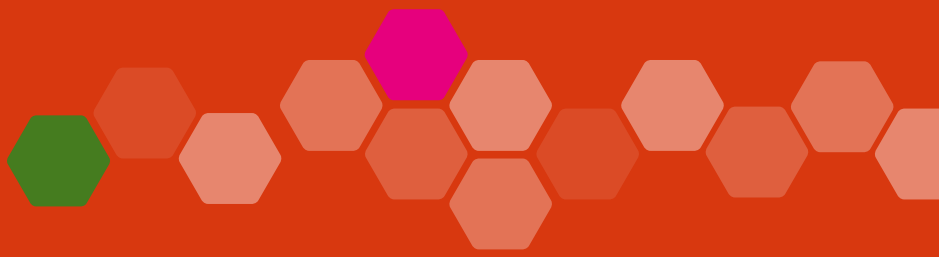
Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Understanding extremism in Scotland: Stakeholder perceptions and views



PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES AND PLACES

social research

Contents

Executive summary

Introduction

This report presents findings from qualitative research conducted by Scottish Government researchers to explore stakeholder understandings of and perspectives on extremism and Prevent delivery in Scotland.

Prevent is a strand of the UK Government's counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST (Home Office, 2018). The stakeholders who participated in this research included predominantly senior-level representatives of organisations that have direct involvement in Prevent in Scotland, or significant interest in Prevent or extremism in Scotland more generally. The research took place between April 2022 and January 2023, with fieldwork carried out between May and September 2022.

This research forms part of a wider programme of work to improve understanding of extremism in Scotland. Complementary research has been commissioned by the Scottish Government to explore the understandings and experiences of the Scottish public and public sector practitioners:

- Understanding extremism in Scotland: Public perceptions and experiences (Scottish Government, 2023b)
- Understanding extremism in Scotland: Public sector practitioner perceptions and experiences (Scottish Government, 2023c)

Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative approach. The researchers conducted a total of 29 interviews, four of which were paired interviews (meaning that two participants were interviewed at the same time), making the total number of participants 33.

Participants represented a range of sectors, including the police (8), faith and belief organisations (7), local authorities (4), education (4), health (1), government (1), prisons (1) and other private/third sector organisations (3).

The organisations invited to take part were identified from existing Scottish Government contact lists and networks. It is important to note, therefore, that while the selection of participants was designed to elicit a range of perspectives from representatives of organisations involved in Prevent, or interested in Prevent or extremism in Scotland more generally, the findings should not be taken to represent the views of representatives of all organisations that have involvement or interest in Prevent or extremism in Scotland, nor the views of the entire sector in which they operate.

Key findings

Understanding of extremism

Participants had difficulty defining extremism, and held diverse understandings of the concept. A particular contention which arose between participants related to

whether holding extremist beliefs can in and of itself be considered extremism, or whether these beliefs have to be acted upon to be considered extremism. There were also mixed opinions as to whether extremism necessarily involves violence.

There was some support for an approach to defining extremism which involves the use of the categories 'politically-motivated', 'ideologically-motivated' and 'religiously-motivated', though it was felt that a caveat that the categories are not mutually exclusive would be needed if they were to be operationalised within Prevent.

Participants were largely in agreement that there are strong links between extremism, hate crime and terrorism, with the idea of a spectrum of views discussed. However, views differed regarding whether sectarianism forms part of this spectrum, with some feeling that it is less harmful than typical manifestations of extremism.

Views on extremism in Scotland

Participants felt that while extremism exists in Scotland, it is less of a problem in Scotland than it is in England. Despite this, many participants felt that the prevalence of extremism is increasing in Scotland, and that Scotland should not be viewed as immune from extremist ideologies and groups.

There was also a perception that the spread of extremist ideologies is different in Scotland to other parts of the UK, with right-wing and sectarian forms of extremism viewed as the most prevalent, and Islamist extremism viewed as less of a problem than in other areas of Britain.

Participants discussed various factors they felt may make people vulnerable to being drawn into extremism, such as isolation and loneliness, spending time online, family background, lack of opportunities and demographic characteristics.

A key theme that emerged during discussions about extremism in Scotland was participants' reflections that more information is needed regarding the extent of extremism in Scotland, trends over time, and the ideologies that are more and less prevalent. There was a desire for further research to be carried out on this topic in Scotland.

Views on Prevent in Scotland

Difficulties with determining the effectiveness of Prevent in Scotland were discussed, but a range of factors that are perceived to work well were highlighted, including the alignment of Prevent with safeguarding policies; the Prevent Multi-Agency Panel (PMAP) guidance; existing tools and resources; and involvement of a range of sectors in the delivery of Prevent.

Concerns with Prevent were also raised, with some relating to the policy more broadly rather than its delivery in Scotland. The concerns that were raised around its delivery in Scotland related to information-sharing; the availability of resources

and funding; the provision of training; and the lack of work to 'tackle the causes' of extremism.

Suggestions for improvement included raising awareness of the positioning of Prevent as a policy that supports community cohesion and integration Scotland; increasing transparency around how the policy is delivered; carrying out greater community engagement work; and improving training and information flows. Participants also expressed support for more research to determine the impact and effectiveness of Prevent in Scotland.

Ability of sectors to identify and support those vulnerable to being drawn into extremism

Those representing sectors with a statutory obligation to fulfil the Prevent duty had mixed views on the ability of those working within these sectors to identify and support individuals who may be vulnerable to being drawn into extremism. While many felt that practitioners are well-placed to identify and support vulnerable individuals, concerns such as the need for more resources, funding and training were raised.

Implications and considerations

Suggestions for further research

This work highlights the need for further research in two key areas. Firstly, participants highlighted a lack of concrete data and evidence about the prevalence of and trends in extremism in Scotland. This suggests that research exploring extremist activity taking place in Scotland in greater detail would be beneficial. This might include work to explore the influence and reach of particular extremist groups in Scotland in comparison with the rest of the UK, and more detailed examination of the data on referrals to Prevent in Scotland in comparison with England and Wales.

Secondly, participants felt that at present it is difficult to determine the extent to which Prevent is meeting the objectives outlined in CONTEST. This suggests that it may be helpful to explore the impact and effectiveness of Prevent in Scotland in more depth. This could be approached through independent in-depth case study or ethnographic research with people who have been through Prevent in Scotland, which would support a more in-depth, multifaceted understanding of what works to address the needs of those at risk.

More broadly, further exploration of the Prevent referral data may also provide an indication of the frequency with which those who are offered Prevent support are referred back to Prevent in future, and potential reasons for this.

Broader considerations

Stakeholders who took part in this research had wide-ranging understandings of extremism. While this was to some extent surprising, it may reflect the fact that the Scottish Government does not currently have an official definition of extremism, having not adopted the UK Government definition (Home Office, 2011).

It therefore appears that it would be useful to give consideration to the merits of having an official definition of extremism for use in Scotland, or at least to set out the views, behaviours and activities that are considered to constitute extremism in the context of Prevent more clearly, to ensure there is a shared understanding of what is meant by the term among those responsible for tackling it.

In addition, this research highlights a need for more training and resources around the different types of extremism that exist, and the behaviours and signs that could indicate vulnerability to extremist narratives, to support those working to deliver Prevent in Scotland to identify those at risk of radicalisation more effectively.

Finally, this research has also highlighted a range of suggestions for ways in which Prevent delivery in Scotland could be enhanced. Although the UK Government retains overall responsibility for national policy on security and counter-terrorism, the suggestions largely relate to improving existing processes, perceptions and understanding of Prevent, rather than the underlying principles of the programme or the mechanisms through which it is delivered in Scotland. The research recommends that the Scottish Government and statutory partners give consideration to both whether and how these suggestions could be taken forward to foster improvements in Prevent delivery in Scotland.

1. Introduction

This report presents findings from qualitative research conducted by Scottish Government researchers to explore stakeholder understandings of and perspectives on extremism and Prevent delivery in Scotland.

Prevent is a strand of the UK Government's counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST (Home Office, 2018). The stakeholders who participated in this research included predominantly senior-level representatives of organisations that have direct involvement in Prevent in Scotland, or significant interest in Prevent or extremism in Scotland more generally. The research took place between April 2022 and January 2023, with fieldwork carried out between May and September 2022. This research forms part of a wider programme of work to improve understanding of extremism in Scotland.

This section provides an overview of the background to this programme of research and outlines the research aims and questions specific to the research exploring stakeholder understandings of and perspectives on extremism and Prevent in Scotland.

1.1. Background and context

Prevent policy

The purpose of Prevent is to 'stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism' (Home Office, 2018). While counter-terrorism (and therefore Prevent) is a reserved matter and the responsibility of the UK Government, the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (2015) places a duty on sectors that are devolved from Westminster to the Scottish Government (local authorities, health and social care, education, prisons, and the police) to pay 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism'. This is known as the Prevent duty.

The Prevent duty guidance for Scotland (Home Office, 2021a) outlines how specified authorities are expected to comply with this duty. There is sector-specific guidance for further education institutions (Home Office, 2021b) and higher education institutions (Home Office, 2021c).

The Scottish Government supports the specified sectors to fulfil their obligations under the Prevent duty (Home Office, 2021a), and ensures that mechanisms are in place for safeguarding and supporting individuals who may be susceptible to being drawn into terrorism as outlined in the Prevent Multi-Agency Panel (PMAP) Duty Guidance[1] (Home Office, 2021d).

In Scotland, the approach taken to Prevent is tailored to the Scottish context and the specific challenges faced by Scottish communities. Emphasis is placed on early intervention, safeguarding, and the prevention of people from becoming alienated

[1] PMAPs are a key part of Prevent and involve using a multi-agency approach to assess the nature and extent of an individual's vulnerability and develop an appropriate support plan.

or isolated, with the aim of reducing vulnerability and increasing resilience to extremist narratives.

Key definitions

Extremism

The UK Government currently adopts the following definition of extremism:

> 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism calls for the death of members of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas'. (Home Office, 2011: 107)

This definition was introduced in the 2011 Prevent strategy (Home Office, 2011), and is a working definition rather than a legal definition. It was used in the UK Government's Counter-Extremism Strategy (Home Office, 2015), which set out the UK Government's approach to countering 'both violent and non-violent' extremism. However, counter-extremism is a devolved matter and the Counter-Extremism Strategy and the UK Government's definition of extremism were not adopted in Scotland.

At present, therefore, the Scottish Government does not have an official definition of extremism. An evidence review carried out by the Scottish Government (2023a) explored how extremism is defined in existing literature, and highlighted the challenges associated with defining the concept. For example:

- Various factors, such as the prevailing political culture, value systems and personal characteristics and experiences, influence how the term is understood, meaning it is an inherently relative and ambiguous term (Sotlar, 2004).
- Extremism is often conceptualised as a continuum of beliefs and behaviours, which makes it difficult to capture in a definition (Wilkinson and van Rij, 2019).
- Defining extremism too broadly can risk impeding rights to free speech and protest, while defining it too narrowly can lead to potentially extremist behaviours being overlooked (Redgrave et al., 2020).

These challenges have meant that while a range of definitions of extremism have been proposed, there is a general lack of consensus on how it should be defined.

Terrorism

The Terrorism Act (2000) defines terrorism as the use or threat of any of the following actions, where the action is designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public and is used for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause.

- Serious violence against a person

- Serious damage to property
- Endangering a person's life, other than that of the person committing the action
- Creating a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public
- Seriously interfering with or disrupting an electronic system

In addition to the above, the use or threat of action which involves the use of firearms or explosives is considered terrorism regardless of whether the action is designed to influence the government or an international governmental organisation, or to intimidate the public or a section of the public.

However, as with extremism, there is no universally agreed-upon understanding of terrorism, and the term is defined differently by governments elsewhere, as well as by global institutions. Reasons presented for this lack of agreed-upon definition in the academic literature include that it is difficult to encapsulate the wide range of behaviours, actions and beliefs associated with terrorism in one definition, and that the term is subjective (Schmid, 2011).

Nevertheless, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2023) has stated that while no standardised definition of terrorism exists, as a minimum, it involves 'the intimidation or coercion of populations or governments through the threat or perpetration of violence, causing death, serious injury or the taking of hostages'. Furthermore, there exists a consensus academic definition of terrorism created by scholars (Schmid, 2011), which defines terrorism as follows:

> 'Terrorism refers, on the one hand, to a doctrine about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties.'

Hate crime

The Scottish Government tends to use Lord Bracadale's definition of hate crime developed as part of his independent review of hate crime legislation in Scotland, which refers to hate crime as 'the term used to describe behaviour which is both criminal and rooted in prejudice' (Lord Bracadale, 2018). Police Scotland (2023a) define hate crime as 'any crime which is perceived by the victim or any other person as being motivated (wholly or partly) by malice or ill will towards a social group' with the five groups covered including disability, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation or transgender identity, which is in line with how hate crime is defined elsewhere in the UK (e.g., Crown Prosecution Service, 2023).

However, there are also conceptual debates around defining hate crime. For example, Garland (2012) discusses difficulties with deciding which identity groups are categorised as specific hate crime groups and which are not.

Stakeholders

In academic literature, stakeholders have been defined as 'individuals, organisations or communities that have a direct interest in the process and outcomes of a project, research or policy endeavour' (Deverka et al., 2012). As noted above, for the purposes of this research stakeholders included predominantly senior-level representatives of organisations that have direct involvement in Prevent in Scotland, or significant interest in Prevent or extremism in Scotland more generally.

These stakeholders were identified through existing Scottish Government contact lists and networks, and included, for example, the Prevent leads for the sectors with a statutory obligation to fulfil the Prevent duty (local authorities, health and social care, education, prisons, and the police), and representatives of faith and belief and third sector organisations (see section 2.2 for more detail). It did not include members of the public, or frontline public sector practitioners involved in delivering Prevent. As will be explained further below, the views of these groups have been explored in separate research projects commissioned by the Scottish Government (2023b; 2023c).

Understanding extremism in Scotland

The evidence review carried out by the Scottish Government (2023a) also identified evidence gaps relating to the real extent and nature of extremism in Scotland. In particular, the review showed that while tentative conclusions can be drawn from data relating to terrorist activity, Prevent referrals, public attitudes and hate crime, there is a lack of research evidence on the prevalence and nature of extremism in Scotland specifically. This impedes understanding of whether the current approach to Prevent in Scotland is appropriate and impactful in preventing the spread of extremist ideologies and reducing terrorism.

The Scottish Government is therefore developing a programme of research which aims to support understanding of extremism and Prevent delivery in Scotland. In the first instance, this research has sought to explore understandings, perceptions and experiences of extremism from the perspective of three key groups – the Scottish public, stakeholders and public sector practitioners[2] – in three distinct but related projects.

The aim of this research is to develop understanding of how the Scottish public, stakeholders and public sector practitioners define and understand extremism; their views on the extent to which extremism is a problem in Scotland and the types of extremism they consider to be more and less prevalent; and how well they perceive current approaches to countering extremism in Scotland to be working.

[2] The research with public sector practitioners was carried out with frontline professionals working in sectors which have a statutory obligation to fulfil the Prevent duty (local authorities, health and social care, education, prisons, and the police).

This report focuses on the findings from the research exploring stakeholder understandings of and perspectives on extremism and Prevent in Scotland. Findings from the research with public sector practitioners and the Scottish public have been published separately (Scottish Government, 2023b; Scottish Government, 2023c).

1.2. Research aim and questions

The aim of this research was to explore stakeholder understandings of and perspectives on extremism and Prevent delivery in Scotland. To meet this aim the project considered 13 research questions across four key areas:

Understanding of extremism

1. How do stakeholders understand and define extremism?
2. How far do stakeholders' understandings of extremism in Scotland align with definitions and categorisations adopted in other contexts?
3. How do stakeholders perceive extremism to manifest as views, behaviours and actions?
4. What are stakeholders' views on the boundaries of extremism? For example, when does a view, behaviour or action cross the threshold into extremism?

Views on extremism in Scotland

5. To what extent do stakeholders perceive extremism to be a problem in Scotland?
6. Do stakeholders feel that the threat from extremism in Scotland has increased or decreased over time?
7. Do stakeholders feel that the threat from extremism in Scotland will increase or decrease in the future?
8. What are stakeholders' views on the types of extremism that are of most concern or growing concern currently in Scotland, and why? What are views on the key drivers of these concerns?

Views on Prevent in Scotland

9. How effective do stakeholders consider Prevent to be, and why?
10. What do stakeholders think Prevent does well, and what do they think could be improved?
11. Do stakeholders have a favourable or unfavourable view of Prevent in Scotland?

Views on the ability of sectors to identify and support individuals vulnerable to being drawn into extremism

12. How well-equipped do stakeholders feel those working in the sector they represent are to identify those vulnerable to being drawn into extremism?

13. How well-equipped do stakeholders feel those working in the sector they represent are to support those vulnerable to being drawn into extremism?

1.3. Report structure

The next section outlines the methodology used to carry out this research. This is followed by presentation of the findings, with section 3 covering stakeholder understandings of extremism, section 4 covering stakeholder views on extremism in Scotland, section 5 covering stakeholder views on Prevent in Scotland, and section 6 covering stakeholder views on the ability of sectors to identify and support those vulnerable to being drawn into extremism. The report concludes with a summary of the key findings and discussion of the implications of this research.

