Muslim Youth Futures

Our Voice, Our Vision, Shaping Our Society

Andy Turner and Aisha Khan

Faiths and Civil Society Unit,
Goldsmiths University of London, 2025.

hereforyouth.org | gold.ac.uk

here for youth | Goldsmiths UNIVERSITY OF LONDON | Faiths & Civil Society Unit | Islamic Relief | AZIZ FOUNDATION

Contents

Project Team

Muslim Youth Futures Project Team

- **Jehangir Malik OBE** – Project Director Muslim Youth Futures, British Muslim Civil Society Report 2023 and Director of Muslim Civil Society Initiative

- **Ayub Seedat** - Chief Executive Officer, Here For Youth

- **Professor Chris Baker** - William Temple Professor of Religion and Public Life and Director of the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths University of London.

Goldsmith Faith & Civil Society Unit | Co-researchers and report authors

- **Andy Turner** is a community and youth worker with a background in UK local and national faith-related projects. He lectures in Community Studies and is a co-director of the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths University of London.

- **Aisha Khan** is a youth and community worker. She is Sanctuary Programme Manager at University of the Arts London creating safe supportive spaces for displaced students and staff.

Funders

This research was made possible with funding from: Islamic Relief, Aziz Foundation, All Ways Network and Goldsmiths.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the young people who participated in this study sharing their insights and experience.

Thank you to organisations and individuals assisting with this study - The Naseby Centre Alum Rock, Concord Centre Sparkbrook, Birmingham City Council, The Muath Trust, Amanah Youth Club, Bordesley Centre, Friday Night Vibes, Dream Chaser Youth Club, Youth Sports Academy, Pitch2Progress, Deaf World, Green Lane Mosque and Community Centre, Soul City Arts, Hamara Centre Leeds, Highfield Centre Leeds, Good Deeds Leeds, UK Islamic Mission, Youth Action Blackburn, Deaf World Birmingham, Rumi's Kitchen London, Friday Night Vibes Wembley, Muslim Scout Fellowship, The Kindgiving Foundation, Osmani Trust London, Leytonstone Mosque Youth Group, East London Mosque and London Muslim Centre, Asha Rage, Adill Hadi, Darnish Amraz, Rawaad Mahyub, Dr Abdul-Haqq Baker, Naveed Sadiq and Bearded Beys, Dr Naomi Thompson, Mahbub Nazir, Obayed Hussain, Lara Paquete Pereira, Ashalam Qureshi, Sadia Sajid, Raheem Mohammad, Martin Duxbury, Uzma Mukhtar, Mustafa Rafique, Ferdous Al-Audhali, Mohammed Kamran, Abdul Ghafoor, Shahyar Khan, Abdulla Almamun, MG Khan, Abdul Hasnath, Amar Abbass, Samina Saddique, Hamza Ahmed, Zahra Najak, Adilah Khan, Yasar Shehzad, Rashid Mohammed, Syed Adil Ahmed, Anwar Khattak, Imam Syed Anisul Haque, Sufia Alam, Saleh Ahmed, Mohammad Shabbir. The Faiths and Civil Society Unit team and the Community Studies team at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Muslim Youth Futures A Glossary

Intersectionality
Intersections of race, gender, class, disability, and sexuality creating overlapping systems of discrimination or privilege. Individuals may face multifaceted forms of oppression not understood in isolation. [1]

Identity Tailoring
Deliberate adaptation of a social identity to align with a context, group, audience, or societal expectation, relevant for individuals navigating multiple social roles, facing pressure to conform to dominant cultural norms. [2]

Code-Switching
Alternating between two or more languages, dialects, or varieties of language in a conversation or talkative context. The adjustment of behaviour, appearance, or expression to suit different cultural or social environments. [3]

Muslimness
Attributes, practices and cultural expressions associated with being Muslim. It covers both religious observances, and the broader cultural identity linked to Islam. [4]

Islamophobia
Irrational fear, hostility, or prejudice against Islam and Muslims via discriminatory practice, stereotyping, and social exclusion. A key societal issue first identified in a 1997 Runnymede Trust report. [5]

Rooted in racism and a type of racism targeting expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness. [6]

Youth Work
Activity and practice supporting personal and social development of young people involving informal education, mentoring and community engagement to empower youth, facilitating active participation in society. [7]

Third Spaces
Social or cultural environment distinct from home (first space) and workplace (second space) where individuals gather and interact. Crucial for community building, nurturing informal interactions and social cohesion. [8]

Muslim Consciousness
Awareness of Islamic beliefs, practices, values, and cultural identity. Recognition and expression by Muslims of a developing sense of identity and mutual awareness in personal and collective contexts.

Muslim Civil Society
Muslim Civil Society is the network of Muslim-led organisations, institutions, and community initiatives that work to advance social justice, civic participation, and the common good within wider society, inspired by faith and shared values.

1. Crenshaw, K. (1989). "Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989, no. 1, pp. 139-167.
2. Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books.
3. Myers-Scotton, C. (1993). *Social Motivations for Code-Switching: Evidence from Africa*. Oxford University Press.
4. Meer, N. (2013). "Racialization and Religion: Race, Culture and Difference in the Study of Antisemitism and Islamophobia." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 385-398.
5. Meer N; Elshayyal K; Islam M; Mohammed R; Aitlhadj L; Fernandez S. et al (2024) "Islamophobia: the intensification of racism against Muslim communities in the UK"; Runnymede Trust.
6. The All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (2018) "Islamophobia Defined: the inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia." 27th November 2018.
7. Jeffs, T., & Smith, M. K. (2005). Informal Education: Conversation, Democracy and Learning. Educational Heretics Press.
8. Oldenburg, R. (1999). The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community. Marlowe & Company.

Reflections

"The Aziz Foundation is proud to support this important study which amplifies the voices of British Muslim youth and shines a light on their needs, aspirations, and lived experiences. Young people represent the future of our communities, and understanding how mosques and community organisations can better serve and empower them is vital for ensuring their flourishing.

The project aligns closely with the Aziz Foundation's wider vision of supporting British Muslims to achieve their potential and contribute positively to society. Through our flagship postgraduate scholarships, internships, and leadership development programmes, we invest directly in young people to help them overcome barriers, access opportunities, and build fulfilling careers."

Joe Dobson
Aziz Foundation, Director

"Across Britain young Muslims are navigating increasing challenges, from poverty to a lack of adequate youth services, without access to the resources that genuinely reflect their diverse needs. But, as the Muslim Youth Futures Report highlights there is immense potential for young Muslims to shape a more inclusive and compassionate society, if a thriving Muslim youth sector is properly invested in.

Our work at Islamic Relief, with youth-focused partners around the country has demonstrated the vital need for this work. Ensuring that young people's voices are at the heart of decision-making, and that youth-led and minority-led organisations receive the support they need is critical. This report is a welcome reflection of the aspirations of young people, and a crucial call to ensure that investment in young Muslims is at the heart of building strength in, and the resilience, of our communities."

Zia Salik
Islamic Relief, UK Director

"The Muslim youth are often talked about, but seldom talked to. Decisions that will affect them dramatically throughout their lives are often made in rooms where they are absent from by those with little understanding of their challenges and aspirations. This is why the Muslim Youth Futures report could not be more important.

Having spoken to youth across the country and led by some of our largest organisations, that work with young Muslims, they have not only done a great job of capturing the diversity, but also the challenges they face. The recommendations section should be mandatory reading for every Muslim organisation and leader in the country. The youth are not just our future, they are our present."

Dr Wajid Akhter
Muslim Council of Britain, Secretary General

Executive Summary

This groundbreaking report attempts to capture the hopes, aspirations and concerns of Generation Z Muslims currently living in urban England, to ascertain what a future co-created by them might offer, and the role that a revitalised Muslim youth work sector can play in enabling that future to come to fruition.

Our study emerges at a critical time in the social, cultural and political life of the UK. With almost one-half of British Muslims under the age of 25, understanding their hopes, aspirations, identities, and sense of belonging is not only urgent—it is fundamental to the future of a cohesive, inclusive and just society. Co-led by academics and civil society partners, our research examined the lived experiences of Muslim young people (16-25) in urban England. It engaged 158 Muslim young people across Birmingham, Leeds, Luton, Blackburn, and parts of London through workshops, focus groups, and interviews, alongside 28 stakeholders from local authorities, Youth Organisations and Muslim civil society organisations. Its key objectives were focused around the need to:

- Investigate how young British Muslims perceive their futures in the context of faith, identity, and civic belonging.
- Map the structural and cultural barriers they face in education, employment, leadership, and representation.
- Surface the forms of leadership, resilience, and creativity that young Muslims are already demonstrating within their communities.
- Offer policy, practice, and philanthropic recommendations for inclusive investment in Muslim youth futures.

Here For Youth CEO Ayub Seedat speaking at The Power of Youth Work – 2023 Commonwealth Youth Work Conference

Like all UK citizens in their cohort, our participants have lived through a pandemic, and long-term economic hardship and cost of living challenges, not least because many of the areas of highest deprivation are localities which contain the highest densities of Muslim citizens. Like several of their cohort, they are also navigating the pressures and competing demands of social media and the distorting perspectives around race, religion and gender which it often proposes, leading to increased threats to mental health and social wellbeing.

However, this research coincided with two major political events which deeply impacted Muslim communities in this country. These are the ongoing war in Gaza and the increasingly desperate plight of the Palestinian people, and the national riots of the summer of 2024 fomented after the brutal murder of three young girls in Southport by someone not of Muslim faith or background. Both events have led to significant and disturbing increases in Islamophobia.

Despite increases in a sense of threat and the often hostile scrutiny from their fellow British citizens and media, the research discovered a determination by young British Muslims to retain pride in their identity, an identity that they are keen to evolve as both an expression of, and commitment to, the growing religious, cultural and ethnic diversity of these islands.

It also found a sustained willingness to play a positive role in our society as creators of social capital, motivated by the principles of empathy, solidarity, and entrepreneurial practices centred on identity and authenticity. In other words, these young people are claiming their right to fashion an identity and way of living that not only enriches the potential of their futures but also secures an exciting and peaceful future for society as a whole.

The headline findings from this research are as follows:

- **Aspirational Yet Marginalised:** Young Muslims consistently expressed strong civic and professional aspirations. However, they feel constrained by systemic Islamophobia, exclusionary narratives in public life, and limited access to decision-making platforms.
- **Faith as a Source of Strength:** For many participants, Islamic values serve as a grounding force for unity, social justice, community service, and ethical leadership. Faith is not a barrier but a strong driver for greater civic engagement.
- **Fragmented Support Ecosystems:** Despite the presence of many grassroots youth initiatives, young Muslims often fall through the cracks due to underfunding, siloed services, and a lack of strategic investment in Muslim-majority neighbourhoods.
- **Leadership Needed:** Participants demanded authentic pathways into leadership — not one-off consultations or symbolic roles. They called for sustained, funded programmes that recognise their full civic potential.

Emerging from these findings are a series of 19 recommendations directed towards key stakeholders, including mosques and wider Muslim civil society, statutory and non-statutory providers of Muslim youth work, and funders of Muslim youth work.

Together, these recommendations address the major agendas attached to the future of Muslim youth work in England, revealed by this research, including:

1. **Establish a National Muslim Youth Investment Fund** to support leadership pipelines, mentoring, and social innovation with Muslim young people.
2. **Invest in and develop a national Muslim youth work Infrastructure Organisation** (IO) to advocate for greater equity and inclusion for Muslim led youth work.
3. **Support faith-literate youth work** that embraces identity, spirituality and activism as complementary, not contradictory.
4. **Strengthen partnerships between mosques, schools and civic institutions** to provide safe spaces for dialogue, critical thinking and vocational preparation.
5. **Combat structural Islamophobia** via policing reform, education policy, and media representation grounded in anti-Muslim racism training.

Conclusion

Our report underscores the urgent need to recognise Muslim youth work as a distinctive field requiring dedicated resources, trained professionals, and supportive infrastructure. We believe there are inspiring and innovative examples that take place within - but increasingly - outside the mosque, in more neutral yet faith-literate and empathetic spaces. These provide volunteer-led, self-authored, and complementary opportunities for young people to navigate what it means to contribute positively to the flourishing of British society as a whole, while maintaining a strong and authentic Muslim faith and cultural identity.

Young British Muslims are not a "challenge" to be managed but a generation of potential to be recognised, trusted, celebrated and empowered. This research invites policymakers, funders, educators, and community leaders to invest in a future where Muslim young people can vocalise their vision and shape the society they are part of.

Jehangir Malik OBE – Muslim Youth Futures - Project Director

Professor Christopher Baker – Goldsmiths University of London Faiths and Civil Society Unit

Ayub Seedat – Here For Youth CEO

Hamza Ahmed, Head of Youth Work at Here For Youth, speaking at Goldsmiths, University of London conference on 'Faith, Intersectionality and the Future of Youth Work Partnerships'.

Introduction

The Muslim Youth Futures study was mooted in September 2023 at the Goldsmiths, University of London conference – **'Faith, Intersectionality and the Future of Youth Work Partnerships'.**

Organised by the Faiths and Civil Society Unit, the event included presentations by Hamza Ahmed - Head of Youth Work at Here for Youth, and Jehangir Malik - Director of the Muslim Civil Society Initiative. Both raised key questions about the life experiences of Muslim young people aged 16 to 25 years. How do Muslim young people experience the shift from childhood to adulthood - navigating their education, employment, relationships, identity and faith? Where are the safe faith-based or secular spaces for Muslim young people? Do Muslim young people participate in youth work and if so, what does this involvement look like? Finally, what is the experience of Muslim young people contributing to civil society? The Muslim Youth Futures research project emerged from these initial questions. Following a period of preparation from September 2023 to April 2024, fieldwork began in May 2024.

