



**Submission from**

**Muslim Women's Network UK**

**for the Inquiry into the  
Preventing Violent Extremism Programme**

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## **About MWNUK**

Having operated for four years under the umbrella of the Women's National Commission, the Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK) established itself as an independent national organisation in 2007, registering as a Community Interest Company.

Since 2007, membership has expanded threefold and the MWNUK now has 140 members. These include academics and students; workers in voluntary sector support services; health professionals; experts in women's rights, diversity policy, disability, and refugees; businesswomen; local government and law enforcement officers; and artists. Membership is diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and location.

MWNUK has an elected Board which consists of 13 members, some connected with the network since its founding, and some drawn from newer members. MWNUK has two part-time staff, an inter-active website ([www.mwnuk.co.uk](http://www.mwnuk.co.uk)) and an office located in central Birmingham.

## **About the views in this report**

Prior to writing this report, the members of MWNUK were consulted for their views. This submission also includes the views of the author of this report, Shaista Gohir, Executive Director of MWNUK as she has considerable experience in 'prevent' work. She is an accredited specialist peer for the Improvement and Development Agency - a role that involves developing and sharing best practice with local authorities on preventing violent extremism (PVE). She has also worked as a PVE consultant with local authorities which has involved engaging with Muslim communities, facilitating workshops, developing commissioning processes, assessing projects for funding, project evaluations, assessments for the NI35, developing action plans, advising on schools tool kits. Shaista also sits on various local authority and police PVE boards.

## **Is the Prevent programme the right way of addressing the problem of violent extremism, or are there better ways of doing it?**

The current approach of targeting the entire Muslim community while trying to address the problem of violent extremism is morally wrong. The far reaching implications of the 'Prevent' agenda for the Muslim community have been totally ignored by government. There is little evidence of recognition by the government on the massive harm done by their emphasis on policies relating to preventing violent extremism.

The main concerns that have been expressed about this programme are:

### **a) All Muslim are being stigmatized**

The 'prevent' agenda is too broad as it stigmatizes the majority of Muslims who are law abiding citizens. Even those Muslims who find the current prevent programme as an acceptable approach to tackling extremism, feel uncomfortable in the way that it is being promoted and labeled e.g. usage of words such as 'preventing violent extremism.' Anger has

also been expressed in other usage of language in the ‘prevent strategy’ as it implies all Muslims have the potential to become violent extremists. For example, **prevent objective 4** is about: *‘Increasing the capacity of communities to resist violent extremism.’* Page 31 of ‘The Prevent Strategy’ explains this objective as follows: *‘strong, organized and empowered communities are better equipped to effectively reject the ideology of violent extremism.....’* This description suggests that all Muslims will be tempted towards violent extremism unless action is taken to build their resilience.

**b) Hatred of Muslims is increasing**

Many Muslims believe that stereotyping all Muslims as potential terrorists in the ‘prevent’ strategy is resulting in the increase of racist attitudes and Islamophobia within the media, amongst the general public and service providers. Resentment also includes from other minority communities who feel that Muslims are being given special treatment by having funding targeted towards them. There is also great concern that right wing groups such as the British National Party are taking advantage of the anti-Muslim sentiments and fuelling further hatred of Muslims. There is fear that Islamophobia has become so acceptable that even school children are becoming involved in verbal and physical abuse.

**c) Right wing extremism is being ignored**

There is resentment in Muslim communities that to date the ‘prevent’ funding by local authorities has not been used to tackle the rising violent threat from racists and fascists. This approach has led to the further alienation of Muslim communities. Although the new Communities Secretary John Denham has recently stated that the ‘prevent’ programme will now also focus on rightwing extremism, it remains to be seen whether that translates to projects on the ground by local authorities.

