INSIDE OUT

Supporting Muslims in Prison and Beyond

This report provides an overview of the discussions held over a weekend in October 2020 organised by the Convert Muslim Foundation.

CONVERT MUSLIM FOUNDATION

Inside Out

Supporting Muslims in Prison and Beyond

Event Convenor
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Due to Covid restrictions the event was restricted to only 30 participants.

Participants

Istiaq Ahmed	Project's Strategic Support Office, Khidmat Centre, Bradford
Ahtsham Ali	Muslim Advisor to the Ministry for Justice
Victoria Ali	Youth worker and criminologist
Sofia Buncy MBE	Women in Prison, Resettlement Project Khidmat Centres, Bradford
Raymond Douglas	Executive Trainer and Facilitator – Gangs and Youth Violence Prevention Consultant
Ferzana Dakri	Straight Path Resettlement Project
Shereen Hemmuth	Service Manager, Health and Wellbeing, The Forward Trust
Dr Lamia Irfan	Research Associate, Birkbeck, University of London
Farzana Shaheen	Stepping Stones to Wisdom – CURE?
Dr Matthew Wilkinson	Senior Research Fellow, Birkbeck, University of London
Amina Abdi	Women 4 Change
Mohd Vania	Real Projects UK
Safura Houghton	The Lantern Initiative
Rezwan Attari	Derby Resettlement – Dawat ul Islam
Christopher Isa Francis	CURE outreach worker
Samir Khattab	Gangs Case Worker
Imran Vohra	Straight Path Resettlement Project
Qadri Shahaz	Chaplain in Training
Muhammed Haqe	Chaplain – HMPS Kent
Ricardo Leingane	Building Contractor Supervisor
Sher Khan	Building Developer
Farooq Mulla	Imam & Chaplain
Yusuf Tai	Muslim Council of Britain
Samirah Kealey	Employability Tutor, Prison and Community
Kamal Al-Idrisy	Chaplain – HMPS Cardiff
Hamdi Mahamed	Women 4 Change
Zam Zam Yusuf	Women 4 Change
Salih Whelbourne	Muallif Initiative

Preamble

Inside Out - 24 to LIFE – the importance of Time!

The Convert Muslim Foundation was established in 2018 gaining UK charitable status in January 2019. A national organisation, established for the benefit of those whose spiritual searching led them to enquire about or convert to Islam, it established a number of projects for their benefit and to address both immediate and long-term needs. Of these, one that is unique to our work is 'Resettlement and Rehabilitation,' the aim of which is to address the needs of those who convert to Islam while serving a prison sentence. This might well be regarded as ambitious considering general attitudes relating to those from within the Muslim community and indeed society generally, who digress from the status quo and find themselves beyond the pale. Previously, those who stepped out of the Muslim community's framework of accepted behaviour tended to be stigmatised, ostracised even, by the community.

As the numbers of Muslim prisoners increased and it was no longer possible for families to skilfully construct believable stories as to why a family member may have suddenly fallen of the radar it has in recent years unfortunately, owing to increasing numbers of our youth entering the judicial system due to gang related incidents, become something of 'a badge of honour' to have 'done time.' In the vast majority of cases however, involvement in crime of any kind continues to be regarded as shameful and dishonourable, particularly where it refers to Muslim female prisoners whose emergence from prison is as painful for her as her incarceration in the first instance, on account of issues around the stigma of family honour.

As we prepare to publish this report, the outcome of a weekend event organised by the Convert Muslim Foundation and convened at the Markfield Conference Centre in Leicestershire, the prison population in England and Wales, as of Feb. 2022, is 79,721 (www.gov.uk/statistics/prison-popuation-figures). Ethnic minorities currently constitute 27% of the prison population compared with 13% of the general population. As of March 2020, 47% of the prison population was considered Christian, whereas the proportion of Muslim prisoners has increased from 8% in 2002 to 16% in 2020 with, according to these figures, 13,563 Muslims incarcerated (See report). This suggests that Muslims make up approximately 17% of all prisoners while standing at approximately 5% of the British population overall.

A 2010 report by the Chief Inspector of Prisons stated that '30% of the Muslim prisoners interviewed had converted to Islam while in prison' suggesting 'some of whom

were "convenience Muslims" who adopted the religion in order to get benefits available only to Muslims.' This long existing and erroneous suggestion is challenged by the latest research conducted by Dr. Matthew Wilkinson, 'Understanding Conversion to Islam in Prison' and referred to in Point 6.12 of this report. The most important aspects of Islam, that of camaraderie, brotherhood and Islam's stance on respect for racial and social justice have long been conveniently ignored in reports previously aimed at arriving at an understanding of the phenomenon of Conversion to Islam in prisons in the UK.

The general approach to the issue of prisons, and Muslim prisoners in particular, is one the Muslim community is reluctant to engage with. The preference is to be involved in community work that is less stigmatising and more admirable in that it is appears to be more socially dynamic and gratifying from a faith centered perspective. The entire support service in this growing area of community service need is being held up by a few overstretched and underfunded organisations scattered around the country that is supported by an increasingly overstretched yet highly impactful Muslim Prison Chaplaincy drawn from the mainly British/South Asian Deobandi community. A main concern for CMF with regard to this is that, considering the majority of converts to Islam in prison are of African Caribbean and West Indian background, as well as small numbers from mixed race and from white British background, is there an understanding of Islam imparted that appreciates the background, culture and family upbringing of those new to the faith that is understood, acknowledged, respected and reflected in its delivery? How are inmates being prepared for release – given the fact that they have little or no knowledge of the Muslim community they are expected to merge into and that, up until the moment of release, the community they have come to know is, by and large, a 'captive audience' that is managed along very different lines to that of the Muslim community outside of prison?

Our concern is based on the many calls received to our office from prisoners where conversations have centred on relatively minor matters of faith such as having pictures and photographs in the home, celebrating the Prophets birthday, length of beards and requests for Prayer clothes to the rather more serious issues of impending release and concerns about accommodation, lack of money, estrangement from family and general anxiety around what they envisage to be a precarious future ahead of them.

To have been issued a prison sentence in the first instance will weigh heavily on an individual, as does the impact of incarceration on the wider family unit for its duration. To emerge from prison as a Muslim may have wider implications and may considered a 'double jeopardy' with regard to being welcomed back into the heart of family and community, hence the need for greater care and understanding with regard to the teaching of Islam, its procedures and practice in a contextualised manner.

The main focus for the Convert Muslim Foundation are those who have converted to Islam while serving a prison sentence hence the strapline for our particular **Resettlement and Rehabilitation** project which is **'24 to Life – The importance of time!'** The importance of the first 24 hours following declaration of the Shahadah. The duty of care required at this very early transitional stage of conversion to guide and support the Convert appropriately and within the scope of 'their normal' is crucial. As is the importance of the first 24 hours following release from prison and how our returning citizens are met, shown warmth and hospitality in the community through the Mosques, Islamic organisations and where they are allocated trained mentors to assist them through the early days of re integration. And finally - how can we support those on long term prison sentences as to how they can utilise their new found faith to cope with the on-going challenges of a long term prison lifestyle.

There is an urgency of need from those sincerely wishing to address this growing concern within the Muslim community that must involve strategic planners, community activists, business heads, investors, representatives of UK Muslim aid organisations, academics and futuristic visionaries. A concerted and combined effort is vital towards building a national response that includes the provision of adequate housing, bespoke training and thoughtful focus on mental health and wellbeing. Fundamental to this is a spiritually infused connection to the Divine by means of Prayer and gentle yet consistent Tazkiyah – continued purification of the heart and soul, as a means to assisting our returning citizens towards leading a productive and fulfilling life away from criminality and in service to humanity that is crucial to building self-confidence and personal fulfilment.

What every returning citizen needs to feel on release from prison is that:

> *'God is about to put your name in the ear of someone who is about to change your life'*
> *Let us all consider the responsibility all of us share in bringing this statement to fruition!*

Batool Al-Toma
Founder Director CMF

Content

Presenters

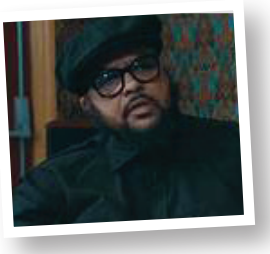
Sofia Buncy MBE is an award winning researcher and co-author of the first ever report into Muslim Women in British Prisons. She is also the founder and Coordinator of the Muslim Women in Prison Rehabilitation Project and is developing a national reputation for her rehabilitation work with Muslim Women Prisoners. She is regarded as a specialist in this area of criminal justice with unique insight into the particular and additional cultural challenges faced by Muslim women whilst in prison and post-prison from an institutional and community perspective.

Ishtiaq Ahmed – has held a variety of roles in community development and racial equality. He is the Strategic Policy and Project Development Officer at **Khidmat Centres** as well as the Strategic Policy Advisor to the Bradford Council for Mosques. Ishtiaq has held positions in local, regional and national forums and through his working career has tirelessly campaigned on equality issues. He counsels on interfaith and community relations and advises on issues affecting Muslim women in prison and post-release.

Ahtsham Ali – is currently the Muslim Advisor for HMP service to the Ministry of Justice. His work includes national policy development regarding the faith needs of Muslim prisoners, along with recruitment and training of Muslim chaplains. With over 25 years' experience working with Muslim youth and communities in a variety of capacities, his roles have included operating as a project manager resettling Muslim clients on probation orders. As part of the Community Cohesive Review Team set up following the 2001 riots in the north of England, he helped author *The Cantle Report*. Ahtsham holds an MA in Theology and Religious Studies and has studied extensively with Sheikh Abdullah al-Judai over several decades.

Batool Al-Toma - is the Founder Director of the Convert Muslim Foundation, a national UK based service offering support, training, education and concerned with the continued development of the Muslim Convert community in Britain. She has contributed to a number of research reports including: *Between Integration and Isolation – a report on the convert Muslim community in Leicester (2010); Narratives of Conversion to Islam – Female Perspectives (2013); Spirituality – the Plight of the Convert Muslim (2015), and Conversion to Islam in Prison and Its Aftermath (2018)*. Batool is currently a member of the steering group for an international research project, 'Understanding Conversion to Islam in Prison' conducted by Dr Matthew Wilkinson, the findings of which are currently being shared with the public.

Ferzana Dakri – leads the Straight Path Resettlement Project, based in Leicester which offers a range of support to prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families.



Raymond Douglas – is one of the UK's leading thinkers and practitioners around reducing gang violence. A prolific desistance practitioner he has created numerous prison intervention programmes tackling conflict and violence. To date, his programme has reached over 10,000 young people annually, and his motivational and transformational seminars aim to reduce the number of people at risk of life threatening behaviour involving guns, gangs and knife crime. Raymond is an accomplished film producer, who has produced several films including 'On Road' which portrays the reality of inner-city youth culture and which won best short film at the Harlem film festival. He continues to lecture at schools, colleges and universities, both nationally and internationally. Amongst appearances at Tedx, Ray has produced a catalogue of work both nationally and internationally.

Dr Lamia Irfan is a Research Fellow in Religion and Criminal Justice, Birkbeck School of Law. She collaborated with a research team to conduct field work in prison, negotiated interviews with prisoners and prison staff and presented statistical data and co-authored the research outputs which included a book on Islam for criminal justice practitioners. Her postdoctoral research was part of the 'Understanding Conversion to Islam in Prison' project, 2018 – 2020, whose focus was on the pro-social capacity for religious change to promote prisoner rehabilitation.