This report presents the research findings in three parts:

Part One: English Muslim Young People – what is Muslim youth self-identity in 21st century metropolitan England? How does intersectionality shape Muslim youth self-identity? What are the safe and supportive spaces used by Muslim young people? We discover Muslim young people *foregrounding* their Muslim self-identity, hyper-visible and paradoxically invisible, *backgrounding* themselves in culture and society.

Part Two: The Role of Faith-Led Community Assets, including the mosque, in the context of Muslim Civil Society. We explore how Muslim youth perceive the mosque and what they would like to see more of and less of, in their mosque. We consider how young people challenge mosques to engage more deeply in civil society and support youth work.

Part Three: Towards an Integrated Infrastructure for Muslim Youth Work in England: Challenges and Recommendations. In this section, we consider Muslim engagement with young people, and the need for additional Muslim youth work, and the infrastructure required to support this.

Methodology

The study employed a Participatory Action Research approach, spending time with groups and organisations to understand the context, challenges, and to engage young people, each of whom was remunerated for their involvement.

- Over ten-months 158 Muslim young people contributed their views and experiences via different opportunities.
- 111 participated in four workshops – 55 females, 56 males. 43 attended in Birmingham (22 females, 21 males); 23 in Leeds (13 females, 10 males); 26 in Luton (12 females, 14 males) and 19 in Blackburn (8 females, 11 males).
- A further 47 participated in other forums – including 29 in five focus groups (17 female, 12 males), 15 in four round tables (3 females, 12 males) plus three in one-to-one interviews (3 males) with a further twenty follow-up interviews from those already taking part in the above forums.
- Participants identified as British Asian, with some identifying with ethnic and cultural communities including Kashmiri, Bengali and Pakistani also Sudanese, Eritrean, Somali, Yemeni, Moroccan and Egyptian with others from Denmark, Ireland and Japan.
- Researchers also met in-person with 28 stakeholders including local authority and statutory sector agencies, locally based Muslim civil society organisations, and youth and community groups. This included two community anchor organisations – Muath Trust in Birmingham and Hamara Centre in Leeds.
- We met 15 youth organisations, including staff at two Birmingham City Council youth centres, one specialist youth work organisation – Deaf World, and Soul City Arts – both in Birmingham, and a member of staff at Muslim Scout Fellowship. We engaged National Youth Infrastructure bodies including NYA, UK Youth and DCMS - Youth Team.
- We engaged with six mosques – two in Birmingham, one in Leeds, two in London – plus one secondary school and one further education college participated at a round table in Blackburn.
- Initially for the first half of the study some areas, organisations and groups had repeated visits and follow ups.
- Our focus was on identifying and understanding key issues and concerns, and appetite for and interest in change.

Muslim Youth Futures Research Workshop at the Muath Trust, Birmingham

We wanted to understand the experience of young people identifying as Muslim including gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, those navigating the criminal justice system, or on the fringes or estranged from the mosque. In addition to a mix of age, gender, and ethnicity, the researchers acknowledged both outsider and insider perspectives - with Muslim and non-Muslim contributors co-leading the study. We used purposive sampling throughout, intentionally selecting participants based on this criteria.

Muslim Youth Futures Research Workshop at the Hamara Centre in Beeston, Leeds

The research intentionally focused on Muslim young people in urban metropolitan England – we prioritised Birmingham, Leeds, Luton, Blackburn and parts of London. Rather than a representative view of Muslim communities, our research reflects localised experiences and perspectives.

We did not investigate the experiences of Muslim young people in suburban, rural, or coastal communities or those living in the other devolved nations – Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These remain a priority for further research.

The study does not confirm a monolithic or inherently open or oppressive culture in Muslim-majority spaces. The study does reveal dynamics and contested negotiations of gender, power, and space within specific socio-cultural and historical contexts.

Our access to Muslim young people primarily came through community contacts – individuals and organisations working with Muslim young people and mosques that were able to assist in introducing the research and the opportunity to participate. Some community contacts expressed interest in the study, though they did not respond further to requests to participate. Others reported difficulty in assembling mixed or separated gendered groups of young people aged 16 – 25 years.

We wanted to include in our sample young people with direct experience of the criminal justice system in England, from Stop and Search to periods of incarceration. Feedback highlighted young people confronting complex circumstances, requiring more capacity to engage meaningfully. Valuable networks were established and the experiences of this key group of young people remain a priority for further study.

Throughout the research, we found that most community contacts assumed 'youth work' meant work with those aged 5 to 15 years. This demographic of children and early teenage young people engage with mosques through supplementary schools or madrasahs in the formal teaching of scriptures.

Our priority in bringing together young people aged 16 to 25 years posed a greater challenge, and in doing so, revealed how far this demographic may be detached – out of reach for some mosques.

"Being Heard"

Strikingly, throughout the study young people and organisations repeatedly expressed gratitude for "being heard" or "being seen". Community contacts and young people often referred to the study being a first, "we've never been asked this". A senior manager at Muslim Scout Fellowship - an organisation with almost 15,000 members - shared her frustration ***"We've been working with young people for 20 years. All the experience and skills that we have of working with and trying to develop young people, and never once have we been asked to be a 'thought provider'. This is the first time that we've really been consulted to share insights."***

Gaza and Southport – Critical Incidents

The Muslim Youth Futures study took place at a seminal moment in the lives of Muslim young people. As the study was being planned in Autumn 2023, the 7 October attack took place by the Palestinian group Hamas, followed by retaliation from Israel. As the war in Gaza continued across 2024, international outrage grew at Israel's escalation. Alongside this, on 29 July 2024, fatal stabbings at a children's dance class in Southport sparked riots in England and Northern Ireland. Violence was fuelled by disinformation on social media, amplified by TV and press, that the attacker was a Muslim asylum seeker. Rioters targeted a mosque in Southport the following day.

During the study, it was apparent that these two events were pivotal moments for Muslim young people, provoking trauma, anger, and active engagement in a range of responses. Although, our Birmingham workshop took place before the Southport riots, subsequent workshops and interviews provided opportunities to discuss their impact. Complex socio-political dynamics, including identity, faith, culture, media representation and the broader policy landscape shape the experiences of Muslim young people in the UK. Existing research (Stevenson et al, 2017) highlights a lack of structured support for Muslim young people aged 16 to 25. Against the backdrop of the war in Gaza and the Southport riots, we wanted to examine how Muslim young people navigate generational tensions, sectarian divisions, and the impact of Islamophobia.

Before considering the findings, we need to briefly familiarise ourselves with the key discussions on Muslim youth identity - the breadth of "Muslimness". By situating the Muslim Youth Futures study in this wider context, we underscore the critical need to listen to young people's voices and reimagine youth work to support their engagement and well-being better.

Part One: Metropolitan English Muslim Self-Identities and Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides a vital lens for understanding the complexity of Muslim identities in the UK – highlighting how race, religion, gender, disability and class intersect to shape lived experiences. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality reveals how overlapping systems of oppression impact marginalised groups, a framework that scholars have applied to UK Muslims.

Modood (2005) argues that Muslim identity is not only religious but also racialised and politicised, subject to varying forms of discrimination based on gender and socio-economic status. For example, Muslim women wearing the hijab face both Islamophobia and gendered stereotypes, resulting in exclusion from public spaces and the labour market (Tyrer & Ahmad, 2006), while young Muslim men often encounter racialised assumptions of terrorism and radicalisation (Hopkins, 2009).

These intersecting oppressions contribute to structural barriers shaping how UK Muslims navigate their identities. Shain (2013) highlights the stresses of combined marginalisation faced by working-class Muslims, influenced by both socio-economic inequalities and ethnic identity.

Despite common misconceptions of Muslims as a homogenous group, Shryock (2010) emphasises that Muslim identity is shaped by personal agency plus external societal pressures. Individuals negotiate their identities whilst being both marginalised and idealised by public representations (Shryock, 2010).

An intersectional approach reveals the diverse, multifaceted nature of UK Muslim identities, compelling a re-evaluation of experiences beyond narrow, simplistic notions. We now explore these experiences in further detail.

Tension for Second and Third-Generation British Muslims

Second and third-generation British Muslims navigate increasingly complex identities, balancing the cultural and religious values they inherited from their parents with the norms of wider European society. Ghatas (2023) argues that these individuals are not passive inheritors of tradition but strive to reconcile their Islamic beliefs with Western civic life actively negotiating their place as "European-Muslims". This struggle manifests itself in tensions over public behaviour, gender roles, and family expectations, as they seek to retain their heritage while integrating into mainstream society (Ghatas, 2023). At the same time, many face a sense of being "exiled at home," where self-identity and belonging are questioned - despite being born and raised in the UK (Elsayed, 2023).

Stereotypes, misrepresentation, and systemic marginalisation create a stark contrast between young people's legal citizenship and their lived experience of exclusion. Inequality and fear further shape their reality, with UK Muslims often feeling scrutinised and treated as outsiders.

Responding to these pressures, some adopt strategies including identity or code switching, seeking community solidarity to resist a sense of alienation (Elsayed, 2023).

This societal marginalisation also has more extreme consequences. Hirsch (2014) highlights how societal discrimination and lack of acceptance can push some young British Muslims towards radicalisation, as they search for identity and belonging in a society that often demonises them. For some, extremism becomes a means to assert identity and resist perceived injustices. Deep tensions define the experiences of second and third-generation British Muslims, conflicted between belonging and exclusion in the only home they have ever known.

> *"I don't normally prefer to say, 'I'm a Muslim', because... when I see another hijab, I think, 'oh, they are Muslims'. I would assume that they would think the same for me."*
>
> **Muslim woman in West London**

Post-9/11 and 7/7: Islamophobia and Surveillance

The post-9/11 and post-7/7 era has reshaped the experiences of Muslim youth in the UK, fostering a climate of suspicion, surveillance, and marginalisation. The securitisation of Muslim identities, reinforced by counter-terrorism policies like the Prevent programme, has disproportionately targeted Muslim communities, creating fear and mistrust (Kundnani, 2014). Not confined to policy, Islamophobia permeates daily life, from workplace discrimination to hate crimes, with visibly Muslim women facing heightened harassment (Allen, 2010; Tyrer & Ahmad, 2006). The voice of Muslim young people powerfully highlights the impact of these shifts, in a study by Sheikh and Hussain (2018). The rise of far-right rhetoric and media narratives linking Islam to terrorism further entrenches negative stereotypes, making integration and acceptance more challenging.

In schools, universities, and public spaces young Muslims report feeling constantly watched, with their religious and political expressions under scrutiny (Choudhury & Fenwick, 2011). This surveillance culture discourages political engagement, as many fear being labelled extremists for voicing concerns (Awan, 2012).

Bi (2018) argues that schools have become sites of control, where teachers are expected to identify potential radicalisation under the Prevent strategy, turning classrooms into spaces of suspicion (Bi, 2018). The Trojan Horse Affair intensified these anxieties, with Muslim students and educators facing disproportionate scrutiny under the guise of safeguarding, provoking heightened distress and more cautious expression of weakened Islamic identities (Bi, 2020).

It is in this context that we sought to understand how young Muslim people aged 16 to 25 perceived themselves and their self-identities.

Findings: Muslimness Self-Identity Foregrounded

The Muslim young people we spoke to have a strong sense of self-identity rooted in their Muslimness. At our workshops 58% of participants self-identified firstly as "Muslim", (78% Leeds, 64% Birmingham, 50% Luton, 39% Blackburn) followed by national or local identities e.g. "I'm British", Dutch, Pakistani, Kashmiri or Brummie, Luton, etc, then race e.g. "I'm Black", gender, employment or a passion or hobby. We were struck by an assumption from most participants that "of course" they would self-identify as Muslim when introducing themselves. Muslimness is a core part of individual identity.

Some interviewees noted self-identity varied depending on context, including the "person I'm interacting with". In one group interview, two males argued that there was "never a need" to state they were Muslim as their religion was evident from their practice.

Two West London females noted that wearing their hijab made verbally self-identifying as Muslim redundant; ***"the fact that I wear a hijab... I sort of assume that they're going to assume that I'm Muslim."*** The other, ***"I don't normally prefer to say, 'I'm a Muslim', because... when I see another hijab, I think, 'oh, they are Muslims'. I would assume that they would think the same for me."***

For most participants, the visual marker of a hijab, or niqab, did not prevent verbal confirmation of identity – one West London interviewee noted ***"I would normally introduce myself as a female Muslim, or a Muslim female. And maybe sometimes I would mention that I'm Asian or I'm a student as well. I would normally go for 'I'm a Muslim female'."***

A Leeds-based female prioritised gender first, secondly profession, ***"being a teacher because of the weight of responsibility... and third of all it's Muslim - it's something that***

affects me daily". One East London male commented, ***"I'd say, 'I'm an Irish... Londoner, and I'm a Muslim'... Some people will think one is not as relevant, or one is more... it can vary."*** One Birmingham City Council youth worker discussing their work with young people in and around the criminal justice system noted that Muslim identity, with its distinct way of life, "always, always digs deep" amongst Muslim young people. They recall reflecting with one young person on whether income generated from drug dealing was permissible - or "halal". This framing of religious language was described as "disruptive", touching a young person's "consciousness" - the young person reflecting on their priorities, and choices and imagining how these could change. Muslim self-identity – with its associated beliefs, values and ethics – is vital in helping support Muslim young people to divert from criminal activity.

