under heavy criticism for adopting a 'checklist' approach that could see loopholes exploited even when platforms have demonstrated meeting obligations (Landi, 2025). Steinberg has also stated that "The very users the OSA seeks to protect – the tech-savvy younger generation – will be the first to find their way around it" (Steinberg, 2025), which appears to be the case from my participants' experience, meaning the Act is not proving effective and the online space is yet another risk factor for radicalisation in need of addressing.

The final facet of issues presenting at Channel I wish to highlight is that most referrals are male and always have been, yet the ages of those referred have consistently decreased. Some participants in this study had acclimatised to this whilst others were surprised to see children as young as 12 being discussed at Channel. As discussed above, the internet plays a significant role in this, particularly given that younger people will be 'Digital Natives' to the extent that internet access has held a constant and likely unmoderated or unsupervised presence in their lives. This has allowed recruiters, whether purposely or inadvertently, to access a younger audience that is more vulnerable and susceptible to radicalisation. Younger people are likely to experience a disconnect with 'Digital Immigrants' such as parents and professionals who are likely to discourage frequent internet use, further pushing younger people to platforms that welcome and encourage their participation. Added to this are concerns such as COVID-19 lockdowns that saw education move online where supervision became less effective, and it can be seen how a person's age becomes one facet in the multi-faceted nature of radicalisation being described by Channel practitioners. Participants

have described a mixture of empathy and bewilderment as their own life experiences involved switching off the TV and playing outdoors as a child, or in recent times feeling that need to stay online constantly as the latest football transfers are announced. Overall, the decreasing ages of referred individuals is a prominent issue experienced by Channel participants and does not appear likely to change in the near future, a shifting landscape that the industry has shown both surprise at and a struggle to comprehend (Thompson, 2024).

While age has changed, gender and sex have remained overwhelmingly prevalent in the published statistics and was reflected in participants' experiences of what is presented at Channel. While it has been indicated that gender may not always be recorded, the imbalance on record and participants' experiences leave little room for doubt. Instead, I found it was more helpful in this study to understand participants' perceptions of why this may be and particularly how gender may have influenced practitioner responses. Participants ranged from accepting this as the norm to offering logical reasons or reflecting with me during the research as something they had not been able to address yet. Pearson (2024) challenges assumptions of gender and radicalisation to argue that masculinity is an inherent part of radicalisation, while the current study finds congruence with this to a large extent as participants noted the substantial amount of anger and discontent where (usually younger) men are aggrieved by their position in society and become more task oriented. Where females were referred to Channel, participants' experiences also led me to identify that male influences still played a key role in their radicalisation journey, as seen with high-profile cases such as Rhianan Rudd who was targeted by a neo-Nazi based in the US.

Despite considering radicalisation and the prevalence of males, the research did not set out to explain why males are so prevalent as it was beyond the scope of this study,

but this study highlights the need for further attention in this area. In looking at phenomena as disparate as sexual offending or suicide it can be seen that males also comprise the majority of statistics for these also, yet this is a very small subsection of the male population, meaning that most males are not involved in sexual offending, suicide, or radicalisation, making it impossible to view gender as having a causal role but the question remains as to why males have been a constant at Channel regardless of ideology or age group. A counterterror officer in the study considered whether females were perceived as less threatening and another participant reflected on whether Shamima Begum and her friends would have passed through airports so easily had they been three young males travelling to Syria. There is a reasonable argument for perceptions of gender leading to men and women being treated differently, however the actual experiences reported by participants in this study mostly do not reflect this, leaving the role of gender in need of further nuanced research and analysis.

To conclude this research question, the question asked was what the presenting issues are that Channel panels are dealing with. Generally, the research has identified that the issues presenting at Channel are possibly the most complex that they ever have been, reflecting published statistics that have shown the older categories of VJ, RWE, and MUU struggle to encapsulate the spread of radicalisation concerns, with Table 2 indicating an improved epistemology but still a flawed taxonomy. Following McCann (2019), I find the term 'Supermarket Extremism' a useful analogy to describe this multi-faceted nature of radicalisation, wherein modern radicalisation can be compared to a shopper exploring supermarket aisles and selecting what appeals to them. This is evident in how participants have described the prevalence of mixed ideologies which coincides at a time when there has been a push from the Independent

Review to ground Channel's work to be based more firmly in ideology. This I find to be an approach that works better in theory than in practice, as a mixture of risk factors beyond ideology muddles the goal of the Independent Review, as participants have described issues of broader vulnerability factors that do not always present immediately as radicalisation but risk evolving into a risk or need to be addressed before radicalisation itself can be tackled. The multi-faceted presentations of radicalisation at Channel meant practitioners also highlighted how it suggests a dearth of services outside of Channel that could be better suited for support. However, when exploring how factors such as neurodiversity and the internet can be interwoven, the prevalence of these which was more than even I expected given that almost every participant raised both as an issue Channel are dealing with and require a level of expertise that comes with a multi-agency panel which includes social workers. It is evident in this research that radicalisation is rarely presenting at Channel as a sole concern, complicated by factors such as trauma and mental health concerns, or any number of factors that give Channel concern that a person is vulnerable or susceptible to being radicalised. Ideology is only one aspect of what is presenting at Channel and to over-emphasise this would be to oversimplify radicalisation in its modern context.

5.2 Research Question Two: How Does Channel Conceptualise the Forms of Radicalisation They Are Dealing With?

As seen in the literature review and analysis, Prevent and Channel can be under the weight of the government and media zeitgeist and their vocal perceptions in how radicalisation is understood and responded to. In addressing this question, firstly I will be exploring how the analysis evidenced practitioners as being conscientious and

reflective in grappling with how structure and agency can influence radicalisation, navigating the murky waters of vulnerability and susceptibility as discussed in the first theme. Following this, secondly, I will be considering how Channel practitioners have been applying the concept of safeguarding to the forms of radicalisation they are dealing with and whether this is cohesive within the multi-agency panels. Finally, I explore longstanding concerns that Prevent has a focus on surveillance, securitization, and disproportionately focusing on Muslims. The study has found scant evidence to support any of these claims, particularly in recent years, whilst participants acknowledge that Prevent is an imperfect program yet has potentially diverted countless people away from radicalisation of which positive stories are rarely published.

The first theme of the analysis considered the ideology, vulnerability and susceptibility tripartite. From the analysis it was identified that practitioners were influenced by their views of whether individuals referred to Channel were vulnerable individuals or whether they were making active choices that risked them harming others and being charged with terror offences. Generally, participants experienced a sense of cases where referred individuals tended to be vulnerable and in need of support, while several participants noted aspects that made 'susceptibility' a useful concept to extend practitioner thinking rather than restricting cases eligible for Channel. Throughout the analysis it is repeatedly referred to how most referrals have radicalisation as one of several concerns regarding a person's risk or wellbeing. The data indicates that participants are recognising nuances in cases presented and demonstrate taking the time to discuss and analyse this within their Channel panel.

This is most prominent with those under the age of eighteen where, particularly in social work, a child would be regarded as vulnerable based solely on their age before

additional factors are considered, adding an extra layer of complexity to understanding each case. This in turn places greater importance on the need for a multi-agency approach and with Channel support being voluntary it would require parental consent, allowing for input from families rather than the cloak and dagger impression that arises in the literature. With children, a greater emphasis on vulnerability is evidenced by participants, however this was questioned by at least one participant with the example of Shamima Begum and the agency demonstrated in planning her trip to Syria. It should be emphasised that the participant stated this did not negate her age and vulnerability but instead is an attempt to evolve the discussion as stripping someone of their agency could also jeopardise any intervention.

Related to the above, the analysis has highlighted that the concept of vulnerability can bring a risk of cases being held by Channel that may be better suited to other multi-agency teams. This was particularly notable in cases where mental health was concerned and to some extent also with neurodivergence. Conditions such as psychosis can cause delusions which can be unpredictable such as including extremism or thoughts of conspiracy. Two participants who are social workers raised questions of why Prevent became involved with patients who only presented as radicalised when psychosis was emerging such as during medication issues. What is positive about these experiences however is that due to social work involvement these cases were conceived of as a vulnerability due to mental health needs and not radicalisation, yet it does raise the possibility of occasions where Channel may be overseeing cases where radicalisation plays a minor role compared to other vulnerabilities. At the same time, this can also create a conundrum as mentioned above where it can be very difficult to separate vulnerabilities from radicalisation risks. This gives practitioners a challenge when it comes to conceptualising issues, however

the multi-agency approach has been found here to bring the diverse ways of thinking to ensure all aspects are considered, with the concept of susceptibility helping to reduce the risk of overseeing vulnerabilities rather than preventing radicalisation.

