



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

COLLEGE OF  
SOCIAL SCIENCES

# MISSING MUSLIMS REPORT: IDENTIFYING THE PRIORITIES FOR BIRMINGHAM

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BIRMINGHAM'S MUSLIMS: in the city, of the city

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[Cohesion & Integration](#)

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## ***Birmingham's Muslims: in the city, of the city***

This project is more than academic research. Bold and unique, this three year programme will consider the story of the city's Muslim communities – their past, present and future – to better understand their contribution to the success of the city. Recent events across the city and country have significantly impacted cohesion. Often misrepresented or misunderstood, Muslim communities deserve a safe space where they have the opportunity to have open and honest conversations with leaders, institutions and policymakers about the issues that matter to them and impact their everyday lives. As a leading Russell Group institution, the University of Birmingham occupies a singular niche to facilitate this. Building on our links across the political sphere, state apparatus and the city, we aim to bring together diverse groups for a range of engaging, relevant and pertinent activities.

Birmingham – as a city and as a university – has a strong commitment to fairness, tolerance and co-operation. This project aspires to generate new ideas to support and encourage others to understand Birmingham's Muslim communities as both 'in' and 'of' the city.

### **DISCLAIMER**

This paper contains the views of individuals that were engaged and duly interpreted by members of the project's research team. Responsibility for any errors therefore lies with the author(s):

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## INTRODUCTION

This briefing seeks to capture the discussions engaged during a workshop held at the University of Birmingham in October 2017. Titled *"Missing Muslims Report: Identifying the Priorities for Birmingham"*<sup>1</sup> the workshop was co-facilitated with Citizens UK Birmingham<sup>2</sup> and the Secretariat of the Commission on Islam, Participation & Public Life. The workshop was open invite and was attended by around 40 people including representatives from locally-based institutional actors – for instance, Birmingham City Council and West Midlands Police – and those from community and grassroots backgrounds.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In September 2015, Citizens UK launched the Citizens Commission on Islam, Participation & Public Life<sup>3</sup> ('the Commission'). The Commission was established on the premise that Muslim leaders were perceived to be retreating from public life, fearful of being tarnished as extremist simply for having faith, with groups who work with prominent Islamic institutions being pilloried for partnering with alleged extremists. Chaired by Dominic Grieve QC MP, 20 Commissioners were brought together from a cross-section of British society to consider how Muslim communities in Britain could better engage and participate in public life.

In doing so, the Commission held hearings, roundtables and individual meetings in a

number of towns and cities across the country including those where Citizens UK currently work with civil society institutions, to hear their testimony as well as evidence from Muslim communities, business, education and government bodies. When the Commission visited Birmingham in April 2016, academics from the University of Birmingham's College of Social Sciences hosted a roundtable discussion between Commissioners, academics and civil society actors both Muslim and non-. Academics from the College also presented written and oral evidence at the Commission's Birmingham hearing the following day.

In July this year, the Commission published the findings of its 18-month national evidence gathering exercise in the form of a report titled, *"The Missing Muslims: Unlocking British Muslim Potential for the Benefit of All"*. Expressing its concern about the increasing absence of Muslims from British civil society, the report set out 18 recommendations that sought to speak to civil society and the business sector, government and local authorities, and Muslim communities across the country.

The workshop held in October 2017 sought to build on the Commission's report by discussing which recommendations had the greatest priority for those living and working in Birmingham. The workshop also sought to consider what might be the best approaches for achieving change as regards taking the priority recommendations forward including beginning to identify who might be best targeted in order to broker and facilitate any change necessary. At the same time, the workshop sought to shape and inform the thinking and design of Citizens UK Birmingham's *"City of Welcome"* strategy as also the University's *"Birmingham's Muslims: in the city, of the*

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<sup>1</sup> The report can be downloaded for free at, [http://www.citizensuk.org/missing\\_muslims](http://www.citizensuk.org/missing_muslims)

<sup>2</sup> For information about Citizens UK Birmingham, see <http://www.citizensuk.org/birmingham>

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the Commission, see [http://www.citizensuk.org/islam\\_public\\_life\\_commission](http://www.citizensuk.org/islam_public_life_commission)

city" three year research and engagement programme.