The example highlights the impact of faith literacy – knowing the significance of halal and the usefulness and "importance of faith-based interventions". This points to the value of training in faith literacy and its potential significance in working with Muslim young people who are involved in or around the criminal justice system.

Some interviewed linked their Muslimness to the impact of the mosque investing in their education via daily after school Qur'anic classes – from 5 years to around 14 or 15 years. Scripture and prayer were taught and practised – nurturing faith, ethics, connection to peers, mentors and religious discipline.

Young people from across our sample consistently referred to the Qur'anic school as something supplementary to formal education, which helped instil notions of "discipline" and "morality", while cementing often lifelong friendships with their peers.

One Birmingham-based male stated, ***"When I was young, and I used to go to the mosque... you're surrounded by people that have the same sort of environment as you... the same faith and everything... It helps because obviously the teachers, they're trying to make you go to the right route at the end of the day... We used to do lots of activities... There was a lot of teamwork. They kept everyone tight knit... it was after school, basically... You can imagine the sort of impact that had in our lives."***

Muslim identity is a vital defining force deeply foregrounded in the lives of young people in our study. How did this strong sense of identity fare when confronted by the war in Gaza and events surrounding the Southport riots?

The War in Gaza

The occupation of Palestine, and the ongoing war on the people of Gaza were a persistent rallying point for the Muslim young people we spoke to. This was a matter of inequality, violence, persecution, and social injustice - experiences that may have resonated with their own daily lives. The war in Gaza and its causes were seismic - a focus for both anxiety and trauma, and solidarity and support. Some young people referred to their worry and distress for Palestinian communities. Others researched, actively sourcing news, following writers, activists, websites and social media. Participants were up-to-date, literate, furious about the illegally occupied Palestinian Territories, and outraged about the Israeli military offensive in Gaza.

When asked about civic engagement and voluntary work, virtually all participants indicated an active interest and involvement. Alongside fundraising for the NHS, volunteering in charity shops, and general neighbourliness – washing cars and visiting the housebound – Palestine and Gaza was a key concern for young people we spoke to. From cake sales, to festivals and events, to direct giving - young people were active and involved. This was about solidarity and support. Being informed and fundraising was an assumed activity.

Young people we spoke to were active in a type of civic engagement, including accessing information, evaluating political responses, campaigning and awareness raising and fundraising.

The centrality of Palestine to Muslim young people was highlighted at the annual Muslim Youth Engagement Awards, hosted by Here For Youth in December 2024. The event celebrated the achievements of over 400 Muslim youth workers and young people in mosques and community organisations across the UK. Each award included a short memorial to civilians, journalists, health workers, or others killed during the war in Gaza.

The Southport Riots

Over the summer of 2024, **rioting outside a Southport mosque sparked significant increases in Islamophobia across England.** As participants referred to the riots, we wanted to understand their impact.

During our data gathering, females repeatedly referred to remaining indoors following instructions by family, friends or employers. This Birmingham female was typical: ***"I was frightened. I was worried about my cousin... and I was texting, 'make sure you stay safe'. 'Look after yourself', telling their parents, all the family members, 'just stay safe. Stay at home'. I didn't understand. What was going on? What was their thing? Why were they so against Muslims? I didn't understand."***

For some the riots were shocking – another Birmingham female noted, ***"I never really saw Britain to be a racist country... I didn't realise... there were people like that."***

Those attacking the mosque were frequently labelled ignorant, for not understanding how Islamic beliefs and values promote charity and peace. For others, they were a reminder of a discrimination, racism and Islamophobia that existed elsewhere in the UK, now feeling more immediate in their multi-cultural metropolitan neighbourhood.

Whereas Luton seemed to some extent insulated from potential public abuse, for participants living in Leeds, West London and Birmingham, the riots challenged assumed levels of tolerance locally.

One male reflected that the fear of his parents' generation in response to these events was having a debilitating impact on young people's confidence, which needed to be challenged.

> *"I think, if anything, I was actually more exhilarated to go out, because I wanted to show that I was part of my community. I wanted to stand with everyone and show you can't bring us down, and you can come and can show yourselves in your masses, and we will return in our masses."*
>
> **Muslim male in Birmingham**

A Leeds focus group of young males asserted they had not been fearful during the riots, until one member disagreed, explaining he had, for the first time, felt scared about the attacks on Muslims. Watching the riots felt unlike anything he had experienced previously, reminding him that people and groups can change. His remarks shifted the dynamic and over half the group agreed that this was 'a scary time'.

For some males, the riots were a reminder of the risk and vulnerability Muslim women were exposed to - easy to identify in burqa, hijab, khimar, or niqab. Some spoke of their "sisters" remaining protected at home, while as males they could move about, some assuming they could blend in and avoid being identified as Muslim.

Protesters clash with police outside Southport Mosque

> *"As a female Muslim, it was much more scarier... I know some people that stopped wearing the hijab in the car for that period of time, just so they could protect themselves. And that's a scary thing to have in this country as well. Like, do you want to sacrifice your safety, or do you want to sacrifice your religion?"*
>
> **Muslim female in West London**

Apart from a few young people who wanted to 'take on' the rioters and fight if needed, we were struck by the overall emphasis on non-violent resistance.

Interviewees across research sites generally spoke about the possibility of showing compassion towards their aggressors and engaging in dialogue to nurture trust, mutuality and community. This was partly in the hope that a lack of knowledge and understanding about the true meaning of Islam could be corrected.

Examples were given of large non-violent gatherings, expressions of solidarity and support outside mosques in defiance of would-be aggressors, when Muslim and non-Muslims rallied to protect mosques and clear up shattered infrastructure in the wake of Islamophobic attacks.

Some young males in Leeds were insistent that these gatherings were not to defend the mosque, but represented open spaces to protect and maybe allow for dialogue.

In the days and weeks following the riots, going outside in public triggered fear of intimidation and attacks. One female said, ***"Going outside... I felt like I can't go to a shop, especially because of the way I dress, it kind of shows to other people that I am a Muslim."***

One West London female commented, ***"I got scared to go outside, knowing that there are people that have such hatred towards Muslims. That especially we have not done anything that could cause such hatred..."*** By contrast, other participants commented on going outside soon after the initial riots, to shops or work, and feeling that the crisis had blown over.

Some remarked on the lack of aftercare from school and the absence of support. The Southport riots happened outside of the school term at the start of the summer holidays, yet the riots were not a brief media story, but an attack on Muslim ideas and communities. The upset and trauma lingered long after the six-week holidays. The absence of any engagement or support from schools indicates an important lack of awareness or consciousness about their Muslim students. Where was the contact, or the allying with students affected during the crisis – or the acknowledgment of support these students might need returning to school?

Both the Gaza conflict and the Southport riots intensified our interest – where did Muslim young people find safety and support growing up – and where was this found today? We wanted to understand the safe and supportive spaces Muslim young people had growing up and their equivalent spaces today.

Volunteers sweep Sussex Road in Southport, Merseyside, after rioters attacked police

Findings: Safe and Supportive Spaces

In the study, 34% of young people from Birmingham referred to a mix of youth work providing safe, supportive spaces growing up. We met with the Birmingham City Council-run Naseby Youth Club and the Concord Centre, both of which provide Muslim-conscious spaces for young people, as well as the Muath Trust, a leading community anchor organisation offering youth work via its Amanah Youth Club. We also met with football training organisations, including Dream Chaser Youth Club, Birmingham Youth Sports Association and Pitch2Progress. Participants listed youth clubs (14%) and football clubs with their coach – "more than a coach", more "a mentor" or "youth worker" (18%) and other sports clubs (2%) as safe, supportive spaces.

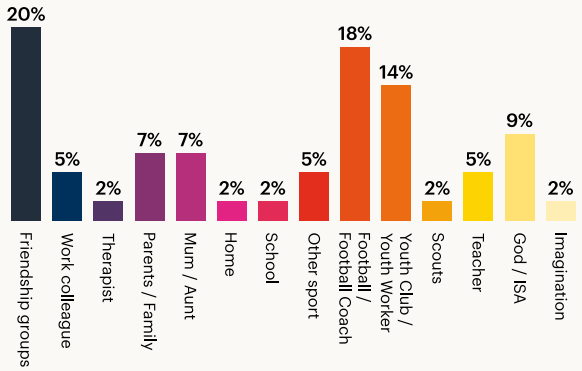
In contrast, while Luton participants did not list any community or youth clubs as safe supportive spaces growing up, 11% listed "playing football" - though no football clubs were named. One Luton female noted ***"having the freedom to kick about and enjoy yourself outside along with the aspect of competition. Meeting new people granted me additional comfort."***

In Leeds, participants did not list sports clubs as safe and supportive spaces growing up. Instead 26% listed community centres or youth clubs as safe spaces – 13% naming the local Highfield Centre or Hamara Centre. 13% listed the "Youth Club" with some referring to local project "Good Deeds", including a "very supportive leader".

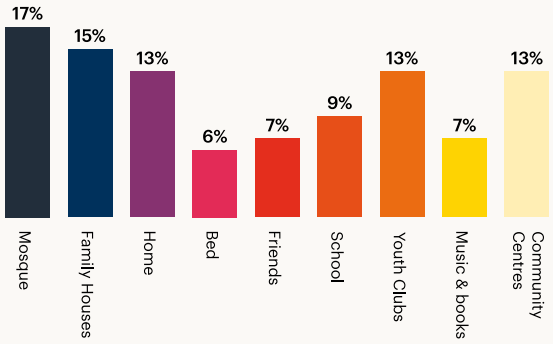
In Blackburn 6% listed a sports club with an additional 2% listing "the park", while "youth club" as safe space growing up was listed by 6% with 'Youth Action' named. Some young people interviewed – particularly in Birmingham and London – referred to significant local authority youth clubs or community centres.

The inconsistent reporting of youth clubs as a safe space by Muslim young people may reflect positive or negative experiences, alongside cuts to vital youth provision. 1,243 publically run youth centres closed between 2010 and 2023 (Unison, 2024), with 1,536 qualified youth worker jobs lost (Kumah, 2025). These vital safe spaces have been removed.

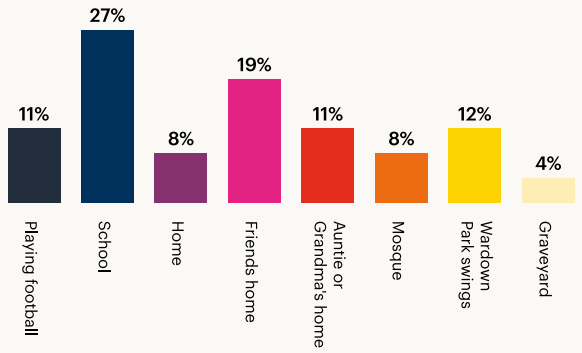
Birmingham
Safe Supportive Spaces Growing up



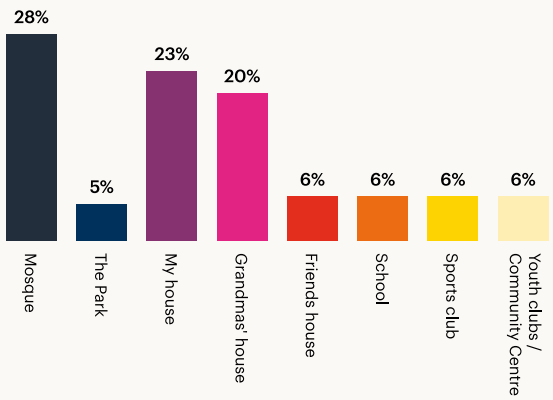
Leeds:
Safe Supportive Spaces Growing up



Luton:
Safe Supportive Spaces Growing up



Blackburn:
Safe Supportive Spaces Growing up



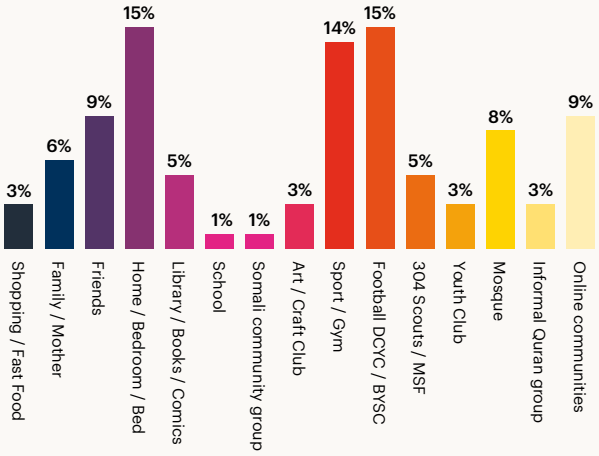
Privatised and Domestic: Home, Family and Friends

Findings from all workshops reveal the most popular safe and supportive spaces for Muslim young people growing up, were private and domestic spaces i.e. home, or homes of family, extended family and friends.