Within the data, it can be seen that participants reflected on the role of structure alongside agency. Issues such as isolation, belonging, trauma, and the wider sociopolitical context were consistently experienced by participants and usually framed in terms of structural barriers which influenced radicalisation and at times frustrated interventions. Particularly with the role of the internet, participants showed empathy and concern around the grip it has on many people but particularly children, identifying it as a structural issue due to its prevalence in everyday life. As mentioned above regarding the multi-faceted nature of radicalisation, this appears to be conceptualised as facets ranging from structure, agency, vulnerability, and susceptibility factors that cultivate a breeding ground for radicalisation.

In terms of a multi-agency approach, the dynamics of each panel appear to vary greatly, which is unsurprising and not necessarily an issue as it shows a variety of conceptualising and more diverse ways of understanding each case. One participant noted that they desired a more critical discussion using each practitioner's specialist knowledge, whilst another presented a case at panel but was not involved in further discussion. A participant described a social worker as resisting the work of Channel that seemed to stem from a misunderstanding of Prevent and was resolved through follow-up discussions, indicating a breadth of knowledge and opinions within Channel. The most notable aspect of panel dynamics was around the police, which likely suggests a different conceptualisation of risk. Several participants found police to be in search of a crime and prioritising the risk towards others alongside having greater restrictions on sharing information. This notably caused tensions at times, however,

yet it did not seem to disrupt the work of Channel. This was also not universal, as several participants reported positive experiences with various police on panels and counterterrorism officers interviewed also conceptualised cases as involving largely vulnerable individuals. Prevent is known as the 'pre-crime' space and this is how practitioners consistently conceptualised Prevent's role in radicalisation, as protecting individuals from becoming radicalised.

Leading on from the above, despite debates around structure, agency, vulnerability, and susceptibility, what was visible in the data is that practitioners viewed Prevent and Channel primarily under a safeguarding lens. This is significant given that the other three Ps of CONTEST (Pursue, Prepare, and Protect) are vastly different, with Prevent and Pursue sometimes conflated in the literature. Participants in this study experienced virtually no doubts that their roles were safeguarding people from radicalisation.

In terms of safeguarding, however, several participants expressed concerns around Channel duplicating safeguarding work that could be done elsewhere or professionals viewing Channel as 'just another safeguarding meeting' where each agency is represented, presents what they know, and then actions, roles, and responsibilities are agreed upon. There are occasions where, as discussed above, some cases may indeed be better suited to other multi-agency panels, whilst how a professional conceptualises Channel may impact their experience of it. What is identifiable in the data is that as professionals increasingly engaged in Channel, they tended to gain a more positive impression of its work. One participant stated they suspected that many critics of Prevent had not engaged with or read the actual strategy, and with the advent of the Prevent duty the online e-learning could be the only engagement some professionals have had. This leaves room for assumptions and influence from the

media where Prevent mainly arises when something goes wrong, which resonates with social workers who also find our profession in the media only after a child death or Serious Case Review. This may leave a difficult epistemological challenge for Prevent. Engagement and experience of working in Prevent has informed and reassured participants in this study, however the comparatively rare experience for a professional to encounter radicalisation in typical frontline roles such as health and social care means mandatory e-learning is the main opportunity to inform professionals of Prevent and Channel's role in safeguarding.

In approaching this study, the literature review noted a schism in debate around Prevent that saw two broad camps emerging that were 'anti-Prevent' and 'pro-Prevent'. Given that this study coincided with the release of Shawcross' (2023) Independent Review of Prevent, this schism was brought into sharp focus for the current study. Extensive criticism of Prevent has seen it conceptualised as securitisation, surveillance, and Islamophobic (Kundnani, 2012; Heath-Kelly, 2013; McKendrick and Finch, 2017). While these have been challenged conceptually in the literature review and using the scant evidence available prior to this study, the gathering of primary data in this study is a rare opportunity to consider what this new evidence can tell us about the claims of the anti-Prevent and pro-Prevent camps, relevant here as it relates to how practitioners conceptualise and understand their work in Channel. Overall, the evidence presented here contradicts much of the extant literature that has been heavily critical of Prevent as seen in the literature review and I will explain this further below.

Firstly, the concepts of securitisation and surveillance have been notable in the Prevent literature since the 2000s (Gillan, 2002; Kundnani, 2009; Maher and Frampton, 2009). It has been explored in the literature review how these criticisms

may have lacked substantive evidence but were not entirely baseless, however what they have been is consistently regurgitated throughout Prevent's evolution (McKendrick and Finch, 2020; Sardoc, 2022). This study showed the development of Prevent since 2003 and the participants have demonstrated from recent experiences with Channel a picture very different to that painted by the literature referred to above. Participant Sixteen went as far to say that they did not believe that some of the most vocal critics of Prevent had actually read the strategy, while other participants highlighted aspects of their work that was not congruent with the criticisms. For example, fundamentally Channel panels are multi-agency panels, particularly since the Prevent duty came into effect in 2015. This multi-agency aspect of Channel panels would make securitisation difficult given how many agencies bring varying perspectives and values as seen in this study. While a counterterrorism officer has noted barriers such as intelligence grading on information, this is a common experience when working with any form of police and social workers in the study also described not sharing information with police where it would be deemed detrimental or irrelevant. In addition to social workers, other agencies and Channel chairs have also demonstrated their pivotal role in ensuring individuals were not criminalized and their radicalisation was seen as a symptom of social needs or mental health. While historically there has been a lot more opacity around Channel (not helped by a lack of research), this research is indicating that Prevent existing for securitisation or surveillance purposes is not the case.

Secondly, participants themselves have also demonstrated an extensive amount of agency as indicated above. Being tied closely to the state has added to concerns of Prevent's role being overreaching, particularly considering aspects such as the aforementioned Prevent duty but also the Independent Review (Shawcross, 2023) and

influence of various Home Secretaries as discussed in the literature review. It is not without warrant that these influences can attempt to reconceptualise the work of Prevent and Channel, however participant experiences indicated that this was far from as authoritarian and dogmatic in daily practice as concerns suggested (Holmwood and Aitlhadj, 2022). Participants demonstrated a critical stance towards the Independent Review in particular, with some recognising a risk of cases coming to Channel that would be better suited for mental health or psychiatric avenues, while others shared their disagreement such as preferring not to risk missing a case where early intervention can be pivotal. The role of practitioner agency and flexibility will be further discussed below in terms of interventions; however it was notable from the data that participants conceptualised the issues they are experiencing at panel in a meaningful but critical way with the multi-agency aspect playing a fundamental role.

Thirdly, it is also evident that practitioners' conceptualising goes beyond oversimplifying radicalisation as an issue residing within the individual at the ignorance of social and political context, which has been another common critique historically and considered in the literature review (Kundnani, 2012; The Open Society, 2016). Every participant noted the complex presentations of radicalisation experienced at Channel. Participants evidently did not conceive of radicalisation as something happening in isolation. Even when considering self-initiated radicalisation participants highlighted factors that included social media and the internet in general as permeating most cases presenting at Channel and the powerlessness often experienced at tackling an omniscient and omnipresent phenomenon. Participants also considered political aspects from Brexit to hotels accommodating asylum seekers and the role each played in radicalisation. This tied to how some participants discussed the role of status in how people were 'not happy with their lot' which I find corresponds to

structural inequality that has become more evident and tangible in recent years. In amongst this, participants also discussed the role of emotions of which anger was notably significant. In general, it can be seen that participants are not viewing those at risk of radicalisation as 'mad' or 'bad', but as discussed in the first research question, individuals referred to Channel are recognised as individuals on unique journeys to radicalisation significantly influenced by their socio-political context and in need of the earliest intervention possible.