Farzana Shaheen – is Managing Director of Stepping Stones 2 Wisdom, a national organisation founded in 2015 and based in Bradford. It offers a range of services including a prisoners' project supporting offenders both within prison and back into the wider community upon release.

Dr Matthew Wilkinson Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research, Birkbeck, University of London, Principal Investigator leading the international research project *Understanding Conversion to Islam in Prison*. This programme represents a large-scale, mixed-methods independently funded study undertaken between the years 2018 and 2020.

Synopsis

This report provides an overview of the discussions held over a weekend in October 2020 organised by the **Convert Muslim Foundation**. The underlying concept of the weekend's discussions was to bring together practitioners and those interested in improving outcomes for Muslims who are currently serving or who have served prison sentences, by examining initiatives and service provision. Also of interest was the discussion of preventative measures and desistance, tangential to which were other areas of support for families and relatives involved. Pertinent suggestions for improvements to services are considered. It is noted that the crucial time for prisoners surrounding the retention of their faith and the ability to desist from further crime is the period surrounding their release. It is here that resources and support are most required to successfully transition from incarceration to a meaningful engagement with both their faith and society following release. Discussion also highlighted the lack of Muslim impact on the drivers of crime and spiralling rates of incarceration which signalled the need for communal responses and spokespeople to step forward and provide the required representation to allow the debates surrounding Muslim imprisonment to be voiced and heard and to offer creative suggestions for improvement.

Acknowledgements

The staff and trustees of the **Convert Muslim Foundation** express their sincere thanks and appreciation to everyone who attended the weekend's discussions and who are involved in the provision of services to Muslims caught up in the criminal justice system for so willingly giving their time to share their experiences and current work. Such contributions allowed the weekend's discussions to enlighten and challenge which enabled the programme to be both informative and potentially productive.

The Convert Muslim Foundation would like to express our sincere thanks to **The Islamic Foundation**, at Markfield in Leicestershire, for its continued support to the convert Muslim community which the orgnisation and its management have generously contributed to from its inception and, most particularly so, over the past three decades. We look forward to a mutually supportive relationship where we, as a growing and developing community, may bring new and innovative concepts and ideas as we continue to be enriched by the traditional Islamic scholarship and spiritual guidance the **Islamic Foundation** is renowned for.

We would also like to express our thanks to the management and staff of the **Markfield Conference Centre** for the standard of care enjoyed by our participants over a weekend that fell within a period of time when the country was tentatively emerging from the first prolonged Covid lockdown. The dedicated attention provided by the staff of the **MCC** was as much appreciated by the organisers of the event as it was by the participants, some of whom were first time visitors to the centre. For this we express our gratitude and as a means of our continued appreciation of this wonderful facility, which has served the Muslim community for the past three decades, kindly call on the generations of Muslims who have benifitted from it to generously support it so that it may continue to serve the Muslim community and the general public for many decades into the future.

1. Setting the scene: the context

'I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change.
I am changing the things I cannot accept.'[1]

1.1 The weekend of 3-4 October 2020 brought together a selection of practitioners, academics and people who had previously served prison sentences as interested parties working to assist Muslims enmeshed within the structures of the UK's criminal justice system across different areas of the UK. This involved discussing on-going research projects alongside local preventative initiatives instituted by some of the practitioners. The meeting aimed to assess current provision and preventative measures alongside post-release assistance, plus explore desistance/exit strategies to deter Muslims from entering or becoming trapped in illegal activity and criminal orbits, by surveying some of the support already in place, and considering other forms that may be required. On-going projects were detailed with incarcerated Muslims, examining how to make the desire to change lives in a positive direction viable through a range of practical and emotional support services; and to consider provision offered post-release to turn aspiration for change into a more realisable tangible reality to reduce rates of reoffending, thereby, enabling purposeful transitions to be pursued, and to inhibit and break negative patterns and life cycles. The initiative, the second of its kind, was convened by Batool Al-Toma, Founding Director of the **Convert Muslim Foundation** assisted by Farzana Shaheen, Director of **Stepping Stones to Wisdom.**

1.2 In terms of limitations - discussion was grounded in an unspoken and unchallenged acceptance of the contemporary reality that surrounds incarceration. No attempt was made to introduce or discuss alternatives to prison, improvements to the current penal system or to consider better conditions within jails, nor ways to exert pressure or lobby for institutional change, or question the assumptions underpinning current practice. The focus and attention centred largely on the types of crime committed by low-income sectors of society. Other forms of crime – including white collar and corporate illegality remain beyond the remit of this discussion.

1.3 Society largely ignores the reality that it produces from penal systems that are both apparent and hidden simultaneously.[2] The most fundamental question is – 'Why do we not care about the way our society treats the people it has failed?'[3] Here, the absence of effective leadership within Muslim communities is both acknowledged and evident, which can be observed as on-going acquiescence with the status quo, coupled with a lack of critical voices, creative ideas and motivation to change what appears to be an ever-deteriorating situation within state sanctioned systems of injustice. 'The most difficult and urgent challenge today is that of creatively exploring new terrains of justice, where the prison no longer serves as our major anchor.'[4]

> To tackle Europe's high prisoner numbers and stop the steady expansion of criminalised populations, we need to downsize our use of prisons and stop relying on criminal justice to solve social problems. To do this, states must refocus interventions away from criminalisation, punishment and retribution, towards harm reduction, social justice and, where appropriate, treatment, reparation and restorative practices. There is also a need to monitor the use of alternatives to imprisonment, to make sure these forms of punishment and control do not simply widen the net of punishment by criminalising people in ever-increasing numbers. Promoting the use of these sanctions without attending to other priorities risks simply widening the net of criminalisation further – punishing more people differently.[5]

1.4 Noted, is the need for an umbrella organisation with strong leadership and direction which can coordinate and oversee the range of organisations and individuals who support people affected by imprisonment to form an effective and powerful force to pursue change and apply pressure to induce the already widely accepted, yet still unimplemented recommendations, emanating from both the Lammy and Corsten reports, in order to see these proposals brought to fruition.[6] Of thirty-five recommendations arising from the Lammy report only six have been implemented, while unified action and pressure is not forthcoming from Muslim communities to strengthen the call for action and hold the Home Office to account. To its detriment the acclaimed Lammy report 'simply did not know' why Muslims are disproportionately imprisoned in comparison to the

general population. 'If you keep a population poor, deny them opportunities to educationally or financially exit that poverty, ignore structural inequality, racially profile them and tell the rest of the population to be suspicious of them' the answer becomes apparent.[7]

1.5 The responsibility of existing Muslim institutions, communities and individuals who discharge their energy and financial resources abroad while sweeping alarming domestic issues deftly under the carpet, requires an awakening to the enormity of the social problems besetting the UK's Muslim communities, and support a realisation that a Muslim's first port of call is to offer help and support to people within their immediate locality. Islam is a faith of balance where the outward and inward harmonise. An overly amplified external focus fixated on distant continents requires realignment with pressing internal domestic issues, people and concerns. When Malcolm X was released from prison he was met at the gates by the Nation of Islam, who were there to support him. 'He did not come out to £40 and a bin bag' containing his scant possessions.

1.6 There remains the concern that despite the best of intentions this gathering of sympathetic Muslims would not transcend beyond the status of a talking shop, with the risk that the weekend's engaging and at times forceful discussion would peter out until a further roundtable forum convenes, when those attending would again gather and ask what has changed since we last met and why are we here? This highlights the imperative to work towards instituting meaningful change.

1.7 In the two and half years since the last discussion forum was held the context in which the participants engaged with each other had indeed changed. Firstly, despite some commendable regional initiatives, provision across the UK remained generally patchy and grossly inadequate in terms of the spiralling demand for services. An increasing number of Muslims had received custodial sentences. Distressingly noted was the statement that 'If current trends of imprisonment continue within the next ten years over half of the prison population in England and Wales will be composed of Muslim prisoners.' Ethnic minorities currently constitute 27% of the prison population compared with 13% of the general population. As of March 2020, 47% of the prison population was considered Christian, whereas the proportion of Muslim prisoners has increased from 8% in 2002 to 16% in 2020 with 13,563 Muslims incarcerated according to these

figures.[8] Of these, 173 Muslims were in prison for terrorist related offences.[9]In London's prisons 27% of prisoners are Muslim, over twice the figures for the city's Muslim population which stands at 12%. Eurostat data for England and Wales detailed 144 prisoners per 100,000 head of populations which records the highest levels of imprisonment in Western Europe.[10] In maximum security prisons and Young Offender's Institutions (YOIs) one in five offenders is Muslim.[11] The cost of keeping a prisoner in prison per year currently averages at £43,213 or £118 per day,[12] of that daily sum, only a paltry £2 is allocated to nutrition, six times less than the budget for a hospital patient,[13] although nutritionists acknowledge the adverse effects of poor diet on general health, mental health, behaviour and wellbeing.

1.8 As part of a world largely hidden from many Muslims, such statistics detailed above could serve as a wakeup call to Muslim community leaders and communities around the UK, firstly to collaborate, to organise, to secure effective leadership that transcends ethnic and sectarian divisions and to consider that the first call on charitable resources is to meet the needs of Muslim members of British Muslim communities. Energy, effort and financial support must be provided where it is most required in the UK to address the multiple levels of deprivation and dislocation that currently decimates many of the contemporary and future prospects for generations of Muslims.

1.9 Secondly, the deteriorating state of the UK's criminal justice system has meant that at every stage of the legal process from decisions taken to stop and search, to whether to arrest suspects and pursue prosecutions, through to sentencing and imprisonment increasing injustice and malpractice is entrenched within discretionary and arbitrary practices that equate to the unequal execution of power, which is exacerbated by institutional racism and bias - both conscious and unconscious. People from minority groups are less likely to plead guilty due to a lack of trust in the existing system and when deemed guilty are subject to longer prison sentences.

1.10 International organisations are increasingly called to scrutinise the unacceptable practices that are permitted within deplorable British policing methods.[14] For example, a recent UNICEF report highlights the plight of children from BAME communities who are disproportionately subject to unethical practices of 'spit hoods' and Tasers, which have been applied to children under the age of eleven and which contravene international rights' standards.

