



The British Muslim Civil Society Report

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Foreword

by Naz Shah MP and Rt Hon. Sayeeda Warsi

The British Muslim Civil Society Report identifies a number of recommendations that could transform and empower Muslim civil society to become a greater driver for positive social change in modern Britain. We hope that statutory and non-statutory bodies alike, including leaders in the third sector, policymakers, and philanthropists will benefit from these insights.

The recent Census shows that Britain's Muslim minority, the second largest religious group in this country after Christianity, is also one of the fastest growing. This report shows that like other minorities, Muslims are a vital part of the civil society landscape and have shown themselves to be some of the most generous givers to charity in the UK.

We are particularly heartened by the way Muslim women have started breaking through glass ceilings and achieving positions of leadership in the Muslim community, though we recognize that there is still much room for improvement. We share the report's advocacy for the need to integrate more women and young people into the decision-making structures of British Muslim civil society.

Many Muslims are driven by their faith to contribute to wider British society. Yet, Muslims also generally suffer from higher levels of deprivation and structural disadvantage than their non-Muslim compatriots. The ongoing cost of living crisis is undoubtedly having a harsher impact on Britain's poorest communities, including many of its ethnic and religious minorities.

This report should be the beginning of important conversations between one of Britain's most civic-minded communities and various statutory and non-statutory bodies concerned with civil society as we build towards a better, more cohesive future in Britain. We hope it will be read carefully by decision makers.



Naz Shah MP

Member of Parliament for Bradford West
Vice-chair, APPG on British Muslims



Rt Hon. Sayeeda Warsi

Member of the House of Lords
Treasurer, APPG on British Muslims

Foreword

by Lord Syed Kamall

Civil society often comes across as a nebulous term, but probably one of the most concise definitions relating to local communities is that of Ashford (2003) who defines civil society as “all those voluntary organizations that exist between the individual and the state such as the family, churches, sports and music clubs, and charities.”¹ In the multicultural society we live in, “churches” obviously extends to all faith groups.

Helping those less fortunate than ourselves by donating zakat is one of the five pillars of Islam. For years, many of Britain’s Muslim families and communities have made zakat payments in order to provide help to those in need in the countries from which their families originate. Britain’s Muslims have thus focused a great deal of energy on helping poor Muslims around the world.

However, as this report highlights, many Muslims play an active role in helping both Muslims and non-Muslims in their local communities across the UK. This report reveals a vibrant British Muslim civil society contributing to inter-communal relations, education, poverty relief, and more, as well as empowering youth and women.

While there also remain many challenges, the producers of this report hope that it will help accelerate efforts to further strengthen British Muslim civil society and contribute to a more prosperous future for Britain across all communities. This report is intended to be the first of a series of annual or biennial reports through which community stakeholders can gain insights, reflect on progress, explore challenges and cooperate for a stronger, more united Britain. It deserves to be read by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.



Lord Syed Kamall of Edmonton

Former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Civil Society

Foreword

by Jehangir Malik OBE

Civil society is the beating heart of Britain's diverse communities. The faith-based charity sector is a growing part of Britain's civil society landscape, and one that has already shown itself to be offering essential services to some of Britain's most deprived communities.

This report offers valuable insights into the wide-ranging contributions of Britain's Muslim community to civil society. Britain's Muslims are diverse, dynamic, energetic, and often young. As this report shows, they are frequently looking for ways to contribute to wider society. They are the engine of an important part of our charity sector.

Whether offering support during the COVID-19 pandemic, or responding to the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, this report shows us the important contributions Britain's Muslims are making to our society. The report also highlights the important contributions made by women and young people to the sector, while noting that more can be done to empower them. It also identifies significant levels of deprivation suffered by Muslim communities.

Drawing on cutting-edge research, it offers valuable insights into both the dynamism and the challenges faced by British Muslim civil society. It argues that Muslims have grown and evolved in their outlook on charitable giving, innovation and social impact in the sector. Stronger partnerships across the third sector, and with the public and private sectors will result in more impactful responses to the needs of British society as a whole. The cost-of-living crisis is a pressing reminder of the urgent need for a vibrant civil society sector in Britain today.

We hope this report inaugurates a long-term conversation between Muslim civil society organizations, the private sector, and policymakers, nationally and regionally, that result in productive partnerships at a local, regional and national level.



Jehangir Malik OBE
Director, Mercy Mission UK

Executive Summary



Recently released census data shows us that Muslims make up 6.5% of the population of England and Wales at 3.9 million strong. This is an increase of 1.2 million since the last census.

In major cities, the proportion of Muslims is especially high, with 30% of Birmingham, 22% of Manchester, and 15% of London's populations being Muslim. Alongside the growth of the British Muslim community, British Muslim civil society has expanded into an impressive array of organizations and institutions that have emerged as significant contributors to modern British society.

They include mosques and Islamic centres, educational institutions, youth associations, student organizations, national umbrella bodies, advocacy groups, and media organizations. Muslims bring a distinctive ethos into civil society which is often inspired by their faith. As the focus groups that have informed this report indicate, most Muslims are driven to contribute to civil society out of a sense of civic duty that arises from their Islamic commitments. Muslims feel that Islam calls on them to serve their communities and their neighbours of all faiths and none.

Islam's sacred scriptures in the form of the Qur'an and the Prophet's teachings call on Muslims to perform regular acts of charity. This is captured in the exhortations of the Prophet Muhammad.

"An act of charity is due for every joint in each person's body for every day that the sun comes up: to judge fairly between two people is an act of charity; to help a man with his mount, lifting him onto it or hoisting up his belongings onto it, is an act of charity; a good word is an act of charity; and removing a harmful thing from the road is an act of charity." (Statement of the Prophet Muhammad narrated by Bukhari and Muslim)

This and many other Prophetic traditions concerned with social welfare, education, the environment, family and so much more, makes it inevitable that many Muslims interested in their religious heritage will also be deeply invested in civil society.

In recent years, Britain has seen a proliferation of Muslim civil society organizations that have enlivened public life and contributed crucial services to communities up and down the country. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was an important period

during which Muslim organizations stepped up to help Britain cope with a crisis on a scale that has not been seen since the Second World War. More generally, relatively severe post-pandemic and post-Brexit economic challenges, a serious cost-of-living crisis, and repeated political crises alongside the passing of Queen Elizabeth II, the longest-serving monarch in British history, have all accentuated the sense of uncertainty and instability in contemporary Britain.

But even before this, over the course of a decade of austerity, Muslim communities have sought to plug shortfalls in the social safety net by establishing soup kitchens and food banks. Young Muslims have established initiatives to support children in some of the country's most deprived areas to successfully pursue higher education. Crucially, British Muslim charities that first established their reputations through world-class contributions in international emergencies and crises have started to recognize that challenges faced by Muslims and their neighbours in Britain also deserve our attention.

Several studies of British Muslims have highlighted that this community suffers from exceptionally high levels of household poverty. **Recently published Census data indicates that 30% of British Muslims live in the poorest 10% of local authority districts in the country.** This has knock-on effects on health, education and future opportunities for a population that has the youngest age profile of any religious or non-religious group in Britain. A positive finding of this report is that there is an emerging effort within British Muslim communities to take poverty and social inequality within Britain more seriously alongside the important international relief efforts that British Muslim civil society institutions have long shown themselves committed to.

Another arena that has been highlighted in our focus group research was the need for women and young people to have more of a voice and influence in many British Muslim institutions, perhaps most notably in mosques and Islamic centres, of which there are over 2,000 in Britain today. The need for more representative institutions has been a repeated concern of reports on British Muslims over the years, and while there has been some progress, much remains to be done. Women and young people make up a majority

of our communities, and their voices need to be structurally integrated into Muslim civil society institutions. Women and girls' contributions to civil society has been a consistent feature of British Muslim communities, but there is too often insufficient accommodation of this half of the Muslim population into the decision-making processes of their institutions. This requires a significant shift in cultural attitudes towards Muslim women, a recognition of the barriers and exclusion that they face in our communities.

The 2021 election of Zara Mohammed to head the UK's largest and most representative Muslim umbrella body, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), reflects a bold move on the part of the country's Muslim leadership. As secretary-general of the MCB, Ms. Mohammed was the first woman, the first Scot, and the first person under thirty to be elected to this post. Through its most prominent public body, Britain's Muslim leadership can be seen as trying to signal the importance of putting forward a voice representative of the frequently underrepresented, much like the Muslim community as a whole in relation to wider British society. This appointment appears to reflect steps towards real change in the leadership of the Muslim community. Thus, women are today starting to lead important and impactful Muslim organizations in the UK.



Zara Mohammed Elected Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain.
Source: mcb.co.uk

The research underpinning this report has uncovered remarkable success stories of a vibrant British Muslim civil society that contributes in significant ways to social dynamism, inter-communal relations, youth and women's empowerment, educational initiatives, poverty relief, and much more. Yet, it is to be expected that a community with such a young profile and which is concentrated in deprived areas of Britain will have many challenges. These challenges include those that are poverty-related and have disadvantaged large sections of the Muslim community, and disproportionately impacted the young as has been illustrated in the Social Mobility Commission's 2017 report on young Muslims as well as *The Missing Muslims* report from the same year. The challenges faced by Muslim youth also include problems of structural racism and Islamophobia that hamper their integration into mainstream society. In particular, they reflect ongoing institutional weakness within Muslim organizations that often have the best of intentions, but lack the experience, expertise and resources to grow into self-sustaining change-making institutions in British civil society.

