The 101 of Islam; a major world religion

Islam is a major world religion, practiced by **24.7%** of the world's population – approximately **1.9 billion people**. It is one of the **fastest growing religions** in the world.

Islam is a **monotheistic Abrahamic religion**, centred on the Quran, a book revealed by God or Allah, unaltered for over 1400 years, to the final Prophet Muhammad. It shares common features with other major world religions in acknowledging the sanctity of life, promoting family values, encouraging social-consciousness and more.

Muslims – adherents to Islam – are a very **diverse** group, scattered across much of the world, and consisting of many different races, cultures and speaking many languages. They are the **second largest religious demographi**c in the world.

The moral code that Muslims practice consist of both the Quran and hadith corpus – the sayings, teaching and practices of the Prophet Muhammad.

The diversity of Muslims extends to their religious interpretation, understanding and practice – this means there is **diversity of belief** within the Muslim community, and some Muslims honour and value religious rites and practices more than others; not all Muslims believe or practice the same things.

Understanding Islamic practice – and your Muslim pupils - The 5 Pillars

In order to understand what Islam means to children and young people, in a practical and spiritual sense, it's useful to look at the Five Pillars of Islam. These are five fundamental practices which are seen as defining elements of a Muslim. They are:

'Shahadah' – a declaration of faith

A set statement, recited in Arabic which enters one into the faith. In Arabic this is written as لا_إله_إلا_الله_محمد_رسول_الله and can be something young people take pride in and see as an identity marker.

'Salah' – five daily prayers

Many Muslims structure their lives around the five daily prayers, and they are preceded by ablution a kind of ritual cleaning with water Muslims refer to as '*wudhu*'. Many young people who are of praying age structure their day around this.

'Zakat' – obligatory giving of charity

Muslims must give a portion of their wealth to worthwhile causes. This means many young Muslims have adopted a culture of charitable giving and this culture will often include charitable acts.

'Sawm' –fasting

During the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims will abstain from eating and drinking from dawn to dusk, as well as increase in other religious rites and refinement of character. This means young people who are of fasting age will change their daily routine to accommodate this.

Hajj

An annual pilgrimage to the holy city of Makkah, to be completed at least once in a Muslim's lifetime, for those that are financially and physically able. A lesser Hajj, which is more common is called Umrah, which consists of pilgrimage to Makkah at any time of the year.

British Muslims – the national picture

There are approximately **3.9 million Muslims** in the UK – roughly **6.5% of the British population**. It is the second largest religion in the UK.

Though Muslims are more geographically spread, compared to other faith communities, a majority live in four inner city conurbations: Greater London, West Midlands, North West and Yorkshire and Humberside.

British Muslims also posses the youngest age profile of all faiths- young Muslims make up almost half of the UK Muslim population. Analysis shows that **1 in 12 school children in the UK is Muslim**. Because of this young demographic and their significance in major cities, they make a large contribution to workforce profile.

Racial diversity within the Muslim population is growing – though typically in Britain, due to migration patterns, people often see South Asian as synonymous with Muslim. **Over a third of all Muslims are from non-south Asian backgrounds, and** this figure is growing.

The majority of first-generation British Muslims arrived in the UK as economic migrants and now make an invaluable contribution to the economy, working in all trades, industries and professions at all levels.

British Muslims are increasing in profile and impact – Muslims make up over 20% of doctors in the NHS that have a faith, notable British Muslims include Sadiq Khan, London Mayor, Mo Farah, Olympic champion, Humza Yousaf, the Scottish First Minister and Nadiya Hussain, TV personality.

Young British Muslims – a new culture

Young Muslims make up the majority of British Muslims and their sense of culture, identity and belonging is breaking from older generational norms. Due to a greater embeddedness in British culture, a growth in religious institutions such as Mosques and youth groups, and in a digital age which values freedom of thought and expression, young Muslims are redefining their sense of faith and culture, one which values both their religious and national identity.

Research shows that religious nurture and the transmission of religion from one generation to the next is high among Muslims, and that Muslim children are more likely than those of other faith groups to profess the same religion as their parents over time. This is true of young people too, when surveyed 79% of Muslim 13–14-year-olds said religion is "very important" to the way they live their life. This means religion is typically an important aspect of self-identity for Muslim students, and Islam plays a key role in their everyday lives.

