



The Prevention Papers

Upstream investment and early action to prevent harm: building knowledge and breaking down barriers

Introduction

Prevention is essential to what **nef** calls the 'Great Transition': moving from where we are today to a sustainable future. Instead of being beset by widening social inequalities, accelerating climate change, catastrophic waste of natural resources and an economy locked into decline, we want social justice and well-being for all, environmental sustainability and an economy that flourishes without wrecking the planet. We can only hope to make this transition if we pay much closer attention to preventing harm.

Just about everyone would agree that our goals are desirable. Where people differ is how to reach them. Some say the markets should be in the driving seat, perhaps with some tweaks to regulation. Others insist that the future lies with voluntary and community-based organisations. Still others argue that government will have to take the lead, as the only institution that can curb the markets and deliver social equity. These competing views have created a kind of impasse, or what we might call the 'paradox of prevention' – everyone agrees that prevention is a good idea, but little is done to make it happen. Considering the depth of the social, environmental and economic crises we face, we must find ways to escape this paradox.

With support from the Big Lottery Fund, **nef** has organised a series of papers, presentations and events

to examine and develop the case for shifting investment and action 'upstream' to prevent harm. Six key themes have emerged from the work so far, which focus on the need for:

1. a systemic approach to prevention that addresses society, environment and economy and how they interact and depend on each other for a sustainable future;
2. a better understanding of how the idea of preventing harm can be realised in practice;
3. an upstream, positive approach to prevention and an awareness of unintended consequences;
4. new incentives and policy mechanisms to support prevention;
5. new ways of valuing and measuring prevention and its consequences;
6. a broad alliance in favour of upstream investment and early action, to include policymakers and practitioners, communities and citizens.

'Prevention' may sound negative. In fact, it is about realising benefits – making better use of public money, better quality of life, less need for heavy-handed state intervention to cope with things that go wrong, and the safety and security of future generations.

However, there are significant barriers. For example, the 'rescue principle' defines much philanthropy, charity

and health care. It's a strong motivation for many organisations, who want to help people who are already needy and give priority to those in greatest need. They may see upstream prevention as a diversion, threatening to reduce funds available for urgent treatment and repair.

Efforts aimed at coping with existing damage are more likely to have immediate, tangible and measurable results. Preventative action is usually longer-term, more complex, less visible, and typically harder to measure. This sets up a political bias against prevention. Some may find there are more headlines, more reputational advantages and even more profits in doing things further 'downstream' – by helping problems become less acute or managing them, once they have occurred.

To help resolve the paradox of prevention and build a broad alliance in favour of 'upstream' intervention, we are building an agenda for further research and action, which is set out below in the section **Further work on prevention**.

The agenda is big, broad, complicated and extremely challenging. Nonetheless, in bringing together a diverse range of participants, capturing cutting-edge thinking in prevention and setting out some thoughts for 'where next', we hope to build knowledge about prevention, to help build a broad alliance and to influence policy and practice.

Building knowledge and breaking down barriers

We offer here a short summary of the main themes that have emerged from our work so far.

The first output was a report, *The Wisdom of Prevention*, published by **nef** in April 2012.

The Wisdom of Prevention

The report argues that early action to prevent harm can have four major advantages. Firstly, it improves human well-being and quality of life, and helps to build resilience. Secondly, it safeguards public resources for dealing with unavoidable risks and promoting positive benefits. Thirdly, it reduces the need for heavy-handed government intervention to treat or cure 'downstream', avoidable ill-being, damage and dysfunction. Fourthly, it helps to safeguard the future for our children and grandchildren. Preventative government should thus be understood not as needless, interfering nannying, but as a liberating force and an essential feature of sustainable development.

The report describes three different levels of prevention:

- 'Downstream' measures which try to cope with the consequences of harm and focus on specific cases, to stop things getting worse.
- 'Midstream' measures which aim to mitigate the effects of harm that has already happened and focus on groups and other things considered 'at risk' or 'vulnerable'.
- 'Upstream' measures which aim to prevent harm before it occurs and usually focus on whole populations and systems.

Sometimes, prevention is needed on all three levels, but 'downstream' intervention should be a last resort. Without tackling the underlying causes of harm, 'midstream' and 'downstream' measures will have little or no lasting effect.

