

2022 Annual Roundtable Report on

Muslim Heritage Children in Care

Supporting Identity and Wellbeing

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This paper was written by Mariam Akhtar and was informed by a My Family Group roundtable event hosted by Shaqib Juneja on 27th April 2022.

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COVER PHOTO: Muslim girl with scarf. Photo credit: Zurijeta - Freepik.com 2022



Foreward

Support, affirmation, care. These are things many of us take for granted in our everyday lives. They are all ingredients of a happy, healthy and stable home which are sadly missing in the lived experiences of many children in care.

My work with My Family Group comes from a place of my own personal experience and understanding – having experienced being in foster placement as well becoming a foster carer myself, I have a unique insight into the care system. It is because of this very personal experience I know the work My Family Group do is a much needed remedy to the many ills of a social care system which is sadly not quite where it needs to be for the children it serves.

Muslim heritage children in care, tragically, often face added disadvantages due to race, religion, class and cultural background.

This means those vital ingredients of a healthy upbringing are that much further out of reach. This needn't be the case. Muslim heritage children in care should benefit from the many social, spiritual and cultural benefits of faith which is theirs by right and this begins by acknowledging and supporting their faith background and destigmatising their identity and experience.

We want everyone reading this report to join us on this journey of providing effective support, care and transformational change for our children and young people. We hope that you will help to bring the spirit of our Roundtable event and this subsequent report alive; by taking these recommendations forward, by bringing them to the care sector, your family dinner table, your mosques and community spaces. We hope they will shape conversations and spur action.

We truly hope they will be the beginning of change for Muslim heritage children in care, to bring them into their rightful cultural home within a community which understands and sees them, to secure better placements and futures and ultimately, a better experience of our care system that all children in care deserve.

A better future is possible and is in our hands as a faith community and a body of professionals with such a special duty of care. I do hope we can share this journey of change together.



Naz Shah MP for Bradford West, Shadow Minister (Home Office)



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Executive Summary

On Wednesday 27th April, My Family Group and stakeholders from a variety of sectors came together for The 2022 Annual Roundtable on Muslim-Heritage Children in Care, in the interest of supporting the identity and well-being, and securing equitable outcomes – happy, secure and prosperous lives – for Muslim-heritage children in care.

Several themes emerged from the roundtable event ranging from the Islamic imperative to look after children in care, the demographic changes in the care sector which have brought us to where we are now

and our role as a community in nurturing the identity and well-being for these children. Also discussed was the diversity of Muslim-heritage children in care, the need for mental health services and what we can do to better the experience of children in care today.

The unfortunate reality is that children of Muslim-heritage are often at a greater disadvantage in the care sector and so the roundtable concluded with a call to action for Muslims, the care sector and organisations to facilitate institutional change to secure better outcomes for Muslim-heritage children in care.

What can you do to make this happen?

I am a member of the care sector, and I can:

- actively seek truly transformative anti-racism, cultural competency and faith-sensitive training from the ground up
- implement uniform systems to capture faith data
- provide better faith-sensitive support for carers of Muslim-heritage children in care
- work with Muslim organisations and communities to create regular reflective practice groups
- for senior, policy making members of the sector to instigate, support and incorporate these measures strategically throughout the sector

I am a national Muslim organisation, and I can:

- actively support the care sector in plugging the gaps in knowledge and service to ensure an anti-racist care system
- reach out to Muslim Mind Collaborative and the Markfield Institute of Higher Education to scope the potential to learn and contribute to local council and organisations in the sector on mental health and pastoral care training

I am a member of the Muslim community, and I can:

- reach out to the British Board of Scholars and Imams and the Muslim Council of Britain for Islamic and community resources
- tap into support and momentum of campaigns from My Foster Family and My Adoption Family such as You Can Adopt, to educate, increase uptake and raise the profile of fostering and adoption within the Muslim community
- ensure my local Imam is familiar with the work of My Family Group and the role of fostering and adoption in British Muslim life
- help to drive change on a local level by working directly with carers and Muslim-heritage children in care to support and nurture them
- get the conversation started: raise the topic within informal discussions with fellow community members

Introduction



There is a growing, and increasingly urgent, need for the Muslim community and colleagues in the care sector to come together to ensure Muslim-heritage children in care are given the kind of specialist support and opportunities to lead whole, happy and productive lives as they navigate through and beyond the British care system.

Support and care that recognises the broad diversity of Muslim children and young people, their backgrounds, circumstances and faith approaches, and the unique role the Muslim community and culture plays in nurturing the child and adolescent.

With this imperative in mind, My Family Group hosted a key round table event with colleagues from across the sector, to build upon our progressive work in this area, and grapple with issues facing children and young people of Muslim-heritage in care. We met to share learning, experience and ideas to build upon and move this crucial work forward.

The objectives of this year's roundtable were to focus on how best to support identity and well-being of Muslim-heritage children, and to create tangible plans to make this happen – a driving force behind My Family Group's work.

Our report focuses on seven themes that emerged from the roundtable event – the Islamic imperative to look after children in care, the demographic changes in the care sector which have brought us to where we are now, our role as a community in nurturing identity, the diversity of Muslim-heritage children in care, mental health of service users, the experience of the child in care today, and what we can do to change this.

We hope this report will help to disseminate learning from this dynamic event, and, crucially, we hope it inspires further action to meet the needs of Muslim-heritage children in care.

Shaqib Juneja
Head of Operations
My Family Group



About My Family Group

My Family Group is a collective of initiatives designed to improve the lives of children in care. We work to ensure every child who comes into care secures a loving and nurturing home that meets their needs, strengthens their identity and prepares them for adult life.

We do this by raising awareness and influencing policy around fostering and adoption, supporting the recruitment of diverse foster carers and adopters and promoting a positive sense of identity that ensures better outcomes for care experienced people

Incepted in 2017, My Family Group has grown and evolved to include:

The Muslim Fostering Network – A bespoke, faith sensitive fostering recruitment service and support network for Muslim foster carers. The Muslim Fostering Network provides essential educational resources and training for foster carers in cross cultural placements with Muslim children.

