

Prevent: Accounts from the Frontline

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This reflection presents a cautious look at Prevent from a youth worker's point of view. It has been written with reference to firsthand experience and conversations with fellow youth workers and attempts to shed some light on why many in the youth and community sector may be reluctant to engage with the UK Government's Prevent Strategy. Although the ideas presented in this article have been developed through personal experience, they also constitute the basis of planned future research on the way Prevent is being received within the youth sector.

As such, the paper will first set a policy context for the strategy outlining how community safety and crime prevention initiatives, which once relied on voluntary involvement, are now increasingly being reinforced by a legal duty on particular professional groups of people to participate. I then look at the focus on the concern around the potential radicalisation of young people, considering why they feature so significantly within the UK Government's counter terrorism strategy. This viewpoint will be assessed against terrorism-related conviction statistics and data on Prevent referrals and interventions, both of which suggest that the counter-terrorist focus on youth radicalisation could be misguided. The article will close with some reflections on experiences gained as a youth worker regarding the realities of what can happen when youth organisations engage with Prevent, as well as present an example of the pressure felt when organisations actively state that they have nothing to offer in terms of information on potential radicals.



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The context of the Prevent Duty and young people

There is nothing new in the method of relying on the public for intelligence in the fight against crime. From neighbourhood watch initiatives to anti-terror announcements on public transport, everyday people, with seemingly little to do with the criminal justice system, are being called upon to be the first line of defence against crime and disorder. The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 places a legal duty on ‘specified authorities’, including schools, colleges, and organisations providing particular support to young people, such as those working with young people on a school exclusion, to share any concerns relating to the potential radicalisation of a young person with the authorities along with any information. As such, like many other community safety initiatives, Prevent’s strength and weakness lie in its reliance on non-law enforcement agents, such as schools and colleges, to initiate action by reporting their suspicions.

However, there is something increasingly sinister about the coercive pressure placed on members of the public to participate in such law enforcement processes. Immigration controls, for example, are no longer simply the responsibility of border control agents and the police, but bank staff, landlords, business owners alike – all forced, through fear of fines and imprisonment, into doing the government’s bidding by checking the immigration status of potential staff members or customers. Whether you agree with the government’s stance or not, everyday people are being increasingly expected to enforce government policies, even when they are not best equipped to do so.

The Prevent Duty Guidelines (HM Government 2015) seem to go one step further. Although the wording in Section 26 of the Terrorism and Counter Terrorism Act 2015 is one of protecting vulnerable people from potential harm, the duty isn't asking people to check particular legalities, but to help assess potential criminality. Mythen and Walklate (2016) comment that such pre-emptive measures often lead to an 'us and them' mentality with people, differentiating those who deserve protection from those who are a potential threat. Seen in this way, the Prevent Duty may well be compelling teachers, health care professionals, social workers, and others with a duty of care to, in effect, treat with suspicion those they are supporting. Like other crime prevention initiatives that rely on 'community' involvement and support, Prevent is a pre-emptive bottom-up tool that works by the government outlining groups they believe could be of particular concern and then 'responsibilising' identified individuals and institutions, by expecting them to identify individuals who pose a potential risk and report their suspicions to the authorities (Hardy, 2015; Innes, 2006; McCulloch and Pickering, 2009; Mythen and Walklate, 2016; Zedner, 2008).

As with any other community safety programme, Prevent seeks to target those most at risk of posing the greatest threat. Due to the concern with Islamic radicalisation, there has been a much publicised and criticised attempt to engage the 'Muslim Community' (Lynch, 2013). Many feel this has had more of a destructive than constructive influence on community relations, through the demonising of particular groups of people by associating them with potential risk (Heath-Kelly, 2013; Kundnani, 2009).

However, young people are possibly of equal focus within government policy. The official viewpoint is that young people are more impressionable to fundamentalist messaging and therefore are at greater

risk of becoming radicalised, with the Prevent Strategy 2011 stating that ‘the percentage of people who are prepared to support violent extremism in this country is very small. It is significantly greater amongst young people’ (HM Government 2011:6). In such instances, Prevent may represent an early intervention tool that is halting potential terror threats before they ever materialise.

However, the data on those who are referred to Channel and those who are considered in need of support suggests that there is a disproportionate emphasis on young people. The Government’s belief in the susceptibility of young people from largely disadvantaged backgrounds to radicalisation lacks the type of empirical research needed to really understand the issue (Breen, 2007; Mythen, et al., 2017). Mythen et al. (2017) explain that the government’s position comes largely from responses to two questions in the 2010 Citizenship Survey that asked about the use of violence to protest or achieve a goal. This, along with concerns that young people are more likely to be searching for meaning and identity, and willing to join social networks – all of which have been identified as building blocks for radicalisation (Murshed and Pavan, 2011; Zech and Gabbay, 2016) – suggests they are the perfect target for fundamentalists. This combination has led the government to conclude that particular young people are at risk of and pose a particular threat to national security. However, the relatively small percentage of young people who are deemed in need of support after being referred for being at risk from fundamentalism suggests that a better, more informed approach is needed.