2. Methodology

2.1. Overview

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions the researchers adopted a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is used to gain understanding of beliefs, experiences, attitudes and behaviours through methods such as interviews, focus groups and observation. The researchers used in-depth interviewing, a method which typically involves conducting one-on-one interviews with a small number of participants to explore their perspectives on a particular topic in detail (Bryman, 2016).

2.2. Sampling

The researchers adopted a purposive sampling method. Participants were invited to take part based on their organisations' involvement in Prevent, or interest in Prevent or extremism in Scotland more generally, and asked to represent the views of their organisation in the interview.

The researchers identified organisations from existing Scottish Government contact lists and networks, with those invited including:

- The Prevent leads for each sector with a statutory obligation to fulfil the Prevent duty (local authorities, health and social care, education, prisons, and the police).
- Predominantly senior-level representatives of the police and local authority sectors who are involved in Prevent delivery in Scotland.
- Representatives of the Home Office who are involved in Prevent delivery in Scotland.
- Multi-Agency CONTEST Group Chairs.
- Representatives of third sector organisations, including faith and belief organisations.
- Representatives of organisations funded by the Scottish Government to carry out work to build community cohesion in Scotland.

The researchers conducted a total of 29 interviews between 5 May and 2 September 2022. Four were paired interviews[3] (meaning that two participants were interviewed at the same time), making the total number of participants 33. The sectors which participants represented included:

- Police (8)
- Faith and belief organisations (7)[4]
- Local authority (4)
- Education (4)

[3] Paired interviews were used where two participants representing the same organisation wished to be interviewed together.

[4] Including the four paired interviews.

- Health (1)
- Government (1)
- Prisons (1)
- Other private/third sector (3)

Given that participants were invited on the basis of their organisations' involvement or interest in Prevent or extremism in Scotland, the sample was not designed to cover all areas of Scotland in a systematic way. Nevertheless, the participants represented organisations operating in a range of geographical areas, including the following local authorities:

- Dundee City (1)
- Edinburgh City (1)
- Fife (2)
- Glasgow City (1)
- Perth and Kinross (1)
- Renfrewshire (1)
- West Lothian (1)

Others operated across multiple local authority areas (6), across Scotland (13) or across the UK (2).

2.3. Ethics and data protection

The researchers carried out an ethics assessment at the outset of the project, which highlighted sensitivities to be taken account of during the research. To ensure the identities of participants were protected and that the views of specific organisations were not attributable to them, the research was designed and conducted in compliance with GDPR legislation. Prior to interview, the researchers provided participants with an Information Sheet giving an overview of the research, a Privacy Notice which explained how their data would be handled, and a Consent Form to be signed and returned. Recognising that the topic had the potential to cause discomfort or distress for participants, the researchers who conducted the interviews were trained to meet ethical standards and experienced in conducting research on sensitive subjects. All participants have been anonymised in this report to protect their identities.

2.4. Topic guide development

The interviews were semi-structured. A semi-structured interview is a method that combines a pre-determined set of open questions with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further (Bryman, 2016). The researchers developed a topic guide which included questions and prompts relating to the four key areas of interest: understanding of extremism; views on extremism in Scotland; Prevent in Scotland; and the ability of sectors to identify and support those vulnerable to being drawn into extremism. A summary of the topic guide is provided in Appendix A.

The purpose of this document was to serve as a guide to inform the flow of the discussions, rather than a definitive list of questions to cover. A key reason for this was that participants in this research had varying degrees of knowledge and awareness of Prevent. Some were involved in Prevent delivery in Scotland (e.g., Prevent sector leads and Multi-Agency CONTEST Group chairs) and therefore had a strong understanding of how Prevent is implemented in Scotland. Others were not involved in the delivery of Prevent but had a wider interest in the policy or in extremism more broadly (e.g., third sector organisations).

The researchers therefore tailored the topic guide to each participant, focusing on the most relevant questions and prompts. For example, the questions relating to the ability of sectors to identify and support those vulnerable to being drawn into extremism were only asked of those representing sectors with a statutory obligation to fulfil the Prevent duty (the local authority, health and social care, education, prisons, and police sectors). This means that section 6 of this report only covers the views of participants representing statutory sectors (n=18). This flexible approach allowed the researchers to focus on areas which were of particular relevance to each participant, thereby achieving greater depth of insight, especially for those with specific types of involvement in Prevent delivery in Scotland.

2.5. Analysis

The researchers conducted all interviews online using Microsoft Teams. The interviews were recorded and transcribed into Microsoft Word. The researchers then analysed the transcripts thematically using the analytical software NVivo to draw out key messages emerging from the discussions.

In the findings sections, language that has specific quantitative meaning (such as ‘majority’, ‘minority’ or ‘most’) has been avoided. This is because qualitative research methods typically aim to capture diversity and depth of experience, rather than demonstrate the prevalence of a particular view. However, in some instances non-specific quantifications have been used (such as ‘many’, ‘some’ or ‘a few’). This language has been used to indicate patterns which emerged in the data, but should not be taken to suggest that inferences can be drawn about the prevalence of views or experiences beyond the sample.

2.6. Limitations

The purpose of qualitative research is not to achieve a sample that is representative of the wider population in a statistical sense, which is often the aim of quantitative research. Rather, qualitative research typically seeks to capture the views and experiences of a small sample of participants, who are selected based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon in detail.

The selection of participants for this research was designed to elicit a range of perspectives from representatives of organisations involved in Prevent, or interested in Prevent or extremism in Scotland more generally. As noted above, the organisations invited to take part were identified from existing Scottish Government contact lists and networks. The findings from this research should therefore not be taken to represent the views of representatives of all organisations that have

involvement or interest in Prevent or extremism in Scotland, nor the views of the entire sector in which they operate.

Relatedly, as discussed in section 2.2, the sample was not designed to cover all areas of Scotland, and while representatives of organisations operating in a range of geographic areas took part, there was greater representation of organisations operating in urban and peri-urban areas than in rural areas. Further research may therefore wish to explore the views and perceptions of stakeholders operating in rural areas in more detail.

3. Understanding of extremism

This section presents findings relating to participants' understanding of the concept of extremism. It covers participants' understandings of extremism and views on the challenges associated with defining it; perceptions of extremist views and actions and where the boundaries of extremism sit in relation to these; views on definitions and categorisations used in other countries; and views on the links between hate crime, sectarianism, terrorism and extremism.

3.1. Defining extremism

The challenges with defining extremism

Early in the interview, participants were asked how confident they felt that they understand what is meant by the term extremism. Many participants said that they felt confident in their understanding of the term, particularly those who are involved in the delivery of Prevent in Scotland. However, not all could articulate a definition when asked to do so, with many commenting that while they understand the meaning of the term and could recognise it if they saw it, it is difficult to summarise concisely.

> 'I know what extremism is. Can I quote it verbatim right now, probably not no. But in terms of being able to identify when something would be considered extremism or not, I can do that.' (Police sector participant)

Participants raised various reasons why they felt that extremism is a challenging concept to define. Firstly, many discussed the subjective nature of extremism. They highlighted that because extremism is often defined in terms of views and behaviours which are outside the norm, the concept can assume different meanings depending on what the norm is. This means that views and behaviours that may be considered extremist in a particular cultural, social or political context may not be considered extremist in another.

> 'It's a really difficult concept to grasp because it means something different if you look at it in different contexts, different political contexts or cultural contexts.' (Education sector participant)

The dynamic and changing nature of extremism was also discussed, with participants highlighting that views and behaviours which would be considered extremist now could previously have been considered acceptable or mainstream.

> 'I suppose it's an individual who has views that society would deem to be on the extremes, but from a subjective perspective it's really hard because there are views that we would consider to be extreme now that historically might have been mainstream ideas.' (Police sector participant)

These points are reflected in wider research on defining extremism, with authors such as Martins (2020) and Redgrave et al. (2020) noting that the subjective nature

of the term is partly why there remains a general lack of consensus on how it should be defined in the literature.

Other participants commented that it is difficult to define extremism without restricting free speech.

> 'One of the challenges with the term extremism is that fine line between freedom of speech and extremism. It's working out where to draw that line, when has something moved beyond offensive and when is it putting people in harm's way.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

This point is also made by Redgrave et al. (2020), who argue that when extremism is defined too widely there are risks of curtailing rights to protest and free speech, but also that when it is defined too narrowly 'much of what most fair-minded people would think of as extremism is left out'.

Participants also discussed difficulties associated with not having a shared understanding of the term extremism, particularly in the context of Prevent. The Prevent duty places an obligation on practitioners working in the local authority, health and social care, education, prisons, and police sectors to recognise where there are signs that an individual has been or is being drawn into terrorism and be aware of the process for providing the individual with support, including by making a Prevent referral (Home Office, 2021a). The Prevent duty guidance (Home Office, 2021a) highlights that extremism can 'create an atmosphere conducive to terrorism and can popularise views which terrorists exploit'. However, participants noted that if practitioners in Scotland have differing understandings of what is meant by extremism, they may have different thresholds for what constitutes a referral.

> 'I think it's really important to be able to define extremism, terrorism, radicalisation. For [Prevent] to work we need to be talking about the same things, but I think people get confused and we mix these things up.' (Other private/third sector participant)

This point is also reflected in wider research. For example, Thorton and Bouhana (2019) carried out interviews with practitioners involved in Prevent delivery in England and found that thresholds for referrals tended to be discretionary and differed between local authorities.

Stakeholders' definitions of extremism

In the literature, Ford (2017) suggests that despite the lack of a universally agreed-upon definition of extremism, existing definitions can be categorised into three broad types, including:

1. Definitions that emphasise extremist values, describing values as extremist if they are atypical, unpopular or deviant. In this definition, extremist values are typically viewed as those furthest away from the values usually associated with liberal democracy.

2. Definitions that emphasise extremists' lack of openness or receptiveness to the perspectives of others, highlighting the centrality of intolerance to difference.
3. Definitions which focus on the synthesis between extremism and violence, with extremist ideologies viewed as inciting adherents to either engage in violence themselves or support the violence of others.

Although many participants in this research felt that extremism is difficult to define, some were able to articulate a definition. While the definitions presented were varied and wide-ranging, they broadly mirrored the three types of definition discussed by Ford (2017). Firstly, some defined extremism as an opposition to societal and cultural norms, values and morals. This was often expressed in terms of a spectrum, with acceptable, mainstream attitudes at one end and extremism at the other.

> 'All beliefs are on a spectrum, and most people fall within that spectrum at some place. When you get to the end of that spectrum, that's when you are getting into extremism.' (Local authority sector participant)

Secondly, some depicted extremism as a reluctance to accept the views or position of others, with extremists conceptualised as narrow-minded and intolerant of others' beliefs.

> 'Most people accept and tolerate a range of religious beliefs. An extremist will believe that their beliefs are the only beliefs that count and everybody else is against them.' (Local authority sector participant)

> 'Extremism implies a reluctance to listen, a reluctance to countenance any views that are in opposition to your own and a reluctance to accept the validity of anyone else's position if it does not wholly or very substantially align with yours.' (Education sector participant)

Related to this was the idea that extremists often see themselves or their views as being superior to others.

> '[Extremism] is normally driven by some kind of dogma or belief that they are superior to others, that other groups are inferior, whether that be religion, race or something else.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Thirdly, some felt that an important element of extremism is that it involves views being acted on in a violent or harmful manner.

> 'The threat of violence is really how we would think of it, anything where people are using their beliefs to provoke violence or carry out acts of violence.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

The definitions presented therefore spanned all three types of definition outlined by Ford (2017), with participants discussing values they would consider to be extremist, the ways in which extremists oppose values held by others, and the links

between extremism and violence. However, there was no clear preference towards any one of the types of definition, and in some instances, participants mentioned elements of one, two or all three when discussing their understanding of the term.

3.2. Extremist views and behaviours

Examples of extremist views and behaviours

Although participants had difficulty articulating a clear definition of the term extremism, most could easily describe views and behaviours that they would consider to be extremist. Examples of viewpoints that participants considered to be extremist included:

- Right-wing extremism
- White supremacy
- Religious forms of extremism, including Islamist[5] extremism
- Left-wing extremism
- Extreme forms of misogyny
- Sectarianism
- Racism

Participants also discussed various ways that these views could be acted on by extremists, such as through physical attacks on people or property, causing disruption or disorder, participation in protests or marches, hate speech, discrimination, bullying, and expressing views online (particularly on social media).

Some participants discussed the idea of a spectrum of harm in relation to extremist behaviours, with more moderate behaviours at one end and more severe, violent behaviours at the other.

> 'It's a spectrum, from holding a view that the majority of people in the country might be uncomfortable with, to vocalising that view, expressing it through public statements or on social media, to doing something about it, taking direct action in ways that harm others and encouraging others to do the same.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Boundaries of extremism

While participants could typically provide examples of views and behaviours they would consider extremist, an area of contention which arose in the interviews related to whether holding extremist beliefs can in and of itself be considered extremism, or whether the beliefs must be acted upon to constitute extremism. This initially emerged in discussions around participants' understanding of extremism, where some described the concept in relation to particular views or beliefs (e.g., the

[5] The term 'Islamist extremism' is UK Government terminology (Home Office, 2018) that is also adopted in Scotland.

belief that your own views are superior to others') while others focused on actions and behaviours (e.g., that extremism involves acting on your views in violent ways).

This was subsequently explored further by presenting participants with the following three scenarios and asking them to reflect on whether they would consider each to represent an example of extremism or not:

Scenarios presented to participants

'I'm now going to provide present you with three scenarios. I'd like you to tell me whether you would consider these to represent "extremism" or not:

1. Someone thinks it is ok to harm others for political, religious or ideological reasons, but they do not put these thoughts into action.

2. Someone thinks it is ok to harm others for political, religious or ideological reasons, and communicates this to others, for example by distributing a leaflet or putting up a poster that advocates their position.

3. Someone harms others for political, religious or ideological reasons.'

Participants' views on these scenarios are explored in detail below.

Views without action

The first scenario describes an example of an individual holding potentially extremist views but not acting on them. Some participants felt that this could be considered extremism. For these participants, holding extremist views was often seen as the start of a journey or pathway that could, in some circumstances, lead to an individual acting on their views in ways that cause harm.

> 'Someone thinks it's ok to harm others for political, religious or ideological reasons, that for me is extremism. They're not necessarily taking action, but they hold an extremist belief. There's a reasonable possibility it will turn into harm.' (Police sector participant)

These participants discussed the importance of Prevent at this stage, as they felt that support offered by Prevent can help with challenging or discrediting extremist views held by an individual before they progress into engagement in extremist behaviour.

> 'I think the earlier the better. If Prevent's about anything it's about prevention, and we know that the more upstream that happens, the more effective it will be.' (Education sector participant)

> '[The first example] is the area which Prevent has to work most if it's going to be successful because it's about identifying people that haven't put thoughts into action [...] It's about how you change somebody's mind before they put

those thoughts into action, how you make them question whether those thoughts are appropriate.' (Local authority sector participant)

However, others felt that an individual cannot be considered extremist based on their views alone, and that it is only when individuals engage in behaviours that draw on their views that this constitutes extremism. These participants highlighted the importance of freedom of thought and conscience, and discussed how in a democratic society people are entitled to hold views and opinions even if these would be considered unreasonable or offensive to most.

'I don't think just because somebody has an unattractive view that should necessarily be called extremism. I think that would be harmful to society, it would create a sort of thought police. If they're not actually doing anything about it, if it stays in their head, if it never goes further than that […] I wouldn't call that extremism.' (Police sector participant)

It was noted that if individuals were referred to Prevent solely for having views some might seem extremist the system could be overwhelmed.

'If some sort of behaviour isn't involved you're often into the realms of free speech, which is something that needs to be protected. If you took everyone [into Prevent] from that first example, you'd pretty quickly overwhelm any system […] there needs to be some sort of filter.' (Health sector participant)

Types of action

There was therefore a subset of participants who felt that extremism necessarily involves some sort of action or behaviour. However, among these participants, a further contention arose relating to the manner in which the extremist view must be acted on for this to be considered extremism. For some, an individual expressing their extremist view or communicating it to others as in the second scenario represented the point at which they could be considered extremist. These participants also felt this was the stage at which Prevent support would be appropriate.

'If they're talking about it with other people or if they're posting on their social media or whatever, arguments about harming others, then I would say that is extremism and that would justify a referral.' (Education sector participant)

For others, there had to be an element of harm – as in the third scenario – for the behaviour to be considered extremism. Participants recognised that harm could take different forms, and was not restricted to physical violence; for example, some discussed non-violent activity such as verbal abuse, online harassment or distributing leaflets denigrating particular communities were also manifestations of extremism.

'You can be very, very disruptive and unpleasant without using physical violence […] it's not just about violence. Protest outside an abortion clinic for example, shouting at people going in there, that is absolutely harming other

people. That is extremism I think, and it's not tolerable.' (Police sector participant)

Some commented that where violence was involved, whether this be the use of violence, support for the use of violence or threat of violence, this constituted a specific type of extremism, 'violent extremism'. Some were able to articulate a definition of violent extremism more clearly than they were able to define extremism in a broader sense.