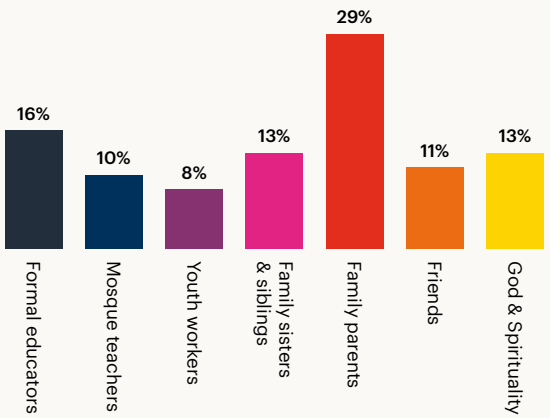
Strikingly, privatised domestic contexts became more important as participants reflected on their current safe, supportive spaces; in Luton up from 38% to 47%, in Leeds, from 35% to 53%, in Blackburn an increase from 49% to 61%. Only in the Birmingham workshop did the importance of private domestic spaces become marginally less significant for young people – from 34% down to 30%.

The survey findings - and the significance of home or homes of family, extended family and friends - synchronised with what young people were saying in our interviews.

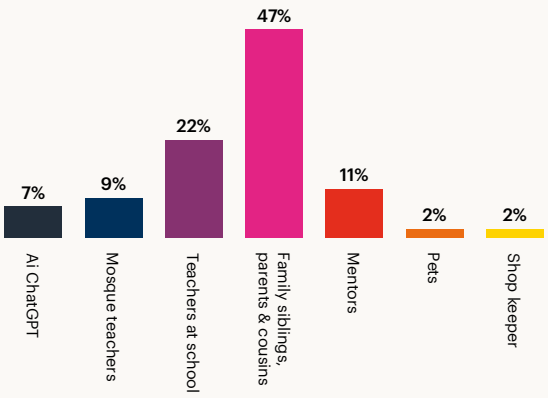
Birmingham - Safe Supportive Spaces: Today



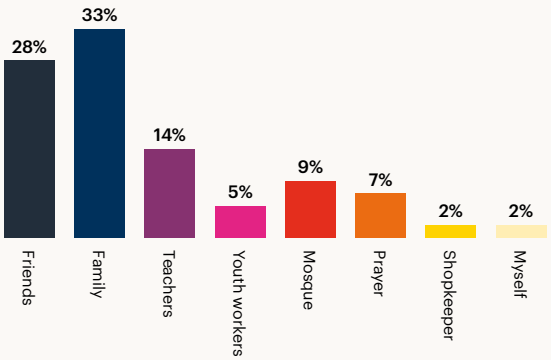
Leeds - Safe Supportive Spaces: Today



Luton - Safe Supportive Spaces: Today



Blackburn - Safe Supportive Spaces: Today



Home or family or friends meant safety, sanctuary, comfort and security. At the same time, the centrality of home was also problematic for some young people. Asha Rage – founder of Dream Chaser Youth Club in Birmingham – noted in an interview that the pressures facing Muslim young people, and the challenges confronting parents – particularly mothers – can be significant: ***"The mother has to look after all those young people by herself, and she is not able to fulfil all their needs, because she's by herself... and she's looking for money to feed them. So, these young people, they're looking, they're trying to find a place that, they can fulfil all the desires their mum cannot fulfil."*** It was this context and in part a lack of support from the mosque that led Rage to establish Dream Chaser Youth Club.

For some, digital spaces helped fulfil desires, deepening or extending their analogue friendships. This was accessed via smartphones including WhatsApp, Snapchat or social media and online communities, including Omegle.

In workshops female participants often highlighted online influencers, networks and resources they had joined. Interviewees also referred to the importance of off-line spaces including commercial sports clubs, shopping malls and cafes – Star City Mall and E15 Café in Birmingham were examples of 'safe spaces'. The safety or security from privately owned spaces came with financial transactions – entrance fee, membership, or the cost of a shopping trip.

Significantly, despite the importance of young people attending the supplementary school or madrasah growing up, the mosque did not feature prominently in participant lists of safe, supportive spaces for young people.

> *"I'm really like, I would say anti-social media... I feel like there's a lot of extreme values now, that sometimes it can be seen to be really controversial to you personally. And it affects you in a way that doesn't really help you. It isn't beneficial. I can use it as somewhere like, I can trawl... I personally, I see more negative in it. It's not something that I fall back on as a sense of support for my faith."*
>
> **Muslim female in London**

Dream Chaser Youth Club Awards, Birmingham

Birmingham Youth Sports Academy (BYSA) End Of Year Celebrations

Focus: Deaf Muslim Young People

- Home, family and friends were identified as **the primary safe and supportive spaces** also featured in interviews conducted with seven deaf Muslim young people.

One young person - part of West Midland based 'Deaf World' - noted that for ***"most of them [deaf young people], it's their home that is the safe space for them"***. For deaf Muslim young people, the intersections of religion, race, and disability deepened discrimination, inequality, racism, misogyny, or Islamophobia.

Deaf Muslim young people gave repeated examples of obstacles and barriers preventing participation in both the mosque or community. Barriers included a head covering niqab or hijab preventing lip reading, or a lack of British Sign Language trained accredited signers in meetings.

Anxiety and trauma were generated by racist or Islamophobic aggression aimed at deaf Muslim young people, at times amplified by their disability, and the challenges of responding or retaliating. Some spoke of this eroding their confidence in public spaces.

In the absence of groups like 'Deaf World' participants tended to avoid the mosque – stay at home, or seek out support elsewhere. Isolated, these deaf young people become an unseen and ignored part of the Muslim diaspora.

Those we interviewed spoke of their sense of fortune at discovering Deaf World, with its welcome, solidarity and camaraderie. Here was recognition that many deaf Muslim young people could not access networks of support and instead struggled to engage with wider society and the mosque.

> *"What I said about the mosque, they don't have any deaf awareness. So for me, thinking,'Should I go back there, or should I just stay home?' I feel like it would still be the same thing, the same issue. There won't be any changes. So I don't think that it is a safe space for me. I would stay home."*
>
> **Muslim male in Birmingham**

Specialist civil society groups, including Deaf World, enable young people to become advocates for change. They highlight the need for deaf awareness training across the public sector, national youth agencies and Mosques, challenging groups to employ deaf youth workers, and provide for deaf young people. From our meetings with deaf Muslim young people, it was clear that Deaf World is both essential and precarious – seeking support, resources, and funding to sustain their unique advocacy, training, and campaigning work, as well as efforts to ensure that mosques introduce British Sign Language (BSL) signing.

Deaf World was one of many Muslim conscious organisations we met, contributing dynamically to communities, and requiring recognition and funding.

Sammey from Deafworld invited to deliver a presentation at Solihull 6th Form College

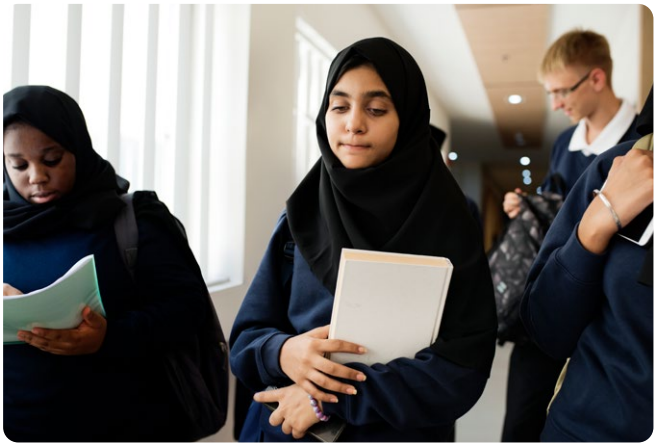
Other Safe and Supportive Spaces: Schools

School had an important, though inconsistent, role as a safe and supportive space. In our workshops and interviews a few participants referred to the culture of school as welcoming, and their overall experience of a safe, supportive space. Most pinpointed the impact of an individual teacher and their kindness or support.

Individual teachers had a key influence by recognising aspects of Islamic life and providing opportunities for its practice. There were numerous examples of this Muslim consciousness via non-Muslim staff.

The school environment, however, was also problematic for the participants. Some recalled hostility from staff or student peers linked to their religion and race. More frequently mentioned were examples of schools not providing opportunities for prayers - core to Muslim life. Here responses were patchy reflecting an academy's local autonomy in managing approaches to daily worship and practices including prayer.

One young person at a youth group in Wembley, West London highlighted challenging experiences at the Michaela Community School – which banned prayer in Spring 2021.



The student noted how his Muslim peers had "got together" and resolved this – ***"as brothers we had to work together to be able to pray"***. In contrast another local school provided a performance space leaving the students to work out how they organise their prayers.

Muslim students evidenced inter-peer solidarity, naming and working through their difficulties together. Some participants referred to progress, recalling no space for prayers when at school, then returning years later to find change – a new prayer room had been introduced.

Other Safe and Supportive Spaces: Third Spaces and Muslim Consciousness

The research found that a smaller number of participants listed public or third spaces – such as a community centre, youth club, or public library – as their safe, and supportive space. This is in a context where English local authority youth services between 2010-2011 and 2023-24 saw real-terms cuts of £1.2 billion – a 73% funding decline (Kumah, 2025).

Oldenburg (1999) introduced the concept of "third places", informal public spaces that exist beyond home (first place) and work (second place), where individuals gather to socialise and build community.

Historically, Muslims have long engaged with such spaces, from early Yemeni coffeehouses to modern-day chai cafés and sheesha joints, which continue to serve as key communal hubs for Muslim young people (Hattox, 2014). Unlike mosques, these environments do not carry the same religious expectations, allowing for more fluid and organic interactions.

For young UK Muslims, third spaces are vital for negotiating faith, identity, and belonging. Shannahan (2011) argues these environments exist beyond rigid religious and secular binaries, allowing young British Muslims to engage in meaning-making and self-exploration. Whether in coffee shops, community centres, or faith-inspired social hubs, third spaces provide flexibility to express faith while participating in broader cultural and political discourse.

In a society that often questions ideas of Muslim citizenship, these third spaces serve as vital platforms for resistance, dialogue, and empowerment, fostering a community rooted in faith and open to diverse expressions of identity. Investing in and sustaining these third spaces is crucial for the well-being, identity formation, and social integration of Muslim youth in the UK.

A consciousness of Muslim faith and belief acknowledged and affirmed by those in secular settings was also essential to engage Muslim young people in public spaces. Muslim consciousness on the part of secular providers might mean an intentional awareness of ideas found in Islamic rituals, also daily prayer, charity, fasting during Ramadan and pilgrimage extending to a deep literacy of a faith tradition lived out – rather than practised (Meer, 2012: 181).

This awareness, consciousness - or faith literacy - was vital in welcoming Muslim young people into secular spaces, generating a loyalty and attachment to both staff and the organisations.

The lack of attachment to third spaces evidenced in our study, perhaps reflects the closure of these resources and their increased scarcity due to the impact of austerity and other cuts to public services. A member of staff at the Muslim Scout Fellowship reflected: ***"The traditional idea of the 'third space' – that people used to speak of - the place outside home and school where young people could go – I don't think exists anymore. Scout groups are one of the closest things we have to that today, but as volunteer-run groups, what they really represent is the community rising up to fill a vacuum and respond to the need created by funding cuts in youth provision."***

Invisible Identity – From Foreground to Background

In our study, we met Muslim young people who foregrounded their faith as core to their self-identity. Both culturally and religiously, young people frequently spoke of the importance and centrality of their faith, which had been nurtured while growing up in the supplementary school or madrasah and at home.

We were struck by the loyalty to the mosque – especially amongst young males. Yet, alongside young people's search for safe, supportive spaces, we found repeated evidence of Muslim young people being backgrounded - becoming invisible and unseen by secular institutions and organisations, including schools, colleges, employers, the workplace – and also the mosque.

Event for young people at Green Lane Masjid, Birmingham

Muslim Youth Futures roundtable discussion with mental health, youth work, education and training professionals in Blackburn

A round table of mental health, youth work, education and training professionals in Blackburn elicited multiple examples of backgrounding Muslim identities. One participant referred to young girls wanting to "wear the hijab", but feeling ***"frightened to wear hijab because... will Higher Education accept them? Will the workplace accept them?"***

Another, working with young women to find degree level apprenticeships, where applicants have to attend an assessment day, reflected on the practical issues of travel and a work-based environment. ***"So you've got to get there. How do you get there? Who chaperones you to get there? And are you comfortable being in an environment or an office that's very male-dominated? You're the only female in that room... And how do they explain to a room of males when I'm uncomfortable as a lone female in itself? There's a challenge as a woman – and there's a challenge as a Muslim".***

> *"Just listening to young people and the rhetoric that they are understanding from the mass media, for example... how they're always portrayed in entertainment, etc.*
>
> *It's always either the very, very much anti-Muslim, or very disempowering, in the sense that you're always like the Oppressed Woman, for example. And it's never anything empowering, it's never anything positive, very rarely..."*
>
> **Female Manager - Muslim Youth Organisation**

Related issues also affect young Muslim males. As one roundtable participant reflected, ***"We're working with this young man... from one of the universities in London... He's come back to town... He went to work for a local firm, and because of his faith practices, the firm could not accommodate him [to pray]... especially in winter months... They said, 'Sorry, we can't accommodate you'."***

We found evidence of "code switching" to deal with this hostility or indifference to Muslim identity. This approach entails a person merging with their setting and avoiding conflict by becoming invisible to others. Female participants spoke of removing the hijab, and males of clothing and fashion - helping them "not be seen".

For some, we found a critical consciousness emerging, as young people reflected on the turbulence of their adolescence and the lack of interest, engagement, relevance or support from their college, employer or mosque.