It is worth mentioning here the significance of the anonymity afforded by this study, which likely aided participants in disclosing such understandings. The evidence here flies in the face of much of the anti-Prevent camp's criticisms, however I would like to highlight that this does not mean the pro-Prevent camp or Prevent as a whole are without flaw. While the primary data provides invaluable insight into how practitioners are conceptualising the issues experienced at panel, it remains a small number of practitioners who participated considering the remit of Channel across England and Wales. Appendix D provides a sample of Channel practitioners who declined to participate or later withdrew their contributions to the study. I raise this here as throughout this study I have challenged common criticisms of Prevent, securitisation in particular, while I find that until practitioners are able to participate in critical research, they themselves are hindered in how they conceptualise the issues presenting at Channel and therefore allegations of securitisation will remain. The multi-agency element discussed above shows how the varying perspectives brought to Channel advances practitioners' understanding, while reflecting with me during data collection (notably regarding gender) also showed that rigid restrictions on research are potentially to the detriment of Channel's effectiveness. Several participants were

appreciative of the opportunity and space to reflect on the work they are doing, whilst others were understandably nervous about participating.

Finally, it is worth revisiting the concept of Islamophobia in light of the data analysed and presented in this study, as this has been a spectre haunting Prevent since its origins as detailed in the literature review, following Prevent throughout its evolution (Quarashi, 2016; Scott-Baumann, 2020). In my own experiences of being asked what I have been researching for this PhD I have taken aback at fellow students and professionals describing it as Islamophobic or racist but struggling to articulate this argument with evidence when I investigated their stance. Within the data, participants did not highlight VJ as a common occurrence at Channel, while the location some participants were based at seemed to vary the race and ethnicity of those being referred to Prevent. Within this, participants highlighted broader factors such as mental health and substance misuse, with religion not commonly referred to in terms of radicalisation.

There are factors to consider in terms of social context such as this study taking place several years after ISIS lost their grip on Syria and there being much less of an appeal to travel there, however Shamima Begum continued to be prominent in the media and some participants discussed her, but again this was with an emphasis on issues such as gender and vulnerability rather than religion or race. A participant has also highlighted that much of the Prevent training also turned towards RWE prior to the increase in statistics for it, similar to how the Prevent duty being applied to the education sector saw it become the single largest source of Prevent referrals. What I argue here is that the way practitioners conceptualise the issues presenting at Channel can be influenced by sources such as training and wider political changes, which could include the association of Prevent with Islamophobia that is notable in the

literature, with participants showing an awareness of this and seeking to redress any imbalance. Overall, whilst flaws and issues with Prevent and Channel are raised by participants and discussed throughout this study, the evidence for Islamophobia is lacking here.

The first research question asked what the presenting issues are at Channel panels, while this second question asked how practitioners are conceptualising the issues presenting at Channel. It can be seen in this study that there are a number of conceptual issues and debates permeating the work of Channel. Concepts such as structure and agency have seen participants tackle epistemological concerns that overlap with concepts of vulnerability and susceptibility. Participants demonstrated their own criticality in these areas, viewing radicalisation and Channel's work under a safeguarding lens. Participants were aware of the values they bring to Channel and how compatibility with the remainder of the multi-agency panel may not always be cohesive, but while imperfect the multi-agency aspect aids in conceptualising the presenting issues in diverse ways. Finally, the most notable and persistent criticisms of Prevent in the literature were contradicted by participants that may not be representative of all England and Wales Channel panels, yet were comprised of practitioners from a range of professions and some who had spent over a decade working with Channel, indicating that conceptions of Prevent as securitising or surveillance are at best outdated and at worst demonstrably untrue in this rare and original use of primary data. Following this, the final research question will specifically consider the role of safeguarding interventions.

5.3 Research Question Three: Are the Safeguarding Interventions Which Channel Devise Working Effectively?

Having explored the issues presenting at Channel and how practitioners are conceptualising them, I finally turn to how effective the safeguarding interventions are which Channel devise and offer as a means of support on a voluntary basis should the individual referred wish to engage with Channel and Prevent. While the participants experienced largely positive and effective safeguarding interventions, this was not without criticisms. Intervention Providers (IP) are a unique feature of Channel and again experiences of these were at times positive but with notable criticisms also. Other notable aspects of interventions are discussed around roles and responsibilities, the effective use of the multi-agency approach, and the role of social interventions. Finally, also considered is that Channel and Prevent in general may be caught in a bind in the sense that negative experiences or failures receive widespread attention whilst the positive work and achievements are unable to be published, which is where the original contribution of this study aims to make an intervention as there is a paucity of publications of this nature regarding Channel.

Intervention Providers (IPs) are the most notable aspect of Channel, with the Channel Duty Guidance describing them as ideological and theological experts who have specialist knowledge in extremism and radicalisation (GOV UK, 2023c: 49). They can potentially be 'formers', a term given to those who were previously radicalised but now work to prevent radicalisation happening with others. The problematic nature of formers was discussed in the literature review so I will revisit this in the context of the analysis of this study but first proceed by considering what participants' experiences in the research can tell us about IPs.

The effectiveness of IPs was generally considered strong and positive but there were notable contrasting instances of this also. Participants experienced them as being well-informed and able to build strong relationships with the individuals they worked with. A participant described how an IP told them the first hour or two each morning of their work involves reading the latest news and scanning for material that could be incendiary and contribute to radicalisation, therefore equipping themselves for what is likely to be presenting at Channel and their wider work tackling radicalisation. This has been evidenced across other participants who discussed political issues such as asylum-seekers being accommodated in hotels or Brexit, where the lead-up to the referendum saw British MP Jo Cox murdered by Thomas Mair, who was later discovered to be in possession of extensive RWE materials. This knowledge base seems crucial for relevant interventions where many practitioners may not have the time or passion for political issues or world events, making IPs more ideally situated to perform this role.

The unfamiliarity of some practitioners becoming involved with Channel for the first time saw them find it uncomfortable and gave a first impression of secrecy which dissipated as the work progressed, whilst others found the involvement of IPs lacking in terms of quality. This was particularly notable with a high-profile case experienced by a social worker who was a standing panel member, and stated the allocated IP never attended panel and would submit updates to the police who would bring this to panel, also adding that the IP had at times reported not being able to get in touch with the individual and this did not seem to be challenged by Channel. Whilst a single case, this raises concerns in several ways between lack of communication and building rapport with the individual, but also contradicts the Channel Duty Guidance which states that written reports of sessions are required to the Channel case officer within

five days of a session with an IP (GOV UK, 2023c: 50), leading to this appearing to be an example of an ineffective intervention but perhaps due to execution, yet there was not a mention of accountability by the participant.

Having IPs as a local resource was valued by several participants, while this also highlighted a potential issue in that IP availability can be expected to vary across England and Wales, making it likely some Local Authorities may find their use much less effective whilst others can maintain a consistent IP and develop trust with them. Home Office are described as retaining a catalogue of registered IPs but is not clear how extensive the catalogue is, creating another aspect of Prevent where there is a level of unpredictability and uncertainty, with independent scrutiny being unlikely. This is related to participant recruitment for this study also, as IPs mostly could not be accessed for this study and those identified were not amenable to participating. This can be understandable in terms of safeguarding confidentiality, but it adds a layer of difficulty in understanding how effective their role and interventions are, particularly considering the varying knowledge and opinions of them in the that dataset for this study, meaning direct access would be more beneficial.

Further to the above, while the multi-agency nature of Channel can be reassuring in that there is substantial oversight of Channel's work by agencies with an array of values, IPs are described as being primarily vetted and approved by Home Office before the Channel chair and police are satisfied the IP is suitable for use (GOV UK, 2023c: 50). This implies much discretion in who Home Office approves to be an IP. How they are vetted is unclear, while the use of formers is stated in the guidance. While literature around Channel is scant, caution has been urged in the use of formers in any counterterrorism work for various reasons, such as how qualified or competent the person may be, their motives in terms of financial gain, or to what extent they are

truly ‘former’ and not glorifying previous terrorism, inadvertently or otherwise (Papatheodorou, 2023). It could be argued that the guidance indicates that this has been considered by stating “Individuals and organisations holding extremist views used to legitimise or support terrorist-related activity of any kind, or to radicalise others into terrorism, in this country or overseas, have no place in delivering support through Channel, nor will they be given public funding to do so” (GOV UK, 2023c: 50), however I posit this statement has been implemented as a political reaction to counter previous criticisms Prevent received for funding community groups that allegedly held extremist views but were not known for supporting violence (Maher and Frampton, 2009).

While it would seem IPs would be the ideal way of measuring how effective safeguarding interventions are, it can be seen from the above how efforts to do so became frustrated. Due to the scope of the current study and challenges detailed earlier in participant recruitment, IPs became unviable to recruit for this study and this appears a consistent issue in the paucity of relevant literature. For example, Thornton and Bouhana (2017) are one of the few studies examining IPs and only six were found for their study, yet the study resonates with my research here as the authors found the effectiveness of IPs to be questionable, while the participants in the current study were mixed in their experiences but with notable positive experiences. In all, this gives me hesitation in concluding how effective the work of IPs has been according to my participants’ experiences, but it raises questions in need of further investigation. Further study focused on IPs will be needed but given the gatekeeping described throughout this study, I am not confident how feasible this will be.