This notwithstanding, the conclusion of this report is decidedly optimistic. British Muslim civil society is on an upward trend as this deeply civic-minded community grows into maturity, experience, and financial independence. Surveys from the past decade have shown British Muslims to be among the most generous donors to charity in contemporary Britain, despite their own poverty. This is in keeping with their faith's strong encouragement of philanthropic giving. In recent years, this has developed into an emergence of charitable foundations set up by Muslim philanthropists that seek to "give back and contribute" to their communities.

It is our hope that this report and its recommendations will serve as a spur to accelerate efforts to further strengthen British Muslim civil society and thus contribute to a more prosperous future for Britain in these uncertain times. This report is therefore intended to be an annual or biennial exercise through which community stakeholders can gain insights, reflect on progress, explore challenges and cooperate for a stronger, more united Britain.

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow draw on roughly twenty focus groups and interviews conducted as part of this project in various cities across Britain mostly over the summer months of 2022. These, alongside desk research, inform the recommendations below as well as the broader report that follows.

The statutory and civil society sector:

1. We would propose that statutory and civil society stakeholders should continue to embrace diversity by formally recognizing the contributions made by faith-based organizations, including Muslim organizations, to the voluntary sector in the UK. Opportunities for collaboration between groups of all faiths and none should be actively explored and realized.
2. In keeping with the Faith Covenant developed by the APPG on Faith and Society, we would like to encourage both local authorities and Muslim organizations to continue to pursue joint work in a way that develops into long-term robust relationships across sectors, including through blended finance, for example. We encourage similar partnerships with central government, an area that needs serious action from both the government and Muslim civil society.
3. We would propose that civil society umbrella bodies like the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) should begin documenting the religious breakdown of civil society organizations in its annual Almanac so that policymakers can become more aware of their levels of contribution to civil society.
4. We would propose that New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) consider regularly publishing summary reports on faith-based charitable work, continuing its pioneering reports from recent years in partnership with faith-based charities, so that the sector and Muslim charities can better understand how they fit into the wider charity sector.

On the youth sector:

5. A Muslim youth sector needs a significant impetus to take off locally, regionally and nationally, addressing the needs and aspirations of a growing, dynamic Muslim population that tends heavily towards a youthful demographic.
6. Youth-focused programmes in the Muslim

community should be provided with culturally appropriate guidance that would allow them to tap into national funding bodies, such as the Youth Investment Fund. This could be strategically supported by local, regional and national bodies by identifying infrastructure development needs and the strategies for the co-creation of solutions within Muslim civil society spaces.

7. Muslim civil society organizations should explore innovative mechanisms for ensuring that young people's voices and lived experience are a core part of governance structures, such as through genuinely empowered "youth advisory boards."
8. The charity sector, alongside partners in national and local politics, need to acknowledge the deleterious psychological impact of Islamophobia, perceived by many young Muslims as embedded within policies like Prevent, on young Muslims'



mental health and their prospects for educational and professional success. They can do so by adopting the APPG on British Muslims' definition of Islamophobia.

9. Muslim youth mentoring initiatives for both genders should be established. Muslim youth need inspiring role models of success from within their communities in Britain - role models they feel have succeeded and are celebrated in wider society without having to compromise their values.



On women's involvement and inclusion:

10. Muslim women should be welcomed and supported as contributors and decision-makers in a greater proportion of Muslim organizations and charities, a majority of which remain male-dominated spaces, and therefore cannot be as responsive as they should be to the needs of half of the population.
11. Mosques and Islamic centres need to offer greater access to Muslim women. This could be achieved in part by opening a conversation about non-South Asian interpretations of a mosque's social and religious function within Muslim communities.
12. More women should be welcomed to sit on the boards of mosques and other Muslim organizations than is the current norm so that boards are well-informed of the needs of a significant subset of their potential beneficiaries.
13. More generally, mosques should not function, as

they do in many cases, solely as spaces of prayer for men for a few minutes every few hours. The MCB's Women in Mosques Development Programme is a step in the right direction. However, mosques will need considerable support to undertake such transformations.

For Mosques and Islamic centres:

14. Mosques and Islamic centres should realize their potential to become major community hubs of civil society. Taking into consideration their size, these institutions could serve as a possible starting point for community services, reflecting the Prophet's mosque as a model for Muslims in all times and places. However, this will need a significant cultural shift in modern Britain, and a major effort within the British Muslim community to build capacity within various local Muslim communities.
15. Mosques should become vibrant hubs of local democracy in the British Muslim community, where Muslims collectively deliberate and participate in their civic duties as Muslim citizens of Britain.
16. Such transformations will not happen overnight, but there should be dedicated capacity building organizations which can, with proper funding, be called upon by aspiring mosques in promising communities, to give advice and practical guidance on how to undertake a root and branch transformation from a prayer room to a worshipful community service hub.
17. Given inevitable limitations on resources, mosques will need to take the first steps towards internal transformation, ideally with commitment and dedication from their communities, men and women, before outside organizations and donors can consider backing long-term transformational projects.

On strategic and blended philanthropy:

18. Given the levels of deprivation in the British Muslim community, key Muslim charities have begun to recognize the immense importance of focusing a greater degree of their efforts towards Britain's domestic Muslim community, as the



Muslim Charities Forum's recent report, *Bridges of Hope*, powerfully highlights. This is a positive development, as is the increasing recognition that the problems Muslims face cannot simply be alleviated by poverty relief, but rather by addressing the systemic and structural causes for their deprivation. Such shifts in attitudes should continue.

19. When producing strategic reports on the future of philanthropy and social investment in the UK, marginalized communities should be taken into account more fully. We recommend that Muslim and other minority faith voices are sought out and meaningfully engaged in national conversations, like the one being attempted in the important recent report, *Unleashing the Potential of Philanthropy and Social Investment*, from the APPG on Philanthropy and Social Investment.
20. British Muslims need to begin addressing the needs of their community based on empirical evidence, and this means strategically investing in serious research, drawing on existing data produced by official bodies like the Office for National Statistics, the National Centre for Social Research, alongside publicly accessible regular surveys like the Census, the Labour Force Survey, the Annual Population Survey, and the UK Household Longitudinal Study.
21. In addition, Muslims can gather data through community initiatives. Such a "British Muslim Survey/Report" would offer granular demographic and economic data that can form the basis for community initiatives, as well as for local and national government to take targeted action to combat deprivation in Muslim communities, actions that are ultimately in the national interest.
22. British Muslim civil society organizations need to further invest in think-tanks and research institutes that develop robust relationships with lawmakers and policymakers, in local, and national government. These institutions should regularly convey evidence-based policy proposals to inform policymakers at the intersections of faith, policy, and civil society.
23. Muslim communities, in partnership with some

of their successful philanthropists and entrepreneurs, need to re-establish a long tradition of Muslim community endowments and foundations (*awqaf*) that can cater towards the self-sufficiency and development of Muslim civil society infrastructure in Britain.

24. Community organizations and initiatives need to be socialized into a culture of seeking funds based on innovative proposals and successful track records of work, thereby increasing the quality of projects that are funded in the community.

On a media strategy:

25. Muslims need to grow and strengthen projects like the MCB's Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM) and other community-led initiatives like those led by Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) to increase media literacy in their civil society institutions. This will allow them to be in a stronger position to combat Islamophobic media reports and hostile media interest.
26. In addition to a reactive strategy, Muslims need a proactive strategy of disseminating and amplifying positive news stories from their communities around the UK. This means developing communi-

cations expertise within Muslim civil society organizations, as well as investing in developing greater numbers of Muslim journalists, and exploring the possibility of setting up high-quality Muslim-run news outlets that can compete in quality and professionalism with mainstream news organizations.

Long-term planning:

27. Britain's Muslim community needs to ask long-term questions about its direction and the role it will play in strengthening the fabric of our society. These questions include: What will the Muslim community's role be in the next ten, twenty, or fifty years? How can it successfully adopt a model of civil society contribution that makes Muslims an integral part of Britain's civil society landscape? What investments should be initiated today in order for the Muslim community to be in a better position to respond to the needs of British society in future decades?



Introduction



The British Muslim Civil Society Report has been compiled in response to a series of discussions with Muslim scholars and civil society leaders from around the UK who were engaged by the charity, Mercy Mission UK, to think about the strategic direction of the Muslim charity sector in Britain today. It quickly became clear from these discussions in late 2021 that there was a widespread feeling that Muslims had reached an inflection point in their community's development in the UK. In recent years, Muslim institutional infrastructure in the third sector has developed and matured, and has started to join hands with its partners across the sector to think self-consciously about systemic and structural challenges facing Muslims nationally in Britain.

