

Being a Prevent officer

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Q&A – PC Claire Doyle asks Sergeant Andy Webb about his career

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PC Claire Doyle – who was new to her role as a City of London Prevent officer during the pandemic – asks Sergeant Andy Webb about his time spent as a Prevent officer in Greater Manchester Police.

Tell us about your policing career...

I joined Greater Manchester Police in 2009, having previously been a prisoner custody officer within the court system and, before that, a baker. My first seven years were on Response in the Trafford district. In 2016, I realised my ambition and joined counter terrorism (CT) policing as part of Prevent, a government-led multi-agency programme that aims to safeguard vulnerable people from being drawn into terrorism. Counter terrorism has always interested me, and so the opportunity to develop my knowledge on the subject and to work within this field was a real driver behind me pursuing a role in CT policing.

Best thing about Prevent...

It embraces the key principles of neighbourhood policing, by working within the community and alongside partner agencies to safeguard the vulnerable within society and to reduce demand on policing.

Response to criticism of Prevent...

It's there to stop people being drawn into radicalisation and terrorism – why wouldn't we, as the police, want to work with partners to have a preventative role in that? I have seen first-hand through my colleagues' experience, as well as my own, that the strategy can have benefits when

appropriate referrals are made and when opportunities to intervene are taken.

Tip for new Prevent officers...

Research the ideologies and develop an understanding of the context and political landscape in which they lie. This will assist with building an intelligence picture around the referral you are working with. It will also help when engaging in discussions with your subject.

Best breakthrough moment in Prevent...

A referral where a young man had threatened to target a university campus if Brexit wasn't implemented to reduce immigration. A meeting with his mother revealed his vulnerability to suggestion from the news and her view that he wouldn't commit offences. After engaging with Prevent, which included me and an intervention provider carefully challenging his beliefs, he moderated his views and accepted that his perspective on immigrants was misplaced.

Biggest challenge as a police officer...

Having only been in Prevent for around six months, I worked through the aftermath of the tragic Manchester Arena attack, taking on a variety of roles within CT policing in the days after the attack. I then reverted back to Prevent in order to deal with the massive increase in demand we faced, as terrorism sat at the forefront of everybody's mind.

Fastest skill developed while working in Prevent...

Public speaking about Prevent and other aspects of CT policing.

Best advice given to me when I started as a Prevent officer...

Being patient in my approach. Coming into the role straight from frontline policing, I was used to having to deal with things very quickly, so the more strategic approach taken in Prevent and having to learn a very different way of working took time to get comfortable with.

Intelligence gathering tip for response officers...

Understanding symbolism – and misused symbolism. Context is important. A good example is use of Thor's hammer, Mjölnir. This is an established and legitimate Heathen/Pagan symbol but when combined with other information, such as certain numbers, it may indicate far-right extremism.

Benefits of Prevent for frontline officers...

I always informed the relevant neighbourhood beat inspector whenever I had a case. This supported the front line on their beat, in terms of understanding an element of risk or vulnerability that they may have otherwise not known about until something had happened

Impact of COVID-19 on Prevent...

A reduced ability to physically link in with the people referred into Prevent. This makes it hard to visit people who would normally have regular support. Referrals dropped most noticeably from the education sector because of home schooling. We now have to consider the potential for new ideologies to become embedded because of people being confined at home, in some cases with nothing but the internet for company.

Things to watch out for in 2022...

The pandemic has thrown up a number of challenges for Prevent. For example, we have seen an increased use of the term 'conspiracy theorist' and we have to question whether an interest in conspiracy theories is an indicator that someone is an extremist. Wider questions about holding controversial opinions and where these sit within the sphere of radicalisation have come to the fore.

I would describe myself as...

Never having set out in life to become a police officer, and yet after the best part of 15 years in the job, I could not imagine myself doing anything else.

- This article was peer reviewed by PC John McCanney, Cumbria Constabulary

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