

A briefing note on the radicalisation of children, young people and families

Background

Members of the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) recently came together to share local experiences of tackling the radicalisation of adolescents and addressing the risks caused by extremist views or behaviours of the parents / carers of very young children. The group also discussed how authorities can work more closely with safeguarding partners, particularly schools, and government departments on the 'Prevent' agenda.

The Prevent programme was designed by the Home Office following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and it operates in a 'pre-criminal' space by offering help and support to individuals identified as being vulnerable to radicalisation. Spotting those at risk is far from straightforward and finding a way to reach out to them can be difficult. Young people can be referred by the likes of youth workers or teachers, to a 'Channel' panel made up of representatives from the council, health, education and the prison service. Once a referral has been received a discrete and tailored plan is put together to challenge extremist views. One size does not fit all.

Channel is funded by the Home Office; historically it was police-led. Councils across England are now leading an increasingly community-based response to this serious safeguarding issue eg the '[Young Leaders Programme](#)' in Redbridge and '[Luton in Harmony](#).' Local policing teams work closely with children's services and schools when concerns arise however there is still a balance to be found between safeguarding the welfare of an individual child or young person and national security when counter-terrorism teams become involved.

As well as learning, ADCS members shared a number of concerns including the difficulties in knowing exactly where the thresholds for intervention lie - when does parenting style, or the holding of particular beliefs, become a child protection issue? The safety of social workers entering an extremely volatile situation, the antagonistic behavior of the press and the lasting impact this can have on community cohesion were touched upon during these discussions. There are also pressing concerns around intelligence sharing between counter-terrorism policing teams and social workers or head teachers due to the high levels of security clearance required.

The ADCS membership is keen that all safeguarding partners and government departments recognise the vulnerability of young people to this form of grooming, exploitation and abuse. It is however important to bear in mind that radicalisation can take many different shapes and forms, from ecological protestors and Al Qaida-influenced groups to fascist organisations and far-right extremist groups. Each locality has its own issues and challenges to deal with.

Who is at risk?

In an age of high unemployment, vulnerable young people can feel disillusioned or disengaged from mainstream society. This can leave them open to negative influences and at risk of embracing extremist ideologies, particularly during the difficult transition years from adolescence to adulthood.

Young people in the criminal justice system can be vulnerable to grooming and radicalisation because they are isolated from their support networks. In one local area a noticeable pattern is developing around young offenders who are not Muslim by heritage but who have 'converted' to Islam in opposition to mainstream society. Some have even begun self-identifying as a quasi-gang. Looked after children placed out of area are also distant from their support networks eg friends and extended family and can likewise become vulnerable to grooming. An authority present for the discussion reported that a young person placed in their area by another LA had recently received a Channel panel referral. Unfortunately this was the first knowledge they had of the young person.

The pupils that come to the attention of staff in schools are largely good students who are well-engaged with their education but might hold narrow friendship groups or outlooks on the world.

Identification of those at risk

Universal services are at the forefront of early identification, early intervention and crucially prevention.

Giving students the opportunity to explore different faiths, cultures and discover more about shared values helps to instill in them the confidence to challenge extremist views. Schools can help to protect children from extremist and violent views in the same way that they help to safeguard them from the harmful effects of drugs, gang violence or alcohol via PHSE and citizenship studies, for example. 'One Extreme to Another,' is a theatre production that deals with this issue, it has been well received to date by young people. Interactive learning tools like these have already been successfully employed to raise awareness of the signs of sexual exploitation (CSE), for example.

A good awareness of the 'Prevent' agenda amongst teaching and pastoral staff can help them to identify learners in danger of turning towards extremism. Many local authorities are offering 'WRAP' (Workshops Raising Awareness of Prevent) training to all schools, including academies and independent schools. Take up of this training is growing as more and more cases break in the media.

Key workers in other universal services, such as health visitors, may also pick up signs that the parents / carers of very young children are in danger of putting their child at risk of serious harm through travel to dangerous countries or involvement with violent groups, for example.

An area of ongoing concern for ADCS members is the wellbeing and welfare of children and young people being educated at home or in unregistered settings. The extremely limited interventions available when curricular or safeguarding concerns arise, particularly in this context, is worrying. Operators of unregistered schools are well versed in the limits of current legislation and routinely reject engagement with the local authority, the DfE and Ofsted.

The following examples were shared by directors from two different authorities during this discussion:

1. A family was stopped at the point of exiting the country. The two young children were, as far as the LA knew, being educated in the independent sector. It later emerged that they had been educated at home for the last 18 months. Nobody knew.
2. Two A Level students were stopped by authorities trying to cross the Turkish / Syrian border and were subsequently returned to the UK. It later emerged that one of the teenage boys was a tutor in an unregistered school.

What does the social work response to radicalisation look like?

Although our understanding of issue continues to evolve, there is a wealth of existing resources and learning available for all safeguarding partners and government departments to draw upon.

For example, requests from the police to remove the passports of children and young people at risk of flight can be dealt with in a similar way to divorce / abduction cases. There are parallels around forced marriage, learning around sexual exploitation (particularly online grooming) and lessons to take from the disruption of gang activities. Several authorities have also used 'wardship' proceedings to rapidly assume guardianship of a child / children put at risk by the radical ideologies or behaviours of their parents.

The first serious case review that deals with radicalisation and extremism has been commissioned by the Brighton and Hove Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB).