

Evidence from An-Nisa Society to the Communities and Local Government Committee into Preventing Violent Extremism and the Prevent programme

About An-Nisa Society

- An-Nisa Society is a women-led organisation working for the welfare of Muslim families since 1985. The organisation works to create a greater understanding of the wider Muslim community and has strived over the past two decades to address those needs. It has led on the campaign for religious discrimination to be outlawed. It develops groundbreaking faith based services and works on influencing policy.

We have developed groundbreaking faith based initiatives such as Islamic counselling, sexual health and Muslim fatherhood.

Trustees serve or have served on various bodies that include, the Commission for British Muslims and Islamophobia (CBMI), Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR), Christian-Muslim Forum, various government working groups such as the PVE Task Force, Community Cohesion and Forced Marriage Working Parties, Muslim Women Talk Campaign.

- An-Nisa was funded for the Pathfinder Stage of Prevent to deliver a programme of personal development for Muslim boys and young men. From the start we expressed our concerns about the government's approach of targeting the whole community as potential terrorists. Once we became alerted to the dangers of this strategy and experienced it first hand, we turned down any further funding.

The report of our project is attached as part of this submission. The recommendations we made were never taken forward.

Summary

In response to our concerns about PVE and the Prevent Strategy we produced a report in February 2009 entitled ***“Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) and Prevent - A Muslim response.”*** In this report, we comprehensively highlighted why we believe Prevent fails in its aim to counter violent extremism. The issues addressed are:

- The whole community approach – viewing Muslims only through PVE
- Increasing risk of discrimination & victimisation of Muslims
- Blaming the victims
- Wider issues of youth disaffection
- Mainstreaming of PVE and Prevent
- Intelligence through the back door
- Erosion of civil liberties & human rights

- Mapping
- Confidentiality
- Muslim voluntary sector
- Example of mainstreaming Prevent & implications of the lack of a Muslim voluntary sector
- Implications of lack of experience of Muslim community in the Mainstream
- Muslim groups will lose credibility and trust
- Transparency & accountability

The details are in the report, which is attached, and forms part of this submission. We will therefore not be addressing these issues in detail in this paper but highlighting particular areas of concern and making recommendations for the way forward.

Main Text

“Prevent is perceived to be Pursue in sheeps’ clothing”

Muslim Public Sector Worker

1. This submission has been prepared with input from Muslims involved in Prevent.
2. We welcome this inquiry, as the Muslim community has had no avenue to raise its legitimate concerns about Prevent. However, we question the premise of this inquiry, which assumes the problem lies in the strategy’s implementation. We fear that by seeking to tinker with the Prevent strategy’s delivery instead of looking at its inception, the inquiry has failed to grasp that the problem lies in it’s fundamental principles, which treat a **whole community** as a potential terrorist risk.
3. We believe that this ill-conceived strategy has further wounded and damaged the already vulnerable Muslim community exposing it to **increased vilification, physical attacks and discrimination**. It has given far right extremists ammunition to justify their attacks on Muslims, such as the recent demonstrations by groups linked to the BNP.
4. It has heightened tensions, created an **Islamophobic backlash** and given legitimacy to far-right extremists who have exploited the PVE agenda to further fuel the grievances of alienated white communities. There is an erroneous impression that Muslims are getting special treatment, funding and privileges, which has also left other minority communities feeling resentful thereby creating local tensions.
5. There is unprecedented and understandable interest in the PVE funding programme by the media and others as it claims it will build ‘resilience’ to violent extremism in Muslim communities. This has led to

paranoia in local authorities leading to **disproportionate and heavy handed monitoring and security checks of Muslim funded organisations**, regular negative media reporting and reports.

6. The vast majority of **Muslims abhor and condemn violent extremism** and support initiatives to counter it. They have sincerely taken part, for example, in the PVE Taskforce convened after 7/7. Many accepted Prevent funding in goodwill until they realised the full implications of the strategy that they were not working 'with' the government, as they believed, but that they themselves were at the receiving end of a government surveillance programme.
7. This strategy is unprecedented in that the main stakeholders, the Muslim community, which it is targeting, have been ignored – it is certainly not community-led. **The delivery of Prevent has been marked by secretiveness and lack of transparency and accountability.** There are infringements of civil liberties and human rights. There has been a distinct lack of normal democratic oversight processes. It makes a mockery of government rhetoric and policies on equality, community involvement, stakeholder engagement, open government, transparency and accountability.
8. The government has been accused of **social engineering** the Muslim community by selecting whom it will interact with based on their support for present government policy.
9. The first stage of Prevent was to bring Muslim communities on board by offering them small pots of funding. The next stage is to **'mainstream' Prevent in core council services** and ultimately in all public sector services. Procedures, which will be difficult to dismantle, are already being put in place to monitor Muslims for signs of extremism when they use any public service. For example, we understand that information-sharing agreements with regards to identifying potential extremists have been developed between departments and agencies.
10. The government has announced that it will be **reframing the Prevent Strategy to take into account white far-right extremism.** We can only imagine the outcry if white working class communities were targeted as a whole community that is vulnerable to violent extremism. We would not wish any community to be subjected to the same treatment that has been accorded to Muslim communities.
11. The government is sending out **mixed messages.** Shortly after announcing the reframing of Prevent in September 2009 to include far right extremism, it announced a further £7.5 million is to go into improving the effectiveness of the Prevent programme in tackling al-Qaeda-influenced extremism. Part of this will mean more than 300

additional dedicated police posts being set up across the two countries. In 2008/09 the current posts were intended to support existing neighbourhood policing teams. In 2009/10 the new posts are expected to have a broader role, incorporating more aspects of the Prevent strategy.

