



## **Memorandum of Evidence from the Muslim Council of Britain**

Communities and Local Government Committee:  
Preventing Violent Extremism

## **Introduction**

1. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is an inclusive umbrella body that seeks to express and be a platform for the diverse interests of Muslims in Britain. The MCB is a non-partisan, cross-sectarian organisation that reflects the rich traditions of Islam, both Sunni and Shi'a, that exists in Britain today. Founded in 1997, it is pledged to work for the common good of the society as a whole.
2. The MCB is made up of major national, regional and local organisations, specialist institutions and professional bodies. Its affiliates include mosques, educational and charitable bodies, cultural and relief agencies and women and youth groups and associations. At present it has over five hundred affiliates.
3. The MCB welcomes this opportunity to submit its views on the Government's programme for preventing violent extremism. Such an appraisal is long overdue and we endorse any initiative that examines what has become, the central policy tool for engaging with Britain's Muslim community.
4. The response is based upon consultation amongst our affiliates and reflects a consensus of views amongst the Muslim community in Britain.

## **Background**

5. The Muslim Council of Britain has long spoken out against terrorism and violent extremism. Ever since the atrocities of 11 September 2001, the MCB has initiated statements and campaigns to speak out against the scourge of terrorism.
6. The MCB does not wish to sweep under the carpet the fact that more than half of Muslims arrested in 2007/2008 have pleaded guilty to terrorism offences. Our message – ever since 9/11 – has been unequivocal and focussed – to call on all members of society to eschew criminality and participate positively in society. It is the job of the professionals to uncover criminality.
7. Significant amounts of public funds have been invested in the Prevent programme. The monitoring and intelligence gathering agenda of Prevent are matters that best reside within the National Security Strategy. It was an error to have contaminated the way a department like Communities and Local Government is publicly perceived by placing national security concerns in its orbit. Community development and cohesion policies ought to apply to all communities fairly and equitably, based on need.
8. While the focus should be on a criminal and policing strategic response, the MCB appreciates the need to explore the underlying causes. However, there seems to have been an expectation that community bodies, by showing 'leadership', can wave a magic wand and ask young people to remain oblivious to international political developments at the root of the frustration – not least the injustice in Palestine that has lasted well-nigh sixty years.
9. The Muslim Council of Britain echoes the widely held view that the 'Prevent' policy, the subsequent strategic response adopted by the Government, has not minimised extremism but has instead proved to be counter-productive. It has flawed analytical underpinnings, as outlined above, and

assumes that the Muslim community must be viewed through the prism of security. This has become known as the 'securitisation of integration'.

10. The MCB has sight of the letter recently sent by Secretary of State for Communities and the Home Secretary to local authorities on the subject of Prevent (August 2009). We welcome the acknowledgement that "it is clear that the label 'Preventing Violent Extremism' attached to the local Prevent funding stream has on occasion been a barrier to promoting good, community-based work". We feel that by drawing attention to Government's concern with "all forms of extremism, including violent extremism", the letter is addressing concerns that the Prevent agenda views Muslims as the 'suspect community'.

### **Substantive Response**

11. From the Muslim community perspective, 'Prevent' programmes are providing the prism through which to see all public programmes – impeding even spiritual chaplaincy in hospitals, and adding student 'monitoring' responsibilities to university authority duties. These are mainstream, service delivery concerns that are being hampered by the short-term, analytically flawed assumptions of the 'Prevent' policy.
12. On 21st March 2009, the MCB convened a community consultation meeting on Prevent and (at the time) the proposed Contest 2 proposals, at the Birmingham Central Mosque. This was attended by over 200 mosque representatives and ulema (religious scholars) from across the country. Views expressed included:
  - (i) from a representative of a Lancashire community body, "we have decided not to access PVE funding....the Prevent/Contest 2 is considering all of us as 'extremists' "
  - (ii) from a representative of a Blackburn community organisation, "Concerns on surveillance and monitoring are having a negative affect on the delivery of Prevent"
  - (iii) from a senior representative of the Birmingham Central Mosque, "How has PVE public money been spent? We need to know the results"
  - (iv) from a representative of a Glasgow mosque, "the Scottish PVE funding is not great, but there remain suspicions and misgivings - we have been debating our policy of engagement"
  - (v) from a representative of a Northwest England Ulama council, referring to the case of some students in Bradford who were tried and subsequently acquitted in March 2006 "We are seeing a climate of suspicion where young men going to the mosques on a regular basis seems to cause concern - Prevent seems to have made us fearful and anxious of each other..."
  - (vi) from a representative of a women's group in Aston, "tell us the facts...there is not enough in the public domain".
13. The MCB acknowledges that Muslim civil society bodies, including those affiliated to the MCB, have successfully bid for 'Prevent' funding. However, many are now reporting themselves that the stated aim of the policy is not working. There is little or no evidence that the policy has reduced extremism.
14. Despite the vast amounts spent on the 'Prevent' policy, a majority of Muslim organisations are not taking up the funding. New organizations, with no track-record in the community, are taking up funding without any rigorous measure of success. The Muslim Council of Britain was recently contacted by a group of Northampton Muslims who said "...we are fortunate that different

