



**THE MINISTRY OF
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES
& LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S
INDEPENDENT FAITH
ENGAGEMENT REVIEW**

Muslim engagement
& development

mend

The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government's Independent Faith Engagement Review

A Submission from Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)

December 2020

MEND's contribution to the inquiry

This submission from Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government's Independent Faith Engagement Review seeks to explore the important role of faith organisations in society and the Government's engagement with faith in the present climate.

MEND is a community-funded organisation that seeks to encourage political, civic, and social engagement within British Muslim communities through empowering British Muslims to interact with political and media institutions effectively. Our approach to achieving this involves a combination of community engagement (through education, community events, local campaigns to encourage voting etc.) and advocacy work (involving victim support, submissions to parliamentary inquiries, media analysis, election resources, briefings etc.).

Considering MEND's expertise as the largest grassroots Muslim organisation in the country, we feel that we can provide valuable insights into fruitful avenues for government engagement with faith communities and the role that these communities play in their localities. As such, MEND hopes that our recommendations may provide guidance to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government in developing meaningful engagement strategies to both empower faith communities and to learn valuable lessons from these communities themselves.

Executive Summary

The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government is inviting evidence on a range of issues, with several key questions to which MEND believes our expertise can make a valuable contribution:

- **In your opinion, are Faith and Religion overall positive things for society?:** Faith communities in the UK have a long history of helping the most vulnerable and contributing to all aspects of society, including through charitable work, fostering a sense of belonging and identity, and also enhancing a sense of shared community values and social responsibility.
- **During the Covid-19 pandemic are you aware of a faith organisation or religious community which has supported your neighbourhood through running a community project or offering support?:** Since the very beginning of the pandemic, British Muslims have been integral in the collective response, both in terms of serving within frontline services and in terms of volunteering efforts in support of their local communities. Efforts have included food and supply distribution, PPE delivery, supporting the homeless and needy, transforming mosques into nightingale hospices, supporting the needs of those in domestic abuse situations, and continuing to provide vital services such as care homes, pharmacies and post offices, to name but a few invaluable activities.
- **Before the Covid-19 pandemic were you aware of a faith organisation or religious community having made a positive contribution to your neighbourhood?"** For Muslims and those of many faiths, service to humanity and social responsibility are central tenets of their religion and their identity. While the current pandemic has highlighted the work of faith organisations and religious communities across the country, this work is but a continuation of a longstanding history of social interventions from faith communities in efforts to improve the lives and opportunities of those around them.
- **Do you feel Government engages meaningfully with people of faith?:** As recommended by the 2017 Citizens UK report, *Missing Muslims*, the Government must mend its "broken relationship"¹ with Muslim communities by reconsidering its policy of disengagement with credible mainstream Muslim organisations that have the trust and support of British Muslim communities.
- **How could the Charity Commission do more to support registered faith charities?** The Commission currently holds minimal credibility amongst Muslim communities due in no small part to the leadership of William Shawcross. Shawcross' approach and the disproportionate targeting of Muslim charities appear to be a continuation of the aggressive anti-Muslim agenda espoused by his former organisation, the Henry Jackson Society. Considering the structural Islamophobia that characterises Shawcross' career, even following his departure, it will take substantive meaningful engagement to restore the faith of Muslim communities in the Commission itself.
- **Have you ever felt that your freedom to express your faith, religion or belief was under threat?** The PREVENT strategy has done untold damage to the confidence of Muslim communities to express their faith. A lack of viable definitions combined with inadequate training has led to a situation in which practitioners often draw their understandings from popular culture rather than official training or evidence-based research.² Ultimately, every day normative practices of the Islamic faith, cultural

¹ Citizens UK, *The Missing Muslims: Unlocking British Muslim Potential For The Benefit Of All*, 2017, accessed 05.09.2019, <https://www.barrowcadbury.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Missing-Muslims-Report-full-report.pdf>

² Ibid

traditions,³ or taking an interest in politics can be seen as a sign of being drawn to political violence and create a risk of individual Muslims being swept up in the apparatus of counter-terror.

- **Do you feel confident that elected members in public office (MPs, Ministers, Local Councillors), have a good understanding of different faith, faith practices and issues concerning people of faith?:** In recent times, both the Conservative and Labour parties have become embroiled in accusations of Islamophobia. With political parties and representatives continuing to tolerate, support, or propagate inflammatory language and simultaneously failing to tackle prejudice within their ranks, minority communities are at risk becoming disenfranchised, not just from political life, but also from social, civic, and economic life through the perceived acceptability of discriminatory practices, institutionalised racisms, and structural exclusions.
- **In your opinion, how could Government and Public servants improve on their faith literacy?** There is an urgent need for the Government, political representatives, and public servants to move away from a conceptualisation of religious literacy purely as an understanding of religious practice, theology, and dogma, and instead view it as a nuanced approach to the social, political, economic, historical and cultural forces that shape the experiences of religious groups. This can only be achieved through active engagement with a broad spectrum of representative Muslim voices and the development of enhanced Islamophobia awareness training strategies in conjunction with credible organisations, such as MEND.

