

Prevent under CONTEST: A Critical Evaluation of its Purpose, Practice, and Reform in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper critically evaluates the **Prevent** strand of the United Kingdom's **CONTEST** counter-terrorism strategy by examining its purpose, implementation, effectiveness, and prospects for reform. Using a qualitative documentary analysis, the study draws on government policy documents, Prevent and Channel guidance, official statistics, independent reviews, civil society reports, and peer-reviewed literature to assess whether Prevent achieves its stated objective of preventing individuals from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. The findings indicate that Prevent has evolved from a community-based initiative into a statutory, multi-agency safeguarding framework embedded across education, healthcare, prisons, and local government. While evidence suggests that early intervention through Channel has supported some vulnerable individuals, the program's overall effectiveness remains difficult to determine because of limited long-term outcome data and a high proportion of referrals that do not progress to Channel support. The analysis also identifies persistent concerns regarding false positives, disproportionate impacts on Muslim communities, the expansion of pre-criminal surveillance, and tensions between national security objectives and the protection of civil liberties. Competing evaluations, including the Shawcross Review, the People's Review of Prevent, and the Independent Commission on UK Counter-Terrorism Law, Policy and Practice, demonstrate continuing disagreement over Prevent's legitimacy, evidence base, and future direction. The paper concludes that, although Prevent has potential value as an early intervention mechanism, its long-term credibility and effectiveness depend on greater transparency, stronger empirical evaluation, clearer risk thresholds, enhanced community trust, and reforms that better balance security, safeguarding, and fundamental rights.

Keywords: Prevent; CONTEST; Counter-terrorism; Countering Violent Extremism (CVE); Channel; Safeguarding; Radicalisation; United Kingdom; Human Rights; Counter-Terrorism Policy.

Acronym

Acronym	Full term
CONTEST	UK's Counter-Terrorism Strategy
DDP	Desistance and Disengagement Programme
DfE	Department for Education
NAO	National Audit Office
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Key Concepts

Key word / concept	Brief meaning in this report
Radicalisation	Process by which individuals may come to support or engage in terrorism or violent extremism; Prevent is officially framed as addressing “causes of radicalisation” (HM Government, 2018; 2023a).
Extremism	In UK policy, often defined as vocal or active opposition to “fundamental British values”; criticised as broad and vague in the Prevent literature (Aitlhadj and Holmwood, 2022; Amnesty International UK, 2023).
Prevent	Strand aimed at stopping people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism through early intervention and support (HM Government, 2018; 2023a).
Channel	Multi-agency programme providing support to individuals assessed as vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism (Home Office, 2018; 2024a).
“Pre-criminal space”	Concept used by Heath-Kelly (2017) to describe expanded surveillance and intervention targeted at people who have not committed an offence but are treated as potential risks.
Suspect community	Term used by Pantazis and Pemberton (2009) to describe groups collectively targeted and stigmatised by security policies; often applied to Muslims under Prevent.
False positives	Prevent referrals assessed as not posing a terrorism-related risk; Medact shows high proportions of such cases in healthcare settings (Aked, 2020).
Safeguarding	Protecting children and vulnerable adults from harm; the government presents Prevent as part of wider safeguarding duties in education, health and social care (HM Government, 2018; Department for Education, 2023).
People's Review	Civil-society review <i>The People's Review of Prevent</i> , arguing that Prevent is ineffective, discriminatory and incompatible with human-rights standards (Aitlhadj and Holmwood, 2022).
Shawcross Review	Government-commissioned <i>Independent Review of Prevent</i> led by William Shawcross; finds Prevent broadly valuable but in need of refocus on ideology and Islamist extremism (Shawcross, 2023).

1. Introduction

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide a critical analysis of the UK counter-terrorism strategy's "Prevent". It provides insight into this strategy's goals, how it is operated, and the room for improvement. The Prevent strand is part of the four strands of the counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST), Pursue, Prevent, Protect, and Prepare; therefore, Prevent should be considered as an upstream and preventative approach to counter-terrorism, rather than a reactive or punitive response to terrorist activity (HM Government, 2018; 2023a, Home Office, 2024b).



Since the introduction of the Prevent strategy, it has undergone numerous revisions (including the 2011 Review) and the introduction of the statutory duty placed on specific sectors by the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015. Prevent operates through inter-agency processes (e.g., Channels) and mandates placed on education, healthcare, prisons, and Local Authorities to consider how their actions may contribute to preventing individuals from being drawn into terrorism (Home Office, 2015; HM Government, 2023a).

