

A Peer Review of the Prevent programme

During 2010-11 the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) worked with Tower Hamlets Council, Lancashire Prevent Forum and Local Government Improvement and Development (now part of the Local Government Group) to create and facilitate a Prevent Peer Evaluation process.

Prevent is a hugely sensitive area of policy and service delivery and there have been significant variations in the experience of local authorities and police forces in delivering the agenda. For Tower Hamlets and Lancashire, understanding local differences in the response to and impact of Prevent interventions was seen as a valuable way to not only strengthen local evaluation, but also to contribute to wider national debates about the future of work preventing violent extremism.

CONTEXT

Designing an evaluation by peer review was therefore well suited as a method for the participating authorities to work together and learn from each other. The evaluation focussed on the work delivered by statutory services to strengthen the authorities' ability as organisations to respond to the threat of violent extremism.

The process was designed as follows: 'Core group' participants each hosted a day which brought together their key partners to reflect on approaches to their work and what had been achieved according to a number of themes earlier identified. Peer reviewers drawn from the 'other' core group acted as 'critical friends', probing reflections according to their own experiences. Also present were sector partners with a broader interest area, who were also able to make a contribution on the day. Following the day long meetings a 'sense-making workshop' was held which drew together the different strands of emergent thinking.

The process provided opportunities for reflection and learning by the participating organisations and their partners. In addition, the peer review element enabled participants to identify the key characteristics of each local context and the different approaches taken to implementing a programme and how these affected impact.

The role of the peers throughout the process was to act as 'critical friends', constructively challenging the assumptions of the host authority and probing reflections, with the aim of learning from each others' experiences and approaches. Given the close partnership working between local authorities and police forces, which has characterised this agenda, the peer review was undertaken as a joint Police / Local Authority venture.

OBJECTIVES

The overall aims of the peer review were to:

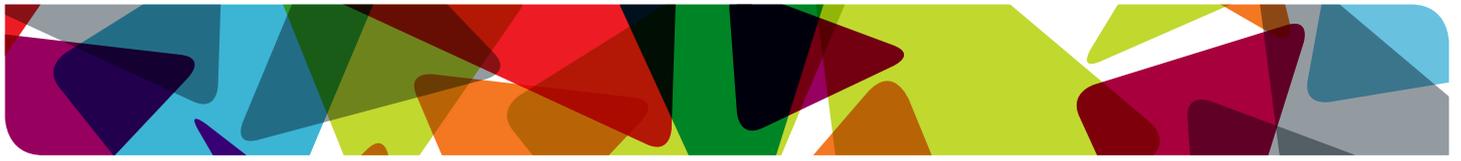
1. Identify what has worked to inform decision making a) for future resourcing of the programme and b) for embedding Prevent in mainstream services and structures.
2. Identify what we have learnt about our local communities and populations and how this can inform future planning.
3. Assess the efficacy of our approach to handling a controversial agenda and how this could inform the future work of our organisations and local government as a sector.

METHODOLOGY

The peer review process consisted of a preparatory phase and three workshops.

Preparatory phase: development of local narratives:

In preparation for the first workshops, the two authorities developed their respective 'local narratives'. The aim of the narratives was to allow peers to begin articulating their local approach to delivering Prevent using a 'theory of change' (ToC) framework. TOC is a useful tool which enables people to articulate the assumptions about the process through which change will occur and specifies the ways in which all of the required outputs and outcomes related to achieving the desired long-term change will be brought about. In this preparatory phase, the exercise therefore entailed the articulation of the participating authorities' respective local contexts; the key assumptions upon which the design of the programme was built, including assumptions made about their local communities and their organisational capacity to handle Prevent-related issues. The narratives also included the objectives that they hoped to achieve and how.



Workshops:

The first two workshops were onsite sessions, which took place in Tower Hamlets and Lancashire. These workshops involved senior stakeholders from the host local authority and Police Force and peers from other areas. The sessions aimed to look in particular at the impact of the authorities' work in the following areas:

- a) reducing the likelihood of individuals engaging in violent extremism;
- b) contributing to the delivery of the national counter terrorism agenda and;
- c) local partnerships between local authorities/Police and statutory and community partners.

Peers worked in small groups and taking each of the three themes they then explored their narratives in more depth, testing assumptions and approaches, and, where they could, developing a simple Theory of Change map, which we used as an organising principle.

The third and final session consisted of a 'sense-making' workshop, involving all peers. On the basis of the learning and main themes that emerged from the discussions of the two workshops held in Tower Hamlets and Lancashire, TIHR consultants developed four 'working hypotheses'. The aim of the workshop was for peers to reflect on these hypotheses and on the challenges they received during the process in order to begin to make sense of their experiences of working with Prevent and develop new thinking for Prevent going forward.

IMPACT

The participating authorities found the peer review process to be a valuable experience. It provided the time and the space for peers to be able to reflect, with colleagues, on the Prevent work achieved to date in their own and partner authorities. Being able to explore their respective local approaches and having 'critical friends' to challenge assumptions was not always easy to hear but enabled participants to challenge themselves and the thinking behind their work. Ultimately, it provided a strong driver and foundation for moving into to the next phase of Prevent.

Secondly, having the opportunity to understand local differences in the response to, and impact of, Prevent interventions was valuable not only in terms of strengthening local evaluation, and also in terms of contributing to wider national debates about the future of work to prevent violent extremism.

Below are some practical examples of how the peer review process impacted on the participating authorities' work going forward:

- The challenging questions raised by peers enabled the authorities to think about new ways to strengthen information sharing mechanisms.
- More proactive work is taking place with wider partners. In this sense, the peer review process has affected operational practice.
- The process proved to be a helpful in strengthening links and collective thinking, which fostered a positive group dynamic, built confidence and initiated a partnership-setting process.
- It enabled the participating authorities to realise the need to challenge themselves more and to develop more self-criticism.
- It allowed useful thinking to emerge around what the right balance is between a community-led and statutory-led approach to delivery.