> 'There's a difference between extremism and violent extremism. Extremism can be completely harmless, it's just something that sits at the edges of what society considers acceptable. Violent extremism is not harmless at all. It's believing in an ideology that accepts violence as a means to get to your position.' (Other private/third sector participant)

Others felt that scenarios where violence was involved were more likely to constitute terrorism, and would therefore not be appropriate for consideration by Prevent.

> 'The third [scenario], that's terrorism, not extremism. If someone harms someone for a political, religious or ideological reason, [they would] fall under Section 1 of the Terrorism Act. That's a key component of it.' (Police sector participant)

Overall, there was no clear consensus among participants regarding where the boundaries of extremism lie, and many felt that all three scenarios represented an example of extremism in some form. Some also emphasised the importance of context in relation to whether each of the scenarios represented extremism, again highlighting the subjective nature of the concept. For example, participants discussed how in some circumstances harming others for political reasons would not be considered extremism, such as during a war.

> 'Thinking it's ok to harm others for political reasons. Anybody goes to war, there's a political reason. You've got to take into account the context.' (Other private/third sector participant)

3.3. Existing definitions of extremism

Views on prompted definitions

During the interviews, participants were asked for their views on three existing definitions of extremism. The first was the Australian Government's (2022) definition of violent extremism, the second was based on the Swedish Government's (2015) definition of violent extremism, while the third was the UK Government's definition of extremism (Home Office, 2011).

Australian definition: a willingness to use unlawful violence, or support the use of violence by others, to promote a political, ideological or religious goal.

Swedish definition: engagement with ideologies that accept and legitimise violence as a means of realising extreme ideological opinions and ideas.

UK definition: vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.

These definitions were identified as part of a review carried out by the Scottish Government (2023d) which explored how extremism is defined in other countries. Notably the term 'engagement with' is not included in the original definition outlined by the Swedish Government (2015) but was included in the definition presented to participants so that its structure aligned with the other definitions.

The definitions were presented to participants later in the discussion about their understanding of extremism, so as not to influence their answers to earlier questions regarding how they themselves would define the concept.

Australian definition

In these discussions, differing perspectives again emerged on whether extremism necessarily involves an element of harm or violence. For example, while some participants felt the Australian definition was helpful, others took the view that some extremists may be willing to use or support the use of violence but not all would, and that some may instead express their views in harmful non-violent ways, such as through discrimination or harassment. These participants highlighted that a focus on violent extremism may mean that non-violent forms of extremism are overlooked.

> 'I think the problem is the mention of a willingness to use unlawful violence or support the use of violence. For myself it's not just about violence because there's other ways of causing harm as opposed to assaulting somebody. You can be causing tension in the community, attacking IT infrastructure or something but it's not necessarily violence as in a physical attack on somebody else.' (Police sector participant)

Some also commented that while they would consider the use of violence to be extremist they would not consider supporting the use of violence to be extremist, so including both in the same definition was viewed as unhelpful.

> 'There's a clear difference between a willingness to use unlawful violence and support it […] A willingness to use unlawful violence is a different thing I think, because you are actually saying, "I am prepared to do it." You have

moved into extremism then, a line has been crossed. I think the two parts of that sentence are different. The willingness to use unlawful violence is clearly moving towards extremism. Supporting it in others, I'm not sure it has quite reached the threshold of extremism.' (Local authority sector participant)

Concerns with specific terms within the Australian definition were also raised, including the term 'unlawful violence', with participants holding a view that there are few contexts in which violence would be considered lawful.

> 'I don't like the expression "unlawful violence". That suggests to me that there is a lawful violence which I don't accept.' (Education sector participant)

The idea of a 'goal' was also questioned, with participants noting that extremists may not necessarily have a specific objective or aim in mind.

> 'I think [the Australian definition] is slightly inaccurate, it talks about promoting a goal, I'm not sure necessarily that extremism always has a goal in mind apart from simply oppression and prejudice.' (Education sector participant)

Some commented that they would associate the idea of a having a specific goal more closely with terrorism than extremism.

> 'I think [the Australian definition] is terrorism if I'm being perfectly honest, it's a willingness to use unlawful violence or support the use of violence by others […] you've got an ideology, you're doing something about it, you're promoting a political, ideological, or religious goal, I wouldn't say that is extremism.' (Police sector participant)

Swedish definition

As with the Australian definition, while some found the definition based on the Swedish definition useful, others believed that it focused too strongly on violence, and felt that not all extremist ideologies condone or encourage violence as a means of achieving their aims.

> 'Again, it's the violence aspect to it which I don't agree with. Hate speech isn't necessarily violence, active avoidance of things, discrimination. I don't think it's just about violence, it's about activity.' (Police sector participant)

Many participants also felt that the term 'engagement with', which was added to the definition for the purposes of this research, was unhelpful, because the term is too vague and broad. For example, it was suggested that it is important to engage with extreme ideologies, such as by researching them, in order to better understand them. It was proposed that if 'engagement with' was changed to 'promoting', 'endorsing' or 'believing in' then this definition could be more useful.

> 'Engagement is a very difficult word […] You need to get into what the definition of engagement is because you could argue that somebody who is

involved in Prevent is engaging with it. If you changed it to believing in them, promoting them, then yes, definitely.' (Police sector participant)

UK definition

For those that felt that the previous definitions of extremism were too focused on violence, the UK definition was viewed as helpful in that it has a wider scope and could encapsulate a broader range of views and behaviours. However, many participants raised concerns with this definition. Most significantly, it was noted that the phrase 'fundamental British values' lacks clarity. Many commented that the values listed in the definition are not necessarily British but could be applied equally to other countries and cultures.

> 'I don't think it's British values, I think it's universal values. Equality for all, human rights. These are not British values; these are universal values.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

> 'It's quite a nationalistic term, British values. Are they massively different to other countries' values? I wouldn't agree with that. I think values cross borders to be honest.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

It was also felt that other terms in the definition are unclear, including 'the rule of law'. Some also queried why the definition focuses on tolerance of different faiths and beliefs specifically, and noted that reference to other protected characteristics such as gender, race and sexuality would be a useful inclusion.

> 'What's missing from that is that it's not just different faiths and beliefs. It's other differences too, race, sexual orientation, age. There can be a lack of tolerance of things that go beyond faith and belief.' (Local authority sector participant)

Finally, some also felt that the definition was too broad, and could risk impinging rights to free speech and protest.

> 'That's not extremism as far as I am concerned, it's just somebody expressing their opinion. There's nothing wrong with somebody being anti-democracy, anti-rule of law, as long as that stays within themselves and they do not act on that view on ways that cross the boundaries of what is considered acceptable.' (Local authority sector participant)

These points are reflected in the literature around defining extremism. For example, many have criticised the term 'fundamental British values' for being vague and unclear (e.g., Lowe, 2017; Pilkington and Hussain, 2022; Winter et al., 2022), while Mythen et al. (2017) argue that its breadth 'potentially criminalises legitimate political opposition and institutional critique'.

Summary

Overall, therefore, disagreements which had emerged earlier regarding the extent to which extremism involves violence were again reflected in participants' discussion of existing definitions. Some held the view that violent action or behaviour is key to defining extremism, while others felt that this makes the definition too narrow.

More broadly, no participants felt that any of the definitions were comprehensive enough or fully aligned with their own understanding, with various concerns raised with each of the definitions. Some suggested that while the definitions individually cover important elements of extremism, none cover the entire concept.

> 'All three could be said to express various aspects of extremism […] they are correct, just not necessarily complete.' (Local authority sector participant)

Categorising types of extremism

The interviews also explored participants' views on an approach to defining extremism recently adopted in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where broad categories of types of extremism are the focus, rather than specific ideologies:

- 'Politically-motivated' extremism
- 'Religiously-motivated' extremism
- 'Ideologically-motivated' extremism

The terminology in Canada was updated in 2019 (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2019) while the terminology in Australia and New Zealand was updated in 2021 (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, 2021; New Zealand Security Intelligence Service, 2021). In Canada, the focus is on the three categories, and no overarching definition of extremism is used. In Australia, the overarching definition of 'violent extremism' noted above is still used in addition to the categories. An overarching definition of violent extremism is also set out in New Zealand (New Zealand Government, 2022):

> 'The justification of violence with the aim of radically changing the nature of government, religion or society. This violence is often targeted against groups seen as threatening violent extremists' success or survival, or undermining their world view.'

Canada, Australia and New Zealand all present a similar justification for the use of this approach (Scottish Government, 2023d). In particular, it is stated that this terminology promotes a shift away from defining extremism threats with reference to any specific religious or political affiliation, in order to avoid using language that may be considered discriminatory. In doing so it aims to destigmatise the way extremism is viewed, by demonstrating that extremism can have many different motivations and is not specific to any single community or religion. This approach is also said to capture a more diverse spectrum of ideologies than other terminology is able to.

Some participants felt that the categorisation approach was a helpful way to think about different types of extremism. They commented that the categories broadly cover all the types of extremism that they are aware of, and that the ideologically-motivated category could serve as a 'catch-all' for types that would not necessarily be considered political or religious.

> 'I think you could probably shoehorn most types of extremism into one of those [...] Especially when you include ideologically because that's incredibly broad. That goes to the heart of an awful lot of it. It's about people having ideas that are too far removed from what society expects. That would encompass things around sexuality, or race, or animal rights, in ways that the other two don't. I'm struggling to think of something that wouldn't fit into one of those three categories.' (Local authority sector participant)

> 'I think that covers it all, because ideological is kind of a catch-all for everything else that doesn't fit political or religious isn't it, and you can have ideologies around practically anything.' (Police sector participant)

It was also noted that the ideologically-motivated category could be useful for covering newer types of extremism that would not necessarily be covered by existing categories, such as incels[6].

Participants also felt that this approach could help to overcome concerns with existing language used in relation to extremism. In particular, it was noted that this approach could shift the focus from particular religious or political groups when discussing extremism.

> 'Removing the labels is a really good start […] it's one of the things that leads to the stigmatisation of certain communities. I think moving to that language is a positive step.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

> 'It incorporates a range of issues without picking out particular communities or faiths as a problem. I think that's helpful actually, to make people realise it's not restricted to any one religion.' (Other private/third sector participant)

Some also commented that the categories would be helpful for practitioners with a statutory obligation to fulfil the Prevent duty.

> 'You might have a practitioner in a school, or senior leader in a school who has a practitioner who comes to them and says I'm concerned about a particular individual, then what that allows the staff within the school to do is to see that there are potentially clear categories that might sit under […] it just gives them a better understanding and an overview of what is meant by extremism.' (Education sector participant)

[6] The incel community is comprised of individuals who feel rejected by women – and arguably society more generally – and turn to the Internet to voice their anger, and often, desire for revenge (Regehr, 2022).

However, other participants raised concerns about this approach to defining extremism, commenting that some ideologies may not fit neatly into the three categories. For example, sectarianism, Northern Ireland-related Terrorism (NIRT) and right-wing extremism were highlighted as often having both political and religious elements. Some also discussed how individuals referred to Prevent can have 'mixed, unstable or unclear ideologies'[7] (Police Scotland, 2023b), and therefore would not necessarily fit in any of the groupings.

> 'My immediate thought would be that there could be ideologies that we see that could be put in either of those categories […] You can certainly get an extreme right-wing individual who is motivated by religious beliefs.' (Police sector participant)

> 'The taxonomy is probably not that useful because there are things which would probably span more than one of those, and there are similarities between them. If you look at NIRT for example, where's that? Is that religious? Political? Ideological? It could be all three of those, actually.' (Education sector participant)

It was felt that operationalising the three categories may present difficulties if an individuals' or groups' ideology does not fit neatly within one.

> 'I mean they're a helpful start but they miss a lot. And I think they could allow a lot of people to fall through the gaps because I don't think it's broad enough to cover all the potential issues.' (Education sector participant)

Participants felt that, if this approach were to be adopted, it would be important to include a caveat that the categories are not mutually exclusive, and that some individuals' or groups' viewpoints may span multiple groups.

> 'I don't think it's unhelpful as long as people are sensible and aren't too blinded by putting someone in a particular category, to the detriment of really assessing what the underlying cause is. It could be used as an initial triage almost, those three categories seem like a sensible way of doing that, while acknowledging that it can be complex.' (Health sector participant)

> 'There's always a risk when you put headers and try fit people into a neat box. Sometimes it's not as clear as that and there will be crossovers. So I think it's a good reference point if it's not too prescriptive.' (Prisons sector participant)

More broadly, some participants believed that in the context of Prevent, too much focus on definitions or categories was unhelpful, and that the emphasis should

[7] This reflects instances an ideology includes a combination of elements from multiple ideologies (mixed), shifts between different ideologies (unstable), or where the individual does not present a coherent ideology yet may still pose a terrorism risk (unclear).

instead be on setting out behaviours and vulnerabilities that practitioners should look out for to improve understanding of when a referral may be appropriate.

> 'I think they could be useful for administrative purposes but the important thing is that we are talking about behaviours. What the ideology is, it's less important than the behaviour […] it doesn't really matter if they are motivated by political motivations, ideological motivations or religious, it's the behaviour that matters.' (Local authority sector participant)

> 'In terms of the frontline of dealing with the community, the emphasis should be on the causes, identifying vulnerabilities, supporting people to overcome those vulnerabilities, so that they're less likely to act out.' (Local authority sector participant)

3.4. Hate crime, sectarianism, terrorism and extremism

Spectrum of views

In the literature, academics have highlighted similarities between hate crime, sectarianism, extremism and terrorism. It has been noted that all of these concepts can have political, religious or social motivations; may involve acts of violence; and can include the targeting of individuals based on their perceived group membership (Baker, 2018; Mills et al., 2015). Knight and Keatley (2020) discuss how the terms extremism and terrorism in particular are often used interchangeably.

During the interviews, participants were asked about their views on the links between extremism, hate crime, sectarianism and terrorism. Many felt that there is a high degree of overlap between the concepts, and noted that they are difficult to disentangle. A key theme that emerged was the idea of a spectrum or continuum between hate crime, extremism and terrorism in particular, with many feeling that perpetrators of hate crime could progress to more extreme forms of thinking and even terrorism without appropriate intervention, such as the support offered by Prevent.

> 'I think the best way to describe it is like a continuum, it's like a road or river […] you have hate crime which could progress to having more extreme views, and it could manifest into terrorism, it's very much a path. With the right education and intervention at the earliest possible stage you mitigate the risk.' (Police sector participant)

These participants also discussed how not all hate crime will necessarily progress to extremism, and that not all extremism will necessarily progress to terrorism. They felt that the challenge is to identify that which has the potential to escalate, so that the risk can be reduced. However, other participants felt that there is not necessarily a clear progression between hate crime, extremism and terrorism, and that the pathways between them may not always be linear.

> 'There is a distinction, but the lines are probably blurred from one into the other [...] I don't think it's a continuum, so I don't think you become an

extremist and then a terrorist, I think you can jump between both.' (Police sector participant)

'What's happened over the years is this idea of a conveyor belt of somebody moving from being kind of, you know, getting more and more religious and becoming an extremist then becoming a terrorist. That's been widely debunked.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Many emphasised how all incidents of terrorism are extreme, but not all extremists will commit terrorist acts.

'Terrorism is probably one of the ways in which extremism manifests itself, but extremism wouldn't necessarily always result in acts of terrorism.' (Education sector participant)

'[Extremism] doesn't necessarily translate to terrorism. There are examples of people who hold views which may not be compatible with others', does that lead to violence, not always. Yes, you will find people who have extreme views who may flow over to the terrorism side but is it a given, no. So I'll always say that it's blurry [...] every terrorist is an extremist but not every extremist is a terrorist.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Drawing distinctions

Hate crime

While many participants commented on there being blurred lines between hate crime, sectarianism, terrorism and extremism, some were able to draw distinctions between the concepts. In relation to hate crime, participants discussed how in some cases such behaviour could be motivated by extremist beliefs or attitudes, with some feeling that an individual carrying out a hate crime could be viewed as a sign that they may be susceptible to extremist narratives.

'[Hate crime and extremism are] difficult to disentangle. I think someone carrying out a hate crime could certainly be an indication or a kind of warning sign that someone does hold an extreme belief.' (Police sector participant)

'I think most hate crimes are motivated by some version of an extremist way of thinking.' (Faith and belief sector participant)

However, participants felt that more commonly, hate crime will be motivated by a particular bias or prejudice held by an individual towards another group in society, which, though deplorable, is not necessarily extremist.

'There's a difference. Hate crime I would think comes from prejudice and stereotypes. It's perpetrated by individuals with a bias against minorities [...] and a lot of it is driven by people who haven't had experiences of other groups.' (Other private/third sector participant)

Participants also discussed how extremists typically have deep-seated belief systems or ideologies that are used to justify their views and actions, which a perpetrator of a hate crime may not necessarily hold.