³ Charlotte Heath-Kelly and Erzsébet Strausz "Counter-terrorism in the NHS: EVALUATING PREVENT DUTY SAFEGUARDING IN THE NHS", accessed 29.05.2018, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/researchcentres/ins/counterterrorisminthens/project_report_draft_60pp.pdf

In your opinion, are Faith and Religion overall positive things for society?

There can be little doubt of the incredible contributions that faith communities have made to our society throughout history and in the present day. Indeed, in the United Kingdom, faith communities have a rich legacy of helping the most vulnerable and contributing to all aspects of society, perhaps most obviously through charitable work, but also by building a sense of belonging and identity, whilst also enhancing a sense of shared community values and social responsibility. The fact that the majority of the UK populace identifies with a religion testifies to the importance that faith plays in the lives of many Britons.

Focusing on the Muslim communities in particular, as but a few examples of how Muslim communities have positively contributed to the UK:

- 885,000 Muslim soldiers fought with the Allies in World War I,⁴ with over 400,000 Muslim soldiers fighting on behalf of Britain – and yet only 2 per cent of the British public are aware of the scale of their sacrifice.⁵
- There are 124,715 doctors employed in the NHS, of which nearly 13,000 were Muslim, comprising approximately 10% of the total medical workforce, and about 17% of those doctors where the religion was declared.⁶ For a community that makes up 5% of the national population, Muslims are over-represented in the medical workforce.
- British Muslims contribute over £31 billion to the UK economy,⁷ with over 13,400 Muslim-owned businesses in London, creating over 70,000 jobs, and Muslim-owned firms representing a third of small to medium enterprises in the capital.⁸
- Per capita, British Muslims donate more to charity than any other social group each year,⁹ with British Muslims donating £100million during the holy month of Ramadan in 2016 – equivalent to £38 per second.¹⁰

During the Covid-19 pandemic are you aware of a faith organisation or religious community which has supported your neighbourhood through running a community project or offering support?

Since the very beginning of the pandemic, British Muslims have been integral in the collective response, both in terms of serving within frontline services and in terms of volunteering efforts in support of their local communities. Recognising such contributions is an essential mechanism for recalibrating perceptions surrounding Muslim communities and providing a much-needed rebalancing of what are generally overwhelmingly negatively framed public narratives regarding their place in society.

MEND recently published its COVID-19 Activity Report, which can be found [here](#). This report outlines the incredible contributions made by our volunteers between March and July 2020 in their efforts to support their local communities. As but a handful of examples:

- **NHS Wellness Box Project:** A volunteer from our Central London team partnered with one of his colleagues to bring the NHS Wellness Box initiative to the heart of the City. They sourced and created well-being packages, including motivational cards,

⁴ Hoare, James. "Britain's Muslim Soldiers of World War 1 find a voice in previously unreported letters." All About History. Accessed June 27, 2017. <https://www.historyanswers.co.uk/history-of-war/britains-muslim-soldiers-of-world-war-1-find-a-voice-in-previously-unreported-letters/>.

⁵ Lockley, Mike. "Forgotten army of 400,000 Muslim soldiers who fought for Britain." Birminghammail. November 13, 2016. <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/forgotten-army-400000-muslim-soldiers-10325190>.

⁶ "NHS Workforce Statistics - September 2019 - NHS Digital". 2019. NHS Digital. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-workforce-statistics/september-2019>.

⁷ "British-Muslims Contribute GBP 31 Bn to Economy," The Economic Times, November 06, 2013, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/british-muslims-contribute-gbp-31-bn-to-economy/articleshow/25269473.cms?from=mdr#:~:text=Synopsis- Nearly%202.8%20million%20Muslims%20in%20the%20UK%20contribute%20over%2031,power%20of%2020.5%20billion%20pounds.&text=LONDON%3A%20Nearly%202.8%20million%20Muslims,pounds%2C%20a%20report%20said%20today>.

⁸ The Muslim Pound: Celebrating the Muslim Contribution to the UK Economy, report, Muslim Council of Britain, 2013

⁹ Tom Moseley, "Which Religion Gives The Most To Charity?," HuffPost UK, October 03, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/07/21/muslims-give-most_n_3630830.html.

¹⁰ Nick Donaldson, "Ramadan - making a real difference," Charity Commission, July 14, 2016, <https://charitycommission.blog.gov.uk/2016/07/14/ramadan-making-a-real-difference/>.

energy bars, coffee, hand cream, and toothpaste to name but a few useful items. They delivered these to NHS staff at various hospitals in Central London. MEND volunteers from across London came together to put together these boxes for our NHS heroes. This turned into a weekly effort with over 100 packages made and delivered every week since the beginning of lockdown to the first week of July.

