

News story: Law tightened to target terrorists' use of the internet

Counter-terrorism laws are to be updated to keep pace with modern online behaviour and to address the issue of online radicalisation, Home Secretary Amber Rudd has announced today.

The government intends to change the law, so that people who repeatedly view terrorist content online could face up to 15 years behind bars. The proposed changes will strengthen the existing offence of possessing information likely to be useful to a terrorist (Section 58 Terrorism Act 2000) so that it applies to material that is viewed repeatedly or streamed online. Currently the power only applies to online material which has been downloaded and stored on the offender's computer, is saved on a separate device or printed off as a hard copy.

The move to tighten the law around the viewing of terrorist material comes as part of a wide-ranging review of the government's counter terrorism strategy, following this year's terror attacks, and will help provide an important and effective way of intervening earlier in an investigation and disrupting terrorist activity.

The legal changes will also increase the maximum penalty from 10 to 15 years to reflect the seriousness of the offence and ensure perpetrators are locked up for longer.

The new maximum penalty of 15 years will also apply to terrorists who publish information about members of the armed forces, police and intelligence services for the purposes of preparing acts of terrorism (Section 58a of the Terrorism Act 2000). There have been a number of prosecutions for terrorism offences which have featured armed forces personnel (or military establishments) as targets for attacks, including the successful conviction of Junead Khan last year for planning to attack personnel at a USAF airbase in Norfolk, and of those responsible for the horrific murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby.

The updated offence will ensure that only those found to repeatedly view online terrorist material will be captured by the offence, to safeguard those who click on a link by mistake or who could argue that they did so out of curiosity rather than with criminal intent. A defence of 'reasonable excuse' would still be available to academics, journalists or others who may have a legitimate reason to view such material.