A final note on IPs before I progress to consider other forms of intervention described by participants is that I find it curious that in the length of time that Channel has been in operation, IPs remain the sole unique innovation that Channel seems to have to

offer. Multi-agency working is not new, and the members of Channel panels mostly originate and qualify in more traditional roles across safeguarding or health and social care, such as education, social work, police, and mental health. A number of participants described experiencing Channel as closely resembling extant multi-agency safeguarding meetings or as mysterious if attending irregularly as a non-standing member of the panel. It is clear that further in-depth research is needed and while I am confident that Home Office have conducted research that has not been published, I am less confident that such research is sufficiently rigorous given political agendas to avoid negative publicity, in turn giving ammunition to the anti-Prevent camp who I also find curious in their emphasis on historic criticism of surveillance and securitisation as explored above. Therefore, Channel may benefit not just from additional critical research but from further innovation and a stronger identity to contribute to more effective safeguarding interventions.

This final research question has seen me focus on IPs heavily as they are what distinguishes Channel and therefore, I believe should have a primary focus as to their contributions to interventions. While experiences of IPs were mixed, participants experienced much more than IPs when being involved with devising interventions in Channel. These were often social interventions in nature; however, this also allowed the different roles of each profession represented in Channel to influence the support offered and deciding who should take a lead role. Again, this showed variation depending on the resources available to a specific panel and different professionals experienced misunderstandings of the remits of mental health, social work, or police powers, for example, which I will discuss further below.

The Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF) was mentioned as helpful by participants. Since the collecting of data for this study, the Independent Review

recommended amending to Prevent Assessment Framework (PAF), however the timing of this study was during this transition and most participants had not yet accessed or used the PAF, meaning it did not arise much in the study. However, some participants stated they experienced the VAF as helpful in ensuring discussions of referrals were kept within the remit of Channel, arguably making the VAF a tool of intervention in its own right despite methodological criticisms it has received as discussed in the literature review. Participants noted that it helped to prevent duplication of work given that Channel's multi-agency composition can resemble other multi-disciplinary team (MDT) meetings. The VAF focuses on Intent, Engagement, and Capability, with a participant noting that having time and space to consider the VAF was then helpful in deciding the nature of the intervention.

Some effective interventions were also experienced by participants that were distinctive in terms of the creativity involved that may not have been possible in other safeguarding contexts. For example, the analysis above detailed a participant impressed by Channel agreeing that the line manager for a referred individual would be the lead role in overseeing the IP's work and reporting back to Channel alongside the individual retaining their professional registration to prevent unemployment becoming another risk factor. This was shown to be an effective intervention that avoided a heavy-handed or authoritative response by having police or similar authoritative figures risk becoming another 'push' factor or risking acquiescence given the difficulty in knowing if a person is truly 'deradicalised'. Further creative approaches were described by other participants however being creative can also mean unique and therefore identifiable, returning me to the pervasive frustration in researching this area, making it difficult to convey the effectiveness of Channel's safeguarding interventions within some of the data collected.

In the literature review I highlighted that examples of Channel's interventions used for training and guidance were curiously social in nature, which became the case in this study although a social approach contributed to effective interventions. It has been identified in the analysis that most participants are experiencing issues in addition to radicalisation at Channel or issues contributing to radicalisation in some way. Participants noted that mental health concerns or trauma needed an intervention either parallel or prior to deciding what Channel's role would be and that it was rare for a case to present at Channel without a number of these additional needs.

I noted in the analysis that, while the prevalence of neurodivergence in Prevent referrals had been recognised, in this study the prevalence surpassed my own expectations as almost all participants experienced cases where it was suspected if not diagnosed at Channel. This is where interventions then were pivotal in effectiveness. Notoriously long waiting lists for mental health services and neurodivergent screenings appeared to frustrate interventions in some circumstances whilst a participant noted they could circumvent the waiting list for an autism diagnosis, while other cases were either exited from Channel or prevented from being criminalised as a result of such social and additional needs being identified and prioritised. While the autism diagnosis mentioned above was discussed by a counterterrorism officer, social workers in the study shared experiences where their intervention and advocacy proved to be effective interventions that saw mental health needs being prioritised in cases where extremist presentations were identified as manifestations of psychosis and not requiring Channel to be involved. While there may be an argument around proper usage of Channel resources, I would argue this is effective use of Channel as it should be effectively intervening to screen out cases in

addition to intervening to prevent radicalisation, aided by the multiple agencies in attendance to ensure specific demographics or conditions are not stigmatised.

The aspect of intervention that participants consistently experienced difficulty with was intervening with a person's use of the internet, particularly with younger people. Participants showed a mixture of disconnect and empathy with the influence of the internet in presentations at Channel, given that many professionals were Digital Immigrants unlike the Digital Natives being presented at Channel (Prensky, 2001). Participants experienced effective interventions where IPs or other workers were able to engage individuals in offline activities, while participants described interventions facing a barrier where parents are not informed or struggle themselves as Digital Immigrants. For example, a participant noted that they have experienced changes in parents and families across time, such a single salary not being sufficient to raise a family, meaning both parents working and becoming less able to supervise internet use. In addition to this, a counterterrorism officer experienced parents being baffled when the influence of algorithms and other social media mechanisms was explained to them. In the literature review it was discussed that the internet is lacking regulation and considered the 'law of the jungle' (Molnar, 2021) as a result, with radicalisation being one of many risks such as exploitation and sexual abuse posed to both children and adults. Several participants stated that community-based interventions were effective in this, however, were frustrated by a lack of available resources, confounded further by the COVID-19 pandemic where participants found that options for intervention had reduced as a result despite an increased need, meaning Channel has had fewer and therefore less effective interventions. At the same time, Channel will also be helpful in filtering cases of 'desperation', where participants have noted that

people may turn to it due to a lack of resources elsewhere, which needs to be addressed at the national level.

I conclude this research question with an emphasis on how radicalisation is presenting as too complex to isolate from contextual factors that may be related to mental health, trauma, relational, or social factors. As stated in the fourth theme, this multi-faceted nature of radicalisation needs to be understood before considering an intervention and although there are similarities with other multi-agency panels, the expertise within Channel would be far too useful to ignore with individuals who are complex and professionals who are not equipped for the extra layer of risk and complexity brought by radicalisation. A professional cannot be an expert in everything and the complexities presenting at Channel make a multiagency approach key. If participants find that Channel's multiagency approach resembles other safeguarding mechanisms then I argue that is because multiagency working works well when it works, and we need only look at historic Serious Case Reviews such as the Deghayes family to see the impact of failed or lack of multiagency working. For example, participants who considered themselves less well informed around radicalisation or terrorism found that counterterrorism officers were helpful and informative in decision-making and planning support, with it being mutual in that officers found it helpful where social workers had existing relationships with individuals and knowledge of community and social resources.

The effectiveness of safeguarding interventions of Channel have proven challenging to critically assess for the reasons discussed above particularly where IPs are involved. This study has broached Channel's interventions against radicalisation that have not been well researched or understood. In this original research there has been demonstrated effective, limited, and creative interventions, which while are not

providing conclusive evidence, are taking an original approach and addressing the research questions, this one regarding how effective the safeguarding interventions of Channel are. This same barrier has brought limitations to addressing all three research questions but a benefit of original research such as this is it points us as researchers to where further research is needed.

The previous section detailed an analysis where four themes were identified in the dataset. The first theme was “*Navigating the Ideology, Vulnerability, and Susceptibility Trifecta*”, followed by “*Safeguarding – Something New or Something Old?*”, then “*Angry Young Men - Gendering Radicalisation*”, and finally “*The Multi-Faceted Nature of Radicalisation*”. These are themes that I as the researcher identified in the dataset. Through reviewing the literature, gaps, debates, and controversies were identified by me and three research questions were then conceived of which guided the remainder of the study. The first question was “*What are the presenting issues that Channel panels are dealing with?*”, followed by “*How does Channel conceptualise the forms of radicalisation they are dealing with?*”, and finally “*Are the safeguarding interventions which Channel devise working effectively?*”. The four themes were identified with a view to answering these research questions, with this chapter synthesizing the analysis to do so, bringing about my own intervention into this area of research. In the next and final chapter I will bring the study to its conclusion as I weave together the findings and the originality with my specific intervention and its implications and the need for further research.