- **Nadi Park Royal Food Parcels:** MEND volunteers from across London were involved in supporting the vulnerable during the pandemic to ensure these people were getting the food and essentials that they needed. In West London, a MEND volunteer partnered with Nadi Park Royal, a Muslim community centre, to put together Ramadan food parcels which were sent out to families who were struggling to buy food to break their fast. Food was donated by kind donors which was packed by volunteers at the community centre and then delivered safely to locals who needed it most. A large number of boxes were also delivered to Lady of Willesden Church to help support vulnerable individuals from the local Christian community.
- **Path 2 Success Series & Phone Listening Service:** During lockdown, there has been serious national concern surrounding spikes in domestic violence and abuse. MEND's Birmingham working group have thus worked tirelessly in collaboration with Birmingham Central Mosque to conduct a weekly webinar series by the name of 'Path to Success' to support women in turbulent times who need self-development and empowerment tools to ensure that their voices are heard. This project was then complemented by the development of the Phone Listening Service to ensure that no one must suffer in silence.
- **Christ the King Foodbank:** MEND's Leicester volunteers joined the Leicester East COVID Support Community Group created by Claudia Webbe and other community initiatives responding to the local needs of the community. Through their community contacts and links, our volunteers identified a key opportunity to support Christ the King food bank in Beaumont Leys. MEND's Leicester working group members organised a refrigerated van and, with the support from local businesses, organised four-weeks' worth of frozen food for delivery to those in need.
- **Midlands Langar Seva (PPE):** As the UK began to experience a shortage of PPE equipment, MEND's volunteers and local community members mobilised to support NHS workers and grassroots organisations to continue to provide essential support to those vulnerable within communities. As one example, a MEND volunteer kindly donated PPE masks and gloves to be distributed across Leicestershire's community groups and organisations in need during the crisis. One of the receivers of the PPE masks was Midlands Langar Seva, who were extremely appreciative of the support provided by the team as it ensured that their foodbank services were able to continue to support those who are vulnerable and in need during these difficult times.
- **The Period Poverty Project:** MEND's Manchester working partner up with The Period Poverty Project. The project was set up by Ghazala Tehseen, a 4th-year medical student, and works to address a lack of access to menstrual products for women and girls, especially within the Muslim community. Before the pandemic, the project ran a service where they delivered sanitary products to organisations and individuals. Within the confines of the pandemic, the team shifted to providing supplies to local organisations, community hubs, and food banks. MEND donated to the cause and supported them in purchasing supplies. Through this work, more than 1000 products were distributed to those who needed it.
- **Homeless Aid UK:** Homeless Aid UK, based in Bolton, have around 300 volunteers across the North West. COVID-19 has exacerbated many issues that Homeless Aid UK have been dealing with, and to support the excellent work, MEND donated to their

cause. The money was used to distribute hampers to the most vulnerable in Bolton and to provide meals for 600 to 700 homeless people each week.

- **Headbands for the NHS staff** After seeing photos of NHS workers with painful bruises behind their ears from wearing surgical masks for long hours due to the COVID-19 pandemic, MEND volunteers, and their children decided to buy headbands and sew colourful buttons on them. These buttons helped to hook the surgical masks' straps instead of hooking them behind the ears to prevent bruises. The children also made "Thank You" cards which were distributed with the colourful buttoned headbands to the NHS staff, working at the intensive care unit (ICU) of Heath Hospital in Cardiff.
- **Glasgow Muslim Aid:** Glasgow Muslim Aid set up food distribution throughout the month of Ramadan when they provided over 200 hot meals per night to asylum seekers, needy individuals, and those in need. The initiative was self-funded by the organisers, friends, family, the wider community, and MEND, who donated £500 from their action aid fund. MEND's team in Scotland also organised a delivery scheme with seven drivers working on a rota system to deliver over 100 hot meals and other donated items every other night throughout Ramadan.

Beyond the work of MEND, there are also countless examples of other Muslim organisations and community leaders who have also been tirelessly working to support their local communities. As but a handful of examples:

- **Umran Amin:** Umran Amin is the Scottish lead for the international charity, *Penny Appeal*, who usually spends his time providing aid in Syrian and Lebanese refugee camps. However, as coronavirus drew closer to home, Umran and his team partnered with *Viral Kindness Scotland*, set up by Anas Sarwar SMP, to help the parents of children with cancer at Glasgow's Queen Elizabeth University Hospital and Gartnavel General Hospital. His team have been handing out packages of food and toiletries to families in need.¹¹
- **Mosque Kitchen:** Throughout lockdown, Mosque Kitchen in Edinburgh has continued its regular service by providing free meals to homeless and vulnerable individuals across the city.
- **Omar Afzal:** Postmaster Omar Afzal is a frontline worker who has been working to ensure a continued Post Office service by engaging with media, government, and national stakeholders to represent the needs of communities throughout the pandemic.
- **Loft 25:** In Birmingham, a volunteering group led by Zhagum Arshad, CEO of *Loft 25*, which usually produces soft furnishings, teamed up with Green Lane Masjid for an NHS PPE campaign. By July they had delivered around 2000 pieces of PPE to various hospitals in the region. They have been sharing their model as an example of best practice at both a national and international level. See examples of their fantastic work [here](#)
- **Shabbir Khalifa:** Across the country, Muslim individuals and groups have been working together to deliver food and necessities to those in need. A teacher at Masjid Umar in Leicester, Shabbir Khalifa, has been working with the local community to gather donations and deliver food parcels to a local health centre.

