

Literature review –

How does the UK's CONTEST strategy effect frontline policing?

Counter terrorism is a crucial part of modern-day policing, that has been streamlined and made easier to understand because of the UK's CONTEST strategy, which was created in 2003 and most recently refined in 2023. CONTEST provides a framework for how the UK deals with a constant unwavering terrorist threat and explains how the police should be adapting alongside terrorism. There is a great number of academic research and reviews into the effectiveness of CONTEST, most of which have been completed in the 2010's. The majority of these papers are based on how CONTEST can be improved, if it is practical and some on how it should be affecting every-day policing. The research I aim to complete and the question I am raising intends to fill the gap of how CONTEST actually effects the day-to-day role of frontline police officers. Based off the results of my research, evaluating CONTEST will become easier, as if officers don't know what it is, how it works and how it changes what they do then it cannot be called a completed success.

The important pillars of CONTEST that I will focusing on during my research will be Prevent and Prepare, this mainly due to the fact that Pursue is completed by specialist, counter terrorism, armed and unarmed officers and Protect is mainly down to legislators and premises owners. This is not to diminish the importance of Pursue and Protect, however, these are simply less likely to affect the role of frontline officers compared to Prevent and Prepare. Due to this I will also be focusing my review of existing literature on this also. I will be reviewing the literature on a thematic basis of which pillar the literature cover the best.

There is a simple, and well-known fact when talking about terrorism since the creation of CONTEST. Terrorism and the means in which those involved inflict terror and the means of radicalising people into terrorism is constantly changing. Glover (2023) highlighted this in a review of a multitude of terrorist groups, attacks and legislation, and has found that in recent years mainly since the later 2010's most attacks are committed by 'Self-initiated terrorists' (S-IT's). S-IT's will tend to use more simple methodologies such as mass stabbings as seen in the London Bridge attack in in 2017, which is in a stark contrast to the larger more complicated attacks of the early 2000's and before such as the 9/11 attack. Despite the general lack of complexity, and amount of planning involved, Glover stated that S-IT attacks can be just as deadly and effective at putting a terrorist message across. This highlights the importance of keeping frontline officers informed as to the nature of the current terror threat, how it is likely to take form, and how frontline, unarmed officers are meant to respond to these attacks.

The main purpose of the Prepare pillar is ensuring an effective and resilient response to terrorist attacks, and previously this has not been the case and there has been too big of an importance placed on to Prevent and the other pillars. This has been witnessed in the 2017 Manchester Arena Bombing in which sadly killed 22 people and injured over 1,000. The first officers to arrive at the scene of this attack were unarmed, non-specialised officers who were part of the British Transport Police. The inquiry into the response to this attack simply found the response to the attack needed to be better (Saunders 2022). Saunders goes onto explain that there needs to be better communication, plans and more of an understanding of how to respond from a non-specialised officers perspective. This lack of training of the first attending officer led a poor overall response, showing the importance that frontline officers have in the response to these attacks. Baker-Beall et al. (2024) has found that since this incident there has been a bigger importance placed upon the Prepare pillar which is evidenced in a number of recent large scale training exercises, and the praise given to the officers who have responded to other terrorist attacks since, such as the London Bridge attack and the Manchester Synagogue Attack in 2025.

Information being shared to frontline officers regarding how they should be responding to attacks it will inherently affect their role, allowing them to be more knowledgeable and will assist negating the need for improvisation in such circumstances which has been described as “Equal[ing] inefficiency” by Alexander (2016). Inefficiency in such incidents and other disaster responses can have catastrophic consequences and lead to public disapproval and a general disbelief in the emergency services as a whole for responding to such incidents. The only way that us as police can counter a loss of trust and to continue to counter terrorists effectively and to learn from our previous mistakes (English, 2024).

Alexander also re-iterates the importance that a plan is not useful if those who are should be involved are not fully aware of the plan and how it comes to take form. This shows the importance of training exercises such as that in Dorset in January of 2026, which was a scenario based on a group of armed terrorists taking over a ferry. Large scale training scenarios such as this one are imperative to improving officers’ response to terror threats, as for effective responses to take place training needs to be up to the same standard as required in actual scenarios (Maheswari and Nalini 2025). Training of this nature will inherently have effect on frontline policing ensuring that officers are aware of the threats faced and the skills and procedures they need to be aware of. However, this training focuses mainly on specialised armed response to these attacks often rejecting the frontline officer’s important role during these incidents.

Countering this argument presented by Alexander is that you can only prepare for what you know may come, and as said by O’Kleasky (2014), terrorism is ever-changing and

the best way to be able to prevent and prepare for attacks is to have a continually adaptive mindset on the best way to operate in countering terrorism.

From reviewing all of the literature surrounding the prepare pillar that I have mentioned it is clear that it has been neglected for a long period of time by emergency responders; despite its importance in supporting the other pillars and the overall response to terror threats. I was also able to see that there is high level of training and preparedness for terrorist attacks by specialised and armed officers as they are the ones who have received the most training for this. However, I have been unable to find any information on how the unarmed, unspecialised officer is to act when put into that situation. As a part of my research, I will be seeking to find the level of understanding of frontline police officers have of Prepare, and if they have any knowledge of their roles within a response to an active terrorist attack.

