



# A MESSAGING GUIDE ON THE PREVENT DUTY

## WHAT'S THIS GUIDE AND WHO'S IT FOR?

In November 2023, Amnesty UK's major report [\*This is the Thought Police\*](#), criticised the UK government's Prevent duty for harming the basic human rights of freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, and the right to equality and non-discrimination.

In the same year, the report [\*Holding Our Own\*](#) was produced by Liberty, NEON ([the New Economy Organisers Network](#)), and nine organisations working in civil liberties, police monitoring and mental health. Inspired by this, Amnesty UK approached NEON to explore how the principles of *Holding Our Own*, which emphasises care and community, can be applied to talking about the Prevent duty.

The result is this **Messaging Guide** developed collaboratively with Amnesty UK, NEON, Prevent Watch, the Runnymede Trust, Maslaha and Open Rights Group. It explores how advocates, campaigners and others can speak to the public about the harms of the Prevent duty and build support for scrapping the policy.

To achieve new ways of talking about the Prevent duty, this guide moves away from traditional human rights language. Prevent does negatively impact human rights, but most people don't think about their lives and experiences in terms of 'human rights'. Rights-based language can feel distant and disconnected from how people see themselves or their lives.

Instead, the guide focuses on how people feel when they are safe and free to express themselves, practise their religion and create trusted relationships. It centres freedom as a shared positive value rather than labelled as a human right.

We hope this guide provides meaningful support to organisations and groups engaging with the public or supporting impacted communities.

## FRAMING PRINCIPLES

- **Lead with shared values. Start with a vision of well-resourced communities where people feel free and safe to be themselves.**

Messages that start with values – rather than problems – have proved to shift thinking in a progressive direction. Values tap into people’s deeply held beliefs and appeal to their better nature.

Lead with a vision of a world where people feel free and safe to be themselves and communities can freely and safely express their religion, culture, political beliefs, neurodiversity and mental health. Talk about the conditions needed for this vision to be a reality: a well-resourced community where people can access the care and guidance they need from people they can trust.



### EXAMPLE MESSAGE

■ Regardless of our race, background, religion or political beliefs, we should all feel free and safe to be ourselves and to express our opinions and beliefs. That is the foundation of a society that celebrates difference.

■ No matter what their race, faith or background, every child should feel free and safe to be themselves at school. Children need space to express their thoughts and feelings. They need adults around them they can trust – who offer support, guidance and understanding.

- **Create a sense of a community joined together across race and religion.**

It is important that our messages challenge the opposition’s divisive rhetoric that pits groups against one another.

In the case of the Prevent duty, those who are disproportionately targeted include Muslim communities, neurodiverse people, disabled people, and other marginalised groups.

Name different identities specifically along race and faith lines at the start of your value statement to show that, regardless of who we are, people want similar things. This emphasises that these values are common sense.

Use phrases like 'no matter/regardless of' to appeal to a joined-up community across racial, religious and political lines. This builds solidarity and agency in a way that protects your message from the opposing tactics to divide communities. Apply this to your shared value and vision to show that people across difference are united on this belief.

#### EXAMPLE MESSAGE

- Regardless of our race, background, religion or political beliefs...
- No matter how we vote, what religion we believe in or how much we earn...
- Whether our children go to a school in Rochdale, Oldham or Trafford...

#### • **Spell out – in clear and direct language – what a Prevent referral looks like and who is most affected.**

Most people know little to nothing about the Prevent duty and therefore do not understand how it works or how its harmful impacts are disproportionately felt by certain marginalised groups.

Where possible, use real stories to illustrate what happens when a Prevent referral is made. Using emotive and direct language challenges the government's framing of the Prevent duty as a benevolent safeguarding tool.

Spell out the range of beliefs and values that can lead to a referral – from supporting Palestine to taking protest action over the climate crisis. This will show who the Prevent duty disproportionately targets – for example, children, young people, Muslim communities and neurodivergent people.

Use statistics to illustrate the wider context and to show that the story you are telling is not an isolated case. See page 9 on how to use the statistics.

#### **Using case studies to spell out what a referral looks like**

It is important to show who are hit hardest by the Prevent duty and how they and their families can experience life-changing impacts. Listening to their experiences shows how the Prevent duty causes shame, a loss of trust in the authorities, stress and fear, and will move people to show solidarity.

#### EXAMPLE MESSAGE

##### **The Prevent duty and young people:**

- The government's Prevent duty demands that our caretakers act like spies. Our teachers, doctors, nurses and social workers, the people we should trust the most, are made to monitor the people they are meant to care for.