My Foster Family – A recruitment, training and outreach service dedicated to working with fostering services to help inspire individuals from diverse communities to become foster carers.

My Adoption Family – A recruitment, training and outreach service for adoption agencies focusing on engagement with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and faith communities, as well as a support network for adopters from diverse backgrounds. A member of the National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group (NARSG).

Arise Refugees – A mentoring, education and sports programme dedicated to supporting unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children (UASCs) and refugee young people. The programme aims to provide stability and build aspirations for children and young people who lack strong social networks and access to their community.



Looking after children in care in Islam: The Islamic obligation to care



While there is a clear and unequivocal acknowledgement within the British Muslim community of our religious obligations towards Muslim children who no longer have the support of their family structure, there is much confusion, and a lack of religious literacy, regarding what shape this support should take when considering modern day institutions and structures which govern fostering and adoption.

The communal nature of Islamic jurisprudence binds us as individual believers and as a faith community. The imperative to harness this to support children in the sector, as well as to ensure Muslim-heritage children are not left out of their communal life was an emergent theme throughout the event.

The tradition of adopting and fostering in the Muslim community goes back to the Prophet (SAW) and is therefore an integral part of Islamic life. The Muslim duty of care towards vulnerable children and young people comes from the very construct of our faith community – as a wider family which forms a network of care around the individual. Nowhere is this more necessary than the care of vulnerable children without

family support. Scholars have explained that children in the care sector may fall under the term ‘Yatim’. Several Islamic religious authorities conclude that according to Islamic law (fiqh), the care for yatim is a communal responsibility whereby a group within the Muslim community must fulfil this responsibility on behalf of the whole. This view has been deliberated upon and endorsed by The British Board of Scholars and Imams (BBSI) and other esteemed religious authorities in the UK.¹

Beyond the immediate care of the child by the host family, there is a wider ecosystem of support that the Muslim community must also fulfil as part of its religious obligation and social duty to fellow believers. The increasingly high rates of mental health related issues suffered by children in care is sobering, as is the trauma that these children face due to separation and other factors relating to their displacement. The support and wider safety network from a faith-sensitive care system and the Muslim community at large becomes both urgent and essential to help these young people maintain healthy happy lives into adulthood.

¹ The BBSI. (2017, March 18). Adoption and Foster Care, From Legal, Linguistic and Islamic Perspectives [Symposium Session]. The Islamic View on Adoption and Fostering, London, United Kingdom. Organised by the British Board of Scholars & Imams (BBSI).

Demography and changes: Where we are now

The latest research into the care sector suggests there are approximately 5,000 Muslim-heritage children in care. With a majority of these children from black and minority ethnic communities, we know these children also face the added disadvantage of having to wait longer to find permanent placements due to their ethnic background.

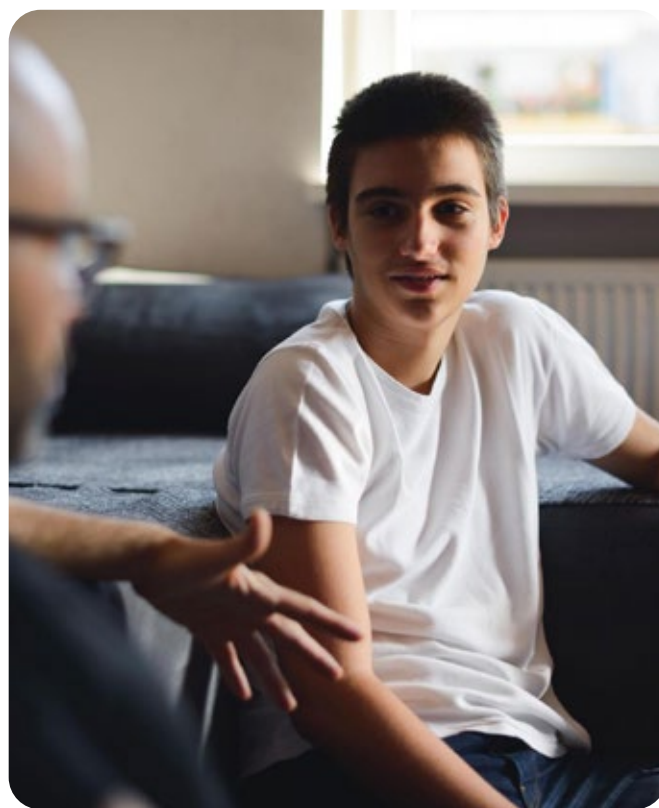
This includes unaccompanied asylum seeking children, a staggering **75-95%** of whom it is estimated come from a Muslim background. The latest research shows that more than half of all Muslim-heritage children in care spend time with non-Muslim families.²

What has compounded this issue is a dearth of Muslim carers in the sector. While the reasons for this are multifaceted and complex – faith communities are often perceived to be harder to reach due to a lack of understanding, literature and research, stigmatisation and a distrust of the system – the impact is unequivocally one of detriment to Muslim-heritage children. Children from Muslim backgrounds need to be supported to nurture their religious identity and heritage, and therefore be cared for and homed in placements which recognise and meet their ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic needs.

Furthermore, though there is limited evidence of how social workers engage with or understand Islam in particular or faith in general, in relation to children's and carers needs, we know that in the care sector, faith as a category is rarely recorded, and therefore not accounted for as a component part of that child's identity.³ This is despite the rightful importance faith holds in the Equalities Act 2010, where faith is rightfully defined as an equally protected characteristic. This gap between legal understanding and rights, and practice in the care sector, needs to be addressed. We also know that faith or cultural sensitivity support and training is not offered uniformly to carers and sector professionals and therefore faith-

sensitive care and consideration is not consistently available to Muslim-heritage children in the sector.

The cumulative impact of this means that children are not given the kind of holistic support they require to build whole and happy lives, secure in their faith identity. This is despite their already traumatic backgrounds, and the role we know faith plays in supporting them through that trauma.