> ‘People can be hateful without having a deep-seated ideology or extreme belief. Extremism is a step beyond having a hateful mindset. It impacts the way they lead their life, it’s all-encompassing. It carries weight for that person on the decisions they make, the social interactions they have. It’s beyond having a prejudice, it’s completely absorbing yourself in that belief system.’ (Police sector participant)

Some also discussed how hate crime is more likely to result from an escalation of an existing conflict than extremism, for example, a neighbourly dispute that culminates in the use of derogatory racial epithets.

> ‘A lot of hate crime comes from heat of the moment, offhand comments [...] not to diminish the victim’s experience, which is really important, but you know is that motivated by extremism, or just ignorance and an inability to control yourself.’ (Police sector participant)

Finally, some felt that extremism involves targeting a whole group or section of society, whereas hate crime can be targeted more at individuals.

> ‘Hate crime can often be a personal attack on someone because they’re perceived to belong to a group, they hold a characteristic. Extremism is a stage further, not just targeting the person, it’d be targeting a [place of worship], for example. There’s a fine line I think, but extremism more targets the group itself.’ (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Terrorism

Participants could point to several features of terrorism which make it distinct from extremism. These firstly relate to its underlying motive. Participants felt that terrorism is often aimed at influencing and affecting government actions and policies, but that this is not a necessary element of extremism.

> ‘For me, there’s something around the [terrorist] act trying to send a message, beyond the rage of the individual involved. It’s a desire for change, to influence government.’ (Local authority sector participant)

Participants also felt that the impact of terrorist activity usually differs to that of extremist behaviour. They discussed how terrorism often involves the use of indiscriminate violence directed at the population at large, with the victims usually unknown to the perpetrator. Due to its indiscriminate nature terrorism can have a wide effect, in that it can instil fear and cause psychological harm to the population as a whole. In contrast, participants felt that extremist behaviour is often targeted at a particular group or section of society and is therefore likely to impact most on the immediate victim and their community or peers.

> ‘Extremism can be more individual [...] effectively it might be striking terror into one person or a group of people but you’re not necessarily trying to put fear into society as a whole. There’s a collective and indiscriminate aspect to terrorism which is “I want everybody to feel terrified”.’ (Education sector participant)

> ‘What I take as the definition of terrorism is that it is deliberately directed against a civilian population. There’s direct action, and that action is designed to frighten and terrorise the community.’ (Local authority sector participant)

Participants also highlighted how the nature of terrorist activity and extremist activity can differ. It was felt that terrorism is typically large-scale and involves planning and coordination, while extremism is not always goal oriented.

> ‘Someone can be sharing their extreme views and even promoting them but for me, [terrorism is] once they’re mobilising and have a plan, they’re planning to act on that, to cause physical hurt or damage to people or infrastructures to promote their ideology.’ (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Finally, participants also felt that terrorism always involves an element of physical violence, but that while extremism can involve violence, it can also be expressed in non-violent ways.

> ‘Terrorism, that would involve violence of some sort. Extremism doesn’t necessarily do that. Terrorism is probably the physical manifestation of extremism.’ (Health sector participant)

> ‘If you’re carrying out attacks I think that’s what it would come down to really, it’s actually carrying out acts of violence. It comes down to that kind of physical attack as opposed to just holding extremist views.’ (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Sectarianism

Many participants were unable to draw a distinction between extremism and sectarianism. These participants felt that sectarianism represents a form of extremism as it involves hatred and, in some cases, harm towards others on the basis of religious and political differences. Highlighting intra-Christian sectarianism in particular, these participants held a view that in Scotland, this form of sectarianism is often not viewed as extremism because it is deeply embedded in elements of Scottish culture, and is therefore normalised and tolerated. However, they felt that it is equally harmful as other types of extremism.

> ‘[Extremism and sectarianism] are exactly the same thing, just a different word. It’s the same form of prejudice coming through that comes through from extremism and it shouldn’t be tolerated, but it is [...] It causes the same outcome, unrest and harm to others.’ (Education sector participant)

> ‘[Sectarianism is] absolutely extremism. Hatred on the basis of nationality or religion is 100% extremism. It’s played down, but it’s a major problem. It’s extremism, without a shadow of a doubt.’ (Police sector participant)

Those involved in Prevent delivery in Scotland commented that this is reflected in the low number of referrals to Prevent that relate to intra-Christian sectarianism. Since 2017/18 most referrals to Prevent in Scotland have related to right-wing extremism or mixed, unstable or unclear ideologies (Police Scotland, 2023b).

> ‘I think in Prevent we don’t get many referrals because people just accept it. If you saw somebody you know saying something which might sound extreme but it was related to sectarianism, you would just think “well that’s what they all say, that’s what happens, isn’t it”.’ (Government participant)

> ‘I do wonder why we have so few referrals about sectarianism in Scotland. Sectarianism is probably underreported, but it’s within that extremism umbrella, definitely.’ (Police sector participant)

However, others felt that sectarianism should not be considered as a type of extremism because the behaviours often associated with sectarianism are less severe or harmful than typical expressions of extremism. For example, some participants felt that in Scotland, sectarianism is more likely to involve name calling or singing offensive songs than it is to involve violence, and questioned the extent to which sectarianism is characterised by genuine hatred, or a clear political objective.

> ‘I see them as different. Is there a desire to change society, influence government, cause fear to the public, I’d argue probably not. I think it’s much more direct in that one party directs disdain to the other and then that’s reciprocated. It’s become a little bit of an inherited cultural belief system for us. I don’t want to trivialise it but I don’t think it’s as bad as what extremism is.’ (Police sector participant)

> ‘I think there’s differences between sectarianism and extremism because all sectarian behaviour is not extreme. Name calling is not nice but it’s not extremism. Casual use of the word Hun, Tim, Fenian, it’s not… there’s malice and ill-will there but there’s not necessarily hate.’ (Local authority sector participant)

Linked to the view that sectarianism is rarely linked with political objectives, some participants observed that sectarianism rarely translates into terrorism, meaning that it should be treated differently to extremism.

> ‘The escalation of sectarianism into serious, what we would call terrorist activity, doesn’t happen in Scotland. It tends to just be [football teams] kicking off, but it doesn’t end up in extreme violence and terrorism. The CT [counter-terrorism] risk isn’t actually there.’ (Other private/third sector participant)

> ‘Is sectarianism the same level as extremism? I’m not seeing the same evidence that it is coordinated really, to the level that far-right extremism, religiously motivated, Islamic-motivated extremism is. Sectarianism is a lot more low-level stuff. Not that it makes it alright for the victims of it. It’s still traumatic, it’s still problematic.’ (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Some participants discussed the importance of context when considering whether sectarianism should be considered extremism. These participants felt that some manifestations of sectarianism can be considered extremist, particularly those that involve violence. However, participants commented that they would not necessarily consider all behaviours associated with sectarianism to be extremist. Some of these participants considered a line to be crossed when the sectarianism involved an element of harm.

> ‘When they promote violence and they call for violence, whether online or at matches [...] it can easily tip into what you would classify as extremism.’ (Education sector participant)

> ‘Again it’s on that spectrum of whether your sectarian views are something that turns into direct action. Direct action might be giving money to them or encouraging violence [...] it doesn’t have to be going out and carrying a bomb around. There are definitely opportunities for sectarianism to become more extreme, and to turn into terrorism.’ (Local authority sector participant)

3.5. Summary

Participants found extremism challenging to define, and had varied understandings of the concept. Many were able to provide examples of what they would consider to be extremist beliefs and actions, but there were differing views regarding whether the holding of such beliefs can in and of itself be considered extremism or whether these beliefs have to be acted upon to be considered extremism. There were also different views regarding whether extremism has to involve the use or threat of violence. While some felt that it does, others felt that non-violent expressions of extremism are equally important.

There was some support for use of the ‘politically-motivated’, ‘ideologically-motivated’ and ‘religiously-motivated’ categories of extremism, though it was felt that a caveat that the categories are not mutually exclusive would be needed if they were to be operationalised within Prevent.

Participants felt that there were strong links between extremism and hate crime and terrorism, concepts which were often discussed in terms of a spectrum. Views differed regarding whether sectarianism should be considered as a type of extremism or a distinct phenomenon, with some feeling that it is less harmful than typical manifestations of other forms extremism.

A key thread through all discussions was the subjective nature of extremism, and that understanding the context from which extremism emerges is key to defining it.

4. Views on extremism in Scotland

This section presents findings relating to participants' views on extremism in Scotland. It covers participants' views on the extent to which extremism is a problem in Scotland; whether the threat from extremism has changed over time; the threat posed by different types of extremism; geographic variations in the prevalence of extremism; and factors that may increase people's vulnerability to being drawn into extremism.

While this section presents participants' views on extremism in Scotland, the previous section highlighted that those who took part in this research had varied and wide-ranging interpretations of the term extremism. It is important to note, therefore, that the perspectives discussed in this section are not based on a common understanding or definition of extremism, and that the ways in which different participants interpret the concept are likely to impact on their views on its prevalence and severity in Scotland.

4.1. Extremism in Scotland

Participants generally felt that extremism exists in Scotland, but that it is not a particularly serious problem. Many drew comparisons with other parts of the UK, commenting that they viewed extremism as less of a concern in Scotland than in England in particular. There was a perception that both lower volumes of extremist activity, and less serious extremist activity, take place in Scotland.

> 'I think we are pretty fortunate in terms of what we deal with extremism-wise compared to the rest of the UK, compared to England especially. They deal with more high-end extremism than we do.' (Police sector participant)

> 'I think in Scotland we have a different threat picture to England and Wales. We don't deal with the same volume or seriousness of extremism as England.' (Police sector participant)

Demographic factors were highlighted as one possible reason for this. In particular, participants viewed Scotland's smaller population size as having potentially contributed to lower levels of extremism. Although many did not elaborate on why a link might exist between population size and extremism beyond noting that in a smaller population the total number of extremists is likely to be lower, it was highlighted that monitoring extremism could be more challenging among a larger population, which could mean there are more opportunities for extremism to grow. However, while some research has identified links between terrorism and high levels of population growth (in combination with income inequality and deprivation) (Coccia, 2018), there is little evidence that specifically indicates a link between population size and extremism.

Lower levels of immigration were also highlighted as a factor which may have contributed to the presence of less extremism in Scotland than England. Participants felt that because areas with higher levels of immigration are likely to be more ethnically diverse, there may be a higher prevalence of problems such as

racism and discrimination. Participants believed that this could in turn create environments which are more permissive of extremist views.

> ‘I guess we don’t see the same sort of levels of immigration, particularly from ethnically more different areas, compared to England for example.’ (Health sector participant)

This point is reflected in the literature. For example, it has been demonstrated that high ethnic diversity is associated with more intergroup threat (Quilliam, 1995; Semyonov et al. 2004) and greater racial bias (Craig and Richeson, 2014); factors associated with willingness to engage in extremism (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Obaidi et al., 2019).

Participants also felt that higher levels of immigration can lead to the propagation of narratives which blame immigrants for domestic problems, creating support for more extreme viewpoints.

> ‘When there’s been a lot of immigration, sometimes a narrative is sown by other people who take advantage of that and try to say these groups are coming to take your jobs, to threaten your way of life. These lies are propagated and they play on people’s fears [...] it can bring extremism to the fore.’ (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Some therefore felt that if levels of immigration were more comparable between Scotland and England, the prevalence of extremism could be higher in Scotland than they currently perceive it to be.

> ‘I do see real issues, and you can see in the way that it’s reported, you know migrants coming across the Channel, you can see that in the attitude of those towards them, there is some real extreme views and it’s extreme views that don’t tend to be shared overtly by Scots, but maybe that’s because we don’t have the influx, and maybe if we were a port destination then maybe those views would surface.’ (Police sector participant)

Some participants also had a perception that levels of extremism are lower in Scotland due to a view that Scotland is more cohesive and tolerant than other parts of the UK. It was suggested that Scotland is more progressive and inclusive than other areas in Britain, which has reduced the appeal of extremist narratives in Scotland.

> ‘I think in Scotland we are pretty tolerant. We identify quite quickly and frown upon extreme views. We have a greater societal acceptance that we need immigration in order to survive as a country. The rhetoric on that is different down south. We haven’t got it right by any means, but I don’t think extremism is such a big issue in Scotland as it is in other parts of the UK, where they’ve got far more tensions arising within communities.’ (Local authority participant)

This argument is highlighted in the work of Bonino (2016), who has suggested that lower levels of Islamist extremism in Scotland can in part be explained by

Scotland's political culture and positive attitudes towards settled immigrants. Notably, however, other research has shown that despite a perception that there are more positive views towards immigration in Scotland than England, the proportion of people who view the economic and cultural consequences of immigration negatively is similar on both sides of the border (NatCen, 2018).

Indeed, some participants felt that while there is a perception that levels of extremism are lower in Scotland this is not evidenced-based, and that there is a lack of concrete data to determine the extent of the problem in Scotland. These participants felt that a result, Scotland should not view itself as immune to extremism.

> 'We, collectively, Scots I suppose, we tend to have the impression of Scotland as an exceptional nation within the United Kingdom, that we're friendlier, that we're more open, and that we are less regressive, we're more progressive… we sort of have that impression, but I'm not sure there are any metrics on that, that's just the impression we have in Scotland, and that's not a good way to make public policy.' (Local authority participant)

> 'The percentage per capita of referrals [to Prevent][8] is a lot lower, but that doesn't fully tell us what's going on at the moment. There could be a lot more extremism in Scotland [...] Scotland is no different to England and Wales, it's not immune.' (Government participant)

Overall, therefore, many participants felt that extremism exists in Scotland but is not a major problem, especially in comparison with other parts of the UK. However, some felt that the perception of extremism as less of a problem in Scotland is not evidence-based. The reflection that there is a lack of data and evidence regarding the extent of extremism in Scotland is discussed further in section 4.6 below.

4.2. Trends over time

Participants were asked to reflect on whether they perceive the threat from extremism in Scotland to have increased, decreased or stayed the same over the last five years. While no participants felt that the threat had decreased, participants had differing views on whether the threat had increased or stayed the same.

Many who felt that there was a chance extremism could have increased in Scotland over the last five years discussed the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants felt that during periods of lockdown people spent more time online, which is likely to have exposed them to greater extremist content. In particular, participants felt that during lockdown extremists promoted and spread conspiracy theories and misinformation online, and that people were more susceptible to these because of grievances arising from the pandemic-related public health measures imposed by governments.

[8] See Scottish Government (2023a) for more information regarding referrals to Prevent in Scotland in comparison with England and Wales.

Participants discussed how the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation along with disrupted education, precarious employment and social isolation during the pandemic may have led to increased risks of radicalisation, particularly among younger people. These factors have all been discussed in recent literature on the subject (Cox et al., 2021).

> 'I think [extremism] has increased and the reason I think it's increased is because of the COVID pandemic. People who are the most vulnerable have been at home, online, looking at information, conspiracy theory type things. We've got a generation who basically have had two years of not living their life, so they have become anti-establishment.' (Police sector participant)

Other contributory factors were also suggested, such as Brexit, which was viewed as having led to increased political polarisation, and the prevalence of mental illnesses having increased over time. However, although some research has sought to explore relevant features associated with particular conditions which may shape vulnerability and risk to extremism, the links between extremism and mental illness are not empirically well-established (Al-Attar, 2019).

Participants who felt that levels of extremism in Scotland were likely to be the same as five years ago mostly pointed to the fact that they were not aware of any evidence or data which indicates that they are growing. Indeed, some participants felt that they could not comment on whether levels of extremism have changed in Scotland because they were unaware of any relevant data or evidence on this, which is discussed further in section 4.6.

Participants were also asked to consider whether they feel that the threat from extremism in Scotland will increase, decrease or stay the same over the next five years. Many felt that the threat from extremism will increase over this period. A range of reasons for this were presented. Firstly, potential consequences of the current economic climate and cost of living crisis were mentioned, with many believing that economic insecurity and unemployment could increase people's vulnerability to more extreme narratives by feeding societal divisions and encouraging 'us versus them' positions.

> 'As people's opportunity to earn what they need in order to live comfortably or even to survive recedes, they will gradually take more and more extreme responses to that. If you're working really hard, living within the law and doing everything possible and you still cannot put food on the table and heat your house, at what point do you begin to get angry with somebody that you want to blame for those circumstances? I think we've got to assume that we'll see a reaction to that, in terms of more extreme behaviour.' (Local authority participant)

Some felt that there is a risk people may channel their frustration into blaming immigrants, which could in turn increase support for the far-right in particular.

> 'There's frustration at fuel prices, rising costs, people are wanting to blame somebody and they will blame immigrants. There's the rhetoric that they are

> taking the houses, they're getting all the benefits or they're using taxpayers money [...] You're going to see increases in that kind of far-right rhetoric.' (Police sector participant)

Some also discussed the Scottish independence debate, and how a second referendum has the potential to lead to increased tension and polarisation.

> 'If we are going for another referendum next October, the lead up to that would certainly polarise opinion and that polarisation I think always encourages extremism as well.' (Police sector participant)

More broadly, divisive and populist politics were also discussed, with participants feeling that people in Scotland distrusting and feeling alienated from the UK Government could lead them to look for alternative, and potentially more extreme, political narratives. Finally, mental illnesses continuing to increase in prevalence was again mentioned as a potential factor which participants felt could lead to increased levels of extremism in Scotland in future, due a perception that mental illness can lead to vulnerability to radicalisation.