Uniquely, the report (and **nef**'s programme of work) considers the case for prevention across the three fields of society, economy and environment. Although prevention has different specific objectives in different fields, these fields are inextricably linked and interdependent. The underlying causes of harm in society, the environment and economy are often strongly linked and can be mutually reinforcing. They must be addressed together if we are to work towards a sustainable future.

To read the full report, click [here](#).

These issues were further explored at a major interdisciplinary conference on 9th May 2012, held at the London School of Economics. We explored how a preventative approach could be applied in each field – society, environment and the economy – what the barriers and opportunities are, and what can be learned from this cross-sectoral perspective.

'The Wisdom of Prevention': Conference, May 2012

The conference included presentations from:

- **Lord Adair Turner**, Chair of the Financial Services Authority
- **Jonathon Porritt**, Founder Director of Forum for the Future
- **Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP**, Chair of the Public Accounts Committee
- **David Robinson**, Chair of the Early Action Taskforce
- **Dharmendra Kanani**, England Director of the Big Lottery Fund.

Prevention may sound like common sense, but as noted by David Robinson at the conference, common sense does not always become common practice. In fact, there are very few examples of a preventative approach being applied in a strategic or systematic way. Even in the health sector, where prevention is perhaps most advanced, as Margaret Hodge noted, only four per cent of the total NHS spend is devoted to preventative measures.

As discussed at the conference, prevention faces substantial challenges in becoming a mainstream approach – including the political will needed to take the agenda forward, establishing the evidence for its impact, the dominant neo-liberal economic orthodoxy, and the ‘rescue principle’ which shapes much philanthropic and charitable activity. Despite these challenges, as indicated by the conference there is a growing recognition that we urgently need a new way to understand and tackle the underlying causes of harm. As Lord Turner reminded attendees, it is the uncertainty of what the human, environmental and financial costs might be that makes prevention a necessity.

To view a short film of the conference, click [here](#).

Expert Seminar

Following the report and the conference, **nef** hosted an expert seminar on 1 November 2012, at the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) at the London School of Economics. This considered issues of policy and practice in greater depth. The seminar was organised around five papers commissioned for the purpose. These are summarised below.

1. Build a systemic approach to prevention across society, environment and economy

The first paper highlights the value of an analysis that crosses the economy, society and the environment, and the importance of recognising that what happens in each of these fields is interlinked. Preventive activity – and the prevention agenda in general – needs to operate across these fields if it is to be successful and sustainable.

The author applies a framework drawn from the historical and comparative study of welfare states to survey the extent of prevention in social, environmental and economic policy. He identifies three factors – *ideas*, *interests* and *institutions* – which help to explain the extent and patterns of prevention that we observe across these domains.

Ideas or ideology often shape the goals, scope and nature of preventive strategies. Public policies, including

preventive policies, are also shaped by institutions. For example, representative democracy can induce short-term policy-making following electoral cycles, militating against longer term preventive strategies. Ideas often reflect organised interests, for example professional interests, which might seek to defend the existing welfare state, or industrial and commercial interests, which can resist restrictions on products that cause harm.

Prevention remains relatively marginal in most fields in spite of apparently widespread support. With the exception of environmental policy, ‘secondary prevention’ has generally been favoured over ‘primary prevention’ – because of dominant ideas, interests and institutions, and increasingly now because of a desire to reduce short-term costs. The global dominance of neoliberal ideas continues to block the emergence of an alternative strategy for an equitable and sustainable social economy.

An alternative, preventive social-economic model would need to address three main issues: the sovereignty of ‘consumer choice’; how to reach consensus on just and sustainable forms of preventive intervention; and the preconditions for integrated policymaking across the three fields.

Understanding prevention policy: a theoretical approach

Professor Ian Gough, London School of Economics

Professor Ian Gough is Visiting Professor at CASE (the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion) at the London School of Economics, and an Associate at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment. Until summer 2009 he was Professor of Social Policy at the University of Bath, where he is now Professor Emeritus.

2. Understand how the idea of prevention can be realised in practice

Michael Jacobs develops this theme, exploring the challenge of implementing policies that aim to prevent harm to the environment.

The author reflects on environmental policy from the perspective of prevention, with a particular focus on climate change. He offers a simple conceptual model of prevention which suggests that successful preventive action (for example, immunisation policies or health and safety) occur where the action and the harm to be prevented are close together in time. This allows for a closer and more apparent relationship evidence, action and effect.