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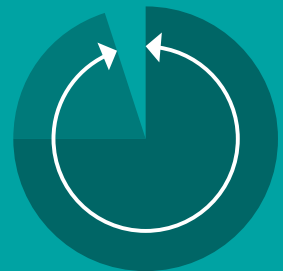
2 Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., De Sousa, S., Boti Phiri, M. and Halford, A. (2018) Among the last ones to leave?: Understanding the Journeys of Muslim Children in the Care System in England <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/globalassets/media/global/08-new-research-section/ctpsr/muslim-children-in-care---research-report.pdf>

3 Ibid



As a young and growing minority community, with **50%** of Muslims under the age of 25, it is crucial to provide all young Muslim children with the care and support they need.⁴ We see children prospering when they are given care, support and the opportunity to connect with their faith and cultural identity, and we see the converse to be true also that cycles of neglect, trauma and alienation perpetuate themselves. It is incumbent upon the Muslim community and colleagues in the sector to come together to secure a brighter future for these near **5,000** Muslim children who are dependent upon the care of their wider faith community.

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⁴ BBSI (2017) Muslim Council of Britain (2015) British Muslims in Numbers: A Demographic, Socio-economic and Health profile of Muslims in Britain drawing on the 2011 Census.

The experience of the child: Why we do what we do

There are an increasing number of Muslim children entering the care system, and a disproportionately low number of Muslim host families with which to place them. As religion and ethnicity are key markers of identity, we know that if children are placed outside of homes which understand, support and value their ethnic or religious identity, it can have a negative impact on their development.⁵

This is in addition to the trauma that children in care face, and the negative impact that an unsettled life in care can bring. Woefully, the outcomes of children in care are reflective of this disadvantage – while on average 47% of children attain eight GCSE, this figure drops to 13% for children in care.⁶ Tragically, they are six times more likely to be excluded⁷ and 41% of children in care are not in education, employment or training, compared to 12% of all 19 – 21 year olds.⁸ They are four times more likely to be in the youth justice system⁹ and almost one quarter of all prisoners have at some time been in care.¹⁰ Sadly, these disadvantages appear to be following children out of care and stealing from their adulthood.

For Muslim-heritage children in care who are facing the ordeal of being removed from their family, the additional barriers they face coming from a background of blanket disadvantage due to their ethnicity and religion is enough to further hamper their chances at the kind of successful adulthood they deserve. Faith matching placements are necessary to

provide the kind of pastoral care that can nurture their whole identity in a non-stigmatising way.

For these children, Islam is more than faith. As well as a set of values there are many cultural markers that inform children's impressions and connection to their faith, these include communal events and traditions. Islamic culture places a very special emphasis on the role of the community both in cultivating the child, and the moral, social and civic individual. Maintaining links to these cultural practices is crucial, as is the connection and social and moral capital gained from having access to a wider Muslim community. The Muslim community and professionals in the sector need to do more to protect and nurture these crucial ties.¹¹

41% of children in care are not in education, employment or training, compared to 12% of all 19–21 year olds.

1/4 of all prisoners have at some time been in care.

5 Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., Boti Phiri, M. and Halford, A. (2022) 'Identity, Intersectionality and Children in Care: The case of Muslim-heritage "looked-after" Children in the UK' in H Schmid/ A Sheikhzadegan (eds.), Exploring Islamic Social Work. Between Community and the Common Good Cham: Springer

6 Explore-Education-statistics.service.gov.uk. (n.d.). 'Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England, Reporting Year 2020'. [online]. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2020>

7 Ibid

8 Gov.uk (2021). 'Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting Year 2021'. [online] explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2021>

9 Experiences and pathways of children in care in the youth justice system, (2021) HM Inspectorate of Probation. (n.d.). [online] Available at: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2021/09/LL-Academic-Insights-v1.0-Day.pdf>

10 Berman, G. (2013). Berman 2013. [online] Source- Prison Population Statistics- UK Parliament (2013) [accessed 2022] Available at: http://www.antonioacasella.eu/nume/Berman_2013.pdf

11 Cheruvallil-Contractor, S.; Halford, A.; Phiri, M.B. (2022). The politics of Matching: Ethnicity, Religion and Muslim-heritage Children in Care in the UK. British Journal of Social Work



Nurturing Identity: Our purpose

Child placements are intended to provide vulnerable children with a necessary family structure, keeping them safe, providing daily routines of food, sleep, play, learning, hygiene and relationships. These alternative family settings help vulnerable children in the development of their identity.

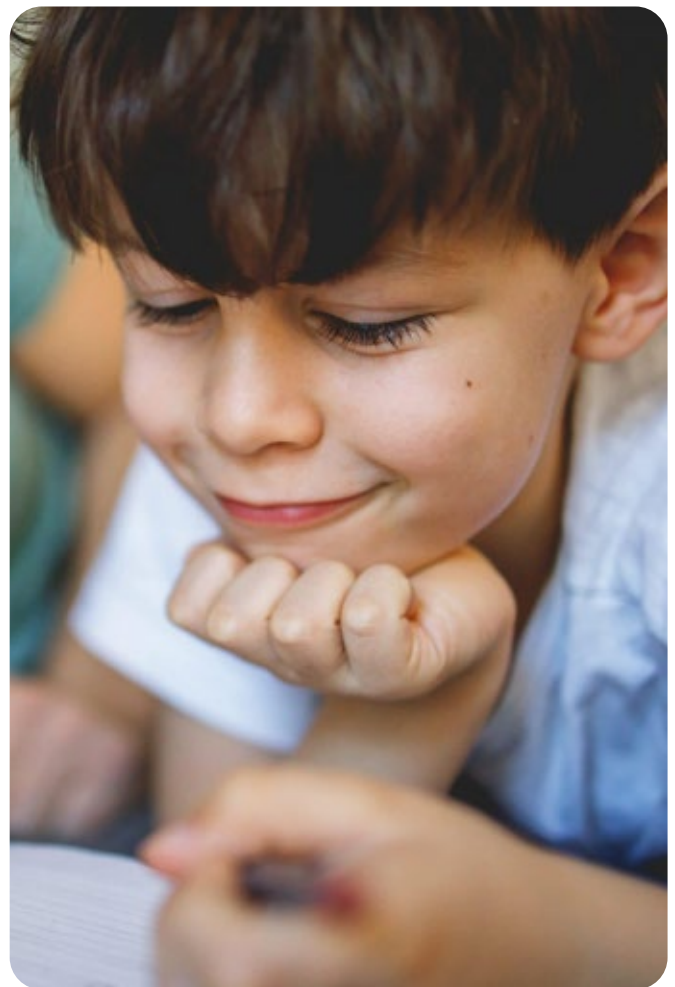
Children's notion of identity defines who they are, where they belong, who they are connected to, how others see them and how 'settled' they are. The factors that make up identity include nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion and language, and crucially how these factors intersect is also identity forming. These factors influence children's values, their beliefs - in themselves and the world they live in – their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. These are fundamental building blocks for young people's well-being. Parenting involves establishing a narrative which brings these key elements together. For children in the care system for whom this narrative is fragmented, it is crucial to ensure they are nurtured by family units and systems which repair that narrative and value every part of their emerging identity. Faith being a key component of this.¹²

