

# **Primary schoolchildren among those referred to terrorism prevention programme**

**MORE than 20 Scottish school children – including two primary pupils – were referred to the terrorism prevention programme last year, it can be revealed.**

Police Scotland data shows 85 people in Scotland were referred to the Prevent de-radicalisation programme in 2022-23 – from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 – with 87 referrals in total as two were referred twice.

They included 21 youngsters referred from secondaries and two from primary schools, with a further six from higher education and the largest proportion of referrals at 31 involving people aged 15-20.

A quarter of referrals involved children aged under 15 while 14 referrals were for those aged 21-30.

Concerns over right wing extremism accounted for more than a third of all referrals with 37 for concerns relating to a “mixed, unstable or unclear ideology”.

Ten referrals were for concerns related to Islamist extremism, with four of those involving children under the age of 15.

Referrals were overwhelmingly male at 92% with female referrals accounting for 7% and one transgender male.

Sharon Dowey, Scottish Conservative spokesman for victims and community safety, said: "These figures are deeply alarming. "It is crucial that authorities monitor any potential concerns to ensure that the public are kept safe, and children are not exposed to extremism."

The Prevent strategy aims to tackle all forms of violent extremism and terrorism, including international, Northern-Ireland related and the extreme right wing.

It is reserved to the UK Government and delivered in Scotland through devolved functions such as education, policing and local authorities.

While the stated aim of the voluntary programme is to divert people from terrorism before they offend and is not a criminal sanction or a punishment, critics claim it has an adverse effect on children and their educational attainment prospects.

## **Programme monitors**

Dr Layla Aitlahdj, Director and Senior Caseworker at Prevent Watch, an organisation that monitors the programme, called for it to be scrapped.

Dr Aitlahdj said: "The Prevent strategy's focus on surveillance over support stigmatises young people and disrupts their education, all while breaching their privacy through unconsented data sharing.

"Scotland must not follow the path taken in England, where Prevent has eroded trust in schools and communities. The Scottish Government has a chance to reject Prevent's damaging approach and instead prioritise genuine community support over securitisation."

Dr Aitlahdj insisted that regardless of the differences in the ideas Prevent targets, the "reality is that it overwhelmingly impacts innocent children".

She added: “Prevent is a harmful, ineffective strategy that should be suspended. Numerous human rights organisations and the United Nations have raised serious concerns, warning that it fosters alienation and discrimination rather than ensuring safety.

“In Scotland, where community cohesion is a valued priority, Prevent risks undermining this foundation. We urge the Scottish Government to reject Prevent’s damaging approach and learn from the failures of Prevent in England.”

Data shows Police Scotland and education bodies made the highest number of Prevent referrals accounting for 69% between them, with others coming from schools, colleges and universities, as well as health bodies, local authorities and prisons.

Police made 31 referrals closely followed by the education sector at 29, with 15 referrals from the local authority sector, including 12 from social work and three from housing associations.

One referral was made by a family member.

## **Early identification**

According to Police Scotland, Prevent focuses on the “early identification of individuals vulnerable to being drawn into violent extremism”.

They say the strategy is not “police led” and is founded on a “shared responsibility across partners and communities to ensure vulnerable people are appropriately supported”.

In a report to the Scottish Police Authority, Chief Superintendent Matt Paden said Police Scotland “played an essential role” in the multi-agency delivery of Prevent.

He said: “It holds information crucial in the assessment of

risk, safeguarding of those susceptible to radicalisation and disrupting people engaged in radicalising others, appropriately shared through effective partnership working and engagement at local and national levels.”

Of the 87 Prevent referrals in 2022/23, 44 were deemed suitable for Prevent Case Management (PCM), with 43 considered not suitable for PCM and signposted to other services.

No further action was required in 25 cases and were closed, with 18 referred onwards.

## **Police Scotland comment**

Assistant Chief Constable Catriona Paton said: “Police Scotland is focused on working in partnership to protect our communities by continuing to deliver the Prevent Strategy.

“The multi-agency approach, which promotes early intervention, will help safeguard those individuals who have been identified as susceptible to radicalisation and being drawn into terrorism or violent extremism.

“We remain committed to building strong partnerships with communities and other stakeholders to address the underlying causes fuelling radicalisation. The publication of the Prevent Referral data ensures communities have visibility of the critical work that is being undertaken to protect both these people and communities.”

A Scottish Government spokesperson said: “All children should be encouraged to develop critical thinking skills and supported to understand the importance of shared values such as respect and diversity. We are clear that the Prevent duty should not, in any way, be used to suppress or limit freedom of speech.

“Prevent aligns with existing safeguarding processes such as Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) that are designed to

prevent harm and safeguard children.”