1.11 The crisis in prisons reflects that of a broken society. There is a drugs crisis both inside and outside of prison. A former prisoner noted that the most popular magazine in Wandsworth prison was GQ:

> Prisoners drooled endlessly over Orlando Bloom's watch or David Beckham's shoes, believing they too could possess these luxuries if they sold enough drugs. Prison is what lies behind the mirror of consumer capitalism, the unseen consequence of telling everyone that they can have whatever they want.[15]

1.12 The potent lure of consumerism may mean that mainstream insecure and poorly paid employment is rejected in favour of more lucrative illicit routes to obtaining money. Adopting Islam or reengaging with faith can lead to a rejection of materialism that can reflect a shift in identity allowing a prisoner to reject a former criminal lifestyle driven by excessive materialism.[16] Other non-material tenets revealed during Matthew Wilkinson's recent research showed a range of values which prisoners maintained had increased connection to their faith, these were: courage, empathy, equality and fairness, gratitude, hope, humanism, humility, patience, peace and non-violence, politeness and respect for others, responsibility and duty, sincerity, tolerance, trust, and work ethics.[17]

1.13 The corporate takeover of many prisons and privatised management introduces commercial exploitation into the system. 'Prisoners are a useful sponge for the government and private companies to squeeze for money. In jail you earn £5 a week. Prisoners haven't received a pay rise since 1997.' The Ministry of Justice 'makes £500,000 a year from in-prison spending. BT, which has a monopoly on prison phones, charges eight times as much as it does to customers in the outside world.'[18]

1.14 Despite attempts to institute a rehabilitative culture within a small number of new prison facilities, such as HMP Berwyn in North Wales, a medium secure facility which opened in 2017, the ethos underpinning this prison has been undermined by serious challenges, while most of the prison estate remains in dire straits[19]. Underinvestment in the prison infrastructure has led to poorly

maintained estates, with decaying facilities, insanitary conditions, overcrowding, insufficient exercise and a lack of exposure to fresh air and daylight, reduced opportunities to engage in training and work, coupled with poor health care and a lack of input into psychological wellbeing and mental health, which have been further entrenched by policies devised to prevent the spread of Covid-19.[20]
1.15 Reports from early 2020 revealed prisoners confined to their cells for '23 hours a day in hot, poorly ventilated cells,' and where visits were banned between March and the end of August 2020.[21] Since these reports, where outbreaks of Covid have occurred, prisons such as HMP Nottingham have seen prisoners confined to cells for 24 hours a day. Such dire conditions can be construed as a form of torture. The closed system in gaols has become progressively oppressive with an increasing lack of oversight and accountability for conditions and practices within the system. The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, as part of the Council of Europe reported that attacks by prison officers on compliant prisoners continue unchallenged and unabated, within three 'violent, unsafe and overcrowded' prisons under inspection.[22]

David Wilson, a criminologist and former prisoner governor stated:

> Prison is costly and counterproductive and is often making the individual worse. Two out of three male offenders reoffend within two years of leaving jail. Prison numbers rising makes it seem like the government is doing something about crime, when in fact they are making our communities less safe. We need to rethink who we release, as well as who we send to prison in the first place, in what numbers and for how long.[23]

1.16 It was also noted that 93% of prison officers are white, many of whom are drawn from former members of the armed forces, while the police service struggle to recruit enough officers from BAME communities. Some are repelled by the poor image police forces project within minority communities, and the perceptions and reluctance of people to be associated with institutions considered authoritarian and repressive. Engagement may be viewed as a form of treachery and a betrayal of those within a family or community who have suffered unwarranted treatment by the police or prison services. Recruits may

be questioned and stigmatised by their families and communities for making such career choices. Stigma can be further heightened for women coming from cultures where employment within the security services is viewed as undesirable for females – as a participant was questioned: 'what do you want to work in prisons for?'

1.17 For situational change to occur requires both systemic overhaul and engagement. People require representation by others who are similar both physically and culturally. One participant stated that to institute internal change people from minority communities need to engage with the criminal justice system and join the police and prison services. Recruitment levels remain low, which means that perception, image and incentives must improve, and reform and significant change is required. For example, police recruitment of BAME officers in West Yorkshire rose marginally from (4.8%) 430 in March 2017 to 503 (5.5%) by March 2019[24] serving a population of 2.2 million people, illustrative of the slow pace of change.

1.18 Further problems concern the retention of police staff, whereby some who sign-up hope to make a positive contribution, become disillusioned for a variety of reasons which can include the treatment they receive and their inability to affect change that may lead to subsequent resignations.[25]While policing is undoubtedly an increasingly complex task, and reporting of negative practice obscures successful initiatives and commendable measures which rarely receive media attention, the inability to execute transparency and accountability surrounding failings are set within a powerfully protective culture where fluid boundaries facilitate misplaced loyalties.

1.19 Across the world a growing awareness of the manifestations of racism in its myriad forms interned within macro and micro-aggression and injustice has arisen to an increasingly receptive and global audience. As a result of police violence and their largely unchallenged mistreatment, in particular of black people while in custody has, in an alarming number of cases, resulted in death. This has manifest in the UK with a rising awareness of institutional racism and its attendant by-products and effects on the lives of BAME people, exposed predominantly through the Black Lives Matter movement and media attention. From 1969-1999 there were 1000 deaths in police custody, only resulting in one successful prosecution of a police officer for manslaughter.[26]

> Appalling inspection reports, damning inquest findings, and statistics on yet more deaths, have become so regular that those in power seem to forget these are human beings to whom the state owes a duty of care. Families continue to be traumatised, not only by the deaths, but by the failure to enact change. Deaths, self-harm, violence, impoverished regimes and conditions are the daily reality of the prison system. Despair and distress are at unprecedented levels in failing institutions within a failing system. The failure to act on warnings from inspection, monitoring, investigation bodies and inquests exposes an accountability vacuum allowing dangerous practices to continue.[27]

1.20 An encounter with two white racist police officers was described. A young British Black man was stopped by police officers on his way home from work and told: 'You look like a burglar.' After explaining he had finished work for the day and was returning home and how the officers could verify this by phoning his employer, he was then told: 'Do we look like BT?' Accused of being in possession of a fraudulent passport (his own genuine document) he was sprayed with CS gas. Such encounters had become a regular part of his life since the age of 14. Appearing as an act of nemesis, the police now pay him for the instruction and educational training he provides.

1.21 Increasing awareness of racial discrimination differs from effective action, resolution and institution of workable measures to address systemic injustice. The backlash is swift providing impetus to a global rise in far-right movements and ideology which festers and infuses into mainstream political discourse in the UK, whereby, Islamophobic diatribes are clearly apparent within the current government, establishment, media and society.[28] To counteract what can be construed as a negative and highly toxic contemporary environment the discussion proceeds to firstly examine what is working well and supports successful outcomes for people who encounter the prison system in the UK.

2. Examples of good practice: a workable 'solution focused approach'[29]

2.1 An Islamic approach to treating prisoners based on a Prophetic model is elucidated alongside the virtues of repentance and forgiveness within the model of care offered by the **Khidmat** organisation and **Stepping Stones to Wisdom** which will be discussed in more detail below. The Prophet Muhammad (blessings and peace be upon him) directed his followers to treat prisoners well, with dignity and not to separate them from their relatives. After cessation of hostilities, they were to be set free or exchanged for Muslim prisoners. There are historical examples of captured prisoners embracing Islam following their release.

2.2 The Muslim community possesses a functioning and workable community led resettlement model focused on how to support women who have received prison sentences, firmly rooted within Islamic concepts and practices, which could be rolled out across the country and adapted to meet both the needs of Muslim men and women in different localities across the UK. Currently, this model is financially viable, based within the community and utilises a holistic and inclusive approach.[30] A range of acclaimed research has been undertaken by **Khidmat**. Recognised practice has been accepted both at community and policy levels.

2.3 **The Muslim Women in Prison Rehabilitation Project** is housed inside the **Khidmat Centres** located within the network of the Bradford Council of Mosques. The project aims to increase awareness within faith communities and institutions surrounding the needs of women post-release and offers access to a comprehensive range of services. These include spiritual and faith-based advice and support, mediation, mental health and emotional wellbeing services, housing support and advice, short-courses, employment and volunteering opportunities that facilitate former prisoners moving on with their lives in a constructive direction.

2.4 As the **Khidmat** centres are multi-functional community centres, housing the project within its framework has meant that the women accessing post-release support and services are able to do so in a discreet and unobtrusive

manner as there are no external signs indicating that anyone attending the centres are going there for any offending-related purpose. As the centres also support other vulnerable groups of people the ethos is to facilitate safe spaces and confidentiality.

2.5 While the project is geared towards supporting all Muslim women who require its assistance, the majority of those accessing its services are derived from South Asian heritage, which reflects the Muslim demography of the area in which the project is located; this means that it has developed expertise in addressing the cultural issues that arise from these sections of Muslim communities and can specifically tailor elements of the provision to meet such cultural demands. Here for example, the stigma attached to female imprisonment and the damage it is perceived to wreak on a family's honour (*izzat*) requires specialist knowledge and mediation to address the potentially profoundly devastating impact on the lives of those serving or who have served prison sentences due to the repercussions on familial relationships. Some women reported being scolded for dishonouring their faith: 'You are not worthy of wearing the *hijab* – who do you think you are?' This also highlights the hypocrisy and ambiguity surrounding the concept of a woman/ mother and its manipulation in society.[31]

> Some choose not to believe that Muslim women in prison even exist, as the subject is embroiled in stigma, taboo and shame. There is the attitude that these women are 'bad eggs' and should not be discussed or supported, let alone rehabilitated.[32]

2.6 For many women from an Asian cultural heritage undergoing a prison sentence can constitute a triple whammy, where women are viewed as custodians of morality. Firstly, there are issues surrounding serving a prison sentence, where a stigmatised woman may lose her home, husband, children and employment. This sets up cycles of trauma where children of Muslim female prisoners can carry and internalise the shame imposed by community stigma. Insight into the traumatic effects on Muslim children of their mothers' incarceration remains unsearched.

2.7 Post-release, a second sentence can be imposed by the family or community in terms of its rejection of the woman who has served time in prison, which may include threats of violence or death threats alongside emotional rejection and social isolation. Thirdly, there is the difficulty of securing employment where previous criminal convictions are required to be revealed to a prospective employer, which may blight future job prospects and block entry to potential career paths. Convictions for crimes involving terrorism may exacerbate these factors and lead to situations where women are managed within the community but not assisted to move forward with their lives, leading to a loss of hope and increasing despair.[33]

2.8 Female Muslim prisoners currently constitute 6% of the female prison estate, many of whom are themselves victims of trauma, tragedy and circumstance – some incarcerated due to violence, abuse and coercion, alongside incidents of blackmail. Instances include coercion into crime, for example, where a woman may receive threats to reveal and publicise explicit personal sexual material. Where honour killings have taken place, a woman may become implicated in the crime through being present at the wrong time.

2.9 Muslim women of all ages are found in prison. For elderly Muslim women the miseries of prison can be heightened through an inability to communicate in English, compounded by the toxic levels of shame and dishonour they imbibe, that is amplified in comparison to the relative leniency Muslim communities' show to male Muslims who transgress.

2.10 A documentary produced by Sophia Buncy MBE highlighted the case of a Muslim woman whose house was ransacked during a police raid. She was arrested, remanded and sent straight to prison. Her primary concern during this time was her children. It was her faith that enabled her to cope during the time spent in prison, where she experienced high levels of anxiety. Following her release, she was able to rebuild her relationships again and received support from the project to address anxiety, and to build self-confidence alongside securing part-time employment.

2.11 A further case involved an abused self-harming woman who attempted suicide. The support she received from the project helped to reduce her propensity to injury. Another case detailed a Muslim woman who after her

marriage ended met a man, who offered support and helped her to move to a new house, but she became entangled in his unlawful activity, and this led her into prison. After two years inside she felt institutionalised. Despite her Muslim culture she had not learned in a meaningful way anything about her faith. While she could read the Qur'an in Arabic an understanding of its meaning was not acquired. Following the help she received, the woman is currently employed as a community support worker. Such cases demonstrate the need to provide services in a culturally competent way due to the lack of understanding that is shown to the cultural needs of Asian women. This includes advice and services on drugs and alcohol. Where someone from the same culture provides advice, this can help the recipient to be responsive to offers of support and feel safe to confide - 'She's been there, she knows what I am going through.'