Children in care inevitably face delays, isolation, alienation and instability. The additional complications faced by Muslim and black and minority ethnic children relates to their very identity and the racism they may face as a result. For children who have lost contact with their birth families and communities this is especially harrowing and can adversely impact their ability to form safe and lasting relationships, their educational outcomes, health and wellbeing, and ultimately their ability to contribute to society.

Most Muslim-heritage children are best placed in families which reflect their religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity. The nurturing and development of the Muslim identity of children in care is integral to their well-being. There are countless examples of the adverse impact it can have when professionals around

children in care have no understanding, a lack of training and value for the child's identity.

Children and young people's identity is both personal and social, it is relational and made up of a combination of interaction factors that emerge and develop over time. This begins early in life and continues into adulthood. The issues and consequences of foster caring are lifelong when it comes to these fundamental issues of our identity, and how others come to see us. The nurturing of faith identity is one of the key issues that the sector needs to explore, develop, train on and value. This is something we hope the Government will act upon following the recent review into the care system.



¹² Cheruvallil-Contractor, S.; Halford, A.; Phiri, M.B. (2021). 'The Salience of Islam to Muslim Heritage Children's Experiences of Identity, Family, and Well-Being in Foster Care'. *Religions* 12 (6):381

Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., Boti Phiri, M. and Halford, A. (2022) 'Identity, Intersectionality and Children in Care: The case of Muslim-heritage "looked-after" Children in the UK' in H Schmid/ A Sheikhzadegan (eds.), *Exploring Islamic Social Work. Between Community and the Common Good* Cham: Springer

Case Study: Forks and Friday prayers

Susan, a foster carer who has cared for over 100 children, has the unique experience of fostering both as a non-Muslim and a Muslim carer.

Susan converted to Islam over 7 years ago, following a placement she had with Muslim children. When the children's placement came to an end, she said she felt something was missing in her life, she made the discovery that it was Islam.

Susan recounts an experience prior to her conversion, during her time caring for unaccompanied asylum seeking Muslim boys. During the school holidays she was keen to take the children to the fair one Friday. The boys' resistance to this outing, on account of them not wanting to miss their Friday Jummah prayers surprised her. At the time Susan suggested they should do their communal prayer on a Sunday instead, and describes their glum faces during that Friday trip to the fair.

Following this early experience caring for Muslim heritage children, Susan learned of the importance of Friday prayer to Muslim children both culturally and spiritually. Susan said she wishes she had had the cultural and faith sensitivity training to have learned this and many other things prior to her conversion.

Speaking of more recent experiences, she values her ability to provide religious advice and counsel to the Muslim heritage children she has since cared for. Most recently, by negotiating an early Festival Allowance, usually given out in November in time for Christmas, so she was able to provide the children in her care the opportunity to celebrate Eid. Susan used the analogy of eating with a fork to describe the importance of faith-sensitive and cultural humility informed care.

While there is a fiqh position on using utensils to eat, there is also cultural dimensions to the etiquettes of eating that will take on different nuances for different members of the Muslim community, and which themselves have their own political and potentially stigmatising impacts. Being attuned to these sensitivities as a Muslim carer means that Susan is able

to make one of the many aspects of her children's day that much less alienating.

Asked what her concerns are for Muslim heritage children in care who aren't given the same opportunity of faith matched placement, she says things like being able to learn how to pray when they approach puberty and other practices that may otherwise connect children to their family and faith heritage.



Diversity: Our strengths

One of the many strengths of the Muslim community is our diversity in, amongst other things, culture and faith approaches. This is where the term Muslim-heritage derives, to accommodate the spectrum of religious practice found within the Muslim community, including those children who come from a Muslim background but may not see faith as an active part of their current identity.

The importance of children being placed with culturally and religiously appropriate families is what, in fact, will enable children of Muslim-heritage to be able to approach their faith identity in a non-stigmatising and open way.

The term Muslim-heritage creates the space within which children's identities can develop irrespective of the socio-religious contexts of their birth family, it provides the conceptual room for children to navigate their own emerging identity. Research shows those children that may reject their faith identity in adolescence often return to strands of this identity later in life. Faith matching placements create those crumbs of identity that children can return to later in life, an essential part of a healthy and secure upbringing.

A tale of two families

Fatima and her two siblings came from a religiously conservative family, and were placed in care following an unexpected turn of events in their lives. The children were placed in various different homes, both together and separately, none of which were entirely suitable for them due to the lack of understanding of Muslim culture and religion. One placement included a non-Muslim South Asian family which was unsuccessful. Another placement saw Fatima's siblings spending Ramadan in a non Muslim home, away from his siblings, opening and closing his fast in isolation. Eventually Fatima and her siblings were placed together in an appropriate home, following their threat to run away.