Males in Birmingham, Leeds, and London focused on their treatment from college and employers. Females in Birmingham, Leeds and Luton referred to the attitudes taken by employers and the mosque, some commenting on the patriarchal assumption amongst males at the mosque and being held back in their expression and aspiration.

A few young males were reported as aware of this frustration from their female counterparts. For some participants, loyalty to the mosque had shifted to individual mentors or organisations who were offering more meaningful engagement and direct support.

Invisible and Hyper-Visible

Muslim young people are largely invisible in policy and practice, except as with the example of Southport riots, when they are viewed through the narrow lens of extremism and security.

Muslim young people face enormous social mobility challenges, held back from reaching full potential at every stage of their lives (Stephenson et al, 2017). Disproportionate barriers in education, employment, and mental health mean these struggles are often overlooked (Shain, 2013).

In the job market, Muslim young people experience high unemployment and workplace discrimination (Khattab & Johnston, 2015), yet targeted interventions to address these inequalities are scarce. Mental health services often fail to consider their cultural and religious needs, leading to disengagement and underutilisation of support systems (Soni & Faraghat, 2020).

Marginalisation is compounded by the paradox that Muslim youth are simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible. Nabi (2011) describes their absence from mainstream narratives, yet they are also subject to intense scrutiny and surveillance, particularly due to stereotypes linking Islam with terrorism. This duality fosters vulnerability and imposter syndrome, reinforcing their exclusion.

Without a shift in perspective beyond counter-terrorism narratives, Muslim youth will continue to be framed as security threats and sidelined in policy discussions. Breaking the cycle demands recognition of their contributions, challenges, and aspirations.

Our participants identified conflicting cultural identities and expectations, which challenged their loyalties and pulled them in opposing directions. On the one hand, a call to a disciplined Muslim life involves daily prayer, volunteering or charity work, fasting during Ramadan, and pilgrimage. On the other hand, inhabiting an individualistic, consumer culture – pluralist, post-secular – including a pick-and-mix set of religious doctrines, beliefs and spirituality.

During adolescence, the tussle of ideas and expectations provoked huge questions about personal identity and how to navigate these as (for example) a primary carer in a family, or at school, college, or work.

This section has observed that for many participants, it was the private domestic space, immediate family or peer group that provided apparent safety and support. Raising questions about its effectiveness is beyond the remit of this study, yet it remains important for future research.

The roles of secular youth and community groups, Muslim civil society organisations, their third spaces, as well as the mosque, were a focus of our study. We now focus on the role of the mosque with Muslim young people aged 16 to 25.

Part Two – The Mosque

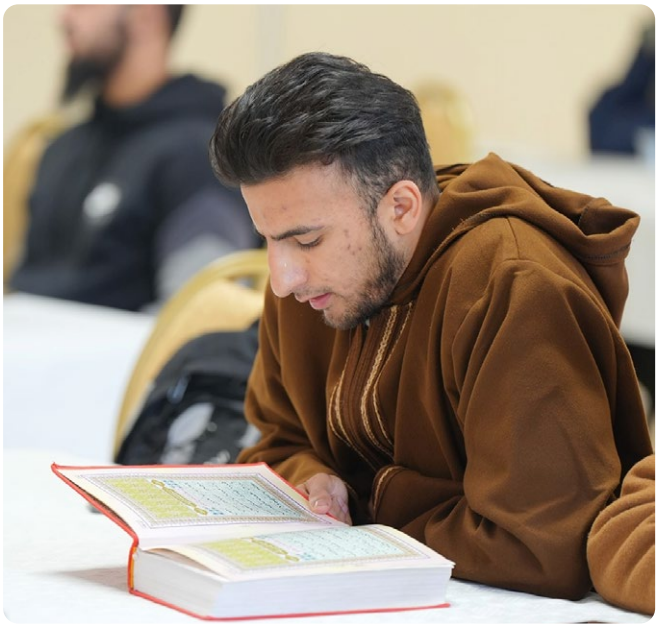
- For this study, we assumed that the mosque is important in the lives of Muslim young people aged 16-25 years. We invited workshop participants to list words that they associated with the mosque.

Keywords used by young people across all four of our research settings are captured in a word cloud, which visually identifies the primary terms associated with the role of the mosque.

Across all our workshops, warm words associated with positive meanings dominated. These included "peaceful", "peace', "safe" and "community". With only a few exceptions, across all workshops and interviews, the mosque is broadly perceived with loyalty and reverence by participants. For young people, the mosque is a serene place of peace, welcome and community.

In Leeds, Luton, and Blackburn workshops, some participants expressed gendered critiques of their community spaces and opportunities provided by some mosques. For example, in Leeds, participants used descriptors including "male-dominated", "men's world", and "male-centred" to voice their dissatisfaction. Similarly, in Luton, terms like "male", "male-dominated", "patriarchy", and "condescending" surfaced, indicating frustration with perceived gender imbalances. In Blackburn, words such as "dominance", "patriarchy", and "male privilege" were used alongside terms including "disappointing", "patronising", and "racist."

Some of these remarks reinforce what Abu-Lughod (2013) cautions as framing Muslim women uniformly as oppressed - reinforcing imperialist narratives and obscuring the agency and complexity of lived realities. Spivak's (1988) critique of the "subaltern" also reminds us of the dangers in assuming one singular voice or experience for marginalised groups. Rather than contributing to external narratives that construct Muslim women as passive subjects needing rescue, we locate these important accounts in a broader landscape of vital intra-community critique and reform.



'More of / Less of' in the Mosque

We asked Muslim young people what they wanted to see "more of" and "less of" in a Mosque. The findings are summarised in the diagram below. Generally, participants recorded more "more of" and fewer "less of" – possibly indicating that there was less to remove, but if possible, more changes to make.

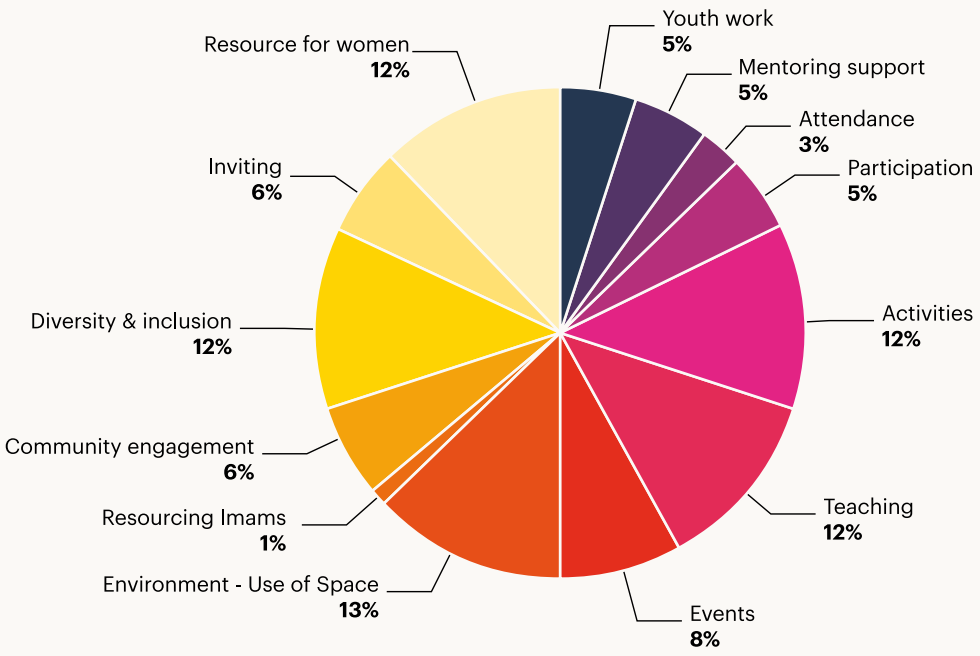
More of... Youth Work, Inclusion, Diversity, Spaces, Female Resources, Events, and Activities

Over a third - 35% - wanted 'more of' youth work, or youth work related requests. Youth work is vital for generating more mentoring and support (5%), extending participation (5%), growing events (8%), and engaging in relevant activities (12%) with a simple call for more youth work (5%). Alongside males, females referred to more sports and outdoor activities – trips out of the city and hikes.

Almost a quarter - 24% - wanted to see more diversity and inclusion – mosques characterised less by a specific ethnicity or group – more mixed up, reflecting a wider, less sectarian community.

13% want more effective use of space, and 12% want more resources and space to support work with girls and young women. 6% referred to more community engagement, and 6% wanted a more 'inviting' mosque.

More of... in the Mosque



Less of... Division and Disruption

A much smaller percentage listed what they wanted "less of", highlighting two themes.

Firstly, less division and disruption – less hypocrisy and narrow thinking. Less conflict in mosques, "internal politics", "controversy" and "politics". And, less disruptive in the context of worship and social activities – fewer "people on their phones" and people "showing off".

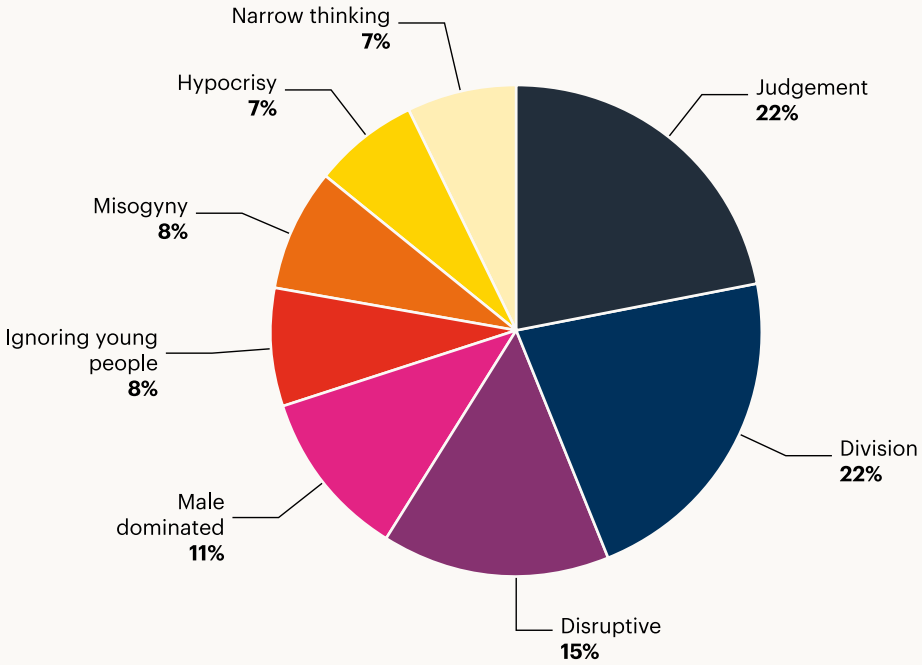
Less of... Judgement Male-centric and Ignoring Young People

A second theme related to attitudes and judgement on display in the mosque – fewer "negative opinions", or "judging from adults" directed at young people. Also, less male-centric spaces. The latter may be due to Friday prayers at the mosque being obligatory and daily prayers encouraged for males – with both being optional for females.

Finally, less overlooking young people, "less decision making ignoring young people", less committees of older people - what about young people?"

Again, these candid insights were not universal, but they reflect vital, localised, intra-community critiques.

Less of... in the Mosque



Challenges and Priorities for the Mosque

Both charts highlight the challenges for mosques in metropolitan English cities. On the one hand, participants expressed tremendous loyalty to their mosque. On the other hand, there is frustration and resentment – the mosque can do better.

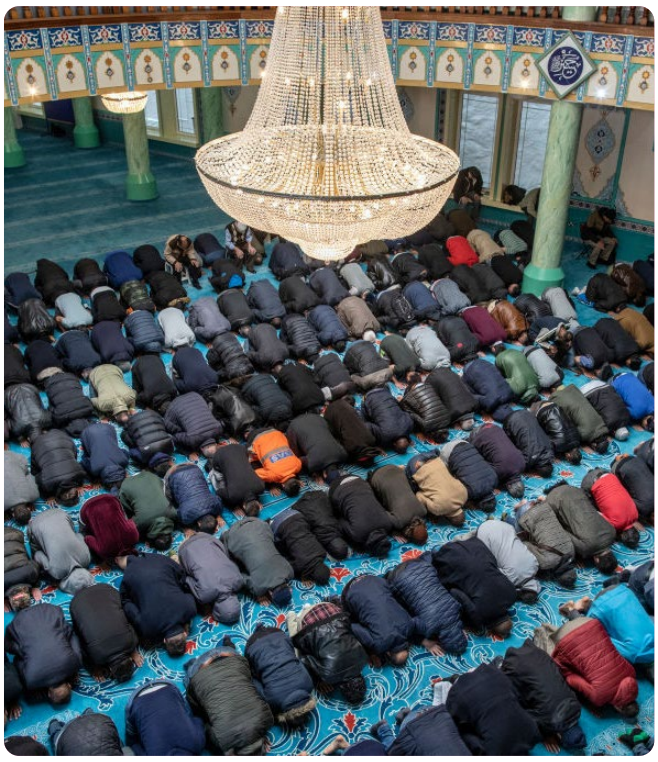
For some Muslim young people, the mosque was socially and culturally irrelevant, avoiding complex realities or social issues in contemporary culture and society. This included ignoring local or national politics, not confronting adequately the chronic everyday challenges of discrimination, inequality, racism, misogyny, or Islamophobia, playing out on the streets and in the media.