This likely indicates a shift in consciousness in the wider Muslim community. Muslims have now come to terms with the fact that they are in the UK for the long-haul. Historically, the vast majority of Muslim charitable giving in Britain was directed overseas. It is no accident that some of the most impressive charitable institutions in our community are dedicated to

international aid. This work has been of immense importance and should continue to be of concern to Muslims in the UK.

In recent years, however, British Muslims have become aware of the fact that they also suffer from high levels of poverty at home. Research from the University of Oxford, drawing on data from a little over a decade ago, indicates that 50% of Muslim households were in poverty, compared to a national average of 18%.² In addition, analysis by the MCB of data from 2010 shows that nearly half (46%) of British Muslims lived in the poorest 10% of local authority districts in the country at the time.³ More recent analysis of 2021 Census data indicates that the percentage of Muslims living in the poorest 10% of local authority districts has reduced from 46% to 30%.⁴ Though a welcome improvement, this is still disproportionately high.

Analysis by the Muslim Council of Britain of 2021 Census data shows that 30% of British Muslims live in the poorest 10% of local authority districts.

In this context, this pilot study seeks to offer a vista into the current state of play within British Muslim civil society. It sees itself as the first step of an effort to deepen the strategic outlook into the direction British Muslim organizations should be taking given the current phase of Muslim community growth and development in Britain. This report has drawn on a range of primary and secondary sources. In terms of primary sources, it has drawn on a combination of focus groups and interviews conducted primarily over the summer months of 2022.⁵ In addition, it draws on a variety of prior reports and academic studies, all of which are referenced in the endnotes.

The role of faith more generally is being increasingly recognized as an important pillar of British civil society. This has been highlighted in Prof Chris Baker's important 2020 report *Keeping the Faith* published by the APPG on Faith and Society as well as in the 2021 *Stepping Up and Stepping Out* report from the Good Faith Partnership, both reports being written in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶

These reports highlight positive steps in the kinds of collaboration that are possible in the civil society space, often in partnership with the public and private sectors, that should be recognized and built upon. This report calls for greater engagement between various stakeholders in that spirit. To this end, the adoption of the Faith Covenant by local authorities in the UK marks a positive step.⁷ But we believe that more needs to be done in developing robust “public-faith sector partnerships,” including at the level of national government. We need to embrace opportunities to co-create blended/pooled finance solutions that follow in the footsteps of Access Foundation for Social Investment’s “Local Access Fund,” for example.⁸

The recent creation by the government of a “Faith New Deal Fund” is a step in the right direction. Its significance for British Muslims, however, has been undercut by the absence of any Muslim organizations in the 16 charities that have been collectively awarded £1.3 million.⁹ The wider charity sector can also do more to recognize the role of faith and minorities in philanthropy. The valuable recent contribution of the APPG on Philanthropy and Social Investment’s report, *Unleashing the Potential of Philanthropy and Social Investment*, could be strengthened considerably with the greater inclusion of faith and minority groups in conversations about philanthropy and government partnerships.¹⁰

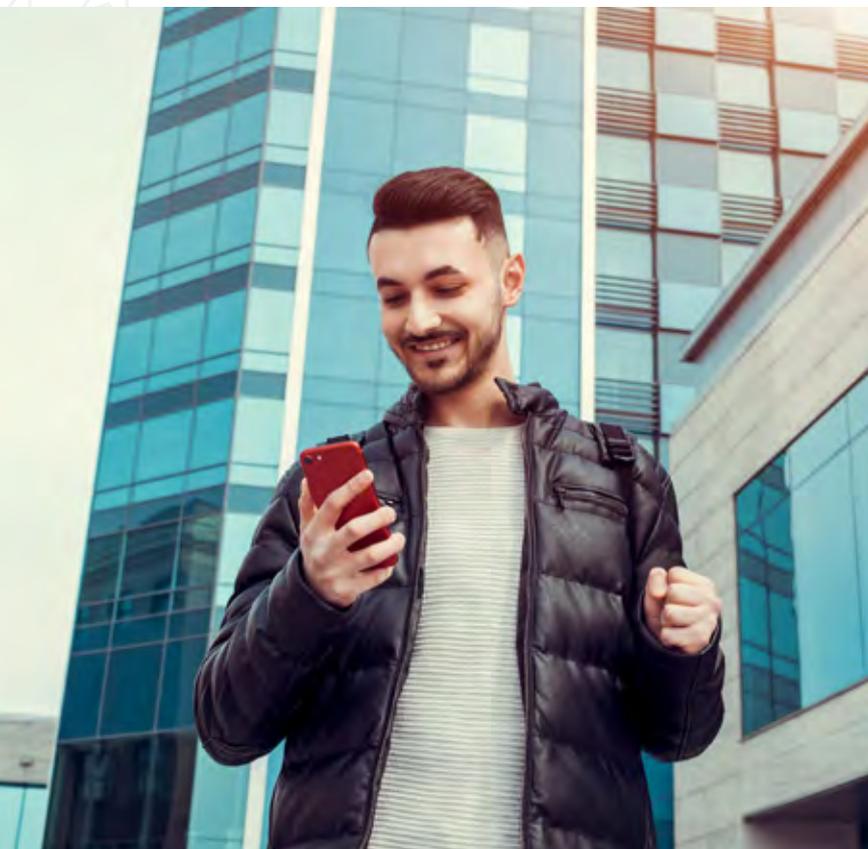
Ultimately, the present report is only the beginning of a broader conversation. We hope that it will serve as an exercise in holding the mirror up to the Muslim community as a means of self-reflection, and that this may instil in our potential partners of different faiths and of none, and our potential partners in local, regional, and national government, the desire to pursue transformative partnerships with one of Britain’s most charitably-oriented communities.¹¹

Report structure

In addition to the above, the remainder of the report, presents three main sections, followed by a conclusion. These consider Muslim demographics in the UK, followed by a broad overview of British Muslim civil society by considering some of its larger and some smaller, lesser-known institutions. The final section reflects on the strategic direction of Muslim philanthropy and charitable giving going forward.

The Appendices contain an outline for a proposed regular *British Muslim Report*, modelled after the *British Sikh Report*, an influential source of data on the Sikh community produced from within that community annually. This presents a model of evidence-based research that can provide a sound foundation for strategic decision-making within the Muslim charity sector, but also provides the evidence base on which Muslims can seek to influence policymakers and public debate.

Muslim Demographics: The Story of a Youthful Community



The 2011 Census recorded the UK's Muslim population as totalling 2.8 million, or 4.4% of the overall UK population at the time. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) offered an updated figure in 2018 of 3.4 million.¹² The latest information comes from the 2021 Census which recently released preliminary data on religion for England and Wales. The 2021 Census data showed considerable growth of the UK Muslim

population since the last census a decade ago. While Scottish data has been delayed, the rest of the UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) has seen the Muslim population grow from 2.7 million in 2011 to 3.9 million in 2021. This is an increase of 1.2 million.¹³ In England and Wales, the Muslim population now makes up 6.5% of the overall population.

The MCB believes these growth figures to reflect, in part, the relatively younger age profile of the British Muslim population, with 36% of Muslim women

having been of childbearing age in the last decade. It notes that in our ageing population, a younger Muslim population is a strategic national asset in the medium term, although "in the longer term, the fertility and age profile of the Muslim population will be no different from the rest of the nation."¹⁴

The Muslim population of Britain has historically also skewed younger than the UK average. According to the 2011 Census, 33% of Muslims were under the age of 16, with an additional 15% aged between 16-24.¹⁵ This means that a little over a decade ago, 48% of the British Muslim population were under the age of 25. This was the youngest age profile of any religious group at the time. The next youngest demographic were those with "no religion" of whom 40% were under 25. As of the publication of this report, the 2021 Census data on these aspects of the British population have not been released.

This highlights two issues in particular. Firstly, the needs of young people should be of particular concern for the Muslim community. As we shall see over the course of this report, more needs to be done to address the needs of young Muslims in Britain. The second issue worth bearing in mind is that, on average,

the UK's Muslims most productive years lie ahead of them. As we shall see, Muslims certainly make up a lively and vibrant community in modern Britain, but they also represent a promising future of contribution to our country.

As the coming pages will make clear, our research indicates that young Muslims are eager to contribute to wider society and the success of their communities and

their country. Illustrative of the civic-mindedness of the Muslim community is the following quote from a recently graduated young woman from East London from one of our focus groups.

As she put it, in the community she grew up in: "It was very much: charity at home and charity in your neighbourhood. [...] There was a lot of sacrificing, helping each other and building a community. [...] We grew up understanding that people get help from other people, and people pitch in when they can for

**In England and Wales,
the Muslim population
now makes up 6.5% of
the population, or
3.87 million people.**

the greater good, [for] the future of their children. That's just what I grew up in [...], I didn't realize this was "charitable." [...] We were just always involved in volunteering. It was very much just a part of what we did."¹⁶

Yet, as our discussions made clear, young Muslims also face a variety of challenges on their path to this goal. With targeted support, the younger generation of Britain's Muslims can excel in their aspirations to succeed in both their professional and their communal lives.