It might be assumed that environmental policy is inherently preventative – because the issues and interventions, as there is a strong discourse in environmentalism about ‘protecting the future’. In fact, most environmental policy has been about responding to pressing current problems. The major exception is the field of climate change, in which significant policy has been enacted before the effects of climate change started to become noticeable and which are addressed only to future benefits (given the time it takes for reductions in emissions to have an impact).

Reasons for this include: the size of the future costs of climate change; the fact that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change presents a strong scientific consensus; an emerging interest in the present benefits of action (for example, through analyses such as the Stern Review and the increasing business interests for action); a social movement arguing a moral case for action; and a generation of politicians who took up the issue and instituted policy frameworks to promote action. However, now a backlash is occurring, and it is crucial to revive and maintain momentum towards preventive action. Statutory targets can help to embed implementation in policy. Above all, it is important to build and sustain a broad alliance and a strong social movement in favour of action.

The challenge of implementing preventative environmental policies

Professor Michael Jacobs, London School of Economics

Michael Jacobs is an academic, writer and commentator on international climate change and energy policy, British politics and social democratic and green political thought. He is a Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics and at University College London, and Co-Editor of the Political Quarterly. Michael Jacobs was for six years Special Adviser to former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and before that head of the think tank and political association the Fabian Society.

3. Promote an upstream, positive approach and be wary of unintended consequences

‘Prevention’ can be attempted in different ways. If the underlying causes of harm are not fully understood and thoroughly addressed, there can be harmful unintended consequences. For example, where urban planning and public buildings are concerned, attempts to reduce crime and fear of crime through heightened security can be counter-productive.

Supported by the police, private security and insurance industries, high security has now become a pre-requisite of planning permission for new developments. A government-backed design policy called Secured by Design is aimed at housing, town centre development and public buildings such as schools and hospitals. While this includes sensible recommendations, such as the need for adequate locks on doors and windows, the application of Secured by Design standards tends to create environments which can appear threatening. Higher crime areas, which correlate with higher deprivation scores, are now characterised by public buildings with a militarised feel to them. The unintended consequence is that fortress levels of security are now a visual marker for poor parts of Britain.

Despite a lack of strong evidence, short term technological measures based on this thinking have taken precedence over long term ‘upstream’ prevention. Secured by Design has offered an attractively simple and straightforward ‘solution’ to the problem and fear of crime in poor places, without having to deal with more complex causes of poverty. The focus on technological solutions has corresponded with reduced investment in guardianship figures such as caretakers, park keepers and bus conductors. These ‘eyes on the ground’, though greatly valued by local residence, have gradually disappeared. As a result, although crime has been falling steadily since 1995, the vast majority believe it is rising. An unintended consequence of extra security can be to raise concerns over safety, while symbols of security can remind us of our insecurities. Anna Minton and Jody Aked call for a more thorough debate to unpick the underlying causes of our need to feel safer.

Fortress Britain: high security, insecurity and the challenge of preventing harm

Anna Minton and Jody Aked, **nef**

Anna Minton is a writer and journalist who has worked as a foreign correspondent, business reporter and social affairs writer and has won a number of national journalism awards. She is the author of the acclaimed book Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the 21st Century City.

*Jody Aked from **nef** consulting has specialist expertise in applying well-being research to organisational strategy, social marketing, service delivery and evaluation. She previously worked for the Centre for Well-being at **nef**, leading on consultancy projects for the built environment sector, children’s services, public health and international development, as well as for central and local government.*

4. Introduce new incentives and policy mechanisms to support prevention

It is important to keep in mind the financial reality facing public services and local authorities. It is extremely difficult to shift resources into prevention while still funding acute services that face rising demand. The politics of decommissioning acute services can be a major barrier to prevention. As one participant in the expert seminar put it, a balance often needs to be struck between responding to current need and preventing future harm. Nonetheless, some local authorities are beginning to shift to preventive approaches, for example by viewing their revenue budgets in terms of investment rather than spending.

As Michael Jacobs notes, some policy mechanisms, such as statutory targets, can lock policymakers into long-term preventative action in climate change. David Robinson and Will Horwitz propose other mechanisms to promote preventive approaches to policy, investment and practice, and to hold government to account.

At present, preventive action can be found in only a few cases where there are bold leaders and relatively small programmes. This is due to a set of deep structural barriers that stand in the way. They include a strong set of disincentives embedded within public spending, especially a short-term planning and budgeting cycle which actively discourages investing now to save money in the future. Reforming these will transform early action from the exception to the norm, across public services, the economy, and the environment.

