



## Transcript: Perspectives in Law Enforcement—Prevent Units and the Importance of Community Relations in Law Enforcement: An Interview With Sergeant Alan Murphy

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Justice Podcast Series is designed to provide the latest information in justice innovations, practices, and perspectives from the field of criminal justice. In this edition, Michael Medaris, Senior Policy Advisor at BJA, talks with Sergeant Alan Murphy of the London Metropolitan Police Service (Met) about London's Prevent and Engage Units and how these units built community relationships in order to better identify and prevent extremist attacks.

**Michael Medaris:** Hello, this is Michael Medaris. I'm a Senior Policy Advisor with the Bureau of Justice Assistance, and today we are sitting down with Sergeant Alan Murphy. Alan is a 17-year veteran of the London Met—better known over here as Scotland Yard—and our interest today and our conversation today centers around his work with the Prevent and Engage Unit. This unit is primarily designed to address the issue of violent extremist behavior by developing trusting, long-standing relationships in those neighborhoods and communities susceptible to extremist ideology. This is very important to us as we here in America are becoming increasingly concerned about similar threats here in the United States.

So, Alan, could you tell us a little bit about the Prevent and Engage Unit that you developed and manage in Hounslow Borough here at the Metropolitan Police Service?

**Sgt. Alan Murphy:** We work in a very diverse community at Hounslow. There's roughly 130 languages spoken here. And our remit was to engage with those that are hard to reach, those that might be on the edge of extremism of all sorts; that's from the far right, through to the far left, animal rights extremism, Islamic extremists, Irish extremists. It's a very wide remit but, the idea being, we had to make efforts to engage with people that we hadn't tried to engage with in the past.

**Michael Medaris:** If you were going to start a unit like this in the United States—and Alan you spent a substantial amount of time in the United States so you are familiar with how we, how our law enforcement operations work—what would be some of the first things you would consider doing?

**Sgt. Alan Murphy:** You have to look at who you would be employing to work there. You look for people with appropriate backgrounds. When we set our unit up, we had a cross match of skills across the organization. We had a faith officer who was linked into all the local churches and the faith groups. We had an officer who'd work Safer Neighborhood teams, which

is the local policing side of things. We had an officer who has worked with the senior management team for a considerable amount of time and worked in partnership with the local council or the local authority. And we also had an officer who had done a lot of youth work, over 10 years' experience at youth work. So that was our broad base, so that we actually had the skills already there.

**Michael Medaris:** I noticed that you use the term "Safer Neighborhood teams." Could you explain a little bit to the audience what Safer Neighborhood teams mean in terms of the Metropolitan Police Service?

**Sgt. Alan Murphy:** I run a Safer Neighborhoods team at the moment: It's a sergeant, two constables, and four PCSOs, who are [police] community support officers. Our role is to engage with roughly about 10,000 people across the borough, and there are 20 wards on the borough with 20 different teams working them. And we work locally with them so we know our local beat. It would be very much [like] the beat officer model that you've got in America. You know your local beat, you know the local people, the issues, and you target those and you try and get results for the local community.

**Michael Medaris:** And going back to the local Prevent Unit, you've selected your personnel in a way that has a broad range of disciplines and interests and experience. What are some of the things you would consider doing before the unit starts engaging the community in terms of training?

**Sgt. Alan Murphy:** Training-wise, I developed what we needed to do with our team so that our skills were enhanced, but we also have to train in-house so that our colleagues are aware of what we're trying to do, where we're trying to do them, and how we're trying to do them, because there is nothing as embarrassing as someone going to a police officer, talking about your unit, and they have no knowledge of them.

So we did that. We then went slightly further afield, and we did some training with our partners and third-party delivery agents across the borough and across the Metropolitan Police Service as well [so] that we were actually educating people as to what we were trying to do so that people were aware and could back us up if necessary. But again, there is nothing as bad as that vacuum of just a unit being set up and no one knowing what they are trying to do and what they are trying to achieve.

**Michael Medaris:** Let's go back to training the frontline personnel that will be in your unit. And if I was going to start one in Washington, D.C., what type of information should be in that training when we're starting a unit from the ground [up]?

**Sgt. Alan Murphy:** You have to look at the local issues to Washington, D.C., being aware of the national issues as well, and international issues also come into extremism work. So what you need to do is educate your staff around the local issues because that's what they are going to home in on, but they have to be aware of what's happening across the borders as well because something that happens in another country can impact on your local community, and it's also about finding out and knowing the local community, what their issues are.

