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# Submission to the Communities and Local Government Committee in response to the call for evidence around the Government's 'Prevent' programme: September 2009

Dr. Paul Thomas (University of Huddersfield)

## Summary

This Submission argues that, as it is **currently constituted, the Prevent programme is *not* the most effective way of addressing the undoubted problem** of the attraction to violent extremist ideologies of a minority of young people, and that, indeed, there is real likelihood of Prevent having a counter-productive impact through **working in contradiction to the overarching policy goals of cohesion and integration**. Here, it is argued that there should be *less* distinction between Prevent and Cohesion, rather than more, in terms of educational interventions with young people. This argument is based on significant primary research around work with young people in West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester, not only around Prevent itself, but also around the impact of community cohesion programmes, the understandings of 'Identity' held by young people, and previous attempts to operationalise 'anti-racist' educational programmes amongst white young people attracted to violent racist ideologies. This primary research shows Prevent programmes to be working with large numbers of Muslim young people in monocultural settings without effectively engaging with the actual issues and perceptions driving the groundswell of support for extremist ideologies. Not only is this counter to the goals of, and positive evidence around, community cohesion programmes, but it runs the real risk of creating a further 'backlash' amongst some alienated white young people. Here, the recent decision to 'extend' Prevent to far-right 'extremism' is helpful, but still does not address the root problems of a mis-constructed policy ( 'Government 'Prevent' strategy widened to combat rightwing racism', *The Guardian*, 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2009).

## Background details

I am a Senior Lecturer in Youth and Community Work at the University of Huddersfield, with many of our Youth Work students working and living in key areas, such as Dewsbury and Batley (Kirklees), Halifax (Calderdale), Bradford, Leeds, Oldham and Rochdale. My previous professional roles have included being a Youth Policy and Campaigns officer for the Commission for Racial Equality in the north of England, and work with white young people and football fans around racism and violence. In particular, this submission summarises evidence from the evaluation I carried out of the initial phases of the Prevent Pathfinder activity in Kirklees (Thomas, 2008), my wider examination of Prevent activity (Thomas, 2009), my recent research in to the understandings of national and personal 'Identity' held by young people in Oldham and Rochdale (Thomas and Sanderson, 2009), and my in-depth examination of the impact of Community Cohesion programmes with young people in Oldham (Thomas,2007).

1. It is clear from my own local evaluation (Thomas, 2008) and national mapping (DCLG, 2008) that the initial phases of Prevent work aimed at young people have worked with significant numbers of Muslim young people on a monocultural, 'single group' basis only – this is a programme aimed at Muslim young people. Whilst agreeing that suggestions of blanket bans on any type of 'single group' funding or activity was an unhelpful and clumsy interpretation of the Commission on Cohesion

and Integration's discussions (DCLG, 2008), I feel this approach of Prevent is problematic in a number of ways. The problems and possible unintended consequences of such 'single group' educational programmes are explored below, as are problems with the actual content of these programmes. In contrast, the submission suggests that we already have clear evidence about the success and efficacy of Community Cohesion work aimed at ethnically and socially-mixed groups of young people in terms of helping to build positive attitudes and more inclusive, over-arching identities, but Prevent work nationally is currently ignoring this evidence, and is so working in contradiction rather than in coherent partnership.