## CASE STUDIES

### **The Prevent duty and young people** *NOTE: Names have been changed*

Zain was only 11 years old when his teacher reported him to the police. He was interrogated by the police without any of his family present. All because Zain, struggling to adapt to a new school and feeling anxious, said during a fire drill that he hoped the school would 'burn down'.

We were all children once and we've all said things we didn't mean when we are feeling stressed or anxious. Under the government's Prevent duty, teachers are pressured to report children to the police instead of responding with compassion, openness and an understanding of the child's needs.

In Zain's case, the police eventually admitted the referral should not have been made. However, Zain's data could remain recorded by the Home Office for life because of one throwaway comment he made. And this is not an isolated case. Children who are Muslim or of Asian descent account for nearly half of the children reported under the Prevent duty ([Amnesty UK Prevent report](#)).



### **The Prevent duty and Muslim teachers**

We spoke to Irfan who was a teacher. He opened his classroom for Friday prayer, inviting in Muslim children who needed a place to pray during that time. Irfan was taunted by his colleagues for having a beard and for his faith practices. Then he was reported to the police under the government's Prevent duty. He was given no explanation or reason for this. The police came into his home, in front of children, and questioned him about his political views. He remembers feeling his heart beating 300 beats a minute. He has since left teaching because of the negative impact this has had on his mental health.

This is a clear example of how the Prevent duty is used to discriminate against Muslims in our community. Of the 153 Muslim people that Amnesty spoke to, 109 said they have changed their behaviour for fear of being reported. They hide parts of themselves, and feel they are not able to express their religion or talk about it freely and safely ([Amnesty UK Prevent report](#)).

### The Prevent duty and neurodivergent people

We spoke to Connor, a 24-year-old autistic man living in a supported flat where he receives visits from care workers every few hours. Connor was reported to the police by his social worker under the Prevent duty because of a number of concerns, including playing the video game Warhammer and watching anime. This experience made Connor feel worried that he was in trouble and might be arrested ([Amnesty UK Prevent report](#)).

We can all agree that none of these instances should lead to anyone, especially a young person, being treated like a criminal and interrogated by the police. But the government's Prevent duty pressures teachers, social workers and health workers to make rash judgements about who seems at risk of being drawn into terrorism, based on gut feelings and biases. This means people feel they are not free and safe to be themselves because of trauma, fear and anxiety of being reported.

### Referencing institutional criticism

When useful, bring in criticism from respected institutions, such as the UN, who have called the Prevent duty racist and harmful. This can be a good way to challenge the government's narrative.

#### EXAMPLE MESSAGE

■ Trade Unions, the UN, civil society groups, teachers and academics have all criticised the Prevent duty for discriminating against Muslims, for invading people's privacy, and for having a negative effect on our freedom of expression ([Amnesty Prevent report, 2024](#)).

■ In 2024, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination condemned the Prevent duty for targeting Muslim communities. It is concerned about the 'chilling effect it has on children's freedom to express themselves and that half of the children reported under the Prevent duty are Muslim or of Asian descent' ([UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2024](#)).

#### • **Talk about successive government policy decisions that have eroded trust and care in communities**

Point the finger of blame at successive governments which have made policy decisions that erode rather than build communities by depriving them of what they need.

Give examples for context – from the Prevent duty being brought in by a Labour government about 20 years ago to 10 years of austerity from Conservative governments. Point out government actions in 2015 when austerity measures were imposed at the same time the Prevent duty was institutionalised and adopted by public bodies – schools, universities, hospitals.

Your message should talk about the harms of the Prevent duty itself but also point to **policy decisions** that have cut public spending and stripped communities of basic resources.

Your organisation may have spoken out or works on issues relating to the impacts of austerity on public services. Talk about how policies like the Prevent duty which erode trust and care in our communities are prioritised over properly funding our healthcare system, schools and mental health services.

Talking about problems with the Prevent duty can be challenging because of the positive connotations the word prevent can have. Mentioning *'Prevent'* to criticise it can reinforce its positive associations in people's minds – most people would support a policy that keeps something bad from happening. Talk about how the policy 'prevents' the positive values we all want and need in our communities.

#### EXAMPLE MESSAGE

■ We've suffered under successive governments that have chosen to break communities apart with harmful policies like the Prevent duty rather than build communities with proper funding in our schools, hospitals and mental health services.