12. The government relies heavily on representative bodies, advisory groups and advisors. **A PVE industry has developed** where lucrative contracts are being given to consultants and 'experts.' Most of these are well established having worked in the Race and Equalities Industries They do not tend to have experience of the faith sector and specifically the Muslim sector. Consequently, a significant proportion of PVE funding is being wasted on ineffectual mapping, research and consultation exercises.
13. The **Quilliam Foundation** have been given considerable public funding and whose doubtful advice the government listens to – being a reformed extremist does not make one an 'expert' on Muslim community issues. This has led, for example, to the Contest 2 controversy where Quilliam's advice led to the government's insistence on not 'speaking' to groups who did not reject 'extremist' ideology as defined by Quilliam.
14. The government's PVE and Prevent Strategies have **diverted attention from addressing the legitimate needs of Muslims as citizens** and as probably the most disadvantaged community in the country as social indicators attest.
15. **There has been a historical failure of government policy towards the Muslim community.** The most glaring example is the Race Relations Act 1987. The fact that the Act did not outlaw religious discrimination and make it a statutory duty to address faith equality and anti-faith discrimination has contributed to the social exclusion of Muslims. A faith-blind approach to equality and anti-racism has not delivered social justice for Muslims. The consequences have been extreme social exclusion, marginalisation, alienation and lack of engagement of Muslims in society.
16. **Another policy failure is the Equality Act 2006.** The government failed to address the lack of faith discrimination when they first came to power in 1997. It took until 2006 for the Equality Act to include faith in the equalities agenda. However, the legislation did not go far enough as there was **no public sector duty to consider religion faith/religion** issues when designing their policies, responsibilities and the delivery of services. Therefore, **there has been no incentive for the public sector to address Muslim social exclusion institutionally and strategically.**

17. **The new Equality Bill, introduced into Parliament in April 2009, will bring in a single 'public duty'** requiring all publicly-funded bodies to proactively promote equality across seven strands, including faith, and remove barriers to fair service provision. However, at a consultation by the Government Equalities Office in London this month, there was a discussion on the urgency in getting the legislation through before a general election in spring. It was said that if it were not completed by April 2010 it would fall. In addition, the House of Commons committee and the House of Lords may delete or add duties. It may mean that the faith discrimination duty is taken out.

18. **The faith public duty in the Equality Bill 2009 is essential to addressing Muslim social exclusion.** It will be disastrous for the Muslim community if the Bill was to fall or if the faith duty is removed. If the Equality Bill was to go through without a public duty on faith or if it was diluted, the Muslim community will be in an even worse position than before. The government needs to take responsibility for its failure in getting faith equality on the statute books as soon as it was elected and when it finally did so in 2006 it did not make it a public duty. If the Bill falls and there is a change of government, it is unlikely to be put forward again in the foreseeable future.

Muslim Voices - Grassroots Experiences of Prevent

1. We have had a considerable amount of feedback from the Muslim community, which has been overwhelmingly against Prevent. They have recounted disturbing experiences of working on Prevent projects, either as workers in the public sector or as Muslim individuals and community groups involved in projects.

2. We have published a set of responses that are representative of the feedback we have received. The paper is attached is part of this submission – the extracts below are taken from the paper.

3. We have been asked to keep them anonymous because criticism of Prevent means marginalisation and exclusion from funding and partnership working opportunities, whereas 'compliant' organisations are facilitated and favoured.

4. PVE is underlying both of the leadership/chaplaincy initiatives, and I have been increasingly shocked and appalled at what I see unfolding...
University Lecturer

5. Although I was supposed to be part of the PVE scrutiny board after the first meeting...I didn't bother going back as it paints all Muslims under the same brush. One, which I am not comfortable with.
London Muslim councillor

6. I'm working on PVE in (a London borough) under Community Cohesion, and to be honest, I didn't understand the strategy until I came into post. It immediately raised my own concerns of the agenda, but I was reassured by the council that they are using the PVE agenda for 'capacity building' and promoting civic pride for the Muslim communities in (London borough). However, the framework and nature of the agenda and partnership working with Police etc, contradicts this...