2. It is clear that the Government's underpinning strategy (Home Office, 2005) on belonging and identity is rightly working towards the strengthening of common and inclusive national identity and affiliation that overlays any specific community, faith or ethnic identities and affiliations, but this perspective is **not** currently identifiable within Prevent work with young people. By working with Muslim young people only in monocultural settings, all other forms of identity and connection with others are effectively ignored. Our own recent research on identity amongst young people in Oldham and Rochdale (Thomas and Sanderson, 2009) identified that young people of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin do indeed overwhelmingly see 'Muslim' as the form of identity most important to them, but they also had positive local identities and were very clear that Muslim identity is not incompatible with, or problematic, towards 'Britishness'. This is positive and important evidence, but we did also find that many of these Muslim young people were using their faith-based identity to make very negative and prejudiced moral judgments on the lifestyles and priorities of non-Muslims, with some of this expressed in crude and aggressive terms. Such feelings found a clear parallel in many of the white young people we surveyed, who displayed a racially-based territorial defensiveness and aggression to non-white 'others'. These racialised, faith-based and mutually antagonistic understandings of identities found in our research echo the Community Cohesion analysis (Cantle, 2001) that has led to a welcome re-orientation of public policy over recent years, and leads me to have real concerns that the type of monocultural approach of Prevent could harden and re-enforce the negative and antagonistic aspects of singular Muslim identity for young people living in tense and divided areas. Such programmes are taking place in a public context where many young Muslims rightly feel that their faith and communities are being stigmatised by outsiders, with the danger that a programme squarely targeting them solely as young Muslims will fuel such feelings.
3. The problematic nature of the monocultural Prevent programme is exacerbated by the fact that currently the programmes do not focus squarely on issues, concerns and events that seem to be driving some young Muslims towards more extreme ideological interpretations, or even to violence. Whilst the more recent 'Channel' programmes of developing work with individuals deemed to be at risk of radicalisation are a welcome and targeted addition to policy approaches, the more broad-based programmes are avoiding discussion of local or international political issues, or of religious interpretation, instead opting for what is often simply general youth activities but for Muslims only. Such avoidance is understandable for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is clearly great concern amongst Muslim communities around any programmes that, in name or content, imply that their community or faith has a generalised problem with 'violent extremism'. My own research has found a studious avoidance of use of terms like PVE, something now accepted by recent government guidance, but which heightens the dangers of such programmes appearing to be dishonest and disingenuous about their real purpose

and funding source. Secondly, my research (Thomas, 2008) clearly found that practitioners and managers feel unskilled and unprepared to engage with young people around such controversial and emotive subjects, as well as feeling that they have not been authorised to engage with young people and communities on such subjects. Such a finding echoes findings of previous research carried out by the University of Huddersfield (CRE, 1999; Thomas, 2002) that many teachers and youth workers charged with carrying out programmes of 'anti-racist' educational work with white young people avoided such engagement, or adopted a 'do as I say' approach, because they personally felt ill-equipped and unconfident about such work in the face of sometimes overt racial prejudices and opinions from some young people. There is clearly a disjuncture between the stated national aims of the Prevent educational activity and the reality of much of its content – much of it is positive and diversionary youth activity, but it is not Prevent activity in any meaningful sense and contains the problematic contradictions explored in this submission. This has been exacerbated by the very limited external evaluation of the programmes (DLGG, 2008) to date. Whilst more recent guidance on evaluation (DCLG, 2009) is helpful, it arguably still understates the importance of genuinely independent evaluation by the many agencies such as Universities equipped to do such research.

4. As well as the possible impacts the current Prevent activity is having on the self-identity of young Muslim people, there is a real risk that the programme is adding further fuel to feelings of 'unfairness' amongst some white young people and their communities. This feeling has been well-documented by academic researchers such as Hewitt (1996; 2005) over the past 15 years, with the sometimes clumsy implementation of well-intentioned equal opportunities policies and anti-racist educational measures provoking a 'white backlash' from some white working class young people who feel that there is little regard or respect for their own backgrounds and community traditions. A key element of this has been perceptions around funding schemes dedicated specifically to ethnic minority communities, with such, often unfounded, beliefs in favouritism seen as a crucial ingredient in the 2001 violent, racially-charged disturbances in the northern towns and cities of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford (Cantle, 2001; Ritchie, 2001). The resulting discussion around 'single group' funding has been highlighted above, but it is clear from my own research in Oldham and Rochdale that perceptions of 'funding favouritism' run deep amongst some white working class young people at a time of very difficult economic circumstances and of active agitation by far-right political groups whose stock-in-trade is lies and half-truths about governmental approaches to non-white ethnic minority communities. In this context, the extension of Prevent to white communities affected by far-right political extremism is a welcome recognition that violent political extremism is not confined to one ethnic or faith group, as witnessed by the number of explosives and conspiracy charges involving far-right activists over recent years. However, monocultural work with white young people only would repeat the failing of existing Prevent work with young Muslims detailed above, and do little to help young people re-examine the 'taken for granted' views, identities and assumptions within their communities, as well as make all sorts of questionable assumptions regarding what actually drives and causes any sympathy they apparently have for extremist and racist right-wing positions.
5. In contrast to the very questionable assumptions underpinning much of the current Prevent educational work with young people, and the very scant evidence regarding positive impacts flowing from such work despite significant national funding