Young British Muslims – a new culture

Research also shows that feelings of 'Muslimness' do not contradict British Muslims' sense of 'Britishness'. In fact, as young Muslims are typically characterised by Islamic values such as loyalty, integrity and faithfulness, it's no surprise, that ICM surveys revealed that 93% of Muslims polled said they felt they belonged to Britain, with more than half saying they felt this "very strongly, and that 95% saying they felt loyal to Britain.

This younger fusion of Muslimness and Britishness has exciting consequences. Young Muslims are making waves in sectors such as art, fashion, tech, journalism and academia to name just a few. They are positively impacting the economic, social and cultural landscape – they are also creating their own spaces, like media platforms such as Amaliah and British Muslim TV.

Young British Muslims – a sense of belonging

The role religion plays may differ in each young Muslim, it is therefore important not to hold or project closed stereotypes based on faith while children and young people's delicate sense of identity is evolving. This is especially true due to how it impacts their overall feelings of belonging.

A study into identity and belonging of Muslim's found that while part of their sense of 'Britishness' or 'belonging' – their 'attachment' - was stable and unmoving, a second part – the feeling of 'ease' - also changes between high and low levels, depending on acceptance or reciprocal feelings from the majority group. So, the feeling of 'ease' in young Muslims is contingent upon reciprocal feelings expressed by their fellow citizens recognising and accepting their attachment as legitimate and true.

Young British Muslims – a sense of belonging

So, Muslims, like other majority and minority groups in society, have multi-layered, complex and overlapping identities which do not impinge upon or diminish their sense of Britishness. We also know that there are external factors which can present unique challenges to young Muslims when it comes to the wider social environment in which their sense of belonging is tested and realised. The same study found that younger generations experienced a "heightened perception of inequalities in treatment and in life chances" which had "likely consequences for their psychological wellbeing". There are a number of studies which sadly contain testimonies of young Muslims "growing up in a climate of being 'othered', with the impact of discrimination "actively discouraging participation and contributing to disillusionment with the political process amongst young British Muslims."

In schools, where we know a sense of belonging is integral to effective learning and general well-being, this is especially important.

Islamophobia – a very real threat

"Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness."

(APPG definition of Islamophobia)

Anti-Muslim hate has far ranging and worrying consequences. 45% of all recorded religious hate crime targeted Muslims in 2020-2021. A recent EHRC report also found that 70% of Muslims said they had specifically experienced religion-based prejudice. The recent surge of anti-Muslim hatred, with incidents increasing by 365% since October 2023 underscores the urgent need to combat Islamophobia.

Islamophobia manifests in the same way as other forms of racism, for example through social attitudes and engaging in racial stereotypes, prejudice and hate; through verbal and physical abuse or violence; through discrimination, for example in the workplace; and most importantly structurally within institutions such as politics, media, employment and criminal justice.

Structural inequalities mean that half of Muslim households live in poverty, and outcomes in health and housing are poorer than national averages. Muslim men are up to 76% less likely to have a job of any kind compared to white, male British Christians of the same age and with the same qualifications; Muslim women were up to 65% less likely to be employed than white Christian counterparts.

Islamophobia – a very real threat

The media climate is also one that impacts wider society, impairing Muslim students. Analysis of over 10,000 news items over a three month period revealed that 59% of all articles associated Muslims with negative behaviour, and over a third of all articles misrepresented or generalised about Muslims.

This also impacts public opinion, and can have a knock-on affect on the playground. Polling on the opinion of Britons on Muslims and Islam showed that 18% of participants believe "Muslim immigration to this country is part of a bigger plan to make Muslims a majority of this country's population" and 31% of young children in particular believe that Muslims are taking over England.

Schools can take a stand against this by implementing clear policies which define and tackle Islamophobia in their settings, and use resources such as this anti-Islamophobia bullying poster which bring oxygen and attention to this form of hate.

MUSLIM MIND COLLABORATIVE — Help With Bullying

In partnership with **KIDSCAPE** — Help With Bullying

Identifying Islamophobic Bullying

What is bullying?
Bullying is repeated, harmful behaviour that is intended to make someone feel upset, uncomfortable and unsafe.

What is Islamophobic bullying?
When this bullying targets Muslims because of their faith, or makes reference to Islamic identity or culture, it becomes Islamophobic bullying, and it is as unacceptable as any other type of bullying. Due to the Equality Act 2010, which lists faith as a protected characteristic, Islamophobia is also legally defined as a hate crime.