Throughout Prevent's history, the policy has been subject to numerous critiques. Many criticisms of Prevent suggest that the programme has resulted in the criminalisation of Muslim communities in Britain (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009), has expanded the use of security in educational institutions and in the provision of healthcare (Heath-Kelly, 2017 & Aked, 2020), has chilled the lawful expression of individuals (Amnesty International UK, 2023 & Aitlhadj & Holmwood, 2022). The Independent Review into Prevent in 2023 (Shawcross, 2023) and differing perspectives found in The People's Review of Prevent (Aitlhadj & Holmwood, 2022) illustrate the substantial division between opinions regarding the aims and impacts of Prevent.

The evaluation addresses the above issues by considering how Prevent is framed in official documents, and by identifying how it is being implemented in practice through secondary data and documented case studies, including a review of the literature. The key issue the report will consider is whether the current design and operation of Prevent meet its intended outcomes, and what opportunities exist to enhance the programme going forward.

Methodology

The author used a qualitative documentary analysis rather than a primary empirical method. The core primary resources were the UK Government's policy and official publications and statistical

documents related to the CONTEST Programme (2018-2023), the Prevent Strategy and Channel Guidance, and the data on the number of People referred to and offered assistance by the Prevent Programme (HM Gov, 2018; 2023a; Home Office, 2018; 2024a). This documentation outlines formal aims of Prevent and describes how Prevent was implemented, with key summary data on referrals, Channel referrals discussions, and cases.

To consider diverse perspectives, the analysis includes significant reviews that differed in their analyses and conclusions regarding Prevent. These are the Independent Review of Prevent (Shawcross, 2023), The People's Review of Prevent (Aitlhadj and Holmwood, 2022), the Independent Commission on Counter Terrorism Law, Policy and Practice (2025), and the Suffolk Prevent Strategy (2024-2027). The key civil society and professional critiques used, including Medact's False Positives Report (Aked, 2020), and a study conducted by Amnesty International UK (2023), on the Prevent Duty's impacts on Rights.

Furthermore, the assessment includes noteworthy peer-reviewed articles that provides a critical analysis of the evolution, governance and social impact of the Prevent Programme, such as the concepts of: "Suspect Communities" (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009), the Expansion of the Pre-Criminal Space (Heath-Kelly, 2017) and the Evidence Basis for the Shawcross Review (Macdonald, Whiting & Jarvis, 2024).

Limitation

A key limitation of this methodology is that the outcome data is limited. While referral data and channel discussion data are available, detailed longitudinal data on outcome data for individuals and communities is limited and/or classified (Home Office, 2018; 2024a; Rights & Security International, 2023). Therefore, the analysis relies on inferences made from published statistics, case studies, and secondary evaluations; hence, it can not definitively establish causal relationships between the Prevent Programme and actual levels of terrorism.

Findings

1. Prevent's role within CONTEST

Prevent is one of four pillars (Pursue, Prevent, Protect, and Prepare) of the 2023 CONTEST Strategy. Its purpose is to prevent individuals from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism (HM Government, 2023a; Home Office, 2024b).

**OBJECTIVE 1: TO TACKLE THE
IDEOLOGICAL CAUSES OF TERRORISM**

**OBJECTIVE 2: TO INTERVENE EARLY
TO SUPPORT PEOPLE SUSCEPTIBLE
TO RADICALISATION**

**OBJECTIVE 3: TO ENABLE PEOPLE
WHO HAVE ALREADY ENGAGED IN
TERRORISM TO DISENGAGE AND
REHABILITATE**

Over the years, Prevent has shifted from an emphasis on local community projects for Muslims to a statutory, multi-agency safeguarding framework that underpins education, health, and criminal justice since the 2011 review of the Prevent Duty and the 2015 Prevent Duty (Heath-Kelly, 2017; Macdonald et al., 2024). The 2018 and 2023 versions of the CONTEST Strategy have further embedded Prevent within an overall security infrastructure, including the Desistance and Disengagement Programme (DDP) (HM Government, 2018; 2023a). This process has increased both the geographic reach and institutional footprint of Prevent, while also sparking discussion of “mission creep” from counter-terrorism into other areas such as welfare and education.

2. Referral patterns and Channel outcomes

The government has released statistics on the number of Prevent referrals and the number that ultimately led to a Channel case. Therefore, even though 7,318 Prevent referrals were made during 2017-2018, only 1,314 were discussed, resulting in only 394 (5% overall) referrals becoming Channel cases (Home Office 2018). Current statistics show that approximately 4,900-6,800 referrals are recorded annually, of which approximately 11-14% are taken as Channel cases (Home Office 2023; National Audit Office, 2023). A high number of referrals are closed out quickly or signposted to non-security services (Home Office, 2018; 2024a).