Mansur and his siblings came from a very chaotic, irreligious family, with substance abuse issues. Mansur's parents suddenly adopted a form of orthodox Islam, and due to other circumstances the children were placed in care. Mansur and his siblings outwardly rejected religious practice.

These two cases demonstrate the need for Muslims on either end of the spectrum to receive faith-sensitive support from the care system, and for faith to guide placement decisions. Mansur and his siblings required support to overcome the trauma of this rejection of identity, while Fatima and her siblings required it to affirm theirs.¹³



¹³Cheruvallil-Contractor, S.; Halford, A.; Phiri, M.B. (2021). 'The Saliency of Islam to Muslim Heritage Children's Experiences of Identity, Family, and Well-Being in Foster Care'. Religions 12 (6):381.

While Muslims are overwhelmingly from black and minority ethnic communities, as the aforementioned case study demonstrates, ethnic matching alone cannot accommodate for the faith of each child as an integral marker of identity. Equally, within the Muslim community, it is important to recognise the breadth of diversity both in culture and in expressions of religious identity and practice. It is also equally important to understand the external factors as a result of this lack of homogeneity of the Muslim identity- the structural disadvantages faced by different factions of the Muslim community.

For example, black boys in particular face the greatest delays in placement, and this is an additional layer of disadvantage that black children of Muslim-heritage will face and which will impact their well-being and outcomes. It is important for all stakeholders to be cognisant of these nuances in race and identity in modern Britain.

My Family Group and colleagues at this years roundtable emphatically stress the necessity for the care system to be truly child centred both on an individual level - for each child to be understood, recognised and respected as the individual that they are and for due consideration to be given for each placement decision. And institutionally, by creating a system which is reflective of the diversity of the children in it, in order to create a sustainable and impactful care system which meets the needs of every child.

We support the work of The National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group to this end, and pledge to continue to bring the lived experience and insight into what it means to be a Muslim and what this means for fostering and adoption. This is necessary for truly and authentically meeting the needs of young people.



Mental health: Our challenges



As mental health literacy grows, both within the care sector and more broadly in society, the mental health of Muslim-heritage looked after children continues to grow in salience. Children in the care system are four times more likely to have mental health problems, a sobering figure which should spur us all into action.¹⁴

We know what leads children to come into care includes trauma, loss, grief and often neglect and abuse. All these things have a significant impact on children's mental health. When children are referred to CAMHS, they are often already in crisis, at the acute end of these issues, and therefore present a variety of complex mental health issues. Children cannot begin to process trauma until they themselves feel safe, and therefore they are often guarded, as this unprocessed trauma brings about a defensiveness and disassociation.

If children are not given the necessary support to process what has happened to them, these defences and other early symptoms can become more problematic. For example, a child's grief can evolve into depression. Often, overwhelmed and grieving children can present, amongst other symptoms, difficulty in expressing how they feel, fractured

expression, disturbed sleep, separation anxiety, difficulty eating, soiling, pseudo development, difficulty grasping time, rivalry, PTSD, compulsion to repeat, drug and alcohol abuse, anger, aggression, school refusal, relationship difficulty and sexual disturbances. These children are often wrongly labelled as 'difficult' and it is important to appreciate the impact of children's early experience on their mental and emotional health. Some children are so distrustful when they come into care they cannot settle anywhere due to the trauma they face.

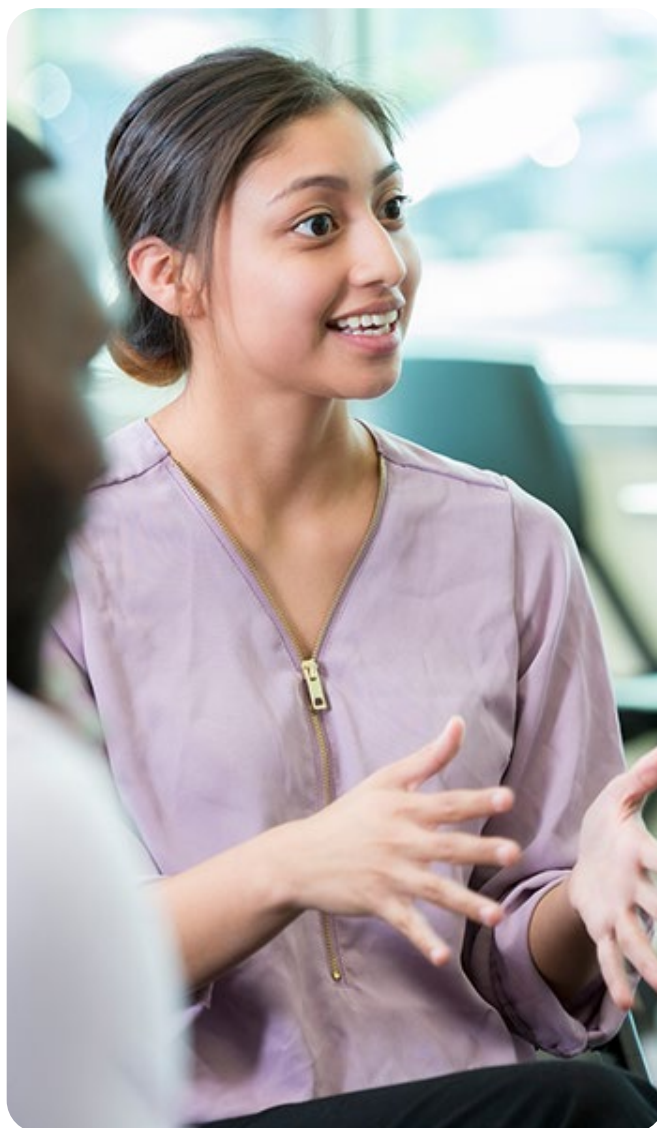
Children of Muslim-heritage face additional complications in regards to their mental health. As well as significant and complex mental health needs, they are also dealing with racism, anti-Muslim sentiment, estrangement from their family culture and faith due to adverse experiences at home. And a sense of isolation and shame. Coupled with the mental pressures we know result from poverty and structural disadvantage – an estimated 50 per cent of Muslim households in the UK are living in poverty and deprivation compared to 18% of the general UK population – and it paints a very worrying backdrop against which Muslim-heritage looked after children are struggling.¹⁵

