Communities and Local Government Committee: Preventing Violent Extremism

Submission by the Institute of Community Cohesion (iCoCo)

1. Introduction

1.1 The Institute of Community of Community Cohesion (iCoCo) is an independent not for profit partnership set up to promote community cohesion as a modern framework for race and diversity focussed on practical action, based on research and evidence.

1.2 iCoCo has unrivalled experience in the area of engaging all sections of Muslim communities and we have undertaken reviews of these communities in many parts of the Country, often as part of more broadly based reviews of community cohesion.

1.3 See website for further details of iCoCo (www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk)

2. Summary of Our Views

2.1 In summary, our views about the Prevent agenda are:

2.1.1 We fully support the need for an anti-terrorist strategy, and believe the present approach should be developed to tackle all threats from extremists that preach hatred and are prepared to resort to violence.

2.1.2 We fully support the need for a preventative agenda which seeks to undermine the allure of violent and anti-democratic means of change and as a means of developing resistance to such appeals

2.1.3 However, the present single-minded focus on Muslims has, to some extent, been counter-productive in that the association with terrorism has been strongly resented by the majority Muslim community and has damaged relations with Muslim communities and created divisions within and between them.

2.1.4 The association of the Muslims with terrorism and extremism has also become stronger in the eyes of the majority, as well as other minority communities

2.1.5 Muslim identity, paradoxically, has also been narrowed and reduced to a simple faith persona, rather than building upon and providing wider experiences for people of Muslim heritage.

2.1.6 Further, we question the efficacy and value for money of many of the schemes developed under the Prevent agenda

2.1.7   We therefore propose that the Prevent agenda be de-coupled from the counter-terrorist strategy and that all future preventative work be positioned within the community cohesion strategy (with changes in departmental responsibilities) and re-branded and widened to deal with all risks of violence by extremists on a common basis, which is proportionate and informed.

2.1.8   In so far as subsequent preventative work focuses on Muslims (or any other specific community) we propose that they be engaged through multiple channels, as employees and employers, parents, neighbours, sports players, students, mothers etc. rather than solely through their Muslim faith identity.

2.1.9   Finally, we have to tackle the underlying causes of hatred and intolerance and that means doing more to tackle the poverty and deprivation within Muslim and other disadvantaged communities to ensure that they have better educational outcomes and employment opportunities and that they can more fully integrate and engage in a wider range social and economic activities. We also have to build social capital across faith, ethnic and other divides ('bridging' social capital), ensure that there are many more schemes to promote educative experiences, democratic renewal and a shared sense of citizenship. This will depend upon a new process of community cohesion 'proofing' of all related programmes, in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

3. Perceptions and Realities of Prevent

3.1 During the course of our research and working with Muslim communities throughout the Country, we are aware that there has been a consistent and growing concern, about the Prevent agenda. There is a widely held perception that the Prevent agenda in the current form, demonises Muslims and attaches guilt by association. This is not the stated aim of the policy and the Government has been anxious to avoid such accusations, but the iCoCo team frequently meets groups which simply refuse to engage with the Prevent agenda. It is not just Muslim-led organisations that are unhappy with the present arrangements – many different groups, both other minority and majority groups, also express strong reservations about what they see as the inherent unfairness of focussing attention and resources on one community. Local authorities have also been critical of the general thrust of this policy and have been less than enthusiastic about using the funding and developing programmes.

3.2 No one seriously doubts the need to prevent terrorism, so we need to ask why the Prevent agenda in its present form has been so controversial.

3.3 Anxiety has grown partly as a result of the Government's latest version of the CONTEST Strategy (The UK's Strategy for Countering International Terrorism, March 2009). This suggests that those who stop short of advocating violence, but express 'extreme' views, will now be targeted:

3.4 This appeared to create a further and unequal level of special treatment for Muslims – i.e. they may be targeted for expressing views that stay within the law. Many Muslim and other commentators have suggested that, as a consequence, most Muslims would be identified as extreme simply because they do not share the Government's foreign policy objectives.