The government’s statistics on terrorism arrests would suggest that under 21s are less likely to be involved in terrorist activities compared to the adult population. Between September 2001 and December 2017, 483

young people were arrested on a terrorism charge leading to 108 convictions (terror and non-terror related) (HM Government, 2018b). This compares to 3,357 arrests and 608 convictions for the adult population (*ibid*). Despite the fact that young people are less likely to be perpetrators of terrorist acts in the UK than other demographics, young people – young men in particular – seem to be of particular focus within the 2015 Prevent Duty guidelines and represent over half of all Prevent referrals. Government data on Prevent show that of 6,093 people referred in the year ending March 2017, 57% (3,487) were under 21 and the vast majority male, with 80% of referrals and 85% of those supported being men (HM Government, 2018a). When put into context of actual arrest and conviction data for terrorist offences that shows those who carry out the attacks are generally males over the age of 30, the focus on young men may well be misplaced. This is not to say that there should not be a concern around the vulnerability of young people, however, the arrest and conviction data clearly suggests that other age groups are susceptible to fundamentalist messages and need protection also.

As it stands, schools and post-16 educational institutions are the main referrers of young people to Prevent with educators referring 50% of the under 21s referred to the programme in 2016/17 followed by the police (23%) and local authorities (15%) (HM Government, 2017). In contrast, youth and community organisations only made 2.2% of Prevent's youth referrals (*ibid*). Despite the numbers of referrals, only 226 (6.5%) young people were considered in need of any intervention (*ibid*).

Given the numbers of young people involved in the education system, it is no wonder referrals from this sector outstripped any other referral source. However, only 7% of the education sector's youth referrals were

of any interest (ibid), suggesting that the way the Prevent Duty is being operationalised is causing teachers to view young people with too much suspicion and to see signs of radicalisation that are not there.

Although the numbers of referrals from other sectors are lower, for the reasons stated above, the conversion rate from referral to intervention recipient doesn't fare that much better. 93-95% of referrals from Police, Local Authority, Health, and the secure estate (prisons, detention centres, youth offending institutions, and the like) were considered of no interest when reviewed by the authorities (HM Government, 2018a). Despite being the lowest source of referrals, a higher percentage of those who were referred by the youth and community organisations (13%) (ibid) were judged to need Channel support than other sources. From an information point of view, this would suggest that youth and community organisations are more effective at assessing the needs of young people than other institutions, although far more needs to be done to engage the sector effectively.

However, this is where my personal concerns with Prevent lie. In my research into young people involved in street violence, when specialist interventions were called upon to deal with group or individual behaviour, those offering more relational support seemed to step back. Either they thought it best or were told to leave it to the trained professionals. This resulted in young people feeling alone and often their behaviour got worse. If this is replicated in the support offered through Channel, the young people most at risk could find themselves further isolated and further at risk.

Young people do need support to help safeguard themselves against fundamentalism. However, there is the obvious conflict generated by asking youth workers and teachers to refer to the authorities those whom they are meant to be building a trusted relationship with.

A view from the sectorⁱ

Many in the youth sector are in a slightly different position than staff from schools and colleges in that they do not have a statutory duty to report concerns. Without this legal requirement, there seems to be a reluctance to support the programme. Concern remains that, if the sector caves in to pressure and strong-arm tactics from the authorities, we may betray the young people we work with, through viewing them with increasing suspicion and subject more innocent young people to scrutiny.

My first real experience with Prevent, besides the rumours and murmurings that existed within the sector, was as the head of a youth construction training programme. Most of the young participants had their troubled back stories – offending, exclusion, substance misuse, and the like – and the project offered young people the chance to learn employment skills by renovating social housing. The idea was to give them the chance to learn practical skills while providing a supportive space to help the participants flourish. Young people would usually be on the programme for three months, working with tradesmen and youth workers three days a week in a semi-formal environment, before being supported to find employment or further training.

Whilst the programme was valuable, the reality was that many of the young people needed longer on the programme to achieve what we in

the business call 'a positive outcome', and many just disappeared before they got to this point. The reasons for the dropouts varied, but for Daniel, a young person with a particularly difficult past, Prevent clearly played its part.

The youth sector was starting to try and understand the ramifications of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 and it was still unclear of roles and responsibilities under the Prevent Duty. Our Head of Safeguarding had attended the Prevent training and reported back to staff that they needed to be 'more aware of the threat that radicalisation poses to young people'. It was also explained that if staff had any concerns about a young person that we should let her know. She would then report our concerns to the relevant Local Authority who, in turn, would ensure the young person obtained the support they needed.

