

MY EXPERIENCE OF PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (PVE) AS A SOCIAL WORKER BASED IN A YOUTH OFFENDING TEAM (YOT)

I first got to know about the funding given to local boroughs from central government to prevent violent extremism (PVE) at a team meeting in early September 2008. The officer responsible for PVE explained that they, along with other councils were not happy that the Muslim Community should be targeted in this way and that the funding should combat all sorts of violence and extremism, such as fascism and far right extremism.

The Youth Offending Team (YOT) agreed and stated that we had a few cases of young people espousing racist views and terrorising ethnic minorities and would welcome funding to cut down this kind of crime.

I recall at the meeting that although the PVE council representative started off with an apology and a questioning of the government's approach the team were not having any of it. They stated in their experience that a few young people have been recruited in custody and come out with extremist and anti-western views but to feel anti-western and have extremist views was, in their belief, not the same as committing actual violence.

Members of my YOT team felt that it was going down a slippery slope once we paint everyone with these views as terrorists. Many of my colleagues in the YOT team said most young people, whether Muslim or not, among our clients are anti-establishment and anti-system. This is because they are in the criminal justice system and are very mistrustful of adults in positions of authority such as the police, courts and that includes government.

We all said increasing numbers of young people feel alienated anyway as no one is listening to them, whatever community they come from. Members of the team - mostly non-Muslim - felt that this government does not like any one being anti-government and are using anti-terror legislation to shut up public opinion.

Members of my team also said that a lot of the terrorists charged were university graduates and educated middle class young people and these are not our client group as we deal with 10-18 year olds many of whom are not educated. We questioned the fact that the government has ploughed all this funding into local councils and there is no clear idea what to do with it and how to target it so that it does prevent violence and extremism.

We told the PVE officer that we would not like to do anything specifically with Muslim young people with PVE money, as this was very discriminatory. In our opinion this money should be targeted at all community groups to prevent all sorts of extremism. We asked the council representative if any money was available for group work to prevent offending, violence and extremism but, like all funders, she said there is money but little bits for lots of organisations and lots of projects. We all questioned who she had gone to, to spend this (PVE) money and what sort of young people had she reached. The officer did not have a clue how to spend it effectively having only really been in partnership with the Ahmadiyaah community. Although she did not name them I know this council has strong links with them.

I also said that while I have no issue in trying to prevent offending and violent extremism in whatever form it takes we, as local government officers, not only have a duty to young people we work with but we also have a duty towards public protection. More training may be needed as to how to conduct assessments on those coming out of custody being at risk of committing violent offences. We advised her to approach custodial institutions and stated that work often needed to be done in custody.

There was one member of the team who stated that preventing violence and extremism was the responsibility of the Muslim community - so some Islamophobic views - but I was positively amazed at the views of my team who apart from me and another social worker are all non-Muslim.

My own thoughts

The whole way funding is offered and projects evaluated illustrates the institutionally racist and Islamophobic nature of government. The government seems to be letting local authorities spend money unwisely and ineffectively to prevent violent extremism. The guidelines are unclear as to how money should be spent, and councils are confused trying to work out how to deliver PVE through community cohesion etc. It seems the government is spending this money to 'appear' that it is trying to prevent violent extremism.

With the Muslim community, however, funding monitoring and evaluation is tight, specific and exploitative and increases the marginalisation and discrimination they suffer. When it comes to Muslim organisations, the government wants to have a very tight control and is very specific and clear as to how they want them to tackle and prevent violent extremism. They seem to want the Muslim community to identify young people that may be extremists and so spy on ourselves. When Muslim organisations want to spend the money in tackling years of Islamophobia and discrimination, funding is not given.

It appears the PVE money instead of preventing violent extremism has made the Muslim community, who want to be mainstream and address issues of disaffection more broadly, more disaffected.