In a fluid, pluralist society, the mosque was perceived by some participants as factional, rigid, narrow and alienating.

There was also a perceived lack of interest in connecting or engaging with young people in the wider community.

One repeated example was of mosques spending money on capital projects to enhance their buildings – such as an extravagant new chandelier – rather than investing in people and youth work.

Mosques were perceived as missing a trick, ignoring the assets in front of them - in other words, male and female young people, including those with disabilities, and with a passion for youth work. Why not find ways to nurture young leaders, and support vital youth work? Why not locate young people and youth work as central in the life of the mosque? What could this look like?



Friday Prayers at The Suleymaniye Mosque in East London

Role of the Mosque in Supporting Muslim Youth Work

When asked, all the mosques we worked with assumed that 'youth work' was an activity with those aged 5 to 15 years, including supplementary schools or madrasahs. For this study, our interest focused on activity nurturing informal education and social development among young people aged 16 to 25 years.

Three mosques we visited offered split youth work provision – we were struck by the contrasting offers for males and females. For example, males generally emphasised competitive sports, including boxing and football, while female offers generally referred to arts and craft activity.

Scouts at Green Lane Masjid

Birmingham's Green Lane Mosque (GLM) has a lively community centre – its CEO Co-Chaired the Faith Alliance with the West Midland's Police and Crime Commission. Aware of the impact of local knife crime on young people, a knife amnesty was promoted, with significant success. GLM collaborated with other West Midlands mosques and community groups, raising awareness of reckless driving, via the "Safe Streets Now" campaign. GLM includes a programme of youth work. A boys' youth club was established in 2019 for males aged 12 to 17, its website referring to "empowerment", "building strong relationships", and competitive sports with "overnight stays and outdoor adventures". Their girls club contrasts in tone, referring to "social", "supportive, safe" spaces. The GLM website also promotes a boys boxing club for 12 to 16 year-olds. Football coaching sessions for young people aged 6 to 15 years are also available. Although the registration form offers a gender option, no female players or teams are pictured, and the enquiry form is addressed to the boys' club. A 'friends and family' Basketball / Dodgeball club runs for girls 18+ with 12+ invited, accompanied by a parent/carer. What if males wanted to develop arts and crafts – or, as revealed in our study, females want outdoor adventures or football? Youth work at Green Lane reveals an appetite to support and nurture young people. Support and resource is also needed to widen and deepen their youth work.

At all mosques, we met staff and unpaid volunteers keen to develop youth work provision. Some wanted to learn more about training or recruiting qualified youth workers or youth worker Imams, or how to support existing youth worker volunteers better. Many recognised the significance of youth work, unaware of professional youth work, and acknowledged they were unable to resource it. How are mosques and Muslim youth organisations supported in their youth work?

Muslim Scout Fellowship

The Muslim Scout Fellowship (MSF) is one of the largest Muslim youth development organisations in the UK, working as part of the Scout Association (TSA). With a national remit and nearly 15,000 members, MSF enables Muslim young people and their groups to fully participate in Scouting – from opening new groups and training leaders to providing programme resources and organising national events.

For nearly two decades, MSF has played a vital role in Scouting's growth. While national membership rises by around 2% annually, Scouting in Muslim communities has grown by about 15% year on year. This success reflects a deliberate and indigenising adaptation of Scouting – a fundamentally British institution – to the needs of Muslims in the UK. Far from being a marginal initiative, Muslim Scouting has become a model of integration without assimilation: young people are encouraged to live out the values of their faith while developing the skills, confidence, and sense of civic duty that Scouting is renowned for.

At its heart, MSF blends grassroots youth work, personal development, and community service within a strong Islamic framework that speaks directly to the lived realities of Muslim families. The result is a generation of young people who are not only thriving within their communities but also contributing positively to wider society as active citizens.

For policymakers, the MSF story is an example of co-production demonstrating what is possible when national institutions and minority communities work in genuine partnership. It shows that Muslim young people are not a "hard-to-reach group" but an under-recognised source of energy, leadership, and social contribution. Greater recognition and investment in this model would not only strengthen Muslim youth provision but also enrich the wider fabric of British society.

Young scouts at a Muslim Scout Fellowship event

Here For Youth

Here For Youth (HFY), the working name for Islamic Network, was unique in this study for its emphasis on youth engagement across the UK. With a background in direct youth work since 2011, HFY shifted to capacity building in 2020, responding to growing need and diminishing youth club resources in the most deprived areas of the UK - also home to the majority of Muslim communities.

HFY primarily train, coach and accredit grassroots community organisations and mosques on their own Youth Engagement Framework. In 2024, they worked with 39 mosques and 34 Muslim youth and community groups, training 632 individuals to implement the Youth Engagement Framework. They help establish weekly youth engagement sessions, connecting over 2,000 young people each week to a mosque or Muslim youth group via their network of 'Youth Hubbs'. With "Hubb" (Arabic for "love"), the aim is to make these spaces the heart of the community. Following the Southport riots, HFY created resources and training to assist mosques and Muslim groups in speaking with and supporting young people affected by the violence.

HFY is a distinctive and essential resource that is growing a national network, promoting Muslim youth engagement, and is starting to be recognised by mosques and Muslim community organisations.

Teenagers engaged in a thought-provoking discussion at the Youth Hubb of the Islamic Society of Gloucester (ISOG)

Part Three – Youth Work and Infrastructure

- Intersecting challenges of identity, discrimination, and policy neglect shape the experiences of Muslim young people in the UK. While they navigate complex generational and cultural tensions, Muslim young people are excluded from meaningful policy discussions unless framed as security risks.

Muslim Youth Engagement Awards, hosted by Here For Youth in December 2023

The climate post-9/11, 7/7, and London Bridge knife attacks has intensified Muslim young people's hyper-visibility in surveillance and counter-terrorism narratives, reinforcing their exclusion. Meanwhile, structural barriers in employment, education, and mental health remain unaddressed, leaving many Muslim young people without adequate support and largely invisible in policy terms.

Throughout our study, the significance of youth work had been highlighted. Before considering the findings, we need to briefly note the context of Muslim youth work.

In Summary: The Muslim Youth Work Landscape

Youth work provision for Muslim young people in England is limited, despite young people under 24 years totalling 46% of the 3.9 million UK Muslim population. Funding constraints and policy priorities conspire to overlook the distinct needs of Muslim young people. Small minority-led groups are often unable to compete for large grants. Despite being closest to lived realities, they remain under-resourced and precarious. Short-term and one-off funds undermine long-term sustainability or growth.

While some faith-based initiatives offer support, mainstream youth services largely fail to engage with Muslim youth in meaningful ways (Thomas, 2011), though we found some valuable exceptions. The gap is concerning, given the structural challenges Muslim young people face in education, employment and social inclusion. Rather than adopt informal education and welfare-based approaches, statutory youth work with Muslim young people is typically framed through a narrow counter-extremism lens. Thomas (2016) argues that policies like Prevent overly focus on radicalisation, diverting attention from broader social and economic struggles affecting Muslim youth.

The complexities of faith, identity, and marginalisation further shape the Muslim youth work landscape. Khan (2018) highlights how Muslim youth work is often misunderstood or sidelined in mainstream services, frequently reduced to addressing the physical, social, and cultural spaces that Muslim youth inhabit, including neighbourhoods, community centres, and institutions they interact with, such as schools and youth services.

Khan argues that mainstream services often focus on the geographical and environmental aspects of Muslim youth work, such as where young Muslims live and the challenges associated with those spaces (e.g. crime, deprivation or segregation), rather than engaging with the deeper ethical, spiritual, and cultural principles that shape their identities and aspirations.

Reducing Muslim youth work to issues of place means policymakers and practitioners risk overlooking the broader values, beliefs and agency of young Muslims, and in doing so, fail to provide meaningful support aligned with their lived experiences.

This has contributed to the invisibility of holistic, supportive youth work practice with young Muslims. The securitisation of Muslim youth work reinforces perceptions of Muslim identity as a policy concern, while failing to address deeper developmental needs. Efforts to formalise training, such as the now-defunct Muslim Youth Work degree at the University of Chester, have struggled to gain long-term institutional backing, while Thompson and Shuker (2021) call for broader, more explicit recognition of religion, faith and spirituality in youth work training, on professional qualifying youth work courses in England.

Despite these barriers, Muslim civil society – including Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), such as Islamic Relief UK, Muslim-led community anchor organisations, mosques and Islamic Centres, Muslim youth organisations, and Muslim youth workers in secular spaces continues to provide vital opportunities for leadership, community engagement, and social participation.

For this study, we identify a range of youth work interventions, including two examples of local authority youth work – blending the secular with a Muslim consciousness - to validate and support Muslim young people.

Muslim Consciousness and Secular Youth Work

The Naseby Centre in Alum Rock and Concord Centre in Sparkbrook are two youth clubs managed by Birmingham City Council where all our participants gave examples of distinct Muslim conscious approaches.

One non-Muslim youth worker recalled providing washed prayer mats to young people using a room in the club for prayers. Young people found the pristine prayer mats a kind and unexpected gesture – touching and impactful. The action provoked immediate loyalty and attachment to the youth worker who identifies as gay and recalled managing homophobic responses when working with other groups of young people. Young people and staff also referred to the support for young males leading their prayers offered by this project – building responsibility and confidence.

Youth session at Concord Youth Centre in Sparkbrook, Birmingham

Young boys playing pool at Naseby Youth Centre in Alum Rock, Birmingham

In the context of a secular youth work space, Muslim-conscious approaches by both Muslim and non-Muslim staff validate young people and nurture trust. The impact of solidarity and support lived out in the diverse, pluralist setting of the club was reflected in the confidence of young females and males owning both their Muslim and racial identities, expressed thoughtfully in reflective discussion.

Young people were encouraged to hold their identities more confidently, tentatively confronting oppression and trauma including racism, homophobia and Islamophobia.

At Naseby and Concord, we also saw the impact qualified and experienced professional youth workers can make, understanding and framing complex challenges navigated by Muslim young people. This included how Muslim young people relate to society and culture and their religious, racial, sexual and gendered identities, recognising and responding via Trauma Informed Practice (TIP) approaches. We saw this particularly in relation to youth work with young males, with an emphasis on recreational games, group work, discussion, outreach and detached youth work. We noted however that girls' work often missed the opportunity to enable them to meet female qualified youth workers.

We now consider further examples from Muslim civil society in the Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS).

Football and Sports Based Youth Work

In Birmingham we found three oversubscribed football coaching and mentoring groups – Dream Chaser Youth Club (DCYC), Birmingham Youth Sports Association and Pitch2Progress – all with Muslim staff and leadership offering supportive spaces for Muslim young people. Each was pioneering and establishing innovative youth work open to all, though attracting largely Muslim young people, loyal to their groups.

In July 2024 we attended the DCYC annual awards at a large conference venue packed with hundreds of young people, parents and carers, stakeholders, and local leaders. DCYC is a Somali-led youth organisation founded by youth campaigner and organiser Asha Rage. The awards evening was hosted and led by the youth - it was well organised, and a powerful celebration by young people, of all their achievements at DCYC.

Community Anchor Organisations

We visited two community anchor organisations, each well established, with experience, long-term interest and track record in working with their neighbourhoods to deliver a range of public services.

Muath Trust Birmingham

Muath Trust based in the Bordesley Centre, Birmingham, was established in 1990 by the Yemeni community to "serve and support the community". It focuses on social and economic welfare via community activity including a food bank, 'Nourishing Souls' – a mental health and food project, English as a second-language (ESOL) classes, a nursery, sports club, multiple education, training and business support programmes including five business units, and 'Trust Quality Care' providing home care support.

To sustain its work Muath Trust partners with a diverse mix of funders, partners and key stakeholders – including the NHS, Birmingham City Council, central government departments and regional and local organisations. Muath Trust runs youth work at both Amanah Youth Club, recently establishing the Base Youth Centre, co-designed and co-created by young people for young people and funded by the UK government Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

When we met, Muath senior staff were recruiting a youth worker to support development of their youth programme at the Amanah Youth Club. Though not professionally qualified, the new appointment is working with Here For Youth to implement the Youth Engagement Framework there.

Youth workshop at Muath Trust, Birmingham

Jehangir Malik with Raheem Mohammad, the director of Hamara Centre, Leeds

Hamara Centre Leeds

Hamara Centre (HC) in Beeston, Leeds started in 1994, and runs a cultural foodbank, café, gym, an adult disability group, digital inclusion projects, groups for older men and women, a Saturday school and education and training projects.

A youth work programme, with qualified youth workers includes hosting work placement students from local accredited youth work training providers. Youth Futures Foundation provided £1.7 million in funding to HC to help tackle workplace discrimination in West Yorkshire. The Football Foundation confirmed funding for HC to oversee a new community Sports Centre. HC works with a mix of local stakeholders and organisations. This includes youth work projects such as 'Good Deeds' - set up in part, as a response to the 7/7 bombings. Hamara staff indicated work was in progress to set up a local consortium to apply for funding, manage contracts and deliver services – including additional youth work.

Youth Action

Finally, we met with Youth Action, a local youth work provider, with Muslim and non-Muslim staff in Blackburn, Lancashire. Starting with a single youth group in 2001 Youth Action have grown youth work provision across Blackburn with activity including workshops, support for young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN), advocacy services and adult education training. Working with a range of mosques and community partners, Youth Action shares a contract to deliver local youth services with two other local providers, funded by the local council.