3.5 This approach further isolates Muslims, already feeling under siege from the general association of everything Muslim with terror, at least, in the usual discourse of much of the press and media. Many Muslims have also been subject of verbal abuse, and attack. For example some Muslim women have reported having their hijab forcibly removed in public places, on buses and in supermarkets.

3.6 However, concern was evident before the new version of CONTEST as the overall approach also appeared to ask Muslims to choose between those who express strong and inflammatory language to demand justice for the Muslim community to end victimisation; and those who support western values and a democratic engagement in wider political life.

3.7 Whilst this may sound a reasonable choice to some people, it misunderstands the complex range of perspectives across Muslim communities. And within those communities there is a widespread belief that an anti-Muslim set of policies operates across the world, including the invasion of Iraq, resulting in a distrust of western values. In addition, some Muslims (as with other faith groups) are theologically opposed to democratic engagement on the grounds that man made systems/rules should not rival faith based doctrine. However, this does not mean that they do not associate themselves with Britain and such a choice is therefore unhelpful and far too simplistic. It could even encourage some Muslims to be more inwardly focussed and be counter-productive, facilitating more support for 'extremist' views.

3.8 The views of Muslim communities are, like any other community, subject to change, but change is more likely with fuller engagement to discuss concerns openly, particularly international policy. Tackling the day to day concerns of Muslims (much of which are shared with other communities including deprivation and poor educational attainment – see below),will also foster a greater sense of respect, trust and inclusion and help to demonstrate that democratic participation is not at odds with Muslim theological values.

3.9 The Prevent agenda includes elements designed to provide an alternative (and moderate) counter-narrative at least in terms of the use of violence, but this has been focused on Muslim theology – which to some extent reinforces the notion of anti-Muslim agenda. However, all extremist arguments should be openly challenged and defeated. We must demonstrate that such challenges are applied fairly across all communities and to all extremist views. Similar mistakes with the Far Right: in the past it was argued that they should not be given 'the oxygen of publicity', but sympathisers can then argue that they are silenced because society is 'afraid of the truth' and win support on the basis that 'political correctness' is at play. We believe the Far Right needs to be

challenged more openly. This is a tough option, but debating any extremist point of view is essential to change attitudes and beliefs, rather than simply contain behaviour, it is likely to be more successful in the longer term.

3.10 So there is a real problem here – if we brand 'extremists' as potential law breakers, the really dangerous people may retreat to the shadows, beyond challenge, capitalising on their suppression and wider sense of grievance, (even assuming that there is in fact an empirical basis to support the claim that extremists tip people over the edge into violent actions).

3.11 The CONTEST strategy is much wider, and in overall terms, impressive and comprehensive. It has four components:

- *Pursue:* stopping terrorist attacks
- *Prevent:* stopping people becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism
- *Protect:* strengthening our protection against attack
- *Prepare:* mitigating the impact of attacks

3.12 Generally no one would argue with any of these strands and we must all be prepared to work together to avoid any violence or further loss of life.

3.13 We believe that situating Prevent within the CONTEST strategy has however been unfortunate, as it is the one area that relies upon community involvement and support, yet essentially links that community – and only one community – to terrorism.

3.14 The Government introduced its revised *Prevent* strategy in October 2007. The strategy is based on trying to understand what causes radicalisation (defined as the process by which people become terrorists or lend support to violent extremism). It has five objectives:

- To challenge the ideology behind violent extremism and support mainstream voices.
- Disrupt those who promote violent extremism and support the places where they operate.
- Support individuals who are vulnerable to recruitment, or have already been recruited by violent extremists;
- Increase the resilience of communities to violent extremism.
- To address the grievances which ideologues are exploiting.

   (The are also two supporting objectives – communications and intelligence.)

3.15 There is very little direct reference to 'Muslims' in this strategy, but nevertheless, this is almost the entire focus. The Government has allocated substantial funding for Prevent to a wide range of agencies and Departments to develop these objectives.

3.16 Most of the money is directed through local authorities and other statutory agencies, but programmes are generally implemented by Muslim-led organisations, some of which have only recently been established to gain funding, and is generally wholly applied in Muslim communities.