¹¹ Warrander, Ruth. 2020. "Scots Charity Worker Delivers Care Packages To Parents Of Cancer-Stricken Kids". *The Scottish Sun*. <https://www.thescottishsun.co.uk/news/5509777/coronavirus-scotland-charity-worker-nhs-deliveries/>

- **Aadil Mitha:** Aadil Mitha, a community pharmacist of Knights Ecton Brook Pharmacy in Northampton, has ensured the continued care and medicine reviews at a local care home after doctor visits were stopped. His support to the residents has been life-changing and ensured that the care home was able to provide care to its residents throughout lockdown.
- **Purpose of Life:** For over five years, Purpose of Life has been working as a children's charity to provide aid overseas. During the current coronavirus crisis, *Purpose of Life* has been working tirelessly in Kirklees to support the homeless and vulnerable. Saj Hussain and his team have been offering food parcel deliveries and coronavirus information for those who are in self-isolation. For more details on their work and how you can support, visit [here](#).
- **AskDoc:** For over five years, *AskDoc* is a Greater Manchester voluntary organisation of healthcare professionals which aims to engage, educate, and empower the local BAME population on health. They have produced resources, with videos in different languages, which advice on how to best to cope with COVID-19 and stay safe. Languages include Arabic, Kurdish, Sorani, Farsi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, French, Polish, and countless more. Their videos have been viewed hundreds of time and can be accessed [here](#).
- **The Myriad Foundation:** The Myriad Foundation (www.myriadfoundation.org) is a Greater Manchester-based volunteer organisation founded in 2013. Historically their work has included the "Soup n Smiles" mobile soup kitchen project for the homeless, and a "my social buddy" project offering support to local hospices and care homes. During the current crisis, their volunteers have been delivering food parcels to elderly and vulnerable, those in financial hardship, and those in self-isolation across Manchester.
- **Masjid Ghosia:** Masjid Ghosia in Bolton has been turned into a Nightingale Hospital under the direction of Dr Mohammad Jiva, MBE, who with colleagues created a temporary hospice in the mosque to relieve pressure on local NHS hospitals.
- **BECA Masjid:** Despite fasting throughout the month of Ramadan, Muslims continued to make valuable contributions to the frontline of the NHS,¹² and volunteering in national efforts to help the vulnerable in their communities at this precarious time.¹³ Ahmed Tajansie is one such individual who led volunteers at BECA masjid in Peckham to cook and distribute iftar meals to NHS staff, as well as those who are vulnerable and isolating in the community.
- **Imam Safeer Khan:** Following Imam Safeer Khan, members of the Muslim community in Kent have been organising to provide support to the elderly who are self-isolating.
- **Muslim Hands:** The Muslim Hands open kitchen in Hounslow has been providing hundreds of hot and nutritious takeaway meals to low-income families and the homeless, as well as providing a warm and welcoming space to those in need.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic were you aware of a faith organisation or religious community having made a positive contribution to your neighbourhood?

While the current pandemic has highlighted the unenviable work of faith organisations and religious communities across the country, this work is but a continuation of a longstanding history of social interventions from faith communities in efforts to improve the lives and

¹² "Covid-19 And Minorities - Muslim Engagement And Development". 2020. *Muslim Engagement And Development*. <https://www.mend.org.uk/covid-19-and-minorities/>.

¹³ Nazeer, Tasnim. 2020. "UK Muslims Are Stepping In To Help Amid The Coronavirus Crisis". *Aljazeera.Com*. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/uk-muslims-stepping-coronavirus-crisis-200413122704311.html?utm_source=website&utm_medium=article_page&utm_campaign=read_more_links.

opportunities of those around them. Indeed, for Muslims and those of many faiths, service to humanity and social responsibility are central tenets of their religion and their identity. These innumerable contributions shape the society in which we live.

In addition to the examples given in the previous question (many of which are continuations and adaptations of initiatives that were already thriving within their local communities), mosques, in particular, are epicentres for community well-being and service to society:

- **Mosque food banks:** Mosques, the primary place of worship for Muslims, serve numerous functions within their local neighbourhoods beyond just providing a prayer facility. In reality, they often perform a vital community centre function which frequently encompasses employment and educative initiatives, charity work, and support services. One example is that of numerous mosques which host food banks to help alleviate rising food poverty. A few examples of mosques that have introduced such measures include the East London Mosque & London Muslim Centre,¹⁴ Birmingham Central Mosque,¹⁵ and Didsbury Mosque.¹⁶
- **Green initiatives** Despite often being characterised in socio-political discourse as an isolated and segregated community, Muslim communities continue to undertake initiatives that benefit wider society and the global community, including by advocating for pro-environmental campaigns. This has included pushing for initiatives that seek to encourage community members to utilise reusable materials (East London Mosque promotes the use of reusable shoe bags for entering the mosque),¹⁷ initiatives that restrict or ban the use of plastic in mosques (Green Lane Masjid in Birmingham in 2019 prohibited the use of plastic bottles).¹⁸ Strategies to make mosques sustainable buildings (the Cambridge Mosque is an eco-mosque built from sustainable materials and has various measures to limit energy expenditure relying on re-useable sources of energy).¹⁹
- **Homeless:** The rate of homelessness has been consistently rising in the UK with public support mechanisms being minimised and increasing economic pressure having a compounding effect. Against this backdrop, various mosques have provided a crucial support mechanism for the most vulnerable in our society, providing free shelter and support. Indeed, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims has noted the immense contribution that British Muslim charities have made towards alleviating homelessness.²⁰ An example of such a project is the Winter Freeze Project that was introduced by the Green Lane Masjid in Birmingham which opened their doors to the homeless in early 2019 when temperatures dropped below freezing.²¹ In 2017, Muslim organisations assisted over 300,000 people by distribution meals, drinks, winter packs and over £350,000 in donations.²² Sufra Northwest London, for example, has utilised a community kitchen whilst investing over £100,000 to provide emergency food.²³ Similarly, the InTouch Foundation, set up by Osman Gondal, has distributed over 200,000 meals since its inception in Bradford.²⁴ Likewise, last winter, mosques in Greater Manchester and Stoke on Trent opened their doors and invited in rough sleepers away from freezing temperatures, often with the help of taxi drivers dropping off those in need of shelter.²⁵

¹⁴ "East London Mosque Provides Hot Meals To Royal London Hospital". 2021. *East London Mosque*. <https://www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk/news/royal-london-hot-meals-jan2021>.
¹⁵ McKernan, Bethan. 2016. "This Mosque In Birmingham Has Set Up A Permanent Food Bank To Help". *Indy100.Com*. <https://www.indy100.com/news/this-mosque-in-birmingham-has-set-up-a-permanent-food-bank-to-help-the-city-s-homeless-7304956>.

¹⁶ "DIDSBRURY MOSQUE'S FOOD BANK : Manchester Islamic Centre". 2019. *Didsburymosque.Com*. <https://didsburymosque.com/didsbury-mosques-food-bank/>.

¹⁷ "The Muslims Are... Going Green - Muslim Engagement And Development". 2019. *Muslim Engagement And Development*. <https://www.mend.org.uk/muslims-going-green/>.

¹⁸ "Press Release: GLMCC Is Going GREEN This Ramadan! - Green Lane Masjid". 2019. *Greenlanemasjid.Org*. <https://www.greenlanemasjid.org/glmcc-is-going-green-this-ramadan/>.

¹⁹ "Europe's First Eco-Mosque Opens In Cambridge". 2019. *Ecohustler*. <https://ecohustler.com/technology/europes-first-eco-mosque-opens-in-cambridge/>.

²⁰ APPG on British Muslims. 2017. "Faith As The Fourth Emergency Service British Muslim Charitable Contributions To The UK". APPG on British Muslims. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cfffdd8a9/t/5ae09b288a922d758d2cd414/1524669250245/+Faith+as+the+Fourth+Emergency+Service+V3+Print.pdf>.

²¹ "Homeless Outreach - Green Lane Masjid". 2020. *Greenlanemasjid.Org*. <https://www.greenlanemasjid.org/welfare-services/homeless-outreach/>.

²² "How Mosques Are Helping Birmingham's Homeless - Muslim Engagement And Development". 2019. *Muslim Engagement And Development*. <https://www.mend.org.uk/mosques-helping-birminghams-homeless/>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Do you feel Government engages meaningfully with people of faith?

In comparison to the adverse socio-political developments in other neighbouring countries such as France, the UK has historically stood as an example of where a secular democracy can thrive not by dismissing, removing, or eliminating the idea of religion or faith in the public psyche, but rather by promoting a multicultural approach to diversity and by providing a space where all communities of faith or no faith can thrive in unity.

However, that is not to say that the approach taken by the UK is beyond reproach. Indeed, the UK's history of appalling treatment of minority communities is an issue in urgent need of recognition and redress. Indeed, the Government of the day (and previous governments) have routinely fostered negative sentiments against minority communities, with Muslim communities currently under particular heavy-handed treatment and scrutiny that often serves to disenfranchise Muslim communities from meaningful political engagement.

There are many ways that structural and institutional Islamophobias create barriers for Muslims in terms of their socio-political and economic engagement on an equal footing with their non-Muslim counterparts. At the heart of Islamophobic rhetoric, what we see is a concerted effort to regulate, exclude, and marginalise Muslims within civil society and political life. Indeed, Muslim organisations have been progressively isolated and excluded from the realm of legitimate political discussion, as highlighted by the Government's current policy of non-engagement with organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain and MEND. In terms of direct and meaningful engagement with the Government, the current approach of the Government thus reduces any prospect of engagement to superficial acquiescence to their existing policy agenda.