**d) Muslim are being put under surveillance by mainstreaming ‘prevent’**

There is a new drive to mainstream the ‘prevent’ strategy in core council services and other statutory agencies so that it is embedded in the delivery of services. The government has not shown that it has considered the impact this part of the strategy will have on how Muslims are viewed and treated by service providers. There is a fear that ‘prevent’ will exacerbate the problem of discrimination already faced by Muslims when accessing services. This part of the strategy also emphasizes information sharing amongst agencies which is being perceived as ‘spying’ on and monitoring of Muslims who use public services. This is likely to alienate Muslims further.

Concerns about mainstreaming the ‘prevent’ agenda are also shared by service providers. For example, many schools in the UK are resisting applying the guidance in the school PVE toolkit launched by the Department of Children, Schools and Families. The toolkit is aimed at helping schools to contribute to the prevention of violent extremism. The government says that many of the recommendations within the toolkit are in line with what schools are already working (on e.g. to develop equalities and anti-bullying practice, community cohesion and the PSHE and Citizenship curriculum). The fact that separate guidance has been produced especially to deal with PVE puts majority of the law abiding Muslim pupils under the spotlight. According to research carried out by various teachers unions, the problem of faith-

based bullying in schools and colleges has intensified in recent years, particularly in the case of anti-Muslim prejudice and racism.

Services and school are also expected to refer vulnerable young people to the police 'Channel' project. The project takes referrals from a number of sources on individuals that may be vulnerable to becoming involved in violent extremism. The referrals are likely to be subjective and may result in inappropriate referrals of young Muslims bearing in mind the anti-Muslim sentiments that have increased. It appears that Muslims are under surveillance in every aspect of their lives and such a strategy will be counterproductive.

**e) Data Collection on Muslim communities**

The national indicator 35 (NI 35) is an assessment framework which evaluates the effectiveness of Prevent related work programmes on a 1 – 5 scale against 4 main criteria. One of the four criteria is: understanding of and engagement with Muslim communities. Page 55 of 'The Prevent Strategy,' states that local authorities should have: *'the sophisticated understanding of local Muslim communities including strong knowledge and their make-up including different ethnic groups, denominations, social and economic status, elected representatives, community leaders, knowledge of location and denomination of mosques, awareness of community groups.'*

This part of the strategy highlights the amount of scrutiny that Muslim communities are under. The government has not showed how this extent of the mapping of Muslim communities is going to help it in its counter terrorism strategy. This blanket approach towards whole Muslim communities highlights that the 'prevent' strategy is not targeted towards individuals who are perhaps on the fringes of violent extremism. No other community has been subjected to this level of information gathering.

**f) No Policies and Actions to tackle Social Injustices faced by Muslim communities**

There is concern that government actions are not matching their rhetoric. For example the government promotes 'shared values' but policies and actions are not addressing problems such as the rise in incitement of hatred against Muslims which is resulting in increased verbal and physical attacks.

Many of the PVE projects funded by local authorities focus on capacity building rather than deradicalising extremists and bringing them back from the brink of radicalization. Such projects therefore do not need to be linked with preventing violent extremism. Instead these should be a part of a broader attempt to tackle inequalities. A priority area for government should be policies and action to tackle the discrimination against and inequalities faced by Muslim communities. Due to the high levels of deprivation faced by Muslims communities, the government could justify building the capacity of communities without having to link such a policy with the 'prevent' programme. The relationship and trust between the government and Muslim communities would be strengthened if it helped Muslims in Britain achieve social justice.

## *Recommendations*

- *Prevent should not be the only strategy used to tackle violent extremism. The government should explore alternative strategies and / or review and amend the current 'prevent' strategy and take into account the concerns raised by Muslim communities, academics and other professionals who have knowledge or are working in this field of work.*
- *The language in the prevent strategy should be reviewed and some research carried out on the impact that the usage of the negative language has had. Research should include an analysis on how the 'prevent' programme has impacted on the opinions of non-Muslims about Muslim communities.*
- *The government should ensure that where right wing extremism is a problem, there are projects which tackles this issue*
- *The government should weigh the costs of mainstreaming the 'prevent' programme against any tangible benefits e.g. will service providers realistically be able to spot potential violent extremists?*