3.17 Not surprisingly, 'Prevent' and 'Preventing Violent Extremism' has simply become synonymous with Muslims.

3.18 This therefore has all the problems of 'single group funding' which the Commission for Integration and cohesion (CIC) warned about and which the Government supported to a large degree. It has certainly reinforces the separateness of the Muslim community.

3.19 There is also scepticism about the way in which Prevent money has been allocated with suggestions that money is 'being thrown at a problem', or even inappropriately 'thrown' at particular organisations. Meanwhile, some Muslim organisations will not, on principle, apply for such funding. This scepticism seems to be shared by many Local Authorities concerned about alienating their Muslim communities, by associating them with terrorism especially as some schemes are perceived as 'spying on the Muslim community', thus developing a further sense of alienation and distrust.

3.20 Those schemes which are established – and to some degree supported by sections of Muslim communities willing to utilise the funding - are difficult to target. Firstly, the groups which do accept funding are generally, almost by definition, moderate and do not influence those most attracted to extremist arguments. In any event, those most at risk of radicalisation do not have an outwardly identifying label as 'potential terrorist'. The most alienated young people are also unlikely to be drawn into community events where they may be identified.

3.21 Unsurprisingly, local authorities and community organisations have used a fair degree of innovation to develop schemes which address some of these concerns, and iCoCo frequently works with local authorities that are genuinely trying to build an approach which creates a common purpose, believing that this is much more likely to achieve better results in the longer term.

3.22 However, there needs to be a strong dose of practical reality associated with this agenda; even the best local authority, university, health trust or school, is simply unable to understand the intricacies of Muslim (or any other) community. Except for a very small number of staff, this role will always be ancillary to their main function. Whilst they all need to do more to reach out to all sections of the community, this debate makes them even less confident and willing to tackle increasingly difficult issues and feel that we should focus on capacity building community cohesion teams.

4. The Narrowing of Muslim Identity

4.1 iCoCo's fieldwork supports the view that the Prevent's sole focus on Muslims through their faith identity is limiting, rather than broadening, their perspectives. This view is supported by academic and other commentators. For example, Gary Younge writing in the Guardian (30th March 2009) pointing out that :'the government continues to approach Muslims as though their religion defines them'. Younge draws upon Amartya Sen to suggest that the present approach has been paradoxical in its effect:

> *'The confusion between the plural identities of Muslims and their Islamic identity is not only a descriptive mistake, it has serious implications for policies for peace in the precarious world in which we live," "The effect of this religion-centred political approach, and of the institutional policies it has generated ... has been to bolster and strengthen the voice of religious authorities while downgrading the importance of non-religious institutions and movements.'*

> Amartya Sen*: Identity and Violence.*

4.2 These appear as sharp criticisms, but the former Community Cohesion Minister, Sadiq Khan, has in fact made a very similar point in his Fabian Pamphlet, *Fairness not Favours* and drew out his own personal experience:

> '*I did not come into Parliament to be a Muslim MP ..Just as ordinary citizens have multiple identities, so do MPs… The people of Tooting elected me and those voters came from all faiths and of none. But no matter how hard I try not to allow my faith to define me as an MP – no matter how many times I ask not to have my religion precede my occupation when I am introduced or described – the fact is that others do often define me by my faith.'*

4.3 We must recognise that any programme aimed at a particular community tends to create and/or reinforce a stereotyped and homogenised view of that community. That is why iCoCo is particularly proud of its commissioned work in many parts of the country to 'understand and appreciate' the diversity of Muslim communities. Like all communities no one group can represent all ethno-national, theological or political strands let alone the many differences associated with generational, gender and other lines. The iCoCo approach has developed a series of local and national studies based upon 'understanding and appreciating Muslim communities', which has helped to develop new engagement strategies. (We have begun to apply this same approach to other faith communities including disaffected White working class groups).

4.4 Another problem is that Government also addresses PVE as though local and community concerns will make the difference to the sense of grievance felt by many Muslims, whereas there is no doubt that many Muslims are less concerned by local issues and continue to believe that Muslims around the world are under attack.

4.5 Meanwhile, we must not forget that the poverty and deprivation are very real in some sections of Muslim communities and that many will find it difficult to develop a meaningful sense of engagement and a real stake in society.

