



2022 Annual Roundtable Report on

# Muslim Heritage Children in Care

Supporting Identity and Wellbeing

Executive Summary and Calls to Action

# Executive Summary

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My Family Group is a collective of initiatives designed to improve the lives of children in care. We work to ensure every child who comes into care secures a loving and nurturing home that meets their needs, strengthens their identity and prepares them for adult life. We do this by raising awareness and influencing policy around fostering and adoption, supporting the recruitment of diverse foster carers and adopters, and promoting a positive sense of identity that ensures better outcomes for care experienced people. Incepted in 2017, My Family Group has grown and evolved to include The Muslim Fostering Network, My Foster Family, My Adoption Family and Arise Refugees.

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

Several themes emerged from the roundtable event:

## The Islamic Obligation to Foster

While there is a clear and unequivocal acknowledgement within the British Muslim community of our religious obligations towards Muslim children who no longer have the support of their family structure, there is much confusion, and a lack of religious literacy, regarding what shape this support should take when considering modern day institutions and structures which govern fostering and adoption. We need imams and scholars to lead a religiously-informed dialogue, which permeates the Muslim community, and brings the interest of Muslim-heritage children in care to the forefront of the conversation. For Muslim-heritage children in care to heal and thrive, it is vital for the Muslim community to play an active role.

## Demography and changes

The latest research into the care sector suggests

there are approximately 5,000 Muslim-heritage children in care, including unaccompanied asylum seeking children, a staggering 75-95% of whom it is estimated come from a Muslim background. A majority of these children are from black and minority ethnic communities, and therefore face the added disadvantage of having to wait longer to find permanent placements due to their ethnic background. The latest research shows that more than half of all Muslim-heritage children in care spend time with non-Muslim families.<sup>1</sup>

What compounds this is a dearth of Muslim carers in the sector, and little understanding and recognition of faith-needs throughout. While the reasons for this are multifaceted and complex, the cumulative impact is unequivocally one of detriment to Muslim-heritage children, who are not given the kind of holistic support they require to build whole and happy lives, secure in their faith identity.

The Muslim community and the care sector must come together to ensure children from Muslim backgrounds are cared for and homed in placements which recognise and meet their ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic needs.



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<sup>1</sup> Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., De Sousa, S., Boti Phiri, M. and Halford, A. (2018) Among the last ones to leave?: Understanding the Journeys of Muslim Children in the Care System in England <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/globalassets/media/global/08-new-research-section/ctpsr/muslim-children-in-care---research-report.pdf>



## The experience of the child in care:

Statistics tell us that the life-chances for children in care are shamefully dire:

- Only 13% of children in care attain eight GCSEs, this is in comparison to a 47% national average.<sup>2</sup>
- They are six times more likely to be excluded<sup>3</sup>
- 41% of children in care are not in education, employment or training, compared to 12% of all 19 – 21 year olds<sup>4</sup>
- they are four times more likely to be in the youth justice system<sup>5</sup>
- almost one quarter of all prisoners have at some time been in care<sup>6</sup>

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

3 Ibid

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

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

6 Berman, G. (2013). Berman 2013. [online] Source- Prison Population Statistics- UK Parliament (2013) [accessed 2022] Available at: [http://www.antonioacasella.eu/nume/Berman\\_2013.pdf](http://www.antonioacasella.eu/nume/Berman_2013.pdf)

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

For Muslim-heritage children, who face additional barriers due to their faith and ethnicity, this is compounded by a system which doesn't give due importance or recognise those very markers of their identity. When children are placed outside of homes which understand, support and value their ethnic or religious identity, it can have a negative impact on their development.<sup>7</sup> And yet, the picture statistics provides us with doesn't speak of the damaging, personal trauma that each child will face having been removed from their familial home.

The Muslim community and professionals in the sector need to do more to ensure Muslim-heritage children in care receive the kind of faith-sensitive support which is self-affirming and nurturing, to combat this seemingly inevitable downward spiral.

## Nurturing Identity

As well as the necessary family structure, child placements are intended to provide alternative family settings which help vulnerable children in the development of their identity.