communities co-exist peacefully in Northampton due to the tireless work of many individuals and agencies. The awarding of this money assumes that ‘there is a problem in the town’ when it doesn’t exist. Muslims ...are part and parcel of everything that goes on here. They are concerned about ... issues that affect the wider community ... [such as]...education, health, housing, youth provision ... mainstream issues that need to be addressed by statutory agencies”.

15. Our experience, therefore, is that ‘Prevent’ is conflating intelligence gathering and anti-terrorism with community services delivery. Prior to 7/7 and even 9/11, British Muslim civil society was evolving to make vibrant contributions to the mainstream third sector. Through active engagement with a range of funding bodies, Muslim community groups could deliver projects on par with other organisations of all faiths and none.
16. It seems that for many agencies and groups, access to funding now becomes possible if they take on a ‘Prevent’ agenda colouring; the other side of the coin is that overwhelming section of the Muslim community which is law-abiding, will not identify with the Prevent agenda that brands them as a problem or suspect community.
17. Since the ‘Prevent’ policy was instituted, the opportunity to access mainstream funding has diminished with those affiliated to MCB reporting that they are being directed to funding emanating from the ‘Prevent’ strand rather than through previous sources of funding. We are now very concerned about the new grants funding given to Local Authorities, because Muslim Communities will be disadvantaged as there is no evaluation framework in place. We should caution that this is now leaning towards another extreme.
18. More importantly, the MCB underlines the point that far from preventing extremism, this policy has prevented cohesion. This surely goes against the ethos and purpose of the Department for Communities and Local Government. It is clear to the MCB that other minority faith communities in the UK are resentful of the disproportionate funding allocated to capacity building and education projects of one grouping in the way that has taken place.
19. Any evolution of the ‘Prevent’ policy should move beyond and away from narrow security concerns. We strongly advocate the renewal of democratic processes to strengthen civil society as a whole. With the MPs expenses scandal and the downfall of the banking sector, the electorate has to be reassured of political processes and systems and inherently have faith of the political leadership imposed on them, be this local, regional and national. Without this there can be no vision of a cohesive society. Regardless of faith, race, social status, social upbringing, civil society and communities face the same problems in terms of education, housing, employment, health, crime etc. There has to be fresh and enlightened thinking on the renewal of democratic processes to make Britain a better nation by strengthening civil society and giving power back to the people, in terms of accountability.
20. As ‘Prevent’ has become the primary tool of engagement between the government and the community, attention is diverted away from pressing issues that cannot be viewed via the prism of security. Britain’s ethnic minorities experience high levels of poverty and deprivation. This is acute for Muslims: a third of the ethnic population is Muslim, though Muslims themselves are of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Over a third of Muslims live in the top 10% of deprived local authority areas; more than half live in the most deprived 20%. Muslim households are most likely to lack central heating while unemployment rates are higher than other sections of the population.

21. In conclusion, we are supportive of this consultation in terms of providing the space for faith and community organisations to feedback on the effectiveness of 'Prevent'. We are hopeful that you will take on board many of the views, recommendations and criticisms that have emerged from this policy. There is an urgent need to actively seek to rectify the damage done that has inevitably distanced the Muslim Community further from engagement on tackling extremism. As a new generation of young Muslims and young people enter civil society, we need to reframe the discussion so that they and other Britons are not criminalized, and are actively encouraged to become part of the public space.