Rather than engaging with a broad spectrum of Muslim organisations and voices, the Government has traditionally insisted in dealing with a handpicked minority who already support their policy positions, particularly on issues such as counter-terrorism, media regulation and Palestine. Consequently, think-tanks and NGOs which do not possess the confidence of British Muslims have exercised considerable influence in shaping public policies, thus resulting in widespread feelings of alienation and frustration amongst Muslim communities. As recommended by the 2017 Citizens UK report entitled "Missing Muslims",²⁶ it is of pressing urgency that the Government reassesses its engagement with Muslim communities and seeks to mend the "broken relationship" by taking steps to end this impasse. The Government must, therefore, urgently reconsider its policy of disengagement with credible mainstream Muslim organisations that have the trust and support of British Muslim communities. Engagement does not mean agreement on every issue but facilitating the exchange of ideas and perspectives is an integral component of a democratic society. Failure to adopt an inclusive approach and engage with a broad spectrum of Muslim voices inherently leads to privileging certain perceptions and voices that are not reflective of mainstream Muslim experiences. Thus, leaving policymakers ill-equipped to address the concerns and genuine experiences of British Muslims.

Examples of how the Government has neglected consideration for the experiences of Muslim communities can be found in its remarkably reluctant approach to addressing Islamophobia within the Conservative Party (as will be discussed further below) and its approach to the definition of Islamophobia.

Defining Islamophobia is crucial as it will provide much-needed clarity in legislation and policies that are intended to protect vulnerable minorities. As duly observed by Gottschalk and Greenberg, "movements against discrimination do not begin until a commonly understood label evolves that brings together under one banner all forms of that particular prejudice". Once established, terms such as sexism, homophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism became essential tools to oppose and tackle the various discriminations and prejudices these

²⁶ *The Missing Muslims: Unlocking British Muslim Potential For The Benefit Of All*, p46.

labels embody; prejudices and discriminations which at one time were considered normal and thus remained unchallenged. Defining Islamophobia is also an act of recognition. For British Muslims, it demonstrates that the Government recognises the hardships they face as undeniable facts in need of address. Furthermore, it reassures Muslim communities that these hardships can, and will, be tackled in a critical and dedicated manner.

However, when presented with a definition of Islamophobia produced by the APPG for British Muslims through a public consultation process and widely accepted by Muslim communities, the Government not only rejected the definition but appears to have no appetite to provide an alternative direction for this work. Such an approach only serves to disenfranchise an already marginalised community further and delays effective measures to tackle Islamophobia being introduced.

How could the Charity Commission do more to support registered faith charities?

The Charity Commission holds a crucial role in the UK in being able to scrutinise and regulate the activities of registered charities, ensuring in particular that donations are being utilised for the advertised aim and the function of the charity is beneficial more widely. The Commission has been criticised over the years, however, because it reinforced structural Islamophobia. In particular, the function of the Commission under the leadership of Shawcross has left the Muslim communities being disproportionately targeted.

Shawcross' undisguised Islamophobia is best demonstrated during his tenure as a former director and trustee of the neoconservative and Islamophobic think tank Henry Jackson Society (HJS).²⁷ HJS itself is renowned for its anti-Muslim agenda, with even one of its founders, Matthew Jamison, describing it as a "far-right, deeply anti-Muslim racist organisation", "corrupt", "undemocratic", a "monstrous animal", and "a propaganda outfit to smear other cultures, religions and ethnic groups".²⁸

In 2012, whilst director of HJS, Shawcross asserted: "Europe and Islam is one of the greatest, most terrifying problems of our future. I think all European countries have vastly, very quickly growing Islamic populations";²⁹ a comment, reminiscent of broader narratives that seek to justify the War on Terror by reducing complex discussions on immigration, terrorism and multiculturalism to reductive binaries of the threat of Islam to Western civilisation. This style of rhetoric has increasingly informed HJS's focus on Muslim communities which propagates and propagandises misguided fears of an "Islamist threat" to curb the civil liberties and socio-political interests of Muslim communities. Shawcross' alliance with HJS and right-wing conception of extremism rooted in Islamophobia has only served to undermine the credibility of the Commission.

A report that revealed the Charity Commissions' anti-Muslim bias in its disproportionate scrutiny of Muslim charities during Shawcross' leadership found that 38% of Charity Commission cases related to Muslim charities.³⁰ Fifty-five of them were loosely classified under "extremism and radicalisation" labels, which had no written criteria and were devoid of evidentiary basis, seemingly used merely as a vehicle for expanding the remit of surveillance over Muslim charities.³¹ Despite Islamic extremism posing the "most deadly" threat to charities as Shawcross warned, of 13 inquiry reports concluded between 2014 and 2016, only one related to Islamic extremism.³² However, the Charity Commission's approach extended to over-extended scrutiny of Muslim grassroots organisations and charities as fronts for extremism and hampering the invaluable work of charities which has led to the

²⁷ "Government Announcement Damages Any Hope Of A Meaningful Independent Review Of PREVENT - Muslim Engagement And Development". 2021. *Muslim Engagement And Development*. <https://www.mend.org.uk/government-announcement-damages-any-hope-of-a-meaningful-independent-review-of-prevent/>.

²⁸ Jamison, Matthew. 2017. "Brendan Simms And The Racist Corrupt Henry Jackson Society". *LinkedIn.Com*. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/brendan-simms-racist-corrupt-henry-jackson-society-matthew>.

