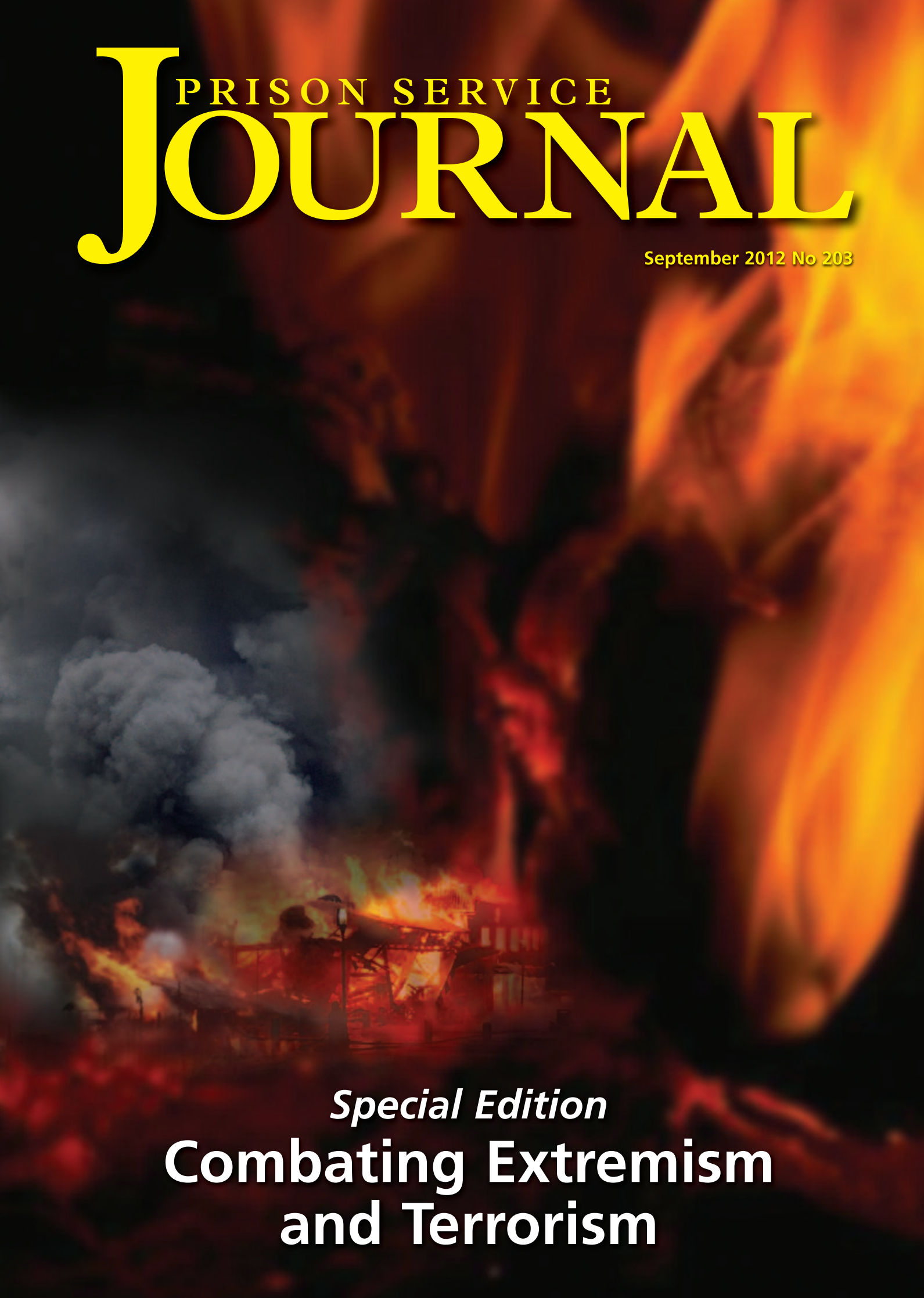
PRISON SERVICE
JOURNAL
September 2012 No 203