2.12 Stepping Stones to Wisdom, a project also initiated in Bradford was established in 2001 following recognition by its founder that Muslim organisations did not exist to help Muslim prisoners. Motivation underpinning the project stems from the hadith that when one part of the *ummah* (community) experiences pain, the community in its entirety is in pain. There are several prongs to this approach involving prevention and support for prisoners while in prison and assistance for those released from prison to prevent new offences being committed - help is offered within the community and the family. Similarly, to the previous project, this is a comprehensive and holistic venture that embraces a range of services including: emotional, spiritual and practical support, education and training, housing, employment, family mediation, identity and cultural support, and assistance for those embracing Islam.

2.13 Resettlement homes are an important element to post-release support. For example, in Birmingham a 16-bedded home is designed to offer those without accommodation a place to stay. This includes a lounge, kitchen, prayer room, games room, classes/meeting room for the residents to use. Such supportive measures are vital if people leaving prison are to succeed on release, as the first few weeks frequently determine whether someone will reoffend or make sustained changes to their lives to enable a more constructive pathway to unfold.

2.14 In terms of preventative measures the organisation seeks through its network of volunteers to steer those vulnerable to crime away from offending. The type of cases encountered included one single mother of five children who

had not received support from the Muslim community after one of her sons became caught up in drug dealing. He subsequently lost the drugs he had been given to sell and was beaten up.

2.15 The lure of the streets and gang culture to young people can be immensely strong. Particularly for those who lack suitable mentors, cannot relate to local Imams and religious teachings, whose parents struggle to contain their child's spiralling disengagement from education and the family, rejection of suitable boundaries, and whose association with undesirable peer groups, pressure, crime and drugs makes it difficult for the young person to contemplate or envisage alternative lifestyles. The set of circumstances that originally attracts or entices a young person to a criminal pathway may be vastly different to the entrapment they subsequently experience, when there appears to be no viable ways to extrication from illicit activity and are unable to reduce the hold of the detrimental people who exert negative influence over or ensnare them.

2.16 Volunteers who work to support the project detailed above are located across the country, within localised groups, and undergo a three-day training programme which includes components on understanding the criminal justice system, the reasons why people go to prison, empathy and forgiveness, discussing judgemental attitudes and approaches; and offering guidance and support, including establishing boundaries.

2.17 Families are frequently the forgotten victims of the prison system. Their emotional wellbeing and particularly that of affected children, as previously mentioned, may require significant help and support. Education so that people can understand the complexities inherent to the criminal justice system is required alongside simplification, so that process and rights are clearly understood. Procedures and processes need to be reworded into plain English to replace the often out dated and archaic terminology in use within the courts and legal system.

2.18 Support is offered to imprisoned people. Mentors derived from ethnically diverse backgrounds phone and write to suicidal prisoners; mental health and emotional support is offered to those at risk of self-harm, depression and suicide; support, representation and advice is given for parole hearings and release plans are set up to support former prisoners on release. One example documents the

case of a Bangladeshi Muslim who had spent time in prison between the ages of 22-42 and had not spoken to his family for 20 years. His father died while he was incarcerated and his family blamed him for his father's death, due to the levels of stress endured. He was subsequently recalled to prison and continued to receive support from the organisation. Access to this project is via word of mouth, prison diaries, the probation service and solicitors.

2.19 Other practical forms of support have been initiated by the **Stepping Stones to Wisdom** programme through prison packs that contain prayer mats, books, and prison diaries. A magazine designed solely for Muslim prisoners called *Beyond Bars*, contains articles focused on mental health, positive relationships, *seerah*, *tafseer*, learning Arabic, support for those embracing Islam, poetry, quizzes, prisoners' contributions and letters from their families. This publication relies on voluntary donations.

2.20 The Straight Path Resettlement Project based in Leicester, operates through the **Khidmah Organisation** established in 1999 and as one of its many goals supports families affected through imprisonment alongside people who have served prison sentences by offering resettlement support. It aims to reduce reoffending, assist the family, promote faith, and has a team of voluntary mentors, who also raise issues surrounding Muslims in Prison. It has a particular focus on children with a parent(s) imprisoned acknowledging the devastating effects of parental separation on a child, their future mental health, long term wellbeing and outcomes in life. These can include isolation, stigma, and the development of psychological conditions including personality disorders, depression, anxiety and deep-seated anger.

2.21 Figures are not currently compiled or available on the numbers of child affected by parental imprisonment. Children are the victims that judges forget who are dispersed to relatives or friends or sentenced to the foster care of strangers, [34] which may lead to their subsequent abuse and neglect. The project organiser, who works as a family engagement officer in prison describes her work as relentless, and that help must remain available to those who are disadvantaged.

2.22 An example from a documentary produced by Sophia Buncy cited the case of 16-year-old Hakeem, whose mother received a four-year prison sentence,

which led to a lack of attention paid to his needs and subsequent neglect. Prior to receiving support from the organisation, he was not in employment, education or training, while there was no one sufficiently involved with him to ensure that he was. He did not speak about his situation as he refused to receive pity.

Muslim prison chaplains

3.1 Religion is integral to the design and regimes of contemporary prisons in the UK whose construction is based historically on interpretations of Christian religious premises, pursuing Calvinist and Quaker ideals including solitude, silent contemplation and reflection, and the training of the mind and body using the cell as a place of retreat and reformation, and work to instil discipline.[35] Chaplaincy has been integral to Christianity since the 4th Century when St Martin, at the time a soldier, cut his thick army cloak in half to share it with a freezing beggar, while the ethics underpinning its ethos and practice are intrinsic to the major world faiths, and call to the universal values of kindness, compassion, empathy and care and concern for each other.

3.2 Pastoral care is embedded within the Islamic tradition as both a communal and moral obligation for Muslims illustrating a deep rooted connection between human beings which reflects the majesty of Allah. There are numerous practical examples of the Prophet Muhammad's (blessings and peace be upon him) pastoral qualities demonstrating kindness and care to those in need.

3.3 Hadiths cite the benefits of this love for humanity:

> *'Whoever visits the sick, or visits his brother in Allah (faith) a caller calls out: 'May you have goodness and your livelihood be good, and may you dwell in an abode in Paradise' (Tirmidhi).*
>
> *All of creation are the dependents of Allah, and the most beloved of Allah's creation is the best to his dependants (Tabarani 10033).*
>
> *Those who love each other for the sake of My Majesty shall be upon podiums of light, and they will be admired by the Prophets and the martyrs (Tirmidhi 2390).*

The Prophet (blessings and peace by upon him) applying a pastoral analogy said: 'All of you are shepherds, and each of you is responsible for his flock (Sahih: Al-Adab Al-Mufrad 212).

3.4 Turning to contemporary practice, currently 233 Muslim chaplains work in 118 prisons in England and Wales, with 34 employed as managing chaplains leading multifaith chaplaincy teams. Of this number 120 are employed as full-time chaplains, 90 are sessional chaplains and the remainder are volunteers. Their role is to provide religious/pastoral care to imprisoned people and staff, with 'a core purpose to serve those incarcerated by the courts by valuing their whole person, body and soul.'[36] Such stipulations have remained in force since a 1773 Act of Parliament enabled chaplains to be appointed and paid to serve prisons in their locality. The Gaols Act of 1823 enshrined the provision of UK chaplains in the prison system.[37] The 1952 Prison Act prescribes chaplaincy duties and the provision of an Anglican chaplain in each prison in England and Wales. 'The chaplain is one of three senior posts in each prison under this act, complementing the appointment of a governor and medical officer,' although it is contended that the previously significant role of chaplain has been largely eroded over time since it was originally outlined, however, managing chaplains who oversee multifaith chaplaincy teams, remain part of the senior management structure.[38] Since 2017, prison chaplaincy has been administered by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.

3.5 After 2001, Muslim chaplaincy has grown at a faster rate than any other faith group within the prison system. In 2013, Andrew Todd attributed this to government investment and interest in the role that Muslim chaplaincy can play in anti-extremism policy and practice. [39] 'Much of the recent government provision flowing from this concern stems from the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act of 2015. This gave rise to the 2015 Prevent Duty Guidance (HM Government 2015), which specifies responsibilities across the public sector. Further, the government review of Islamist 'extremism' in prison (Ministry of Justice 2016) gave rise both to a plan, announced in 2016, to place prisoners identified as 'extremists' in special units (BBC News 2016) and to the announcement in 2017 of a new Counter-Extremism Taskforce to work in prisons (HM Government 2017).'[40]

3.6 As part of their role prison chaplains are mandated to visit new prisoners alongside people held in segregation units, those confined to cells, in health care units, inmates at risk of self-harm and those preparing for release. Today, Muslim prison chaplains are subject to stringent recruitment processes, required to hold certificated qualifications in Islamic theology and display suitable character, personality and aptitude for the position. Prison chaplains are also subject to DBS and counter terrorism clearance vetting, before receiving clearance.[41] To assist Muslim chaplains HMPS has developed a *Tarbiyah* course which aims to educate the prisoner and allow him/her to grow in a nurturing and holistic way. Its modules aim to link faith to becoming a good citizen.[42]

3.7 The role of the chaplain is to listen, talk and offer support:

> They are present in the daily grind of prison life, they must be available to laugh when others are laughing and to carry the tears when the pain becomes unbearable, they should be found in the most difficult of places, when unfolding events are uncertain and frightening, they should be available to listen and encourage. Prison chaplains should be approachable, they must never proselytise, but through their words and actions they shine as advocates for their faith, and their faith communities.[43]

3.8 Muslim chaplains occupy a liminal space in the prison system where they are frequently not regarded fully as a staff member and have been subject to suspicion from both staff and prisoners. Half of the role can involve getting the establishment to trust the chaplain and the other half doing the job. A Muslim chaplain described being regarded as a government spy by prisoners wary of his intentions and role. Other forms of rejection have included refusal to pray behind a Muslim prison chaplain and declining to shake hands, on the grounds that the chaplain was a '*kuffar*' (disbeliever) or, at least, he was not a follower of the same 'school of thought' as the majority of the Muslim prisoners in a particular prison. Engagement with the Prevent programme has further obfuscated lines of trust. Distinctions between religious and secular forms of therapy and rehabilitation are increasingly unclear – this has led chaplains to engage in programmes intended to prevent offending behaviours and to instil positive attitudes.[44]

3.9 Some female Muslim chaplains detailed the stigma they experience when administering chaplaincy in a prison setting. Here, they argue that, 'if it is bad for us, what is it like for women in prison' which may yield a 'massive impact on women's identity.' Gender disparities appear in the accounts of Muslim men and women in prison and in their access to chaplaincy services. Muslim women experience prison on different terms to those of Muslim men, who may enjoy the solidarity of brotherhood that is denied to female Muslim prisoners. This is often due to the different conditions and composition of prisoners within prisons, where women are more likely to be isolated from other Muslims and experience loneliness. Islam can therefore become something that they have difficulty exhibiting, particularly visible clothing, such as wearing the hijab. One female Muslim prisoner was told: 'Take that towel off your head – what is that you are wearing?' 'I'd rather just conform and not wear that.'

