

Prevent and Counter-Extremism Briefing

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Vuelio Policy Researcher Tom Stevenson takes a look at the Government's counter-extremism strategy, which is set to become a key focus of the general election debate when campaigning resumes tomorrow.

Background

Prevent forms one part of the government's wider counter-terrorism strategy ('Contest'), which consists of four elements: Pursue, Prevent, Protect, and Prepare. [The current iteration](#) of the strategy dates from 2011, when it was revised by the coalition government and is complemented by the government's [counter-extremism strategy](#) (2015). There are three objectives to Prevent: responding to terrorism's ideological challenge; preventing people from being drawn into terrorism; and working with sectors and institutions where there is a risk of radicalisation. The government emphasises that Prevent is not a spying programme. The programme is co-ordinated by the Home Office's Office for Security and Counter-terrorism, with funding for work overseas provided by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. Where appropriate, the Home Office works with other departments, such as the Department for Education, the Department for Health, the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy.

The Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 introduced the [Prevent Duty](#), which places an obligation on certain bodies to 'have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism'. The bodies subject to the Prevent Duty are local authorities, criminal justice, education and childcare, health and social care, and the police. This broad obligation is clarified through guidance issued by the Home Office. As part of this process, individuals may be referred to the [Channel](#) programme, where a panel run by the local authority assesses the case and decides if intervention is needed, and if so, what support to provide.

In the aftermath of the attack in Manchester, Amber Rudd (the Home Secretary) has confirmed that a planned 'uplift' in the Prevent programme will go ahead after the election, assuming that the Conservatives are re-elected.

Next steps

In the [May 2016 Queen's Speech](#), the government announced its intention to introduce a 'Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill' (a 'Counter-Extremism Bill' was also included in the May 2015 Queen's Speech), but no progress had been made in introducing this when parliament was dissolved. A consultation ahead of the bill was due in late 2016. An article in [The Observer](#) in January 2017 indicated that the government had been unable to legally define extremism, with a source commenting that 'The bill is sinking without trace'.

Similarly, an overhaul of Prevent and the government's wider anti-terrorism programme has been expected for some time. In November 2016, [The Guardian](#) reported that an internal review by the Home Office, had concluded that the programme needed to be 'strengthened', with 12 suggestions on how it could be reinforced. This was to be detailed as part of the government's reworking of its counter-terrorism programme, expected by the end of 2016. In March 2017, [The Guardian](#) reported that this 'refresh' was still expected, and would contain 'a major expansion of the Prevent anti-radicalisation programme.' In an [interview](#) on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme in the aftermath of the attack in Manchester, Home Secretary Amber Rudd confirmed that the government, if re-elected, 'will be going ahead with an uplift in Prevent' and increasing spending.

For and against

General Election 2017 manifestos

Whilst Prevent is not mentioned by name by the [Conservatives](#), they call the current counter-terrorism strategy 'world-leading' and propose the creation of a Commission for Countering Extremism. The manifesto suggests that lessons should be learnt from anti-racist efforts in the 20th century, with support the public sector and civil society in identifying threats, together with other measures such as greater regulation of the internet. This suggests that a Conservative government would be unlikely to significantly change anti-terrorism policy.

In contrast, [Labour](#) does mention the Prevent strategy by name and vows to review it, assessing its potential to alienate minority communities, and its effectiveness, criticising the government for its failure to 'take any effective new measures' against extreme radicalism. The party promises to strike a balance between counter-terrorism measures and civil liberties. When he was shadow Home Secretary, [Andy Burnham](#) repeatedly called for the 'toxic' programme to be scrapped, branding it 'discriminatory' and helping extremism to flourish.

The [Liberal Democrats](#) describe Prevent as 'flawed' and call for it to be scrapped and replaced with more community engagement and support for communities to develop their own approaches.

Supporters

Supporters of Prevent include the [Quilliam Foundation](#), a counter-extremism thinktank. They recently highlighted the results of a report by Policy Exchange, which found that Muslims are largely supportive of the strategy, and almost 50% believed the Muslims needed to do more to tackle extremism. Quilliam argue that high levels of far-right referrals to the Prevent programme show that the programme is not 'solely focused on pursuing Muslims'. Whilst Quilliam accept that the policy needs reform, this is because the nature of the challenge is constantly shifting.