Special Edition

Combating Extremism and Terrorism

Intervening Effectively with Terrorist Offenders

Chris Dean *is a Principal Psychologist and Head of Extremism in NOMS Interventions Group.*

One of the most significant questions of our time is how can we prevent people from committing terrorist offences? The desire to 'intervene' in order to achieve this is powerful and the pressure on correctional services to deliver this is considerable. In recent years — under the government's CONTEST strategy — NOMS has developed a number of initiatives to contribute to this endeavour. Whilst managing terrorist offenders in custody is nothing new for the Prison Service, intervening to prevent such offending is. This article outlines the background to the emerging interventions in NOMS, what we have learned so far and addresses the ongoing challenges that will shape this work in the future.

Background

From a correctional perspective, intervention may take many guises. These may range from implementing a well considered policy to having a meaningful conversation with an offender, from expertly delivering a structured programme to placing an individual in suitable employment, from locating an offender effectively to rebuilding supportive relationships with friends and family. Whilst the word intervention has become more commonly associated with structured or semi-structured programmes, such approaches are only a part of how NOMS has addressed this issue.

A significant consideration is the cultural and social context in which interventions are delivered[1]. Providing the basic services for survival in majority Muslim countries where these are not in place may suffice to draw some individuals away from extremism, but this clearly is not the case in the UK. Although extremism is not a welfare issue here, learning from other jurisdictions does suggest that intervention should be holistic and address social, psychological, political, operational and, where appropriate religious approaches. NOMS has actively sought to develop such a strategy and infrastructure (as outlined in Richard Pickering's article) involving security and intelligence working with intervention staff and chaplaincy groups as well as with partner agencies in the community. In addition to the structured interventions presented here, London Probation has developed a Diversity and Violent Extremism package, NOMS Muslim chaplaincy has developed the Tarbiyah programme designed to develop knowledge and understanding of Islam, and one-to-one support work is being delivered in HMP Manchester.

Structured Interventions

Over the past four years a team in NOMS Interventions Unit has been developing structured interventions to specifically address terrorist offending. A number of precursor products have been piloted and evaluated and their successors are now being delivered in custody and in the community as part of offender supervision. These are the Healthy Identity Interventions (HII Foundation and Plus) and Al Furqan. Their aim is primarily to encourage individuals to desist from terrorist offending and ideally to disengage from an extremist group, cause or ideology. Experience shows that many of those who are wedded to a political cause may never become totally disengaged but may still make the decision to desist.[2] As NOMS business is to prevent offending *behaviour* rather than to police thought the goal of desistance is an appropriate correctional goal.

In a democratic country any intervention needs to reconcile the right of freedom of expression and thought with the rights of the public to security and safety. Therefore it is important to allow individuals to retain their own beliefs except where they support the use of terrorist violence, in which case challenging such beliefs becomes a legitimate goal. To try and ensure a balance is maintained individuals are not challenged directly but invited to consider alternative beliefs or perspectives alongside those they already subscribe to. This approach does not seek to undermine their beliefs or values but to encourage them to re-examine them, question how consistent they are with their other values and beliefs and raise doubts about the use of violence in the furtherance of their aims.

Identity issues appear to go to the heart of why people commit these types of offence and also why

1. El Said, H. (2012). *De-radicalising Islamists: Programmes and their Impact in Muslim Majority States*. International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR). Kings College: London.
2. Bjorgo, T & Horgan, J. (2009) *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individuals and Collective Disengagement*. Oxon: Routledge.

they choose to disengage and desist.[3] They recognise that when people identify strongly with their relationships, groups or values, these bonds can have a powerful effect over their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Helping people to reconsider what they most identify with (and can often love or care passionately about) is a process that requires support, sensitivity and persistence. This focus allows the interventions to take a more holistic approach and focus on what really matters to people rather than addressing more peripheral issues. The things that offenders typically gain from their involvement (status, purpose, identity, meaning, belonging and justice) are common needs that can be met in other ways. Enabling them to realise and express what they want in legitimate ways is at the bottom of what intervention is trying to achieve.