#	Measure	Value	Unit
1	Total Prevent referrals (2017–18)	7,318	count
2	Channel panel discussions (2017–18)	1,314	count
3	Channel cases (2017–18)	394	count
4	Channel cases as % of referrals (2017–18)	≈5	%
5	Annual referrals – recent low estimate	4,900	count
6	Annual referrals – recent high estimate	6,800	count
7	Channel adoption rate – recent low estimate	11	%
8	Channel adoption rate – recent high estimate	14	%
9	False positives in healthcare – <u>Medact</u> low estimate	90	%
10	False positives in healthcare – <u>Medact</u> high estimate	95	%

This is suggestive of an efficient way of filtering low-level concerns and providing additional support, however, a civil-society report states that approximately 90-95% of referrals are "false positives", resulting in potential negative impacts on trust, well-being and stigma, particularly in healthcare (Aked, 2020). Referrals are also disproportionately represented by children, young people and male youth/young men, with a high proportion of referrals recorded as "mixed/unstable/unclear ideology" and often mentioned together with mental health and/or neurodiversity issues (Home Office 2023; Rights & Security International, 2023). This raises the question of whether a security-framed process is an appropriate response to primarily social or clinical vulnerabilities.

Proportion of Prevent referrals and the referrals discussed at a Channel Panel and adopted as a Channel case, years ending 31 March 2016 to 2024



These are statistics presented by the Home Office (2024a)

3. Safeguarding, positive impacts, and illustrative UK case studies According to the Home Office (2024b), rather than being perceived as a means of surveillance, the PREVENT programme focuses on early intervention as a safety net. For example, the Department for Education (2023) has presented examples in which young people who received support through Channel moved away from violent thoughts due to vulnerabilities, including bullying and bereavement.

Case study 1: Abdu (positive safeguarding outcome) Abdu, aged 12, has experienced bullying and bereavement, whilst also supporting Daesh (ISIS). He received Youth support (ideological mentoring) through Channel and subsequently disengaged from his extremist views, felt more connected with his peers, and had his case closed by review (Department for Education, 2023). This is an example of Prevent using multi-agency, proportionate early intervention to support ideological and psychosocial vulnerabilities.

Case study 2: the “cucumber case” (problematic ‘false positive’)

The cucumber case has gained notoriety because it involved a 4-year-old Muslim boy whose nursery staff interpreted his drawing of his father cutting a cucumber (with the accompanying mispronunciation “cooker bum”) as meaning “cooker bomb” and required completion of Prevent-based paperwork before his case was de-escalated (Prevent Watch, 2016; Quinn, 2016). Despite the lack of wrongdoing, the child’s mother reported experiencing fear and stigma, raising concerns regarding the potential misapplication of Prevent

to very young children and the apparent increasing “hyper-visibility” of Muslim families (Aitlhadj and Holmwood, 2022; Amnesty International UK, 2023).



📷 The child's drawing of a cucumber caused concern, said his mother. Photograph: BBC Asian Network

Prevent referrals for very young children (Hyphen / Prevent Watch)

Summary of Prevent referrals for very young children in the UK (2016–17 to 2023–24), based on reporting by Hyphen and Prevent Watch.

Age group	Time period (UK)	Total Prevent referrals	Islamist-related referrals	Islamist as % of that age group
Under 2 years old	2016–17 to 2023–24	86	59	68.6%
2–5 years old (inclusive)	2016–17 to 2023–24	500	Not specified	Not specified

Therefore, examples such as these illustrate the ambiguity of PREVENT as a positive and helpful programme while also creating harmful false-positive situations and creating 'suspect' communities.

4. Critical perspectives: Suspect Communities and the Pre-criminal Space and False Positives

Scholars illustrating the construction of Muslims as a “suspect community” constructed by Prevent and subjected to exceptional levels of scrutiny due to Counter-Terrorism powers (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009). Prevent is expanding upon a “pre-criminal space” in which large swathes of the population are

governed by safeguarding legislation to ensure that they cannot, through normal institutions, be “infected” by extremism (Heath-Kelly, 2017).

Medact’s False Positive report identifies racial and religious disparities in serious mental health referral rates within healthcare where there is no credible national security risk. It concludes that Prevent undermines confidentiality and therapeutic relationships (Aked, 2020). Reviews conducted by civil society organisations demonstrate that Prevent has structural Islamophobia, is based on weak evidence, and limits the rights to lawful political/religion expression (Aitlhadj & Holmwood, 2022; Amnesty International UK, 2023).

Local strategies, including that of Suffolk, which identify another “pre-criminal space” and clearly identify Prevent and embed it within safeguarding structures giving priority to Islamist extremism, while providing a clear example of the shared model of early intervention and the securitisation of normal welfare work (Suffolk County Council, 2024).