■ Politicians have used the Prevent duty to divide our communities, turning our caretakers into spies – watching, recording and targeting us because of our religious beliefs, political opinions, and for how we express ourselves.

■ The government's 'Prevent' duty prevents trust. It stands in the way of us building trusting relationships with the very people we should be able to go to for care and guidance.

#### • **Advocate for solutions that are tangible and achievable – and speak to wider systemic change.**

Always have a clear solution or alternative in your message – one that goes beyond just 'scrapping Prevent'. This could be a short-term solution, but it should be followed by a long-term solution that speaks to the systemic issues you have identified in your campaign. It builds the belief that things could be different; it motivates people to do something instead of leaving them with more problems.

Direct your demands at the new government. Make it clear that they have the opportunity to change course.

**Your short-term solutions** need to feel tangible and achievable for people. For example, you can call on the government to:

- Scrap its Prevent duty on the grounds that it is ineffective, disproportionate and discriminatory
- Make reparations for people harmed by the Prevent duty
- Redesign safeguarding, and train people in caring jobs on better safeguarding practices that build strong relationships and centre people's wishes, feelings, and physical, emotional and educational needs ([Maslaha, 2022](#)).

**Your long-term solution** needs to speak to broader system change – and should sound concrete and achievable. You can demand that politicians promote and protect our human rights by talking about people feeling safe and free to be themselves and to express their faith and political beliefs. You can also talk about the resourcing that needs to happen for our schools, hospitals, social care and mental health services to truly meet people’s needs.

### EXAMPLE MESSAGE

- Today, we need this current government to right the wrongs of past governments and take the Prevent duty out of our schools, hospitals and universities. And we demand politicians address and repair the harms people have experienced at the hands of the Prevent duty.
- We need politicians to support our teachers, nurses, carers and social workers to truly do their job – to care for our communities. This means properly training people involved in care work in the best safeguarding practices – those that are built on trust and put people’s feelings and physical and emotional needs first.
- But this can only be possible when this government properly invests in our schools, hospitals, mental health and social care. This means that teachers, nurses and carers are paid well and have the resources and time to care for communities.
- Our politicians need to promote care in our communities so that everyone feels safe and free to be themselves, to express their religion, their politics, their beliefs. This means removing the Prevent duty from schools, hospitals and community spaces.



# CORE MESSAGE

## Value

Regardless of our race, religion or political beliefs, we should all feel free and safe to be ourselves. That is the foundation of a society where we celebrate differences and support each other to grow and thrive.

## Problem

Successive governments have refused to build our communities up by starving schools, hospitals and mental health services of proper funding. Instead, policies like the Prevent duty divide communities, turning caretakers into spies. Trusted people, who should be offering guidance, support or a shoulder to cry on, are being instructed by this government to watch, record and target the people they are meant to care for.

## Impact

The Prevent duty pressures people like childcare workers, teachers, carers, counsellors and nurses to report people they care for to the police if they feel the person is being influenced by so-called extremist ideas. But these judgments are often based on gut feelings rather than concrete evidence and can undermine obligations to put people's needs first.

And research shows this leads to young people, Muslim communities and neurodiverse people being unfairly targeted because of their faith, political views or interests. For example, Zain (see case study on page 4) was reported to the police by a teacher after saying during a fire drill he hoped school 'burned down'. Because of the pressure of the Prevent duty, his teachers overlooked the fact that Zain had been struggling to adapt to a new school and was feeling anxious.

One in three people reported to the police under the Prevent duty are children under 15 and nearly half of the children are Muslim or of Asian descent.

And we were all children once. We've all said things we didn't mean when we are feeling stressed or anxious.

We can all agree that instances like this should not lead to anyone, especially a young person, being treated like a criminal and interrogated by the police.

## Solution

We need the current government to stop targeting young people, Muslims and neurodivergent people under its harmful counter-terrorism policies. It is time for the government to remove the Prevent duty from schools, hospitals and universities. Then, it needs to work to repair the harm caused by a policy that sews distrust. This means supporting people like teachers, nurses, carers, and social workers to do the best job they can by providing proper safeguarding training based on trust building.

In the long term, this current government needs to listen to and act on the needs of communities who, because of government policies, experience discrimination every day in their schools, workplaces and hospitals. We know what our communities need for people to feel free and safe and to live their lives fully.