Why does Islamophobia occur?
Often, when Islam or Muslims are in the news, they become topics of interest and conversation. Because of this, a lot of mistruths circulate which can lead to people holding false and negative views concerning Muslims, their practice, beliefs and culture.

Unfortunately, this can be mirrored by children and young people depending on what they have seen or heard via the internet, family or friends. These misconceptions and prejudices can find their way into the classroom, playground, or online, and can cause harm.

What does Islamophobic bullying look like?
Stereotyping: when people assume all Muslims have certain characteristics this is Islamophobic; there are over 1.5 billion Muslims in the world - about 23% of the world's population are Muslim and they consist of many different races, cultures, languages and practices.

Islamophobic slurs, comments or name calling: when people use negative or aggressive language to refer to Islamic belief, practices or culture. This could be face to face, or online. Difference should be celebrated as it is what makes our schools such great places to be.

Discriminating: This can be intentionally leaving someone out or alienating them on account of their Islamic faith. Our schools are strongest when we think and act inclusively.

What you can do about it
If you have experienced this, or have been targeted in any way because of your faith, it is important to get help from a trusted adult. You can also receive private and confidential support from many organisations.

Schools and unconscious bias

The latest research into racism and discriminatory views has shed light on the pervasiveness and harms of unconscious bias. Unconscious bias refers to the deep-seated prejudices we all absorb due to living in deeply unequal societies. Unconscious or implicit bias can lead to instinctive assumptions. Unconscious bias can be present even in people who genuinely believe they're committed to equality; it's harder to spot and root out than obvious discrimination.

In order to root out these underlying views that can colour our impressions and actions, it's important to educate ourselves, create space and opportunity for empathy, learning, and growth. Understanding that we are all prone to fall into negative assumptions about those that are different to us is as important as acknowledging that our brains are malleable and capable of positive change. This can only help us to better ourselves, develop new understanding, insight and opportunities.

In schooling, unconscious bias is especially dangerous in both teachers and pupils because children and young people need safe spaces to develop, grow and express themselves.

Impact of Islamophobia on staff

Research and data obtained by NASUWT (2020) found that:

- Verbal abuse: 60% of BME teachers are more likely than the generality of the workforce to experience verbal abuse from a pupil.

- Hostility and aggression: 46% of BME teachers said they had been shouted at or sworn at by a colleague in school in the last year.

- Systemic racism: BAME teachers report experiencing systemic racism, with nearly two thirds (66%) reporting that in the last year levels of racism in the workplace had increased or remained the same.

(Educate Against Islamophobia)

Impact of Islamophobia on students

According to the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (2011), students who are discriminated against have been reported to develop a no. of negative effects including:

- Low self-esteem
- Self-segregation
- internalised oppression
- disengagement from school activities
- not fulfilling their potential
- attraction to violent extremist ideologies
- drop out/school refusal
- health problems/depressions
- suicidal thoughts

Racism and marginalisation experienced by Muslims in schools and wider society plays a large role in their underachievement.
(Shah, 2018, cited by Dykes, 2021)

(Educate Against Islamophobia)

Islamophobia and unconscious bias

Unconscious bias regarding Muslims could lead people to assume they are 'fifth pillars', harbour ill intent, are culturally 'backwards', misogynistic or less accepting or open as others. It can also extend to Muslim families and ideas of legitimacy and agency. These impressions come from negative stereotypes that exist around us. Lots of qualitative research shows that Muslim pupils are aware of these impressions, and subject to Islamophobic bullying in schools. A Department of Education study in 2017 showed 18% of the pupils polled in England have seen other children being bullied for being Muslim.

This issue is especially politically sensitive because policy and popular perception regarding 'Islamophobia' as a legitimate form of racism is underdeveloped, and there is a prevailing perception that anti-Muslim sentiments are legitimate.