²⁹ "Government Announcement Damages Any Hope Of A Meaningful Independent Review Of PREVENT - Muslim Engagement And Development". 2021. *Muslim Engagement And Development*. <https://www.mend.org.uk/government-announcement-damages-any-hope-of-a-meaningful-independent-review-of-prevent/>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

Commission losing significant legal challenges against organisations such as CAGE³³ and Human Aid UK.³⁴

At the same time, many Muslim communities refer to Shawcross' leadership and point to confusion as to why his former organisation, HJS, is allowed to retain its charitable status, despite its clear and vitriolic political campaigning and lobbying against Muslim communities amongst political and policy circles – activities that seemingly lie in violation of restrictions placed on charities with regards to political lobbying. For many, this double standard sends a message that the Commission is but another organ of anti-Muslim machinations that serves to control the legitimate activities of Muslim organisations. It will thus take considerable meaningful engagement to restore the faith of Muslim communities in the Commission itself.

Have you ever felt that your freedom to express your faith, religion or belief was under threat?

For many Muslims, the PREVENT strategy is a constant regulating force on how they can express and practice their religious identities. While the flaws in the strategy are numerous and far too extensive to discuss here, particular attention needs to be paid to the culminating impact of its lack of definitions and inadequate training.

Amongst the vast array of critical failings within the PREVENT strategy is a lack of viable definitions. At present, the Government has no clear working definition of 'extremism', 'non-violent extremism', 'British Values', nor 'radicalisation'. With hundreds of thousands of staff having already been trained through the Workshop to Raise Awareness of PREVENT (WRAP-training), these practitioners are attempting to identify 'radicalisation' to tackle 'extremism' without appropriate guidance as to what it is that they are identifying. This lack of definitions leaves public sector workers in a position to determine risk based on personal understandings, stereotypes, and biases. This is further exacerbated by an inherent inadequacy in training that has been noted by the Home Affairs Committee³⁵ (PREVENT trained public sector workers may often receive only 45-60mins of online training to identify signs of radicalisation), which leaves practitioners drawing their understandings from popular culture rather than official training or evidence-based research.³⁶ This has led to a situation where every day normative practices of the Islamic faith (for example, wearing the hijab or going on Hajj), cultural practices (watching an Arabic news channel),³⁷ or taking an interest in politics (criticising foreign policy) can be seen as a sign of being drawn to political violence. Indeed, looking at the NHS specifically, research conducted by Warwick University has found that 70% of the respondents "were 'likely', or 'very likely'" to refer someone for the "possession of Islamic/Anarchist philosophy books". This is important as the PREVENT training programme does not indicate this as a factor indicative of radicalisation. Still, it is reflective of the structurally Islamophobic nature of the current PREVENT strategy. The authors of the research, in line with the overarching concerns surrounding the PREVENT duty, conclude that "respondents are drawing their attitude from popular culture rather than official training or academic research".³⁸

Considering the infiltration of the PREVENT duty into every public service from schools to healthcare, libraries, councils, and universities, it creates an environment in which Muslims often consider their very identity as a Muslim to place them at risk from being swept up in the apparatus of counter-terror. While many continue to display their religious identity with pride, it is understandable that people feel compelled to hide or abandon parts of their identity to avoid the consequences of an unwarranted referral to PREVENT.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ House of Commons, "Radicalisation: the counter-narrative and identifying the tipping point – Eighth report of Session 2016-17", August 25, 2016, accessed June 20, 2018, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/135/135.pdf>

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Charlotte Heath-Kelly and Erzsébet Strausz "Counter-terrorism in the NHS: EVALUATING PREVENT DUTY SAFEGUARDING IN THE NHS", accessed 29.05.2018, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/researchcentres/irs/counterterrorisminthenshs/project_report_draft_60pp.pdf

³⁸ Ibid

Do you feel confident that elected members in public office (MPs, Ministers, Local Councillors), have a good understanding of different faith, faith practices and issues concerning people of faith?

Whilst there are numerous examples of elected members in public offices respecting and engaging with faith communities, there are also examples of where elected officials have expressed concerning views which have fostered and reinforced Islamophobic sentiment. Public figures must show greater maturity and responsibility when discussing issues involving minority communities and take care not to cause hysteria for the sake of political popularity and agendas. If political leaders do not take meaningful steps towards eliminating hate within their own parties, they cannot hope to inspire tolerance and understanding across society. MEND hopes that all political parties will take a renewed stance on tackling prejudice in all its forms.

With political parties and representatives continuing to tolerate, support, or propagate inflammatory language and simultaneously failing to tackle prejudice within their ranks, minority communities are at risk of being pushed to fringe parties and narratives, or else disengaging from the political apparatus altogether. Moreover, when these types of divisive narratives are propagated, maintained, or left unchallenged by the ruling party, such discourse becomes representative of the ethos of the state. Therefore, marginalised communities become disenfranchised, not just from political life, but also from social, civic, and economic life through the perceived acceptability of discriminatory practices, institutionalised racisms, and structural exclusions.