3.10 Due to the current Covid induced conditions within prisons a chaplain discussed how the most complex prisoners were prioritised and received attention, while the others remained largely neglected. In terms of prisoners' health conditions, unless these are declared by the person subject to imprisonment their needs will be overlooked unless another agency in prison notices, which leads many people who require help slipping through the net. It has been suggested that there are more people with mental health conditions inside prisons than those receiving care from hospitals. It is estimated that around 60% of female prisoners have experienced domestic violence. Research suggests that around 60% of all prisoners have suffered a brain injury. This can result in neurological changes to the brain, making those injured more impulsive, less able to control their emotional reactions coupled with reduced attention spans and a marked inability to understand meanings and people.[45]

4. Contributory factors

4.1 The findings of doctoral research conducted by Dr Lamia Irfan were presented. She highlighted the importance of further developing an understanding of the positive role of religion in desistance and involvement in crime. It was contended that boredom, poverty and de-industrialisation have shrunk the space for working class youth to transition successfully to adulthood.[46] This, combined with austerity measures has axed youth service provision and

contributes further to alienation and anomie. Connection to a neighbourhood and territorial affiliations give agency to marginalised groups, allowing them a sense of location and belonging in a society from which they may feel socially excluded. Involvement in crime allows marginalised youth leadership roles, close social bonds, excitement, thrill and access to a lifestyle that could otherwise not be afforded. Involvement in crime can be perceived in some cases as a response to a lack of opportunity and social capital.[47]

4.2 Difficulties of establishing a strong adult identity were other areas of concern. Seeking access to a lifestyle a person could not afford, alongside greed and other vices were also pertinent. Other problematic formations persist. A superficial focus on the foundations of religion sometimes circulates that is derived from anti-authoritarian attitudes particularly stemming from young Muslim males: laddish, gangster, and jihadist hegemonic forms are likely to pose obstacles, and reinforce criminality or anti-social behaviour and attitudes.

4.3 For born-Muslims, close family ties are seen as important despite involvement with crime. Reconciliation of values between community, family and peer groups, and criminal activity utilise complex strategies. Involvement in crime is seen as driven by fate and temptation. Young Muslims engaged in crime maintain attachment to norms and values while simultaneously transgressing them. 'Hiding their crime or blocking themselves from the moral implications of their actions, were other important strategies employed as a show of respect for community norms while being involved in crime.' Such strategies are deployed to avoid stigma within the community.[48]

4.4 The main ways in which religion is used in childhood and the life cycle include the development of collective identity – which is shared in small local communities. Religious teachings form the basis through which Muslim children develop a sense of moral self-identity. Spiritualism and a belief in a higher power is an important component of self-identity. As a pious self develops over a lifetime, a sense of spiritualism provides resilience in the face of adverse life events.[49]

5. Abuse

5.1 It has been widely documented that many people serving prison sentences have been victims of abuse in their childhoods and adolescence, where this can leave a lifetime of scars and repercussions.

5.2 Abuse includes neglect, child sexual abuse, emotional and spiritual violations and domestic violence. A case of 80 victims of sexual abuse arose due to institutional denial, whereby the abuse was hidden using Islamic texts permitting defilement to continue. Such situations can be reduced through instituting proper safeguarding procedures and measures to hold abusers to account. It was challenging to find Muslim organisations willing to facilitate change. Measures put in place through consultation and advisory boards can provide direction and monitor how legal regulations are implemented. Islamic therapy and counselling are also required to support those suffering from trauma and abuse and enable them to access improved futures. The idea of post-traumatic growth is gaining traction, where people surmount painful experiences and emerge with an acquired resilience and growth to become survivors rather than victims. Here, the role of chaplaincy is to offer ways forward and explore opportunities to develop, 'being a presence, being alongside, being available'. 'To look for the good in people and to help them rediscover this for themselves.'[50]

5.3 Through education and raising awareness prevention can be enhanced to start to reduce the number of children falling into crime. Aside from social improvement programmes, activities to occupy children constructively, including the development of mentors, sports facilities, healthy interests and hobbies are required.

5.4 How to stop the cycle of offending by supporting the person at risk was one question posed for reflection. To look at ways to reduce the possibilities of grooming and access to guns and drugs was an immediate suggestion. Schemes such as Kickstart can offer anger management therapies to address emotional behavioural issues, while access to apprenticeships can enhance future employment prospects and provide a sense of direction and purpose. The mosques are huge spaces where free activities can be offered such as community boxing, and where there are ample opportunities for *zakat* and other charitable donations to fund these provisions. What is happening to prevent such healthy collaboration, and

how a culture of giving collaboratively can be facilitated was questioned. Citing the example of one *masjid* that extravagantly spent £190,000 purchasing *ghusl khana* (funeral ablution facilities), provided an example of how resources could be redirected into deserving projects. Initiatives can grow and develop from small beginnings rather than being thwarted by overly ambitious plans that struggle to materialise.

5.5 In terms of increasing Muslim community engagement, risks must be taken in bringing diverse people together by acknowledging that disputes and disagreements will be part of the process. Funding issues can be overcome by finding people with the ability to affect change and who have access to financial resources. By holding mosques to account and seeking ways to overcome obstructive gatekeepers, conversations can be facilitated to examine the major issues which require resources and action. This can be initiated by targeting like-minded individuals, by challenging entrenched hierarchies and seeking horizontal leadership models, by seeking quality over quantity and educating Muslims to unite.

6. Current research

6.1 Media focus has documented conversion to Islam in prison, frequently essentialising the factors thought to contribute to people in prison embracing Islam. These include bullying and gang related abuse and the propensity for prisons to be incubators of radicalisation and potential terrorist activity.[51]

6.2 Research into conversion to Christianity revealed the following findings, which may resonate with those embracing Islam in a prison setting:

> (…) the conversion narrative 'works' as a shame management and coping strategy in the following ways. The narrative creates a new social identity to replace the label of prisoner or criminal, imbues the experience of imprisonment with purpose and meaning, empowers the largely powerless prisoner by turning him into an agent of God, provides the prisoner with a language and framework for forgiveness, and allows a sense of control over an unknown future.[52]

6.3 During imprisonment, an increased focus on religious ritual and learning was apparent. Religion helped to manage the 'pains' of imprisonment. Spiritual sense-making played an important role allowing attachment to positive meanings to imprisonment. Time in prison allowed the absolution of sins, placing focus on spiritual and self-development. Religion provided the route toward a 'second chance' and a 'blueprint' for a new identity inside prison.[53]

6.4 Muslim prison composition was multi-ethnic and plural, whereby, they could usually rely on each other for tangible and intangible help, which allowed a sense of solidarity to prevail, particularly, in response to stereotyping and marginalisation.[54] Solidarity, between Muslim prisoners allowed reconciliation with a hostile environment. Focus on religious ritual and learning was important.[55]

6.5 For some converts, suspicion and scrutiny of their conversion was an uncomfortable and alienating experience. In some prisons, relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim prisoners and between Muslim prisoners and staff proved strained. This response was considered typical:

> I generally feel that a vast majority of these conversions are gang related. What tends to happen on some of the wings is, a prisoner will come in, and he will get a visit, and then he might be a Muslim the next day or say he's a Muslim. Yes, and they might do it for protection. I dare say, there are cases when that isn't the case, and I'm aware that it's not always like that, but that's generally what I feel happens here, if I'm honest (prison officer).[56]

6.6 The preliminary findings of a current research project detailing conversion to Islam in prison under the leadership of Dr Matthew Wilkinson were discussed. It has examined the lived experiences of Muslims within prison systems in several countries encompassing the UK, France and Switzerland. The numbers of converts in prison in England and Wales were estimated at 3500. In the context of this research, Islam was seen as a faith that is powerfully rehabilitative and allows positive ties to be renewed. A broad spectrum of possibility exists within the forms of Islam practiced in prison. While versions of Islamism (a nebulous term defying any suitable definition, applications of which can indicate various

degrees of political entrenchment or militancy) propagated in prison have been linked to terrorism.

6.7 The research attempted to bridge fear/suspicion and naivety surrounding the practice and adoption of Islam by people in prison. The aims were to ascertain who are the converts to Islam both from a demographic and religious perspective and seek to find out why people choose to embrace Islam. The types of Islam or Islamist views circulating in the prison setting were also a target of the research. It also sought to uncover how the institutional effects of the practice of Islam manifests itself within the prison environment.

6.8 The research methodology applied triangulated research tools using mixed methods: questionnaires, observations, interviews, and accessed the views of different actors within the prison system: Muslim prisoners, chaplains, governors and officers.

6.9 Many prisoners agreed to participate to allow their voices to be heard within their commitment to Islam. For some this was the first experience of talking about their faith. It also provided respite from the monotonous routine of prison and uncovering the pro-social benefits of choosing Islam in prison can be a good thing. Others rejected the opportunity to engage. This was due to suspicion, a strategic choice, they thought that it may be a spying exercise, apathy, the observation that research does not improve a situation and, while the research was independently funded some prisoners did not agree with the agenda of the research.

6.10 In response to the statement: *Islam belongs in Britain on an equal legal footing* – some prisoners did not agree and considered that Muslims and non-Muslims should not mix – this generated a certain amount of reticence and fear amongst some of the prisoners not to engage with the research.

6.11 Most of the sample adhered to a traditional or activist understanding of Islam, supporting the idea of equality before God – unity and diversity. Around a quarter fell under the category of Islamism – detailing an 'us versus them' ethos with revolutionary overtones. A small proportion around 4% were inclined to extremism who viewed non-Muslims as less human than Muslims and who were considered stripped of human properties – two prison participants were

committed to violence. In contrast, many of the prisoners interviewed revealed that their religious faith moderated their behaviour. Prisoners demonstrating a sincere commitment to a mainstream interpretation of Islam served to moderate others who held extreme views.[57]

6.12 The reasons why people chose to follow Islam fell into the following broad categories listing the most popular reasons in order of preference:

1. Piety
2. Emotional reasons – including guilt, seeking forgiveness from God and their victims
3. Good company
4. Perks and privileges
5. Protection

6.13 Here, the data strongly suggests that Muslim prisoners in European prisons are more likely to choose Islam for reasons of faith, good company and emotional support than for perks, privileges and protection.[58] The bonds of care cultivated to attain the love of Allah, are important within the closed environment of a prison setting, where the importance of good company is vital where it impacts influence on practice and beliefs. The Prophet (blessings and peace be upon him) said: The similitude of good company and bad company is that of the owner of musk and the one blowing the bellows. The owner of musk would either offer you some free of charge or you would buy some from him, or smell its pleasant aroma. Whereas, the one who blows the bellows (the blacksmith) he either burns your clothes or you omit a repugnant smell (Muslim 2628).

6.14 Differing levels of commitment to the faith were noted which were categorised through various labels. As to be expected faith became heightened when in prison with 55% stating this. 80% of the Muslims who provided information about their experiences in prison stated that they understood more in prison about Islam – and prayed more in prison than they had before. A high proportion found their faith intensified. The reasons underpinning this were due to more time to think, read, pray and understand. Some admitted to the need to constantly repent for their crimes and request forgiveness from God each day. Being surrounded by other prisoners who showed a serious commitment to practising their faith increased their resolve and provided a shared sense of

community. Engagement with chaplaincy services provided individual bespoke religious attention, along with statutory visits, and Islamic studies classes. Friday prayers, enables prisoners to listen to a weekly sermon and meet and mix with other prisoners. It also offered dealers an opportunity for transactions and increased this subsequent risk to other prisoners.