Which leads me on to—you have to speak to the community and listen. There is no point in trying to tell them what you think the issues are. You have to actively listen. You can't promise everything, but what you can promise is to try your best, and this is the way you will actually start building bridges and break down the barriers that are in place.

**Michael Medaris:** Speaking of breaking down barriers, some neighborhoods in our communities will be instinctively resistant or reluctant to engage the police based on prior history [and] based on the countries they come from. How are—what were some of the things that your unit did that were non-law enforcement but seemed to be able to reach out and gain common ground with some of these communities at risk of extremism?

**Sgt. Alan Murphy:** I worked on the principle of, if we got an invite anywhere, we attended, because if you don't attend in the first instance, you won't get a second invite. If we say we'll try to deliver something, you feed back and you work around that. I work on a principle as well of—it's like having your friends. You are in touch with your friends within a 4- to 6-week period; it's an ongoing relationship. If it gets beyond that, then it becomes "on a long finger"; you tend to put things off. So I tend to state to my team that we must have engagement with people over a 4- to 6-week period so we're not losing any bridges we start.

Some of the things we did—we got involved in teaching first aid at various faith establishments and with youth groups across the borough. We also got involved in teaching self-defense to youngsters, to females. We tried to source some swimming lessons for especially mothers who had young children who couldn't swim and due to religious or cultural differences couldn't use swimming pools at regular times. We worked on the first aid side of things because you had people with young children who'd never taken a first aid course in their lives. These were things the communities were asking could we develop and deliver. Well, as police officers, we actually had the skills and staff on the borough to deliver these, and we worked around what we had. We also spoke to all [of] our staff and asked what their outside interests were because a police officer is just not a police officer wearing a uniform; they actually have outside skills. We had a break dancer, a DJ, we had people at martial arts and boxing skills, so we were able to utilize these skills to actually deliver something to the community.

**Michael Medaris:** Alan, I've really become very, very curious about some of the things you learned in your 2-year stint with the Prevent Unit. [Are there] things that you would like to share with an American audience that kind of surprised you but became relatively very important in the success of your unit?

**Sgt. Alan Murphy:** I think you have to consider things like personality. You get accepted into various communities for your personality, for who you are. A lot of the conversations were, "Alan's a good guy; Alan can do this, Alan can do that." And on the back of that was, "Oh by the way, he's a police officer too." So it is about your personality.

One of the issues I had was, I was handing over [the] care of one faith community to another officer, and the question put to me by the community was, "Well, who's coming?" So I said his name, I said his rank, and they said, "What if we don't like him?" And that kind of threw me a bit because I realized at that point they were actually engaging with me as a person as opposed to the Alan that wears a uniform and is delivering.

You've also got to consider the skills that the officers have got coming in to the role, how you can develop and educate them—and a lot of it is about education—because that's where you get problems with communities; it's a lack of education for the police officers on their behalf and also an education for the community. An example of that would be a lot of police officers feel they can't enter religious establishments or cultural centers for fear of actually putting someone off or insulting them in any way. And what I've actually picked up over the last 2 to 3 years is to say, "We are happy for you to come into our faith and cultural centers. If you're doing something wrong, we'll point it out to you and then you'll learn from it. But if you're not coming through the door, we cannot engage with you." And it's seen then as a polarization that becomes a "them and us" situation, that the police are not making enough effort. So I've encouraged all of the officers across this borough and further across the Met to say, "Take a chance. Knock on a door. Get invited in. Have a cup of tea." This is local policing at its very heart and soul.

What I tend to do—I like to cycle when I'm on patrol because it means that you're more approachable. I've been told this by the community on numerous occasions. Down to the effect [that] one day I was late for an appointment, so I got a lift off a colleague in a vehicle. They [the community] actually said I looked more officious on that day. I was wearing the exact same uniform, I was in my cycling equipment, but I hadn't got my bicycle, and the community said, "You just look more officious." And I couldn't see through that. As a police officer, you kind of have your blinkers on and you're just convinced that you are the same person, but the fact that I hadn't got a bicycle made me more intimidating. And I couldn't see it, but now I do. It's a learning process. Definitely, for me as a police officer, it has helped develop me over the last couple of years in what I've been doing. There's an acceptance that maybe we don't do everything right all the time, but we have to communicate with the community themselves and listen to what they're saying. And you will be surprised as a police officer if you actually listen, actively listen, and you can just change one or two things that you're doing and it makes you more approachable; it makes you a better police officer, and it works for everybody within the community.

