



UNIVERSITY OF
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COLLEGE OF
SOCIAL SCIENCES

CHALLENGES AND CHANGES IN RELATION TO PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN BIRMINGHAM

BIRMINGHAM'S MUSLIMS: in the city, of the city

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Prevent & Security Workstream

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Birmingham's Muslims: in the city, of the city

This project is more than academic research. Bold and unique, this three year programme will consider the story of the city's Muslim communities – their past, present and future – to better understand their contribution to the success of the city. Recent events across the city and country have significantly impacted cohesion. Often misrepresented or misunderstood, Muslim communities deserve a safe space where they have the opportunity to have open and honest conversations with leaders, institutions and policymakers about the issues that matter to them and impact their everyday lives. As a leading Russell Group institution, the University of Birmingham occupies a singular niche to facilitate this. Building on our links across the political sphere, state apparatus and the city, we aim to bring together diverse groups for a range of engaging, relevant and pertinent activities.

Birmingham – as a city and as a university – has a strong commitment to fairness, tolerance and co-operation. This project aspires to generate new ideas to support and encourage others to understand Birmingham's Muslim communities as both 'in' and 'of' the city.

DISCLAIMER

This paper contains the views of individuals that were engaged and duly interpreted by members of the project's research team. Responsibility for any errors therefore lies with the author(s):

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INTRODUCTION

This consultation document reflects roundtable discussions brokered by the University of Birmingham with institutional and community stakeholders working in the field of preventing violent extremism (PVE)¹. The roundtable – held in March 2017 - was the first activity in a number of collaborative exercises that aim to construct a better picture of what a ‘successful’ approach to preventing violent extremism in Birmingham might look like. The roundtable formed part of the University’s *“Birmingham’s Muslims: in the city, of the city”* project and was borne out of conversations which first emerged out of the project’s opening conference in October 2016. Exploring some of the very real challenges facing the city and its Muslim communities, the conference also considered how those same challenges might be turned into opportunities. One opportunity related to facilitating a more open and democratic dialogue about PVE. This document is a preliminary step in that process, one that looks towards furthering the dialogue with those stakeholders who participated in the roundtable as well as those who did not.

OVERVIEW

At the outset, discussions focused on how a lack of open dialogue about PREVENT and PVE had created a vacuum that had been filled by largely negative perceptions and criticisms. These perceptions and criticisms were seen to be routinely voiced, tending to

focus on PREVENT especially and included: unduly targeting Muslims and their communities; constructing Muslim communities as ‘suspect communities’ that demand greater scrutiny and surveillance; limiting freedom of speech including the censoring of speaking out against the British Government and British foreign policy in particular; and imposing a top-down, Government-backed version of a ‘British Islam’ seen to be more compatible with Western, secular and liberal values. It was noted that these perceptions and criticisms were not merely the preserve of Muslims but were also evident among certain sections of the media, within think-tanks, in academia, and political discourse also. Some also expressed concerns about when PREVENT overlaps and intersects with issues relating to social care, health and wellbeing, crime and justice, and education among others, it was very easy to conclude that ‘all things Muslim’ were being framed by PVE, counter-terror or counter-radicalisation. In the context of Birmingham, some felt the legacy of Project Champion continued to detrimentally shape perceptions.

While so, there was a shared view that some change was already evident in the city about perceptions of PREVENT and PVE. Aligning this with the start of the Syrian civil war, some spoke about how the safeguarding aspect of PREVENT had had a positive impact through stopping a number of individuals from travelling to the Middle East. This positive impact was especially evident among the families of those who were stopped. As it was explained, PREVENT interventions not only meant that loved ones were stopped from travelling to a war zone and being potentially killed but so too did the interventions also avoid them from the potential of having their homes raided, being arrested and subsequently imprisoned. This shift from perceiving PVE

¹ Please note the necessary distinction between references to ‘PREVENT’ which specifically refers to one strand of the British Government’s four-stranded counter-terrorism strategy and ‘preventing violent extremism’ which is more generic and encompasses a variety of activities and endeavours that may or may not include PREVENT.

and PREVENT as being primarily about surveillance to being more about safeguarding was not only suggested as already being underway but so too was it mooted that it might be an effective way to challenge and change negative perceptions and criticisms more widely.