6.15 For women, the intensification of their religious faith while in prison was reduced, being more likely to remain at the same level or decrease further. Here the absence of family, and a lack of chaplaincy provision all contributed to this gendered disparity.

6.16 What proved most striking, and is a critical issue for further consideration, was while over 80% of people in prison thought they would carry on practicing their faith following release only around 30% managed this. What happens within the first few weeks following release appears crucial. It was noted that 34% would reoffend within a year.

> I fell off my *Deen* (religion) you know my *Deen* suffered when I left prison. First it was for a couple of months two, three months it was strong and all going good praying five times a day, but then slowly slipped back into you know… erm… bad habits and basically not bad habits but I stopped praying and you know not the right company maybe – definitely not the right company and then kind of fell off it and then it's been very here and there…

6.17 The striking disparities between the practices of Islam when inside prison as opposed to when outside of the institution, was considered due to a complexity of factors, including:

1. The ways in which Islam is taught does not address the realities of prison life, for example, offering *fiqh* classes on marriage for people serving life sentences.

2. Chaplains – are marked by a lack of professional development courses and training – they are not sufficiently instructed to meet the needs of

the growing diversity of people in prison and most especially those who convert to Islam while serving a sentence.

3. Religious literacy of prison officers is generally low, despite some well-intentioned and respectful officers; this can lead to both suspicion and naivety. For example, refusal to step on a prayer mat to prevent an attack.

6.18 Risks to prisoners embracing Islam were apparent in differing forms. Unmanaged conversions were a problematic issue – this had led to someone filling in a form on behalf of another prisoner; a convert circumcised himself in his cell and had to be taken to hospital. An observation was made how conversions were, at times, treated with suspicion by prison staff. Often basic practices of Islam such as growing a beard, establishing daily prayer and seeking *Halal* food were regarded as suspicious and considered as such due to the prevalence of an overt mistrust of Islam. In this light, chaplains have a duty of care and guidance over changing values, shifts in identity and attempts to make a fresh start in life. This can begin before the *Shahadah* is pronounced, to ensure that the person concerned understands the faith they are adopting and gains grounding in its precepts.

6.19 Being Muslim in male prisons carries high status among other prisoners, particularly due to its perception as masculine, edgy and anti-establishment. For women, the situation is somewhat reversed, and wearing a hijab could be problematic, as is a lack of access to dedicated chaplaincy to help support the maintenance of faith and a religious identity.

7. Preparations for release

7.1 How chaplains prepare people in prison for release was highlighted as another problematic area that was insufficiently addressed by the chaplaincy service. Transition arrangements are required to fill the gaps and lack of links between prison chaplaincy, mosques and, where available, community chaplaincy. The stigma of being an ex-prisoner also hampers engagement with mosques and few mosques are equipped or prepared to support prisoners on their release. It is difficult to find sympathetic mosques willing to assist. As one man was reported to have stated in a mosque: "I can't believe my taxpayers' money is being spent

on these crooks." There was also a denial of the criminality that exists within Muslim communities. In contrast, it was noted that people who have been in prison and who are sincere in their intentions to develop their Islamic faith and require appropriate support from mosques, should receive help.

7.2 Cultural sensitivity was also required – people who have embraced Islam have come from a culture, language and upbringing that need to be respected and supported. The importance of maintaining kinship ties was emphasised, as those who deliberately sever the ties of kinship or encourage others to do so, are not following Islamic principles.

7.3 It was considered unjust that the stigma for committing a crime should remain and be widely encouraged to continue post-release when prisoners had paid their dues to society, otherwise a prison sentence becomes a life sentence, when the future is permanently blighted by past misdemeanours. This also makes a mockery of the concept of rehabilitation if it becomes too difficult to secure employment due to the millstone of a previous criminal record and the reluctance of society to see beyond previous behaviour, pejorative labels, and provide training, education and openings into work.

8. Post-release

8.1 Reintegration and resettlement are central to offenders' post-prison experiences. Such terms are deceptive, based on suppositions that imprisoned people possessed a level of integration and were settled prior to entering prison. The pre-prison life experiences of offenders suggest a turbulent and disordered existence epitomised by severe social as well as economic deficits and dislocation.[59] After conviction, such insufficiency increases through additional stigma, shame, negative social learning from the prison environment, and social exclusion due to labelling as a convicted criminal.[60] Low levels of social and economic capital that offenders possess before prison diminish further once convicted. The age-crime curve illustrates that most offenders will eventually completely desist from crime as they grow older.[61]

8.2 The post-release period is a particularly important time where support is required as there is potential both for desistance and continued or increased

offending. Such time is fraught with challenges and possibilities. A key concern is whether individuals who have previously been involved in crime can successfully transition. Thus, a crucial aspect of positive reintegration and resettlement is long-term desistance from involvement in crime.[62] 'Research is inconclusive on the questions of how far participation in religious activities inspires prisoners to retain their religious interests after release and of the extent to which they prevent offenders from becoming further involved in crime.'[63]

8.3 For desistance to be facilitated requires comprehension of change and maintenance of crime-free behaviour[64]. Maruna observes that former offenders frame their criminal past and commitment to desistance via a redemption script. This contains three main elements: 1) emphasis on a 'core' positive identity; 2) strengthens a convincing sense of personal control over future actions; and 3) focuses on generativity - by hoping to contribute positively to future generations.[65]

8.4 For Muslim former offenders belonging to a religious community provides an important facet of a redemption script. Here, a focus lies on the significant role played by family, religious community, work and friendship groups in facilitating changes in identity and desistance from crime. Biographical accounts suggest that social roles in the family were the strongest 'hooks' for motivating changes in identity and in promoting desistance from crime. Developing positive social roles as a father, husband, son or brother were central to decisions to refrain from illicit activity. Desistance, is therefore, a social endeavour not merely a personal decision. Interdependent relationships based on mutual reciprocity are important in fostering change to promote desistance.[66]Such factors have important application in terms of services offered by Muslim organisations and communities to support desistance. The main difference between persistent offenders and ex-offenders was a sense of control over personal actions.[67]

8.5 While individual trajectories differ, common drivers which push towards crime were observed which include:

1. Socio-economic deprivation and experiences of poverty
2. Racism
3. Weak social bonds in the family and at school
4. Pull of negative peer relationships, and bonds within a neighbourhood
5. Substance abuse
6. Lack of opportunity to establish a viable career or trade

9. Developing desistance

9.1 A redemption script is designed to create a positive identity – which is separate from a person's actions – this enables a distinction to be discerned between the undesirable behaviour/crime committed by someone and from whom they are themselves. Fostering personal control – this can encourage and inculcate a desire to contribute positively to future actions. In encouraging such development an important role can be played by family, religious communities and relationships.

9. 2 To strengthen Muslims coming out from prison by imbibing a positive core identity and social capital, where help with housing and employment can be accessed through their social contacts. A religious group can offer gateways to redemption, reduce and remove psychological burdens, which can be fostered though appropriate rituals. This enables lives to be reset by seeking forgiveness which allows a person to move beyond the historical and negative aspects of their lives.

9. 3 To remove the inclination and temptation to return to criminal activity mentors and close supportive relationships and support groups can play an important role. This also helps to overcome doubts surrounding the ability to go straight and contribute positively to the community and sustain periods of time when faith and resolve fluctuates. The stigma and stumbling blocks can appear immense, and barriers to finding suitable housing and employment are not easily surmounted.

9. 4 Muslim businesses can be approached to offer job opportunities and training. This may be facilitated by setting respectful boundaries that support both the returning citizen and the person offering provision.

9. 5 It is considered important to move away from applying stigmatising labels that attach criminality to a person: such as, con, ex-con or ex-offender. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service within certain aspects of its approach adopt a more enlightened stance and refer to people in prison as "clients," where an emphasis on rehabilitation reduced recidivism from 42% to 29% over 16 years. Here, the loss of freedom is the punishment not the prison regime.[68]

9. 6 Training programmes that offer guidance on self-employment and establishing businesses are required as one means of circumventing the difficulties people who have served prison sentences can experience in obtaining employment and removes the potential for the embarrassment and stigma of having to reveal previous convictions to potential employers.

9. 7 Barriers to reintegration of former prisoners include societal ostracism – whereby people who have served prison sentences may not be seen as part of the community; viewed as people who are not directly relatable to the immediate community; or made to feel unwelcome, where some people may not want to pray in a mosque with someone who has been in prison. This means finding accepting spaces once outside of prison can prove problematic, and those who cannot, struggle.

10. The role of religion

10.1 All faiths incorporate forms of prayer and meditation in their practices which help to promote and regulate 'emotional self-management.'[69] The development of spiritual practice helps to promote perseverance and resilience. Maruna[70] considers the importance of religious ritual in assisting with the reintegration of a person leaving prison into society which helps to support the idea of new opportunities and beginnings offering a fresh start, which is considered important in strengthening the sense of possibility and hope. Research supports the benefits of spiritual practice, for example, having thoughts of gratitude each day can be as equally effective as taking anti-depressants.[71]

10.2 Joining a faith community and receiving respect and accountability are important within a prison and show a person what to expect from a religious community once they are released. This facilitates resilience and helps the imprisoned person to take on a more constructive identity, which along with support from a faith community on release, can help to consolidate faith practice and assist its retention and support the person's desistance to crime.[72]

10.3 An earlier initiative, the 'Belief in Change' programme commissioned by NOMS Chaplaincy and supported by a European Social Fund grant was a multifaith programme aimed at medium to high-risk offenders which offered

experiences to encourage change within the participants. They engaged with reparative work. There was also a sense of retreat through community and reflective journaling, whereby inspirational talks from external speakers alongside the more mundane activity of living side by side with fellow prisoners were provided. Peer support and restoration work was included along with developing a Life Plan for release, combined with extensive life skills training. This allowed the idea of developing the self in a constructive way to coalesce. However, the key to success is a supportive faith community to receive and assist the person leaving prison on their new journey which increases the possibility of new personal narratives being supported to success. [73]

10.4 Due to the gap between expectations and reality – as mentioned above, which can appear relatively quickly for many people on release who battle to retain their newfound faith under the pressures of life on the outside. While some rehabilitation opportunities exist outside of prison, they may be difficult to access. Many experience problems in securing accommodation and struggle to legitimately obtain sufficient income to survive. The quickest route to making money often lies with old associates and negotiating the difficult logistics of life beyond the gate makes it tempting to fall back in with previous peer groups.

10.5 A survey of 400 Muslim prisoners conducted by the Muslim Youth Helpline found that 30% considered that the Muslim community could have played a constructive role in keeping them out of prison. In terms of reoffenders – 63% did not receive the support they needed when leaving prison for the first time. 82% strongly maintained that the provision of faith sensitive community support when leaving prison would have prevented reoffending.[74] Religious communities were seen to promote moral messages that condemned acts of deviance and crime and helped offenders maintain a sense of connection to moral norms and values.[75]

10.6 Just as the 24 hours before and after taking the *Shahadah* was considered a key point in time – in terms of who is there to give someone real, honest sincere help and offer a safety net, not an agenda - the 24 hours following release from prison is equally crucial. Who is there for someone leaving prison, who is going to meet them at the gates, who is going to introduce them to a community of believers, who is going to offer support over the longer-term?