Just be aware of “silo effects” as well, that if you get too established in what you’re doing, and you think what you’re doing is right and you’re not listening, you’re not actively listening, you’ll just end up worlds apart from the community you are supposed to be serving—because, at the end of the day, we are a part of that community. A big bone or a big thing we always talked about was the similarities. I’ve got young children; everybody I’m dealing with has got young children. We all want a safer environment, a safer world for the children to grow up in. There’s a commonality to start off with. So you will find things that are there. If you get invited for food, go around and—being British police service, you have a vision of us sitting there with cups of tea and our finger out while we’re sipping our tea; it doesn’t work that way. You actually sit on the floor, you sit on the food mat with people, you share food with them, and all the time you’re building bridges, you’re building that confidence where someone will turn around and say to you, “There’s an issue here, there’s an issue there.” I’d never thought I’d have it, but I had a young man brought in to me who the imam and the people at the mosque were concerned he was being taken down the route of extremism. But they brought him in to me because they trusted me as a person to speak to him one on one and tell him where he was going wrong from the police and the law and the legal point of view; whereas, they were breaking him down from the religious point of view and saying what he was actually reading about was wrong. So we were working two-pronged to actually stop people [from] becoming extremists.

**Michael Medaris:** And that’s a wonderful approach and the one that offers the best chance of success. So I’d like to close with this: Alan, if you could tell us three things that—if we were going to do a Prevent Unit, what are the three things in terms of personnel selection, terms of training, terms of aptitude, what are those things, those three things, that you would make sure we knew about?

**Sgt. Alan Murphy:** You need your staff to be personable, approachable, but very open-minded too. You need them to think outside the box. You don’t want them to think of everything in life as being police officer realm. They are human beings first of all, and this is how they are going to engage with the community, so get them to be human. Say, “Throw away the uniform for a bit and just imagine yourself as someone on the street who’s got some issues. How would you like to be treated by the police service? How would you best

like to be approached?” It’s down to little things. Some people like to be e-mailed. Some people like to be text messaged. Some people like you to go face to face. Some people like you to just drop in. But you have to listen and pick up what people actually want from you.

The second part is knowledge. You have to equip your staff with the knowledge to deal with the communities that you try to engage with, but you also have to give them an enhanced knowledge because their colleagues should come to them as points of reference, as experts in their field, and let them feel confident in what they’re doing. I got asked to do a presentation to 350 senior managements—sorry—senior managers of this service. Being of lower rank, I was petrified. I got in to do my presentation and I realized I was an expert in what I was actually talking about and most of the people in the room have read about it or have a very small knowledge. And that was an eye opener to me to say that my knowledge base had been enlarged so much that I was ahead of the field of some of my managers, and I was actually to them a source of reference.

And then, the last thing I would say is the officers have got to be accepted by the community. If you’ve got somebody who wants to go out and do interventions and police work, arresting people/investigating crime, this doesn’t balance up with what the community actually wants. The community wants someone that they can trust. They don’t want you knocking on the door one day, arresting somebody inside their establishment, and then coming back the next day and saying, “It’s me, I’m back. I’m the same person as I was 2 days ago, but yesterday I had to put handcuffs on somebody and take them away at gunpoint, whereas today I want to talk to you about the issues.” It’s a very difficult thing to do, so you actually have to say to your officers they may have to put aside some of their policing skills, policing mindset, to actually build those bridges and encourage engagement work. But the bottom line I always said to the community was, “If something’s happening and I have to deal with it as a police officer, I will deal with it, and you have to accept that as well.” So it’s a bit of give and take.

**Michael Medaris:** Well thank you Sergeant and the wider purview departments of the Metropolitan Police Service. Sergeant Murphy, Metropolitan Police Service, Hounslow Bureau, thank you very, very much!

**Closing:** Thank you for taking the time to join us for this conversation. If you found the discussion interesting, we encourage you to visit the BJA web site for more innovative ideas and best practices at [www.ojp.gov/BJA](http://www.ojp.gov/BJA). From all of us here at BJA, thank you for tuning in to today’s podcast. We hope you will join us again for another edition of BJA’s Justice Podcast Series.

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