As staff, we should be interrogating our negative perceptions of Muslims, as well as other minority groups, and questioning the norms we champion ourselves. Creating clear school policies which define and call out Islamophobia can only benefit the entire school community - leading to happier, safer, more inclusive and thriving schools.
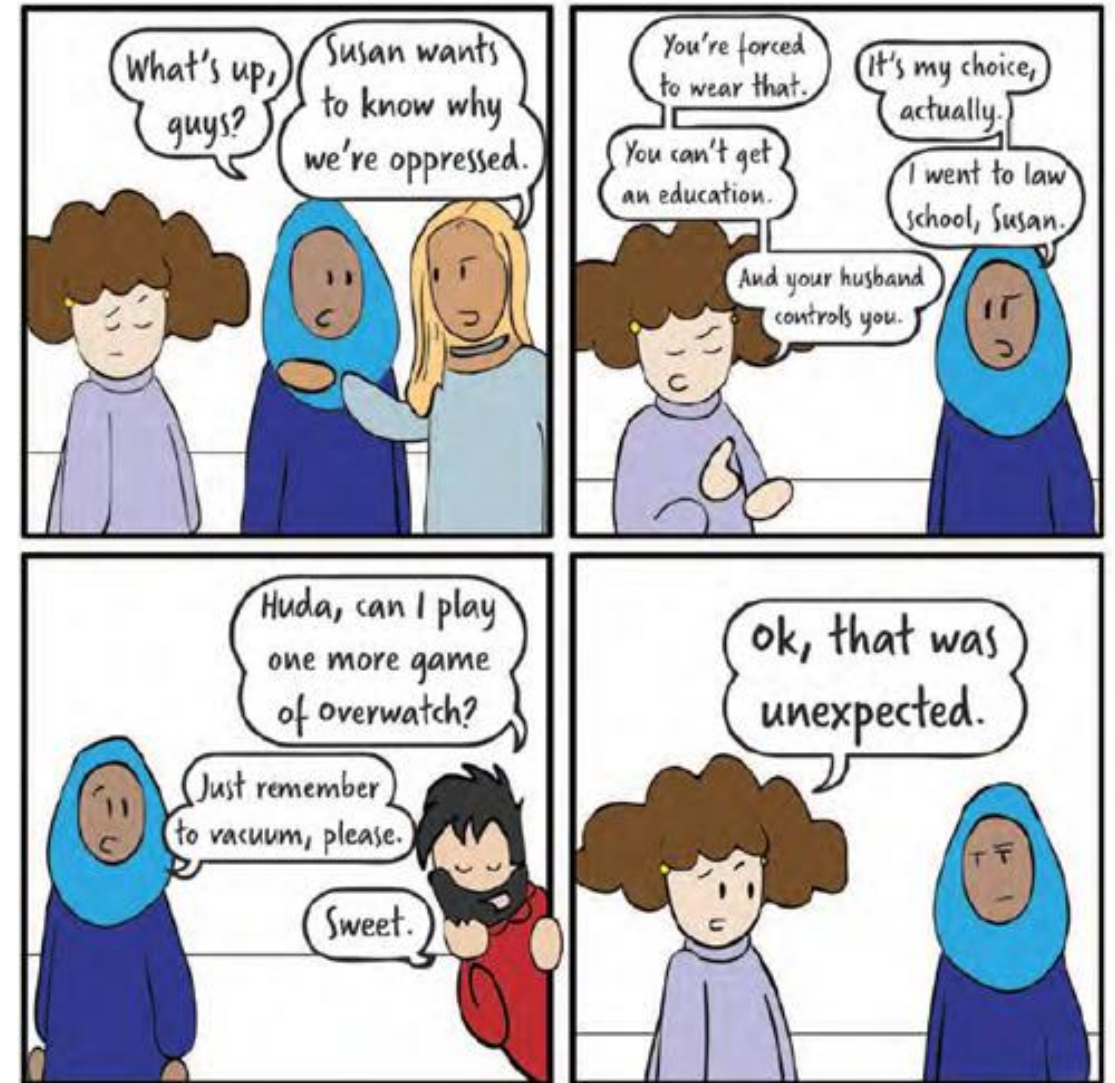
Young Muslims – in their own words: What being Muslim means to them

The Resilient Me Programme, run by The Children's Society, ran focus groups with young Muslims in schools. During the sessions young people were able to identify ways their faith positively contributed to their wellbeing such as:

- taking notice of others and being aware of their feelings
- being grateful for what you have
- prayers
- communal prayer
- fasting
- noticing your own feelings and emotions.