¹⁴ Mental health and well-being of looked-after children Fourth Report of Session 2015-16 HC 481. (n.d.). [online] Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmeduc/481/481.pdf>

¹⁵ Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). (2016). Home. [online] Available at: [BMINBriefing7_Jan16.pdf](https://www.mcb.org.uk/BMINBriefing7_Jan16.pdf) (mcb.org.uk)

Evidence suggests that Muslim children don't access CAMHS as much as other groups and may not even seek referrals.¹⁶ This mental health crisis is exacerbated by the lack of faith-sensitivity training that exists in the mental health sector, and the anxiety clinicians themselves express they have working with Muslim families.¹⁷ Clinicians often have difficulty appreciating faith as important to some children. This mutual apprehension felt by both Muslim families and the mental health system creates a self-perpetuating cycle in which children are the ultimate victims.

Muslim children deserve a system which understands them and values their faith, particularly given how integral a role it plays in their mental wellbeing. Research undertaken on Muslim mental health by BCBN found that over 80% of young people that had experienced mental health struggles said that faith played a positive role in supporting mental wellbeing. More than half of young people surveyed overall also said they are likely to turn to faith when experiencing mental health struggles. Interestingly, this figure increases to 61% for young Muslim men, who are further underrepresented in the mental health care system compared to their female counterparts.¹⁸ These findings underscore the importance of a faith sensitive wrap around support service for vulnerable Muslim children, and the need for multi-agency cooperation in this regard.



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16 Kam, S.-E. and Midgley, N. (2006) "Exploring Clinical Judgement: How Do Child and Adolescent Mental Health Professionals Decide Whether a Young Person Needs Individual Psychotherapy?" in *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (11):27

17 Abedi, R. (2021) "How do clinicians respond to the faith identity of young Muslims in a London Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) clinical context? An interpretative phenomenological analysis" University of Essex Research Repository. Available at: <http://repository.essex.ac.uk/30361/> and <http://repository.tavistockandportman.ac.uk/2433/>

18 Bungwala, S, Meha, A, Prof Tunariu, Aneta, D (2021) 'Hidden Survivors- Uncovering the mental health struggles of young British Muslims [online] Available at: Hidden_Survivors_Full_Report.pdf (bcbn.org.uk)

A need for Muslims, the care sector & organisations to facilitate institutional change: **A call to action**



The one thing that everyone in the social care system agrees on, regrettably, is that it isn't currently a good place for children to be, and this unfortunate reality has been duly noted by the Government in the recent care review. These challenges are only amplified for children of Muslim-heritage who often face disadvantage at either end of the care system, as well as further disconnect from their heritage, and an inability to root themselves in a secure sense of identity.

It is clear that things need to change if we agree that children in care deserve the same life chances as their non-care counterparts. This involves the Muslim community galvanising and coming together to intervene to prevent this continuing trajectory. From the care sector, it also involves a deep reckoning and recognition of the unique situation Muslim-heritage children in care find themselves in, and a willingness to work to change that.

There was a resounding call from the participants in this year's roundtable for institutional change around the way Muslim-heritage children in the care sector are supported. This was a call for change that wasn't simply superficial, or tick box, but brought substance,

tangible outcomes and employed a sustainable approach.

The care system is inherently unrepresentative - **24% of children in care come from ethnic minority communities**, compared to 13% of the population. Despite this significant overrepresentation, there continues to be little focus both on the causes of this racial disparity, and the myriad of issues that arise as a result. Persistently, there is little emphasis placed on faith and culturally sensitive support to children, carers, or sector workers, creating a chasm of understanding and lack of co-operation at the heart of these services for vulnerable children.

There is undoubtedly a need to nurture an inclusive care system – this is absolutely critical to the way in which we are able to meet needs of the children and young people in it. This needs to be incorporated structurally, in how we develop and deliver our services on a strategic level, but also granularly on a micro-level, and more broadly speaking on a community level amongst Muslims.

What I can do in the care sector



Vulnerable children, young people and their families require an anti-racist care system. As it stands, this requires radical change from the ground up.

On a personal level, for all of us who are raised in a society built upon racism, the work of becoming anti racist is ongoing. It requires being able to ask uncomfortable questions which may make us feel uneasy – two vital ingredients for meaningful change – and goes beyond the status quo of tick-box training programmes which do not provide opportunity for reflection and growth. Nowhere is this transformative training more necessary than where we are dealing with the most vulnerable in society, the care sector.

Active, anti-racist training requires vulnerability, openness and honesty. It requires having frank conversations that question your conscious and unconscious thinking and an unwavering commitment to change. This will require collaborative working and synergies with Muslim organisations and must involve those with lived experience leading the conversation.

This introspective and rigorous approach to anti-racism is necessary in order to ensure children from ethnic minority backgrounds are not almost twice as likely to end up in care. To ensure Black children do not have to wait four times as long to be placed. To

ensure we see recruitment of families from a diverse range of backgrounds into the sector. And so we are able to meet children in care where they are, and nurture them with the sensitivity required.

CALL TO ACTION:



We need to see care sector workers on all levels demand anti-racism and cultural humility training. And we want managers, directors and commissioners to actively seek this for their social workers, carers and other agency staff. My Family Group provide training which centres the lived experience of Muslims and creates transformative change through My Foster Family and My Adoption Family.

Sector professionals, hand in hand with Muslim organisations, must also commit to regular reflective practice groups to create understanding and dialogue. My Foster Family and My Adoption Family provide third spaces for these dialogues to take place.

On a structural level, a standardised and uniform approach to capture faith data is necessary both symbolically, to recognise the role it plays in providing

secure care for children, and practically, so that it becomes a salient feature in decision making and placement of children and young people. This needs to be incorporated in a sensitive way, one that recognises the nuance of culture and identity and how it shapes children's evolving identity.