In order to promote a new approach focused on the longer term which is thoughtful, rigorous and sustained, the authors propose a range of mechanisms to ensure that spending on early action becomes the default option. These include: national ten-year spending plans and 'Early Action Transition Plans'; treating early action in the same way as capital investment; and better information on what is spent now and how much it will cost tomorrow. A cross-party 'transition commission' is proposed, to help build consensus about the areas where early action is needed and to help reorient thinking and planning.

Shifting to prevention: overcoming the structural barriers

David Robinson and Will Horwitz, Community Links

David Robinson OBE is a community worker, the co-founder of Community Links and now senior adviser. He currently leads the Early Action Task Force. He founded We Are What We Do and the Children's Discovery

Centre. He is a trustee of the holding company for the Big Society Bank and, as one of the architects of the Social Impact Bond, chairs the Social Impact Bond advisory group.

Will Horwitz is Community Links' Communications Coordinator. Prior to Community Links, he was Oxfam's UK Poverty Communications Officer where he carried out communication strategies including online strategy, media coverage, publications, and stories/case studies compilation.

The Early Action Task Force is a group of charity, business and academic leaders tackling the barriers to early action, promoting a society that prevents problems from arising rather than one that deals with the consequences. The Early Action Task Force's second report, The Deciding Time, has recently been published and is available on the Community Links early action website at: www.community-links.org/earlyaction.

5. Develop and promote new ways of measuring the value of prevention

A crucial part of creating a positive agenda for prevention is to continue to strengthen the evidence base for alternative approaches. The ways in which 'value' is conventionally understood and measured can be a barrier to prevention.

It is important to develop alternative ways of calculating long-term value in order that future costs and benefits, including inter-generational ones, can carry appropriate weight in decision-making. That said, there are limits to the use and impact of evidence in policymaking. Politicians often use evidence selectively to justify decisions they have already made – and challenge the methodology where there is strong countervailing evidence.

Broader factors, including ideological conceptions of value, often play a larger role than evidence, in part because of the nature of knowledge and evidence in the social sciences, which is typically more contested than in other scientific fields. Other challenges include the complex links between interventions and outcomes and the time lags involved. These can make it harder to value and measure preventive action.

Questions of 'value' sit at the heart of decision-making, even where processes claim to be objective. While there is broad agreement that prevention makes sense, the practical case for national and local government making preventative investments is often undermined by a reliance on conventional measurement tools. These focus mainly on money; they fail to ensure that the full

benefits and costs of a given activity accrue to the actors responsible for it (which both over-rewards activities that create harm and under-values activities that prevent it); they struggle to 'price' longer-term and less certain outcomes and, because of their narrowness, they tend to reinforce the unequal distribution of benefits across society by reflecting the interests of existing owners of assets and wealth.

Gaining traction for a preventative agenda in policy and practice will depend on demonstrating that the benefits outweigh costs in monetary terms. This paper describes **nef**'s approach to measuring social value, and emphasises how this much more holistic approach to measurement is crucial to advancing prevention in policy. **nef**'s work has found that many social, environmental and economic outcomes measured through this approach turn out to have significant positive implications for the public purse. This helps to strengthen the case for prevention in a number of ways. It sheds light on barriers to upstream investment and early action, and suggests ways of overcoming them. **nef**'s analysis points to the need for a political focus on such 'upstream' measures as enhancing social mobility, reducing child poverty and tackling income and wealth disparities through early intervention ('pre-distribution'), rather than through post-hoc tax adjustments and income transfers.

Valuing prevention: returns on long-term investments and early intervention

Helen Kersley and Anna Coote, **nef**

*Helen Kersley is head of the Valuing what Matters programme at **nef**. Her work at **nef** has encompassed research into public procurement, labour markets, and criminal justice. She began her career in the Government Economics Service, specialising in international finance at HM Treasury, and later the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and Advocacy International.*

*Anna Coote is head of Social Policy at **nef**, and a leading analyst, writer and advocate in social policy. She was responsible for ground-breaking work on health and sustainable development as Commissioner for Health with the UK Sustainable Development Commission, led the Healthcare Commission's work on engaging patients and the public, and was Director of Health Policy at the King's Fund.*

Build a broad alliance – from policymakers and practitioners, to communities and citizens

Michael Jacobs notes the important role played by social movements in favour of action against climate change. This is something that other areas of prevention could learn from and the theme emerged strongly from the seminar discussion. What's needed is a 'hearts and minds' strategy to influence decision-makers and a broader shift of attitudes in favour of an upstream, positive prevention agenda. This means building a broad consensus, backed by social movements and able to survive the ministerial merry-go-round and successive changes of government.