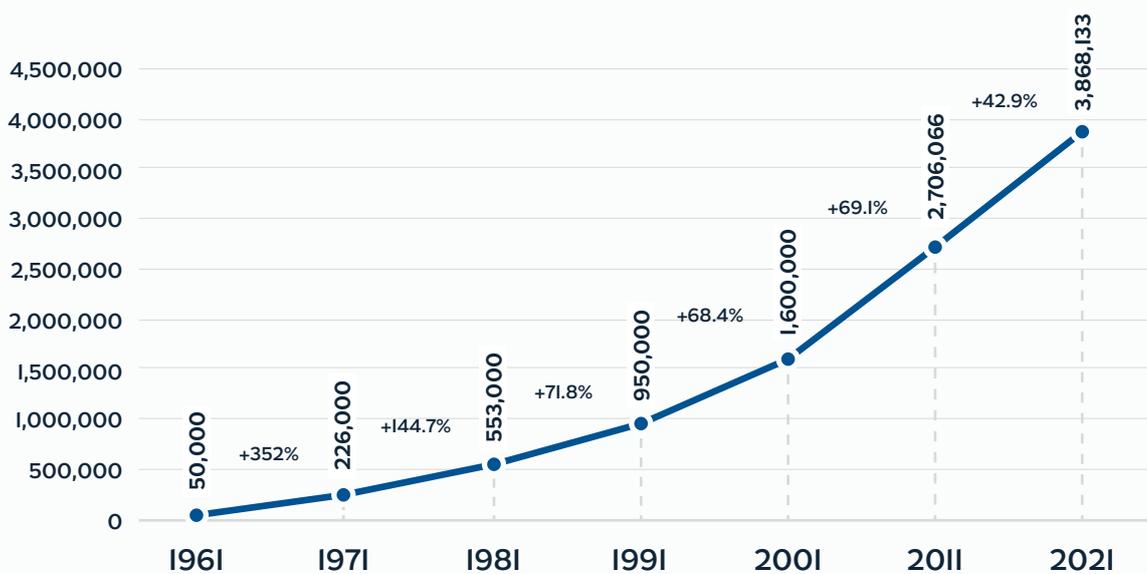
"We grew up understanding that people get help from other people, and people pitch in when they can for the greater good."

Young female focus group participant





Muslim Population of England and Wales



Muslim Population by Local Authority Districts 2021



Why “Islam” Matters in Civil Society



What is civil society? A common definition holds that “civil society” is synonymous with the so-called “third sector” which exists alongside the public and private sectors. The idea has a long and complex history, but re-emerged in the 1980s and is today understood to refer to “the space outside the family, market and state.”¹⁷ The World Bank describes civil society as referring to: “a wide array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.”¹⁸

Interestingly, the World Bank definition, which is in turn invoked by the World Economic Forum, notes the importance of faith-based organizations. In British institutions, however, religion is less frequently highlighted. In the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) annual *UK Civil Society Almanac*'s analysis of the third sector workforce, religion is not a category of worker that is analyzed, even though religion-based charities are present in broader analysis of the sector. Since

the general category of religion is not explored, it is hardly surprising that specific religions like Islam or Christianity are entirely absent from the analysis. This is understandable in light of the general trend of increasing secularization in modern Britain, and the rise of the religiously unaffiliated.

Yet, as the 2016 National Philanthropy Capital (NPC) report on faith-based charities notes: “a higher proportion of faith-based charities (34%) were registered with the Charity Commission in the last ten years than non-faith-based (25%).” This is across all faiths, and not just with respect to Muslims. In the same report, however, it is noted that most Muslim charities (53.5%) had been registered in the ten years before 2016. The NPC adds that this contrasts with “the view that religious affiliation and identification is declining in our society.”¹⁹

Most Muslim charities (53.5%) had been registered in the ten years before 2016. This contrasts with “the view that religious affiliation and identification is declining in our society.”

One of the questions asked in the focus groups and interviews conducted as part of this research was regarding the role of faith in motivating civil society work for Muslims in the voluntary sector. These focus groups

and interviews consistently illustrated that, for most people in the sector, religion reflects a central motivating factor for civil society action within the Muslim community.

One interviewee, a veteran of the sector from Bradford, contended that Muslims made up perhaps the majority of civil society workers on the ground in several British cities, and that such work was motivated in large part by religious reasons.²⁰ Focus group participants reflected similar sentiments. A clear majority of participants expressed their primary motivation for volunteering and working within the charity sector as being grounded in their faith. Some participants would quote verses from the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet to illustrate how they saw their role in charitable endeavours as grounded explicitly in their faith. A small number of participants highlighted that faith was important, but that a sense of shared humanity was even more important.

That the most common refrain heard in focus groups was that faith played a central role in motivating civil society action was not particularly surprising. Although the general trend in British society has been towards secularization, with religion becoming less salient in the average citizen's life, the Muslim popula-

tion has not tracked this trend. A 2018 Ipsos MORI analysis of multiple surveys of British Muslims concludes: "Religion is a far more important part of their life for most Muslims than it is for other people in Britain, and is central to their sense of identity."²¹ In particular, the report draws on a 2010-II study in which three-quarters of British Muslims (74%) said that they felt religion was very important to their sense of identity, compared to a national average of 22% of all adults.²²

In a separate 2010 study, 94% of adult Muslims said that religion was either "extremely important" (51%) or "very important" to them, while "not a single Muslim respondent said it was not important at all."²³ The results did not markedly differ by gender or age, but interestingly, they did differ between

graduates of whom 62% held religion to be "extremely important" compared with those without a degree, for whom the figure was 50%.²⁴ The general trend among younger people was of higher levels of religiosity, with studies from 2005 to 2010 indicating that Muslim religiosity was on an upward trend.

While it is not the purpose of this report to speculate about the reasons for this trend, it should be noted that religion was clearly important to most of the participants in the focus groups for this report. These focus groups were organized on the basis of religious identity, inviting people who were active in British Muslim civil society, rather than, say, on the basis of Asian or African identity, thus it is to be expected that respondents were generally people for whom their religious identity was especially salient. This does not change the reality of the civil society space often being presumptively secular in Britain today in a way that contrasts with how many Muslims engage the space.

While it is understandable, in light of broader trends towards secularization, that major institutions have increasingly tended to view religion as marginal, the unqualified adoption of such a perspective is liable to

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marginalize Britain's growing Muslim minority. Instead of assuming a uniformly secular outlook in thinking about civil society, it makes sense to remain alive to the importance of religion to certain sections of our charitable and voluntary sectors. This could be achieved by adopting a more open attitude towards religiously motivated participants in the sector.

A relatively straightforward way of achieving this would be to include voluntary questions regarding religion in surveys of participants within the sector. For example, organizations like the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) could study the religious breakdown of participants in the sector alongside its current practice of studying the ethnic breakdown of the sector. In the latest edition of the NCVO's annual *UK Civil Society Almanac*, which it describes as "the definitive publication on the state of the voluntary sector," it offers valuable demographic data regarding who works in the sector.²⁵ This could be augmented with a breakdown of religious affiliation.

We would propose that the NCVO, NPC, and similar institutions begin to regularly document the religious breakdown of voluntary sector participation alongside ethnic background. This will hopefully encourage more Muslims to self-consciously participate in the sector. Given the pride with which Muslims, and indeed, other faith groups view the importance of contributing to charity, highlighting the level of a faith groups' participation in this sector could incentivize greater contribution on the part of members of a given faith.

British Muslim Civil Society: An Overview



The British Muslim population has made great strides since the early emergence of communities in port cities in the late 19th century. The most significant growth has taken place in the past sixty years with the arrival of large numbers of Muslims to Britain, overwhelmingly from the former colonies. The legacy of British India has meant that the majority of Muslims in the UK come from South Asia with Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Indians collectively making up the majority of Britain's Muslims.

By 2023, the community has witnessed significant progress both individually and collectively, in virtually all sectors of professional life. Britain's Muslims have achieved high office in politics, increased wealth in business, and wide recognition in their charitable endeavours, among many other contributions to British life. Notable figures include the current popularly elected mayors, including most notably the Mayor of London; politicians, peers and cabinet ministers from both the government and the opposition parties, both in the Houses of Commons and the Lords; as well as in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Senedd.

Beyond politics, British Muslims have achieved considerable success as entrepreneurs and have started to set up philanthropic foundations. Alongside large-scale philanthropy, the average Muslim

Briton has also been noted to be especially generous in their charitable giving. Muslims have made visible progress in mainstream media, news journalism, entertainment, and sports, with numerous journalists, commentators, newsreaders, television personalities, and sportspersons. But beyond such public facing roles, Muslims are especially well represented in the NHS, as doctors, dentists, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. They are also contributing to a range of other professions, from the law to the civil service, academia to literature.

Britain's Muslims have achieved high office in politics, great wealth in business, and wide recognition in their charitable endeavours, among many other contributions to British life.



King Charles 'impressed' by British Muslim Heritage Centre - BBC News



Examples of Muslims in Civil Society

The foregoing reflects a wide range of areas in which Muslims have made important contributions in British life across the public, private and third sectors. With the focus of this report being civil society, the remainder of this section will consider the very significant contributions that Muslims have made in this sector in particular. These have not necessarily been nationally visible big-ticket projects.