4.6 This therefore all points towards the need for a broader approach, using multiple aspects of the identities of Muslim communities and to integrate the work into that of other communities where the potential for violence is also a concern.

5. Prevent and the Community Cohesion Agenda

5.1 We are concerned that the Prevent agenda has been run as part of a counter-terrorism national programme. This appears to be because of a lack of trust in the mainly local authority community cohesion programmes which are seen by some Government departments as 'soft and fluffy'. We reject this view – as do most local authorities and other agencies – and would point out that changing attitudes and values is generally much harder than controlling behaviour. Further, local authorities and their partners are able to see all threats to cohesion in the round and have the same governance, policy and practice in place to reach across the spectrum. Indeed, it is not practical or cost effective to set up separate teams. An inclusive approach enables them to maintain a working relationship with their Muslim communities.

5.2 The real problem with the Prevent agenda is simply that it is presently situated within a counter-terrorism strategy and implemented by a team dedicated to counter-terrorism and is therefore viewed through this lens with suspicion and apprehension; there is a strong belief that the community will be spied upon, wrongly accused and treated unfairly; or simply that the community is made guilty by association with terrorism.

5.3 If Prevent were to be positioned with the remit of community cohesion practitioners a more inclusive and proportionate approach could be taken, working across communities, dealing with all forms of extremism, in which ever community is most at risk. We would point to the growth of the Far Right and whilst some Far Right groups are legitimately contesting democratic elections, it is also the case that these groups are often accompanied by a dangerous fringe element who are prepared to resort to violence and practice intimidation and promote hatred. Even Far Right democratic parties often demonise communities, exacerbate tensions and intimidate sections of our community.

5.4 The link between the Far Right and the Muslim community is plain to see – many of their campaigns promote negative images of Muslims, fringe elements sponsor hate campaigns which just happen to coincide with elections and more recently and more worrying the Far Right are embarking on a campaign of provocation against Muslim communities – as evidenced by the recent events of Harrow and Birmingham. All extremism is therefore inter-connected and in this case, the intimidation of Muslim communities is bound to heighten their fears and apprehension and, in turn, push them towards their own extreme elements who persuade them that this is simply indicative of the

underlying western anti-Muslim campaign. Community cohesion local teams and practitioners will necessarily have to adopt common approaches and provide interventions which are cross- community, to bridge divides, dissolve tensions and widen experiences and identities.

5.5 We therefore propose that the Counter- terrorism (CONTEST) strategy should focus on the largely reactive and responsive elements most closely aligned with the emergency services and that the 'prevent' element be widened, re-named and incorporated into generic and local cohesion programmes dealing with all aspects of community relations, including the tackling of issues of poverty and alienation and promoting common interests and shared experiences.

5.6 None of this is to suggest that Government should remove its very sharp focus on the combating of terrorism, but rather it is more effective to engage people through all of their life experiences and roles, rather than simply through their faith identity. It exposes them not only to a wider variety of voices and influences, but also to members of many other communities too – and of course has the added benefit that non-Muslims begin to see what they have in common with themselves. This would also enable a closer alignment with other Government strategies to promote active citizenship and community empowerment, which are generally ignored under the current narrowly focussed work of Prevent.

5.7 Community cohesion programmes are more able to tackle the underlying issues that breed resentment, fear and hatred and to provide the skills to enable communities to learn to live and prosper with difference. This requires a wide range of approaches including both formal and informal education programmes (and the new schools duty has been a very welcome development), active citizenship and volunteering schemes, sports, arts and social care schemes, to build social capital and to encourage people to look out for one another across ethnic, faith, age and other boundaries. This needs supporting with a drive to ensure that public services are cohesion 'proofed' so that all policies and programmes support 'bridging'. This also needs to include procurement and the funding of schemes in the voluntary and private sectors.

5.8 We believe this new approach will be much more likely to broaden peoples' horizons rather than reducing them, and be seen to be more open and fair, addressing extremism and risks on a consistent and proportionate basis. This will gain a wider acceptability and will be more sustainable in the longer term.