Young Minds and the Muslim Youth Helpline also consulted young Muslims on their identity and mental well-being. Here is what Young Muslims said in their own words:

> Being Muslim is about finding peace, it teaches me to find peace in everything I do
> - Inayah

> Being understanding, being knowledgeable and being kind
> - Omar, Leeds

> It's what makes me 'me', I guess
> - Saleem, London

Young Muslims – in their own words: their challenges

Some spaces you might feel safe due to how people look at your identity, and others you might not feel safe

- Participant, Resilient Me Workshop

The misconception is we all have the same mentality, when obviously that isn't the case

- Omar, Leeds

Some People when they see or hear about the way we live, they do judge us...for example what we wear or the fact we refrain from alcohol, but that doesn't make us any different, we're still human

- Inayah

Being a black Muslim... I definitely felt like the minority... it just made me feel like an outsider. I'm sure every Muslim has felt that feeling of not belonging. All I want to do is fit in.

- Saleem, London

Being Muslim in School – the opportunities

BEHAVIOUR

Understanding both the diversity in practice and background of Muslim students, and giving them the space to grow, without imposing limiting views on Islam, will enable young Muslims to draw the best out of themselves, their faith identity, and will have a positive impact on their learning and general sense of well-being – therefore providing much benefit to schools. When we make children and young people feel they must censor themselves, or limit their identity, it can have the opposite effect.

Faith as a lever for positivity is particularly relevant in a school setting due to the level of commitment, discipline, empathy and drive Islam can instil in young Muslims. Islam places a unique and critical emphasis on the discipline of learning, and it is given a special space in religious thought. Young Muslims have the potential to apply this to their school environment when it becomes a valued part of their identity.

Being Muslim in School – the opportunities

LEARNING

Furthermore, Islamic edicts are compatible with modern approaches to pedagogy and learning. For example, Growth Mindset and the idea of development through learning, enrichment and agency. Also, Muslims are taught Allah (God) is All-Merciful, with the notion of forgiveness and repentance holding key places in Islamic thinking. These ideas are entirely compatible with the notion of failure as a key element of success. Additionally, supporting fellow students is reinforced in Islamic scripture. Muslims are often told to 'Love for your brother what you love for yourself', promoting productive and positive mindsets.

The fact is, that the potential Islam and Muslim culture has in schooling in underexplored. A major barrier to unlocking that potential is reductive ideas concerning Islam, and unconscious bias. In putting the child at the centre of all they do, most schools will discover that understanding children's faith and cultural background is key to getting the best out of them.

Being Muslim in School – the opportunities

Belonging and a whole-child approach

Cultivating a sense of belonging for Muslim children is what grants them a sense of ownership of their education, a stake in their educational environment and better allows them to develop a sense of agency and confidence in their life path. For schools, understanding how faith acts as a lever, motivator and source of inspiration to these children and young people can only positively contribute to schools' aims of improving life-chances and creating meaningful impact.

When a child's whole self is valued, and when those differences are understood and acknowledged in meaningful ways, that means children can apply the same discipline and passion they may to their faith, to areas of their wider personal development. In order to benefit and see the whole child - schools must demonstrate to that child that they value and acknowledge their wholeness.

Being Muslim in School – the opportunities

MENTAL HEALTH

Islamic belief and practice is often cited as a source of peace, comfort and a means of coping against adversity for much of the Muslim world. Religious belief also often gives people a sense of purpose, direction and meaning which can have a positive impact on their mental well-being. With the mental health epidemic in British schools reaching alarming heights, there is potential for children and young people of Muslim-heritage to benefit from their faith in their school settings.

There is a significant body of literature which shows that religion may influence wellbeing through pathways that are behavioural, psychological, social and physiological.

'Positive religious coping', is associated with reduced levels of depression and the use of an internalised spiritual belief system to provide strategies that promote hope and resilience. Muslim clients are also more likely to use religious coping techniques than individuals from most other religious groups in the UK

As we've seen – for young people in particular - faith is an important part of their evolving sense of identity. Irrespective of their commitment to faith as adults, young Muslims need to be at ease with their sense of cultural identity.