Following short presentations from Chris Allen and Özlem Ögtem-Young (College of Social Sciences, University of Birmingham), Saidul Haque Saeed (Citizens UK Birmingham) and Esmat Jeraj (the Commission Secretariat), participants were put in small groups and tasked with talking through the recommendations in order of identifying those the participants liked and subsequently. Where recommendations had a national focus, participants were asked to reinterpret them for the Birmingham setting as opposed Britain per se.

From there, participants were asked to identify which of the recommendations they consensually thought might have the potential to catalyse meaningful and positive change in Birmingham. In conclusion, participants were asked to prioritise the three most important recommendations setting out their reasons why. Finally, participants were afforded the opportunity to put forward any recommendations not included in the Commission's report.

It is necessary to note that while the recommendations were largely welcomed, there was some consternation among a handful of participants about the fact some of the recommendations had been made in other reports or fora. While so, it is necessary to stress that this does not render the recommendations invalid. Instead, it rather more illustrated how in spite of them having been originally posited elsewhere, little tangible progress had been made in taking them forward. Consequently, all of the recommendations remained timely as also socially, politically and culturally salient.

## **THE PRIORITIES FOR BIRMINGHAM**

The report's 18 recommendations were divided into three categories: civil society and the business sector; government and local authorities; and, Muslim communities. Each category and the recommendations prioritised are considered below.

### *RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE BUSINESS SECTOR*

In this category, two recommendations were prioritised by participants. Of greatest priority was the need for the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) to consider providing guidance on accurate reporting on Muslim issues, to ensure that faith is not conflated with extremism. At the national level, there was some concern about the need to address the negative stereotypes evident in the national press and media about Birmingham and its Muslims in particular. Citing how the city and its Muslims were negatively represented following the Westminster terror attack earlier this year, participants spoke about the need for better knowledge about how to counter the negative stereotypes while also having a better understanding of how to complain and respond to inaccuracies and inappropriate coverage. At the city level, participants spoke about needing to establish better relationships with those such as the Birmingham Post and Birmingham Mail as also BBC West Midlands and ITV Central. Some also spoke about the potential for facilitating faith literacy workshops on behalf of journalists and others working in the media.

The second was for local authorities, schools, colleges and youth clubs to champion and expand opportunities for young people to meet and share experiences. While concrete ideas on how to

take this forward were limited, the example of the Muslim Scouts movement and its integration into the wider Scouts Association was shared as an example of good practice.

### *RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES*

In this category, three recommendations were prioritised two of which were duly combined. The recommendation of greatest priority was the need for Government to adopt a definition of Islamophobia and for the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to set up administrative systems to consider Islamophobia in the same way it does other hate crimes. For participants, the emphasis was focused on a commitment from Birmingham City Council – and other state and institutional bodies in the region – to not only adopt a formal definition of Islamophobia but so too make a public declaration about not being tolerant of Islamophobia or indeed any other similar discriminatory phenomenon. Participants felt this would send out an undoubtedly strong and wholly positive message to all of Birmingham's communities irrespective of whether they were Muslim and non-. Participants believed that this would make Birmingham appear somewhat distinct from other towns and cities and would fit with Citizens UK Birmingham's 'City of Welcome' strategy.

As noted previously, the second priority sought to combine two of the Commission's recommendations: for Government to convene an independent review of Prevent and for local authorities to develop a Prevent Advisory Group made up of local stakeholders. While the former was nationally-focused, there was significant receptivity among participants representing local institutions. There was a similar

receptivity to the development of a Prevent Advisory Group also.

### *RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MUSLIM COMMUNITIES*

Here just one recommendation was prioritised by participants. Of greatest priority was the need for mosques to invest in British-born imams that would be paid a decent living wage - funded by Muslim institutions in the UK - and equipped with pastoral skills so they are able to deal with the challenges facing British Muslims contemporarily. While prioritised by a significant number of participants, there was also some scepticism expressed. While most recognised the need for imams to be better paid and for the role to be better professionalised, some were concerned about the drive towards 'British-born' imams and what they perceived to be the increasing institutionalisation of Islamic teaching and worship. From the discussions, it was felt that while there was a need for change as regards the recruitment and training of imams such would be better to occur rather more organically as generations and by consequence, mosque leadership committees' change. One point that all were able to agree on was the need to improve the pastoral support available to Muslims in contemporary Britain whether that was that through mosques and imams or other institutional and community sources.