There were therefore differing views on whether levels of extremism have increased or stayed the same in Scotland over the last five years, but no participants felt that extremism has decreased over this period, and many felt that extremism will increase in the next five years.

4.3. Types of extremism

Right-wing extremism

Participants discussed their views on the types of extremism or ideologies they perceive to be more and less prevalent in Scotland. Many participants felt that right-wing extremism is the most prominent form of extremism in Scotland, and that its prevalence has increased in recent years. Two explanations were presented for this, though these focused more on reasons why right-wing extremism may have increased across the UK as a whole rather than in Scotland specifically.

Firstly, some felt that there has been an increase in the prominence of extreme right-wing groups in the UK in response to Islamist terrorist attacks which have taken place in recent years, such as the 2017 Westminster attack.

> 'I think there's a possibility that it's the aftereffects of Islam-based attacks taking place in the UK probably between 2017/18 even going into 2020 when you got the Westminster Bridge attack, stuff like that. I think there's a young impressionable part of the population that think it's their duty to stand up and fight against that.' (Police sector participant)

Secondly, some felt that immigration policies which have been advocated by the UK Government, such as the Home Office hostile environment policy and the policy to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, have focused media and public attention on issues associated with immigration and in the process, given exposure to far-right viewpoints in the UK.

> ‘One of the main things for me, when you look at how right-wing the government has been in Westminster, this extraordinary one of sending people to Rwanda… That sort of galvanises and encourages support for particularly racist points of view.’ (Police sector participant)

Contrary to this viewpoint, there is some academic evidence to suggest that the absence of representation of such views within mainstream politics may increase support for more radical-right parties, such as UKIP (Ford and Goodwin, 2014).

Other participants felt that right-wing extremism is not a particular concern in Scotland, particularly in comparison with other parts of the UK. For example, some felt that the extreme right-wing are less organised in Scotland than in England. This related to the perception noted above that Scotland is more cohesive and tolerant than other parts of the UK, which participants felt has led to Scotland being less permissive of extreme right-wing viewpoints.

> ‘One thing I’m really pleased about is that the right-wing doesn’t do as well as it could because it can’t organise properly in Scotland. If it could organise properly then it would be a bigger threat.’ (Local authority participant)

As noted above, however, there is research which has suggested that views on policy issues such as immigration could be similar between Scotland and England (NatCen, 2018).

Sectarianism

Research previously carried out by the Scottish Government (2015) highlighted that pockets of intra-Christian sectarianism exist in Scotland, with more violent and extreme forms concentrated in particular areas. While not all participants considered sectarianism to be a form of extremism, those who did highlighted intra-Christian sectarianism as a prominent type of extremism in Scotland. Indeed, many felt that this is the most prevalent form of extremism to exist in Scotland. These participants held a view that intra-Christian sectarianism is a normalised and tolerated form of extremism, which leads to it being treated differently to other types.

> ‘[Sectarianism] is the only ideology that is accepted by the State and supported by the State; we don’t see the State supporting Islamic extremism but you’ve got Catholic and Protestant schools, you’ve got Orange Walks allowed to take place [...] all that based upon freedom of expressing your culture. It has to be called out for what it is rather than viewed as a cultural aspect of Scotland.’ (Other private/third sector participant)

However, some commented that they may view it as the most prevalent because it is the most visible form of extremism in Scotland. For example, some participants noted that it is more common to witness incidents of intra-Christian sectarianism than it is to witness right-wing or Islamist extremism.

Many also highlighted that the concept of sectarianism is broader than intra-Christian sectarianism alone. It was felt that while the focus in Scotland is often on the tension between Catholics and Protestants, other forms of sectarianism also exist, such as within the Muslim community. The murder of Asad Shah, an Ahmadiyya Muslim shopkeeper who was attacked in Glasgow in 2016 by a Sunni Muslim because of his religious views, was highlighted as an example of intra-Muslim sectarianism in Scotland, though several noted that the perpetrator had travelled from elsewhere in the UK.

> 'We often view sectarianism in Scotland as just being about Protestant and Catholics but of course there's sectarianism between Islamic groups too. There was the murder of the shopkeeper in Glasgow, Asad Shah, that was religiously motivated.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Islamist extremism

Participants generally felt that Islamist extremism is less prominent in Scotland than it is in other parts of the UK. The demographic profile of the Muslim community in Scotland was highlighted as a potential reason for this, with some participants feeling that the Muslim population is smaller and more integrated in Scotland than it is in England, which may have lessened the appeal of Islamist extremist narratives.

> 'The Islamist ideology I think is an area for concern in other parts of the UK. It's not something we see much of up here, not that I'm aware of anyway. I think in England in particular there are big communities that have perhaps not integrated well. That creates challenges. Whereas in Scotland the community is smaller, and very well integrated.' (Health sector participant)

This argument is also reflected in the literature, with Bonino (2016) arguing that greater community cohesion in Scotland may have reduced the impact of 'grievance-based jihadi propaganda'. Steps that the Muslim community in Scotland took in response to high-profile Islamist terrorist incidents elsewhere in the UK were also highlighted, such as expanding religious syllabuses beyond reading the Quran.

> 'There's actually very little [Islamist extremism] and in terms of that, you've got to look at how the [Muslim] community in Scotland upped its game and stepped forward when there was [sic] events like 9/11 and 7/7 [...] A key part of that was ensuring people were literate about their religion. When we saw what people were doing in the name of their religion we thought, "Right, we need to change" and the mosque leaders were actively part of that change and started to teach more to children than just reading the Quran.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Extremism and the Scottish independence debate

Some participants also discussed extremism and the debate on Scottish independence. As noted above, some felt that this had potential to lead to increased tension and polarisation.

> ‘If there is another independence referendum which leads to a narrow defeat, you’ve got a perfect environment for breeding extremism because you have got a very, very sizable minority who are frustrated.’ (Local authority participant)

Newly emerging concerns

Finally, some participants discussed extremism-related concerns that they feel are emerging in Scotland, such as the incel movement. The case of Gabrielle Friel, who was found guilty of terrorism charges in 2020, was mentioned. Friel was accused of having expressed affinity with and sympathy for one incel-motivated mass murderer (Police Scotland, 2021). However, while Friel was found guilty of possessing weapons for purposes connected to an act of terrorism, the jury returned a verdict of ‘not proven’ in respect of the charge that he prepared for terrorist acts by researching spree killings connected with incels.

Forms of extremism relating to gender and reproductive rights more broadly were also highlighted as potential future concerns, with some highlighting anti-abortion protests that had taken place outside Scottish hospitals and clinics in the summer of 2022 as behaviour that could be considered extremist.

> ‘There is the potential for [extremism relating to] human reproductive rights as well. I think the debate about abortion could take extremist terms, if it hasn’t already. I’m not sure that picketing an abortion clinic isn’t an extremist act… I’m pretty sure it is.’ (Education sector participant)

There was also discussion of disruptive climate activism, and how this has increased in prominence in recent years. Some felt that forms of climate protest can be problematic, such as blocking roads or damaging infrastructure. However, many were hesitant to label this behaviour as extreme due to their support for the cause. Indeed, difficulties with drawing a line between activism and extremism were often discussed, with some suggesting that a line is crossed when the behaviour puts others at harm.

> ‘We have got to stop talking about climate action in the same breath as extremism. It’s not the same thing. It’s activism. But maybe there is a question there, what is the difference between activism and extremism? Maybe it’s part of a spectrum […] there’s nothing wrong with activism until your activism is to promote direct action which could harm others.’ (Local authority participant)

Overall, therefore, participants generally felt that the types of extremism that are more and less prevalent in Scotland differ compared with other parts of the UK, with right-wing and sectarian forms of extremism the most prevalent, and Islamist extremism less of a problem.

4.4. Geographic variation

Participants discussed their views on whether the prevalence of extremism in Scotland varies by geographic region. Some participants felt that extremism is more likely to be a problem in urban parts of Scotland than in rural parts. Different reasons were presented for this. In line with points discussed above, some felt that urban areas are more likely to experience higher levels of immigration, which could lead to the existence of prejudiced viewpoints.

> 'In the large city centres where they've experienced more immigration there might be more prejudiced views, views like "why are these people coming in and stealing our jobs or threatening or way of life?" There's certainly an element of that.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

A larger population size in urban areas was again raised as a potential factor that may lead to higher levels of extremism, although as noted above there is little evidence which indicates a direct causal link between population size and extremism in academic literature.

Other participants felt that extremism is likely to be a problem in rural areas of Scotland as well as urban areas. In contrast to the points made above, these participants felt that lower levels of ethnic diversity in rural areas could increase the likelihood of extremism due to the lack of exposure to, or interactions with, people from other ethnic groups, leading to more bias and discrimination.

> 'I suspect that bigotry will be much more engendered in some of the more rural parts of Scotland. I suspect that racism in [rural areas] is much more rife than it would be in Glasgow or Birmingham because the proportion of the population from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background is very small.' (Education sector participant)

> '[In urban areas] there's the constant encounter with the other, people have their neighbours, their kids in schools. There's Melā and multifaith celebrations and that kind of stuff. In some of the rural areas, there may be more of a feel of the other because there isn't that same multiculturalism.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

This point is also supported by literature. For example, Oliver and Wong (2003) found that ethnic diversity can be associated with less prejudice in neighbourhoods, while Van Assche et al. (2014) showed that ethnic diversity can be associated with more positive attitudes towards outgroup members such as immigrants. Participants also felt that levels of isolation and loneliness may be higher in rural areas, which could increase vulnerability to extremism (reasons suggested for this are discussed further in section 4.5).

Though there were differing views on whether extremism is more likely to be a problem in urban or rural areas, some felt that geography is now less relevant due to the increasing ease with which people can communicate with others and access

content online. These participants discussed how virtual communication now means that people can be radicalised without leaving their home.

> ‘Extremism now can take place anywhere with an internet connection [...] Geography is less important nowadays when you’ve got the internet linking the whole world up.’ (Police sector participant)

Indeed, a number of studies have pointed to the internet’s ability to ‘reach’ individuals who would otherwise not have been reachable by extremists in any other way (Neuman, 2008).

As well as discussing geographic variation in levels of extremism more broadly, participants also reflected on whether the prevalence of particular ideologies or types of extremism may vary by region of Scotland. The main ‘type’ of extremism that was raised in these discussions was intra-Christian sectarianism. While not all participants felt that sectarianism was a form of extremism, those who did often considered that this was most prevalent in the west of Scotland, and in particular Glasgow.

> ‘Glasgow and to the western side of the Central Belt is where sectarian perspectives are most problematic.’ (Health sector participant)

However, others felt that while Glasgow is the focal point of sectarianism due to particular football clubs being based in the city, there are people with sectarian attitudes and viewpoints across the country.

> ‘I hate the stereotype that sectarianism is a Glasgow problem because it’s not a Glasgow problem, it’s a Scotland problem. The history of sectarianism is a Scotland-wide issue. Glasgow is the epicentre because the football clubs [Celtic and Rangers] are located in Glasgow.’ (Local authority participant)

Extreme views relating to Scottish nationalism were also mentioned in discussions around geographic variation, with some feeling that there is a chance these could be more prevalent in parts of the north of Scotland and in rural areas due to higher levels of anti-UK government sentiment in these areas than other parts of Scotland.

> ‘I think in the north there’s probably kind of an undercurrent of nationalism, anti-English, anti-UK. You look at what was done to those groups in the highland clearances and things like that, sometimes these areas can be a bit more anti-establishment.’ (Police sector participant)

There were therefore mixed views regarding the geographic distribution of extremism in Scotland. Some felt that extremism was more likely to be a problem in urban areas, but others highlighted reasons why extremism may also be a problem in rural parts of Scotland. Intra-Christian sectarianism was viewed as a more prevalent concern in the west of Scotland and in particular Glasgow (though some participants disagreed with this), while some felt extreme views relating to Scottish nationalism could be more prevalent in the north and rural areas.

Notably, throughout these discussions many participants qualified their views by saying that they were largely anecdotal, and not based on concrete data or evidence, an issue which is covered in more detail in section 4.6.

4.5. Factors that make people vulnerable to extremism

Participants discussed a range of factors they felt might make someone vulnerable to being drawn into extremism. The factors mentioned were highly interconnected, with an individual being affected by one factor (e.g., negative familial relationships) often increasing their likelihood of being affected by another (e.g., loneliness).

The most common factor discussed by participants was isolation. It was felt that those who are isolated or lonely may have a desire for belonging or purpose, which may draw them towards groups espousing extremist viewpoints.

> 'That sense of purpose, if people don't have anything to get up for in the morning, there's nothing that defines them as an individual. If someone can start subtly introducing them to things that give them that sense of purpose, they feel like they're part of something bigger… and that's problematic.' (Health sector participant)

In addition, some felt that those who are isolated may have a lack of counter-narrative from their family or peers, which may lead to existing grievances or views becoming further entrenched.

> 'I think probably quite a significant factor is that people spending time alone are only getting one dimension of information. They're not having anybody, whether it's a friend or a parent, or a social worker or teacher, countering whatever rhetoric they're getting. It's making it really kind of quite compounded for that individual.' (Police sector participant)

Research has demonstrated associations between social isolation, loneliness and vulnerability to extremism (Bhui et al., 2014; Lyons-Padilla et al., 2015; Pfundmair et al., 2022). For example, a review of international evidence carried out by Pfundmair et al. (2022) found that social exclusion can increase approval of extreme and violent political parties and actions, and willingness to engage in illegal and violent action for a political cause.

Mental illness was also discussed. For example, some held the view that addiction and having suffered trauma could make someone vulnerable to extremism. However, some commented that they felt there was a lack of research demonstrating links between mental illnesses and vulnerability to extremism. As highlighted above, at present the nature of the relationship between mental illness and engagement in extremism remains largely unclear (Bhuai and Jones, 2017; McGilloway et al., 2015).

Some participants mentioned neurodivergence as a possible factor that might make someone vulnerable to extremist ideologies. These participants specifically discussed autism, expressing the view that some autistic people might be more susceptible to radicalisation, for example due to a perceived tendency to develop

obsessional interests. However, while there is some research which has shown that autistic people have engaged in extremist-related violent acts (Woodbury-Smith et al., 2022), there is no empirical evidence indicating a causal link between autism and extremism (Al-Attar, 2018; Faccini and Allely, 2017; Worthington et al., 2022). Indeed, many have highlighted the importance of exercising caution against drawing conclusions of causality and oversimplifying the relationship between autism and extremism (Al-Attar, 2020). For example, Al-Attar (2020) notes that while studies have suggested an overrepresentation of autistic people among terrorist offenders as compared with the general population (Corner and Gill, 2015; Corner et al., 2016), there is no evidence to indicate that autism plays a causal role. Al-Attar (2020) suggests that rather, different aspects of autism may interact to contextualise factors that lead an individual to engage in extremism. He suggests that an 'individualised case formulation' approach should be used when considering such factors, taking account of the diversity and heterogeneity of autism and the role of co-morbidity in an individual's pathway.

Spending a lot of time online was also highlighted as a risk factor by some participants, with the internet viewed as providing opportunities for extremists to target, connect and communicate with people vulnerable to radicalisation. As noted above, it was felt that this risk had increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as during this time people may have spent more time alone and on the internet, particularly younger groups.

Participants also discussed individuals feeling that they are unable to fulfil their potential or having a lack of opportunities as factors which could make them vulnerable to extremism. They often linked this with problems such as poverty, socioeconomic deprivation, unemployment and poor educational attainment.

> 'It's linked to socioeconomic deprivation. If people are disaffected and don't feel direct engagement with society, they're more likely to tip into extremist behaviour because they don't have an invested stake in the values of the society that they feel has let them down.' (Education sector participant)

More specifically, as discussed above some felt that this could create a sense of injustice which could in turn lead individuals to be influenced by extremist narratives, such as placing blame on immigrants.

> 'It comes down to socioeconomic factors, people who are feeling disadvantaged and looking for a scapegoat.' (Faith and belief sector participant)

An individual's family environment was also thought to affect their vulnerability to extremism. While this was mostly discussed in relation to a lack of counter-narrative as mentioned above, some also felt that family members could encourage individuals towards extremism if they themselves held extremist views. Demographic characteristics were also felt to be important, with some viewing young males as more likely to be vulnerable to extremism than other groups.

Participants therefore highlighted a range of factors they felt could make people vulnerable to extremism, most notably isolation and loneliness; mental illness; neurodivergence; spending time online; family background; lack of opportunities; and particular demographic characteristics. Some also felt that the factors that may make someone vulnerable to extremism can be dependent on the ideology or type of extremism in question. For example, it was mentioned that affiliation with the incel community may be associated with specific risk factors, including holding misogynistic views and feeling sexual and romantic frustration.

4.6. Improving data

As noted throughout this section, a key theme that emerged during discussions about extremism in Scotland was participants' reflections that their views were not based on data or evidence but rather were more anecdotal. Participants often qualified statements by noting that they were unsure if there was evidence or research underpinning their view.