Many of them are small local initiatives that are unlikely to make it to mainstream national media outlets, and not only because Muslim institutional communications infrastructure is largely lacking. The nature of civil society work is that it is often local, small-scale, incremental, and focuses on delivery rather than PR. This underlines the special importance of communicating successes to wider constituencies—an issue that requires specific investment on the part of most Muslim institutions.

Over the course of our focus groups and interviews in numerous cities and locales up and down the country, we have been able to witness the remarkable achievements of Muslim charities and voluntary organizations to their local communities that deserve

much wider recognition and support. Our focus groups invited people who were actively engaged in civil society and illustrated numerous success stories from the voluntary sector. But there was a universal sense of the current scale of work only marking the beginning of what is needed. What follows is inevitably only a snapshot of a variety of local initiatives around the country that could be highlighted. So many excellent initiatives have had to be left unexplored for want of space and not because they do not deserve wider attention from our national institutions.

Britain's Muslims have achieved high office in politics, great wealth in business, and wide recognition in their charitable endeavours, among many other contributions to British life.

Over the course of the past several decades, British Muslims have grown not only in population size but also in terms of institutional strength. Many of their institutions are now decades old

and have well-established reputations within the community. Others are relatively new and already making waves. Others still are yet to find their feet in a context of frequently hostile media attention towards Muslims and their institutions, a theme which we will see repeated over the coming pages.

British Muslim civil society organizations include a wide array of institutions and associations, both

formal and less formal, that constitute the vibrant fabric of the British Muslim community. They include both national and local organizations, as well as the umbrella bodies they collectively set up. They include organizations that are focused on education, communal worship, poverty relief, advocacy, and media, and often several of these combined. The examples mentioned here represent a selection from a wide array of such organizations.

The MCB and Other Umbrella Bodies

Beginning with national bodies, several of them have long existed in the constellation of organizations that make up British Muslim civil society. Perhaps the most important among them is the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), widely recognized within the community, in scholarship, and by independent observers to be the most broadly-based and representative umbrella body of Muslim institutions in the UK. In a sense, the MCB with its more than 500 affiliate organizations, reflects the breadth and depth of the diverse Muslim civil society space in the UK.

The MCB has also shown itself to be remarkably dynamic in its electing as its head in 2021, its first secretary general who was a woman and person under the age of thirty. Given the youthful demographics of the Muslim community, and the fact that no female secretary general has ever been elected to office in the past, this has been an important symbolic choice.



The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is widely recognized within the community, in scholarship, and by independent observers to be the most broadly-based and representative umbrella body of Muslim institutions in the UK.

MCB MUSLIM COUNCIL OF BRITAIN



Besides the MCB, there are innumerable other umbrella bodies, the most important of which include the following (in chronological order of founding):



1. **The Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS)** was founded in 1963 as an umbrella body for student Islamic societies at colleges and universities throughout the UK. Its mission is to: “strengthen society by fostering a God-conscious and nurturing environment for Muslim students, through a journey of development, faith-inspired activism and advocacy.”²⁶



2. **The Association of Muslim Schools (AMS)**, an umbrella body for institutions of primary and secondary education that cater to Muslim communities around the UK. Founded in 1992, they are an institution representing the needs and interests of 156 Muslim schools. They are also recognized by the Department for Education.²⁷



3. **The Muslim Council of Wales (MCW)**, an affiliate of the MCB, was established in 2000 as an umbrella body “to serve the needs of the Muslim community across Wales.” It describes its work as “designed to enhance the quality of life for Welsh Muslims, build community cohesion and encourage active citizenship.”²⁸



4. **The Mosque and Imams Advisory Board (MINAB)** was founded in 2006 as an umbrella body for mosques. It describes its role as one of “facilitating good practice in mosques and Islamic teaching institutions through a set of core standards related to governance, personnel, participation of women and youth, and civic responsibility.”²⁹



5. **The Muslim Charities Forum (MCF)** was established in 2007 and is an umbrella body for Muslim charities in the UK. Through its network, it aims to “collectively build a more accountable, transparent and efficient British Muslim charitable sector.”³⁰ Its important report, *Bridges of Hope*, has been cited in the Recommendations above.



6. **The Muslim Council of Scotland (MCS)** was established in 2007 and is an umbrella body with over 100 affiliated mosques and Islamic centres throughout Scotland. It describes itself as an organization that “seeks to build positive relationships within civil society to promote understanding and advocate for better social change.”³¹

These umbrella bodies illustrate the breadth and depth of the civil society space. Given that these institutions aspire to act as umbrella bodies, they may be viewed as reflecting the various sectors as well as the geographic spread of British Muslim civil society institutions as they currently exist.

The absence of a Northern Irish umbrella body should be seen as reflecting the particularly sparse Muslim population of Northern Ireland. In the 2011 UK Census, Muslims of Northern Ireland made up 0.1% of the UK Muslim population, i.e. 1 out of every 1,000 UK Muslims in 2011 was Northern Irish.³² Since then, the Muslim population of Northern Ireland has nearly tripled to just under 11,000. Assuming that Scotland’s Muslim population data takes the total UK Muslim population to around 4 million, Northern Irish Muslims would make up roughly 0.3% of the total UK Muslim population—a small but relatively fast-growing community.

Mosques and Related Organizations

With over 2,000 mosques in the UK, many of which are registered charities, these institutions may well be the most widespread charities in the British Muslim civil society space.³³ Besides the national umbrella bodies highlighted above, various cities also have their own umbrella bodies for local initiatives, for example, Bradford has had its Council for Mosques since 1981, while Lancashire has had its Council of Mosques since 1989.³⁴ Such councils or similar bodies are dotted around the country including in: Birmingham,³⁵ Bolton,³⁶ Bristol,³⁷ Essex,³⁸ Leicester,³⁹ and Nottingham.⁴⁰

In addition to such bodies that are mosque-focused, it is important to highlight that mosques are themselves important centres for civil society. This is sadly not always realized, but in many

instances, mosques are the most vibrant community hubs in the local area. In some cases, a mosque complex may offer regular services, such as restaurant facilities, soup kitchens, and food banks for the public irrespective of religious affiliation. This was certainly the case for some of the mosques whose members participated in our focus groups.

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In this regard, it is worth highlighting a handful of exemplary mosques whose operating model remains less frequently encountered, perhaps given the scale of community services they offer, but could inspire a very different kind of ethos within Britain's mosques, and illustrate the possibilities of

some of Britain's larger mosques becoming central hubs for community work.



London Islamic Cultural Society and Mosque

These mosques are hardly isolated examples, and from 2023 onwards we can look forward to the ground-breaking Cardiff University research project, "Understanding British Imams," which is studying imams from 60-70% of the UK's more than 2,000 mosques. The dynamism of many mosques being replicated elsewhere suggests the possibility that many more of them in the UK could become major hubs for vibrant civil society activity that serves more than the five daily prayer needs of Muslim men. Instead, a rejuvenated mosque could bring about positive transformations intergenerationally, beyond male worshipers, and indeed, beyond just a Muslim constituency.

The general lack of young people, women, and visionary leaders, alongside the lack of term limits on trusteeships that would force renewal, has tended to perpetuate the lack of dynamism in these many mosques.

Since 2018, a project known as the Beacon Mosque Awards has been recognizing achievements by mosques in ten different categories in the UK.⁴¹ This may be seen as a much-needed step to incentivize high standards of professional and spiritual excellence throughout the UK's mosques. While many mosques are doing excellent work, as one long-time activist in the Muslim community commented in one of our focus groups, there is much more that needs to be done. In particular, he highlighted that the vast majority of mosques did not emulate the model that is exemplified by a handful of exceptional mosques.⁴²

Others have argued that most of the UK's mosques are very small institutions catering for a small local constituency and cannot possibly operate on the scale of some of the UK's larger, better resourced mosques.⁴³ According to the aforementioned activist, who spoke of roughly twenty years of experience in the sector, the vast majority of mosques were run with very narrow interests on the part of unrepresentative committees lacking in vision and the

dynamism needed to create the genuine civil society hubs that mosques could be.

Too often, these mosques failed to cater to the needs of anyone aside from the older male demographic that dominates mosque boards. Others in the focus group agreed. The general lack of young people, women, and visionary leaders, alongside the lack of term limits on trusteeships that would force renewal, tended to perpetuate the lack of dynamism in these institutions. Still other participants in the focus group suggested that the same could be said of many well-meaning charity trustees in the British Muslim civil society space.

Hence, the two exemplary cases outlined below should not be viewed as the rule, but rather are unfortunately still very much the exception, though they can be viewed as inspirational models which could be learnt from.

