

# 1. Executive summary

- 1.1 Prevent has a noble ambition: stopping people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. I heard time and again about how Prevent saves lives, helps tackle the causes of radicalisation, prevents individuals from potentially carrying out an act of terrorism, and assists others to disengage from extremism. **The government should be proud of Prevent's positive impact in this regard.** Prevent's architecture is sophisticated and impressive. The caricature of Prevent as an authoritarian and thinly veiled means of persecuting British Muslims is not only untrue, it is an insult to all those in the Prevent network doing such diligent work to stop individuals from being radicalised into terrorism.
- 1.2 Despite this, all too often those who commit terrorist acts in this country have been previously referred to Prevent. Prevent apparently failed to understand the danger in these cases and this review demonstrates how such failures might be avoided in the future.
- 1.3 The Statutory Prevent Duty works well to ensure that public agencies consider radicalisation as a risk, facilitate engagement with partners, and that counter-radicalisation measures are implemented on the ground. I have found the duty to be especially effective in schools, where awareness of radicalisation risk has been successfully embedded within safeguarding work, and support from Home Office and Department for Education leads are strong. **I was greatly encouraged by the dedication and diligence of Prevent's multi-agency Channel panels** – the process for supporting individuals. I observed these panels working on complex cases featuring a wide variety of risk.
- 1.4 However, I have found several areas that require improvement. Above all, **Prevent must return to its overarching objective: to stop individuals from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism.** Prevent is a crucial pillar of the UK's counter-terrorism architecture, yet it has increasingly come to be seen as synonymous with safeguarding – i.e. an emphasis on protecting those referred into Prevent from harm and addressing their personal vulnerabilities. Whilst safeguarding rightly sits as an element of Prevent work, the programme's core focus must shift to protecting the public from those inclined to pose a security threat. Prevent must not overlook the reality that most would-be terrorists pose a threat on account of their own agency and ideological fervour. Prevent too often bestows a status of victimhood on all who come into contact with it, confusing practitioners and officials as to Prevent's fundamental purpose.
- 1.5 Prevent's first objective – to tackle the causes of radicalisation and respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism – is not being sufficiently met. **Prevent is not doing**

**enough to counter non-violent Islamist extremism.** Challenging extremist ideology should not be limited to proscribed organisations but should also cover domestic extremists operating below the terrorism threshold who can create an environment conducive to terrorism. **Prevent has a double standard when dealing with the Extreme Right-Wing and Islamism.** Prevent takes an expansive approach to the Extreme Right-Wing, capturing a variety of influences that, at times, has been so broad it has included mildly controversial or provocative forms of mainstream, right-wing leaning commentary that have no meaningful connection to terrorism or radicalisation. However, with Islamism, Prevent tends to take a much narrower approach centred around proscribed organisations, ignoring the contribution of non-violent Islamist narratives and networks to terrorism. Prevent must ensure a consistent and evidence-based approach to setting its threshold and criteria, and ensure it does not overlook key non-violent radicalising influences.

- 1.6 I was consistently unable to determine how many Prevent-funded civil society organisations (CSOs) and community projects are achieving impact. I found there were inadequate mechanisms to evaluate individual projects. **Funding too often goes towards generic projects** dealing with community cohesion and hate crime, and few CSOs could be seen publicly to contest extremist discourse. Of particular concern, I discovered that **some CSOs have promoted extremist narratives**, including statements that appear sympathetic to the Taliban. As a core principle, the government must cease to engage with or fund those aligned with extremism.
- 1.7 I was disturbed by the **prevalence of antisemitism within the Channel** cases I observed. Individuals discussed at Channel panels tended to harbour violent and fanatical beliefs about Jews, often expressing an intent to kill, assault or blow-up members of the Jewish community. Prevent must better understand and tackle antisemitism where it is relevant to its work. As part of this pursuit, Prevent work should cover UK extremist networks supportive of terrorist movements that explicitly target Jewish communities. Prevent should also better address the anti-Jewish component of both Islamist and Extreme Right-Wing ideology.
- 1.8 It is clear that **Prevent is out of kilter with the rest of the counter-terrorism system**, and the UK terrorism threat picture. Islamist extremism represents the primary terrorist threat to this country – consistently accounting for the majority of terrorist attack plots both carried out and thwarted by the intelligence services.<sup>1</sup> **At present, 80% of the Counter Terrorism Police network’s live investigations are Islamist while 10% are Extreme Right-Wing.** The fact that only 22% of Prevent referrals for the year 2020-21

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Turner, 'MI5: 31 late-stage terror plots foiled in four years in the UK', BBC News, 10 September 2021, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-58512901>

concerned Islamism suggests a loss of focus and failure to identify warning signs. This misalignment has been partly driven by a sharp uptick of 'Mixed, Unclear, or Unstable' referrals, which constituted over half of Prevent referrals for the year 2020-21. Mental health and neurodevelopmental issues, as well as personal and domestic difficulties are often factors in such referrals.

- 1.9 In my assessment, **Prevent is carrying the weight for mental health services**. Vulnerable people who do not necessarily pose a terrorism risk are being referred to Prevent to access other types of much-needed support. This is a serious misallocation of resources and risks diverting attention from the threat itself.
- 1.10 The Desistance and Disengagement Programme (DDP) is a positive addition to Prevent's mission, with tailored interventions providing tangible benefits to an offender's life circumstances. However, I am **not satisfied that sufficient precaution is being applied to rehabilitation work**. As the murderous Fishmongers Hall attack of 2019 showed, optimism bias can have tragic consequences. Procedures need to be built in that can correct this. It is vital to avoid complacency around the danger that ideologically driven offenders may continue to pose, and how this can differ from other types of offending. This requires staff to understand the ideology itself, how it manifests, and the risks it can pose.
- 1.11 There is a **lack of training** on how to manage controversial issues of substance regarding extremist ideology. There is also a lack of confidence in the ability to refer effectively and recognise extremism-related behaviour in Islamist cases. I am concerned that a culture of timidity exists among practitioners in the round when it comes to tackling Islamism. If left as it is, potentially fatal blind spots will emerge and grow.
- 1.12 There is a **concerted campaign by some, including a number of Islamist groups, to undermine and delegitimise Prevent** through the spread of disinformation, misinformation and half-truths. Accusations that have since been debunked continue to circulate in communities and on various online platforms. This suggests that certain criticisms of Prevent are being made by those naturally hostile to it. Some actors who oppose Prevent, such as Islamist groups and their sympathisers, are themselves radicalising influences. This campaign has been particularly damaging because of the way in which it has focused many of its efforts within British Muslim communities, discouraging those communities from engaging with Prevent, while also stirring up grievance and mistrust towards wider British society, non-Muslims, and those Muslims who do engage with Prevent and counter-extremism. I was particularly concerned to learn that Muslims working in Prevent have suffered intimidation and even death threats. The government must do more to recognise and tackle the disinformation and demonisation around Prevent, and to protect frontline staff against intimidation.