## STATS THAT TELL A STORY

1. 109 out of 153 Muslim people that Amnesty spoke to said they have changed their behaviour out of fear of being reported under the Prevent duty, leaving them scared to be themselves ([Amnesty UK Prevent report](#)).
2. The government's Prevent duty, forced into schools, means that nearly one in three people reported to the police under the Prevent duty are under 15. These are children at a pivotal stage of their lives when they should be allowed to express themselves freely and be given the space to make mistakes and receive guidance and care.
3. The government's Prevent duty pressures teachers to make rash judgements about who seems at risk of being drawn into terrorism. Prevent's 'Risk Guidelines' are broad and vague. Personal judgments are based on gut instincts and biases. That has led to the Prevent duty having a racist and discriminatory impact. For example, nearly half of the children reported to the police under the Prevent duty are Muslim or of Asian descent ([Amnesty International, 2023](#)). And research shows that children, neurodiverse people and Muslims are most often wrongly flagged up.
4. The Home Office claims that the Prevent duty is not a criminal process, but information about people reported – even if no further action is taken – is held on a Police Case Management database for a minimum of six years. For children, this could be their entire school life ([Amnesty International, 2023](#)).
5. The Prevent duty is forced on many people in our communities. Over five million people entrusted with our care, like nurses, teachers and social workers, have had to do this training ([Amnesty International, 2023](#)).
6. Evidence has shown that in the NHS, Asians were referred four times more than non-Asians, and Muslims eight times more than non-Muslims ([Amnesty International, 2023](#)).
7. There is also a disproportionate number of neurodiverse people and young people aged 15-20 who are reported under the Prevent duty.

## WORDS THAT WORK

Do say...	Don't say...	Why...
The Prevent duty	Prevent	Spell out the name of the policy. Just saying 'Prevent' when most people know little to nothing about it can be misleading and reduces its officiality.
Scrap the Prevent duty and address the harms it has caused	Scrap Prevent	Do not stop at 'Scrap Prevent'. Talk about the harm it causes and what you are advocating for too.
People feel free and safe to be themselves	Freedom of expression Freedom of religion	Talk about freedom in terms of people. Avoid jargon or bureaucratic language that can feel alienating.
The government's Prevent duty	Counter-terrorism policy Flagship counter-terrorism policy	Avoid talking about the Prevent duty as a counter-terrorism policy – it primes people to think that this is the only policy the government is using to stop terrorism.
Reported to the police [under the Prevent duty]	Referral	'Referral' waters down how harmful and traumatising this process is. Talk about what really happens when the Prevent duty is used.
The Prevent duty pressures [teachers, nurses, social workers] to monitor and report people to the police, often on gut instinct rather than concrete evidence.	Prevent is a dragnet approach	Focus on how the Prevent duty targets people with marginalised identities. It is important to talk about how it is indiscriminate, but for a coherent narrative in this story we want to shed light on its disproportionate harm. 'Dragnet approach' is jargon that most people won't understand.

Disproportionately targets	Disproportionate impact	Use active language that shows that Prevent targets people with marginalised identities.
Harmful impact on people's lives	Chilling effect Worrying effect	Use direct language that shows the real harms of the Prevent duty. Examples make it real for people.
Influenced by so-called 'radicalisation' / 'extremist ideas'	Drawn into terrorism	'Drawn into terrorism' is language used by the government. Instead, talk about so-called 'radicalisation' or 'extremist ideas' to show how these are constructed.

## COMMON ATTACKS

**ATTACK:** What's wrong with a policy that prevents people from becoming terrorists?

**RESPONSE:** The government's Prevent duty pressures teachers, social workers and health workers to make rash judgments about who seems at risk of being drawn into terrorism based on gut feelings and biases. And so often these biases mean that people are targeted because of their faith, race and their neurodivergence like autistic people.

We know of a 24-year-old autistic man called Connor who was living in a supported flat where he received visits from care workers every few hours. Connor was reported to the police by his social worker under the Prevent duty because of a number of concerns including playing the video game Warhammer and watching anime. This experience made Connor feel worried that he was in trouble and might be arrested.

We can all agree these behaviors should never lead to anyone, especially a young person, being treated like a criminal and interrogated by the police. We need to scrap the Prevent duty and develop actual safeguarding procedures so if people, like Connor's social worker, have any concerns they can show support with respect, trust and care without causing any harm.

**ATTACK:** Prevent isn't racist. Today there are more people being referred for far-right extremism or for saying things about gender than for Islamic extremism.

