

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Social Inclusion and Community Safety Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes



Wednesday 24 April 2024

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Nikos Souslous (Chair), Trey Campbell-Simon and Andrew Dinsmore

Other Councillors: Councillor Rebecca Harvey (Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Community Safety)

Officers:

Matthew Hooper (Director of Public Protection)

Neil Thurlow (Assistant Director of Community Safety, Resilience and CCTV)

Aysha Esakji (Prevent Coordinator)

Debbie Yau (Committee Coordinator)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Sally Taylor and Omid Miri.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2024 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. UPDATE REPORT FOR THE PREVENT TEAM

Neil Thurlow (Assistant Director of Community Safety, Resilience and CCTV) briefed members that the Prevent Team worked across both the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham (LBHF) and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) as one area. Since its inception in 2011, the Prevent Team had built up trust and confidence with the local communities. The report had set out the current threat and risk of LBHF based on the counter-terrorism local profile including those associated with the Gaza War. Although the Prevent Team had faced Home Office's funding cuts, both LBHF and RBKC had agreed to jointly fund the Prevent service as it was the Local Authority's responsibility in discharging the statutory Prevent Duty. While the Team had engaged in sensitive and confidential matters, it had managed and mitigated the risks well through both Prevent Advisory Group (PAG) and Faith Forum.

Aysha Esakji (Prevent Coordinator) highlighted the lasting and trusting relationship with the community partners built over the last decade. When incidents like the Gaza War happened, some of the partners had approached the Prevent Team before any emerging issues were escalated or hijacked by harmful influences.

The Chair was concerned about the Home Office's criteria in assessing the risks across the London boroughs given that LBHF had historically seen significant Daesh extremist activity (page 20). Aysha Esakji advised that in undertaking assessment, the Home Office had a prioritisation process that would assess the threat and risk of each area and list them on a lead table. It had obtained data from various sources and assessed LBHF and RBKC separately. As such, the overall risk for the area was listed towards the bottom of the lead table.

On the Chair's enquiry about the seven London boroughs that would continue to receive fundings, Aysha Esakji noted that from April 2024, the Home Office had cut the Prevent funding from some of the London boroughs covering 11 areas. The remaining boroughs would also cease to receive funding from April 2025 except seven boroughs which were deemed to have the highest threat and risk currently. They were Westminster, Tower Hamlet, Enfield, Brent, Haringey, Redbridge and Newham. She added that the Home Office would review the situation in two years' time to determine which boroughs had higher threat and risk for future fundings.

The Chair enquired whether there were any changes to the Prevent service after it was funded by the local authorities. Aysha Esakji remarked that the work of Prevent service was guided by the counter-terrorism local profile drawn up by the Police every 18 months. The profile highlighted the current threat and risk locally and in West London. On funding matched by the Government, Neil Thurlow said that the Prevent service was fully funded by the Home Office for over a decade. However, the service had seen significant cuts over this time concluding in April 2023, when service funding was reduced by 50% and notice was given to the Council that funding would completely cease from the end of financial year 2023/24. He also noted that the Council was also required to undertake transitional work to secure long-term funding for growth.

Councillor Andrew Dinsmore asked if the Council had more control now over the locally funded service. Matthew Hooper (Director of Public Realm) said while there was some degree of autonomy for the service now when being funded locally, the local authority still had a statutory Prevent Duty which was assessed against a specific performance benchmark framework set out in the report (page 16).

The Chair further asked if the Prevent service was equipped to deal with extreme far-right terrorism which, in his opinion, had become the biggest threat to the British communities. Aysha Esakji noted that the Prevent service dealt with far-right as well as Daesh extremism. Neil Thurlow added that the far-right extremists would use world events to justify their actions. For example, some far-right followers had used the opportunity of the Gaza War to divide among Muslim and Jewish communities. In response, leaders of the Faith Forum had stood united and sent a letter to the Prime Minister and Home Secretary before Christmas to raise their concerns and seek answers around the Gaza War. Neil noted the Faith Forum was disappointed for not receiving a response or an acknowledgement so far.