> 'That is my sense, but I don't have any evidence to back that up.' (Local authority participant)

> 'I think there's probably more right-wing extremism in some of the rural areas but I have no evidence for this. It's very difficult to really know, isn't it?' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Further, some specifically commented that there is currently a lack of robust information regarding the extent of extremism in Scotland. Potential reasons for this were noted. For example, participants acknowledged that it can be difficult to measure extremism because it is often covert and hidden.

> 'The latent number of people who are immersed in extremist ideologies, who are planning terrorist attacks, we'll never know what that is really. It's incredibly difficult to measure.' (Local authority sector participant)

It was also felt that sharing of information regarding extremist activity taking place in Scotland was limited, for example between Police Scotland and other organisations (discussed further in section 5.3). While participants understood that this was due to potential security risks associated with sharing such information widely, it was felt that this hindered understanding of extremism in Scotland.

This argument is reflected in wider literature. For example, Knight and Keatley (2020) discuss how data on extremist and terrorist activity is rarely available in the public domain due to its sensitive nature, and note how processes in place to protect individuals can create obstacles for data sharing.

More specifically, some participants also felt that there is a lack of understanding at present regarding the impact the COVID-19 pandemic may have had on levels of engagement with extremism in Scotland. It was noted that referrals to Prevent decreased during the pandemic (between April 2020 and March 2021 55 referrals were made to Prevent in Scotland compared with 100 in the previous year and 126

in the year prior) (Police Scotland, 2023b). However, participants felt that this was unlikely to reflect a decrease in extremist activity, commenting that COVID-19 may have in fact increased levels of extremism for reasons discussed above. However, in the absence of other sources of information, participants felt that it is currently difficult to tell whether the pandemic impacted on levels of extremism in Scotland or not.

> 'It's difficult to say [whether COVID has impacted levels of extremism in Scotland] isn't it, there were so few referrals [to Prevent] during that time that it was difficult to tell what was going on.' (Local authority participant)

Many participants were therefore supportive of more research being carried out on this topic and had a desire for improvements to be made to the collection of data on extremism in Scotland, as well as wider sharing of existing data where possible.

4.7. Summary

Many participants felt that while extremism exists in Scotland its prevalence is not high, particularly in comparison with England. However, some did not feel that there was enough evidence to determine the extent to which extremism is a problem in Scotland, and that Scotland should therefore not view itself as immune to extremism. There was a perception that the types of extremism that are more and less prevalent in Scotland differs to other parts of the UK, with right-wing and sectarian forms of extremism the most prevalent, and Islamist extremism less of a concern than it is in other areas of Britain.

While views on whether levels of extremism have changed in Scotland over the last five years varied, many felt that they would increase in the next five years, and no participants felt they had decreased. Some felt that extremism is more likely to be a problem in urban areas of Scotland, while others highlighted reasons why extremism could be prevalent in rural areas too. Intra-Christian sectarianism was viewed as more of a concern in the west of Scotland and in particular in Glasgow.

Participants identified a range of factors that they thought might make people vulnerable to being drawn into extremism, including isolation and loneliness, mental illness, neurodivergence, spending time online, family background, lack of opportunities and particular demographic characteristics.

Throughout discussions, many participants highlighted that their views were often not based on fact or evidence but rather were more speculative or anecdotal. There was support for further developing the evidence-base on extremism in Scotland.

5. Views on Prevent in Scotland

This section presents findings relating to participants' views on Prevent in Scotland. It covers their views on the challenges associated with measuring the effectiveness of Prevent; aspects of Prevent that work well; current concerns with Prevent; and suggested areas for improvement.

As highlighted in the introduction to this report, participants in this research had varying degrees of knowledge and awareness of Prevent. Some were involved in Prevent delivery in Scotland (e.g., Prevent sector leads and Multi-Agency CONTEST Group chairs) and therefore had a strong understanding of how Prevent is enacted in Scotland. Others were not involved in the delivery of Prevent, but had wider interest in the policy or extremism more broadly (e.g., third sector organisations).

Throughout this section, therefore, it has been specified where a view was offered only by participants involved in Prevent delivery and when a view was offered only by participants not involved in Prevent delivery. Where this is not specified, the view was offered by participants both involved and not involved in Prevent delivery.

5.1. Measuring the effectiveness of Prevent

The purpose of Prevent as set out in CONTEST (Home Office, 2018) is to 'safeguard and support vulnerable people to stop them from becoming terrorists or support terrorism'. The objectives of Prevent are to:

- Tackle the causes of radicalisation and respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism;
- Safeguard and support those most at risk of radicalisation through early intervention, identifying them and offering support;
- Enable those who have already engaged in terrorism to disengage and rehabilitate.

While the focus of these objectives is on terrorism, the Prevent duty guidance for Scotland (Home Office, 2021a) highlights the links between terrorism and extremism. For example, the guidance states that 'terrorist groups often draw on extremist ideology, developed by extremist organisations' and that 'being drawn into terrorism includes not just violent extremism but also non-violent extremism, which can create an atmosphere conducive to terrorism and can popularise views which terrorists exploit'. Given that the focus of this wider research programme is on improving understanding of extremism in Scotland, participants were asked to reflect on whether they feel that Prevent is effective in addressing extremism in Scotland.

A key theme that emerged in these discussions was the view that it is difficult to establish the effectiveness of Prevent, with many highlighting the inherent challenges in evaluating programmes that are preventative in nature. For example, some discussed how it is difficult to determine whether an individual disengaging

from extremism following Prevent support did so as a direct result of Prevent intervention, or whether this was due to other factors.

> 'We can't measure prevention really. If people leave Prevent and don't do anything again, do we see that or success, or do we actually not know if it was the interventions that made a difference? Their life could have been made better by something else, a new relationship or whatever it may be. Measuring Prevent is really difficult.' (Police sector participant)

Some also had a perception that there are low levels of terrorist activity in Scotland, which they felt could indicate that Prevent is meeting its objectives. However, they also discussed the difficulties with determining whether this is due to Prevent or due to other reasons, such as demographic or cultural factors.

Further, some participants involved in Prevent delivery specifically commented that they do not feel there are adequate monitoring and evaluation processes in place for Prevent in Scotland. For example, a participant representing the local authority sector discussed there being a lack of assurance that different local authorities in Scotland are working to the same standard when it comes to Prevent.

> 'The other thing is around assurance, how do you get assurance around how effective Prevent is. You can measure that you've got all the bits of the strategy in place, but that's not a measure of how effective [Prevent] is. I think what we've not got is really good intelligence around the different variations between different areas in Scotland and it would be good to get that actually and the assurance that everyone's working to that common standard.' (Local authority sector participant)

Many participants therefore felt that at present, there is a lack of evidence regarding the impact of Prevent in Scotland. Despite this, participants highlighted aspects of Prevent delivery in Scotland that they considered to be working well, as well as discussing potential areas for improvement. These will be covered in detail below.

5.2. Aspects of Prevent that work well

Within Scotland, Prevent has been more closely aligned to areas of policy that promote community cohesion and integration than those that focus more on security and justice related aspects of countering terrorism, and is grounded in early intervention and safeguarding (Home Office, 2021d). Participants who were aware of this approach were supportive of it.

> 'The focus [in Scotland] has very much always been on safeguarding. The idea that Prevent is about identifying vulnerable people and giving them the support and the interventions that they need in order to have better outcomes in life and to be less vulnerable is something that most people can readily accept and endorse. I think that the alignment of Prevent with that wider safeguarding agenda is one of its strengths.' (Local authority sector participant)

Those representing sectors with an obligation to fulfil the Prevent duty also felt that the alignment of Prevent with other safeguarding procedures was helpful for conveying to practitioners within these sectors that a key aim of Prevent is to offer support to individuals that may be vulnerable, rather than being a punitive counter-terrorism measure.

The PMAP Duty Guidance (Home Office, 2021d) was also viewed as a positive development by participants involved in Prevent delivery in Scotland. This guidance sets out the process for holding PMAPs, a key part of Prevent which involves using a multi-agency approach to assess the nature and extent of an individual's vulnerability and develop an appropriate support plan (Home Office, 2021d). These participants felt that the guidance had provided greater clarity around processes and responsibilities for those involved in PMAPs. In particular, some felt that the guidance had improved local delivery of Prevent by more clearly setting out the role of local authorities in coordinating and supporting the process.

Participants involved in Prevent were also supportive of the multi-agency delivery of Prevent. As outlined in the PMAP Duty Guidance (Home Office, 2021d), a range of agencies can be involved in supporting vulnerable individuals as part of Prevent, such as the police, education, social care services, health sector services, children and youth services and community justice services. Participants felt that this was helpful for ensuring that individuals involved are able to access a holistic, bespoke package of support which is tailored to their needs.

> 'The multi-agency panels that are convened, I think that's a really good holistic way of addressing the problem, and means that an individual is getting bespoke care. When an individual has been identified as having some sort of problem, you've got a group of people that are collectively in a very good position to support that.' (Health sector participant)

These participants also felt that relationships between the agencies involved in Prevent are generally positive. For example, some commented that there is good communication and sharing of information between partners.

> 'I think there's quite good communication, information-sharing between all the different partners in Scotland. I think because geographically we are quite small, and because it's dedicated teams of people that tend to deal with [Prevent] then you get to build up some really good relationships amongst the different organisations, so you know who to go to quickly if there's a problem.' (Prisons sector participant)

Finally, those involved in Prevent delivery commented that the tools and resources offered by Prevent are useful, including the training and Intervention Providers (IPs). IPs are specialists who are commissioned to increase ideological or theological understanding, and to challenge extremist ideas and fixated thinking among individuals referred to Prevent[9].

[9] Intervention Providers

5.3. Current concerns with Prevent in Scotland

Prevent policy

Though many participants could point to aspects of Prevent in Scotland that work well, they also highlighted a number of concerns with Prevent. Many of these related to the policy more broadly, rather than to specific aspects of its enactment in Scotland.

Notably, many felt that Prevent has a negative reputation, with various reasons for this discussed. Firstly, some participants who are not involved in Prevent delivery in Scotland (particularly those representing faith and belief organisations) held the view that Prevent has unfairly stigmatised and targeted Muslim communities. There was a perception that across the UK as a whole, Muslims are erroneously referred to Prevent, such as for displaying signs of increased religiosity.

> 'The Muslim community have felt marginalised, targeted and victimised by the Prevent legislation [...] People who are [making referrals to Prevent] have little understanding of the Muslim faith, terminology, the culture, so people are reporting on other people just because they're praying five times a day or somebody has put a veil on.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Some participants not involved in Prevent delivery also felt that Prevent has created risks of discrimination, and had a view that the referral process can encourage frontline practitioners to act on their conscious or unconscious bias and to engage in racial profiling.

> '[A teacher] could take a strategy like Prevent and think "Oh, I've got a Muslim in my classroom. I'm going to watch them really intently and if they say one word out of line, I'm going to report them".' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Some of these participants also had a perception that Prevent involves an element of spying, surveillance and informing on others, including some who felt that referrals are made to Prevent maliciously, to target particular individuals or groups. An alleged example of this taking place in Scotland was described by one participant.

> 'There was a case in Scotland, I don't know how far it actually went but somebody reported an Imam to Prevent and said "Oh he's an extremist, he's a radical" because they had a land dispute with him [...] so there's misuse of the policy as well.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

However, not all participants held the above views about Prevent themselves. Some framed this discussion in terms of views about Prevent they feel are held by others, but commented that they themselves are unsure of the extent to which these perceptions are rooted in evidence. Regardless, many participants (including those involved in Prevent delivery in Scotland) felt that these perceptions had damaged Prevent's reputation. This is reflected in the literature; for example, Finch

and McKendrick (2019) discuss criticisms that have been levelled at Prevent, and note that these criticisms have led Prevent to be described as a 'toxic' policy by a range of academics. Some participants felt that this reputation had reduced the credibility of Prevent, which has led to a lack of buy-in from Scottish communities and sectors.

> 'I mean we've almost re-positioned Prevent in Scotland as a more supportive, long-lasting intervention, but I'm not sure the toxicity that's associated, or that's perceived around Prevent at a UK level has been helpful to us.' (Local authority sector participant)

There was also a view among some participants that Prevent has been 'imposed' on Scotland by the UK Government, and that there has been a resultant lack of scope to adapt or modify the policy to make it more appropriate for implementation in Scotland. For example, one participant felt that the UK Government is focused more on Islamist extremism than other types of extremism, but that this approach is not suitable for Scotland, where the proportion of the population that is Muslim is much smaller than in other parts of the UK.

> 'I think the challenge we have is because Prevent is not actually… it's a reserved matter. Some of the [UK] government views around Prevent suggest it should be focusing on Islamic terrorists when in actual fact that isn't the demographic we have in Scotland.' (Police sector participant)

Some participants involved in Prevent delivery also felt that Prevent is overly complex and disproportionate in light of their view that levels of extremism are low in Scotland.

> 'You have this very, very heavy-handed complex mechanism and reporting structure and actually very, very few cases and instances that surface […] it feels like a great big steam hammer to crack a very small walnut.' (Education sector participant)

Finally, some participants not involved in Prevent delivery also highlighted examples of terror incidents carried out by individuals known to Prevent, such as Usman Khan who carried out the Fishmongers' Hall attack on London Bridge in 2019, as evidence that the policy is ineffective.

Prevent in Scotland

As well as concerns with Prevent more broadly, specific concerns with its enactment in Scotland were also highlighted. These concerns were raised by those involved in Prevent delivery, including Prevent sector leads and Multi-Agency CONTEST chairs. Firstly, some felt that cooperation between partners involved in Prevent in Scotland could be improved. In particular, some commented that there is less buy-in to Prevent from some sectors in comparison with others.

> 'There needs to be more buy-in across the board. There's some agencies and organisations who you can tell are absolutely 100% on board, and

there's others who are not interested, because they have other priorities and this is a big add-on for them.' (Police sector participant)

Some participants representing the police sector also commented that other sectors tend to view the PMAP process erroneously as being police-led rather than as a process that is led by local authorities (Home Office, 2021d), and is reliant on the involvement of national, regional and local partners across multiple sectors.

Relatedly, although some participants felt that information-sharing between partners involved in Prevent worked well, some felt that it was not always reciprocal. In particular, some felt that there is not always a two-way flow of information between sectors and Police Scotland when a referral is made, for example to advise whether the case had been adopted by Prevent and what support was being offered to the individual. However, it was acknowledged that this information may be of a sensitive nature, making it challenging to share widely.

'One of the things that might actually help would be having some kind of information-sharing protocol with Police Scotland. At the moment, their approach to information-sharing is "you provide us with information and we say thank you very much". There is no two-way flow. There's structural resistance to providing any two-way flow of information. If you make a referral you don't get any comeback.' (Education sector participant)

'I think we could be more open with how we share [...] sometimes sectors might highlight a concern but never actually hear what happens with it once they've done it. Obviously there are sometimes sensitivities around about it, but I do think if people think that there's purpose in what they're doing, feel they're being heard and listened to and something happens because of it we'd encourage referrals.' (Police sector participant)

Meanwhile, other participants representing the police sector discussed a challenge being that Police Scotland are reliant on partners sharing information with them about vulnerable individuals, but that this might not be forthcoming if awareness of Prevent is low.

'[In Prevent] a lot of our flows of intelligence come from partners, whether it's education, health [...] so we're reliant on the quality of that, which is outwith our control. It also depends on those partners being aware of Prevent, and of the issues that we're interested in.' (Police sector participant)

Some participants also felt that at present there is not enough resource and funding dedicated to Prevent in Scotland, which makes it difficult for sectors to contribute at the level required. In particular, those representing sectors with a statutory obligation to fulfil the Prevent duty discussed current monetary and resource strains on the public sector, and how these make it difficult to engage fully in Prevent alongside other responsibilities.

'Professionals have what they would say is a day job and a caseload which is enormous and Prevent is effectively, an overhead to that and we don't get

> funding for Prevent [...] [The local authority sector] is the sector that, in some respects, is under most pressure financially and will be, for the next few years. Therefore, [it] will be increasingly focused into dealing with the caseload of confirmed vulnerable people, rather than resourcing Prevent.' (Local authority sector participant)

Some also had a perception that greater resource had been dedicated to Prevent in England and Wales than in Scotland. For example, one participant mentioned how there are centrally-funded Prevent coordinators in England and Wales – roles which do not currently exist in Scotland.

Training for Prevent in Scotland was also discussed. At present, the main training on Prevent is the Home Office eLearning training, which covers three main areas: Prevent Awareness, Prevent Referrals, and PMAP/Channel Awareness (Channel being the equivalent process to PMAP in England and Wales). Other Scotland-specific training is also available, such as training on delivering PMAPs for PMAP chairs and deputies.

Many participants felt that the existing training resources are broadly useful. However, although some Scotland-specific training is available, there was a perception that the available training is directed more at those involved in Prevent in England and Wales, and does not cover how Prevent operates in Scotland sufficiently. Some also felt that the content of existing training could be improved. For example, it was suggested that there is not enough practical guidance on the types of behaviours to look out for when an individual may be susceptible to extremism, or on different ideologies or types of extremism and their underlying motivations.