Some stakeholders did question the extent to which negative perceptions about PREVENT and PVE were commonly held among Muslim communities, especially among Muslims with a younger demographic. As some stakeholders explained, many young Muslims did not have a detailed understanding of PREVENT and PVE. Likewise, because young people had grown up in a post-9/11, post 'war on terror' world, so the relevance and resonance of such events were far less significant and determinative for them than they maybe were for older and possibly more politically astute individuals. Some suggested that because this was the 'norm' for many young Muslims, it likely diluted the significance of some of the criticisms cited previously about PREVENT in particular.

Another potential change currently underway was the fact that more individuals, groups and organisations were delivering PVE programmes and initiatives in the city. For some, this was illustrative of a greater 'buy-in' from community stakeholders and Muslim communities more widely. PREVENT still appeared to be somewhat problematic however in that there was an ongoing reluctance and suspicion about receiving state or institutional funding in relation to it. Similarly, there was also some recognition that criticisms and attacks against Muslim

groups and organisations that chose to deliver PVE programmes continued to be common and somewhat routine. There was a view however that if more strong voices from within Muslim communities began speaking out in support of PVE and PREVENT, this would dramatically change perceptions. As the discussions went on, effective strong voices would need to command trust within their communities at the same time as being seen to be credible and authentic.

In discussions about the most effective ways to challenge and change perceptions about PVE and PREVENT, the safeguarding aspect was seen to be especially important. As one community stakeholder put it, safeguarding was in fact what PVE was about: "it's about the safeguarding and it's about the people I'm working for, the young people at the ground level of the street". Another opportunity for challenge and change was seen to be in the need to better share and communicate the 'successes' of PREVENT and PVE: in particular, impact and evidence. Most felt that finding a meaningful way of evidencing this was long overdue. At the same time however, discussions acknowledged the difficulties in doing so not least because of issues relating to confidentiality and the sensitivity of the data and information involved. While so, the need to evidence was acknowledged as being a crucial tool in challenging negative perceptions. Better evidencing about how PREVENT and PVE seeks to respond to far-right and other forms of extremism was also seen to be another potential means through which perceptions could be challenged and subsequently changed.

QUESTIONS FOR AN ONGOING DIALOGUE

These questions draw on a number of the points raised during the roundtable discussions. In doing so, they aim to prompt a series of responses that will shape and inform the next stage of discussions in the

process of establishing a more open and democratic dialogue about PVE and PREVENT in Birmingham. Responses are sought from those who participated in the original roundtable as indeed those who did not,

to some or all of the questions below.

1. Are there limits to what PREVENT can do? How much should it be realistically seeking to do?
2. How can narratives about PREVENT and/or PVE be shifted away from the typical 'to and fro' of arguments between defensive advocates and offensive opponents?
3. To what extent is it possible to 'measure' the impact of PREVENT and/or PVE? How might such a 'measure' be established? How are existing programmes, initiatives and activities currently being 'measured' for impact and 'successes'?
4. What might 'meaningful evidence' look like in terms of positive impact, success and so on?
5. Who is best placed to identify both 'measures' and 'meaningful evidence'?
6. What is the best way to communicate 'good news' and 'successes' to different audiences (e.g. Muslim communities, civil society, and the general public)? Are different approaches required for local, regional and national audiences as indeed other types of audiences too (e.g. Muslim, general public, political and so on)?
7. Is it right to try and shift narratives about PREVENT and/or PVE from surveillance to safeguarding?
8. What role is there for academics to support institutional and community stakeholders in terms of evidencing, measuring, evaluating, communicating and disseminating?

All responses should be made to Chris Allen via email at c.allen.2@bham.ac.uk. If you would prefer to discuss your response over the telephone or face-to-face then please email with full contact details and someone from the project team will get in touch.