

The role of the Social Worker in tackling violent extremism

Around the country, across a range of practice settings, social work practitioners are wrestling with a new and emerging social issue - the risk of service users becoming involved in violent extremism. Our social justice and rights-based approach combined with our expertise in working with vulnerable people and disaffected communities means that social work has an important contribution to make in this area. The risk of violent extremism is an issue that all areas of social work may have to address; from mental health to child protection and criminal justice to working with vulnerable adults. This guidance note aims to help social workers navigate this practice issue, as well as identify areas for professional development. What is clear is that more empirical research needs to be done about the social work role in this area.

Not all cases will require statutory intervention; many service users and families would benefit from a community based approach. Importantly, and in all cases, rigorous assessment and respectful intervention should be our guides for ethical social work practice. It is also important to recognize the role that the media has in exaggerating risk thus influencing the paradigm in which we operate. Whilst there is a risk to our national and international communities from terrorism and violent extremism, we need to continually question assumptions, stereotypes and myths surrounding this issue. We need to be politically aware; able to debate risk and understand how our work is influenced and the role we can play in influencing others. We need to be clear on what social work offers, and our limits.

The Language of Violent Extremism

The Terrorism Act (2000) defines terrorism as ‘the use or threat of action designed to influence the government or an international governmental organization or to intimidate the public, or a section of the public; made for the purposes of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause’.

Social work recognizes the potency of language and for the purposes of this guidance we have opted to use the term ‘violent extremism’ to refer to what is commonly referred to as ‘terrorism’, ‘radicalization’ and ‘extremism’. We believe that more work needs to be done around the labeling of terrorist individuals so as not to blur activists and fundamentalists with criminal individuals who espouse violence. Freedom of thought and expression are rights in our society, to be protected and promoted, and not conflated with violent activities or hate speech. Our main priority as social workers is to prevent harm to the service user or others and we intervene to do so.

The Government’s Prevent Agenda

The Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, in the Home Office, works to counter the threat from terrorism through the government’s counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST. The strategy is based on four areas of work: pursue (to stop terrorist attacks); prevent (to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism); protect (to strengthen our protection against a terrorist attack); and prepare (to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack). The Prevent Strategy is the one that social workers will come in to contact with as it works with a wide range of sectors including education, criminal justice, faith, charities, the online world and health. Prevent defines radicalization as ‘a process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism.’ Extremism is defined as a vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. ‘Violent extremism’ is seen as an ‘endorsement of violence to achieve extreme ends’ (HM Government, 2011).

The Channel process comes under the remit of the Prevent strategy. This process is a multi-agency approach to identify and provide support to individuals who are at risk of being drawn into terrorism by giving individuals access to services such as education, specialist mentoring and diversionary activities. **Sections 36 to 41 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 set out the duty on local authorities and partners of local panels to provide support for people vulnerable to being drawn into any form of terrorism and to have ‘due regard’ for Prevent in their policies, procedures and day-to-day business.** This has numerous implications for social workers, both at a strategic and operational. Guidance has been provided about Channel to assist local authorities in complying with the requirements of the CT&S Act 2015. For more information on Channel, please see www.gov.uk/government/publications/channel-guidance. Prevent duty guidance is available: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2015/9780111133309/pdfs/ukdsiod_9780111133309_en.pdf.

Contemporary case studies

Statutory child and family social work

After six years in prison for terrorist related activities, a father reunites with his family. Married with four children, the father quickly resumes his public protesting against the UK for the war in Syria. His older children are seen with him at a number of protest rallies that the police deem are illegal rallies. All of the children are home schooled; they are not seen by the home education workers. Police refer the family to children’s services. A Social Worker was asked to assess the risk of the children being radicalized. After meeting the Social Worker once, the parents withdraw parental consent to continue the assessment under the Children Act (s17, 1989).

A Gangs Project

Ramal is a gang member and a practicing Muslim; he spent time in a Young Offenders Institution for stabbing. Six months after being released, he is suffering from depression and has begun self-harming. He told his Social Worker he has a desire to hurt others and ‘feels like stabbing a stranger’. He said he wanted to go to Iraq - to see his family. The Social Worker discussed the case in her supervision. The manager informed the police and Channel, without any discussion with Ramal. The manager directed the Social Worker to contact Ramal’s 15 year old cousin (known to the same gangs service) and disclose that they held concerns about Ramal’s mental health and to ask if his family had noticed anything. This was not shared with Ramal, and he found out and rang his Social Worker angry, upset and confused. He permanently disengaged after that.

NHS Trust – Adult Services

Jonny’s is 23, unemployed and blames this on increased immigration. He attends college. The Prevent Lead for the NHS Trust was contacted by the police Channel Team asking if he was known, as they had concerns about a possible undiagnosed mental illness. He was later arrested for breach of the peace because he was intoxicated, shouting racist abuse. Jonny was an outpatient to a Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) and a reassessment was agreed and completed. He was polite, with no evidence of immediate self-neglect or abnormality in appearance and with no indications of hostility. He talked about his political beliefs, saying the assessment was a way to discredit him as ‘mad’. No history of self-harm/suicidal behaviour and no evidence of psychotic symptoms detected. He was arrested nine weeks later for a serious assault on a young black male.

