

19 March 2018

Operation Dovetail update

Purpose of report

For discussion.

Summary

Matt Collins, Director of Prevent at the Home Office, will attend the meeting to provide an update on the introduction of Dovetail; a new proposed approach for administering Channel, part of the Prevent counter-terrorism duty, which will see some responsibilities transferred to local authorities. This paper provides a brief overview of proposals and a summary of issues raised by councils in response.

Recommendation

That Members of the Safer and Stronger Communities Board note the update and issues raised by councils in response to the proposals, and seeks reassurances from the Home Office that these issues will be addressed.

Action

Officers to action as directed.

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Background

1. The UK's counter-terrorism strategy, Contest, comprises four strands; Pursue (catching terrorists before they carry out an attack); Protect (making infrastructure and similar targets less vulnerable); Prepare (planning responses in the event of an attack) and Prevent (stopping people from becoming terrorists or support terrorism). The Contest strategy has been under review by the Government over recent months and an updated version is expected to be published very shortly.
2. The Prevent strand operates in the non-criminal space, and has a number of implications for local authorities and partners. It is underpinned by a statutory Prevent duty on specific authorities, including councils, under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.
3. The Channel programme is a key part of the Prevent strategy. Section 36 of the Act requires local authorities and others to provide support for people who are vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism, before they commit an offence. This process, known as Channel, aims to provide support to individuals at an early stage and help protect them from radicalisation. It uses a multi-agency approach to identify those at risk, assess the nature and extent of that risk and develop a plan for support.
4. Under the Act, local authorities are required to establish a multi-agency Channel panel. Statutory Channel guidance sets out how partners, including councils and the police, should work within this process.

Dovetail

5. Government is keen to emphasise, and build on, Channel's core aim of safeguarding individuals at risk of being radicalised. To this end, the Home Office is proposing making changes to Channel – aiming to de-securitise the process by transferring responsibilities for some elements of Channel from the police to local government, sitting more closely with local authorities' wider safeguarding responsibilities.
6. This approach, known as Operation Dovetail, was piloted in nine areas in 2017 (Brighton, Croydon, Haringey, Kent, Kirklees, Lancashire, Luton, Oldham and Swansea), using a range of different models. Following an evaluation of the pilots last year, the Home Office is now proposing to introduce Dovetail across England and Wales, with a graduated regional roll out over the coming months.
7. Matt Collins, Director of Prevent at the Home Office, will provide an overview of the pilots and further details about the model now proposed. However, the key elements are as follows:

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- 7.1. The police will continue to be key partners and will retain the counter-terrorism risk, but the nature of their involvement in the Channel process will change. They will still be responsible for checking that individuals referred to Channel are not currently under police investigation, and that referrals are not malicious, misguided or misinformed, but other elements of the Channel process will be transferred.
- 7.2. Local authority Channel Chairs will be retained, with local authorities picking up responsibility for gathering information about referred individuals, assessing individuals' level of risk, commissioning support for individuals from approved intervention providers, reviewing progress/risk over time, as well as administering panels and updating databases. Responsibility for making initial visits to the individual referred, and securing consent to proceed with a Channel referral from that individual (or their parents, in the case of a child), will now be undertaken by 'the most appropriate person' – who may be a local authority employee, such as a caseworker already involved with that family, or for example a teacher or probation officer.
- 7.3. The model is expected to operate on a regional basis, with new dedicated Local Authority Channel Coordinators (LACCs), funded by the Home Office, coordinating processes and arrangements for a number of Channel panels across council boundaries. LACCs will be managed by Supervisors, also funded by the Home Office. Currently, local authorities administer Channel panels from existing resources.
- 7.4. There are plans for 96 posts in total, comprising 25 Supervisors and 71 LACCs. The posts will be based in Regional Hubs within selected local authorities (employed by one authority), servicing a number of Channel panels across the region.
- 7.5. The Home Office has recently conducted a series of regional meetings with local authority officers to discuss the proposals, including the number of LACCs and Supervisors to be employed in each region, and how this might be coordinated across local LAs. Further consultation with local authority Chief Executives will commence shortly.