Experience so far suggests that in order to encourage desistance and/or disengagement interventions need to try and help offenders work towards all or some of the following five goals:

1) Enabling them to meet their personal needs and desires without becoming involved with an extremist group, cause or ideology

2) Addressing the specific attitudes or beliefs that enable them to harm (or support harm) to others

3) Enabling them to express, tolerate and cope with powerful emotions without denigrating or harming others

4) Empowering them to take more responsibility for who they are, how they live their lives and the personal commitments they make

5) Encouraging them to use alternative ways to realise their goals or express their commitments without breaking the law or causing harm to others.

The Healthy Identity Interventions are delivered one-to-one (or two facilitators to one offender) over a number of sessions and are responsive to the individual's needs, risks, type and level of engagement.[4] They are suitable for all types of extremist offenders (regardless of cause) and address both the factors and circumstances that *motivate* individuals to engage and commit terrorist offences as well as the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions that *enable* them to offend. These are the factors that feature in the Extremism Risk Guidelines (ERG 22+).[5] They focus on issues associated with personal and group identity, self-image, group involvement, managing threat, group conflict and seeking social change. The interventions encourage offenders to reconsider whether the commitments they have made to an extremist group, cause or ideology really allow them to achieve their goals, meet their needs and be the type of person they want to be. Ultimately, they encourage individuals to move on with their lives, embrace new commitments and feel empowered to walk away.

Some of the key attributes of this intervention which have been positively endorsed by both facilitators and offenders are: the scope to select the sessions that are most suited to the individual; to work at their own pace; to explore and examine issues which go to the heart of the issue and the power of the material to initiate and sustain genuine commitments to leave offending behind. Both the HII and Al-Furqan have been piloted and evaluated and are in the process of being mainstreamed in both custody and the community.

Enabling them to realise and express what they want in legitimate ways is at the bottom of what intervention is trying to achieve.

The Al-Furqan intervention (meaning to distinguish between truth and falsehood) is specifically suitable for Islamist offenders where ideology has become wedded with extremist interpretations of the Islamic faith. It is intended to challenge misinterpretations of Islamic texts and the 'single narrative' interpretation of world history that support Islamist violence. It does this by avoiding schools of thought and going back to source, inviting participants to examine 20 key texts from Islamic scripture that concern the use of violence by placing them in their original context, by exploring the example and influence of the life of the prophet and his companions and examining periods in Islamic history of peaceful co-existence with those of other faiths. It focuses on key themes such as when it is legitimate to use violence; the covenant of security and good citizenship in Islam, stressing the importance of avoiding discord and meeting obligations to ones neighbours and hosts; how Muslims should conduct themselves with non-Muslims; the concepts of an Abode of War and an Abode of Peace which indicate that Muslims may only defend themselves when they exist in an abode of war and not in a tolerant

3 . Schwartz, S J, Dunkel, C S & Waterman, A S (2009). *Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective*. Studies in International Conflict & Terrorism. 32:537-559.

4. HM Government – National Offender Management Service (2011). *Healthy Identity Intervention; Delivery Manual.*. London: Ministry of Justice Publications.

5. HM Government – National Offender Management Service (2011). *Extremism Risk Guidelines: ERG 22+ Structured Professional Guidelines for Assessing Risk of Extremist Offending*. London: Ministry of Justice Publications.

and accepting community. The aim is to challenge attitudes that support violence by developing a more elaborate and informed understanding of Islam as a tolerant and peace-loving faith within which it is the duty of Muslims to uphold peace and harmony. A preliminary evaluation has endorsed its effectiveness as a means of answering some key questions about the duties and obligations of Muslims in a non-Muslim host country and freeing up participants from beliefs that were holding back their progress.

Learning from Interventions

The importance of effective assessment.

