



Providing Faith and Culturally Sensitive Support Services to Young British Muslims

Rabia Malik, Aaliyah Shaikh and Mustafa Suleyman

A Research Project funded by
The National Youth Agency


The National Youth Agency

Information and Research

The National Youth Agency

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Eastgate House, 19–23 Humberstone Road, Leicester LE5 3GJ.

Tel: 0116 242 7350. Fax: 0116 242 7444.

Website: www.nya.org.uk E-mail: nya@nya.org.uk



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Images used throughout this report supplied by Muslim Youth Helpline & muslimyouth.net

Research Team

Rabia Malik (B.A., M.Sc., PhD)

Dr Rabia Malik is a Family Therapist and Social Psychologist. She leads the Marlborough Cultural Therapy Centre based at the Marlborough Family Service in London. She specialises in working with Pakistani and Muslim clients and community groups and has written several papers in this area. Rabia has also been a senior lecturer in Psychosocial Studies at University of East London, where she taught courses on 'Race', Culture and Psychology, Social Theory and Qualitative Research Methods. Her doctorate is from University College London, and was on the Cultural Construction of Mental Illness Amongst Pakistanis.

Aaliyah Shaikh (B.A., M.A.)

Aaliyah has an MA in Muslim Community Studies and conducted her MA research on 'Exploring the Framework for Islamic Counselling and Psychotherapy in British Muslim Society' and received a distinction for this. She also works as a Muslim Chaplain at St Marys NHS Trust, where her core responsibilities include faith and culturally sensitive support, visiting patients on wards using counselling skills and also supporting staff. Aaliyah has previously worked as Helpline volunteer at MYH and is currently pursuing training in Psychotherapy.

Aaliyah has recently set up a poetry organisation called British Muslim Arts and Poetry (BMAP). It is a platform for British Muslims to voice themselves through poetry and chart their journey through life. It provides a platform from which young British Muslims can feel heard, validated, accepted and are given a non-judgmental space to creatively articulate who they are and what they feel.

Mustafa Suleyman

Mustafa is Chair of the Muslim Youth Helpline and has been volunteering for the charity since 2003. He was previously a Policy Officer in the Mayor's Office at the Greater London Authority and has since moved on to work as an independent policy consultant. Most recently he published a report assessing the nature and extent of religious practise among British Muslim communities as part of an engagement with the Young Foundation in which he advised them on setting up new community organisations that engage British Muslims. He is currently working towards an MA in Contemporary History and Politics at Birkbeck College, University of London.

Advisory Board

Tufyal Choudhury

Tufyal joined MYH as a trustee in 2006. He is a lecturer in international human rights law at the University of Durham. His research focuses on issues of racial and religious discrimination. His current research commitments include a project looking at how 11 EU cities are responding to the needs of Muslims, funded by the Open Society Institute and working with the Oxford Centre for Migration, Policy and Society in a project looking at Muslims and Social Cohesion in the UK.

Tricia Jessiman

Tricia Jessiman has worked on numerous research projects involving young people, including research into child eyewitnesses, crime reduction, and research into the contribution of non-formal education Awards to young people's learning and achievement. Tricia has also been involved in wider work around non-formal learning, exploring how it might contribute

and be included in the Foundation Learning Tier. Since August 2006 she has coordinated the Research Programme launched by The National Youth Agency with the purpose of commissioning research that will enhance the Agency's knowledge and capacity to support policy makers and practitioners. Since 2000, Tricia has worked in a voluntary capacity for Leicester Youth Offending team, as a mentor for young people deemed at risk of entering the criminal justice system. She also volunteers with local youth groups in Leicester, and supports adults with Dyslexia at Leicester Adult Education College.

Muhammad Khan

M G Khan has a background in youth work practice, policy and management. He is a lecturer at the University of Birmingham and is Chair of the Muslim Youth Work Foundation.

Abdullah Maynard

Abdullah Maynard is a researcher, Islamic counsellor and freelance management consultant. He is a member of the board of the Muslim Youth Work Foundation. Abdullah has carried out qualitative research covering a range of social issues for Primary Care Trusts, local authorities and the Home Office.

Sughra Ahmed

Sughra Ahmed is a researcher in the Policy Research Unit of The Islamic Foundation. Her area of research is Muslim Youth in Britain. She is working with a number of organisations to consider the issues young people face whilst growing up in the UK and the impact of this upon the wider British communities. She led a year long training programme 'Women in Faith', an interfaith project training British Muslim women from across the UK on interfaith skills. Sughra is also a trainer in Diversity and Cultural Awareness; her programmes involve training personnel in the public arena on areas such as beliefs and practices and understanding women in the Muslim community. Sughra has a BA (Hons) in English Language and Literature and an MA in Islamic Studies. She is an Executive member of the Association of Muslim Chaplains and is also co-founder of the Young Muslims Forum, a youth debate forum.