Chapter 6) Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I will be synthesising the origins and context of the study, the gaps identified that highlight the original contribution of this study, the challenges faced in executing the research, the findings, and implications for future practice and research, all to articulate the intervention this study provides for the extant knowledge base in Prevent, Channel, and safeguarding against radicalisation by social work. The personal preface at the beginning of this thesis added an additional but also original lens that contextualises elements of my researcher positionality as a 'Ceasefire Baby' as coined by the late Lyra McKee (2020), which I will also consider in the importance of the researcher as well as the research. Finally, the research concludes with five recommendations for policy and practice.

6.1 Context of the Study

This study aimed to understand the presenting issues at Channel, how practitioners conceptualised them, and to explore how effective safeguarding interventions were in addressing them. In the wake of terror attacks such as 9/11 and 7/7 since the turn of the millennium, Western governments have sought to address concerns about 'homegrown' terrorism, by approaches such as countering terrorism as early as possible before a person progresses to committing a terror offence. This process that takes place prior to a terror offence came to be known as 'radicalisation', with Prevent being established to divert people from this radicalisation process. Since its inception in 2003, Prevent has proven to be divisive, attracting controversy from politicians, academics, and the media. Channel was piloted in 2007 as the operational arm of Prevent and much less is known about Channel or the work it does, making this t

research study an imperative and original contribution striving for balanced critical analysis.

The literature review that underpins this study identifies notable gaps and limitations in existing research . Prevent's polarising nature meant that a balanced and critical analysis of its evolution was necessary prior to departing on the research. This identified a paucity of primary research and a plethora of research published by authors with an identifiable 'anti-Prevent' or 'pro-Prevent' leaning. Within Channel, the lack of primary research was more apparent. These were key gaps that the current research sought to address. When considering how radicalisation has evolved both conceptually and taxonomically at Prevent, this highlighted a further gap for this current research to intervene in and make an original contribution. This is further aided by the ways that my social work voice brings an additional perspective in this intervention. Having considered the extensive literature outlined above, I decided upon three research questions that I considered apposite in addressing the gaps identified in the literature review:

RQ1: What are the presenting issues that Channel panels are dealing with?

RQ2: How does Channel conceptualise the forms of radicalisation they are dealing with?

RQ3: Are the safeguarding interventions which Channel devise working effectively?

Through a qualitative research design, this study addressed the research questions by conducting semi-structured interviews with participants who had worked with Channel, resulting in identifying four themes:

Theme One: Navigating the Ideology, Vulnerability, and Susceptibility Trifecta.

Theme Two: Safeguarding – Something New or Something Old?

Theme Three: Angry Young Men - Gendering Radicalisation.

Theme Four: The Multi-faceted Nature of Radicalisation.

These themes are indicative of the findings of this study, which contrasts with much of the literature reviewed early in the thesis, particularly when considered from a social work perspective. I will highlight the findings, their implications, and their originality below.

6.2 Findings

Firstly, a noticeable shift in the ideological bases of referrals to Prevent and Channel is seen in published statistics and was reflected in the study. RWE has seen increases in numbers and VJ decreases, immediately raising a question to concerns of Islamophobia prevalent in the literature. While explanations such as refocused training can influence this, the most significant aspect is in terms of mixed ideology referrals, which is an ambiguous taxonomical term that this study has been able to provide nuance for a deeper understanding of, both from the literature review and analysis of the data. In the study I have identified the complexity of cases presented at Channel, with ideology being just one facet of risk participants discussed amongst mental health, trauma, and the influence of the internet and social media. McCann's (2019) 'Supermarket' analogy has been useful in conceptualising this, as people at risk of radicalisation are often selecting from various sources that at times can even seem contradictory yet gives rise to a concern that a person could be radicalised and commit a terror offence.

Secondly, while there was an ongoing epistemological debate around the roles of vulnerability and susceptibility in radicalisation, it was clear that a safeguarding lens was adopted and used by practitioners. The study showed that participants were thoughtful around concepts such as structure and agency, evidencing reflexive practice and debate within Channel particularly where children are involved. While there were indications of some challenges between agencies, notably police, panels demonstrated cohesiveness when safeguarding against radicalisation, with the role of social work being notable in avoiding criminalizing vulnerable individuals. This is where the originality of the study contrasted greatly with publications that have been highly critical of Prevent, as participants, notably who work with Channel unlike highly critical authors who lack such experience, were not experiencing issues such as surveillance, securitisation, or Islamophobia. Indeed, despite the challenges of recruitment the sample I was able to recruit demonstrated a wide array of diversity in sex, ethnicity, and profession, again contrasting a notably white or androcentric authorship of the most persistent criticisms of Prevent. This is not to dismiss valid concerns and historic issues which this study has also explored thoroughly but has diverged from the divisive literature.

Thirdly, the study was interested in the safeguarding interventions implemented by Channel and the findings were valuable as an area of Prevent that has not received much attention. Being unique to Channel, Intervention Providers (IPs) and their role was emphasised in the study, with the findings demonstrating their role as having strong effectiveness at times whilst questions also arose to the varying quality of IPs and their recruitment, such as the use of formers and Home Office's discretion in who passes the vetting process to be accepted as an IP. While Thornton and Bouhana (2017) raise similar concerns, theirs and the current study form what little original

knowledge of IPs is available, meaning that while this study brings an original element of rare knowledge more recent than Thornton and Bouhana, it also highlights the need for further research in this area as I suspect that Home Office are sitting on extensive knowledge that will not see academic or mainstream publishing, furthering the conundrum discussed in this research that argues that is the negative outcomes that receive the most attention. Beyond IPs, the current study brings findings that social interventions play a large part of Channel's work from the participants' experiences. Confounded by the pandemic, the "line in the sand moment" as told to me by a counterterrorism officer, much of interventions seem to revolve around countering narratives found online and getting people offline to find more meaningful relationships face-to-face, confounded further by the prevalence of neurodivergence presenting at Channel and the lack of community resources in a post-pandemic society still arguably in the grips of austerity, in turn risking cases being referred to Channel as a result of services elsewhere being missing or overwhelmed.

6.3 Originality of the Research

This study is an intervention in the current debates and evidence base of radicalisation. It makes a valuable and original contribution to knowledge where there are notable gaps in the literature as identified above. While there have been extensive publications about Prevent, these have been to a much lesser extent the case for Channel, with few publications engaging in primary research and instead unhelpfully debating the role of securitisation and surveillance. When primary research was found in the literature, it rarely involved active practitioners who have attended Channel. Pettinger (2020) and Thornton and Bouhana (2017) are among the few who have

directly published primary data collected from Channel, While Weeks (2018) examined the role of mentoring and IPs more generally by including the post-crime space. The fast-evolving nature of radicalisation, particularly considering the collapse of ISIS and COVID-19 pandemic, means that research has an urgency in keeping pace which the current study has brought. The primary data presented and analysed here has been as a result of engaging with practitioners who have attended Channel in various capacities, notably during the pandemic and after lockdowns concluded, experiencing the effects this had on radicalisation trends. This study has navigated a divisive academic landscape and an industry resistant to external research to provide original primary research from an original perspective of Social Work.

6.4 Challenges, Limitations, and Future Directions

A paucity of extant research may seem like the most prescient challenge in this area, however the resistance to ameliorating this was much more worrisome for me as an academic and as a social worker. The challenges in recruitment have been detailed further above but are worth re-emphasising as I find their significance cannot be understated. What I experienced with Home Office when recruiting participants was not just the expected reticence and mistrust most researchers are familiar with, but hostility that bordered on paranoia that saw professional safety risk being compromised. What I mean is that potential participants disclosed in private communications some worrying responses from line managers in their roles and frustrations with Home Office, such as a potential participant explicitly stating they were told by a line manager that their employment would be terminated had they participated in this study. The coincidental timing of my recruitment period beginning

in 2023 seeing new guidance published late that year which explicitly directed Channel practitioners not to participate in research not approved by Home Office did not go unobserved and only fed into my concerns, with implications of costing this research valuable participants.