Children's notion of identity defines who they are, where they belong, who they are connected to, how others see them and how 'settled' they are. These factors influence children's values, their beliefs - in themselves and the world they live in – their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. These are fundamental building blocks for young people's well-being. Parenting involves establishing a narrative which brings these key elements together. For children in the care system for whom this narrative is fragmented, it

is crucial to ensure they are nurtured by family units and systems which repair that narrative and value every part of their emerging identity. Faith is a key component of this.<sup>8</sup>

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

Most Muslim-heritage children are best placed in families which reflect their religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity. The nurturing and development of the Muslim identity of children in care is integral to their well-being. This is one of the key issues that the sector needs to explore, develop, train on and value and is something we hope the Government will actively support.

## Diversity

One of the many strengths of the Muslim community is our diversity. The term Muslim-heritage comes from this endeavour to accommodate the spectrum of religious practice found within the Muslim community. It is also important for all stakeholders, including the Muslim community, to be cognisant of the nuances in race and identity in modern Britain, and fully recognise that the Muslim community is not monolithic.

My Family Group and colleagues at this year's roundtable emphatically stress the need for the care system to be truly child centred both on an individual level - for each child to be understood, recognised and respected as the individual that they are and for due consideration to be given for each placement decision.



And institutionally, by creating a system which is reflective of the diversity of the children in it, in order to create a sustainable and impactful care system which meets the needs of every child.

Research shows those children that may reject their faith identity in adolescence often return to strands of this identity later in life. Faith matching placements create those crumbs of identity that children can return to later in life, an essential part of a healthy and secure upbringing. This is something the care system should aspire to.

## Mental Health

Children in the care system are four times more likely to have mental health problems.<sup>9</sup> This unfortunate truth is no surprise, given what leads children to come into care includes trauma, loss, grief and often neglect and abuse. All these things have a significant impact on children's mental health. Early intervention in mental health is also key to the long-term development and well-being of children and young people.

8 Cheruvallil-Contractor, S.; Halford, A.; Phiri, M.B. (2021). 'The Salience of Islam to Muslim Heritage Children's Experiences of Identity, Family, and Well-Being in Foster Care'. Religions 12 (6):381 Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., Boti Phiri, M. and Halford, A. (2022) 'Identity, Intersectionality and Children in Care: The case of Muslim-heritage "looked-after" Children in the UK' in H Schmid/ A Sheikhzadegan (eds.), Exploring Islamic Social Work. Between Community and the Common Good Cham: Springer

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

This picture is further complicated for Muslim-heritage children in care who face wider structural and cultural issues when it comes accessing mental health care – Muslims more generally face cultural taboos and are more reluctant to seek help,<sup>10</sup> and mental health practitioners, who receive little to no faith-sensitivity training, say they feel anxious dealing with Muslim families, creating a self-perpetuating cycle.<sup>11</sup>

Muslim children deserve a mental-health system which understands them and values their faith, particularly given how integral a role it plays in their mental wellbeing. Research undertaken by BCBN found that over 80% of young people that had experienced mental health struggles said that faith played a positive role in supporting mental wellbeing. More than half of young people surveyed overall also said they are likely to turn to faith when experiencing mental health struggles.<sup>12</sup> These findings underscore the importance of a faith sensitive wrap around support service for vulnerable Muslim children, and the need for multi-agency cooperation in this regard.

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

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

It is clear that things need to change if we agree

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

In order to nurture an inclusive care system, changes need to be incorporated structurally, in how we develop and deliver our services on a strategic level, but also granularly on a micro-level, and more broadly speaking on a community level amongst Muslims.



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

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

12 Bungwala, S, Meha, A, Prof Tunariu. Aneta. D (2021) ‘Hidden Survivors- Uncovering the mental health struggles of young British Muslims [online] Available at: [Hidden\\_Survivors\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](http://Hidden_Survivors_Full_Report.pdf) (bcbn.org.uk)

**We are calling on YOU as a member of the care sector to:**

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

**We are calling on YOU as a member of the Muslim community to:**

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

**We are calling on YOU as National Muslim Organisations to:**

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

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

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

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



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