One size does not fit all. As with other offenders, terrorist offenders vary in terms of their motivation and degree of involvement. They also vary in the extent to which they identify with an extremist group or cause, what they would do and to whom. Some become involved because they genuinely want to change the world or to redress injustice; whereas for others it meets criminal motives such as making money or because they enjoy violence. Whilst not all are motivated by a noble political cause, all are motivated for personal reasons. Individuals therefore require interventions that target and respond to these personal differences. For those who have risks and needs similar to more 'conventional' offenders referring them to conventional interventions is the more appropriate course of action. Good assessment is therefore crucial in informing decisions about risk, needs and management strategies so that resources are deployed proportionately and our approaches are effective, ethical, legal and credible. The implementation of the ERG22+ has been crucial in identifying appropriate intervention, measuring its impact, communicating progress and assessing risk in multi-agency forums.

The aim is to challenge attitudes that support violence by developing a more elaborate and informed understanding of Islam as a tolerant and peace-loving faith within which it is the duty of Muslims to uphold peace and harmony.

Recognising the dynamic nature of engagement.

Learning suggests that commitment or engagement is dynamic and that intervention can impact differently at different stages of readiness to change. We cannot assume that offenders are all heavily engaged at the time of intervening or that they haven't already made steps to disengage. Similarly we cannot assume that those whose involvement seems peripheral at the time of conviction haven't become more engaged over time. This requires making subtle and sensitive discriminations which if not handled carefully can threaten the credibility of what we are trying to achieve. Intervention is effective when it is responsive to where individuals are in terms of their commitment and involvement. For some the result may be a permanent decision to 'walk away'[6]; some may begin to question their commitment, thinking and behaviour; for others intervention may consolidate decisions to change they have already made; for others it may simply allow them to express their version of events. For some simply being given the opportunity to discuss their involvement in detail has built trust and a willingness to engage with offender management.

Respecting issues of identity and affiliation.

Identity issues have been recognised as significant not only for why people engage but also why they disengage.[7] The reasons why individuals become engaged in a terrorist group are not different from why anyone bonds with any group, cause or idea: to achieve a sense of identity, meaning, belonging, purpose or security, with the same outcomes in terms of pride, love, even passion, or threat or fear when these identifications are challenged. Enabling individuals to discuss and explore the impact and importance of their extremist engagement on who they are and on their lives — for better or worse — can help them to appreciate the power of this in their lives. Acknowledging the importance of this, without validating what they may have been prepared to do because of it, can allow trust and mutual respect to develop.

With trust individuals can be open to exploring whether their extremist identity actually met or continues to meet their needs or defines who they want to be. A number have described how intervention

6. Horgan, J. (2009). *Walking Away from Terrorism*. Oxon: Routledge.
7. Schwartz, S J, Dunkel, C S & Waterman, A S (2009). *Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective*. Studies in International Conflict & Terrorism. 32:537-559.

helped them resolve personal doubts about their involvement not reflecting the type of person they wanted to be. Disengagement involves active attempts to establish a new identity and commitments in relationships, life circumstances, interests and employment options. However, for change to be embedded it needs to be supported by new opportunities, peers and trusted others who can validate these new identities and tolerate mistakes and set-backs that are a common feature of change. Intervention can play a fundamental role in this process but without a supportive context progress can be hindered or reversed.

The Power of Relationships.

Evaluation has stressed the importance of a trusting, collaborative, mutually respectful and supportive relationship with the facilitator. Often facilitators have had to overcome suspicion, hostility and defensiveness to enable this. Comments such as *'I have realised you are not that different from me'* or *'I thought you would be out to hurt me, not help me'* illustrate the potential for breaking down 'us and them' perceptions which justify violence.[8] These relationships of trust with the authorities have raised the confidence of other offenders to engage in intervention. This underlines the importance of retaining trusted facilitators and possibly using ex-terrorists to build credibility and trust for the authorities. It also argues for maintaining a small specialist group of facilitators to deliver this type of work (especially in custody) who can develop expertise and credibility not only with terrorist offenders but with other departments and agencies in the wider counter-terrorist community.

This power also operates outside of formal intervention in the everyday encounters extremist offenders have with any member of staff who represents the 'out-group'. Demonstrations of concern, respect, empathy and compassion have been the trigger for change in several terrorist offenders who have reported that such behaviour contradicts their preconceptions of staff as 'the enemy' who they expect to humiliate, demean and dis-empower them. This also supports the potential power of positive diversity policies that seek to embed respectful relationships and racial harmony. Equally the importance of family members, friends or companions in facilitating disengagement should not be underestimated.