If Channel is to broker trust after nearly two decades of Prevent suffering accusations of securitisation and surveillance, this dilemma of transparency clashing with national security needs a resolution. The participants in this study did so with extreme trust in me as the researcher to protect their identity which in itself is likely to have had innumerable implications in terms of what they were willing to disclose in research interviews, as I have detailed above how much unique work became unpublishable due to being identifiable. My argument is that this is a detriment to Channel and even a detriment to national security. The shielding of information and research does little to assuage the anti-Prevent camp's concerns but also provides practitioners with limited knowledge in executing their roles within Channel. It has been shown in this research how prevalent it is for practitioners to attend Channel on one occasion and be mystified by the process. Knowing that a referral to Prevent does more than 'tick a box' would be helpful for all relevant workers in Local Authorities as the multi-agency Channel panel welcomes the diversity of professions, which the extant literature does not represent accurately. While it may be tempting to reduce this to a training need, for those practitioners who are not standing members of Channel I find training less effective due to the rarity of radicalisation cases in many Local Authorities.

Following from the above, recruitment challenges lead me to acknowledge a challenge in this study sample and in generalizing the results. Given that every Local Authority across England and Wales will have a Channel panel, with some authorities merging their panels, there are a vast number of practitioners that this study's sample can only

represent to a limited degree. Having said that, this qualitative research emphasizes meaning and explanation rather than positivistic aspirations of generalisability. Nevertheless, the participant sample recruited demonstrated substantial diversity in terms of profession and location. The analysis also reflected the published Prevent statistics, meaning that, whilst a small sample was recruited, the results remain valuable, especially given the paucity of original primary research.

This study provides insight and an opening into an area that is both fraught with difficulty and lacking in research, with the future directions I find need to begin simply with further research around Channel in general. The issues of trust, criticality, and transparency are substantial barriers to overcome given that many academics will lean towards the anti-Prevent camp, however I hope that this current study evidences that there is a possibility for research and researchers to be critical yet fair and balanced who are much-needed for safeguarding against radicalisation to be improved, in and beyond Prevent.

6.5 The Role of Social Work

Social Work is synonymous with safeguarding. Every day there are social workers across Britain and further afield who are protecting children and families from issues such as criminal and sexual exploitation, grooming, and gangs. As argued throughout this study, extending this work to prevent radicalisation is not a large leap. Social workers are well positioned to identify and respond to radicalisation at early stages, such as in teams responsible for assessments, safeguarding, children in care, or youth justice, to name a few examples. This study found that social workers already operate as standing Channel panel members and can attend when concerns arise from their

caseload, so therefore I posit that this should continue and maintain a key social work presence and voice as part of every multi-agency Channel panel. Social workers, like all professions at Channel, can bring a different perspective and knowledge, however our emphasis on the social aspect of concerns and solutions can be a unique contribution to Channel particularly where younger and more vulnerable people are involved.

In addition to practice, I hope this study evidences the value of social work research and the role it can have in safeguarding against radicalisation. Although Prevent forms one of four 'Ps' of the government's counterterrorism strategy, research can benefit from social work perspectives, values, and methodologies in addition to those from counterterrorism or security-based perspectives, with my added caveat that the remit of Prevent needs vigilance given that I have noted academics and other commentators conflating it with Pursue.

6.6 My Role

This study began with a personal preface and in the spirit of social work I find it beneficial to conclude by revisiting it at the end of this journey. Qualitative research has long recognised the subjective role of the researcher and sought to adapt this to becoming a strength within qualitative research. At first, I was unsure and curious about this, however at the tail-end of this research I have come to the conclusion that it has been of benefit for the researcher that I acknowledged the self that I brought. Similar to the discussion above regarding what social work can add to this area of research, I have found that having left one area known for radicalisation (Northern Ireland) and to study radicalisation in England and Wales instead has expanded my

own insight alongside the development of research skills typical of a PhD programme. While the nature of the radicalisation differed between these two contexts, I reflect on both and see it is often the case that people are reacting to the social context they find themselves in, that reactive or punitive responses are unhelpful, and that othering people as terrorists or similar is to deny root causes and social solutions.

The topic of radicalisation and the challenges detailed above would potentially become enervating for a student, however for me it has solidified a sense of purpose and identity. These challenges are a reminder of why this research is crucial in the first place, with my persistence and resilience demonstrating and fuelling a passion for further research in this field. While there is the potential for disagreement with the stance I claim in being balanced, critical, and fair, I maintain that this stance is evident throughout the study and has not been prevalent enough in the literature nor especially politics and the media. It is my hope that this work inspires further similar research in the future.

The final section of this final chapter is given to four recommendations I have identified as a result of conducting this study. The gaps in the literature led to three research questions, which were addressed through four themes identified in the dataset, and now five recommendations are suggested that I believe will support Prevent and Channel in safeguarding against radicalisation, where social workers can play a key role. The appendices will follow this, which I have referred to throughout the study.

6.7 Recommendation One: Child-Focused Practice

In social work we are working with people across the lifespan including pre-birth and in loss and grief, yet children will take primacy where they are involved in our work due

to their inherent vulnerability (with vulnerability itself being a problematic term in Prevent – see Recommendation Three). As seen from this research, this is now coming to the fore for Prevent and Channel, with referrals increasingly being for younger people and at a national level we are also seeing younger people being arrested and prosecuted, with agencies such as MI5 publicly stating a struggle in comprehending youth radicalisation. It is important we get to grips with this as soon as possible and in doing so I do not believe we can view children under the same lens as adults when referred to Channel. For example, at the time of this research being conducted the VAF (Vulnerability Assessment Framework) was still in use. This is a standardized assessment used regardless of a person's age, meaning both children and adults are screened using it. This can be problematic if the context of a person being a child is not given primacy, with unfortunate cases such as Rhianan Rudd potentially having a different outcome had she been treated as a victim of grooming earlier in her case rather than being arrested and charged. This is not to say that all children should be exempt from criminal proceedings – if a crime has been committed and a child is above the age of criminal responsibility, then I would expect proportionate responses, but then we would be straying into the jurisdiction of Pursue. The focus here is Prevent, where a child-focused approach can be evidenced from some of the participants in this study, so to have this formalised and standardised would be appropriate in areas such as the Channel Duty Guidance or Vulnerability Assessment Framework (soon to be changed to Prevent Assessment Framework).

6.8 Recommendation Two: Online Safeguards for Children

One of the most glaring issues found in the literature and raised by all participants is the role of the internet in modern radicalisation. Safeguarding concerns on the internet are not new, as historically it has been well known for websites and platforms to host harmful content that internet providers may not have been aware of, such as material that encourages self-harm, suicide, and eating disorders. It is therefore not surprising that these platforms were exploited to promote radicalising materials, with ISIS being infamous for their use of Twitter whilst RWE groups more recently have exploited social media platforms, and mass shooters such as Brenton Tarrant have live-streamed their horrific crimes. Despite the attempts to regulate social media and legislation such as the Online Safety Act 2023 it is clear from this research (or even a brief perusal online) that current measures are not effective enough. Therefore, it is recommended that a more powerful body is established that can take action against material online designed to radicalise others.

The proposed recommendation here must be acknowledged as problematic in its implementation. The sheer volume of traffic and material online may be too overwhelming to attempt to regulate efficiently and deciding what material is unsafe carries a subjective burden that risks accusations of censoring free speech. Existing terror legislation includes sharing material online or declaring support for a proscribed organization, yet there is much material that is able to skirt this legislation. Given the prevalence of VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) and Artificial Intelligence, material may instead be pushed further into the Dark Web where professionals risk breaking the law simply by accessing it. An additional issue here also is that this can impact our knowledge and understanding if researchers such as me are also locked out of unsafe content. Such an over-reaching regulation could be perceived as authoritarian and

dictatorial, in turn worsening radicalisation through angering populations where those who view radicalising material mostly do not end up radicalised. With these concerns in mind, I argue that doing nothing is not an option and what is currently being done does not appear to be enough. At a minimum there should be a strive to tackle material that is undoubtedly in breach of counterterrorism legislation, and a body that has the authority to remove content and sanction providers more swiftly and effectively I argue will be a positive step towards addressing radicalisation.

6.9 Recommendation Three: Make Vulnerability the Central Concept in Prevent Work

The change of emphasis in the Independent Review to ‘susceptibility’ rather than vulnerability raises concerns that there is a possibility for cases to be declined at Channel by raising the threshold to where ideology and radicalisation risks must be prominent. This would be problematic on multiple fronts, such as ideology increasingly being less clear in those referred, creating a risk for referrals to be prematurely rejected. Another concerning aspect of this would be that the more tangible radicalisation concerns are then the greater likelihood a crime could have been already committed, and the person comes under the jurisdiction of Pursue, resulting in criminalisation when an earlier intervention could have prevented it, hence the name of ‘Prevent’, an issue referred to in the previous recommendations. I find that this also may risk undermining the capability and professional judgement of Channel panel practitioners, who in this study have demonstrated themselves as well equipped to identify cases unsuitable for Channel.

