

Southport Inquiry

APPROACH TO THE PHASE 2 TERMS OF REFERENCE

This document has been developed as an indicative guide to how the Inquiry intends to approach its work under the Terms of Reference for Phase 2 and the issues that will be examined by the Inquiry. This guide may evolve and be subject to amendment as Phase 2 of the Inquiry progresses.

Approach to the Phase 2 Topics

In Phase 2, the Inquiry will examine the adequacy of arrangements in England and Wales for identifying, assessing and managing the risk posed by individuals at risk of extreme violence where ideology is not the primary driver (“Violence Fixated Individuals”, or VFIs), and for disrupting the circumstances in which such violence may be enabled.

The Inquiry recognises that serious acts of violence by VFIs do not arise in a vacuum, nor are they typically the product of a single cause, agency or failure. For Phase 2, the Inquiry will assess where opportunities for prevention exist, where risks go unrecognised or unmanaged, and where systemic gaps contribute to escalation.

The Inquiry will consider evidence relating to:

- Early vulnerabilities, unmet needs or background conditions.
- The emergence of grievance, identity issues or attraction to violence.
- Behavioural or psychological changes that may give rise to concern.
- The role of online environments in reinforcing interests in violence.
- The point at which concerns become more established.
- Circumstances in which individuals move towards preparation for violence.
- Means of acquiring weapons.

The Inquiry will consider how organisations, including safeguarding agencies, mental-health provision, education, policing, youth justice, multi-agency arrangements, online regulation, and legal frameworks identify, interpret and respond to risk. This includes how concerns are recognised, assessed, shared, managed, escalated/de-escalated and disrupted.

The Inquiry will also examine the role of online environments in influencing, reinforcing or enabling violence-related interests and behaviours. This includes exposure to harmful or violent content, the effects of algorithms, anonymity, online communities and gaming environments, and the interaction between online activity and offline behaviour.

The Topics covered by the Phase 2 Terms of Reference and issues to be examined

The Topics shown in highlighting below are those set by the Terms of Reference for Phase 2 of the Inquiry.

Under each Topic, issues are set out which the Chair intends to use to guide the evidence to be explored in Phase 2. Phase 2 evidence may relate to one or more Topics, and to different Issues within the Topics. The list of issues is only a guide to help shape the evidence to be heard in Phase 2. It should not be read as implying a fixed sequence. Not all indicative issues will be explored in the same way or to the same extent. For Phase 2, the Chair will consider an appropriate combination of:

- Witness statements
- Witnesses called to give live evidence including in seminar format
- Contributions from interest groups and organisations
- Case studies
- The consideration of documentary material
- Academic and expert opinions

The Terms of Reference make clear that "*The Inquiry will also consider alternative forms of evidence gathering to assist it in providing effective and pragmatic recommendations, seeking advice from a range of experts on how to address VFI risk. This may include, but is not limited to, commissioning responses from relevant organisations, authorities, legal or academic experts and holding seminars to provide a platform for robust debate and analysis of the current systems and any recommended proposals.*"

Nothing in this approach should be taken as pre-judging the findings of the Chair.

Topic 1: Identifying and Managing Risk

Violence fixated individuals are defined in the Terms of Reference as “*individuals at risk of extreme violence, where ideology is not the primary driver*”. The Inquiry will examine arrangements for those who are aged 25 or under.

- I. The adequacy of arrangements in England and Wales for managing the risk from violence fixated individuals (VFIs). Where arrangements are considered inadequate, the Inquiry is asked to make recommendations for improvements. In particular, the Inquiry should examine:**
- (a) How effective are multi-agency arrangements in identifying, assessing and managing the risk posed by VFIs? This includes Prevent, Youth Offending Teams and policing.**

Topic 1 Issues

- 1.1 Whether existing statutory and non-statutory frameworks in England and Wales adequately define, recognise and address VFIs as a distinct group.
- 1.2 The extent to which frontline agencies understand indicators of fixation with violence where ideology is not the primary driver.
- 1.3 Gaps in national strategy, guidance, governance and accountability structures relating to VFIs.
- 1.4 The extent to which the existing legal framework and policy enable effective information-sharing and engagement where parental consent is withheld, withdrawn, or manipulated.
- 1.5 Which single agency or what structure should be appointed or established to record, monitor and co-ordinate interventions for children and young people who present a high risk of serious harm.
- 1.6 How to develop an appropriate culture so that agencies are prepared to own and manage risk appropriately, not just refer it on to others.

Identification of VFIs

- 1.7 How effectively Prevent, Youth Offending Teams, policing, education, health, social care and other partners identify early behavioural or psychological markers of fixation and intent toward violence.
- 1.8 Consistency of referral pathways and thresholds across regions and agencies.
- 1.9 Quality and timeliness of information sharing about concerning behaviour in regions and agencies.

Assessment

- 1.10 Whether current assessment tools (e.g., threat/risk matrices, mental health assessments) adequately capture the risk of VFIs.
- 1.11 Are there variations in the training and capability of professionals to assess fixation, pre-attack behaviours, and complex vulnerabilities.

Risk Management

- 1.12 How well do agencies coordinate management plans, case ownership and monitoring arrangements for VFIs.
- 1.13 What are the resourcing models and capacity of multi-agency processes to manage complex, long-term cases.
- 1.14 What are policing strategies for individuals who may not meet criminal thresholds but demonstrate escalating behaviours and are they effective?
- 1.15 The development of a shared multi-agency risk-assessment tool that is clear, accessible and suitable for use across public sector services.

(b) How integrated are these arrangements with wider safeguarding systems and mental health services? Could improvements be made to better identify and manage VFIs?

