

## Executive Summary

Leicester has one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the United Kingdom (UK) outside London. The Muslim communities in Leicester hail from predominantly Indian (mainly Gujarati), Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds. According to the 2001 Census,<sup>1</sup> Leicester's population was 279,921, of which just over 30,000 (11 per cent) were Muslims, making them the third-largest faith group in Leicester after Christians and Hindus.

In 2003, Leicester, which is predicted to become the country's first "plural city" with no overall ethnic majority, was awarded Beacon status for community cohesion.<sup>2</sup> The city has instituted many positive, effective practices in support of its multicultural ethos. All the Asian religious communities – Hindu, Sikh and Muslims – have a significant presence, and individuals from these communities play important roles in the economic and political life of the city. Seventeen of the 54 councillors for the city (31 per cent), including the previous lord mayor, are of ethnic-minority background.

Despite such positive examples, the city shows signs of tensions that cannot be ignored. These include the differing levels of socio-economic deprivation in areas within the city; simmering tension between particular minority groups; underachievement and unemployment among Muslims; and the increasing economic divide between the affluent and not so affluent.

This report examines the situation and everyday lives of Muslims<sup>3</sup> living in Leicester.<sup>4</sup> The most detailed study of Muslims in the city to date, it provides views from diverse Muslims on their neighbourhoods and local area relations and the influence of the media on people's perceptions of Muslims. The study places a particular emphasis on the engagement and political participation of Muslims and on public policies aimed at improving integration and social cohesion. It also seeks to understand whether the concerns highlighted by Muslims differ from those of other minority groups and whether common ground exists in the experiences of Muslims and non-Muslims.

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<sup>1</sup> Census 2001, Office for National Statistics (ONS).

<sup>2</sup> Beacon awards are annual themed awards from the central government that recognise local governments' excellence in improving the quality of life for their residents and communities by delivering services that are innovative and visionary.

<sup>3</sup> The research does not provide a definition of "Muslim" in terms of religious practice or belief, but accepted respondents' and participants' self-definition as Muslims.

<sup>4</sup> The first stage of the "Muslims in EU Cities" project produced a literature review on the UK, providing a comprehensive review of available research and literature on Muslims in the UK. This led to the inclusion of Leicester and the borough of Waltham Forest in London as part of the 11 cities monitoring project by the Open Society Institute. See EUMAP, *United Kingdom, Muslims in EU Cities: Cities Report, Preliminary Research Report and Literature Survey*, Budapest, Open Society Institute, 2007, available at [http://www.eumap.org/topics/minority/reports/eumuslims/background\\_reports/download/uk/uk.pdf](http://www.eumap.org/topics/minority/reports/eumuslims/background_reports/download/uk/uk.pdf) (accessed 10 August 2009).

Integration is understood as a two-way process that requires engagement by individuals as well as opportunities for participation.

Belonging and identity can be multifaceted, and for many individuals their neighbourhood and city are their key barometers for belonging. To better understand the role that local structures can play in promoting public participation, three wards in Leicester were selected for research: Evington, Stoneygate and Spinney Hills. Spinney Hills, which has the highest percentage of Muslims (55.9 per cent), is also the ward with the lowest rate of full-time employment (26.9 per cent), highest unemployment (6.7 per cent), highest level of economic inactivity (14.1 per cent), highest percentage of “no qualifications” for work and highest level of social housing (28.5 per cent).

Contrary to popular perception, the majority of Muslims in Leicester possess a strong British identity and sense of belonging to the city as well as the country, holding many values in common with non-Muslims.

Muslim children could now constitute nearly a quarter of state-school pupils in Leicester. Important policy issues arise around the shifting demographics of pupils in schools and the level of educational achievement of marginalised groups. State schools in Leicester, which have not performed as well as in other cities in the region, have shown a marked improvement in recent years. Some Muslim parents have opted for private education. There also appears to be a steady drift of the affluent away from the city to the suburbs and their superior schools. The most significant challenge in education is improving the achievements of white pupils in the most deprived parts of the city in order to stem white flight to the suburbs.