Green Lane Masjid and Community Centre (Birmingham)

As one of the largest mosques in Birmingham, GLMCC has a long-standing reputation for being one of its most dynamic. It is based in the Small Heath area in south-east Birmingham, an area with a majority Muslim population. The mosque opened in 1979 and was registered with the Charity Commission in 2008. The charity's stated purpose is to "advance the Islamic faith for the public benefit." To that end, major



Green Lane Masjid - Small Heath, Birmingham

refurbishments have resulted in a state-of-the-art prayer and teaching space, alongside a dizzying array of pastoral care and other services for both men and women, young and old, that are publicly accessible to Muslims of one of the country's most deprived areas.

Its website showcases the range of important services it offers the local community every single hour of the week.⁴⁴ Aside from the five daily prayers, these include legal services, domestic violence support services, mental health support sessions, spiritual well-being services, dedicated youth services with a youth advisory board, regular food banks, community sports, and religious classes in multiple languages. GLMCC was integral to Birmingham's COVID response as part of the integrated response with Birmingham NHS. It also co-chairs the Faith Alliance Group with West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit.⁴⁵ GLMCC also has a significant online presence via social media with roughly a million followers across its many channels.

Shia Ithna'ashari Community of Middlesex (Harrow)

SICM is a growing mosque and community centre and one of the most innovative projects of Britain's vibrant Shia Muslim community. They regularly host an impressively diverse array of nearly 100 speakers a year, including: religious scholars (both Shia and Sunni), academics, activists, and professionals showcasing the full range of British Muslim talent. This is in

addition to excellent interfaith work with local communities as well as a very strong relationship with the local (Sunni) Harrow Mosque to which SICM extended its facilities for Friday prayers for thirteen years in an exemplary demonstration of Shia-Sunni concord.

Harrow Mosque would subsequently support SICM's bid with Harrow council to build a new state-of-the-art purpose-built mosque and Islamic centre called the Salaam Centre. The Centre will revolutionize how mosques and Islamic centres look in the UK through its planned blend of architectural traditions bringing together British, East African, Iranian, Iraqi and Islamic themes alongside a fusion of many cultures in its overall design and layout.⁴⁶ Besides the foregoing, SICM has been a key hub for civic engagement in Harrow, getting the community engaged in local democracy, being a founding member of Harrow Citizens, running a weekly food bank called Soul Kitchen distributing over a hundred packets of food a week, alongside innumerable activities for young people, women and children.⁴⁷



Artists impression of The Salaam Centre - Harrow, London





A record number of Muslim scouts join UK scout troops - Source: The Independent

Muslim Youth Inclusion and Provision

The Muslim youth sector needs considerable development and remains troublingly small relative to the scale of the Muslim youth population. As mentioned earlier, under-25s made up roughly half of the Muslim population of the UK in 2011. Although 2021 Census data on the age profile of Muslims is yet to be released, Muslims will likely continue to be the religious group with the youngest profile. Currently, a well-structured youth sector that self-consciously caters for the needs of Muslim youth is lacking. What does exist appears to be ad hoc in relatively small close-knit communities, sometimes associated with mosques. But overall, there is little wider coordination, regional or national.

Consequently, the overwhelming majority of Muslim youth, who according to the last census made up roughly half of the Muslim population of the UK,⁴⁸ remains woefully under-served. There have been excellent national initiatives like the Muslim Scout Fellowship which caters to over 5,000 Muslims in the UK. However, this represents 0.38% of British Muslims under the age of 25.⁴⁹ In other words, Muslim scouts represent roughly 4 out of every 1,000 young Muslims in this country.

In a number of focus groups that were dedicated to issues of concern to young people, there was a great deal of energy and enthusiasm among both young

men and young women to contribute to the civil society space. Some of these youths had established projects of their own in their communities in response to a lack they felt around them. One excellent example of this that emerged in one of our focus groups is "The Legacy Project."⁵⁰ Driven by high school students who had successfully gained places at high-ranking British universities, it is designed to help young people in deprived boroughs of East London to successfully navigate the challenges of deprivation by supporting them to apply to university among other ways of achieving social mobility. Another project that was started by and for young people is the Muslim Youth Helpline. This is by now a well-established service that recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary and is dedicated to meeting the "urgent need for faith and culturally sensitive support services" for Muslim youth.⁵¹

The Muslim youth sector needs considerable development and remains troublingly small relative to the scale of the Muslim youth population.



Muslim Youth Helpline (myh.org.uk)

Alongside such positive examples, there were also challenges. One aspect was a perceived lack of guidance from more experienced participants in civil society about how to engage mainstream society more effectively. Some young people expressed the need for conversations about how Muslims could reconcile their religious and cultural values with aspects of wider British culture.

Others spoke about a culture of suspicion of young Muslims brought on by policies like Prevent, which were often perceived by focus group participants as discriminatory and Islamophobic.⁵² In a separate scholars' focus group, it was noted that some particularly sensitive issues were best dealt with by committees of specialists bringing together community leaders with Islamic scholars, legal expertise, and other experts, to deliberate and publish systematic guidance on how Muslims could respond to such issues.

At the same time, there are impressive relatively large-scale projects that have emerged promising transformative possibilities for young people who are fortunate enough to benefit from them. Perhaps most notable among these is the educational project of Star Academies, a project that is not exclusive to the Muslim community, even if it was founded and is led by a Muslim scholar, Sir Mufti Hamid Patel.⁵³ Star Academies is a multi-academy trust which manages over thirty schools around the UK, often in neighbourhoods with a high number of Muslims.

Their model has led to remarkable successes in taking children from deprived local authorities with low levels of educational attainment, and achieving some of the best GCSE and A-level results in the country. The scale of the problem is much larger than can be addressed by a few dozen schools, however. For a

Given the young profile of the UK's Muslim population, it is likely that the school-age Muslim population is roughly a million students, or 10% of the country's school attendees.

sense of this scale, we should note that there are over 32,000 schools in the UK with a student population of over 10 million.



Sara Ziglam (R) shares her results with Ayah Shah (L) and Khansa Iqbal. Tauheedul Islam girls' high school in Blackburn. Photograph: Asadour Guzelian/ The Guardian

There are over 200 Muslim independent schools.⁵⁴ Given the young profile of the UK's Muslim population, it would not be implausible for the school-going population to be roughly a million students, many of whom will live in the most deprived local authority districts of the UK, since these are the areas where Muslims are disproportionately situated.

Evidence suggests that the distinct needs of Muslim girls may not be consistently addressed in the Muslim youth sector. However, in our focus groups, we did come across one important initiative started by Muslim women specifically for Muslim girls. This is a sports initiative called Dream Chaser Youth Club in inner city Birmingham that is offering more Muslim girls the opportunity to play football, a sport that is very dominated by males. The initiative has been covered in the national media over the years.⁵⁵ Similar projects that cater for Muslim girls include Yaseen Youth in Harrow and Here for Youth who work nationwide. Both organizations have built strong faith-based

youth development programmes for boys and girls while ensuring access is as equitable as possible.

As noted earlier in this report, the youth sector needs considerable development within British Muslim civil society. One concrete way in which this could happen is through taking advantage of funding that is being made available by national and local government that has been earmarked for young people. Whether this is through the Youth Investment Fund or the National Youth Guarantee, there are in fact hundreds of millions in public funds that are available for developing this sector that Muslim civil society institutions need to tap into.

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The Youth Investment Fund has been allocated £368 million, while the government has earmarked £560 million as part of the National Youth Guarantee.⁵⁶ Yet, for minority communities, the infrastructure and knowledgebase for taking advantage of such public funds to address the needs of their youth is often lacking. These are areas in which Muslims could benefit from the support of Youth Sector charities as well as from local government in helping build such infrastructure from the ground up within Muslim communities.

Youth-focused programmes in the Muslim community should thus be provided with culturally appropriate infrastructure support. This would ensure equality of opportunity and access as they seek to attract finance and resources from current and future national funding streams, such as the Youth Investment Fund and Youth Futures Foundation. This could be strategically supported by local, regional, and national bodies by identifying infrastructure development opportunities in an asset-based approach, with the co-creation of solutions within our growing Muslim communities and civil society spaces.

Other Charities

It is naturally not possible to do justice to the sheer range of Muslim-run charities in the UK in this short report, so this subsection will briefly offer some high-

lights from the sector. The pioneering third sector institutions within the Muslim community have historically been internationally focused aid organizations. Perhaps the oldest and by far the largest among them is Islamic Relief (IR), an organization established in 1984 whose global income in 2021 was £183 million. Although it has established a global reputation as an overseas aid organization, it has also started to significantly scale up its work in the UK, considering some of the needs of Britain's Muslim community.



Liverpool FC Foundation teams up with Islamic Relief UK and the Liverpool Mosque Regions Network to deliver essential support - Source: Liverpool Echo

Other UK charities include advocacy organizations for the welfare of groups in need of support within the Muslim community. This includes women's groups like the Muslim Women Network (MWN) in Birmingham and the Muslim Women's Council (MWC) in Bradford.⁵⁷ The latter, leaders of whom we interviewed, draws inspiration from Islamic teachings to offer community services led by Muslim women. This includes running soup kitchens for those in poverty or dealing with the impact of substance abuse. They offer these services irrespective of faith or gender. In our interviews, however, MWC leaders highlighted the severely limited resources available for charities like theirs, and the need for charities working in a given area to work collaboratively rather than competitively.