Members noted that LBHF scored 5 which showed the quality and depth of service delivery against the Prevent Duty benchmark on engagement with a range of communities and civil society groups. The Chair sought further elaboration. In response, Aysha Esakji highlighted the work of the PAG which was set up in December 2011. As PAG members who knew their communities better would share information on the current threat and risk locally at the monthly meetings, the Prevent Team could work with them to co-produce Prevent strategies to keep the community safe. Together with the leaders in the Faith Forum, the PAG also helped in co-delivering the service with the Team like preventing individuals from travelling out to the conflict zones or diverting individuals away from the path of radicalisation by providing the support they needed.

Neil Thurlow appreciated the consistent approach of Aysha Esakji in listening to the concerns raised at the meetings and providing support to individuals in various aspects from housing, benefits to employment and education. Through the journey, Aysha had gone through difficult conversations concerning accountability before becoming their trusted partner. Aysha elaborated that in addressing concerns about the impact of policy changes at the national level, the Prevent Team had held community question times to enable direct conversations between Home Office officials and the communities. She said that the two sides had a better understanding of each other after frank and honest discussions.

On Prevent referrals, Neil Thurlow said that it was nearly impossible for community groups and family members to make referrals and most identified risks came from the Police and schools. In response to Councillor Dinsmore's concern, Aysha Esakji noted that a lot of far-right referrals had come from schools. A couple of youth groups had also reflected concerns about some young people attending had expressed some extreme idea. She gave a detailed account on how to deal with individual cases which involved the school, Police, Channel Panel comprising health and education colleagues and faith leaders who might help prevent after having a one-to-one intervention. In addition, the Safeguarding Lead would collate information about the individuals received from various departments and pass them to the Police for their further actions.

In reply to Councillor Dinsmore's further questions, Asyha Esakji said that as part of their due diligence efforts, the Home Office had provided a list of intervention providers covering all types of extremism. The Prevent Team would match the identified individual to the best intervention provider who might have faced the same situation previously and hence could share their own experience. Asyha also noted that in general, the Team worked in the prevent space where no crime had been committed. However, the Police had found in the previous year some young people aged between 10 and 15 years old had been in the pursue space. As the age of 10 and 11 were too young, the Prevent Team was still giving these young people support with a view to preventing things from getting worse.

Regarding the Prevent Team's work with other boroughs as raised by the Chair, Aysha Esakji advised the Committee that Prevent Coordinators of the London Prevent Network, particularly those from the West London cohort, would meet and share information monthly to see what the common concerns were and if there were any similar issues.

Responding to the Chair's concern about the collaboration of the Prevent Team with other departments/units, Neil Thurlow highlighted the dynamic working relationship between the Prevent Team and Gangs Unit both of which sat under his oversight via the Community Safety Unit. The officers had all received the WRAP (Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent) training. They also worked very closely with the education officer to see who could give the best support to individuals who had been exploited around extremists with a view to preventing violence from happening. Matthew Hooper observed that the ways in which organised groups, be it gangs or alliance on faith issues, sought to exploit and get new people involved were quite similar. It was crucial to identify them at the early stages and put in place the right interventions before it was too late.

As regards public perception of the Prevent Team over time, Neil Thurlow remarked that while Prevent could still be seen as worrying, more people now understood what the Prevent Team was doing and perceived it as a pre-criminal justice space and an early intervention support space. Along with more school teachers and professionals having received the WRAP training, the Prevent Team had gained the trust and confidence of the communities through the PAG meetings and Faith Forum.

Councillor Rebecca Harvey (Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Community Safety) remarked that it was very disappointing that the Government had cut the Prevent funding as it was a statutory duty. As the borough had large performance and sport venues, the Council recognised the importance of keeping residents and visitors safe and would continue to fund Prevent. She hoped that the Government would review their decision. Councillor Harvey also gave credits to Aysha's fantastic work in co-ordinating the Prevent service.

Echoing her disappointment, the Chair hoped that the Council might receive advanced notice about funding in future. Neil Thurlow said Aysha had been lobbying colleagues in the Home Office regularly. However, the Government's position was not changing, and the Team had worked to accept that reluctantly.

The Chair expressed appreciation to the work of the Prevent Team.

RESOLVED

That the Committee noted the report.

5. DATE OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the following dates of future meetings:

- 24 Jul 2024
- 20 Nov 2024
- 4 Feb 2025
- 30 Apr 2025

Work Programmes:

- Update on the CCTV Network
- Review of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act
- Law Enforcement Team Update
- Hate Crime Strategy
- Violence against women and girls
- Anti-social behaviour

Meeting started: 7.04 pm
Meeting ended: 7.44 pm

Chair

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