Some participants also had a sense that the Home Office eLearning training may be completed once as a 'tick box' exercise, but that it may not always be refreshed. It was felt that this could be problematic in areas or sectors where referral numbers are low, as those not involved in Prevent on a regular basis may fall out of practice.

> 'In some authorities there may be no cases, in some there may be one every few years… so keeping it relevant I think is the key bit, and reminding ourselves of how we approach it. Some will see nothing from one training event to another, there will be no instances, and I think that can lead to a bit of complacency.' (Local authority sector participant)

Some participants were also critical of the fact that the focus of Prevent in Scotland is largely on the second objective outlined in CONTEST (Home Office, 2018): 'safeguarding and supporting those most at risk of radicalisation through early intervention, identifying them and offering support'. It was felt that less work is carried out in relation to the first objective: 'tackling the causes of radicalisation and responding to the ideological challenge of terrorism'. For example, some felt that wider community engagement work to challenge harmful ideologies and promote integration and cohesion would be beneficial, such as campaigns or work with schools, third sector organisations and faith groups. However, there was a view that

this does not take place at present, or that any work that has been carried out in this space has been 'piecemeal' or 'sporadic'.

> 'They're responding to referrals but I don't see any proactive work on a Scotland-wide basis to reduce extremism. On a case-by-case, individual basis I think they're doing an excellent job, but it's that bigger picture, that drive, you know how we engage in schools, campaigns, linking with education. I don't think we've had anything like that in Scotland.' (Police sector participant)

> 'Tackling the causes, community level Prevent stuff, what's Prevent doing that's based in Scotland? I don't think it does anything. They don't commission projects, they don't work with the third sector, they don't work with faith groups. It's a massive gap.' (Other private/third sector participant)

Some felt that work of this nature was carried out to a greater extent in other parts of the UK. However, it was acknowledged that this may be a result of resource constraints in Scotland.

Finally, as discussed above, some also felt that there is a lack of data and evidence surrounding the impact and effectiveness of Prevent delivery in Scotland, which makes it difficult to determine how well Prevent is working. For example, one participant discussed the use of Counter Terrorism Local Profiles (CTLPs)[10] in England and Wales. CTLPs are documents that outline the threat from terrorism-related activity within specific areas, and are used to develop understanding of risk and vulnerability. The participant felt that CTLPs provide those involved in Prevent delivery at a local level with a greater understanding of the level of risk, but noted that they are not currently used in Scotland. However, while CTLPs are not used in Scotland Annual Overview Products (AOPs) are produced, which aim to provide specific context of relevance to the delivery of the four Ps of the CONTEST strategy (Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare) in the West, North and East of Scotland respectively.

5.4. Areas for improvement

The reputation of Prevent

Alongside highlighting these criticisms of Prevent, participants also made suggestions as to how Prevent delivery could be improved in Scotland. When it came to the reputation of Prevent, some participants not involved in Prevent delivery felt that this could be difficult to change. A few participants representing faith and belief organisations felt that the policy is unworkable in its current form. As discussed above, these participants felt that Prevent's reputation precludes buy-in from communities, particularly Muslim communities. However, without this buy-in participants felt that Prevent was unlikely to be successful in meeting its objectives. These participants felt that it would be necessary to either 'rebrand' Prevent or to

[10] Counter-Terrorism Local Profiles

replace it entirely with an alternative approach, though it was acknowledged that the power to do this is currently reserved to the UK Government.

> 'You need to find some way of presenting Prevent as not targeting a particular community because that's what gave it a bad name. It may be that it needs to be reinvented, maybe it needs to be rebadged or renamed and so on to make it sound completely different.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

> 'If a major section of the community, the demographic who are affected by this policy don't want to engage with it, what are you going to do? This policy needs to go and it has to start from scratch [...] it's just toxic.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

While some felt that it could be difficult to change Prevent's reputation, others had suggestions for ways in which this could be improved. Firstly, some felt that it would be useful to raise awareness of the positioning of Prevent in Scotland. As noted above, in Scotland Prevent has been more closely aligned with areas of policy that promote community cohesion and integration than those which focus on countering terrorism, and is grounded in early intervention and safeguarding. However, some participants felt that this is not widely known. In particular, it was felt that due to the involvement of the police, Prevent is viewed by some as a law enforcement tool which could lead to criminal investigation or a criminal record, making them hesitant to engage with Prevent or make a referral. Improving understanding of the fact that Prevent operates in a pre-criminal space, and is focused on providing support and redirection to vulnerable individuals, was therefore viewed as something that could be beneficial.

> 'This is a non-criminal, early intervention, but because the police are involved… that puts people off.' (Police sector participant)

Relatedly, some participants felt that it would be helpful to increase transparency around how Prevent is delivered in Scotland. These participants felt that a further reason some may be hesitant to engage with Prevent or to make a referral is because they do not have a clear understanding of what happens to an individual when they are referred. Increasing understanding of, for example, how referrals are made, the initial gateway assessment undertaken by police, and the PMAP process, was therefore viewed as something that could be beneficial for rebutting these perspectives.

> 'I think a lot more needs to be done to educate what Prevent is about [...] what are the warning signs, how people are being identified, what does Prevent actually do. There's still a lot of misunderstanding around it, there's still a lot of nervousness that it's somehow targeting individual communities.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Some participants suggested that one way to do this could be to make case studies publicly available in Scotland, as has been done elsewhere in the UK (Home Office, 2021e). It was felt that these would not only enhance understanding of the Prevent

process but would also represent an opportunity to provide 'success stories' of those who have been provided with support to enable them to disengage from extremism, and that this could increase support for the approach.

> 'I think it would be helpful for there to be stories of people who have benefitted from [Prevent], people that have been quite extreme and then have come out the other side and want to talk about their experience. So if they had been recruited to some extremist group and then rehabilitated, for want of a better word [...] I think if there's a personal story behind it people would engage with it a lot more, understand what's happening and why it's being done.' (Faith and belief organisation participant)

Some felt that this could help to overcome the challenges with demonstrating the effectiveness of Prevent as discussed above.

> 'Prevent measurements are really difficult to achieve [...] I think we need to look at a qualitative narrative as opposed to quantitative narratives.' (Police sector participant)

Finally, the perceived lack of wider community engagement work which takes place in relation to Prevent in Scotland was highlighted as an area for improvement. Many felt that Prevent's reputation could be improved if there was greater grassroots engagement with communities, third sector organisations and faith groups, support of projects and initiatives to encourage community cohesion and integration, and events and workshops, with the purpose of raising awareness of Prevent and challenging extremism at a local level.

Prevent delivery

As well as the above suggestions aimed at improving the reputation of Prevent, other suggestions were discussed by participants involved in Prevent delivery in Scotland which specifically related to the enactment of the policy. Firstly, as highlighted above, it was felt that improvements could be made to Prevent-related training. Many participants commented that it would be helpful if more Scotland-specific training was available, and if more practical guidance for frontline practitioners was incorporated into the training, such as on extremist behaviours and ideologies. One participant suggested that a 'tiered' approach to training, with different content depending on the practitioner's role and level of engagement with the public, would be useful.

> 'It's got to be a tiered approach [to training]. Not everybody needs to know it in depth and detail, but the people that are likely to come across vulnerable people, frontline facing, they need to know what it is when they're going in a house, what they're looking out for.' (Police sector participant)

It was also felt that encouragement to undertake training more regularly or for 'refreshers' to be available would be helpful, so that the key messages conveyed by Prevent training remain at the forefront of practitioners' minds even when they aren't dealing with large numbers of referrals.

Some also felt that improving information flows between partners would be beneficial. This was discussed both in terms of the police sharing more information with other statutory sectors involved in Prevent delivery, and in terms of improving awareness of Prevent among other statutory partners so greater information is shared with police about individuals that may be vulnerable to extremism.

Having additional resource dedicated to Prevent delivery in Scotland was also raised, though many acknowledged that this would be challenging in the current economic climate.

Intervention Providers (IPs) were also mentioned, with some commenting that more IPs, which are more affordable and accessible and that cover a wider range of ideologies than are addressed currently, would be helpful.

> 'If we look at the IPs, there are more for Islamist and extreme right-wing than there would be for the mixed, unstable ideology. Probably because they are more mainstream.' (Police sector participant)

> 'We're low on IPs in Scotland. It would be great to have more accessible, easily deployed, cheaper to use IPs, where we don't need to rely on somebody coming up from Birmingham or the south coast.' (Police sector participant)

Finally, there was support for greater collection and use of data and evidence within the implementation of Prevent to improve understanding of how Prevent is working in Scotland.

5.5. Summary

Many participants discussed difficulties with determining the effectiveness of Prevent in Scotland. Despite this, some aspects of Prevent delivery in Scotland that work well were highlighted. These included the alignment of Prevent with safeguarding; the PMAP guidance; existing tools and resources such as training and IPs; and the multi-agency delivery of Prevent.

However, critiques of Prevent were also raised. Some of these related to the policy more broadly rather than being specific to its delivery in Scotland, including Prevent having a negative reputation. Others related to the delivery of Prevent in Scotland in particular, including concerns around information-sharing between partners; resources and funding; training; the lack of work to 'tackle the causes' of extremism; and the lack of data and evidence surrounding the impact of Prevent in Scotland.

Key suggestions for improvement highlighted by participants included raising awareness of the positioning of Prevent as a policy that supports community cohesion and integration Scotland; increasing transparency around how the policy is delivered; carrying out greater community engagement work; and improving training, information flows and use of data and evidence.

6. Ability of sectors to identify and support those vulnerable to being drawn into extremism

As noted in the methodology section, some participants in this research represented sectors which have a statutory obligation to fulfil the Prevent duty (n=18). These participants were asked for their views on the ability of those working in the sector they represent to both identify and support those who may be vulnerable to being drawn into extremism.

It should be noted that the number of participants who were asked these questions was small, and that the current role of these participants does not involve direct contact with service users. While the questions were designed to gather organisational-level views on the ability of those working in statutory sectors to identify and support vulnerable individuals, a separate strand of this programme of research (Scottish Government, 2023c) provides greater insight into the views and experiences of frontline public sector practitioners working to deliver Prevent in Scotland.

The section begins by outlining views of participants from each sector[11], before covering key themes which emerged across all interviews with those representing statutory sectors, including the impact of COVID-19 and difficulties in identifying and supporting with particular forms of extremism.

6.1. Views by sector

Local authorities

Participants representing the local authority sector generally felt that those working within this sector are well-placed to identify those who may be vulnerable to extremism. They discussed how local authority practitioners tend to be connected to individuals and families in a range of ways, meaning they are able to notice changes in behaviours or views that may indicate vulnerability to extremism.

> 'Local authorities connect with individuals and families in a way that no other sector does and from multiple angles. Especially very vulnerable people that are quite often in touch with mental health services, social work services, education and housing. That gives us multiple points of contact.' (Local authority sector participant)

[11] In this section a distinction has been made between participants representing the local authority and education sectors. However, in Scotland the provision of education is the responsibility of local authorities, which are under a statutory duty to ensure that there is adequate and efficient provision of school education in their area. This meant that at times education settings were also discussed by participants representing the local authority sector.

However, some felt that local authority practitioners may be less well-placed to identify vulnerabilities among those who are no longer in education and who are not in receipt of social security or housing provision, as they may have limited contact with public service providers.

> 'I think the concern I would have is older people. If you're not on the radar of social provision and you're older than 20, you're not there, as far as the local authority's concerned [...] once people are out of education provision, they become much more difficult to identify.' (Local authority sector participant)

Further, while many participants felt that those working within the local authority sector are generally well-equipped to identify vulnerable individuals, some commented that because instances of individuals being vulnerable to extremism tend to be rare, local authority practitioners may not be involved in supporting these individuals on a regular basis.

> 'I think that [being able to identify vulnerable individuals] are pretty widespread skills actually, the problem is that instances are pretty rare, so in some authorities there may be no cases, in some there may be one every few years [...] I think that can lead to a bit of complacency.' (Local authority sector participant)

There was a view that local authority practitioners may therefore be less confident in dealing with vulnerable individuals than in their ability to identify them. However, one mitigation against this raised by some participants is that the approach adopted by Prevent is similar to approaches which are used within child protection, adult protection and mental health, which practitioners use regularly and are experienced in.

> 'The methodology that we're using is the same methodology that we use for child protection and adult protection. So it is a risk that we don't deploy it on a significant number of occasions around extremism or terrorism, but on the other hand I think that we use almost the exact same process in a number of different cases is probably a sufficient mitigation.' (Local authority sector participant)

Finally, as noted in the previous section, resource and funding problems were highlighted as making it difficult for those working in the local authority sector to contribute to Prevent at the level required.

Police

Participants representing the police sector had mixed views on how well-placed those working within that sector are to identify individuals who may be vulnerable to extremism. Some felt that the police are in a strong position because they typically have high levels of engagement with communities, and in particular with individuals who are vulnerable in society in general, such as those with mental illnesses, those with drug or alcohol-related problems, or those who are involved in crime.

> ‘We are probably the only remaining service to actually go out in the community and have an active involvement with the individuals who are our most vulnerable in society, particularly round about mental health, crime, drugs and alcohol [...] we come across those people day in and day out.’ (Police sector participant)

There was also a view that flows of intelligence and information-sharing within the police tend to work well, and that frontline officers are well-supported by colleagues with specialist counter-terrorism expertise, meaning they can seek guidance or advice when required.

However, some participants commented that the nature of the interaction between the police and members of the public may differ from the interaction between members of the public and those in other statutory sectors. In particular, they felt that police officers may have more sporadic, one-off encounters with individuals, such as when responding to emergency calls, than those in the education or local authority sectors, who typically spend more time with service users. There was therefore a view that those in other sectors may be better-placed than the police to identify changes in behaviours or views that would indicate vulnerability to extremism.

> ‘Obviously teachers, health visitors, and social workers might spend years interacting with individuals and looking at their behaviour. They have a lot more signals than we do, because they have a lot more exposure to it.’ (Police sector participant)

Some participants also felt that awareness of Prevent may be low among frontline police officers. Participants discussed how police are required to complete online training on Prevent, but that if this is not refreshed regularly then it may not be at the forefront of their minds given the wide range of other issues they are faced with when on duty.

Some participants also held a view that there may be apprehension among the police to engage with counter-terrorism or make referrals to Prevent, due to a hesitancy to label someone as a potential terrorist. It was therefore felt that raising awareness of the safeguarding focus of Prevent in Scotland among the police could be useful.

While views were mixed on the ability of police to identify individuals vulnerable to extremism, many felt that the police are well-equipped to support those who have been identified as vulnerable. It was highlighted that while the PMAP process is relatively new, similar principles and approaches are used to help individuals with other vulnerabilities, such as in child and adult protection, which police are skilled and experienced in. However, as noted in previous section, there was a view among some that PMAP is sometimes viewed as a police-led process, rather than one that is dependent on collaboration between sectors and partnership working.

> ‘A lot of what people think about Prevent is that it’s police led. It’s not. Sectors should be working together, problem solving to create bespoke plans

> for individuals. We've all got to be working hand in hand across agencies to provide a response.' (Police sector participant)

Participants with this view felt that it would be helpful to raise awareness of the need for a wide range of sectors to work together to support individuals vulnerable to extremism.

Education

Participants representing the education sector also generally felt that those working in education are well-placed to identify individuals vulnerable to being drawn into extremism. They discussed how a range of safeguarding processes exist in educational institutions around child protection, wellbeing and mental health, and how Prevent is often integrated into or aligned with these. In particular, participants discussed how those working in education are already trained to look out for problems such as loneliness, frustration and mental illnesses as part of their wider safeguarding responsibilities, meaning that they are experienced in observing signs that may indicate vulnerability to extremism.

> '[Education practitioners] would be looking out for isolation, seclusion, anger, mental health issues of any kind anyway [...] Prevent has been incorporated into that. People just see that as part of the same continuum to do with mental health and wellbeing.' (Education sector participant)

However, participants thought that more Prevent-specific training and resources for those working in education could be helpful, particularly focusing on behaviours and signs to look out for.

> 'I think we need to provide real examples of what extremism means within Scotland, what those behaviours look like, because if people don't understand what it means how are you going to get them to raise that concern.' (Education sector participant)

Further, although participants generally felt that education practitioners are capable of identifying individuals that may be vulnerable to extremism, some felt that the perceived negative reputation of Prevent may create hesitancy to engage with the policy. There was also a view that some practitioners working in the Higher Education sector in particular see Prevent as incompatible with free speech, a narrative which has also been discussed in the literature (Fenwick and Fenwick, 2020). As with those representing the police sector, education sector participants felt that it would be helpful to raise awareness of the safeguarding positioning of Prevent in Scotland.

> 'I think above all, Prevent should be presented not as an anti-platforming or an anti-free speech or free thought or stigmatising process, but part of a broader spectrum of support for potentially vulnerable individuals.' (Education sector participant)

A concern was also raised that Prevent results in some vulnerable individuals, such as those with poor mental health, being treated differently to others, when the underlying problem may be similar.