Another important recent women-run project is called Vibrant Scottish Mosques which calls for “inclusivity of women in our mosque spaces at all levels.”⁵⁸ Working with leading Islamic scholars in Scotland, they have also published a recent report, *Hear My Voice*, on Muslim women’s experiences in mosques and what needs to be done to improve their access to communal prayer spaces.⁵⁹ Muslim women have been very prominent contributors to all aspects of civil society, but a widespread complaint heard in focus groups was that they often did not have access to, or influence within the mosque.

While social media and online resources have democratized access to Islamic knowledge, it is still the case that large numbers of mosques are not enabling access for women to attend. Although there are historical schools of thought that assert that women should not attend the mosque, focus group discussions overwhelmingly were of the view that such attitudes were not suited to the British context. The common norm of not offering space to women in mosques was seen as contradicting the explicit teaching of the Prophet to not prevent women from attending the mosque.⁶⁰

Finally, advocacy groups like the MCB’s Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM) offer stellar services to a community that is, in many ways, under siege from influential sections of the British media and political establishment. They have demonstrated in their ground-breaking 2021 report entitled “British Media’s Coverage of Muslims & Islam (2018-2020)” the overwhelming scale of the negative reporting about Muslims in the British media. CfMM also liaises closely with journalists and offers community training on dealing with the media.

Vibrant Scottish Mosques calls for “inclusivity of women in our mosque spaces at all levels.”



Media Institutions

One of the arenas in which Muslim civil society institutions appear weakest is in the media. Certainly, there are a wide range of media institutions within the Muslim community, from satellite channels to online news outlets of various kinds, but none of these could be considered “mainstream” or have the ability to drive the news agenda in the mainstream in any sense.

None of these would compare to a national broadsheet or be covered on a mainstream television or radio news programme’s “review of today’s papers.” No Muslim outlet is liable to be read by or influence major policy decisions in the way that the *Economist* or *The Times* might aspire to. Indeed, there is no Muslim news outlet, be it a website or a news channel, that could conceivably be seen as meaningfully harbouring such aspirations in the near future from a Muslim perspective.

Media outlets are an extremely important component of a democratic culture. While in theory they are meant to keep the citizens of a democracy informed and equipped to participate, they also are important outlets for promoting the interests of their financial backers. Thus, an outlet like the *Economist* champions liberalism both socially and politically. *The Guardian* advocates for centrist and centre-left politics.

Most of the UK’s prominent newspapers skew to the right, and as the recent ground-breaking report from CfMM has conclusively shown, most news outlets in the UK demonstrate significant bias against Islam and Muslims.⁶¹ This is illustrated by the widespread tendency to associate Islam and Muslims with negative news stories. Ultimately, this is largely about framing.

It is perfectly possible to isolate the guilt of a Muslim criminal’s actions from the wider Muslim population of roughly 4 million in negative stories, just as should be the case with other kinds of negative stories in the press. Other identity markers, whether they be based on ethnicity, religion, gender and the like are perfectly possible to isolate from negative news stories.

Not all Catholics or Christians need to be associated with the crimes of a small number of their co-religionists who have been complicit in sexual abuse scandals of some church leaders, for example. Nor should all British and American non-Muslims be expected to apologize, on demand, for the illegal war in Iraq that caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and contributed, according to President Barack Obama, to the rise of ISIS.⁶²

Such obvious standards are too often abandoned when a story is about Muslims, however. One cause of this is the lack of investment on the part of Muslim communities in their capacity to engage in current affairs discussions in public forums. Very little of the existing Muslim media seriously engages in news journalism, and those that do sometimes appear to

adopt a tabloid-style reactionary editorial stance that mainstream tabloids can often get away with because they are underwritten by billionaire owners.

In this context, if Muslims wish to prevent negative coverage in the press that has built up over decades, they will need to engage in

significant short-, medium-, and long-term strategic investment of resources, both in terms of financing serious media projects that are of the quality of the best mainstream outlets, and also in creating viable career pathways for journalists who are interested in more fairly representing Muslims. Even in this regard we are seeing progress, with the Aziz Foundation pioneering contributions in journalism and working to create opportunities for talented young Muslims in the leading outlets of the country.

One of the arenas in which Muslim civil society institutions appear weakest is in the media.



The Need for Strategic Philanthropy

The most recent systematic study of the data on the religious breakdown of charities, from NPC's 2016 report, "Faith Matters," highlights that at £542 million, the Muslim charity sector's total income represented 3.32% of the total income of faith-based charities in the UK.⁶³ Although this is a relatively small proportion, the NPC report notes that Muslim charities made up 4.74% of the faith-based charity sector at the time. Hence, the funds raised are not too far off the actual proportion of Muslim charities in the faith-based charity sector.

Add to this the significant levels of poverty in the British Muslim population, which data from 2009-2011 showed to be the condition of 50% of Muslim households relative to the national average of 18%.⁶⁴ Considering that this was before the era of austerity and the current cost-of-living crisis, it is plausible that these rates may worsen somewhat in the near future. In this context, Muslims should be especially concerned about their philanthropic efforts being deployed strategically to help develop greater economic resilience within deprived communities in the UK.

From overseas to a domestic focus

Muslim charities have historically been overwhelmingly focused outside the UK. Authoritative data of this phenomenon seems to be limited, but the 2016 NPC report on religious charities indicates that half (49%) of their overall donations were directed overseas. The proportion is likely to be significantly higher than this in the Muslim sector of religious charities. That is to say, a relatively impoverished British religious community has been sending donations overseas to likely even more impoverished people in other parts of the world. On one level, this is to be commended.

Muslim charities have historically been overwhelmingly focused outside the UK.

Strategically speaking, however, British Muslim communities could ask themselves whether they would be in an even better position to contribute abroad if there was not as much poverty to be found at home. This was an impulse that the Prophet Muhammad himself emphasized. In a well-known hadith report the Prophet informs one of his companions that he



should not donate all his wealth and leave his family destitute, adding that expenditures on one's family are also considered an act of charity.⁶⁵

More importantly, however, if Muslims in the UK are able to strengthen their community's ability to more fully participate as democratic citizens and engage in campaigns in support of overseas aid, they could have a far more significant impact on UK policy with respect to overseas aid than they currently do. This needs to be seen in the context of profoundly troubling recent moves by the UK government with respect to overseas aid.

In recent years, the UK government has slashed its overseas aid budget, much of which goes to overseas poverty relief in the same countries that Muslim charities support. Even if we assume that all of the £542 million Muslim charity income goes overseas (which it does not), then we can recognize that this is dwarfed by the UK government budget in the same areas. In 2020, the government cut international aid by £4.6 billion in

the midst of a global pandemic, and is currently exploring whether another cut of the same magnitude will be necessary.⁶⁶ If Muslims are strategic in their charitable endeavours, they can recognize that investing some of their resources in policy research and influencing the government to explore alternatives to slashing the aid budget would be a far better

investment for the good of its overseas aid recipients than focusing only on what the poorest religious community in the UK can offer on its own. Such choices would require having an informed Muslim donor base, and this in turn would require higher levels of education and lower levels of deprivation.

Investing some resources in policy research and influencing the government to explore alternatives to slashing the aid budget would better serve overseas aid recipients.

Investing in young people

Another element of a Muslim philanthropic strategy would entail investing more systematically in the young people who make up a disproportionately large section of our community. Young people are the future leaders, decision makers, and philanthropists of our community, and they need to be cultivated as such. A commitment to charity, or the desire to “pay it forward” will inevitably arise from dedicating resources to the development of Muslim youth in a holistic manner - spiritually, educationally and professionally.

Some recent examples of Young Muslim Leadership development programmes:

- Young Muslim Leadership Programme - Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (oxcis.ac.uk)
- Future Leaders Programme - Mercy Mission UK
- MCF Future Leaders programme - Muslim Charities Forum
- Aziz Foundation Scholarship Programme



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Islamophobia

A major arena of strategic investment needs to be how the community can confront the scourge of Islamophobia that is widespread in our society. As an impoverished community, Islamophobia remains a major structural obstacle to Muslims flourishing in Britain. When major newspapers, politicians, and media outlets routinely portray Muslims as a threat based on the actions of an unrepresentative handful of individuals, this has deleterious consequences for the whole community.

Muslims can be edged out of public life by the “hostile environment” created in recent times, as has been documented in several studies over the years.⁶⁷ Muslim women who wear the headscarf suffer a “triple penalty” according to a UK parliamentary report: for their gender, their religion, and their race.⁶⁸ Our focus group participants—young and old, male and female—repeatedly expressed the sentiment that the pressures created by widespread Islamophobia held them back from fully participating in British public life.

Creating Muslim Foundations and Endowments

While there is considerable poverty in the Muslim community, there is also considerable wealth. In part, this reflects unhealthy levels of inequality in contemporary British society. In a 2013 report, the MCB put the number of Muslim millionaires in the UK at 10,000 stating that they collectively held

In a 2013 report, the MCB put the number of Muslim millionaires in the UK at 10,000 stating that they collectively held £3.6 billion in liquid assets.