As one participant in this study indicated, susceptibility could be most useful when applied as an extension rather than a replacement of vulnerability, allowing Channel practitioners to consider the roles of structure and agency in cases, whilst also affording space to understand the increasing complexities seen in Prevent referrals. Cases can always be signposted at a later point should it emerge that radicalisation concerns are not significant rather than potentially missing a case where concerns become too obvious, too late. The potential for negative media attention from this has been demonstrated in a recent example of Axel Rudakubana in 2024 where it became known that three Prevent referrals were not progressed to Channel. Even though it would emerge that sufficient professional judgement and rationale was used in this case, my argument is further cases like this risk being denied and with a less defensible decision-making process. In the most recent Channel Duty Guidance at the time of writing, safeguarding is deferred to the final two pages of the guidance. This leaves me with the impression that it is not seen as central to Channel's work despite all practitioners in this study emphasizing it is part of their practice. Therefore, the recommendation is for practice and policy to align by Channel and the wider Prevent strategy ensuring vulnerability is not de-prioritised or replaced by susceptibility. In either the overall strategy or Channel Duty Guidance.

6.10 Recommendation Four: Implement Radicalisation Education as Part of the Social Work Curriculum

At the University of Gloucestershire we have been fortunate to have had several individuals capable of providing in-depth knowledge of radicalisation and Prevent, meaning It has been embedded in the curriculum for several years. However, at

present there is no mandate for any radicalisation education within Social Work across England and Wales. Social Work England is the body which inspects universities where Social Work is taught yet has nothing to say in regards to radicalisation despite it having been a legal duty for Local Authorities since 2015. In implementing this there will be several barriers I can see. Firstly, is the lack of expertise necessary for high quality teaching in this area. The social work curriculum is already quite a compact journey for students and educators, none of whom can be experts in everything. One amelioration for this could be the Prevent training available online, however in my view, although I was impressed when completing the training again recently, it is still too narrow for suitability in an academic context where debate and challenge is needed. Secondly, given the extensive discussion in this study on the polarisation of anti-Prevent and pro-Prevent debates, the stance of the educator will be pivotal in how it is taught and there likely would be resistance to it being taught at all. With the multiagency nature of Channel, there may be an opportunity for a guest lecturer from a different agency or a Prevent Lead or Channel Chair to be invited to provide some teaching. As can be seen here, there is room for creativity and flexibility in how radicalisation is taught to student social workers but the priority is that it is part of the curriculum to afford students the chance to engage in a valuable learning experience. This is not a problem unique to Channel. Social workers will be aware that as community resources have decreased in recent years, the number of children on Child Protection plans and being brought into care have increased when an early intervention service likely could have averted this result. It was emphasised in the Independent Review that Channel should focus more on ideological concerns and less where mental health concerns are the priority. Although I have challenged the ideological aspect above, this is further confounded if a lack of community and

statutory resources sees a person's condition deteriorate until radicalisation is difficult to discern from mental health issues. In addition to this, there then runs a risk where a person will see much more severe consequences such as being detained in a psychiatric hospital or imprisoned should a crime be committed, with all consequences risking harm and fatalities.

6.11 Recommendation Five: Multi-Agency Working

Channel by design is a multiagency mechanism and the final recommendation is to ensure this is upheld but also improved upon since there will always be room for improvement. Participants in this study demonstrated a wide array of knowledge and appreciation for the space that Channel provides for constructive discussion and debate. This is key for social workers (but also other professionals) who may find themselves working with Channel for the first time and feeling under-equipped or out of their depth, as seen in this study. What is also seen in this study is a lack of clarity for some practitioners on what is actually expected of them when they attend Channel. A solution to this would be prior discussions with the Channel Chair or Prevent Lead to make the process feel less like the "secret service" as one of my participants stated. This multiagency aspect would also ensure that social work has a strong presence and voice within Channel, but also that accountability is assured given historic aspersions that Prevent as a whole is shrouded in mystery, securitisation and surveillance.

Finally, Channel panels appear to have a variety of skilled and experienced professionals in attendance, yet the key facet that makes Channel unique is the use of Intervention Providers. This is again a model steeped in the same veils of secrecy

that Prevent has not done much to help against. It leads me to question why this rigid model has persisted. As a social worker I am aware of a wealth of methods to make Channel the most effective it can be and given the findings of this study I see it as an inevitable change needed given the evolving nature of radicalisation, which Prevent needs to evolve with in more meaningful ways than changing the VAF to PAF or being influenced by reactionary politics such as in the wake of the Southport murders. The way forward for Prevent and Channel will be to retain its multi-agency focus and keep social work as a vital member of each panel.

As a final note, radicalisation will continue to evolve and Khosrokhavar (2017) stated that radicalisation is problem of society, reflected in the findings of this study. Radicalisation holds up a mirror to our society and while it is not a pleasant view, it should also not be surprising. Prevent and Channel are essential tools in safeguarding against radicalisation but can and should do better.

ix. Appendices

6.1 Appendix A - Photos from Derry



Bonds Street in the Waterside area of Derry is demarcated as a Loyalist area by the colours of kerbstones which reflect the colours of the Union Jack. The mural is one of many across Derry, and graffiti referencing drug-dealing issues encapsulates the multi-faceted issues locally. This photo was taken by me.



Known as 'Free Derry Corner' due to the monument which usually bears the text "YOU ARE NOW ENTERING FREE DERRY", which was changed after the onset of the Israel and Hamas conflict to reference Refaat Alareer, a poet killed in an airstrike in December 2023. This photo was taken by me.



A photo of part of the Bogside taken from the Derry Walls. Visible is the reference to a paramilitary group and several flags, notably the flag of Palestine, as many in Northern Ireland note a parallel between the English occupation of Ireland and Israeli occupation of Palestine. This photo was taken by me.



Part of the Fountain area of Derry, again demarcated by the painted kerbstones but also lampposts and a monument stating, “NO SURRENDER”, a reference to the 1689 siege of Derry but it was also a slogan arising during The Troubles. This photo was taken by me.



On the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, this photo was captured in the Creggan area of Derry (Robinson, 2023). Visible is a police Land Rover which is still what comes to mind when I hear 'police cars' mentioned in conversation.



Maydown Police Station in Derry. Beyond views like this when driving past I have never seen the inside of a police station in Northern Ireland with their intimidating tall walls and heavy-set doors (Campbell, 2024).

6.3 Appendix C - Analysis Sample (Participant Twelve)

Comments denote initial observations, with those in bold font being used to group together observations into codes and potential themes

<p>Transcript:</p> <p>19-36: The far right is certainly a big category of concern.</p> <p>There's a range of different far-right cases. We've had a lot of white supremacy, neo-Nazi cases that are deeply concerned about the Great Replacement and whites being a minority in the West, and associating that with the Channel crossings, associating that with the lack of strong borders that they expected after Brexit, and they hold the government accountable for that.</p> <p>A lot of antisemitism as well associated with that, so that's the sort of extreme right-wing cases that are associated with neo-Nazism, obsessed with Hitler and World War Two, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.</p> <p>We've also had a lot of far right, more the cultural nationalism. That's more associated with EDL-type narratives of the spread of Islam and the decline of the West, and more cultural arguments of the need to preserve Western civilisation from high levels of immigration, or Jihadist terrorism, grooming gangs etc., etc.</p>	<p>Themes generated from codes/comments:</p> <p>Ideology, vulnerability, and susceptibility</p>
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So those are the two most common far-right categories we have around the extreme right wing, and then that more broader cultural nationalism.

We have had quite a few people that are in that mixed, unclear, unstable or conflicted category. We've certainly had incels referred, involuntary celibates who have this entitled sense of grievance, they feel entitled to sex with women and are struggling with being a virgin or struggling with not engaging in romantic relationships.

41-55: As a percentage or so, the Islamist extremism has declined, I would say probably, over the last year or so, in terms of the percentage of cases at the Channel Panel but we certainly have had people who are very susceptible to getting drawn towards a broad utopia of building a caliphate and feeling like this would be the just and honourable settlement for Muslims globally and making comments as things change politically. So making comments about pro-Taliban we had, when the Taliban took over, or more recently around pro-Hamas, that's been in the media a lot the last few weeks.

