Blavatnik School of Government
Oxford, 20 November 2025

David Anderson
(Lord Anderson of Ipswich KBE KC)
Independent Prevent Commissioner

Prevent and Counter-Extremism in the UK

Objectives of Prevent
(Contest Strategy, July 2023)

- ***Tackling the ideological causes*** of terrorism (e.g. via CSOs, formerly RICU)
- ***Intervening early*** to support people susceptible to radicalisation (Prevent duty, Channel)
- Enabling people who have already engaged in terrorism to ***disengage and rehabilitate*** (DDP)

Intervening Early
CTSA 2015, ss 26-41)

- **Prevent duty**: "*have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism*": (s26)
- Referral to Prevent / triage / gateway assmt / info gathering / referral to Channel or PLP
- **Channel Panel**: support plan, intervention provider (consent needed), closure, review

Numbers referred
(2024/25: published 6 November 2025)

- ***8,778 Prevent referrals*** (record: Southport?)
  - 89% male
  - 36% aged 11-15
- ***20% referred to Channel***, and 50% to other services for support
- ***54% (767) consented*** to support

Types of concern
(Prevent referrals / Channel adoptions 2024-25)

- No identified ideology: 56% / 22%
- Extreme Right-Wing: 21% / 42%
- Islamist Extremism: 10% / 15%
- Fascination with Extreme Violence: 5% / 9%
- Multiple ideologies: 5% / 7%

The Lloyd Report
(Inquiry into Legislation against Terrorism, 1996, 1.24)

"Most significantly of all, perhaps, there are indications that some individuals with fanatical leanings or personal grievances are increasingly attracted to terrorist methods. This may come to represent the greatest threat of all, in the longer term."

Ken McCallum
(Director-General, MI5, speech of October 2024)

"We're encountering more volatile would-be terrorists with only a tenuous grasp of the ideologies they profess to follow. …

… [I]t's harder these days for my investigators and their police counterparts to quickly and definitively determine whether an act of violence is ideologically motivated or driven by another factor like mental health."

Lessons for Prevent
(David Anderson, July 2025, 5.11)

"What Lloyd called '*fanatical leanings*', often fuelled by family trauma or '*personal grievances*', are swiftly inflamed by geopolitical events and the malign algorithms of social media into a mash-up of resentment, rage, rigid certainties and normalised violence. Extreme brutality is absorbed from any available source. Extremist content intersects in unpredictable ways …"

Mental Health and Neurodiversity
(Prevent referrals 2024-25: inc. uncofirmed)

- 34% of Prevent referrals, inc:
  - 14% Autism spectrum disorder
  - 9% Risk of suicide
  - 5% Risk of self-harm
- Clinical Consultancy Service 2024 (replacing VSHs: LfP 4.45f)
- A new "suspect community" – or a vulnerable cohort in need of help?

Is Channel worth it?
(3% of the counter-terrorism budget)

- ***Well-publicised failures***:
  - Ahmed Hassan (Parson's Green tube bomb, 2017)
  - Ali Harbi Ali (Sir David Amess, 2021)
  - Axel Rudakubana (Southport, 2024)
- ***Anecdotal successes*** (LfP Annex 4)
- RAND ***evaluation of DDP***, 2023 (LfP 4.69)
- ***Independent evaluation of Channel***, 2025-26 (LfP 4.71f: Ipsos UK/UCL, Dr Paul Gill)

Recent/pending changes

- ***Data recording***: PCMT (LfP 4.21f)
- ***Assessment tool***: PAF (LfP 4.24f)
- ***Routes to Intervention*** (LfP 4.57f)
- ***Transparency***: Prevent Learning Reviews, further recommendations (LfP 4.67, 6.19f)
- ***Enhancing insight*** (LfP 6.43f)

Human Rights / Discrimination
(Lessons for Prevent, 1.54-1.60)

"Frequent themes of these narratives are the secrecy attending Prevent, its targeting of non-violent expressions of faith, its disproportionate impact on Muslims, the stigma attaching to a Prevent referral, the retention and sharing of private data.. the chilling effect on free speech … and the corrosive effect of the Prevent Duty on trust in teachers, medical staff and others".

"Listening to British Muslims"
(Lessons for Prevent 1.59-1.60)

- Crest (2020) polled 2000 Muslims/non-Muslims and ran 12 focus groups of Muslims

- Results "***very difficult to reconcile with the dominant, polarising narratives***, *which argue that the Prevent programme is a 'toxic brand' mistrusted by British Muslims and, alternatively, that British Muslims are 'in denial' about Islamist extremism and 'need to do more' about it"*

Shawcross Report
(Independent Review of Prevent, 2023)

- "The Islamist threat is severely under-represented in Prevent referrals [then 22%] and cases adopted in Channel" (4.36)
- "I am not aware of any recognised terrorist attacks in the UK perpetrated by assailants who could be described as falling within the MUU category" (4.51)
- "Vulnerable people who do not necessarily pose a terrorism risk are being referred to Prevent to access other types of much-needed support" (4.100)

Summary of Criticisms
(Lessons for Prevent 7.1)

"Prevent has implacable enemies and critical friends."

- Lacks teeth – or abuses state power?
- Stigmatises Muslims – or too easy on Islamists?
- Old-fashioned insistence on ideology – or modish interest in those with none?
- Fails to detect, fails to prevent?

Scrutiny and Support
(LfP 1.60, 7.6-7.8)

- The no doubt varied motivations of its opponents cannot excuse Prevent from the obligation to justify itself to the public.
- All who have a part in Prevent are venturing into sensitive and contested terrain.
- They do not always get it right – but lives have been turned round by inspiring and resourceful intervention providers.

Future Direction

- ***Restore the focus on extremist ideologies –*** especially "the Islamist threat"? (Shawcross)
- ***Threat of mass violence*** – include violence-fixated individuals within the CT / CONTEST framework, or at least Prevent? (LfP/Bingham)
- ***Wide front door –*** a comprehensive violence prevention strategy, Prevent sitting behind MASH as a specialist disposal? (LfP/Bingham)

Wide Front Door

- Advantages:
  - More coherent and connected scheme
  - Systematic "step down" into other interventions
  - Address two distinct lines of criticism by:
    - Reducing stigma: front door will not be labelled "terror"
    - Allowing Prevent to focus on ideology (Shawcross)
- Challenges:
  - Cultural barriers to joint work, data sharing
  - Some MASHs will need to be developed
  - Risk of reduced commitment from CT specialists?

Counter-Extremism
(Government's 2024 definition)

"Extremism is the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to:

(1) negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or
(2) undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or
(3) intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (1) and (2)."

Why define extremism?

- Standards for ***limiting external engagement*** of public authorities?
- Basis for ***criminal offences*** / ***coercive powers***?
- ***Interaction with Prevent***: be alert to "*certain divisive or intolerant narratives which can reasonably be linked to terrorism*" (Prevent Duty Guidance)? First Objective?

Discuss!
(Lessons for Prevent, 1.61f)

- "These realms of unpalatable speech, beliefs or behaviour beyond violent action would be ***better situated within policies relating to communities and education***" – Professor Clive Walker

- "Taking a ***securitised approach to a societal problem*** which affects larger cohorts or even whole communities will be ***ineffective and arguably counter-productive***" – Dame Sara Khan

- "***Just because extremism is a word does not mean that it is a useful legal concept***" – David Anderson

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