Another group which supports Prevent is [Inspire](#), a counter-extremism organisation (in receipt of Home Office funding). Whilst it acknowledges that the programme is 'by no means perfect', Inspire suggests that much criticism derives from the government's poor communication. The organisation suggests that Muslim organisations which support Prevent are reluctant to speak out. Inspire is,

however, critical of the government's proposals for a counter-extremism bill, and to legally define extremism.

Other defenders of the programme include [Simon Cole](#), the National Police Chiefs' Council lead, who believes that it is 'fundamental' to fighting extremism. He cites as a case study, an incident in which a man considering travelling to Syria was referred to the programme and subsequently changed his mind. The programme has also attracted international praise, being held up as an example by both [Rob Wainwright](#), head of Europol, and [Hans Das](#), head of the European Commission's Terrorism and Radicalism Unit.

Critics

The programme has become controversial amongst many of the groups meant to be involved in delivering it. The [National Union of Teachers](#) passed a motion at its conference in April 2017, reaffirming its policy that the strategy should be withdrawn from schools and colleges, and replaced by alternative strategies developed with the profession. The NUT is concerned that the programme has the effect of alienating segments of the population and that large numbers of unnecessary referrals are being made. Similar concerns have been raised by other educational groups, including the [University and College Union](#), which calls it 'dangerous' and 'draconian', and the [National Union of Students](#). Practical concerns have been raised by the [Association of Teachers and Lecturers](#) which points to the 'poor quality' training offered to educational staff, and the [National Association of Head Teachers](#), which points out that teachers are not experts on the topic.

Concerns about the Prevent strategy have also been raised repeatedly by the [Muslim Council of Britain](#), which believes that it does not have the support of Muslim communities and exacerbates extremism. The MCB is proposing its own scheme, focused at opposing violence, rather than liberalisation of Islam. Objections have also been raised by organisations such as [Rights Watch \(UK\)](#), which suggests that it is curbing children's 'fundamental rights and freedoms' and leading to 'arbitrary interventions' in their lives, [Liberty, and Open Society Justice Initiative](#), which suggest that the programme is counterproductive, harmful, and based on false claims.

The outgoing Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, David Anderson QC, argued in an [Evening Standard](#) article in February 2017 that the government needs to engage more broadly with British Muslims, be more open and introduce independent oversight. After the Manchester attack, speaking to [BBC Radio 4](#), Anderson stated that the programme needed to be 'strengthened' but also made 'palatable to all the communities that it affects', with these communities playing a role in countering extremism.

Key players in parliament

Supporters

Amber Rudd (Conservative)
Home Secretary



"I have been proposing, and we will be going ahead with, an uplift in Prevent and when we do that we will also be making sure that it has even more effective outcomes in communities to protect us, to keep us safe."

Ben Wallace (Conservative)
Security Minister



"If you care about your religion, your families and your communities then the safeguarding work that Prevent contributes to is vital. It is a policy for all of us not for the few. It is a policy that is making a difference and saving lives."

Baroness Williams of Trafford (Conservative)
Minister of State for the Home Office



"What Prevent is not trying to do is curtail freedom of speech. What it is trying to do is protect those people who might be targeted by the terrorist recruiters who threaten this country."

Critics

Diane Abbott (Labour)
Shadow Home Secretary



"The Prevent strategy is misconceived because it limits legitimate safe spaces for discourse, places like classrooms and lecture theatres."

Lucy Allan (Conservative)
Sponsored Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 (Amendment) Bill



"The problem lies in the way the communities most affected by Prevent experience and perceive the strategy. For all its good intentions, if it is perceived by those it affects as punitive or intrusive, it will not be productive or have the desired effect."

Alistair Carmichael (Lib Dem)
Shadow First Secretary of State



"The Prevent strategy has failed. Despite it going through various iterations, it remains a fatally flawed programme. It is distrusted by the communities it professes to try and work with to tackle radicalisation and extremism."