This will not be easy. Participants at the seminar noted that moving from 'downstream' to 'upstream' 'prevention' is likely to challenge powerful interest groups, including those in public services and the voluntary sector, as well in business. However, many people and organisations working in these sectors are equally frustrated by failure to address or resolve the issues at source. They too could become allies in the transition to prevention. There are growing business interests in favour of combating climate change; it is possible to envisage similar interests emerging in other fields.

As Anna Minton and Jody Aked suggest, it may be easier for people to grasp simple rather than complex issues. Because prevention is inherently complex, people will need information, education, advocacy and leadership to understand and support this agenda. And the more complex a problem, the more important it is to bring moral arguments to the fore.

Some commentators appear to regard the prevention agenda as an essentially technocratic exercise – focusing largely on questions of evidence and measurement, or new policy or financial mechanisms – to be discussed and determined within the political class. These mechanisms may be necessary, but they are insufficient. A truly preventative society requires change from the bottom up – with people and organisations increasingly engaged, becoming more powerful and less vulnerable.

Many of the programmes and projects supported by the Big Lottery Fund demonstrate how people and communities can be engaged in prevention on the ground. One discussant at the expert seminar, Peter Taylor Gooby, suggested that radical participative methods could play an important role in engaging the public in prevention.

This is central to **nef**'s agenda – working with a diverse range of actors including local communities to develop and promote sustainable alternatives. For **nef**, the prevention agenda must be underpinned by a positive

vision of a future society – for sustainable social, economic and environmental justice, including inter-generational justice. Challenging established interests that benefit from the status quo is crucial to resolving the paradox of prevention and building a broad alliance in its favour.

Further work on prevention

Reflecting on the work so far, **nef** remains convinced that ‘upstream’ investment and action is urgently needed to address the toxic combination of social, environmental and economic crises that beset us today. We recognise that there remains an uphill struggle to convince policymakers and practitioners in all three fields to make the shift, and that many significant practical barriers stand in the way.

What is needed now, in **nef**’s view, is to develop and promote the intellectual, ethical and economic case for prevention. This calls for:

- building knowledge about the differences and similarities between the three fields of society, environment and economy, to further develop a holistic rather than sector-level model of prevention;
- developing a deeper understanding of the costs, benefits and trade-offs involved in taking a preventative approach to policy and practice, compared to conventional approaches. This includes generating case studies showing the relative costs and benefits of preventing harm, drawn from across the three fields;
- better understanding the political, economic and social/cultural barriers to prevention, and how these relate to and influence each other, and how they can be overcome;
- building alliances with proponents of prevention across the three fields, including between policymakers and practitioners;
- developing emblematic policy proposals, with robust costings, to demonstrate the potential benefits of preventative approaches;
- stimulating wider public debate about the need to prevent harm, with a view to influencing research, policy and practice.

Case studies drawn from across the three fields will help to anchor ideas about prevention in concrete examples and would begin to identify the costs and benefits of prevention-based alternatives alongside conventional approaches. Areas for study could include local economic development, personal debt, poor and insecure housing, food production and supply, improving the real security of local environments, and

better balancing work, family and social life. It will also be useful to explore options for safeguarding the well-being and security of future generations.

We welcome responses to these papers and suggestions for future work in this area:
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Special thanks to:

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Expert seminar discussants: Professor Peter Taylor Gooby (Professor of Social Policy at the University of Kent), Richard Wakeford (Principal at Rural Strategy), and Ambreen Shah (Deputy Director, England Policy, at the Big Lottery Fund).

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The cover image shows the John Snow memorial and public house on Broadwick Street in London. Snow's study of the 1854 cholera outbreak in the area mapped the incidence of the disease, tracing the origin of the epidemic back to a single water pump. This discovery confirmed his then contested hypothesis that cholera is a waterborne disease. The day after he reported his findings to the Board of St James's Parish, the pump's handle was removed, shutting off the problem at its source. John Snow moved the focus upstream, tackling the root of the problem, preventing, rather than curing disease. He is now considered to be the father of epidemiology.