**RESPONSE:** Nearly half the children referred are Muslim or of Asian descent. Trade Unions, the UN, civil society groups, teachers and academics have all criticised the Prevent duty for discriminating against Muslim people, invading people's privacy and preventing people from freely and safely practising their faith. We are still

calling for this government to scrap the Prevent duty – it should not be used on anyone regardless of their race, religion, political views or opinions. This harmful policy prevents anyone from feeling safe and free to be themselves, which is an essential part of our society. Instead, we need this government to deal with the racism that Black, Asian and Muslim communities have experienced by putting an end to the dangerous language senior officials use when talking about migration and Muslim people. We need politicians to bring anti-discriminatory campaigns into collaboration with organisations and groups led by black, Asian and Muslim communities.

**ATTACK:** As a teacher, where should I go with any concerns (about extremism, misogyny, for example) if there's no Prevent?

**RESPONSE:** Teachers and people working with children need to approach any safeguarding issues they have with the child's best interest at heart. In whatever case, if a child's safety and wellbeing is a concern, teachers should have the time and training to have a conversation with the young person so they can give them the guidance and support they need. For instance, we know that Sex and Relationships Education is essential in teaching young people about gender and tackling misogyny. This can only be possible when our schools are properly funded, with small class sizes so teachers can give each child the attention they need and can signpost to the mental health services available. We can all agree that under no circumstances should any child who is struggling or feeling unsafe be traumatised or put in harm's way. But this is what happens under the Prevent duty when some children are reported to the police instead of being treated with care and compassion.

**ATTACK:** But Muslim communities support Prevent.

**RESPONSE:** The Muslim-led organisations and groups we work closely with do not support the Prevent duty. And back in 2021, when a desperately needed review of the Prevent duty was about to take place, 450 Muslim organisations, including 350 mosques and imams, chose to boycott it because William Shawcross, who is known to have Islamophobic views, was appointed as the reviewer.

This led to 17 human rights organisations conducting their own alternative review called [The People's Review of Prevent](#) which talked about how discriminatory the policy is against Muslims, especially children and young people. It gave voice to the people most impacted by the Prevent duty.

## WHERE THE PUBLIC IS AT

### **1. Almost half of Britons are now equally concerned about religious extremism and right-wing extremism following the 2024 riots.**

In the aftermath of the riots in the summer of 2024, nearly three-quarters of Britons polled (73%) now see right-wing extremism as a concern ([YouGov, 2024](#)). This is up from 59% in a previous poll in February 2024 ([YouGov, 2024](#)). It brings concern about right-wing extremism to almost the same level as religious extremism (74%).

This shift is significant for two reasons. Firstly, the threat of extremism and violence is clearly felt by people and is something they want addressed. Secondly, as progressive communicators we have more space to talk about who is really sowing division and presenting a real threat in our communities.

### **2. Most people believe communities in Britain are divided, especially along the lines of political beliefs.**

The majority of people (76%) believe that Britain is divided these days. Half (51%) also now think that the differences in people's political views are so divisive it is dangerous for society – up from 44% in July 2024. Meanwhile, 62% say people with opposing political views are steadfast in their opinions regardless of the evidence ([Ipsos, 2024](#)). When asked about divisions between different groups, half (52%) thought the most tension exists between immigrants and people born in Britain (up from 2018), followed by people with political views (44%), people of different ethnicities (42%) and between different religions (36%) ([Ipsos, August 2024](#)).

### **3. People remain most concerned about Britain's public services.**

A high proportion of people (84%) are concerned about the state of British public services ([Ipsos, 2024](#)). Two in five people want the government to increase its spending on public services ([Ipsos, 2024](#)). Essentially, people are aware that the foundations of our society (our transport, healthcare, education) are not properly funded and support solutions that call for more investment into these essential services.

### **4. 'Defence and terrorism' are not top concerns for people but an increasing majority think crime and anti-social behaviour are a big problem for the UK and getting worse.**

In 2024, when pollsters asked people about their top concerns, 'defence and terrorism' did not appear as a top priority ([YouGov, 2024](#); [Ipsos, 2024](#)). However, the majority of Britons (86%) think crime and anti-social behaviour are a big problem for the UK as a whole. Plus seven in 10 believe that crime in the UK has risen over the past 12 months and think that because of things they've seen on the news (76%) and social media (43%) ([Ipsos, August 2024](#)). Although these numbers are not directly about defence and terrorism, they can be used to understand people's perceptions and fears over safety and crime.

## RESOURCES

- [The Prevent duty and its chilling effect on human rights](#) Amnesty International UK
- [Radical safeguarding](#) Maslaha
- [From It to Us: Language Analysis on Human Rights Discourse in Australia, UK and US](#) Anat Shenker-Osorio

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