10.7 Shadd Maruna, a pioneer of the concept of desistance, maintains the importance of a supportive faith community to the successful resettlement for

people renewing or embracing faith in prison. He notes how faith is the crux that offers a new start in life and frees the person from their past identity and allows them to understand the past and to view themselves differently in terms of the present and the future. Spiritual practice provides order and meaning to daily life.[76]

10.8 It was recommended that former prisoners as external speakers go into prison to explain to the people inside how their Islamic faith has helped them make a success of their lives and share that experience, showing how this has been achieved. Here, education was key to reorienting people, where actions can speak more than words. When exemplars of good actions – perceptions of a faith can be transformed – this also gives hope to prisoners – who need to see a constructive pathway to change and enables them to see what is possible and what can be achieved.

> What I really want to do is get into that mentoring like youths that are in gangs and trying to deter them from, because obviously I've been there, I've done that. Been involved in gangs in that area and stuff like that. So that's what I want to do, and in terms of, that would be fulfilling for me. Just before I came out, I was thinking about even like charity work abroad. Not for long. Just for me, helping someone, I get, there's nothing, there's not a better feeling, you know what I'm saying? There's not a better feeling. Obviously, I have to make money, but I started to realise it before, I was always 'money, money, money'. But there's more to life than money, you know? Money can't bring you happiness. So, I'd rather help someone along the way, and be satisfied and content, you know? So, like I said yeah, so hopefully, hopefully, something to do within the mentoring sector, helping youths, and have a family, settle down. See my family around me is all comfortable, settled, my mum--love my mum, implicitly man... Dad, dad's fine. Sister, just make sure I'm meeting my nephews, niece, don't want for nothing. Just be a good, just be, hopefully trying to be a good husband or I would just be a good family man.[77]

10.9 Involvement in mentoring roles is linked to a lower sense of stigma about previous criminal history, more pro-social values, better self-esteem and better

coping strategies, along with higher levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction (LeBel, Richie and Maruna, 2015).[78] Religious communities were seen to promote moral messages that condemned acts of deviance and crime and helped offenders maintain a sense of connection to moral norms and values.[79]

10.10 Some of the main areas where financial support and practical assistance is required from the Muslim community for imprisoned Muslims are:

1. Preventative measures via effective social action to stem the tide of the huge numbers entering the prison system, which as previously cited, could reach 50% of the prison population by 2050.

2. As chaplaincy budgets do not cover books, more donations are required to meet the cost of purchasing suitable books on Islam, courses and other essential artefacts. The necessity to provide books devoid of sectarian leanings was also essential as material that was inclusive was required.

3. Financial assistance - Muslim prisoners, particularly converts, fall into several categories of eligibility to receive Zakat – from freeing those in bondage to helping those whose hearts are to be reconciled.

4. Prison volunteers are required to support the work of Muslim prison chaplains. Where Christian organisations provided around 7,500 Christian volunteers to work within the prison system there are only around 200 Muslim volunteers. One-to-one sessions can be conducted by individual voluntary chaplains with prisoners, for example, a Bosnian volunteer to help assist a Bosnian prisoner. Issues arise over recruitment of volunteers as they must be able to meet the needs of imprisoned people relating to the diverse sectarian understandings of Islam and are subject to detailed security vetting.

5. Plans and provision for resettlement are urgently required, and Islamic charities could be lobbied for financial and practical assistance.

6. Recruitment – while a rigorous selection process is instituted to recruit chaplains, those applying are largely drawn from Deobandi

seminaries. At present there are only two Muslim chaplains within prisons in the UK derived from an African-Caribbean heritage, despite a large proportion of prisoners from this ethnicity being imprisoned, who are left to rely on support from Muslim chaplains who may lack awareness and affinity with their cultural needs. The requirement for chaplains from Kurdish, Albanian and Somali backgrounds was also mentioned. Sponsorship for training chaplains is required and equipping them with theological knowledge.

7. A lack of female Muslim chaplains - the recruitment and training of female prison chaplains and awareness of their roles requires improvement. For example, it had proved problematic to secure a female prison chaplain to visit a women's prison in Wales, when one withdrew due to the stigma involved. This highlights the need for educational programmes raising awareness about the work and role of female chaplains and the necessary training, practical and theological knowledge, checks and vetting required to fulfil the rigorous prison entry requirements.

Concluding remarks

The mark of a civilised society is shown in the manner in which it treats its most vulnerable citizens. People in prison and the crimes they have committed are a reflection of the type of society that has been created and the sort of human beings who can emanate from it. The societal context within contemporary Britain reflects a perpetuated failure to act and profoundly inadequate responses from those in positions of authority, that permeate through the structures of society. It allows disadvantaged people to fail by propagating harsh environments, while locating such failure within the individual. The toxicity of many dysfunctional Muslim communities is evident, where the youth bite back with increasing ferocity. From this it can be surmised that as a country and as members of local communities that our shared common humanity demands that we can and must do better to improve the quality of people's lives, to create both a sense of purpose and that of belonging. A proportion of the energy and resources that are allocated to policing dysfunction could be diverted to support constructive projects that enable lives to be lived well.

Collective and effective voices to both lobby and represent the needs of Muslims in the UK are an imperative, whereby social campaigners, journalists, politicians and religious leaders can raise awareness and highlight the many faces of injustice, and pursue meaningful measures of change. While it takes a village to raise a child it is evident that it can take a community to support a person returning to society from imprisonment.

Appendix

Speaking from Experience….

Of the attendees at the **Inside Out** gathering we were privileged to have amongst us three returning citizens who took to the speakers platform in a totally unscheduled, and for them, unprepared and 'off the cuff,' overview of their personal experiences of the prison system based on their combined 40 years of incarceration.

The three men, two of whom were heritage Muslims of British Asian background and one a mixed race convert to Islam, began by speaking of their early childhoods in 70's Britain, they and their families interaction with Islam, dysfunctional home life, the enforced Madrassah system and its failure to instill the compassionate aspects of the faith it purported to convey to the children there followed by teenage mutiny and rebellion, involvement in gangs that eventually led to a life of crime and the inevitable term of confinement at her majesty's pleasure in a variety of the MoJ's facilities.

The men spoke of prison life, the severity of the day to day system, the cruelty of prisoner on prisoner violence and the inner battle to conserve as sense of normality, a means of preserving a method of self-protection and how Islam brought them through the experience finally finding the spiritual strength and inner peace that propelled them through to final release. They spoke of the Prison Chaplaincy experience with honesty where the system didn't work to their advantage and Chaplains were less than helpful to eventual admiration for the system and the individuals encountered having found themselves in prisons where the Chaplaincy service was working well and with excellent results overall.

All three are working in jobs that bring them a huge sense of pride in their achievements and, as each have families of their own now, are all in a position to provide for and sustain their families. Having spoken to one in particular since the event he expressed how taking part in the event overall, particularly the opportunity to speak to the gathering about his own experiences, brought a self-confidence he had not realized or imagined he had before. He felt his story would be of great value and bring an enlightenment to the community generally around the prison system and the importance of a support service necessary on release from prison but, more importantly, to young people who have a greater possibility

of involvement in activity that may bring them into the radar of the Law and possibly fall victim of crime and end up in prison. The Muslim community, Mosques and Islamic Organisations are missing out on an important opportunity here. As figures of Muslim prisoners rise at disturbing rates and considering we have the largest population of youth under the age of thirty years we need to use everything at our disposal to try to reverse these worrying figures sooner rather than later.

Finally, the one request all three of these men made was to perform Hajj or Umrah – Hajj in particular. If anyone reading this article runs such a service, or have access to anyone who does, who would graciously provide an opportunity for one, or all three, to bring this desire to fruition we at CMF would be so pleased to hear from you **info@convertmuslimfoundation.org.uk**

Thank you to all three for their kind contribution to the event **Inside Out** and we wish all of them God's blessings, guidance and protection for them and their families into the future.

Empowerment in Action: A Psychological Wellbeing Strategy for Male Muslim Former Prisoners Adjunct to the Forensic Mental Health Conference entitled:

The Imprisonment of Muslim Men:
Forensic Mental Health and the Challenges for Society
Wednesday 18th September 2019 Brunel University London Conference
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On 18th September 2019, Brunel University London hosted the first ESRC Grand Union Doctoral Training Programme (GUDTP) funded Forensic Mental Health Conference. Attracting UK and international experts, the conference focussed on the role of faith, difference and diversity in prisoner rehabilitation with Muslim men, and examined how best practice can be shared across fields. National and international speakers representing academia, applied and forensic practice shared their expertise.

Topics included; the role of faith for men with sexual convictions across different faith groups, exploring the foundations of collaborative working, innovative ways in which current prisoners are being engaged for rehabilitative and treatment purposes, and the impact of the wider context and climate upon the individual. Individual and collective challenges that current and former prisoners face when returning to the community were highlighted with similarities of experiences at individual, family and community levels addressed throughout the day. Panel debates and roundtable discussions provided a forum for vibrant debate about key issues in forensic mental health. The day was an excellent opportunity to bring scholars and practitioners together to share ideas and best practice. Delegates from prisons, mental health, social services and academia participated in an open floor discussion surrounding the most pertinent issues in relation to the Conference theme.

The importance of collaboration across different fields, faith and community as a protective factor and education at all levels was widely referenced. Examples of breaking negative cycles around accessing help and support were also brought to light. The conference was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council's Grand Union Doctoral Training Programme (GUDTP) Incubator Fund and Brunel University London. Following on from the conference, the organisers held a closed capacity development exercise with the conference contributors. This has now been developed further into a Capacity Building Document, outlining potential future directions for this work.

Herein follows the Executive Summary Capacity Building Document - Executive Summary:

Muslim men are consistently overrepresented in imprisonment statistics. Post-release, they are routinely disempowered and often marginalised by their experiences of incarceration. This situation highlights the need for greater understanding and, thereafter, a holistic model of wellbeing that promotes empowerment through the creative potential of the individual spirit, and the reassurance of community belonging. In practical terms, capacity development is widely regarded as the driving force behind collective human potential.

As capacity development is an interactive, iterative process, it must pose credible questions, present realistic solutions, and examine potential outcomes through accurate measure of effect. Following a one-day international conference and subsequent planning workshop concerning the challenges and opportunities facing male Muslim former prisoners, this Capacity Building Document (CBD) unites a range of community-based practitioners, global subject matter experts, and academic specialists. We advocate a holistic strength-based approach that promotes long-term wellbeing amongst Muslim male former prisoners, their families, and their communities.

Our method reflects a spiritually informed, culturally sensitive micro-meso-macro conceptual framework that locates the individual firmly at the centre of rehabilitative support network. Consequently, a series of personcentred recommendations are presented as the foundation of an overall strategy to encourage desistance from crime and promote successful reintegration.

The CBD is intended to minimise the harmful social consequences associated with the overrepresentation of Muslim males in the Criminal Justice System. We maintain our recommendations would be most effectively realised by capitalising upon existing resources and pursuing a strengths-based approach. Thus, we advocate continual engagement with key stakeholders and the furtherance of collaborative, mutually responsive relationships. These stakeholders include but are not limited to: community-based grassroots organisations; faith-based practitioners; criminal justice professionals, and academic specialists.