Issues

8. We have been in contact with a number of local authorities regarding the proposals for Dovetail to explore the implications and gather views, including three areas involved in the pilots. While there have been very few objections in principle to the roll out or to the concept of aligning Channel with other safeguarding responsibilities, there are a number of concerns about how the programme will work in practice, how it will be resourced and about levels of consultation and communication with local authorities.
9. It should be noted that areas contacted who were involved with the pilots were largely positive about their experiences.

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10. Concerns raised with the LGA can be summarised as follows:

- 10.1. There are many uncertainties about how the model will work in practice and what will be expected of local authorities, leading to a number of operational concerns.
- 10.2. The specific model being proposed has not been fully tested. In addition, a robust evaluation of the pilots has not been made public and processes have not been transparent.
- 10.3. Agreeing arrangements across authority boundaries is not necessarily straightforward, with further concerns about where risk, accountability and escalation of issues will lie. There are also concerns that working across police force and health agency boundaries should be minimised.
- 10.4. Channel panels currently operate differently in different councils. A regional model could mean local insight, relationships with partners, and freedom to design approaches that suit local needs are lost – particularly as LACCs will be working remotely from the majority of councils. This might be exacerbated where the region covers a wide geographical area.
- 10.5. There are concerns that the proposals are not sufficiently resourced. Further, long-term funding arrangements for the programme are uncertain (with a commitment to fund for the period of the spending review), with worries that councils will have to meet these costs by other means in future.
- 10.6. Areas which currently have fewer Channel referrals reported concerns that they would lose out to others where demand is larger and resourced differently – with particular concerns about developing resilience and responding adequately if events escalated.
- 10.7. Transferring some responsibilities from police colleagues will need to be managed carefully to ensure continuity, that new staff can learn from police experiences and to maintain critical relationships with council partners.
- 10.8. There were several concerns reported regarding use of the police CMIS database for Channel case management/recording. Other concerns were raised about the length of time taken to get relevant enhanced security clearance for new staff.
- 10.9. New skills will be required for staff to undertake this work (both LACCs and others) requiring the provision of adequate training and resource. This includes assessing vulnerability; seeking consent from individuals to proceed with referrals; and operating within the law.

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11. Members may wish to suggest how these concerns might be addressed by the Home Office. This could include:

11.1. Improved communication by the Home Office with local authorities regarding the proposals, their implications, plans for implementation along with ongoing contact as the programme is rolled out. Councils need a clearer idea of expectations and what the Home Office thinks this should look like in practice.

11.2. Further piloting of the programme before full roll out would help ensure that operational issues are ironed out and enable a smooth transfer, with opportunities for other areas to learn from early adopters.

11.3. Ensuring there is sufficient lead-in time for implementation and transfer of responsibilities, to allow for continuity, sufficient training, access to systems and security clearance, and to establish new ways of working across authority boundaries and forge new relationships with key partners.

11.4. Detailed Home Office guidance and training about what is needed to ensure Dovetail operates smoothly, including what new protocols and legal arrangements will need to be introduced locally to ensure cross-boundary working, guidance on data protection (including the implications of new data protection regulations, GDPR), as well as opportunities to learn from pilot sites and share resources. Regional events might be particularly useful.

11.5. Assurances about the sustainability of funding in the long term.

Implications for Wales

12. Local authorities in Wales are subject to the statutory Prevent duty under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, and Dovetail will be rolled out across Welsh councils.

13. As Dovetail interlinks with a number of devolved areas (including eg local government, education, health), a separate task and finish group is being established to develop a model for how Dovetail will operate in Wales.

Financial implications

14. The Home Office has said it will fund posts for LACCs and supervisors for at least this spending review period, including all associated costs such as travel, accommodation, training, and on-costs.

15. As noted above however, there are concerns about the levels of funding and resourcing in future.

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Next steps

16. Members may wish to raise some of the issues and possible responses noted above at the Board meeting, and seek assurances that concerns will be addressed by the Home Office.
17. If appropriate, these issues could be raised further with the Home Office in writing and/or at further meetings with officials to discuss the concerns in more detail.
18. The LGA could assist with disseminating guidance, training and communications as it becomes available.
19. Members may wish to press the Home Office to ensure that the LGA is included in some formal oversight of the roll out to ensure concerns can be quickly fed back to the Home Office during the roll out and that we are involved in drafting statutory guidance.