5. Review of Prevent and its Critics and Reform Proposals

Shawcross (2023) argued, in the Independent Review of Prevent, that, although it is necessary, Prevent has become too broad a safeguarding measure that covers a range of non-violent extremist ideologies. It recommends a renewed focus on ideology and prioritisation of Islamist extremism as the most pressing threat. The government broadly accepted these recommendations (HM Government, 2023b). There are critiques of this ‘evidencelight’ and ‘ideological’ response (MacDonald et al. 2024) from many civil liberties and Muslim groups, with many refusing to participate in the review (Aitlhadj and Holmwood, 2022; Rights & Security International, 2023).

In sharp contrast, the People's Review of Prevent calls for the repeal of Prevent on grounds of harm and discrimination; it claims that there is inconsistency between the Prevent Framework and the principles of Human Rights (Aitlhadj and Holmwood, 2022). In addition, the Independent Commission on UK Counter-Terrorism Law, Policy and Practice (2025) described Prevent as the most contested part of the CONTEST strategy, questioned the radicalisation model from which Prevent is developed and proposed an alternative specific to the public-service sector's existing multi-agency safeguarding frameworks, linking health and violence reduction, including re-examining the duty expected of the public sector, transparency and independent oversight. The Suffolk local strategy illustrates how Prevent has become an institutionalised multi-agency partnership at the local level (Suffolk County Council, 2024)

Discussion and Conclusions

Prevent raises questions about its effectiveness and legitimacy as a counter-terrorism strategy. It has two elements: the first is to decrease the potential for violence through initiatives regarding ideology, early intervention, and rehabilitation (HM Government, 2018; 2023; Home Office, 2024). Data collected through various channels (Home Office, 2018, 2024; Department of Education, 2023) demonstrates that individuals, like Abdu, who participate in multi-agency support from local authorities are able to disengage from extreme ideologies and overcome more general issues such as low self-esteem and trauma.

Evidence of success is mixed. A strong attrition rate between Channel referral and continued involvement in the programme, along with the absence of reliable long-term data on outcomes, creates a

barrier to determining whether Prevent actually reduces the risk of terrorism. The data supporting this assertion is based on both empirical studies but also on evidence collected by civil society organisations. Research conducted by Medact, the Rights-and-Security Initiative, Amnesty International UK, and numerous other organisations all indicate that Prevent results in very large numbers of false positives with dire consequences for individuals, their families and communities (Aked, 2020; Prevent Watch, 2016; Quinn, 2016; National Audit Office, 2023).

Muslim communities have been experiencing disproportionate effects as a result of Prevent, including creating or encouraging the development of suspect communities, a new and larger set of pre-emptive surveillance mechanisms that extend into everyday life, and an increase in the security of welfare interactions (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009; Heath-Kelly, 2017; Rights-and-Security International, 2023; Amnesty International UK, 2023).

The Shawcross Review, The People's Review, and Independent Commission all describe the legitimacy of the Prevent Strategy as being controversial; thus, at times, it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of Prevent and whether it actually fulfils its purpose. The Shawcross Review's suggestion to focus only on ideology and Islamist extremism reinforces the notion that Prevent may be biased and blind to the social and economic aspects of the causes of violence, while the People's Review and Independent Commission's calls for Prevent to be integrated with existing, broader public health and safeguarding frameworks attempt to achieve the goals of early intervention with minimal harm and maximum trust. (Shawcross, 2023; Macdonald et al., 2024; Independent Commission, 2025).

The literature reviewed suggests that Prevent has partial applicability - some individuals may receive constructive assistance; however, due to a lack of transparency and poor evaluation processes, many see Prevent as stigmatising and therefore a source of fear. For Prevent to be more defensible and effective, the following changes need to occur:

Policy and Practice Recommendations

☐ **Strengthen the evidence base and transparency**

- Independent, Long-term (longitudinal) evaluations of Prevent & Channel (compared against non-security related safeguarding interventions)
- Publish anonymised/disaggregated outcome data of long-term outcomes by Age, Ethnicity, Gender, Disability, and Type of Concern related to Prevent.

☐ **Narrow and clarify Prevent's scope**

- Clarify&tighten risk indicators (especially "mixed/unclear ideology")
- Route mental-health/neurodevelopmental cases mainly through health/social care rather than through security services.

☐ **Re-centre ordinary safeguarding and rights**

- End the use of Prevent as a quasi-intelligence system inside the public services (schools, hospitals, and social services)
- Use existing Safeguarding Frameworks that are clearly based on Professional Ethics and Rights Standards.

□ Embed meaningful community participation and oversight

- Include Muslim Communities and Critical Civil Society Groups in the Redesign and Oversight of Prevent.
- Work towards rebuilding trust and avoiding disruption to social cohesion.

In conclusion, Prevent sits between security, safeguarding, and rights. A more specific, clearer, and rights-respecting approach, which sees communities as partners, not suspects, and does not misinterpret cases like the cucumber one, would achieve the stated government objective and share the same goal of reducing the terrorism threat while upholding the principles that Prevent claims to represent.

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Appendix 1