Employment rates of Muslims are low and economic inactivity high, especially among Muslim women, who often stay at home to look after the family. According to the 2001 Census, 50 per cent of Muslims in the UK are below the age of 25. This demographic profile has significant implications for the future of the labour market.

In terms of housing, studies by the Leicester City Council in 2004 show a need to communicate services more effectively and develop strategies for the accommodation of large families.<sup>5</sup> Except for recent migrants from Somalia, most Muslims in Leicester are long-term residents, with increasing numbers living in owner-occupied property.

The health status of Muslims in Leicester is very mixed. Black, minority and ethnic (BME) groups are recognised to be at greater risk of suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, coronary heart disease and other health problems than white citizens. However, when analysing the problems arising from smoking, excessive alcohol consumption and teenage pregnancy, the outer wards, with a smaller presence of BME groups and a poorer socio-economic profile seem to have the worst health status. As the

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<sup>5</sup> H. Ahmad, P. Robert-Thomson and I. Kszyk, *Report on the Community and Sector Consultation on Community Cohesion*, Leicester, Leicester City Council, 2004 (hereafter Ahmad et al., *Community Cohesion*).

contact between citizens and service providers will often involve discussions of cultural habits, such as diet and lifestyle, providers may need to have more detailed cultural and minority competencies to handle the health-care needs of the city's diverse residents, especially the older generation for whom language remains a barrier.

Relations between police and Muslim communities in certain wards in Leicester are among the strongest in the UK. The police appear to have a fairly thorough understanding of the communities in their area and engage in regular and frequent outreach work. However, recruitment levels of minorities, including Muslims, remain low, reflecting serious issues of mistrust and image that the police must overcome.

Muslims play an active role in civic and political engagement and there is greater trust in local authority than in the central government. Muslim citizens, feeling able to influence decision-making in the city, contribute to the high voter turnout among ethnic minorities. Newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers face important challenges in a time of growing economic uncertainty, in which debates on immigration can seem very negative.

The faith communities of Leicester are valuable contributors to the life of the city. The city is particularly well served by the strong faith presence of Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, along with important institutions committed to positive inter-faith relations in most of these communities.

The influence of the media in defining the public's views on international and domestic issues is undeniable. Respondents reported a more positive picture of the depiction and reporting of Muslim communities by the media in Leicester in comparison with the national media. There are also important signs of well-established institutional relationships between Muslim leaders, community organisations and sections of the media locally. The Leicester Multicultural Advisory Group and other such bodies are broadly seen to be important contributors to positive community relations. However, while the institutional relationships seem largely positive, individuals feel less confident, engaged and empowered in accessing the media. This could be due in part to the fact that there are few Muslims in media organisations. Community media may prove useful in increasing the visibility of Muslim reporters and in enhancing the skills and confidence of residents interacting with the media.

Approximately 50 per cent of Muslims and non-Muslims interviewed by the Open Society Institute (OSI) believe racial discrimination is still very much alive in the UK. An even larger number (over 70 per cent of both groups) feel that there is a fair amount of religious prejudice in the country today and that it has increased over the last five years. Muslim respondents felt that attitudes towards them had become more negative, though Islamophobia and racism did not feature in the list of things respondents did not like about their neighbourhoods.

While policymakers, politicians and community leaders are all keen to assert that there is little room for complacency and that potential threats to stability need to be monitored

constantly, they recognise that Leicester now possesses a culture of basic trust among leaders of different communities and ways to deal with tensions when they arise.

Problems nevertheless exist and cannot be ignored. Looking at the socio-economic data of different wards in the city, for example, the divide between rich and poor seems quite significant, and the differences in deprivation in areas of the city must be addressed.