Reflective practice questions:

- How is ‘risk’ presented or constructed in each case study?
- Does the presentation of risk shape or influence what happened?
- What other influences played a part as each case unfolded?
- As the allocated social worker, would you have done anything differently in each case?

Assessment and Intervention

Effective assessments are achieved through relationships with people that are being assessed. With violent extremism, which is so evocative and highly charged, and where the consequences can be deadly, there is a high potential for risk to be over-exaggerated. **Frequent, high quality supervision is essential for social workers to be supported and challenged, confident in their decision-making.**

Risk assessment and social work requires practice tools that are grounded in and facilitate a relational approach to risk. The Signs of Safety is such an approach that is being used in adult and social care (www.signsofsafety.net). The Signs of Safety takes a comprehensive approach to analyzing danger, existing strengths and safety/protective factors and future safety and utilizes a simple judgment scaling process to involve all participants. The framework can be used with individuals, groups or whole communities and this methodology potentially offers a powerful tool for social workers to use in this area of radicalization or violent extremism.

Talking about the issues of extremism and radicalization with a service user or family is not always easy and some might not feel comfortable due to a lack of political and cultural understanding or a fear of false accusation. It may feel easier to default to rescue approaches. This is a new area of practice and we must recognize the importance of taking the time to know and understand our service users. **Make it your business to be self-aware about how cultural messages and diversity debates may be influencing your practice.** As the case studies above show, we need to provide rigorous assessments because ‘process-led’ practice can lead to disengagement and isolation of the service-user and potentially, whole communities. We need to speak up - not be fearful of offending.

Social work's contribution

As social workers, we must remember, and remind others, that we cannot predict human behaviour. Whilst we may have a duty as social workers, under the CT&S Act 2015, to provide information about our service user to the relevant agencies, we must remember that we are not “soft” police. The police and CONTEST hold the final responsibility for arresting individuals who threaten violent extremism. We are social workers with a distinct set of skills and a distinct value base and we must be firm in reminding external agencies of these skills and values.

So what can social workers offer to the fight against violent extremism?

- Social justice values and human rights – Social justice and human rights must underpin our practice decisions and judgements. This area of work seriously blurs the line between liberty and security for us and our service users. Where possible, we must have open conversations with our service user around the concerns held.
- Community involvement – Early engagement is key to successful prevention. Our emphasis must be on **helping families and individuals rather than monitoring or reporting them.** By intervening at an earlier stage, the risk should be low enough to foster good relationships which avoid an over-emphasis on deficits. By opening up practice to include community-led and family-based approaches new arrangements can be offered by statutory services and community or third sector groups working together.
- Multi-agency working - Many of us have excellent working relationships with schools, police and health services; this needs to be expanded upon and utilized so that risk is addressed in a holistic manner. Section 38 of the CT&S Act requires the partners (social workers) co-operate with the Channel panel and the police in providing any relevant information so that it can effectively carry out their functions to determine whether an individual is vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism. (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/42)

[5189/Channel Duty Guidance April 2015.pdf](#)). We need to work with networks to ensure risk is minimized, and ensure that opportunities for diversion for the service user are maximized.

- Advocacy - As service users open up about their experiences, we can facilitate debate about the societal messages people are exposed to about war, the atrocities of war, societal inequalities, politics, ethnicity, identity and poverty, amongst other issues. We have to recognize that a 'British-centric' way of thinking is only one view-point.

Practice issues for consideration

- Social worker safety - We need to establish whether we are working with the police in an integrated or collaborative model. Unless the relationship between social workers and the police is made clear, it is easy for social workers to do "soft" policing. This has severe consequences for the social worker- service user relationship. Real life examples have shown that it can become dangerous for the social worker if the service user believes that they are being covertly monitored.
- Potentially increasing risk - If social workers are acting as "soft" police, then there is no "welfare" offer and only a monitoring and enforcement side. This results in vulnerable people having nowhere to turn, thus creating more pressure for already isolated people. Service users who are suffering from paranoia, may find the experience extremely distressing - as may those who do not suffer from any mental health conditions.

Training and Development

Through discussion groups, it was recognized that there is a need for training and development on the following areas:

- Difficult conversations - working with resistance, influence and power
- Understanding cultures as 'sets of meanings,' influences and differences
- Risk analysis skills and working constructively with risk
- Community engagement and community mobilization
- Political and experiential situation in war zones; attractions to join and belong
- Learning from other politically fractured jurisdictions – e.g. Northern Ireland; USA.

Useful links and further reading

www.signsofsafety.net

<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/counter-terrorism>

Youth Justice Board, (2012), Process Evaluation of Preventing Violent Extremism Programmes for Young People, Youth Justice Board.

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