So yes, Islamist referrals we certainly still get and that tends to be concerns from professionals hearing comments around quite often misogyny, so making threats to women for not wearing certain clothes or making some reference to a global

conflict that they essentially support, that violence that they've seen from the Taliban or Hamas or something like that. That's how those referrals typically come through.

But as I say, as a broad summary, I would say the far right is probably the biggest ideological group and then it's that mixed, unclear, unstable, these different mix of narratives, then finally Islamist is probably the third largest.

64-87: Definitely. I think the trajectory has broadly been more and more far right over the last year, that's probably the biggest change because I would say maybe a couple of years ago it was bit more evenly spread between far right and Islamist but yes, far right certainly seems to have picked up.

A lot of the thinking around that as well in the Channel Panels and listening to different professionals, has been the impact of Covid. With Covid, you obviously had a lot of people in lockdown for months at a time, spent a huge amount of time online and the anti-Covid conspiracy theories around government lockdowns and challenging the BBC, challenging these institutions, that seemed to dovetail quite closely with some of the far-right movements that leapt on that conspiracy theory around Covid as well.

I think that led to a lot of people being more susceptible maybe to some of these far-right narratives that previously, they weren't really exposed to. But there's the context of

Covid and lockdown and all these different narratives flying around, it opened the gateway to more people, I'd say, getting drawn into some of these more fringe ideas around the far right that previously they hadn't really been susceptible to.

I don't know if that's one aspect going on, is maybe partly why the far right seems to have taken over a larger percentage of our cases, but yes, certainly the last year and a half has been lots of different people really struggling with mental health, struggling with managing to get back into school routine after lockdowns, struggling with friendships, all these different things came together with more and more people spending huge amounts of time online, particularly young boys, young boys isolated online, things like that.

So I think that's part of the explanation potentially, we're seeing all the consequences of all those uncertainties and anxieties and lockdowns around Covid has now come out in more cases of exploitation online, including radicalisation maybe.

371-411: I think a lot of people on Channel Panels would talk about a sense of belonging is really important as a vulnerability. People who are seeking a movement, a group, a cause that they're part of and that they can meaningfully change something, I think is a really, really key insight. A lot of the cases potentially are either socially isolated or they're

<p>part of a community, integrated and part of a community, but they want to protect that community from an external threat.</p> <p>So if you're socially isolated or not, a sense of belonging just is consistently relevant to a lot of these cases. They want to be part of something meaningful. They quite often see a dynamic of my group is under threat from that group, that binary us versus them. So a sense of belonging can be quite important, I would say.</p> <p>It's difficult to talk about specific vulnerabilities because a lot of them are so different, but neurodiversity has come up quite a few times, nationally as well. Nationally, the Home Office has looked into doing research into this because different Prevent teams have identified this but social workers work with a range of different vulnerabilities, don't they, and Channel Panels have sometimes seen a slightly disproportionate amount of young people, for example, with autism referred in.</p> <p>So that's not to be saying that with a lack of nuance, it's not say there's a direct correlation but sometimes certain presentations like neurodiversity and specific contexts, where there's that fixed interest, there's potentially challenges around social communication, there's potentially a lack of belonging and spending a lot of time online. All these different things can make certain people getting drawn into, as I said, that sense of belonging with a specific community online.</p>	
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Participant Twelve Codes Compiled and Amalgamated into Potential Themes (Indicated by Colour for Conceptual Overlap):

Mix of ERW ideologies, Channel crossings, Brexit, and hostility towards the State, MUU and Incels, not under Prevent jurisdiction, Violent Jihadism has reduced, hierarchical summary: ERW-MUU-VJ, COVID, Internet, and conspiracy theories were exploited as gateways by ERW, Mental health, school routines (lack of), isolation, Last 2-3 years that incel became recognised as a concern, Comprehensive assessments, CT police also have secure information, Social care brings in a focus on vulnerability, social concerns meet radicalisation concerns, Vulnerabilities intersecting, Hierarchy of intervention, The multi-agency aspect is essential, Consent plus timing and exiting cases, avoid duplicating work, Leadership from Channel chair, Intervention Providers are the key difference in Channel, E-learning is not enough, Safeguarding epistemically helps social care professionals, tailored interventions, Protective factors/risk factors, Panel composition varies, CT police make clear the boundary between criminal and pre-criminal space, online aspect carries a lot of unknowns, Professional curiosity, Timescales and waiting lists can frustrate interventions, Postcode lottery, Relational intervention, Males under 30 comprise most referrals, Young men see a position they *should* be in but cannot reach, Being sold a fulfilling, problem-solving ideology, Redemption, A woman's role of propping up the caliphate, Similar issues for females but different manifestations, Misogyny and gender, Meaningful change, Isolation vs protecting their community, Trauma can be exploited, ERW exploits political issues such as asylum-seekers in hotels, Asylum seekers can be presented as a threat to women with genuine cases of harm, Professionals need a basic understanding of politics and local issues, Extremist groups offer actions and simple solutions to real issues, Us and Them

Amalgamated codes:

Risk and ideology, Prevent remit and professional knowledge, intervention, gender

6.4 Appendix D - Rejection Emails

Hi Cathal,

I've chased this up and apologies, it's not the answer we were looking for:

Thank you for submitting this request for Home Office engagement. In line with our policy on research not funded by the Home Office or its partners, we advise against practitioner engagement in research that does not fill a critical evidence gap for the Home Office. Unfortunately, after review we assessed this research not to meet our criteria for engagement and advise against Prevent practitioner participation in this research.

Sorry.

Morning Cathal,

Sorry for the delay in getting back to you. I've run this request past HO colleagues who I know you have also reached out to. We have been advised that we are unable to help with this request at this time. There are a number of reasons for this, including a number of competing priorities including commitment to other research projects currently.

Im sorry about this and wish you all the very best with the work.

Thanks

Hi Cathal,

Apologies, I've now heard back from the people who look at this and they've asked me to pass the following on.

"Thank you for submitting this request for Home Office engagement. In line with our policy on research not funded by the Home Office or its partners, we advise against practitioner engagement in research that does not fill a critical evidence gap for the Home Office. Unfortunately, after review we assessed this research not to meet our criteria for engagement and advise against Prevent practitioner participation in this research."

As such I'm afraid I can't set up a meeting. I've passed on your request below to see if there's any leeway & they'll be in touch separately if so.

Kind regards

Hi Cathal

You are probably aware that the Home Office has published its revised Channel Duty Guidance 2023.

Having had a cursory read, I could not help but notice paragraphs 187 and 188 around participation in research. It makes clear that Channel Chairs such as myself are not to participate in external research linked to their Prevent role, except in exceptional circumstances. Those exceptional circumstances being a priority evidence gap determined by the Home Office, who would also consider any new research requests.

On that basis, I will have to withdraw my consent to participate in your research piece until the Home Office have approved the research project.

Apologies, but the revised guidance makes the position very clear.

Best wishes

Hi Cathal

Hope you are well.

I have discussed the research with senior management and unfortunately at present [Local Authority] are unable to participate.

Many thanks,

Hi Cathal

I am so sorry, having considered the new Home Office Duty Guidance it does not permit me to participate in research which is not funded by the Home Office or its partners. I am really sorry.

Thanks

Hello Cathal,

Thank you for your further email. As you know, [Member of Parliament] is deeply impressed with your research and your desire to improve collaboration with the Home Office on the extremely important issue of safeguarding responses to radicalisation.

Unfortunately, as indicated below, officials at the Home Office have assessed your research and deemed that it does not meet the criteria for engagement and have therefore advise against Prevent practitioner participation in this research.

I regret that the change in Home Secretary does not affect the Home Office's policy on research or research criteria for engagement and I do apologise for the disappointment caused.

You may find information through the links below about future research opportunities:

[Research at Home Office - Home Office - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/research-at-home-office)

[Areas of research interest relevant to the Home Office - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/areas-of-research-interest-relevant-to-the-home-office)

I'm sorry that I could not send you a more helpful response.

Best wishes,

Hi Cathal

Thanks for asking me to take part in your research!

Unfortunately, I have not been permitted to participate due to the sensitive nature of the information we would be discussing.

I hope the rest of your research interviews go well and I look forward to reading it when you publish!

All the best,

x. References

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