Islamophobia is seemingly prolific across both major political parties in Westminster, not only amongst members but also across the most senior levels, including the Cabinet. In 2019, MEND published its report³⁹ *From 'Letterboxes' to 'Ragheads'* in which we detailed over 100 cases of Islamophobia emanating from Conservative Cabinet members, MPs, councillors and candidates. Far from highlighting a small population of traditional 'keyboard warriors' the report demonstrates that Islamophobia is endemic and is being fuelled on online platforms and in public statements even by some of the most senior members of our Government.

However, the Conservative Party is not unique in this respect. A recently leaked internal Labour Party report⁴⁰ appears to have revealed a disturbing past of Islamophobia and inaction within the party. The report shows former senior members of the party supporting Islamophobic views and discussing delaying investigations. Meanwhile, it provides evidence of inconsistent approaches to punitive measures and the purposeful mishandling of complaints as a result of "factionalism" within the party. Moreover, the Labour Muslim Network has also recently released a report having researched the experiences of Islamophobia amongst Muslim Labour members, revealing entrenched problems with how the party approaches and deals with Islamophobia within the party.⁴¹

In your opinion, how could Government and Public servants improve on their faith literacy?

Religious literacy is approaching the issues which affect religious minorities with nuanced understandings. This is more than acknowledging theological doctrine and practice, but rather extends to having an appreciation for the social, political, economic, historical and cultural forces that shape the experiences of religious groups. This also entails avoiding ethnocentric determinations as an 'objective' and 'universal' reality without consultation with those whom the issue directly affects (for example, applying western notions of acceptable dress to Muslim women who choose to wear hijab). As explained by Diane L. Moore, Director of the Religious Project at Harvard University, religious literacy involves "understanding

³⁹ Muslim Engagement and Development. 2019. "From 'Letterboxes' To 'Ragheads'". Muslim Engagement and Development. <https://www.mend.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Islamophobia-in-the-Conservative-Party-MEND.pdf>.

⁴⁰ "Leaked Labour Party Report Reveals Islamophobia And Inaction Within The Party - Muslim Engagement And Development". 2020. *Muslim Engagement And Development*.

<https://www.mend.org.uk/leaked-labour-party-report-reveals-islamophobia-and-inaction-within-the-party/>.

⁴¹ "Islamophobia And The Muslim Experience: The Labour Party Report". 2020. *Labourmuslims.Org*. <https://www.labourmuslims.org/research>.

religions and religious influences in context and as inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience.” A lack of religious literacy serves to sow Islamophobia, xenophobia, and racism into the milieu of British society through spreading prejudice and stereotypes of minority communities, and Muslims in particular. At the same time, it creates an environment wherein religious minorities feel excluded from public debate and representation. Such a situation is highly detrimental to community cohesion and the subsequent ability of religious minorities to participate and engage as equal members of society fully.

As such, there is an urgent need for the Government, political representatives and public servants to move away from a conceptualisation of religious literacy purely as an understanding of religious practice, theology, and dogma. This is especially true when it comes to understanding Muslim communities as when viewed through this lens there is a tendency to assume hegemony across Muslim communities in terms of experiences, values, ideals, and political interests. In reality, British Muslims are incredibly diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, and language. Two-thirds of UK Muslims are of Asian ethnicity, with 10% being of Black ethnicity and 7% being of Arab ethnicity, while white British Muslims comprise 3% of the UK Muslim total.⁴² Beyond English and Welsh, the range of languages spoken by British Muslims is also vast, including but not limited to, Arabic, Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati, Turkish, Somali, Kurdish, and Pashto.

Moreover, British Muslims are hugely diverse in their ideologies, beliefs, and practices. While the majority of Muslims in the UK follow Sunni schools of thought, an estimated 1 in 10 classify as Shia.⁴³ Considering this vast diversity, it is rare to find unchallenged consensus amongst British Muslim communities on any topic. As such, any issue involving British Muslims must take into account a broad spectrum of perspectives that encompass this diversity of experiences, values, identities, beliefs, and practices.

Consequently, the first step in approaching this broad spectrum of voices is to dismantle the Government’s aforementioned policy of disengagement with grassroots Muslim organisations and focus on genuine efforts to engage communities in democratic dialogue, regardless of any discomfort caused by opposing political perspectives. There is also a need to enlist the support of these grassroots and credible organisations, such as MEND, in developing and implementing Islamophobia awareness training across the public and Government sectors. It is through such training that individual public servants may approach a more nuanced understanding of the communities that they seek to serve.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ "The Diverse Origins of Britain's Muslims." BBC, January 18 2016, accessed 05.09.2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-33715473>

How MEND can assist parliamentarians, policymakers, and community stakeholders

- Providing briefings, information, analysis, and expertise on issues impacting Muslim communities.
- Arranging opportunities for parliamentarians, policymakers, and community stakeholders to engage with their local Muslim communities.
- Conducting research within Muslim communities.
- Connecting parliamentarians, policymakers, and community stakeholders to other local stakeholders.

If MEND can be of any assistance to your work, please feel free to contact info@mend.org.uk