Recommendations: Our recommendations follow a six-step approach:

1. Engagement and partnership building with key stakeholders
2. Develop outcomes measures
3. Develop and implement pilot project
4. Project expansion to additional cities
5. Develop national guidelines
6. Implementation of national project

We believe communities are sustained by the leaders they create from within. It follows; therefore, that with the benefit of enhanced wellbeing and the guidance of appropriate support mechanisms, the motivated individual can realise his/her capacity to become an empowered leader of change.

A Call to Action It is our intention to begin Step One (Engagement and Partnership Building) of the six-step approach by the end of 2020. Our success will be entirely dependent upon the relationships we sustain. And so, we encourage those organisations and individuals interested in learning more about our work and supporting this project to contact rahmanara.chowdhury@brunel.ac.uk. We thank you for your contributions so far and look forward to developing our relationship

The reform of prisons has been my life's work, but they are still utterly broken Tue 10 Aug 2021

Frances Crook

Frances Crook is the chief executive of the Howard League for Penal Reform

Prisons are fundamentally unjust, but a small,
ethical and compassionate system would transform lives
'The sheer monotony of life inside does nothing for
the mental health challenges many prisoners face.'

Nobody really cares about prisons. They are so far removed from the experience of most people and they are, apparently, full of horrid people. Occasionally, the media will run stories about rat-infested cells or suicide rates, but because so few people have anything to do with prisons, the stories soon fade and life for those on the outside continues as normal.

But prisons matter. It matters who goes into them. It matters what happens inside them. And it matters how much they cost. Although prisons too often function like black holes into which society banishes those it deems problematic, the state of our prisons tells a story about all of us. Prisons reflect society back to itself: they embody the ways we have failed, the people we have failed, and the policies that have failed, all at immense human – and economic – cost.

As chief executive of the prison reform charity the Howard League for the past 35 years, reforming prisons has become my life's mission. In October, I will leave my work with one sad but inescapable conclusion: prisons are the last unreformed public service, stuck in the same cycle of misery and futility as when I arrived.

If a time traveller from 100 years ago walked into a prison today – whether one of the inner-city Victorian prisons or the new-builds where the majority of men are held – the similarities would trump the differences. They would recognise the smells and the sounds, the lack of activity and probably some of the staff. It is not only the buildings that have stayed the same – it is the whole ethos of the institution.

Prison is an unhealthy place. Most prisoners have come from poverty, addiction and social deprivation cemented by decades of failed social policy. Many arrive with long-term health problems, and in prison their health deteriorates further. While life expectancy

and the quality of life for much of the country has advanced significantly in the past three decades, prisoners are considered "old" at 50. In the 12 months to June 2021, 396 people died in prison custody – some from Covid, some from suicide, many from "natural causes" that few of us on the outside would consider natural in middle age.

Even before prisons were locked down during the pandemic, it was normal for men – who make up 95% of the prison population – to spend almost all day in their cells. Wing-cleaning or an education class might occupy a few hours on a weekday. A shower every few days might offer brief respite. Men spend the day, and sleep, in ill-fitting, saggy prison uniforms, unwashed for days on end, waiting to be released.

Mealtimes provide structure, but not sustenance. Breakfast is a pack of white bread, a small bag of cereal and a small carton of milk, provided at tea-time the day before. (Inevitably, it is consumed that night.) They wake hungry, without food until lunch at about 11am – usually a small, soggy baguette, a packet of crisps and an apple, if they're lucky. One hot meal comes with stodge and vegetables cooked beyond the point of identification at about 5pm.

The sheer monotony of life inside does nothing for the mental health challenges many prisoners face. Addictions worsen, with drugs readily available across the nation's prison estate. Lockdown may have ended what little human contact prisoners had with the outside world. It did nothing to stem the flow of narcotics.

On release, many face homelessness and joblessness and may well have lost any family contact they had before incarceration. The people we step over in the street, for whom we sometimes buy a sandwich or a cup of coffee, are often people recently released from prisons. It is hardly surprising that about half of those released are reconvicted of a further offence and end up back inside. It is a merry-go-round but without cheer.

Minister after minister has done nothing to address the central question haunting our prison system: what is it all for? Each new secretary of state arrives with a new idea – improving a handful of prisons, building a few new ones, or getting people on to sex offender courses – and millions are duly splurged on the latest fad. But it does not face up to the problem that is the prison system as a whole.

At the heart of prisons is the fact that they are fundamentally unjust. They embed and compound social, economic and health inequalities. They disproportionately suck in men

from poor, Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. They do nothing to help people out of crime. We only have to look at the internal punishment system to see that unfairness is the name of the game, with Black people significantly more likely to be physically restrained and punished than their white counterparts.

The whole system needs radical overhaul, starting with a swingeing reduction in the number of people we imprison. Custody is the most drastic and severe response the state has at its disposal and should only be used in exceptional and rare instances – either for the most egregious crimes, or when someone poses a serious and continuing threat to public safety.

Abiding by that principle would virtually empty our prisons of women and children, and drastically reduce the number of men behind bars. Most women are either on remand or serving a short sentence. Many are survivors of domestic abuse. Vanishingly few have committed violent crimes that warrant incarceration; fewer still could be reasonably considered to pose an on-going threat to society. They, along with the 500 children who are currently incarcerated, should be managed in the community by specialist local authority-run services that provide the support, rehabilitation and education that will save them from further imprisonment. Thousands of men would benefit from similar support, whether that's community addiction services, decent housing or mental health facilities.

The number of people in prison in England and Wales today sits at 78,600. That number could and should plummet – and swiftly. Margaret Thatcher – no softie on criminal justice – managed with less than half that number of prisoners. The Netherlands has drastically cut its prison population and is closing its prisons. A shrunken estate could be transformed so that prisons become places of purpose where people receive holistic support, quality care, meaningful skills and education, in an environment that is as similar to the society they will eventually re-enter as possible.

Over the past 35 years, I hope that I have contributed to making things just a bit better. I am most proud of the work we have done with police forces to reduce the arrests of young people, saving hundreds of thousands of children from experiencing the trauma and lifelong damage of being arrested. But the state of our prison system, the leviathan that continues to devour lives and resources and contaminates political discourse, remains my most bitter regret. A small, ethical and compassionate prison system would save the taxpayer a fortune, change lives and transform incarceration for good. It does not have to be like this.

Two deaths in English prisons make me wonder how civilised we are in 2021

Eric Allison

Eric Allison is the Guardian's prisons correspondent

When unlawful detention and failure to provide food and medication are implicated in inmates' deaths, this is a new low

Without doubt, the conditions in jails in England and Wales are currently – and by some distance – the worst I've ever known them: both in four decades as a career criminal after first entering custody in 1957; and latterly, for 17 years, writing about the prison system that held me for about 16 years, on and off.

I base that statement on clear evidence. The past 14 months have been by far my busiest since joining this paper as prisons correspondent; inundated by calls, messages, letters about how Covid has had an impact on an already grossly underfunded, chaotic and dangerous system.

Then, earlier this month, I received shocking accounts of two deaths in custody from the charity Inquest, which were heard in evidence before two juries at two coroner's courts. They have seared themselves indelibly in my mind and made me reassess my belief that I can no longer be shocked by anything coming out of our wretched penal estate.

On 21 May a jury at West London coroner's court delivered their narrative verdict on the death of Winston Augustine and heard evidence about the last three days of his life. They heard that, on 28 August 2018, he was moved to the segregation unit at HMP Wormwood Scrubs in west London. On 30 August, at 16.47 he was found to have killed himself in his cell. Pathological evidence indicated he had been dead for four to five hours. **Dead for that length of time, in daylight, in a prison cell on a small unit? What was going on?**

The jury were told Augustine's cell door had not been opened since he arrived on the unit and that he had received no food in the time he had been there. Pathological evidence showed his body was in a state of ketoacidosis, indicative of starvation. He was also starved of his medication: a daily slow-release dose of the strong painkiller tramadol,

prescribed to relieve his chronic pain, caused by kidney stones. The day before he died a nurse and a doctor were, separately, refused permission to see him. The nurse pushed a single dose of tramadol under his cell door. It's not known if he took it, but the jury heard he would have been in "severe pain" when he died. The jury found the failure to fulfil his need for food and medication contributed to his death.

What did the officers in that unit say about this man's treatment? That he was "non-compliant" and therefore too dangerous for them to unlock his door. Segregation units are generally well staffed and sometimes hold people who tend not to comply with rules.

I've seen how the justice system is crumbling. Why doesn't the government take action?

Dominic Grieve

The other prison death inquest concluded on 21 May. The jury at Milton Keynes coroner's court had deliberated on the death of Mark Culverhouse, who killed himself in another segregation unit, this time at HMP Woodhill on 23 April 2019.

Culverhouse, 29, had a minor criminal record but major mental health issues. The jury heard that, six days before his death, he had climbed some scaffolding and threatened to jump off the third-storey frame. Skilled negotiators talked him down before he was arrested for offences related to the incident.

He was taken into custody by police in Northampton and deemed fit to be detained, despite one of his negotiators wanting him to be assessed under the Mental Health Act. The next day, Culverhouse was taken to court, but before appearing had to be taken to hospital after repeatedly head-butting a wall in the cell area.

While he was in hospital – and repeatedly saying he would kill himself if he went back to prison – the probation service decided to recall him to prison in relation to a previous short sentence for driving while disqualified.

That recall was unlawful because he had served his full time on that sentence, but, astonishingly, the jury heard the probation service did not, then, calculate sentences before recalling prisoners.

'Deep crisis' in British prisons as use of force against inmates doubles

On arrival at Woodhill, CCTV footage captured him telling staff he had tried to kill himself and asking to go to hospital. On 19 April, he was moved to the segregation unit, where he repeatedly hit his head hard and said he wanted to die. He was taken to the prison hospital and spent a few days under constant observation.

Four days later, he was taken back to segregation in restraints following a row with another prisoner. Again Culverhouse hit his head hard and expressed his wish to die. Later that day, he was found dead.

In Woodhill, he was subject to self-harm observation, so should have been monitored closely. The day he died, two observation notes simply recorded him lying under a sheet. He was in that position, dead, when finally, staff entered his cell to physically check on him. Administrative staff had been told that he might be due for immediate release, but this information was not passed on to him.

It is said that our prime minister is a great admirer of Winston Churchill, who reportedly said: "The treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilisation of any country." Staying with history: the senior coroner at the inquest into Culverhouse's death said he was "outraged" at the circumstances and said his detention was unlawful and "contrary to the Magna Carta of 1215".

In this, my second career, I have come across many organisations connected to the criminal justice system. Some, in my view, do a better job than others. The charity Inquest would be at the top of that group. Please visit their website and read what these two men meant to their families. And remember: two men, not numbers, died in prison. One where starvation played a part, the other held unlawfully, according to laws established 800 years ago.

A measure of our civilisation, in 2021?

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Recommended Reading

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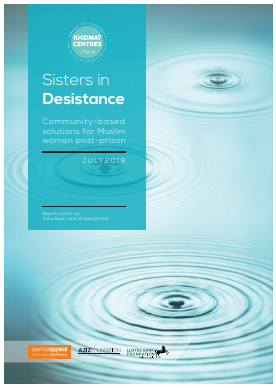

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https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/5/298


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Prison as a Site of Intense Religious Change: The Example of Conversion to Islam

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