

Learning from counter-terrorism

By David Hillson

When a cabinet minister had her computer stolen a few months ago, it initially seemed like just another case of lax government security. Then we discovered that the unfortunate victim was Hazel Blears, MP, the current Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, whose responsibilities include the Prevent element of the Government's counter-terrorism strategy.

Suddenly the theft of her computer became more significant, as people began to worry about sensitive information falling into the wrong hands. Fortunately, it appears there was nothing secret on the machine and it was protected. However, the news also made some people want to know more about 'Prevent'. What is it and how does it work?

Since early 2003 the British Government has had a long-term strategy for countering international terrorism. It's known as CONTEST and some consultant or other probably earned a huge fee for coming up with the name. It is simply a contraction of COuNter TErrorism Strategy and it has four strands, known as the four P's: Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare (see Figure 1).

The first two P's aim to reduce the overall threat to the British public from international terrorism, while the second two P's seek to reduce the extent of our vulnerability. Each strand has a very specific goal, with a range of associated actions to put it into practice:

- **Prevent** terrorism by tackling its underlying causes, particularly trying to address the radicalisation of individuals in the UK and elsewhere, dealing with underlying structural problems such as inequalities and discrimination, and challenging the ideologies used to support terrorism;
- **Pursue** terrorists and those who sponsor them, disrupting terrorist planning and activities through intelligence and action, both at home and abroad, including international cooperation with allies and partners;
- **Protect** the public and UK interests in UK and overseas, to reduce vulnerabilities to attack by strengthening border security, protecting key utilities and transport infrastructures, and paying special attention to crowded public places;
- **Prepare** for the consequences of a terrorist attack, by assessing possible impacts, building the necessary capabilities to respond to any attacks that might occur, regularly evaluating and testing

preparedness, and learning lessons from exercises and real events.

The Government currently spends a total of £2 billion annually on counter-terrorism, intelligence and resilience, with particular effort focused on the Prevent strand of CONTEST. Citizens should be reassured that the Government is taking this threat seriously, and that a structured and comprehensive approach has been developed and is being implemented.

How is the UK Government's counter-terrorism strategy relevant to those of us working in projects? Fortunately, most of our projects have nothing to do with terrorism or malicious threats to human life and security. We do, however, face many other types of threats which require our serious and structured attention. Can we learn anything from CONTEST and the four P's?

Threats are uncertain future events or sets of circumstances that may never occur. However, if they were to happen, they would have a negative effect on one or more of our project objectives. This means threats have two key characteristics, which we might label as 'probability' (how likely is it to happen?) and 'impact' (what would the result be?). The main way we deal with threats in the context of projects is through risk management, which offers a structured approach to identify, assess and respond to all types of risks (including both threats and opportunities).

The response development part of the risk process is where we try to find appropriate ways to tackle each identified risk, and some believe that this is the most important element of managing risk. After all, if our responses are ineffective, then risk exposure remains unchanged, or we may even make it worse. On the other hand, effective risk responses will reduce risk exposure and give us the best chance of meeting our project objectives.

Response development is where the four P's come in. The first two P's tackle the probability side of the threat equation.

Prevent seeks to reduce the chance of a threat arising in the first place, by tackling its underlying causes. And **Pursue** aims to disrupt the processes that might lead a threat to turn into a real event, minimising the probability of a successful attack. The impact dimension of threat is addressed by the second two P's. The **Protect** strand ensures that our

vulnerability to a threat is as low as practicably possible, while **Prepare** provides contingency plans to deal quickly and effectively with any events that might actually happen.

Project managers and those responsible for addressing risk in projects could learn a lot from considering these four P's of counter-terrorism. They offer different insights into ways of tackling the threats we face every day in our projects and organisations, and could help us to find more effective responses. We may not encounter the menace of terrorism in our projects, but we should be as determined as the Government to take all necessary steps to deal with the threats we do face.

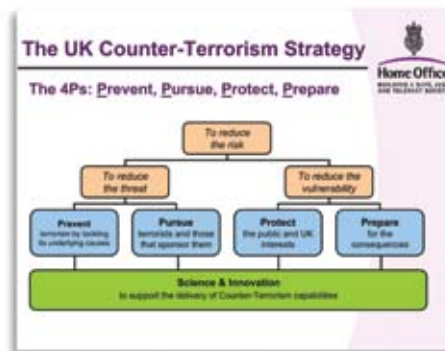


Figure 1 © Crown Copyright

Last month David looked at 'Lessons from the National Risk Register' and for those who are interested full details of the UK National Risk Register can be found on the Cabinet Office website at http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/reports/national_risk_register.aspx

About the author

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