The Islamic faith in particular, though expressed and practised in a diverse way by a diverse group of adherents, can be a great source of enrichment for young people in schools. While studies typically show young Muslims value this, they also show that young people struggle due to external factors and acculturation. By creating more inclusive spaces, schools can draw the best out of their Muslim pupils.
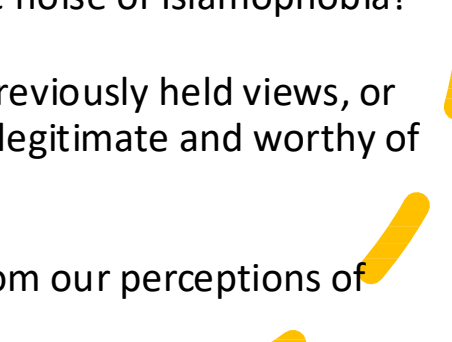
What we need to ask ourselves as educators

For a happy, productive school, it is important for leaders to understand the cultural and religious context of their students. School represents a shared space for people from a number of different backgrounds, to grow and learn together, co-operatively from a place of mutual understanding and trust. Leaders that facilitate this from a place of openness, honesty and integrity will cultivate the most productive and content school cultures environments. This may take a little out-of-the-box thinking, and some mental retraining.

Here are some questions for leaders to consider around inclusive schools for faith communities

- Does my school/classroom promote inclusivity?

- Is inclusivity being seen entirely from a majority perspective? Is it seen as a cumbersome, tick box exercise?

- Is it being nurtured from a place of openness, understanding and humility? Is it helping people to grow and understand or reinforcing hidden prejudices?

- Do we recognize diversity in terms of faith as well as race and culture?

- Are we homogenising Muslims in our approach? Or recognising intracommunity diversity.

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- Is it being nurtured from a place of openness, understanding and humility? Is it helping people to grow and understand or reinforcing hidden prejudices?

- Are we understanding our own views, perspectives, values within a context? Do we understand culture as pervasive and all encompassing, including our own positionality?

- Do we recognize diversity in terms of faith as well as race and culture?

- Are we homogonising Muslims in our approach? Or recognising intracommunity diversity?

- Are we getting our perceptions of Muslim from wider/media narratives? Have we interrogated our perceptions of Muslims, given the white noise of Islamophobia?

- Are we delegitimising certain people, or beliefs, due to previously held views, or due to influence from wider narratives regarding what is legitimate and worthy of attention and time?

- Are we disentangling our experiences with individuals from our perceptions of groups as a whole?

Being Muslim in School – the practicalities

There are many ways schools can make space for young Muslim's to feel comfortable in their identity, and to create the necessary sense of 'belonging', and these come from having an understanding of Islamic culture and practice. A few of these practical steps include:

- Creating prayer spaces and accommodating ablution/pre-prayer washing

- Accommodating, and being more accepting of, modest iterations of dress

- Acknowledging different religious times and festivals such as Ramadan and Eid

- Creating an Islamophobia policy which clearly defines and helps to combat anti-Muslim hate

- As Muslims practice a whole spectrum of belief within Islamic theology, some young Muslims will refrain from certain acts such as listening to music, drawing images of sentient beings, engaging in mixed-gender friendships and relations. Whilst this is not a norm of majority culture, it is important for schools not to stigmatise these nor force children and young people into things they are not comfortable with, or which conflict with their values

- Many Muslims will endorse family values and more traditional/orthodox views on sex and relationships. It is important for schools to create safe spaces for respectful discussions on these issues where they may arise – in PHSE or RSE

Being Muslim in School – incorporating the young Muslim voice

"Miss, **you** just get me"

Schools flourish where diversity and difference is appreciated in meaningful ways. This means centring young people's voices. Given the institutional disadvantages Muslims face, the relationship between student, home and school can become imbalanced, impairing all three.

Schools will truly benefit from accommodating the Muslim pupil's voice - our research in compiling this resource unearthed that Muslim teachers and school staff were often the sole source of comfort for young Muslims. Many Muslim school staff reported children and young people feeling only they, as fellow Muslims, understood them. The implication being the wider system didn't.

We would encourage all schools to take the time to engage the Muslim pupil voice in their decision making and to inform their wider school culture so schools, and their Muslim pupils can flourish.

Concluding activity

In groups, discuss – and feedback on – one of the following:

- identifying where Islamophobic bullying might be specifically named in the schools **anti-bullying policy**

- if the school **collects data by religion**; how the school can monitor take-up of well-being activities by students of different faiths

- planning **a faith-based young people's voice committee** where students can offer their own observations

- how as a school we might **facilitate the sharing of experiences** of people who have supported Muslim students –

- considering the **school dress code** and how it is implemented in practice, and could it be changed to be more inclusive

- what can the school do differently to make sure **Ramadan is celebrated** and understood in a positive light in the school community

- considering where Muslim students currently **prepare for pray and pray together**, and how this could be improved, perhaps in consultation with parents/students.