## **How robust is the Government's analysis of the factors which lead people to become involved in violent extremism? Is the 'Prevent' programme appropriately targeted to address the most important of those factors?**

The government lists many factors that lead people to violent extremism which includes racism, discrimination, inequalities, lack of social mobility, unemployment, and criminality. Foreign policy remains the main grievance yet the government analysis down plays this fact often describing this grievance as 'perceived' implying that it is not justified. In fact, 'prevent objective 5' in the 'prevent' strategy is about addressing grievances. However, projects addressing this objective tend to focus on providing space to express grievances rather than actually dealing with them. Despite the government's analysis of factors leading people to violent extremism, it has not shown how any of these grievances are being addressed or taken into account in policy decisions.

***Recommendation – The government should not just to create space for debating grievances but actually implement policies and take action to tackle the grievances.***

## **How appropriate, and how effective, is the Government's strategy for engaging with communities? Has the Government been speaking to the right people? Has its programme reached those at whom it is-or should be-aimed?**

Concerns regarding 'who' the government is engaging with and 'how' they are engaging with Muslim communities have been expressed as follows:

### **a) Muslim women are being used by government**

Concern has been expressed about the use of Muslim women in the 'prevent' agenda. Muslim women are one of the most deprived groups in Britain today who should be empowered anyway. There is concern that the skills of Muslim women are being built up to 'spy' on their families rather than participate fully in society and overcome barriers they face. For example, Muslim women face multiple discrimination based on their gender, ethnicity, faith and dress; highest unemployment rates; the poorest health; low educational attainment etc., yet there appears to be no concrete policies to tackle these issues. In addition other faith and secular women's groups are hostile towards Muslim women's groups as a result of the 'prevent' funding being targeted towards them.

As Muslim women are high on the government's political agenda, the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group was set up almost two years ago. At the time, this appeared to be a good idea as Muslim women's voices are often not heard by policy makers. In the last two years the women have had little opportunity to influence policy. Instead the women have been involved in developing and overseeing the delivery of three projects. However, this task could have been carried out by the myriad of the already existing women's groups. The government has missed a real opportunity to involve Muslim women in decision making processes – something that even the Muslim communities are not doing.

### **b) Engagement not diverse enough**

The government's engagement with Muslim communities has improved since 2007 with more diverse groups of Muslims being engaged with including women and youth. However, more still needs to be done. The government and especially local authorities need to continue with efforts to reach out to and engage with more diverse Muslim groups and newer Muslim communities.

Some local authorities are only engaging with a handful of groups and individuals who they are familiar with. There is concern that this is resulting in some hard to reach communities being ignored and funding being given to organizations that have no access to people affected by extremists therefore are achieving little tangible benefits. There are also concerns that many grass root organisations are still unaware of the PVE funding or have find it difficult to access it as they are unsure of the agenda. This may perhaps explain the lack of resistance from Muslim communities on 'prevent' as they may not be fully aware of the long term implications for them. However there are groups that are refusing to work under the PVE banner as they fear losing credibility as the title ignores that the vast majority are law abiding citizens. Those that have accepted the funding may not necessarily agree with the current strategy but may be viewing the funding as an opportunity for empowerment and capacity building.

## *Recommendations*

- *The National Women's Advisory Group should be given more opportunities to influence policy.*
- *Policies to tackle the empowerment of Muslim women should not be linked to 'prevent.'*
- *Government and local authorities should to continue seeking out more diverse voices in the Muslim communities.*
- *Local authorities should to ensure the PVE funding is accessible to a wider range of groups.*

## **Is the necessary advice and expertise available to local authorities on how to implement and evaluate the programme?**

It is very difficult to judge whether 'prevent' has been effective. The local authorities may feel that their initiatives have been successful. But overall can we measure really the public is safer and the threat of violent extremism has been reduced due to the 'prevent' projects? If Muslims feel alienated by 'prevent,' can we really say that the strategy has been a success?