Muslim Worker – Employed in Prevent funded post in a London council

7. The chair of the group who is the council lead, and the (Prevent Board) as a whole, were reminded repeatedly at the monthly meetings that the issue of local narrative needed to be addressed before the group could proceed. It appeared that this was largely being ignored and that the council wanted to proceed on delivery without meaningful discussion.

Council Officer - North England

8. ...in (our borough), there has been no public consultation with the Muslim community and its voluntary sector. The Prevent Programme Board has no Muslim voluntary sector representation. In our area, Muslims are so ill informed and badly organised that we cannot make our local authority accountable to the Muslim community for such a sensitive area of work. This is replicated across the country.

Muslim Voluntary Group

9. Many of the programmes are aimed at Muslim women...the promotional material is deliberately misleading. Nowhere does it say 'come to this workshop to prevent violent extremism'. The aims and objectives are false. Even if those delivering the projects believe they are trying to improve the prospects for Muslim women (which is in dire need), they never disclose the real aims, which come from the Prevent strategy.

Muslim Voluntary Group

10. Many women invited to workshops are vulnerable...they do not need to come to a PVE workshop to help themselves. Their more fundamental issues of education, mental health, marriage and extended family relationships need addressing first through community development initiatives rather than Prevent.

Muslim Voluntary Group

11. Participants (at Prevent projects) whether young or old are not told why they have been invited to the workshop or programme. They are systematically deceived. Most don't have the analytical approach necessary to question the organisers and ask uncomfortable questions like: Who funded this? What are the aims of this session? Where will

our feedback go? Why were we invited? If they had an inkling of the Prevent Strategy – in simple terms, many would turn on their heels and head home.

Muslim Voluntary Group

Recommendations

We believe the government needs to undertake the following with the same robustness that it has with the Prevent Strategy.

1. An-Nisa Society believes that the government's Preventing Violent Extremism agenda (PVE) agenda and the Prevent Strand of its CONTEST strategy is **fundamentally flawed and discriminatory and calls for it to be dismantled with immediate effect.**
2. The government needs to **facilitate the Muslim third sector**, which will then be able to communicate with, and advise the government and service providers on behalf of genuine grassroots Muslim communities without recourse to expensive and ill-informed 'experts' and consultants.
3. The government should **cease linking community cohesion, capacity building, community development and addressing inequalities with PVE.** This approach risks de-legitimising much needed community building of the Muslim community. Security measures should be separate and distinct so that there is no doubt as to their objectives. As the Taxpayers Alliance states, "Skilled policing and robust intelligence are the most effective ways of tackling violent extremism. Funding projects carried out by community groups is doomed to failure."
4. **Addressing inequalities, social and economic deprivation, social exclusion and fractured families** as a common goal for all communities will be more productive to building 'resilience' to social ills, including extremism of any type.
5. We believe the way forward is to **engage purposefully with underprivileged communities** to ensure cutting-edge services within communities to prevent grievances based on perceived inequalities based on ethnic, religious or socio economic factors.
6. **A public debate** needs to be held on the crisis in our most vulnerable communities and how we need to address this with sensible and just policies. There is general concern nationally about young people in all communities, the breakdown of families and fractured communities. Root causes must be investigated and addressed.

7. **Bring together Britain's diverse communities** to work to address the wider issues that are affecting all of us including what is causing large numbers of young people, from different communities, to feel hostile and alienated from society. This will do more for community cohesion than anything else.
8. Rethink and reformulate the equality and diversity agenda for the 21st Century. Review how communities are identified and how needs are met to **incorporate faith identity and faith based needs**.
9. Rethink its strategy towards the Muslim community. It should **cease dealing with the whole Muslim community through the prism of anti-terrorism but rather as citizens** who need the support of their government and through mainstream strategies.
10. **Ensure that the faith strand in the Equality Bill is not diluted or removed**. Furthermore, the faith public duty should be elucidated in government guidelines in more depth. The public sector lacks understanding of institutional Islamophobia in the delivery of goods and services. There is a need for comprehensive guidelines on faith equality for the public sector.
11. **Prioritise addressing Islamophobia and Institutional anti-Muslim discrimination (Islamophobia)** within the public sector. A robust faith duty in the Equality Bill 2009 will facilitate this.
12. **Promote the mainstreaming of initiatives targeting Muslims** as a socially excluded community, as separate and distinct from PVE, and make it core business. Prioritise community development, community cohesion, social inclusion and capacity building for the Muslim community through the mainstream. Set targets in strategies and plans both nationally and locally so that progress can be monitored.
13. **Facilitate the building of local infrastructure in the Muslim community**, for example, through investment in the development of a Muslim voluntary sector that will cater for a wide variety of Muslims needs. The voluntary sector will then have the capacity to formulate itself into community-led grassroots local advocacy and consultative forums and eventually national representative bodies. Such a programme will provide tangible relief to distressed local Muslim communities and directly affect their quality of life, increase engagement and give people a stake in society as citizens and not as 'pariahs.' This will enable the Muslim community to take the lead on its own issues and concerns and engage on an equal basis.