Also, although inter-faith dialogue, discussion and harmony are celebrated, the inter-faith ethos has yet to penetrate into all sectors of society. There are those who view inter-faith activity with some suspicion. Women and younger people tend to be much less present in the various leadership and representative forums for faith groups. Below the surface there are tensions between faith groups, particularly between Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities. Lack of research makes it difficult to measure such tensions, but this issue was touched upon in interviews with community groups. Surprisingly little work has actually been undertaken in fostering meaningful dialogue between these communities, and the few initiatives seem to have been overshadowed by other priorities in the competition for limited resources.

While ethnic minorities are well represented in elected positions in the city, they remain under-represented, though not absent, in some key positions in the police, council leadership and the National Health Service (NHS).

Challenges also exist within the Muslim communities in the city, between different denominations and different ethnic groups. Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other smaller communities can at times feel as if they are a minority within a minority, whose difficulties are forgotten amid the relative success of Gujarati Muslims.

Respondents raised concerns about the “Preventing Violent Extremism” (PVE) policy, renamed “Mainstreaming Moderation” by the Leicester City Council. While the policy has a relatively small central government grant, it nevertheless has created resentment among non-Muslim communities who have at times viewed this as favouritism, unfair and denoting exclusive attention and resourcing. The current PVE agenda could, therefore, could wind up building capacity in some sectors of the city while undermining cohesion work in other areas. Equally significant, the city has been undergoing a dramatic shift and growth in the size of its Muslim population. Based on school enrolment data, the numbers of Muslims in state schools have significantly increased since the 2001 Census. If Leicester does become a plural city by 2012, this fact may create further tensions, alienating those troubled by the city’s changing identity.

Many of the study’s findings, ranging from community cohesion to relationships with the police to confidence in the media, require collective action and leadership from Leicester’s policymakers, its minority communities (including Muslim communities) and its wider population.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Leicester has one of the most diverse populations of ethnic minorities in the UK outside London. The Muslim communities in Leicester are also heterogeneous, composed of both ethnically and culturally mixed groups stemming from Indian (mainly Gujarati), Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds, among others. Many of the communities settled in Leicester in the 1970s after large numbers of Ugandan Indians expelled by Idi Amin arrived in the UK. By contrast, the Somali and Kurdish communities are considered to be new arrivals in Leicester and have been settling in the city only over the last 10 years.

Policy discussions on Muslim communities have been quite prominent in the UK, especially since the *Satanic Verses* affair<sup>6</sup> in the late 1980s, which led to pronounced concerns about representation and community leadership. Riots in the north of England in the summer of 2001 also raised concerns of poverty, racism and, crucially, segregation.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most significant (and contentious) policy context now is the discussion of the terror threat in the light of 11 September 2001 (9/11) and, more importantly for the domestic context, the attacks carried out in London on 7 July 2005, which raised the profile of “home-grown” terrorists. The most recent UK government counter-terrorism strategy released in March 2009 brings a renewed emphasis to the “Prevent” side of the strategy, in addition to the other elements: “Pursue, protect and prepare”.<sup>8</sup> There is also a move to raise concerns about forms of extremism that are not necessarily overtly related to violence. The strategy states: “As Government, we will also continue to challenge views which fall short of supporting violence and are within the law, but which reject and undermine our shared values and jeopardise community cohesion.”<sup>9</sup>

The city of Leicester has established a Mainstreaming Moderation Forum (composed of community leaders, council staff, police and other stakeholders) to help its work on the “Prevent” agenda, but there have been concerns about the impact of this agenda on cohesion in the city. Leicester has a positive reputation for cohesion, race and inter-faith relations and (as has been mentioned) was awarded Beacon status for race equality in 2002 and for community cohesion in 2003. Its inter-faith activities have also generated much interest nationally and indeed internationally.

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<sup>6</sup> The publication of Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 led to widespread protests by those regarding it as a defamation of Islam. See Michael Binyon, available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article1950780.ece> (accessed 6 August 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Ted Cante, *Community Cohesion Report: A Report of the Independent Review Team*, London, Home Office, 2001, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Home Office, *The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering International Terrorism*, London, Stationery Office, 2009 (hereafter Home Office, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Home Office, 2009, p. 87.