CALL TO ACTION:



We need to see local authorities and adoption and fostering agencies adhere to national best practice guidance and ensure that they collect faith-sensitive data, specifically faith sensitive identity of children in care.

More information, resources and signposting must be made available for families looking after Muslim children, to support them in accessing best support for children in their care.

CALL TO ACTION:



A commitment from Local Authorities and adoption and fostering agencies across the UK to ensure their carers have access to faith sensitive support and guidance available through My Adoption Family and My Foster Family.

All of these changes must be supported on a higher policy level, commitments must come from leadership and be implemented strategically to ensure there are no gaps in the system, and no child left behind. This must be part of the DNA of children's services across the board.

CALL TO ACTION:



We want Directors of Children's Services and service leaders and managers of fostering and adoption agencies to work collaboratively with My Family Group and experts and academics in the field to ensure anti-racism is at the heart of what they do.



What I can do in the Muslim community on a local level



On a community level, Muslim institutions must take active steps to educate themselves and their congregation on the Islamic obligation to foster.

We see positive changes in communities which take on the Foster Friday Campaign as a core responsibility rather than a one-off cause. Where these conversations are instigated and sustained in an honest, open and rigorous way at a community level, space is created at grass roots level to recognise our communal obligation to the most vulnerable and neglected children in our community.

This must be coupled with religiously sensitive outreach, educative and recruitment work across the breadth of the Muslim community to ensure we are increasing the number of foster carers and adopters in order to keep up with the need, and to reflect the diversity of Muslim-heritage children in care. Muslim communities must harness the momentum of You Can Adopt and other nationwide adopter and foster recruitment campaigns which are committed to myth busting, raising the profile of fostering and adoption so families are able to see its benefits, and securing a diverse and inclusive care system.

CALL TO ACTION:



We need the Muslim community to galvanise and organise on a local level, working directly with carers and Muslim-heritage children in care to support and nurture them. My Family Group facilitates local, grass-roots work with Muslim communities, reach out to see how you might be able to make a lasting, positive change for local Muslim-heritage children in care.

Recognised within this call was the need for training and support for imams to stand up to and fulfil their role within the Muslim community. Imams play a unique role in the Muslim community, in their ability to connect Muslims with the Quran and traditions of the Prophet (pbuh), they are integral to the synthesis of the idea of a communal duty and responsibility to act. If the idea of supporting the Yatim is unintelligible to the British Muslim community in its modern context, the Imam plays a crucial role in bridging that gap of understanding and religious learning. The training and support required for Imams is at a Fiqhi, more detailed

and substantive level. This should include generating and effectively disseminating more nuanced fatawa and scholarly pieces to provide a basis for resources that Muslim leaders could use to educate their communities.

CALL TO ACTION:



For Imams to work with the British Board of Scholars and Imams to realise their potential as catalysts for change in the quest for an inclusive care system which supports and nurtures Muslim-heritage children to realise their faith.

Imams must also be willing to undertake training in pastoral care that is trauma informed and in relation to addressing contemporary social issues from a psychological and theological perspective.

Support from inside the Muslim community must also be available to fostered and adopted Muslim-heritage children and their carers in order for us to fulfil our potential as a faith community which centres the needs of the most vulnerable. We need to see Imams working directly with Muslim-heritage children in care, across care homes and other settings, to provide pastoral and spiritual support.



Other Muslim leaders and their communities must also come together to help develop a crucial and authentic sense of Islamic identity within children in care, most of whom have no natural recourse to the religious capital necessary to do this. This is as well as providing much needed pastoral care. We want to see robust Islamic networks which give emphasis and value to children's Islamic identity. We envision an advisory group, made up of community members working together in synergy to help children in care to repair their trust in adults through mentoring streams, as well as to enable them to maintain connections to their community. This whole community approach is one which would see Muslim Pastoral care evolve as an academic discipline yet directly translated into action at a grassroots level. Additionally, it must instil sustainable structures necessary for Imams to be fully and properly qualified in this area. Further, this will build scope for incorporating pastoral care education in the care sector, an endeavour we are already seeing in the Markfield institute of Higher Education's call for papers to help develop pastoral care in the Muslim community as an academic discipline.

CALL TO ACTION:



We need local Muslim organisations to reach out to the British Board of Scholars and Imams and the Muslim Council of Britain for Islamic and community resources, as well as tapping into support and momentum of campaigns from My Foster Family and My Adoption Family such as You Can Adopt to educate, inform and take action in recruiting suitable Muslim Foster carers and adopters.

What I can do as a Muslim organisation on an institutional level

National Muslim organisations and their potential to create sustainable, positive change. Muslim organisations must stand up to support social workers and the care sector at large. The training needs of social care workers in faith awareness and faith sensitivity needs to be identified and met, with all the nuance required.

Muslim organisations must lead on this in order for the theological knowledge and lived experience to be conveyed and incorporated accurately. This training needs to help sector professionals and carers to recognise false assumptions about Muslim children and culture. Muslim organisations and sector professionals must commit to regular reflective practice groups to this end. Religious institutions must also create a reflective space for social workers and care experienced people to talk in a safe way.

Muslim organisations need to work collaboratively with Local Authority and fostering and adoption agencies to ensure relevant, accurate and culturally sensitive information, resources and signposting are available for carers looking after Muslim children. This is crucial to ensure Muslim-heritage children in care are getting the tailored support that they deserve.

CALL TO ACTION:



National Muslims Organisations must actively support the care sector in plugging the gaps in knowledge and service to ensure an anti-racist care system and to provide safe spaces in which discussions and sharing of knowledge can occur. Reach out to My Family Group to see where your skills and expertise may bridge a crucial gap in the system.

The Muslim community must also look specifically into what we are able to do to support the mental health needs of our young people of Muslim-heritage in care in a timely and faith- and culturally sensitive way. This includes working with CAMHS to ensure the specific



mental health needs of vulnerable Muslim children and young people are being met.

