

Southport Inquiry



SOUTHPORT INQUIRY OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION

Chair, members of the Inquiry panel,

1.Introduction

1.1 I appear on behalf of the Local Government Association (“LGA”). The LGA welcomes the opportunity to assist Phase 2 of the Southport Inquiry in its examination of the arrangements in England for identifying, assessing and managing the risks presented by violence-fixated individuals (“VFIs”). The issues before the Inquiry are grave. They concern the protection of the public, the safeguarding and support of children and adults, and the ability of public bodies to recognise and respond to serious risk before harm occurs.

1.2 At the outset, the LGA pays tribute to those who were killed and injured in Southport, to their families, and to all those affected by the attack. The LGA recognises the profound importance of the Inquiry’s work and approaches its participation with humility, seriousness and a determination to assist the Inquiry in identifying practical and lasting improvements.

1.3 The LGA’s evidence is given through the first witness statement of Mark Norris, a Principal Policy Adviser authorised to speak on its behalf. That evidence reflects the LGA’s understanding of the experience of councils, informed by engagement with local authority practitioners and relevant professional networks. The LGA is not an operational body, does not manage individual VFI cases and does not direct the exercise of councils’ statutory functions. Its contribution is therefore directed to the wider legislative, policy, governance and resourcing framework within which councils and their partners are required to act.

2. The central submission

2.1 The LGA’s central submission is straightforward. At present, there is no

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comprehensive, coherent or properly resourced national framework designed specifically to identify, assess and manage the risks presented by VFIs. Councils and their partners are required to navigate overlapping statutory regimes, policies, thresholds and multi-agency arrangements, none of which was designed for this task. This creates uncertainty about definitions, referral routes, risk ownership, information sharing, intervention and accountability.

2.2 That is not a criticism of the commitment or professionalism of those working in local government or partner agencies. The evidence demonstrates considerable goodwill, skill and pragmatism. Practitioners are seeking to protect the public and support individuals despite unclear legal boundaries, inconsistent thresholds and severely constrained services. The present system relies too heavily on professionals finding ways to make arrangements work, rather than providing them with a clear and lawful structure within which to do so.

3. The principal issues

3.1 Definition and scope. There is no clear, consistent and widely understood definition of a VFI. The terminology is applied differently across services and agencies. In the case of children and young people, the label may also stigmatise and obscure the needs, experiences and causes underlying the behaviour. Any future framework must therefore define its scope with precision while preserving a child-centred and trauma-informed approach.

3.2 Legal and policy coherence. Existing safeguarding, counter-terrorism, serious violence, mental health and criminal justice arrangements overlap but do not form a complete system. In particular, adult and children's safeguarding regimes are principally directed to protecting vulnerable individuals from harm, whereas VFI cases also require a clear focus on the risk that an individual may present to others.

3.3 Prevent and Channel. Prevent and Channel offer an established multi-agency approach, but they were created to address vulnerability to being drawn into terrorism. Their application to non-ideological VFI cases is uncertain. This results in inconsistent practice and creates a risk that Prevent becomes the default destination for cases that do not meet the thresholds of other services. If those arrangements are to retain a role, their statutory basis, remit, resources and relationship with other pathways must be clarified.

3.4 Information sharing and escalation. Legal gateways exist, but practical hesitation, inconsistent agreements, incompatible systems and uncertainty about closed or rejected referrals impede timely information sharing. A national approach, supported by clear legal advice, common terminology and effective escalation arrangements, warrants serious consideration.

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3.5 Capacity and intervention. Councils, police, health services, schools and other partners are operating under acute demand and financial pressure. Mental health services, children's social care, adult social care, youth services, Prevent teams and specialist intervention providers cannot safely absorb additional responsibilities without sustainable funding, adequate staffing and access to evidence-based interventions.

3.6 Online risk. The online environment can intensify fixation, isolation and harmful influences at a pace that local services struggle to match. Councils have limited powers and uneven access to relevant information and specialist capability. Effective prevention must therefore include stronger national action, up-to-date guidance and proportionate duties on those best placed to reduce online harm.

4. A future framework

4.1 The LGA does not invite the Inquiry simply to add another panel, duty or administrative layer to an already crowded landscape. Structural change must be justified by function. Whatever model is adopted, it should have a clear statutory footing; require and fund effective cooperation among all relevant agencies; provide for early multi-agency triage; enable lawful and efficient information sharing; identify responsibility for each case; and secure access to appropriate interventions. It must address both the risk to the public and the needs and vulnerabilities of the individual.

4.2 The evidence considers a possible "Big Front Door" model through which violence-related concerns could be received and triaged at an early stage. Such a model may help direct cases to the appropriate pathway and reduce the risk of cases falling between services. It would, however, require careful design, counter-terrorism expertise at the appropriate stage, safeguards to preserve trust in existing services, clear links with children's and adult services, and substantial additional resources. The LGA's position is not that this is the only viable model, but that any model must satisfy the conditions necessary for success.

5. Conclusion

5.1 The LGA will seek to assist the Inquiry constructively and candidly. Its evidence identifies gaps and pressures, but it also demonstrates the considerable expertise and commitment that exist across local government. Councils are willing to play their full part. They must, however, be placed within a coherent national system that states clearly what is required, who is responsible, what powers may lawfully be used and how the work will be funded.

5.2 The Inquiry's task is to recommend arrangements capable of protecting the public while responding lawfully, proportionately and humanely to the needs of those whose conduct gives rise to concern. The LGA respectfully submits that lasting



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improvement will depend not upon transferring unresolved risk to local authorities, but upon creating a genuinely whole-system response in which every relevant agency has clear duties, sufficient capability and shared accountability.

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