### *ALTERNATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS*

In addition to the 18 recommendations put forward by the Commission, participants identified two additional recommendations they believed were of significant priority Muslim communities in Birmingham.

The first was the need to better convey the 'multiple faces of Birmingham'. Noting the

increasingly diverse demography of the city, participants felt that Birmingham City Council could better celebrate this; one suggestion being a visual poster campaign titled and capturing the 'multiple faces of Birmingham'. While far from Muslim-specific, participants felt that this would be beneficial to all in the city and would again fit well with Citizens UK Birmingham's '*City of Welcome*' strategy.

The second was to improve the engagement of and with Muslim women at all levels. Going beyond existing structures and processes that typically see Muslim women engaged solely in relation to 'Muslim women's issues', participants identified a pressing need for more women to be included in mosque committees as also sharia councils. At the state and institutional level, participants suggested the need for more Muslim women to not only be engaged but more importantly, to be seen to have a higher profile.

### **PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CITY OF BIRMINGHAM AND ITS MUSLIM COMMUNITIES**

To consider providing guidance on accurate reporting on Muslim issues in Birmingham and the West Midlands, to ensure that faith is not conflated with extremism. To seek the support and input of the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) as regards appropriate ways of responding and complaining where appropriate.

For Birmingham City Council – and others in the city - to adopt a formal definition of Islamophobia at the same time as making a public statement denouncing all forms of discriminatory phenomena. To work with appropriate authorities in the city to ensure

that Islamophobic hate crime is dealt with in the same way as other hate crimes.

For Birmingham's mosques to invest in imams appropriate to the city and its Muslim communities, to work towards ensuring that imams are paid a decent living wage funded by Muslim institutions in the UK, and for them to be equipped with the correct pastoral skills to meet the needs of those they seek to support.

For Birmingham City Council schools, colleges and youth clubs to champion and expand opportunities for young people from different backgrounds to meet and share experiences through the encouragement of outreach programmes and other appropriate activities that are attractive to young people.

For Birmingham City Council and West Midlands Police to consider convening a review of its Prevent provision at the same time as establishing an Advisory Group made up of local stakeholders to share best practice.

For Birmingham City Council and other appropriate institutions and actors to consider the creation of a campaign showcasing and championing the city's diversity, referred to here as the 'multiple faces of Birmingham'.

For Birmingham's institutions to consider how to better engage Muslim women. For Birmingham's mosques and Muslim organisations to consider how to better include Muslim women as also their views and opinions.

## WHERE NEXT?

Aside from this briefing paper, the full discussions from the workshops will be used to inform conversations within the research team delivering the *"Birmingham's Muslims: in the city, of the city"* project not least as regards the design and delivery of future events and activities as also civic and public engagement. In order to feed back on this, an update will be published in the autumn of 2018 when it will be hoped that some tangible success can be reported as regards moving the priority recommendations forward.

In addition, the full discussions will be shared with both the Secretariat of the Commission on Islam, Participation & Public Life and Citizens UK Birmingham as a means of catalysing further conversations and hopefully, future collaboration. In the immediate future, these will form the basis of conversations with Citizens UK Birmingham and its members as regards moving forward with its *'City of Welcome'* strategy.

This briefing paper will also be shared more widely to try and generate wider input from existing and indeed new stakeholders simultaneously. In this respect, the briefing seeks to prompt new ideas and thinking as also open dialogue about new collaborations and engagement with the research team at the University of Birmingham. It is hoped that the workshop and its discussions will contribute towards a process of establishing a more open and democratic dialogue about key socio-political issues relevant to all communities in the city of Birmingham. In this way, the research team at the University of Birmingham not only hope for a wider, ongoing dialogue about the issues and priorities identified here but more importantly encourage it. In the first

instance, those looking to engage and develop collaborative approaches are recommended to contact Chris Allen at [c.aleen.2@bham.ac.uk](mailto:c.aleen.2@bham.ac.uk).