streams, there is clear and positive evidence at a local level about the positive impacts on young people's attitudes and behaviour from programmes of Community Cohesion work based around cross-ethnic contact and work. A more general discussion around Community Cohesion is not the focus of this call for evidence, but the Committee did pose the question, *'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 evidence discussed above of the monocultural nature of Prevent work argues that Prevent activity is not just differentiated but contradictory to community cohesion activity. My own in-depth study of the impact of community cohesion youth work activity with young people in Oldham, Greater Manchester (Thomas, 2007) highlights the very significant changes to the assumptions and priorities of youth work brought about in Oldham by this new policy priority of cohesion, and the extremely positive response to cohesion from both youth workers and young people of all ethnic backgrounds. This positive evidence suggests, I would argue, that we need to question whether any meaningful distinction between cohesion and Prevent work with young people is actually helpful and effective. Bluntly, if community cohesion is rightly a key policy priority, and actual community cohesion work with young people in racially tense areas is successful and well-received, which my research suggests it is, what is the evidence base for suggesting that monocultural work with significant numbers of Muslim young people is an effective way of addressing violent extremist attitudes and actions of a small number of those young people? To date, much Prevent work has produced no meaningful evidence of success on its own stated terms.

Youth Work agencies in Oldham have reacted to the post-2001 focus on Community Cohesion by re-casting their priorities and work plans. My research found that they had prioritised cross-ethnic contact amongst young people in **all** the work they did, not just in projects focussed on equality and diversity, but in all their mainstream, arts, sports and outdoor activities. Their aim here has been to make contact with, and respect for, diversity of all types central to all their work with young people, utilising 'twinning arrangements' between youth projects, residential trips, and regular town-wide youth festivals and projects. The focus has not only been on improved contact between white and Asian young people, but between able-bodied and disabled/learning disability young people, rural and urban areas, and different geographical areas seen as having 'territorial' disputes between their respective young people. In doing this, this new community cohesion-based youth work has utilised the key principles of what is known as 'contact theory' (Hewstone et al, 2007). Here, none of the young people have been asked to deny their existing community identity, with vital preparation done in their own local, monocultural settings. The cross-ethnic contact has been carried out regularly and over time, to allow relationships to build naturally and safely, with fun and shared youth activities used as a platform to enable dialogue about difference and identities to develop informally and naturally, rather than 'forcing' it through programmes overtly about 'racism' or 'violent extremism'. Both youth workers and young people involved have reacted positively because this process works on the basis of what they have in common as young people living in Oldham, with common interest in having fun and new experiences. In particular, youth workers have welcomed this community cohesion work, with its emphasis on commonality and fun, as being much more effective than previous programmes of 'anti-racist' work, which were delivered in monocultural settings and which appeared closer to formal, school-type lessons, in

stark contrast to the enjoyable and challenging experiential community cohesion activities shared with others.

**In conclusion, this submission argues for a significantly reduced differentiation between current Prevent educationally-based activities and community cohesion activity.** Smaller –scale, targeted work with young Muslims viewed at risk of radicalisation, through the ‘Channel’ approach, is undoubtedly needed, but large-scale, unfocused and monocultural work with significant numbers of Muslim young people is not only not effective, but arguably counter-productive in terms of actually strengthening separate identities and damaging efforts to promote community cohesion. Instead, the submission draws on a range of recent empirical research by the University of Huddersfield to argue that the helpful extension of the programme to include far-right violent extremism should be used as an opportunity to fundamentally re-cast Prevent activities towards a cohesion basis, whereby opposition to and collective resilience against violent political extremism of all kinds is built through funding youth activities that develop cross-ethnic contact, dialogue and respect, and which strengthen common local and national identities.

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