Sticking to What Works.

Experience also suggests that the general *'what works'* approaches that govern how we intervene with other offenders are equally effective with this group.[9] Effective interventions are those that have been delivered as intended (preserving integrity), where staff have been adequately trained, supervised and supported and where offenders and facilitators are supported by those around them. Ensuring intervention targets those personal factors (criminogenic needs) and circumstances which seem to contribute to the offending also appears to be crucial with this group.

Whilst there are also political or ideological drivers to their offending there are also criminal drivers, and the motivation is also always personal.

This is important as terrorist offenders can create anxiety, fear and unease in staff. Whilst there are some differences in the offending and presentation of terrorist offenders compared to criminal offenders, there are also some similarities. OASys profiles indicate that extremist offenders have similar problems to criminal offenders in the areas of emotional wellbeing, relationships, accommodation and employment and particular problems with thinking and behaviour, attitudes and lifestyle and associates. A significant number also have a criminal history, such that the skills, knowledge and experience that staff bring to other offenders are also relevant to this group. Whilst there are also political or ideological drivers to their offending there are also criminal drivers, and the motivation is also always personal. Working with *personal* issues and needs to prevent offending is what staff of all disciplines do on a daily basis.

What is not yet clear is the extent to which extremist offending is also associated with a deficit in thinking and/or behavioural skills, or whether intervention needs only to focus on uncoupling ideology from its psychological hooks. We need to continue to develop our learning about the differences and similarities between extremist offenders and criminal offenders, but this should not prevent us using what we already know as a solid basis for steering this evolving area of work.

8. Borum, R. (2004). *Psychology of Terrorism.* Tampa: University of South Florida.
9. Mullen, S. (2010). Rehabilitation of Islamist Terrorists: Lessons from Criminology. *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 3, 3, 162-193.

Progress-enabling opportunities.

Our experience suggests that both 'push' and 'pull' influences are important to disengagement. Forming new (or rediscovering old) relationships, interests, activities or groups unconnected to their extremism appears crucial in this process. Whilst this takes responsibility, creativity and courage on the part of the participant it also requires new opportunities and support from others in their immediate surroundings in both community and custody. Where structured intervention has been most effective is where the learning and insight taken from sessions has been realised in embracing new opportunities in their lives. This has proved easier in the community than in custody where opportunities are more limited. In both contexts allowing new freedoms has to be balanced against maintaining restrictions that ensure safety and security. This is not easy to achieve and requires understanding, trust and collaboration between all the parties involved. A danger is that restrictions imposed on individuals by the authorities can fuel further grievance or claims of marginalisation which can sustain their involvement.

A danger is that restrictions imposed on individuals by the authorities can fuel further grievance or claims of marginalisation which can sustain their involvement.

Ongoing Challenges

Measuring Effectiveness and Progress.

Unlike other offender groups, we do not have the numbers of convicted terrorist offenders to conduct rigorous outcome studies. Therefore measuring and evidencing impact and change will continue to be confined to reflecting on the experiences and progress of those who have completed interventions. We need to be cautious about assuming that our interventions are effective but ensure that they are designed as effectively as our current knowledge allows, based on a clearly articulated model of change and systematically evaluated. Whilst the ERG has identified a number of risk factors associated with engagement and readiness to offend, these have only been evidenced by a limited number of cases and are only as good as our current understanding allows. Experience suggests that judgements about intervention and progress are most credible when informed by a range of different perspectives sharing information and knowledge and recognising that change is a dynamic process.

Ensuring Quality.

Given the intense political and public pressure to prevent terrorist offending at all costs, intervention can be deployed inappropriately and disproportionately. What feels the right thing to do may not always be the effective thing to do. Asking individuals to reconsider and re-examine fundamental heart-felt beliefs and life choices is not equivalent to 'sausage making'. This is not intended to sound flippant but to emphasise the sophisticated, sensitive and skilled work required over potentially long periods of time to have a meaningful impact. This is expensive of resources in the current climate. Ensuring a measured approach that seeks to evolve knowledge and understanding should build confidence in our ability to intervene proportionately and resist delivery pressures which could undermine effectiveness.