Some concerns with regards to the handling of 'prevent' by local authorities include:

### **a) Lack of expertise**

Concerns have been expressed that local authorities do not have sufficient guidance, expertise and knowledge of Muslim communities to implement the 'prevent' programme. In some local authorities there is insufficient staff to help deliver the 'prevent' work and is added to the existing workload of staff. This often results in too much pressure being placed on staff which must have a negative impact on the delivery of the agenda. PVE budgets make up a tiny proportion of local authorities total budgets, yet this area of work appears to be taking up a disproportionately large amount of staff time in terms of delivery, oversight and feeding back to government etc.

There does not appear to be sufficient training and face to face opportunities for staff from different local authorities to share best practice or learn from each other's problems. Although a website exists through the Improvement and Development Agency to share good practice and experiences, staff are often too busy to make use of this resource. Also the National PVE conferences that often take place involve listening to selected speakers and do not give opportunities to staff actually delivering the strategy to discuss good practice and problems amongst themselves.

**c) Lack of transparency**

The issue of lack of transparency has also been raised with regards to how projects are funded i.e. whether impartial and robust selection procedures are being applied; the amounts of funding being awarded to organizations; and evaluation reports. Where individuals have actually tried to obtain this information from their local authorities, they have been met with resistance. Some local authorities are also accused of being too busy ticking ‘boxes’ and achieving targets on paper that may not necessarily translate to practical tangible results on the ground with real people.

***Recommendations***

- ***Opportunities for staff delivering PVE from different local authorities (such as away days) should be created where they can share good practice and learn from each other’s problems and experiences.***
- ***There should be sufficient resource in place to deliver the ‘prevent’ strategy and support provided to local authorities where needed.***
- ***Local authorities should implement procedures to ensure there is transparency on funding awarded; which groups receive funding; selection criteria followed on funding decisions; and on evaluations.***
- ***Local authorities should have procedures to ensure better communication with their communities.***

**Are the objectives of the 'Prevent' agenda being communicated effectively those at whom it is aimed?**

Most groups that are being funded are unable to reach those vulnerable youth that are likely to be drawn into violent extremism or have extremist attitudes. Also such individuals are unlikely to want to engage with such mainstream Muslim organizations.

During the consultations the issue of the issue of citizenship education was also raised. There was criticism that the rather than patronizing youth by educating them on what it means to be a good British citizen, more effort should be directed towards making young Muslims feel that they are fully accepted by society as a British citizen through action such as tackling discrimination; raising educational attainment; tackling high unemployment rates; and tackling health inequalities etc. More need to be done to engage with disaffected youth who are marginalized and excluded from decision making processes but not under the ‘prevent’ policy.

***Recommendation – An analysis needs to be carried out on how many projects that have been funded to date actually engage with youth who are on the fringes of extremism or have extremist attitudes compared projects targeting Muslims generally.***

## **Is the Government seeking, and obtaining, appropriate advice on how to achieve the goals of the 'Prevent' programme?**

### **a) Influence of Police**

Concerns have been expressed about too much influence from the police on local authorities on delivering the agenda which means some action plans for delivery have a heavy police bias and are insensitive to Muslim communities.

### **b) Influence of Muslim Advisors**

Concerns have been expressed that the Muslim advisors selected by government to advise on 'prevent' have had no or very limited contact with the Muslim communities whom they are advising on and whom this strategy is having a considerable impact. The recent recruitment of Muslim advisors through an application process is welcomed and is a step in the right direction. However, as the communities are diverse and spread across the UK, their reach will still be limited.

### **c) Influence from Muslim communities**

Concerns have been expressed that some local authorities are not consulting the local Muslim communities with regards to the best way to achieve the 'prevent' objectives especially as these communities are considered vital in helping to deliver the 'prevent' programme locally.