Muslim institutes and mosques need to provide wrap around pastoral support which recognises the unique trauma faced by children and young people in care. Imams need the training to deliver this mental health support and trauma-informed care to children in care and their carers.

Muslim organisations need to prioritise mental health collaboration with CAMHS and work on developing multi-disciplinary teams to ensure Muslim carers have training in trauma informed care, child psychology, attachment and education for children in care. This must be underpinned by Islamic psychology, making it culturally relative to the communities concerned.

Sector specific programmes of pastoral care need to be developed to this end and more academic literature needs to be developed to further support and progress this area of learning. Structural support is required to ensure training resources are accessible and sustainable.

CALL TO ACTION:



For Muslim organisations to reach out to Muslim Mind Collaborative and the Markfield Institute of Higher Education to scope the potential to learn and contribute to local council and organisations in the sector on mental health and pastoral care training.

Conclusion

Muslim-heritage children in care need our help. Colleagues in the sector, and members of the Muslim community have a unique, collective role to play to provide that help and to support these vulnerable children to overcome the adversities they face and to realise their full potential.

The urgency at this year's Roundtable event was felt more acutely than ever. As a diverse group of stakeholders came together to drive the conversation forward and to create a momentum for change, the importance of multi-stakeholder collaborative working was clear. This is crucial if we are to secure happy, productive and well-grounded Muslim-heritage children and young people who have experienced the care system. Equitable outcomes, and an end to cycles of disadvantage should be a shared goal for both the care sector and the Muslim community that is met collaboratively.

We call on all those involved in the care of Muslim-heritage children, and all members of the Muslim community to come together to make a lasting, effective and sustainable change for the future of these children, and the care system that will play surrogate to many more.

We invite you to join My Foster Family to see how you can fit into this bigger picture

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Acknowledgments

After thanking Allah for enabling us at My Family Group to continue this work for and on behalf of the children in care, I would like to begin by acknowledging the support shown by Naz Shah, our local MP for Bradford West. Naz is a champion for the work we do and brings empathy, expertise and heart to the cause - being care-experienced and a foster carer herself. She has been an exceptional supporter for our cause, and an ambassador for Muslim heritage children in care everywhere.

I would next like to thank all the contributors and invited speakers to our 2022 Roundtable Discussion, starting with Dr Sohail Hanif (CEO of the National Zakat Foundation) and Zara Mohammed (Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain) for their continued partnership in our work, and for their ongoing support and guidance. I would like to extend a huge thank you to two of our long-time supporters from within the care sector, Mark Owers (Independent Chair of the National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group) and Dr John Simmonds OBE (Director of Policy, Research and Development, CoramBAAF) for their inputs to the discussions as well as their wider allyship and assistance.

I am deeply thankful to Shaykh Dr Haitham Al-Haddad (Advisor at the Islamic Council of Europe) for sending us his recording from Turkey and providing his thoughts from a faith-based family support background, and Islamic Shari'a Council perspective. Likewise, I am delighted that Dr Fatuma Abdi (Somali Mental Health Network) could join us and share her experience as a mental health practitioner and provide her insights from working with the Somali community. Finally, I want to thank Cathy Seiderer (Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Manager, Brighton and Hove Council) for joining us as partner, and presenting the experiences of the Brighton and Hove Fostering Team and their engagement work with the local Muslim community.

Additionally, I also want to acknowledge and thank all our keynote speakers, first to Sabah Gilani OBE (CEO of the Better Community Business Network) for stepping in to lead on the publication and launch

of this report and presenting the notable work the Muslim Mind Collaborative have been doing to support young Muslims around mental health. Sabah and BCBN have been supporters since the inception of this organisation, and I am extremely pleased that Sabah has now joined our My Family Group board of trustees to continue the remarkable work that we have so far achieved.

I would next like to extend my utmost gratitude to our close friend and advisor, Dr Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor (Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University) for her contributions in the sector and presenting her learnings to the Roundtable. Sariya has led the way for us with her research exploring the experiences of children of Muslim-heritage in the care system, and she is also a proud adoptive mother to two children. I am also grateful that Dr Rachel Abedi (Director, Reflection Network) another close friend and advisor, and an adoptive mother, was able to join. Rachel is a Child and Adolescent Psychoanalytic Psychotherapist and has worked in CAMHS and her research in the sector has been equally valuable.

I would further like to acknowledge Dr Rahmanara Chowdhury (Head of the newly formed Centre for the Study of Wellbeing and Course Lead for Islam and Pastoral Care at the Markfield Institute of Higher Education) for her contributions and continuing advice and support. Rahmanara is a Chartered Psychologist and her input to the discussions have been invaluable. Likewise, I also want to acknowledge Shaykh Abdullah Hasan (Imams Against Domestic Abuse and the British Board of Scholars and Imams). Shaykh Abdullah's background in Islamic sciences, counselling and psychology has brought a worthy perspective to the Roundtable discussions.

Certainly, we look forward to continuing work, conversation and dialogue with our esteemed colleagues and furthering our agenda to secure equitable outcomes, and happy and whole lives for the children and young people that are at the heart of what we do, and who show extraordinary courage every day.

I believe special thanks is due to our copywriter Mariam Akhtar who has been the real drive behind this report and has worked painstakingly hard on this over the past few months to get into a substantial piece that we hope will have a definite and lasting impact. Additionally, I believe a note of thanks is due to our board or trustees at My Family Group for their guidance, support and commitment that has enabled us to carry on moving forward to address the challenges and barriers that are still faced by the many Muslim heritage children in care.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to our CEO Shadim Hussain who has taken this organisation forward in leaps and bounds to help make the lives of Muslim heritage children in care better. Shadim was sadly unable to be with us at the Roundtable this year, but I am eager to continue his legacy. His passion in this sector has etched a place for this cause in many of our hearts, and I feel it is right to continue his rallying call of the last five years that we all must step forward to make the lives of the children in care in our own communities better.



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**“It takes a
community to
raise a child”**