Supporting Disengagement.

Structured interventions are not divorced from the contexts in which they take place. An ongoing challenge is how we respond operationally to those who show signs of wanting to disengage or who may already have taken steps to disengage. The extremist identity can confer benefits, especially in high security prisons where issues of survival, status and security are paramount. Choosing to 'walk away' involves giving up these benefits and exposing oneself to considerable intimidation and pressure, especially when this becomes public. If offenders do not feel safe or supported in this process, or experience that the system is not responsive to the changes they have made and continues to define them by their offence, it is less likely that they will engage with interventions. There are arguments for and against relocating individuals who wish to disengage. Relocation may remove them from negative sources of influence, but may also prevent them from providing an alternative and credible source of hope and support to those who may be re-considering their own position.[10]

Commentators are quick to identify how influential terrorists may radicalise others in custody but are less quick to appreciate the impact that those who have disengaged may also have on others. This raises the question of whether 'ex-terrorists' should play a more active role in our intervention strategies. There are many reasons why this may be beneficial, including preserving their own decision to disengage where there

10. Bjorgo, T & Horgan, J. (2009) *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individuals and Collective Disengagement*. Oxon: Routledge.

are few valid roles for ex-terrorists to move in to. However there are also costs to this strategy such as the reputational risk of them becoming re-engaged. How we locate, support and utilise those disengaging from terrorist causes or ideologies is an ongoing natter for debate.

Intervening with those about whom there are credible concerns.

NOMS has a responsibility to intervene not only with those who have been convicted of a terrorist offence but also with those about whom there are credible concerns about radicalisation and future risk. This raises various practical, legal, ethical and professional issues. However taking action to challenge possible future offending is not without precedent. Violent or sexual behaviours that manifest in prison or in supervision in offenders who are not convicted of violent or sexual offences are addressed within established child and/or public protection processes. Intervention in these circumstances may involve exploratory discussions about the issues or referral for further support. At the very least, such concerns would be shared with staff on a multi-agency basis and the offender monitored appropriately. However engaging offenders who are not convicted of terrorist offences in structured interventions (as part of sentence management) remains contentious. This is an area that will evolve over time and transparent risk screening should ensure that any such intervention is credible, defensible and appropriate.

There clearly remain a number of ongoing challenges and issues to be addressed such as how can we engage with those who are most staunch and resistant to working with us? How can we be confident about self-reported progress and how can we measure change effectively? How can we ensure intervention approaches are ethical, defensible, credible and at the very least do not 'provoke' or fuel offending? When and for whom may structured intervention be unnecessary? How can different staff in NOMS become more confident about working with terrorist offenders? What opportunities are there to work in partnership with other parts of the counter-terrorist community?

Conclusion

The development and delivery of a co-ordinated, multi-faceted approach to preventing terrorist offending is still in its relative infancy. In a short space of time we have made significant advances in piloting and evaluating a structured assessment methodology and associated interventions that are evidence-based, grounded upon 'what works' principles and beginning to be integrated into mainstream offender management processes. We are developing a growing understanding of pathways, treatment targets and what appears to work, but increasingly need to consider the detail of what works when, why, how and with whom. Through our experience we are developing a much richer understanding of why individuals choose to engage and cross the offending threshold, and why some may choose to disengage and/or desist. There remain a number of significant and pressing challenges, none more so than the necessity to measure more robustly what is and what is not effective. Some terrorist offenders continue to resist working with the authorities. We can only assume that they remain prepared to commit terrorist offences. An important goal for all those who seek to prevent such offending is to ensure that we do not replicate or reinforce the radicalisation process through the work that we do and the policies we create.

Making further progress in addressing these types of issues is likely to require innovative approaches which demand both faith and considerable perseverance. Being able to research, analyse and learn from such experiences and feeding this back into the ongoing evolution of interventions is essential.