£3.6 billion in liquid assets.⁶⁹ An increasing number of wealthy Muslims are, however, setting up charitable foundations, with the Aziz Foundation being one of the pioneers in this arena with its funding of hundreds of Muslims to pursue postgraduate degrees, and strategically important areas like journalism where Muslims remain significantly underrepresented.⁷⁰



Given the scale of the wealth in the British Muslim community, it is quite realistic to expect growth in this arena—growth that is desperately needed to help the Muslim community free itself of poverty and marginalization in the medium- to long-term. In this connection, technology is now playing an important role in enabling stakeholders and investors in the community to be more strategic in their deployment of financial resources towards charitable ends.

One example of this may be seen in the emerging Islamic charitable fintech project, Waqfinity, which seeks to draw on technology to reinvigorate the Islamic concept of the charitable endowment, or *waqf*,

through collective communal investments. Such enterprises reflect the demand within the British Muslim community to establish a stronger and more robust giving framework, thereby ensuring the long-term sustainability and impact of their civil society contributions.



Conclusion: Planning for the Future



This report offers a strategic overview of the current state of British Muslim civil society. It is inevitably only a snapshot in time of the remarkable diversity and dynamism that characterizes this young and increasingly confident community in modern Britain. The realities on the ground offer both opportunities and challenges. Muslims are improving in their levels of education and their financial security.

They are also young and entering the prime of their lives. Yet, this also means that they have not yet established the firm roots and social networks that they can look forward to in a generation's time, when many more are likely to have reached the very top of the public and private sectors. Given the focus of this report, Muslims' success in the third sector is our most salient concern and here too, we can look forward to growth and innovation in the coming decades.

There are, however, challenges, as have been outlined in the foregoing pages. Implementing our recommendations, outlined at the beginning of this report, will put us in a much better position to address those challenges. Muslims remain an especially young community in Britain, but in the not-too-distant future, the number of our elderly will grow sharply. The challenges of all age groups need to be borne in mind in long-term strategic planning for the community and should be reflected in our conversations on civil

society. This report illustrates our belief in the need to invest now to offset the challenges of the future.

The Muslim civil society conversation in Britain needs to develop thoughtful medium-, and long-term horizons alongside its current tendency towards presentism. This is where reports of this nature hope to contribute. Some members of Muslim civil society should periodically step back from addressing the immediate needs of our community and reflect on questions that will better prepare us for longer-term challenges we may face and contributions we will want to make to British society. To this end, we hope that the community and our partners in wider civil society, as well as in the business community and the public sector, will recognize the need to mobilize resources to fund future iterations of reports like this one and the British Muslim Survey that we are proposing.

Appendix I: Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the generosity of a large number of people, most of whom will have to remain anonymous, as they were the participants of numerous confidential focus groups and interviews conducted mainly over the summer months of 2022. I am incredibly grateful for the time they gave to help me better understand their work in the Muslim third sector.

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Several venues also kindly offered their facilities to conduct in person focus groups. These include Birmingham City Football Club and the Humanitarian Academy for Development in Birmingham, Finefair Ltd in Redbridge, Impact Hub in Bradford, the Islamic Foundation in Markfield, and the City Retreat in Leicester. Thanks are also due to the Muslims in Britain Research Network (MBRN) for kindly providing a platform at their annual conference to talk about the project. In several areas, certain individuals were instrumental in helping organize focus groups. In this regard, I'd like to especially thank Yasmin Surti in Leicester, Azim Ahmed in Cardiff, Rameez Mahmood in Glasgow, Riyaz Timol in Preston, Kamran Rashid and Zahra Imran in Bradford, Ayesha Karim in East London, Saiqa Ali in South London, and Hamza Ahmed in Birmingham.

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Usaama al-Azami

Principal Investigator



Appendix 2: British Muslim Survey

Preliminaries

Modelled on the British Sikh Report (BSR), the production of such an annual survey of British Muslims would offer extremely valuable empirical data that can inform the Muslim community and its voluntary sector regarding the strategic needs of the community.⁷¹ What follows is a proposed outline of the sorts of questions that could be asked as part of such a report. The report would need to be funded, and could be done by a consortium of Muslim charities and philanthropists.

Relative ease

The effort required to engage in an biennial census of Muslims is likely to be relatively low given the size of the Muslim population. Statistically speaking, responses to a survey on the part of 2,400 Muslims, assuming they represent the diversity of the Muslim community, is all that would be necessary to obtain data that is accurate to within a 2% margin of error.⁷²

Considering that the Muslim population in the UK is likely to be around 4 million in 2023, obtaining this range of valid responses to a self-reported online survey would seem perfectly plausible with the relevant publicity drive. Of course, efforts would need to be made to ensure the representativeness of the sample and the validity of the data, which is where many of the challenges for such a survey would likely lie.

It should be noted that the BSR has annually been successful in collecting data from between 2,000 to 2,700 Sikhs over the past decade from a base population of about half a million, roughly 13% of the size of the Muslim population. That is to say, the BSR has drawn on about 0.5% of the entire Sikh population of the UK. If a Muslim survey were to receive 10,000 responses from the full range of the Muslim population, this would represent about 0.25% of the Muslim population, but offer us an incredible level of granularity of insights into the state of British Muslims.⁷³ If this were undertaken annually or biennially, our evidence-based understanding of the long-term development of the Muslim community would be far superior to even what we can learn from the census—which takes place every 10 years.

The BSR's online model is also particularly cost-effective, even if it would be necessary, if such a model were adopted, to ensure those with limited computer literacy and internet access are well represented in the survey process. The BSR encourages community volunteers to print out and fill in forms on behalf of elders in their community who might not be able to fill in the form for themselves online.

However, to be achievable a few prerequisites would be necessary:

- i. This project would need longer-term investment which would help cultivate the institutional capacity within the British Muslim community to undertake this research on a long-term, ideally biennial, basis.
- ii. The core team of researchers will need to be led by a professional statistician alongside experts in British Muslim studies and Islamic studies. We may wish to explore other models that currently exist for comparable communities. The BSR, for example, is edited by a statistician with decades of experience in the field, and has a senior academic in Sikh studies as an advisor to the project. The Muslim population being much larger than the Sikh population, it will likely be advisable to have a large advisory panel of experts reflecting the diversity of Britain's Muslim community.
- iii. The project must be independent of any partisan agenda, being backed by the full range of Muslim institutions in the UK while being independent of any one of these institutions as a project.

What does a rigorous evidence-based approach to Muslim community issues look like?

Muslim communities have to recognize their needs are best understood through empirical research. Currently, this is being undertaken in a somewhat unsystematic fashion owing to the lack of a coordinated effort on the part of funders and researchers. The Census provides some data that is useful, but as with the BSR, it makes sense to cover some of the same ground as the Census for comparative purposes.

Economic data and income levels

For example, a knowledge of Muslim economic conditions can give them an idea of how they can allocate charitable resources within their own communities. Questions could explore household size, home ownership rates vs rent/council housing, employment sector/level, income levels, savings levels, average charitable giving, volunteering levels etc.

Some possible questions:

1. Housing and finance

- a. What best describes your living arrangements?
 - i. Homeowner outright
 - ii. Homeowner with mortgage
 - iii. Homeowner with Islamic finance
 - iv. Renting privately
 - v. Council house
 - vi. Other: please specify
- b. How many people live in your home?
- c. How many bedrooms does your home have?
- d. What is your gross salary?
- e. What field do you work in?
- f. What is your gross household income?
- g. Did you hesitate to get a mortgage for religious reasons?
- h. Did you hesitate to enter higher education due to student loan interest?
- i. Do you hesitate to buy products on credit?
- j. Which word describes your financial situation best: wealthy, comfortable, getting by, struggling, in poverty.

2. Education

- a. Highest education level
- b. Subject studied at university or other post-secondary educational track
- c. Subject category: medical related; engineering related; other sciences; business related; social sciences; humanities; vocational training
- d. Are you happy with your choice of degree at university or other post-secondary institution?

- e. Career aspirations when entering university or post-secondary educational training

3. Ethnic background

- a. How would you describe your ethnicity?
 - i. African, Arab, Asian, Black, White, mixed, other (please specify)
- b. Where were you born?

4. Social engagement

- a. Volunteering levels
- b. Engagement in activities outside the Muslim community
- c. How important is charity to you?
- d. Roughly how much on average do you give in charity per month?
- e. What is your first language?
- f. If your first language is not English, how well would you describe your ability to speak English: very good, good, fair, poor

5. Political engagement

- a. Are you registered to vote?
- b. Are you a member of a political party?
- c. Do you engage in the political process beyond voting, e.g. by campaigning and canvassing?
- d. Do you vote in general elections?
- e. Do you vote in local elections?
- f. Do you feel that British politics addresses your needs as a Muslim?
- g. Which three of the following are major political concerns for you in 2023?
 - i. Cost of living crisis
 - ii. UK government instability
 - iii. COVID response
 - iv. NHS under pressure
 - v. Islamophobia
 - vi. Brexit
 - vii. Foreign policy
 - viii. Climate change
 - ix. Other issues (please specify):

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