Further points around a suggested review of Prevent – drawing on research/evidence of ‘what works on countering violent extremism

A specific area of Prevent where there is room for review is the definition and application of the term ‘non-violent extremism’. The government has understandable anxieties concerning tackling non-violent extremism and this issue was acknowledged by most from whom the Commission heard from as being a legitimate concern.

But it is also clear that the issue of non-violent extremism will not be successfully dealt with unless there is greater trust and collaboration between Muslim communities and government agencies and a better appreciation of what exactly the government is trying to address.

As noted in my verbal evidence a review of Prevent could seek to more clearly define non-violent extremism; revisit the boundaries of who is included/excluded in this definition; and review the benefits/drawbacks of non-engagement with those labelled as non-violent extremists. This should draw on emerging evidence of ‘what works’ in countering violent extremism (CVE), to provide constructive suggestions on how Prevent could be refined and improved. Below is an initial overview of some of the available evidence and/or lessons learnt which such a review could draw upon:

- Groups classified as non-violent extremists have been shown, in some specific cases, to be effective in dissuading individuals from violent behaviour and moderating extreme views. This has been the case, for example, in Canadian approaches to tackling violent extremism where Salafist groups have been engaged to stop individuals progressing onto violent extremist behaviour.¹

- Furthermore, the available research on countering violent extremism tends to show that top down approaches by governments, which have focused on a ‘battle of ideas’/ have sought to shape community values, have tended to be unsuccessful in preventing or reducing extremist behaviour, and occasionally counterproductive.² This too points

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¹ Note also that respected CVE experts have highlighted there is little evidence that ideological or religious ‘pull’ factors are the sole or key drivers of violent extremist behaviour See e.g. J.M. Berger, Making CVE Work: a focused approach based on process interruption, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, May 2016; also James Khalil, Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions are not Synonymous: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2014.862902. Similarly Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller have shown that radicalisation does not necessarily lead to violence – it is possible for individuals to hold, express and consume extreme views, without transgressing to violence. Jamie Bartlett, Carl Miller, “The Edge of Violence: Towards telling the difference between violent and non-violent radicalisation” in Terrorism and Political violence, Vol 24, Issue 1, 2012

² See Peter Romaniuk, Does CVE Work? Lessons Learnt from the Global Effort to Counter Violent Extremism, Global Centre on Cooperative Security, September 2015 p24 -5. See also the review of Australia’s CVE programmes which found that initiatives to ‘build resilience’ in communities have not of themselves proven to be sufficient to stop all individuals heading down a pathway of radicalisation. Individuals within these communities were still being drawn towards extremist ideologies, the study found. Australian Department of
to a need to revisit definitions of ‘non-violent extremism’ and ‘British values’ and perhaps just as importantly the process by which definitions are arrived at.

- Instead, community-level partnerships in the CVE space - whereby community organisations are involved in identifying, and diverting individuals from violent extremism - have been relatively effective. This has occurred where community relations have been invested in as an end in themselves, rather than simply for CVE purposes. Danish and Dutch models using community mentors working alongside community police officers are now being piloted in locations in Africa and the Middle East.

- Note also that the current definition of extremism in CONTEST potentially leaves the British government vulnerable to accusations of ‘double standards’, also vis a vis overseas counterparts (for instance, Saudi Arabia, a key ally, could be characterised as opposed to the fundamental value of democracy). A more nuanced official definition could be adopted, and some initial language on this is provided in a footnote.

- The need for an approach based on two-way communication and trust is further strengthened when one considers the examples of where Prevent is working successfully. One such example is in Leicester, where an independent multi-faith organisation rooted in the local community holds responsibility for bringing together community members and statutory bodies to discuss cases of concern. This has enabled the community to take responsibility for tackling potential cases of extremism, in a manner that is in line with the legal framework but also understood and trusted by the local community itself.

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the Prime Minister and Cabinet ‘Review of Australia’s Counter-Terrorism Machinery’:


4 CONTEST definition of extremism: ‘Extremism is the vocal or active opposition to our fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also regard calls for the death of members of our armed forces as extremist.’

5 A more nuanced definition of extremism could be: ‘Extremism is the possession of black and white worldviews, the inability to acknowledge the potential validity of different viewpoints, and the desire to impose, often by force, intimidation or coercion, the views one holds on others.’