- 1.16 The strength of links between VFI related processes and young adult and child safeguarding systems.
- 1.17 The capacity of community mental health services and forensic mental health services to deliver timely and effective clinical interventions for violence-fixated children and young people.
- 1.18 What are the barriers to access, referral, or sustained engagement with mental health treatment.
- 1.19 Whether joint decision-making between police, health, and safeguarding is sufficiently embedded and consistent.
- 1.20 Are there opportunities to improve case escalation processes for individuals of concern.
- 1.21 Whether existing powers under the Mental Health Act 1983, as amended by the Mental Health Act 2025, are sufficient to permit assessment or intervention where a child or young person poses a serious risk of violence but does not meet detention thresholds.

(c) What interventions reduce the risk to the public from VFIs? What barriers exist to delivering them and how can they be overcome?

- 1.22 Evidence of the effectiveness of psychological, behavioural, therapeutic, or social interventions that reduce the risk from VFIs.
- 1.23 The availability and accessibility of such interventions across England and Wales.
- 1.24 Barriers to delivering effective interventions, including:
- workforce capability and training
 - governance and risk tolerance
 - legal or consent-related limitations
 - service capacity and funding.
- 1.25 Innovation or specialised approaches that could be used nationally.

(d) Do other threat management systems such as those for terrorism or organised crime have lessons for good management of VFIs?

- 1.26 Good practice and transferable models from:
- Counter-terrorism risk management (e.g. CT policing, the Security Service, Prevent)
 - Organised crime threat management frameworks
 - Public protection arrangements for high-harm individuals (e.g. MAPPA).
- 1.27 Whether elements such as structured case management, intelligence-led approaches, or multidisciplinary specialist teams could improve VFI management.

Topic 2: The role of the online environment

II. The role of the internet and social media in influencing and enabling VFIs to prepare and carry out violent attacks. Proportionate to the timetable set out below, the Home Secretary would welcome expert evidence on this subject.

Topic 2 Issues

- 2.1 The ways online platforms may facilitate fixation, fantasies of extreme violence, or attack planning for individuals without ideological drivers.
- 2.2 The role of algorithms, recommendation systems, and niche online communities in reinforcing violent interests.
- 2.3 How online disinhibition, anonymity, or harmful content platforms may contribute to risk escalation.
- 2.4 Current capability of agencies to detect online behaviours linked to fixation or pre-attack planning.
- 2.5 Barriers to monitoring, reporting and responding to online harms, and proportionate options for improvement.

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- 2.6 Whether there are lawful and proportionate mechanisms to identify concerning patterns of online behaviour, including:
 - online browsing and searching activity
 - patterns of online purchasing
 - behaviours designed to evade safeguards, such as the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), multiple accounts, or changes of names and delivery addresses.
- 2.7 Whether there should be a further ability to restrict or monitor access to the internet on the part of children and young people, if a significant threshold is passed concerning the risk they pose to others.
- 2.8 Whether there should be age verification for the use of VPN software and other options to avoid VPNs being used to circumvent the age-related protections in the Online Safety Act 2023.

Topic 3: The effectiveness of current laws and systems for identifying, monitoring, and disrupting the activities of VFIs

III. The effectiveness of current laws and systems for identifying, monitoring and disrupting the activities of VFIs and reducing the harm caused by online spaces which promote extreme violence.

Topic 3 Issues

- 3.1 The adequacy of current legislation to identify, monitor, and disrupt VFIs prior to harm.
- 3.2 The effectiveness of systems enabling:
 - disruption of preparatory activities
 - management of individuals who pose a risk but fall below criminal thresholds
- 3.3 The clarity and use of existing orders (e.g., court orders, civil injunctions) relevant to those at risk of becoming VFIs and established VFIs.
- 3.4 Whether current legal powers adequately support the identification and escalation of risk arising from the acquisition of dangerous but legal items.
- 3.5 Whether statutory powers sufficiently address modern online threats.

Topic 4: sale and possession of offensive weapons and articles with a point or blade

IV. The effectiveness of policies and regulation in relation to the sale and possession of offensive weapons and articles with a point or blade.

Topic 4 Issues

- 4.1 *Detection of concerning purchasing behaviour:*
- Whether existing commercial, regulatory or enforcement systems are capable of identifying concerning patterns of purchasing behaviour.
 - The effectiveness and proportionality of mandatory or voluntary reporting arrangements for suspicious behaviour.
- 4.2 *Archery bows and related equipment:*
- Whether conventional archery bows present risks comparable to other controlled weapons.
 - Whether age verification prior to sale, delivery restrictions (including ID checks), and mandatory delivery labelling should be considered.
 - The role of Trading Standards or industry standards in preventing the use of military-style imagery or marketing of this equipment.
- 4.3 *Crossbows and other high-harm weapons:*
- The adequacy of existing controls on crossbows.
 - Whether regulatory reform should be considered, including prohibition, licensing schemes analogous to firearms, or restricting sales to age-verified in-store transactions (noting that the Home Office is currently consulting on how to regulate crossbows).
 - The effectiveness of marketing and advertising controls relating to such weapons.
- 4.4 *Knives and bladed articles:*
- The effectiveness of current controls on knife and bladed item sales, including restrictions on sharp-tipped knives and particular high-risk items.
 - Whether further restrictions on online sales should be considered for certain categories of bladed articles.
 - The robustness of online age-verification and age-verified delivery standards.
 - Risks associated with importation of bladed items and with complex delivery chains involving multiple subcontractors.
- 4.5 Whether the provisions and guidance relating to relevant offensive weapons and age verification require clarification and / or consolidation.