Alongside these youth work providers we met other third space organisations, making spaces to serve and inspire Muslim young people.

Soul City Arts

Soul City Arts (SCA) is a unique UK arts agency defined in part by the drive and passion of its founder and artistic director, Mohammad Ali MBE. In a large warehouse space that serves as a mixing venue and studio, Ali described his use of visual spectacle, installations, walkthrough experiences, and immersive environments to engage all the senses and connect diverse communities.

Sensitive to individual communities, including Muslims, events and programmes attract multiple social groups. Issues of segregation are confronted – including class, Islamophobia, racism, sexism, and violence. The events are designed to be highly participatory. Producers and authors collaborate with the public to nurture connected spaces; for example, "Ramadan Streets" (2025), which was a week-long cultural event with community-led activities connecting food, faith, culture and neighbourhoods. At SCA, Muslim and Non-Muslims learn, share and discuss issues and concerns, and during the Southport riots following the PM's visit to the region, hosted a roundtable meeting.

Significantly, SCA works with a breadth of partners, including Birmingham City Council, supported by the UK Government's Community Recovery Small Grant Fund, to lead this example of a Muslim-conscious space. In December, we attended their annual celebration – a meal with an opportunity to celebrate stories and achievement, find solidarity and network usefully.

Rumi's Kitchen

Rumi's Kitchen blended community engagement approaches with social enterprise and the arts to cultivate open, inclusive spaces. Based in Brent, West London, Rumi's is a café, running retreats, coordinating food bank activity and hosting events, serving local people, including some on low incomes via a 'pay what you can' scheme.

During our visit, a lead worker discussed their mission, of serving those isolated and vulnerable with food and company, and the nurturing of spirituality through educators, artists, and community leaders. Rumi's Kitchen also utilised creativity, spirituality, education, and empowerment to nurture welcoming spaces for Muslim young people, helping them combat isolation and discover avenues for self-expression.

Despite being linked to a local mosque, Rumi's Kitchen was independent, working to engage second and third-generation Muslim young people by creating an open "non-judgemental environment" with "spirituality and Islam". While we were unable to attend their events, it seems from social media that their events attract younger audiences.

Soul City Arts - Ramadan Streets event in Small Heath, Birmingham

Friday Night Vibes

We also met young people who were running or volunteering at Muslim youth groups with an intentional focus on exploring the tenets of Islam through discussion, prayer and supporting one another in their Muslim lifestyle.

Some of these groups were linked to a mosque, while others were running alongside, beside – or in parallel to local mosques – attracting young people attached to a range of mosques. Networks including 'Here for Youth' offer these groups non-qualifying youth work training, resources and support. One example was 'Friday Night Vibes' (FNV) in Wembley, North West London.

At FNV, male and female young people meet in local community centre facilities, in separate groups – males playing sports, females doing crafts, each shifting into prayers and input prepared by volunteers. The week we attended explored the theme of 'sacrifice' through a story from the life of the Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him), the Qur'an, and stories of what sacrifice means today.

In the male section, boys and young men aged 13 years to mid-twenties engaged in the topic, smartphones away, the discussion inspiring ideas about how they might better sacrifice their time to serve their community. Stories were told about car-washing, shopping for a neighbour, and litter-sweeps. In the female section, a similar discussion took place.

One young woman described the session as a valuable space for dialogue and friendship. Another mentioned how attending the group "feels good because it gets you thinking", a "learning journey" where she gains both Islamic knowledge and personal insight. Another recalled at length about her experience as a neurodivergent individual, emphasising the need for more support for the 16 to 25-year-old age group, particularly at the intersection of faith and neurodivergence. FNV provides a space that supports and equips young people in their Muslim way of life.

We were struck by the level of meaningful engagement by a group of young people on a Friday night during the Euros football competition – evaluating neighbourliness and living for the welfare of others.

Run by volunteers, FNV attracted a mix of young people from across West London. Young women expressed appreciation for having an open space to discuss the Qur'an, social issues, and the unique experiences being faced by young Muslims.

Friday Night Vibes weekly youth engagement session in Wembley, London

Mixed Youth Provision

- Our study identified prolific and active Muslim civil society engagement via secular youth work and community anchor organisations, community-led arts organisations and faith-based third spaces.

Mosques run traditionally may not be able to fully accommodate Muslim young people confronting complex challenges, for example, related to identity or mental health. However, the presence of 'Muslim Conscious' third spaces identified in this research reflects a growing need for environments to address the diverse cultural and social experiences of Muslim young people. These spaces offer refuge for open discussions and foster belonging without fear of judgment.

Research by Cabras and Mount (2017) shows that social interaction in third places reduces the risk of depression by 32% amongst Muslim young people, underscoring their mental health benefits (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). Those projects summarised above offered distinct and valuable youth work spaces, yet many struggled to gain recognition and generate institutional backing through statutory or grant funding.

Addressing these systemic issues requires a shift from policies framed by securitisation issues, toward more inclusive frameworks acknowledging the diversity, aspirations and contributions of Muslim youth. The centring of Muslim young people – their voices and a mix of spaces fostering genuine belonging, where Muslim young people are seen and truly valued – is also vital. How might this be nurtured and sustained?

Qualified and Professional Youth Provision

We asked each organisation if they employed qualified professional youth workers. The response was patchy. Some did not see the need for recruiting this level of practitioner, perceiving that their staff had adequate mentoring, leadership, or coaching skills. Some complained about the perceived costs of a professional youth worker, while others used funding to hire unqualified staff, who, when funding ended, shifted to volunteering their time. Others explained their struggle to fund and then recruit suitably qualified candidates, noting the closure of professional training courses locally. One organisation spoke of successfully 'recruiting' a qualified youth worker, only to discover they were not trained or qualified. One provider questioned the usefulness of qualified youth workers when unqualified youth workers appeared to be just as effective.

The Hamara Centre was unique for its links to a professional qualifying youth work training provider, hosting students on placement, and its CEO, a qualified youth work professional, teaching on the qualifying programme. Despite obvious and distinctive crises confronting Muslim young people aged 16-25, the general lack of understanding and interest in qualified professional youth workers or knowledge of their value was striking. Little priority was given to recruiting qualified professional youth workers.

Research session at the Hamara Centre, Leeds

Cuts to Youth Work Provision

Our study coincided with reports of funding cuts by Birmingham City Council, threatening the Naseby Centre and Concord Centre. One visit to the Concord Centre coincided with a meeting between the Director of Schools and Employability from Birmingham City Council and the senior youth worker as part of a youth service review. The visit enabled us to provide feedback on concerns for the club's future to the relevant authorities.

Following their review of the Youth Service, Birmingham City Council proposed directly funding the Concord Centre, with four others, including Naseby Youth Centre, set to close unless partners could be found. The pressure on these clubs to deliver distinctive youth work and sustain their resources in areas of high deprivation seems unrealistic without support from Birmingham City Council.

Coordinating Provision and Support

Our findings reveal limited Muslim youth work provision. Some cities and communities had good youth work available, delivered by qualified and non-qualified staff and volunteers, while others were poorly served, requiring young people to travel significant distances to access a club or group. We observed that some providers were connecting, and collaborating with each other, such as the excellent 'Good Deeds' working with Hamara Centre. Others seemed isolated and precarious, competing to survive in a challenging local ecosystem.

In Birmingham, we met three football-based organisations supporting Muslim young people – each leading in distinct, effective types of youth work. Each will benefit from collaborating on aspects of funding, training and resourcing volunteers and staff to generate useful collaboration or resourcing. Some highlighted challenges with governance and funding, with one leader recalling being excluded from accessing leadership forums within the mosques on the grounds of gender.

Youth workers and managers repeated the challenge of negotiating with key stakeholders or funders, for example, on the retention of distinct Muslim practices or identities. Some interviewees reported patronising or hostile responses from funders or local infrastructure organisations – for example, the Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) – with one organisation bypassing the CVS to develop their own networks in order to establish their own consortium.

Backgrounding or Foregrounding?

In a tough social, cultural and economic context, we noticed some Muslim organisations backgrounding themselves, code-switching to erase clues of their Muslim identity. In Blackburn 'Youth Action' worked to support Muslim young people – why not 'Muslim Youth Action' or a tag line linking to their Muslim community or network? Even 'Here For Youth' is the working name of 'Islamic Network', with clues to their vital Muslim resource role now less apparent.

At a key time to affirm Muslim identities, being visible as a Muslim organisation is vital. Alongside this, Muslim civil society leaders reported huge challenges for Muslim organisations, of structural racism and Islamophobia in the behaviour of partners, key stakeholders and funders. Some reported funding being deliberately withheld – others reported being excluded and not accessing the lottery based funding due to ethical reasons. This needs to change.

Celebrating and Supporting

Muslim civil society encompasses a wide range of dynamic and prolific youth work provision. We observed distinctive and outstanding youth work practices that would benefit from being promoted to wider local and national audiences, including young people, funders, and policymakers.

We observed network organisations, including 'Here for Youth' addressing some of this work, but also noted major gaps. For example, we considered during a crisis impacting Muslim young people, who will a mosque contact to help them navigate the media, or feed into the policy debate? Who will amplify the voice of Muslim young people to broader audiences? Or support a mosque or Muslim group, identify and develop appropriate youth work practice and secure funding? Or in the case of specialist organisations like Deaf World, who is helping them to advocate, engage in policy or reach their next level?

A Muslim-led Infrastructure Organisation (IO) highlights a vital opportunity to nurture the voices of Muslim young people and feed them into policy development. For example, this study is published as the UK government Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) completes its consultation on the needs and priorities of young people - and a new youth strategy. How are DCMS engaging with Muslim young people? It is vital that Muslim young people, alongside those of other faiths, are included. To assist organisations engaging with Muslim young people are significant - including:

- **The Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH)** is a support service providing mental health support, mentoring, campaigns run by and for young Muslims.
- **The Muslim Association of Britain Youth (MABY)** organises youth camps, leadership training, community work, and political engagement, nurturing youth activism and leadership.
- **The Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS),** established in 1963 working as a support body for Muslim university societies; a major network for students.
- **Young Muslims UK (YMUK),** established in 1984 - nurtures Muslim youth leadership, spirituality, and social activism.
- **Mosaic** is a mentoring and leadership programme founded by HRH The Prince of Wales in 2007.
- **Inspirited Minds** focuses on mental health education and campaigns for young Muslims.
- **Patchwork Foundation** works mainly with Muslim young people to promote youth participation in UK democracy in minority communities.
- **UpRising** leadership mentoring and employability programmes help leaders better reflect and represent the communities they serve.

Despite this activity, there are significant gaps. Where is the 'go-to' Infrastructure Organisation (IO) to support Muslim young people, and/or promote Muslim youth work? It appears absent.

Local charity work by the Muslim Association of Britain

Hamza Ahmed, Head Of Youth Work at Here For Youth, delivering the 'How To Effectively Engage Teenagers' workshop at Al-Ansar Islamic Education Centre in Goodmayes, London

National Infrastructure Organisation for Muslim Youth Work and Muslim Young People

We asked the National Youth Agency and UK Youth to point to local, regional or national groups that functioned for them as a Muslim youth or Muslim youth work IO. Both gave names of individual experts, umbrella bodies focused on broader themes – including tackling racism or narrower agendas – with no obvious national IO representing Muslim young people or youth work. Correcting this will be essential for developing a credible presence across civil society - and in the youth work sector. Muslim youth workers have been here before.

In December 2005, Muslim youth workers and their supporters met with the National Youth Agency and the then Department for Education and Skills via two national conferences about Muslim youth work. Organised by youth work practitioner and academic MG Khan, and attracting over 600 participants from across the UK, the conference produced the report 'Towards a National Strategy for Youth Work' (2005).

Significantly, this report (2005) called for ***"development of Muslim youth work training approaches"***, a ***"qualifying course and training modules on Muslim youth work".*** Also development of mechanisms to inform best practice, a website and "establishment of an organisation" to contain and incubate this work (2005: 19).

Khan defines Muslim youth work as a distinct practice, ***"creating safe spaces for Muslim young people to explore personal, social, spiritual and political choices"***, with a set of principles for practice (Khan, 2006). Khan established the Muslim Youth Work Foundation (MYWF) to develop a programme of support for Muslim youth work and is currently working on a national Muslim youth work strategy. It offers one resource for a broad Muslim diaspora looking to develop its youth work. During our research, multiple professional and qualified youth work practitioners referred to MG Khan.

As in 2005, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Youth Strategy due for publication in late 2025 presents a major opportunity to rebuild youth infrastructure and restore the state's commitment to young people. For Muslim young people, the test is whether a "universal" strategy delivers equitable outcomes. Investing in minority-led youth infrastructure, embedding authentic co-production, and providing sustainable resources will unlock the potential of a generation of young leaders - and strengthen Britain's social fabric for the long term.

Meanwhile, a vehicle representing the diversity of Muslim young people is also needed. Advocating at a national policy level, this mechanism needs to work across different Muslim sectarian and ethnic backgrounds to build capacity and collaboration. This study highlights challenges confronting Muslim young people, alongside their presence as a dynamic force for good across British society. We throw down the gauntlet to public and private organisations, Muslim organisations and Mosques to step up in their advocacy, resourcing and support for Muslim young people. A priority is to facilitate a breadth of funding pathways - public and private - to support Muslim young people, as well as the individuals and agencies working with them.