Daniel came onto the construction programme after a staff member from a local social services department found him sleeping rough behind their office. After securing a place in a hostel for Daniel, he was introduced to us as something to get involved that would support Daniel while he figured out what next he wanted to do with his life. The hope was to support Daniel to get some structure in his life and eventually support him into an apprenticeship or college course, whilst helping him develop his interpersonal skills along the way. It was clear Daniel needed support – during his time on the programme, he hardly said a word and preferred to work on his own. After a few weeks, Daniel started isolating himself during break times so that he could pray. The project staff were a little concerned at this point, not so much with the praying, but with the fact that he seemed to have no real interest in socialising with others on the project during downtime or breaks. As the weeks went by, Daniel

seemed to become increasingly interested in Islam and was watching preaching on his phone while others sat around conversing.

On one such occasion, a staff member glanced at his phone and thought he may have seen an ISIS flag on the screen. During the staff debrief at the end of the day, the issue was raised and the organisation's Head of Safeguarding was informed of the incident. She stated that she would have to report the incident. As Daniel hadn't really connected with any of the staff, it was thought that we should simply inform the social worker who referred Daniel on to the programme as she may have a better relationship with Daniel than we did.

That was the last we saw of Daniel – his social worker fulfilled their Prevent Duty by alerting the authorities of our concerns, which had been interpreted as suspicions. The weekend before Daniel was due to be back in, the police had broken down his hostel door and arrested him. A few days later, we got a call from a very irate Daniel, after he had been released without charge and with no indication that he had been watching radicalising material. He vented his anger at being betrayed by the one organisation that he felt cared and had been willing to help him. This may not be the way that referrals to Prevent are meant to be dealt with, however, it does indicate that with such a sensitive issue, mistakes can be made on many levels and these mistakes can have serious impacts on young people. Those involved in decision making processes, whether it be the youth workers who did not feel able to address the issue with Daniel, the social worker who informed the police, and the police themselves, all could have dealt with Daniel differently.

We too felt let down – although we were not convinced that the local authority was going to provide much useful support, we did not think our conversation with Daniel’s social worker would end up in his arrest.

I wish I could say that this heavy-handed approach to tackling radicalisation was a rarity within the youth sector, however, discussions with others in the youth sector makes me not so certain. In my position as both a frontline worker and a trustee of a local youth organisation in London, I often have the privileged but sometimes concerning position of being able to get an overview of what organisations face when working with young people who meet the government’s criteria of suspicion. The reality is of all the committees and staff groups from the organisation that I sit on, none have ever discussed concerns regarding the radicalisation of young people. When the umbrella organisation that we belong to attempted to start a professional network focused on the issue of radicalisation, there was not enough interest to get it off the ground. Despite this lack of interest, the Government’s focus on addressing the radicalisation of young people has led to the police wanting to engage with organisations who see little connection between their work and Prevent. The reluctance of organisations with no statutory duty to engage has caused the police to resort to applying pressure on organisations to supply them with information on potential radicals. An informal catch-up with Lee, a Director of a South London-based youth organisation, sheds some light on the type of tactics that are being used.

‘It was right here, that he started to question me,’ Lee commented, sipping on his coffee at Costa. ‘I got a phone call from someone in the council working on Prevent and ended up feeling that I had to meet them. I couldn’t understand why they wanted to meet with me really, when I got the call, I said that we don’t see any extremism. I mean, we

are a sports project, but they insisted.’ Lee explains, ‘I mean, what do they think, we do have some Muslim boys, but they’ve often turned out to be the good ones.’ Despite Lee’s assertions that there was no sign of radicalisation in any of the 150+ young people he and the other workers support each week, the representative from Prevent insisted on meeting.

A few days later, Lee met with the council official and a police officer who tried to convince him that his involvement in the programme was vital. ‘It was as if they were not listening,’ explained Lee. ‘I rolled off a list of our Muslim boys, showing that they are often the ones we need to worry about the least. I mean, look at Abdul, his Mosque supported him to travel and train to be a leader. I bet he fits their criteria, but he is the least radical person you are likely to meet round here. And what about Luke, he converted to Islam at 18 and it was the thing that turned his life around. I mean, coming from the background he does, with a mother who just lives to drink and a father who is useless, Islam was the best thing that could ever have happened to him. But they weren’t interested in this; they seemed certain I had some information to offer.’

What struck me about Lee’s retelling of the encounter was the assumption that he would have something to share and that he would be willing to or could be coerced into participating in a system of suspicion and spying. He took the involvement of the police officer as a strong-arm tactic to ensure he took the request for his involvement seriously. When Lee commented that he didn’t feel that the programme had anything to do with him or the young people he worked with, he was pressured into admitting some of the young people may be a risk and that he should accept his role as an informant. Such is the concern about the pressure Lee felt that, during this informal chat, he was worried to even talk about it for fear of what may happen.

Closing remarks

Considering the place of community involvement within the Prevent strategy, the clumsy nature of the examples given here suggests there is a need for further exploration into youth organisations' experiences of Prevent. The anecdotal evidence above indicates that those closest to the frontline don't share the government's concern about the risk young people pose and that on the rare occasion suspicions are raised, information is handled in such a forceful way as to damage the little trust youth organisations have built with young people. At this point, further research is needed to understand whether what I have experienced and been privy to as a youth worker is an exception or part of a wider pattern.

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ⁱ Pseudonyms are used here and throughout this article.