The prevention of radicalisation and stopping people from becoming terrorists has always been a focus since the creation of CONTEST. The Prevent pillar is mainly active through the Prevent programme in which CTP works alongside a number of different sectors that offer support and advice to those who have been deemed susceptible to terrorist radicalisation (West Yorkshire Police, 2026). Prevent referrals are currently at an all-time high in 2025 with a total 8,778 referrals being made and police being responsible for 30% of these which is only second to the education sector (36%) (Home office 2025). Brady (2016) has written that the general public consensus at the time of writing his report was that Prevent was a failure due to the amount of people that had been travelling abroad to join terrorist groups which at the time was predominantly ISIS. Prevent having negative reviews has continued to be an issue as stated by a Home Office report in 2024 which described the Prevent programme as “Not fit for purpose”. There are clearly issues with the Prevent limb of CONTEST, including the number of referrals, ability to assess risk, and a risk of “pre-crime” (Pantucci, 2010), which runs the risk of “exacerbating the very problem it seeks to address”.

On the contrary, Prevention can be a difficult area work in as I have already discussed with previous research stating the changes in terrorist methodology over the years and also radicalisation methodology. An example of this was the shift into the use of social media and online radicalisation that was utilised by ISIS which proved very effective at getting a variety of individuals to partake in ISIS activities (Awan, 2017). With the recent change in methodology, ideals and even with the MI5 Director General stating that lines are becoming blurred and that he has never seen such a variety of threats before (MI5 2024), it begs the question as to how Prevent is meant to function effectively. Vale and Rose (2025) have stated that, “There is no set mould for terrorists of recent years making harder for effective prevention to be put in place”. This is evidenced by Vale and Rose by discussing a 13-year-old boy who has been convicted for being the leader of a

neo-nazi, proscribed terrorist organisation. If a child can have such extreme views at such a young age and have them embedded and strong enough to create a terrorist organisation then how will Prevent be able to identify and work with that child? This case also raises the point that Prevent are only as good as the referrals they receive, if a person goes through their life with extremist views but never goes through the Prevent then how is the programme able to work effectively?

So how can police assist in the Prevention of terrorism aside from simply just submitting referrals? Weisburd et al. (2022) has found that from a frontline officer's perspective the best form of prevention is community policing and engaging with communities where risks are identified and working with them to help prevent radicalisation. This method of working with communities has always been used in other areas of policing, mainly relating to gangs and drug dealing, and it has proven to work so this method should be further implemented into community policing teams. Bahadur Lamb (2014) has also found that in order to better Prevent radicalisation then a far more caring approach needs to occur almost as if the officer were to be 'looking after' the person at risk. Despite this, Terrorism is normally believed to be a police or security forces matter, however, prevention is a part that everyone needs to start taking into account if it is to work effectively. This is already demonstrated with the majority of Prevent referrals coming from the education sector, instead of law enforcement and security forces. The concept of Community Counter Terrorism was brought in by Huq (2020) as an idea of communities, who are often the most susceptible to radicalisation acting as their own counter terrorism force. An example of this which Huq described was members of a church removing those partly involved in terrorist recruitment therefore, removing the risk. This once again highlights the importance of police working with communities to inform them of the risks and asking for communities to also do their bit in Prevention.

Overall, there appears to be a range of research showing different opinions of how Prevent runs. Some will argue that it needs to change and it is not working, and others will say that it is doing the best it can do given the situation, and state that it's in. It is also important to consider that whenever an attack happens the blame seems to most commonly fall onto Prevent, when some people may not have been referred at all and some people can simply not be changed. Shawcross (2024) has summarised this well by saying that "As a country we should be proud of Prevent and the proportionate and humane response that it represents" while also recognising that Prevent does also need to be improved. I also can also see that one of these ways that Prevention can be improved is to increase the level of community policing and the awareness of terrorism and radicalisation in local communities.

To summarise the literature available to me, it is clear that CONTEST is a very effective strategy at countering terrorism, in theory. The main difficulty it faces the ever-changing face of terrorism and the way that it is shaped by the global climate. As discussed, the rise of ISIS and their attack and radicalisation methodologies caused great levels of difficulty for all of the pillars of CONTEST. However, the strategy allows for change and accepts learning, which can be seen in the aftermath of the 2017 Manchester Arena Bombing. This means that over time the response to terrorism is only going to improve. There are also a number of ways that CONTEST and its individual pillars should be affecting frontline policing for example in the community policing aspect and the approach that we take to dealing with those at risk of radicalisation. However, there is very little and very difficult to find, literature on how CONTEST does actually affect policing. This gap in the research, I believe, may be the key to improving the UK's Terrorist response, as with a better understanding of how the frontline officers view, understand and are able to apply CONTEST, police forces will be able to improve how the officers are able to apply it among their usual roles.

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