Shareefa Fulat

Shareefa Fulat read Biochemistry at Oxford University graduating in 2000. She worked as a graduate analyst in the investment bank JP Morgan Chase, before joining the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism in early 2002 as a Project Manager. Shareefa was co-author of a response from a Muslim community perspective to the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act 2001 Review Committee in June 2003 and appeared before the committee with a team of Muslim lawyers to present evidence on the impact of the legislation on Muslims in Britain. In 2003 Shareefa joined the Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH) as its first paid member of staff and Director. MYH is Britain's first support service for Muslim youth founded in 2001 by a group of British Muslim teenagers. In October 2004 MYH launched www.muslimyouth.net, an online support service for Muslim youth in the UK. In 2007 Shareefa joined the Preventing Extremism Unit in the Department for Communities and Local Government as Leadership Capacity Manager.

Executive Summary

Background

The Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH) is a faith and culturally sensitive support service which was set up in 2001 by a group of young Muslims who were concerned at the lack of appropriate support mechanisms available for themselves and their peers, within their own communities or from mainstream service providers. MYH rapidly developed an innovative model of service delivery in which young volunteers trained in faith and culturally sensitive counselling skills were at the forefront of service delivery. The service is targeted at Muslim youth aged 16 to 25 years of age, and to date MYH has dealt with over 15,000 enquiries from young people in need and distress across the country.

For many young people our services are the first and last port of call. Our experience shows that young Muslims are increasingly reluctant to access mainstream support services for fear of being discriminated and misunderstood, and conversely mainstream support services are struggling to serve hard to reach minority Muslim youth. Where required, MYH has acted as a bridge to other services, by first building the confidence of young Muslims to access other services.

As Britain's first national support service for Muslim youth, we have an invaluable source of client data and experience of dealing with the social and psychological problems experienced by young British Muslims. Through the analysis of data records from the Helpline and interviews with clients and volunteers this research project aims to reveal a profile of the kinds of issues facing young Muslims, as well as, a deeper understanding of how faith and culturally sensitive service provision might be extended by policy makers and adopted by mainstream service providers to engage hard to reach British Muslim youth in their services.

This is a joint project between Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH) and The National Youth Agency (NYA) who have funded the research.

Aims

With over 50 per cent of the UK Muslim population under the age of 25, according to the last census, there are few if any effective national services reaching out to young Muslims. Furthermore, there is a severe shortage of research and data available to service providers and policy makers about the social condition of Muslim youth. In light of this the aims of the research, using quantitative measures to analyse the MYH data base and qualitative case studies and interviews with clients and volunteers, were:

- To highlight the sociological and psychological issues facing young British Muslims and their impact on the mental health of this sector of society.
- To develop an understanding of young Muslim clients and volunteers experiences of the MYH model of faith sensitive service delivery and identify features of good practice.
- To highlight areas of concern and challenges in service provision to Muslim youth and possible ways forward for policy makers, service providers and Muslim communities.

Key Findings

Phase I: Quantitative Data

Findings show that major concerns affecting Muslim youth are relationship issues, mental health difficulties, religious concerns, offending and rehabilitation, sexuality and sexual health and abuse. Case studies reveal how specific issues such as offending and rehabilitation and sexuality and sexual health are understood by young Muslims as being inextricably interwoven with cultural and religious belief systems. Hence the many life choices and issues that young people face are mediated through and involve negotiating relationships and identities as well as different religious and cultural systems. Questions and concerns about relationships and religion which are culturally embedded become paramount and unless addressed can trigger and exacerbate mental health difficulties. These difficulties are further compounded by a severe lack of appropriate resources and safe supportive spaces in which young people can have their voices heard and responded to.

The top five concerns that Muslim youth calling up the helpline face can be seen in the diagram below.

Five Main Concerns Affecting Muslim Youth:



Phase II: Qualitative Data

Interviews were carried out with ten helpline workers and ten helpline clients. The following emergent themes were identified:

Identity and “Muslimness”

For the majority of the clients interviewed, as well as for helpline volunteers, Islam was not a separate part of their identity, but integral and interwoven into all other issues and aspects of their lives. This recognition of and empathy with their faith identity was an important reason why clients found it easier to access support through MYH.