## **Recommendations**

- *Recruitment of regional Muslim advisors who can feed concerns of Muslim communities to the national advisors should be considered.*
- *When delivering the 'prevent' programme, local authorities should assess how the language and actions relating to 'prevent' is impacting on local communities.*
- *There should be check and balances in place to ensure that police working with local authorities take into account the impact their use of language; input; and actions are having on local Muslim communities.*
- *Local authorities should carry out regular consultations with Muslim communities.*

## **How effectively has the Government evaluated the effectiveness of the programme and the value for money which is being obtained from it? Have reactions to the programme been adequately gauged?**

### **a) Lack of expertise**

Local authorities are often under resourced in terms of staff to carry out 'prevent work' and do not have the expertise to carry out evaluations of projects. Local authorities therefore at times have to rely on consultants for evaluations and support. As this is a new agenda, there are insufficient experts in this field of work. There is concern that some so called 'experts' have little knowledge of the agenda or knowledge of communities but are being used by local

authorities who perhaps feel they have no choice as they need the support and are under pressure to deliver the strategy locally.

**b) Evaluations are not carried out or are not robust enough**

Although local authorities have been visited by government auditors and some have even had independent evaluations of their projects, such assessments are only as good as the criteria set for them. During the consultation, there were suggestions that some local authorities ‘know’ what to say to pass such reviews. Also there has been criticism of some evaluations praising projects which the local communities have felt have been wasted resources and have not fulfilled the ‘prevent objectives.’ In most cases, where independent evaluations and audits have been carried out, they have not been communicated to the local communities and are not made accessible.

The government has selected certain ‘prevent’ projects from around the country as best practice in their national ‘prevent strategy.’ However, there was no independent evaluation of these projects to verify they were indeed good projects that were worth replicating elsewhere. The projects were simply chosen as they were recommended by local authorities and regional government offices. Some of these so called best practice projects have received criticism locally.

**c) Reactions to the projects not being gauged locally**

The ‘Prevent’ programme will only be effective if it has the support of the local organizations and communities. It appears that to date, the opinions of people on the ground have not been gauged after the delivery of projects with regards to their effectiveness and appropriateness.

Although some local authorities may be running community workshops where the reactions to their projects may be expressed, there is no formal requirement to consult local communities to check the effectiveness of the projects and local strategy. Such feedback is important as it could help improve the local ‘prevent’ strategy.

***Recommendations***

- ***Projects that are highlighted by government as best practice should be verified and evaluated first.***
- ***All evaluations should be more robust with improved measurement criteria.***
- ***Lists of experts in the field of PVE should be provided to local authorities by central government.***
- ***Local reactions towards projects should be measured.***

## **8. Is there adequate differentiation between what should be achieved through the Prevent programme and the priorities that concern related, but distinct, policy frameworks such as cohesion and integration?**

The engagement of Muslim communities is mainly occurring through ‘prevent’ rather than any other policy framework including cohesion and integration. However, as some of the aims of ‘prevent’ overlap the aims of integration and cohesion, some local authorities are packaging and delivering ‘prevent’ under the cohesion label to make it more acceptable to Muslim communities. The Integration and Cohesion programmes should be separate entities with their own unique aims and goals as they are crucial issues in a multicultural society. However, these policies also need to be reviewed as they have been reduced to the failure of Muslim and other migrant communities themselves. The government therefore focuses exclusively on changing the behavior of these communities. However, cohesion and integration involves a two way process involving both minority and indigenous white communities. Unless the government acknowledges that there is also an attitude problem among the white community, who maybe even more unwilling to integrate, then any of the government’s policy frameworks will have a limited impact.

### ***Recommendations***

- *The ‘prevent’ and cohesion / integration policies should be kept separate by local authorities.*
- *The cohesion and integration policies should be reviewed and not just focus on attitudes of minority communities but include the white indigenous communities as well.*

## **CONTACT DETAILS**

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