

The Southport Inquiry: Phase 1 report

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The Home Secretary gave an oral statement to the House of Commons on 13 April responding to The Southport Inquiry Phase 1 report.

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker I would like to make a statement on the Southport Inquiry.

I must thank all who participated in the inquiry and the Chair Sir Adrian Fulford, and his team.

Today, Sir Adrian published the report of the inquiry's first phase.

This summer, the Government will provide a full response, this will also cover Lord Anderson's Prevent review.

Today, I will provide the government's initial reaction to an Inquiry that exposes a series of tragic failures. From which, we must learn.

We do so in the shadow of the events of the 29th of July, 2024.

I will not name the perpetrator nor dwell on the details of the crimes that saw three beautiful young girls murdered, the attempted murder of eight other children and two adults, and lasting physical and psychological harm to many more.

I speak on behalf of the whole House when I say my thoughts today are with all those affected.

In honour of them, and the memory of three murdered girls:

Elsie Dot Stancombe, Bebe King and Alice da Silva Aguiar.

We must act now to prevent similar attacks.

It was for that reason that my predecessor appointed Sir Adrian Fulford to lead a full statutory inquiry. The Inquiry's work has two parts.

The first, which reported today considered the decisions made by the agencies and services that interacted with the perpetrator.

This included a range of institutions within the criminal justice system, as well as education, healthcare and local government. It also considered the actions of his parents.

The findings of the Inquiry are unsparing.

Sir Adrian has uncovered systematic failures across multiple public sector organisations.

The recording and sharing of information was poor. None of the agencies involved had a full understanding of the risk the perpetrator posed and many did not take steps to assess the risk he posed to others.

There was a failure by the agencies involved to take responsibility and nobody was clear who was in charge. So the failure, because it belonged to everyone, belonged to no-one.

Where individuals missed opportunities to intervene, lessons must be learnt.

But they did so within organisations that repeatedly passed the risk to others and where systemic failings existed.

The perpetrator came into contact with the state on countless occasions. Lancashire Police responded to five calls to his home address. The police were called when he was in possession of a knife in a public place. He was referred, on several occasions, to the multi-agency safeguarding hub.

He came into contact with children's social care, the Early Help service and children's mental health services.

He was referred to Prevent on three occasions.

He was convicted of a violent assault and referred to a youth offending team.

All failed to identify the risk that the perpetrator posed. And so he fell between the gaps.

The warning signs were missed, a growing history of violence, and clear and continuing intent to commit harm.

In the Home Office, the focus falls on Prevent and policing.

Sir Adrian is clear that police should have progressed the perpetrator to the multi-agency Channel programme. Channel could have actively assessed and managed his risk.

Instead, he was not deemed suitable because he had no fixed ideology.

This ran counter to the guidance at the time, but the thresholds were unclear and the guidance was applied inconsistently. The perpetrator's multiple referrals were also considered individually.

When they should have been seen as a cumulative and compounding risk. The perpetrator did not receive the correct interventions.

And his autism diagnosis meant professionals focused far too much on his vulnerability and far too little on the threat he might pose to others.

The horrific attack was itself evidence of the ease with which it could be concluded.

There were no restrictions to stop the perpetrator from watching the violent content that inspired him, nor downloading instructions to make poison, nor viewing terrorist materials online.

He was also able to bypass the safeguards that should have stopped him from buying, and receiving, dangerous weapons.

These findings are devastating. But they are not surprising.

Findings like these have been heard in inquests and inquiries before. This time, however, they will be a spur for change.

The Inquiry makes 67 recommendations. The government is reviewing these and will respond to those which relate to national government this summer. And I expect local agencies to do the same.

Since this awful crime, the Government has already acted.

That begins with Prevent. Since the Southport attack, the Home Office and Counter Terrorism Policing have reviewed historical cases, to ensure that similar instances were handled correctly, with cases reassessed for any change in risk and managed accordingly.

This Government has reviewed the Prevent thresholds and published updated guidance.

We have introduced a new Prevent Assessment Framework, with mandatory training for Counter Terrorism Case Officers.

Oversight of repeat Prevent referrals has been strengthened, ensuring that cumulative risk is not missed and that senior sign-off is required before a case is closed.

To provide independent oversight of the whole system: we created an Independent Prevent Commissioner.

And I would like to thank Lord Anderson, for so ably taking on that position on an interim basis.

His term ends today, and I am pleased to say that I have appointed Tim Jacques as the new Prevent Commissioner, who begins his role tomorrow.

This government has also begun to place greater controls on a dangerously unregulated online world.

The Online Safety Act requires companies to remove illegal content from their platforms. The Act is intended to limit children from encountering content that is legal but poses a risk of significant harm.

But this is just the beginning of what can and must be done. The internet remains a dangerous place for children, and we are clear that tech companies have a moral responsibility to keep their users safe.

But have no doubt that when they fail to do so this government will intervene which is why this government is consulting on whether to remove children's access to social media entirely.

I can also announce today that the government will legislate to prevent the spread of extreme violent content online.

We have also made it harder for people to purchase weapons. The Crime and Policing Bill places new controls on the online sale and delivery of knives. We have banned the manufacture, purchase and possession of ninja swords and zombie-style machetes and earlier this year, we published new guidance, mandating that any child caught with a knife must be referred to a Youth Offending Team.

In the aftermath of the attack, the Government commissioned Jonathan Hall KC - the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation to consider the legislative gaps exposed by this attack. This identified an inconsistency that clearly needed addressing.

Unlike terrorist attacks, if you are planning an attack without an underlying ideology, there is no crime on the statute book. Jonathan Hall therefore recommended the creation of a new offence. This legislation will also be brought forward as soon as parliamentary time allows.

But the Inquiry also identifies a wider issue. There are rising numbers of young men who are fascinated by extreme violence. Boys whose minds are warped by time spent in isolation online.

This is a risk to us all.

Where someone is vulnerable to terrorism, they can and should be managed through the Prevent programme. However, where they are not, there is no clear approach to that risk.

Today, we publish the terms of reference for the second part of the Southport Inquiry. It will face directly into this challenge.

Sir Adrian will provide recommendations on the adequacy of the existing arrangements across all arms of the state for identifying and managing the risk posed by violence-fixated individuals.

He will explore what specific interventions are required to reduce the risk to the public. He will also review the influence of the internet and social media and the ease with which weapons can be procured.

Sir Adrian begins this work immediately and will present his final recommendations next Spring.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the summer of 2024, an act of unspeakable evil took place in Southport.

Nothing will ever heal the pain of those who survived, including the families who suffered unimaginable loss.

Responsibility rests with the perpetrator. But there was also responsibility within the family. The perpetrator's parents knew the risk he posed but did not co-operate with the authorities.

And there is also responsibility on the state, and on all of us here.

To learn the lessons from failures, wherever they occurred and the lesson is that the failures happened everywhere.

We must ensure we do not find ourselves here again, grieving deaths which should never have happened had the state, and those who work within it, acted differently.

Madam Deputy Speaker, that is our task and I commend this statement to the House.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-southport-inquiry-phase-1-report>