> ‘The problem with Prevent is that you have a subsection of [vulnerable individuals] who go into a different state-run aspect of management. It sits uncomfortably within the HE [Higher Education] sector that we treat certain types of vulnerable individuals differently from certain other types of individuals.’ (Education sector participant)

Health

Only one participant represented the health sector. This participant discussed current resource strains on the NHS, which they viewed as existing prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but as having been exacerbated as a result. They felt that due to challenges such as high workloads and care backlogs, health practitioners are unlikely to be spending the time with patients that would be required to identify potential vulnerability to extremism.

> ‘I think [the health sector] has real challenges around capacity and has done for a couple of years, the system is under a lot of strain. It compromises the ability of clinician or a medical practitioner to spend any amount of time with someone other than dealing with the obvious issues they are presenting with. You’re not going to get that conversation that might develop in which they start to pick up on potential problems in the background.’ (Health sector participant)

The participant therefore felt that while healthcare practitioners may be able to pick up on obvious signs of vulnerability to extremism, they are unlikely to notice more subtle indications of this.

> ‘I think without a proper conversation, unless they said something obvious, so if you had a white middle-aged male who had a skinhead and a football shirt on, who took immediate offence to a non-white nurse, something like that, where it was very quickly, very obviously a difficult situation. I think, beyond those obvious ones, it’ll be very hard for a nurse or a doctor to quickly pick up on something.’ (Health sector participant)

A further concern raised by this participant was that there may be inconsistency in how Prevent is delivered across different Health Boards in Scotland. The participant felt that at present some Health Boards are engaged in Prevent and have formalised structures for delivery, while others are less engaged and deliver Prevent on a more informal or ad hoc basis.

> ‘In Scotland at the moment, we’ve got inconsistencies across the areas, in terms of how Prevent is done from healthcare settings [...] a lot of the Prevent stuff is done on quite an informal basis, not a sort of formalised structure, therefore what happens in Health Board A might be quite different to Health

Board B. Some instances that's maybe a pragmatic solution, I think in others it creates problems.' (Health sector participant)

Prisons

As with health, only one participant in this research represented the prisons sector. This participant felt that those working in prisons are typically experienced and skilled in identifying vulnerabilities among prisoners, such as when a prisoner has poor mental health. However, they felt that they may not necessarily associate such vulnerabilities with a risk of extremism or radicalisation. They suggested that training around behaviours that specifically indicate a risk of vulnerability to extremism, such as signs to look out for or symbols that may be displayed in prisoners' cells, would be beneficial.

> 'I would say that the prison staff are very well equipped to identify individuals that are struggling, identify when someone has a mental health problem. But I don't think they associate that with the risk of extremism or radicalisation. I do think there's probably more training there for prison staff in terms of what type of behaviours they should be looking out for and what to do if they suspect that someone is at risk, or if someone is displaying these types of behaviour.' (Prison sector participant)

However, the participant felt that there had recently been improvements in the ability of prison staff to support individuals that have been identified as vulnerable to extremism, resulting from new processes and systems now in place.

6.2. The impact of COVID-19

Participants representing statutory sectors discussed the potential impacts that COVID-19 may have had on the ability of those working in these sectors to identify and support those that may be vulnerable to extremism.

Many felt that it was more challenging to identify vulnerable individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants discussed how the restrictions associated with the pandemic led to a reduction in face-to-face interaction between practitioners and the public, making it difficult for them to notice changes in views or actions that could indicate vulnerability to extremism. In particular, although in many cases contact between practitioners and the public continued online during this period, some discussed the difficulties involved in identifying changes in behaviour remotely.

> 'Online, you can switch your camera off. You're not necessarily seeing your students [...] I think the pandemic affected that ability to see a nuance of change in somebody or notice that, oh [a person] has turned up in the same clothes for the past five days. You can't see those things because you're not physically together.' (Education sector participant)

There was also a view that the pandemic may have distracted practitioners from looking out for signs of vulnerability to extremism, as COVID-19 and public health were at the centre of practitioners' minds over this period.

> '[COVID-19] probably has had an impact because it's just… I suppose it's been a distraction. The staff coming into work on a day-to-day basis, at the forefront of their mind is going to be anything COVID related.' (Prison sector participant)

Indeed, over the period April 2020 to March 2021 there were only 55 referrals to Prevent in Scotland, which represented a decrease of 45% compared to the previous year (100 in the year ending March 2020) (Police Scotland, 2023b). However, as discussed in section 4.2, many participants felt that extremism is more likely to have increased in Scotland over this period, as people were spending more time isolated from others, potentially being exposed to extremist content online.

Views were more mixed regarding the impact that COVID-19 may have had on statutory sectors' ability to support individuals that have been identified as vulnerable to being drawn into extremism. Some felt that COVID-19 did not have a significant impact on sectors' ability to offer support, as the processes for doing so remained fundamentally the same, but were adapted to ensure they adhered to public health restrictions. An example of this is PMAPs taking place online, which some felt there were benefits to as more people could attend without having to travel long distances.

However, some felt that supporting vulnerable individuals was more challenging during COVID-19. For example, difficulties with providing support online were highlighted, with some participants viewing it more difficult to build rapport and trust with individuals remotely. One participant discussed this in relation to IPs specifically.

> 'I know there's been cases where Intervention Providers have been deployed via teams or via phone which has been entirely ineffective [...] It can be difficult to build up that rapport with an individual, getting the social cues, the kind of non-verbal communication that you can get sitting in a room with somebody. I would say that it's more difficult to build trust.' (Police sector participant)

Though various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were highlighted by participants, many felt that these were no longer affecting the ability of sectors to identify and support vulnerable individuals. However, there was a view among some that COVID-19 has led to a change in work patterns, with more people working from home than was the case before the pandemic. These participants felt that this may mean that there could be a continued impact on sectors' ability to identify vulnerable individuals due to reduced levels of face-to-face interaction.

6.3. Identifying and supporting people who are vulnerable to different types of extremism

Some participants felt that particular forms of extremism may be more difficult to identify and address than others. In terms of ideologies that may be more challenging to identify, incels were highlighted. As described by Regehr (2022) the incel community is comprised of individuals who feel rejected by women – and

arguably society more generally – and turn to the Internet to voice their anger, and often, desire for revenge. Typically, they express violent fantasies to be perpetrated against 'Chads' and 'Stacys' (popular men and women) (Regehr, 2022).

Participants discussed the continued existence of patriarchal views in society, and how these may be difficult to distinguish from incel-related beliefs when expressed in subtle ways. Some also felt that behaviours that may be associated with the incel community, such as being reclusive, frustrated or not fitting in, can be common among young people. They felt that practitioners may therefore be hesitant to make a referral to Prevent based on these behaviours alone.

> 'I think what's made the sort of incel type thing more worrying is that being reclusive, being a loner, feeling that you don't fit in, is not an unusual situation for a teenager, so capturing that in a way that's not overreacting is quite difficult.' (Education sector participant)

Participants who considered sectarianism to be a form of extremism also highlighted it as being potentially more difficult to identify than other types of extremism. As discussed previously, participants commented that sectarianism is so engrained within Scottish culture that it is rarely labelled as extremism, which is reflected in the low number of referrals to Prevent for sectarianism.

In terms of support for those who may be vulnerable to extremism, some participants felt that individuals who present with a mixed, unstable or unclear ideology could be more difficult to help than individuals affiliating with other ideologies, due to a view that it can be challenging to offer a counter-narrative to forms of extremism that are not necessarily coherent or clear.

> 'I think if there's an identified ideology it makes it easier to actually deal with. For those who don't have an identified ideology and kind of sit in between, or sit in the cracks and the gaps, it becomes very difficult to actually do much with them, because you're not, you can't then address the ideology and try and reverse it.' (Police sector participant)

The incel movement was also highlighted as particularly complex and less well-understood than other forms of extremism because it has only recently gained traction. It was felt that specific training on incel and mixed, unclear or unstable ideologies would be beneficial for practitioners.

6.4. Summary

Across all interviews with participants representing statutory sectors, there were mixed views on the ability of those working within these sectors to identify and support individuals who may be vulnerable to being drawn into extremism. While many felt that practitioners are well-placed to identify and support vulnerable individuals, participants also highlighted various concerns, most commonly around the requirement for more resources and funding to deliver Prevent, and the need for training on behaviours and signs to look out for.

All participants discussed the impact of COVID-19 on the ability of frontline practitioners to identify and support vulnerable individuals. Many felt that COVID-19 made it more challenging to identify those vulnerable to extremism, but views were more mixed on the impact of COVID-19 on supporting individuals identified as vulnerable. However, it was felt that COVID-19 is no longer impacting the ability of practitioners to identify and support vulnerable individuals.

Finally, some participants felt that particular forms of extremism may be more challenging to identify and address than others, including the incel movement, sectarianism, and other mixed, unstable or unclear ideologies.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore stakeholder understandings of and perspectives on extremism and Prevent delivery in Scotland. This section summarises the key findings from this work, reflects on their implications and presents suggestions for further research.

7.1. Summary of findings

Understanding of extremism

Participants had difficulty defining extremism, and held diverse understandings of the concept. A particular contention which arose between participants related to whether holding extremist beliefs can in and of itself be considered extremism, or whether these beliefs have to be acted upon to be considered extremism. There were also mixed opinions as to whether extremism necessarily involves violence.

There was some support for use of the 'politically-motivated', 'ideologically-motivated' and 'religiously-motivated' categories of extremism used in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, though it was felt that a caveat that the categories are not mutually exclusive would be needed if they were to be operationalised within Prevent.

Participants were largely in agreement that there are strong links between extremism, hate crime and terrorism, with the idea of a spectrum of views discussed. However, views differed regarding whether sectarianism forms part of this spectrum, with some feeling that it is less harmful than typical manifestations of extremism.

Views on extremism in Scotland

Participants felt that while extremism exists in Scotland, it is less of a problem in Scotland than it is in England. Despite this, many participants felt that the prevalence of extremism is increasing in Scotland, and that Scotland should not be viewed as immune from extremist ideologies and groups.

There was also a perception that the spread of extremist ideologies is different in Scotland to other parts of the UK, with right-wing and sectarian forms of extremism viewed as the most prevalent (among those who considered sectarianism to be a form of extremism) and Islamist extremism viewed as less of a problem than in other areas of Britain.

Participants discussed various factors they felt may make people vulnerable to being drawn into extremism, including isolation and loneliness, mental illness, neurodivergence, spending time online, family background, lack of opportunities and demographic characteristics.

However, a key theme that emerged during discussions about extremism in Scotland was participants' reflections that more information is needed regarding the extent of extremism in Scotland, trends over time, and the ideologies that are more

and less prevalent. There was a desire for further research to be carried out on this topic in Scotland.

Views on Prevent in Scotland

Difficulties with determining the effectiveness of Prevent in Scotland were discussed, but a range of factors that work well were also highlighted, including the alignment of Prevent with safeguarding policies; the PMAP guidance; existing tools and resources; and the multi-agency delivery of Prevent. Concerns with Prevent were also raised, with some relating to the policy more broadly rather than being specific to its delivery in Scotland. Concerns relating to its delivery in Scotland were around information-sharing; the availability of resources and funding; the provision of training; and the lack of work to 'tackle the causes' of extremism.

Suggestions for improvement included raising awareness of the positioning of Prevent as a policy that supports community cohesion and integration Scotland; increasing transparency around how the policy is delivered; carrying out greater community engagement work; and improving training and information flows. Participants also expressed support for more research to determine the impact and effectiveness of Prevent in Scotland.

Views on the ability of sectors to identify and support those vulnerable to being drawn into extremism

Those representing sectors with a statutory obligation to fulfil the Prevent duty had mixed views on the ability of those working within these sectors to identify and support individuals who may be vulnerable to being drawn into extremism. While many felt that practitioners are well-placed to identify and support vulnerable individuals, concerns such as the need for more resources, funding and training were raised.

7.2. Implications and considerations

Suggestions for further research

This work highlights the need for further research in two key areas. Firstly, it is notable that the perceptions of stakeholders of the threat posed by extremism in Scotland broadly aligned with findings from an evidence review carried out by the Scottish Government (2023a), which indicated that levels of extremism may be lower in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK, and that there may be differences in the types of extremism that are more and less common in Scotland when compared with other parts of Britain. However, the evidence review also highlighted a lack of concrete data and evidence about the prevalence of and trends in extremism in Scotland, which was also noted by participants in this research.

Further research exploring extremist activity taking place in Scotland in greater detail would therefore be beneficial. This might include work to explore the influence and reach of particular extremist groups in Scotland in comparison with the rest of the UK, and more detailed examination of the data on referrals to Prevent and hate crime in Scotland in comparison with England and Wales. It is

likely that such research would support those with responsibility for delivering Prevent in Scotland to do so more effectively, by improving their understanding of extremism in Scotland and their awareness of any Scotland-specific risks.

Secondly, participants felt that at present it is difficult to determine the extent to which Prevent is meeting the objectives outlined in CONTEST. This research therefore suggests that there would be benefit in work to explore the impact and effectiveness of Prevent in Scotland in more depth. This could be approached through independent in-depth case studies of, or ethnographic research with people who have been through Prevent in Scotland. Exploring the experience of Prevent from their perspectives, including developing understanding of the circumstances and factors that led to their referral, how the programme has worked with them and what the results of this have been, would support a more in-depth, multifaceted understanding of what works to address the needs of those at risk. Indeed, participants in this research showed support for making case studies of individuals who have been supported by Prevent available, which they felt would help to improve understanding of, and transparency around, how Prevent is delivered in Scotland.

More broadly, further exploration of the Prevent referral data may also provide an indication of the frequency with which those who are offered Prevent support are referred back to Prevent in future, and potential reasons for this.

Broader considerations

It was notable that the stakeholders who took part in this research had such wide-ranging understandings of extremism. In particular, it might have been anticipated that those representing sectors with a statutory obligation to fulfil the Prevent duty may have a broadly similar understanding of the concept, given their responsibility for ensuring that Prevent is implemented effectively in Scotland (Home Office, 2021a). However, even among this group of stakeholders, a range of different interpretations of extremism were presented.

Although this was to some extent surprising, it may reflect the fact that the Scottish Government does not currently have an official definition of extremism, having not adopted the UK Government definition (Home Office, 2011). The findings from this research suggest that the absence of an official definition of extremism in Scotland, combined with the subjective and relative nature of the term, has led to it being interpreted in varied, and at times contradictory ways.

Participants in this research pointed out difficulties with not having a shared understanding of what is meant by extremism, particularly in the context of Prevent delivery. For example, it may lead to different thresholds for what constitutes a referral, and for their subsequent adoption into the Prevent programme.

It therefore appears that it would be useful to give consideration to the merits of having an official definition of extremism for use in Scotland, or at least to set out the views, behaviours and activities that are considered to constitute extremism in the context of Prevent more clearly. This would help to ensure there is a shared

understanding of what is meant by the term among those responsible for tackling it in the Prevent arena as a means to stop individuals being drawn into terrorism (as opposed to those seeking to tackle hate crime and sectarianism, for example).

In addition, it may be useful to be clearer about the types of extremism or ideologies that Prevent is concerned with, as it was also notable that when asked about extremism in Scotland, some participants discussed beliefs and behaviours that would not be covered by conventional understandings of the term (e.g., disruptive climate activism).

It may also be beneficial to improve training in relation to the factors that can lead people to be susceptible to extremism, and in particular, to prioritise training and research in relation to the linkages between extremism and neurodivergence and mental illness.

Indeed, participants themselves highlighted that more training and resources around the different types of extremism that exist, and the behaviours and signs that could indicate vulnerability to extremist narratives, would be useful, to support those working to deliver Prevent in Scotland to identify those at risk of radicalisation more effectively.

Finally, this research has also highlighted suggestions for ways in which Prevent delivery in Scotland could be enhanced. Although the UK Government retains overall responsibility for national policy on security and counter-terrorism, the suggestions presented by participants largely related to improving existing processes (e.g., training and processes for sharing information), perceptions (e.g., by raising awareness of the positioning of Prevent as a policy that supports community cohesion and integration Scotland and increasing transparency around it's delivery) and understanding of Prevent, rather than the underlying principles of the programme or the mechanisms through which it is delivered in Scotland. The research recommends giving consideration to both whether and how these suggestions could be taken forward to foster improvements in Prevent delivery in Scotland.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Topic guide summary

Section	Topics covered
Background and job role	• Organisation and job role • Length of time in role / profession • Role in relation to Prevent • Geographic scope of organisation
Understanding of extremism	• Confidence in understanding of term extremism • Extremist views and actions • Views on whether three scenarios represent extremism • Views on definitions of extremism • Views on categorisation approach • Distinctions between terrorism, hate crime sectarianism and extremism
Views on extremism	• Views on extent of extremism in Scotland • Views on extent of types of extremism in Scotland • Geographic variation • Views on trends over time • Views on factors that make people vulnerable to extremism
Views on Prevent	• Views on effectiveness of Prevent • Opinion of Prevent
Views of ability of sectors to identify and support individuals	• Ability of sector to identify / support vulnerable individuals • Areas where well-equipped / less well-equipped • COVID-19 impacts

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