Recommendations

For Muslim-led civil society community organisations, Muslim-led faith assets, philanthropy and funding

Recommendation 1

Establish a National Muslim Youth Investment Fund to advocate and support Muslim young people.

The fund will invest in partnership and collaboration across voluntary, community, statutory, private and corporate sectors as envisaged in recommendation two.

Recommendation 2

Invest in and develop a national Muslim youth work Infrastructure Organisation (IO) to advocate for resources and support Muslim youth workers.

A Muslim youth work IO will promote faith-literate youth work embracing identity, spirituality, and community activism. The IO will actively partner with young people, youth leaders and youth work practitioners to be central to establishing this work, alongside policy makers, and Muslim civil society.

Recommendation 3

Build capacity of faith and civic leaders

as facilitators who can nurture community engagement, the opening up of 'third spaces' and the development of youth work to incorporate deaf young people, and those marginalised or with other disabilities.

Recommendation 4

Effectively engage Muslim Youth across a range of religious, civil society and third spaces

– including mosques, schools, youth groups, community centres, parks, restaurants, cafes, sporting venues and online platforms to include deaf young people, and those marginalised or with other disabilities. Embed minority youth in governance at local and national levels.

Recommendation 5

Create safe environments for expressions of Muslimness;

including accommodation of prayer times, modesty considerations, halal food in youth settings and celebrating Islamic heritage and identity.

Recommendation 6

Invest in Muslim Youth Leadership through the development of programmes that empower young Muslims

with essential skills in leadership, community organising, and public engagement to act with purpose, influence public discourse, and contribute meaningfully to society and contribute meaningfully to unlock the resilience, innovation and flourishing of all young people in the UK. Empower young Muslims including those marginalised or with disabilities, with essential skills.

Recommendation 7

Expand access to youth mentorship programmes led by Muslim professionals across a range of sectors

– including law, education, business, media, the arts, charity and public service. Align the youth offer of DCMS with DWP's employment and skills Youth Guarantee and DfE's education reform.

Recommendation 8

Create diverse youth advisory boards, co-design panels embedding minority youth in governance at local and national levels.

Include Muslim young people, especially those from deprived areas or racialised communities. This will be a major tool in tackling institutional Islamophobia as well as contributing to anti-racism, youth wellbeing, and social cohesion. To include deaf young people, and those marginalised or with other disabilities.

Award For The Most Resilient Youth, given out at the 2nd Annual Muslim Youth Engagement Awards 2024 by Here For Youth in London

For statutory and non-statutory bodies and youth work Infrastructure Organisations

- **Recommendation 9**

Train and resource qualified professional Muslim youth workers to engage, support, and advocate effectively with Muslim young people.

Once completed, a distinct Muslim youth work approach needs to form a core part of accredited professional youth work training and those marginalised or with other disabilities.

- **Recommendation 10**

Develop relevant materials for all levels of youth worker training – including faith-based youth work training modules for levels 4 - 6, and covering all faith and belief traditions in the UK as well as Islam.

Group Discussion led by Layne Robinson, Head of Social Policy Development at the Commonwealth Secretariat with Here For Youth CEO Ayub Seedat at The Power of Youth Work – 2023 Commonwealth Youth Work Conference

For statutory sector including local and national government and voluntary / philanthropic funders

- **Recommendation 11**

Commission internal reviews and race equality audits for statutory and voluntary bodies that explicitly tackle institutional Muslim hate and Islamophobia, instead of deploying generic faith inclusion or categories for Black and Global Majority categories.

- **Recommendation 12**

Ensure anti-Islamophobia training for all frontline youth workers, statutory services including police, social and healthcare professionals, policymakers, and funding decision-makers – distinct from generic diversity or anti-racism training.

- **Recommendation 13**

Appoint senior leads or panels to oversee progress on tackling Islamophobia within public sector organisations and to report publicly on progress.

- **Recommendation 14**

Prioritise equitable funding for Muslim-led youth projects, particularly those embedded in local community organisations like mosques or community centres and working with those experiencing marginalisation within the Muslim community, and wider communities across the UK.

- **Recommendation 15**

Support smaller grassroots organisations in dealing with disproportionate scrutiny at the level of applying for funding, as compared to larger, non-Muslim-led charities or organisations.

- **Recommendation 16**

Promote positive narratives of Muslim youth leadership, creativity, and civic contribution through funding, media partnerships, and national campaigns that challenge Islamophobic and other hate-filled tropes.

For Philanthropic and Statutory Funders

- **Recommendation 17**

Invest in further research into home, family and extended family to highlight practice and tactics which enable distinctive Muslim practice and identity.

- **Recommendation 18**

Invest in further research into the experiences on enabling distinctive Muslim practice and identity across suburban, rural, coastal contexts of the UK.

- **Recommendation 19**

Invest in further research into the growing development of 'Muslim Conscious' or 'semi-sacred' third spaces identified in the research that allow for safe discussion and identity-formation alongside other expressions of Muslim and wider civil society.

Bibliography

Abu-Lughod, L. (2013). *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press.

Ahmad, F. (2007) 'Muslim Women's Experiences of Higher Education in Britain', *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 24, pp. 46-69.

Allen, C. (2010) *Islamophobia*. London: Ashgate.

Awan, I. (2012) '"I am a Muslim not an extremist": How the prevent strategy has constructed a "suspect" community', *Politics & Policy*, 40(6), pp. 1158–1185.

Bi, S. (2018) 'Panopticons, Power and Pleasure: Why the Hijab is Not a Problem', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 38(1), pp. 139–141.

Bi, S. (2020) 'The School as a Double-Edged Panopticon — Increased Anxiety and Deflated Islamic Identities: A Child-Centered Perspective on the Trojan Horse Affair', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 40.

Cabras, I. and Mount, M. P. (2017) 'How third places foster and shape community cohesion, economic development and social capital: The case of pubs in rural Ireland', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 55, pp. 71–82.

Choudhury, T. and Fenwick, H. (2011) 'The Impact of Counter-Terrorism Measures on Muslim Communities', *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology*, pp. 151-181.

Crenshaw, K. (1989) 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), pp. 139-167.

Elsayed, S. (2023) 'Exiled at home: British Muslims' experiences of integration', *Frontiers in Sociology*, 8, p. 1172057.

Farzana, S. (2013) 'Race, nation and education', *Education Inquiry*, 4(1), pp. 63-85. https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v4i1.22062.

Foucault, Michel (1975) 'Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison', New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Ghatas, I. M. (2023) 'Muslim Diasporas: An Examination of the Issues of the Second and Third Generation Muslims in Europe', *Transformation*, 40(2), pp. 156-168.

Hattox, R. S. (2014) *Coffee and coffeehouses: The origins of a social beverage in the medieval Near East*. University of Washington Press.

Hirsch, A. (2014, September 19) 'The root cause of extremism among British Muslims is alienation', *The Guardian*.

Holt-Lunstad, J. (2024) 'Social connection as a critical factor for mental and physical health: evidence, trends, challenges, and future implications', *World Psychiatry*, 23(3), pp. 312–332.

Hopkins, P. and Gale, R. (2009) *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Khan, M. (2005), "Towards a National Strategy for Muslim Youth Work. Report of the National Conference - December 2005". National Youth Agency

Khan, M. G. (2013) *Young Muslims, Pedagogy and Islam*. Policy Press.

Khattab, N., Johnston, R. and Manley, D. (2015) '"All in it Together"? Ethnoreligious Labour-Market Penalties and the Post-2008 Recession in the UK', *Environment and Planning A*, 47(4), pp. 977-995.

Kumah, G. (2025) YMCA Calls for Urgent Action to Reverse Decline in Youth Services Funding" YMCA: YMCA.org.uk; 28 January 2025.

Kundnani, A. (2014) *The Muslims Are Coming! : Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror*. Verso.

Modood, T. and Calhoun, C. (2005) *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain*. Edinburgh University Press.

Nabi, S. (2011) 'How is Islamophobia Institutionalised? Racialised Governmentality and the Case of Muslim Students in British Universities'.

Oldenburg, R. (1999) *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Third ed.). New York, NY: Marlowe & Company.

Shain, F. (2013) 'Race, nation and education', *Education Inquiry*, 4(1), pp. 63-85.

Shannahan, C. (2011) 'Negotiating faith on the Coventry Road: British-Muslim youth identities in the "third space"', *Culture and Religion*, 12, pp. 237-257.

Sheikh, F; Hussain, R. (2018) "Voices of Young Muslims - Building a society free of Islamophobia", London: Jawaab [At https://tinyurl.com/yc4fjwuz].

Shryock, A. (2010) *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/192.

Spivak, G.C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? *Die Philosophin*, 14(27), pp.24–28.

Stevenson J; Demack S; Stiell B; Abdi M; Clarkson L; Ghaffar F; Hassan S. (2017) "The Social Mobility Challenges Faced by Young Muslims"; London: Social Mobility Commission.

Thomas, P. (2011) 'Unwilling Citizens? Muslim Young People and Identity', in *Youth, Multiculturalism and Community Cohesion*. Palgrave Politics of Identity and Citizenship Series. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Thomas, P. (2016) 'Youth, terrorism and education: Britain's Prevent programme', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 35, pp. 171-187.

Thompson N; Shuker L. (2021) 'The "secular culture" of youth work training: are JNC-recognised programmes in English universities equipping youth workers to work with diverse religious communities?' Luton: Youthscape Centre for Research.

Tyrer, D. and Ahmad, F. (2006) *Muslim Women and Higher Education: Identities, Experiences and Prospects*. Liverpool: Liverpool John Moores University and European Social Fund.

Unison (2024) "Britain's Lost Generation Government - cuts have shattered council youth services and left vulnerable youngsters exposed", Unison report - June 2024; London: Unison.

Appendix

P1 Getty

P4 Here For Youth CEO Ayub Seedat speaking at The Power of Youth Work - 2023 Commonwealth Youth Work Conference

P5 Hamza Ahmed, Head of Youth Work at Here For Youth, speaking at Goldsmiths, University of London conference on 'Faith, Intersectionality and the Future of Youth Work Partnerships'.

P6 Muslim Youth Futures Research Workshop at the Muath Trust, Birmingham

P7 Muslim Youth Futures Research Workshop at the Hamara Centre in Beeston, Leeds

P8 Getty

P9 Adobe Stock

P10 Getty

P11 Protesters clash with police outside Southport Mosque. Source: The National

P12 Freepik (top left corner)

P12 Volunteers sweep Sussex Road in Southport, Merseyside, after rioters attacked police - Source: (PA Wire)

P14 Getty

P15 Birmingham Youth Sports Academy End of Year Celebrations in Birmingham

P15 Dream Chaser Youth Club, Birmingham

P16 Sammey from Deafworld invited to deliver a presentation at Solihull 6th Form College. (Deafworld Facebook)

P17 Freepik

P18 Event for young people at Green Lane Masjid, Birmingham (top left)

P18 Muslim Youth Futures roundtable discussion with mental health, youth work, education and training professionals in Blackburn (bottom left)

P19 Young Minds

P20 East London Mosque on X (Twitter)

P21 Green Lane Masjid

P22 Pexels

P23 Friday Prayers at The Suleymaniye Mosque in East London (Getty) (bottom left)

P23 Scouts at Green Lane Masjid (greenlanemasjid.org) (middle right)

P24 Young scouts at a Muslim Scout Fellowship event (Muslim Scout Fellowship)

P25 How to Run a Successful Youth Hubb (hereforyouth.org) (top right)

P25 Teenagers engaged in a thought-provoking discussion at the Youth Hubb of the Islamic Society of Gloucester - ISOG (hereforyouth.org) (bottom)

P26 Muslim Youth Engagement Awards, hosted by Here for Youth in December 2023

P27 Youth session at Concord Youth Centre in Sparkbrook, Birmingham (Facebook) (bottom)

P27 Young boys playing pool at Naseby Youth Centre in Alum Rock, Birmingham (ourcommunity.org.uk)

P28 Pitch2Progress (middle left)

P28 Youth workshop at Muath Trust, Birmingham (top right)

P28 Jehangir Malik with Raheem Mohammad, the director of Hamara Centre, Leeds (bottom right)

P29 Soul City Arts - Ramadan Streets event in Small Heath, Birmingham (soulcityarts.com/ramadanstreets)

P30 Friday Night Vibes weekly youth engagement session in Wembley, London

P31 Research session at the Hamara Centre, Leeds

P32 Local charity work by the Muslim Association of Britain (mabonline.net)

P33 Hamza Ahmed, Head of Youth Work at Here for Youth, delivering the "How to Effectively Engage Teenagers" Workshop at Al-Ansar Islamic Education Centre in Goodmayes, London

P34 Award for The Most Resilient Youth, given out at the 2nd Annual Muslim Youth Engagement Awards 2024 by Here for Youth in London

P35 Group Discussion led by Layne Robinson, Head of Social Policy Development at the Commonwealth Secretariat with Here For Youth CEO Ayub Seedat at The Power of Youth Work - 2023 Commonwealth Youth Work Conference

Muslim Youth Futures

Our Voice, Our Vision, Shaping Our Society

Andy Turner and Aisha Khan
Faiths and Civil Society Unit,
Goldsmiths University of London, 2025.

hereforyouth.org | gold.ac.uk

here for youth | Goldsmiths UNIVERSITY OF LONDON | Faiths & Civil Society Unit | Islamic Relief | AZIZ FOUNDATION