Recognition and Acceptance

Identity is in part developed through the eyes of ‘others’ and the experience of recognition is at the heart of identity formation. A lack of positive recognition can lead to a sense of alienation

as well as poor self-esteem and often underlies the dynamic of racism. Both clients and Helpline volunteers alluded to the sense of a lack of acceptance or belonging that they felt at times from mainstream society, as well as from within Muslim communities. Recognition and acceptance, not just in terms of their difficulties, but also their ethnicity and religion was pivotal for clients. Receiving recognition through the eyes of another Muslim, around issues that are often contentious was significant and allowed the holding together of, at- times, contradictory conflicting issues in a way that enabled growth and integrative solutions to emerge without fragmenting identities.

Belonging and Empowerment

A sense of belonging and connection enabled empowerment and self-authorship. For clients, this was facilitated by seeking support from within the Muslim community; something they had not previously felt able to do and for many of the helpline volunteers the idea of actively working together with other Muslims in a Muslim organisation to meet the needs of their peers gives them a sense of solidarity and empowerment.

Islam as a Dynamic Process

Contrary to the conventional perception of Islam as a monolithic system with static, rigid concepts, throughout the interviews there were hints of movement, change, and an evolving understanding of self, society, Islam and what it is to be a Muslim. This weaving together of individuals everyday life issues, identity and Islam created a sense of a learning process and self development and was expressed by helpline volunteers in expansive terms.

On the Margins

The majority of helpline clients and volunteers thought that the service they received or provided at MYH was somehow distinctive. For helpline clients and volunteers, faith was a significant and distinctive feature, which was used positively to engage clients rather than as a barrier. Clients and volunteers expressed concerns and doubts about the lack of awareness displayed by mainstream services about the faith and cultural sensitivities of Muslim clients. This was mirrored by frustration with Muslim communities and lack of support infrastructure and willingness from within to deal with difficult contentious issues. Thus MYH could be seen as bridging the gap between mainstream support services and the community, for a younger generation of British Muslims who have a distinctive identity which does not cohere completely with either. Services that respond to and understand these complex identities, and crucially, that do not seek to 'solve' by pushing young people into either/or camp are urgently needed.

Recommendations

This report aims to influence three key stakeholders, in a bid to improve the engagement of Muslim youth in providing and accessing support services. These three key stakeholders are: government policy; statutory services and also the Muslim community.

Policy Makers

Amongst the key policy recommendations is a proposal to include a duty on public authorities to promote equality and tackle discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. The report also urges investment in further detailed research on a wide range of social and phenomenological issues concerning British Muslims to inform a long term strategic response to the issues facing British Muslim communities. Policy makers are also advised that community led initiatives that are aimed at a particular community should not be prevented, where they meet a genuine need. A fresh and engaging approach is required for the preventing extremism agenda, one which understands the challenges facing young British Muslims rather than alienating them further.

Service Providers

It is strongly felt that mainstream service providers must begin using faith as a key identity indicator in appreciating welfare needs of young British Muslims, and there is a need to develop services and models of practice that understand the socio-cultural, faith and psychological dimensions of the lives of Muslim young people. Creative outreach strategies are needed that are sensitive to cultural barriers and can work with notions such as family honour and shame in engaging with hard to reach clients. In addition to this, more user involvement is essential if mainstream services are to make themselves more responsive to the specific needs of young British Muslims. Critically, user involvement needs to gain the sanction of communities as well as address concerns of individual users. New and innovative ways of collaborative work are required, to best cater for individual user needs, and this would include ventures such as knowledge partnerships between statutory services and faith sensitive Muslim support services, as well as joint case working.

Muslim Communities

Recommendations for the various Muslim communities are mainly structural, and include the need for facilitating community infrastructures that encourage public-conversations and community-led preventative outreach campaigns. Also, there is an urgent need to work collaboratively with other sectors and communities (both inter-community and intra-community) with a focus on fostering a step-change in community dynamics. To this end, a body of Muslim scholars, who are able to tackle social and psychological issues facing young British Muslims, is required to support and validate practical interventions from a theological and spiritual perspective. Finally, Muslim communities need to develop a more inclusive 'values-based' rather than a 'rules-based' approach to providing information, advice and guidance to their young people if they are to deal effectively with the complexities and confusions in young people's lives.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report looks at the context and lived experiences of young British Muslims accessing the services of the Muslim Youth Helpline.

Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH) is Britain's first national faith and culturally sensitive support service for Muslim youth. MYH was born of the realisation that young Muslims were not accessing appropriate support services either within their own communities or from mainstream service providers.

Seeking to address the failure of mainstream service providers and the Muslim community in providing adequate support to Muslim youth, MYH rapidly developed an innovative model of service delivery in which young people trained in faith and culturally sensitive counselling skills were at the forefront of service delivery. Recognising that young people need ongoing support for multiple and linked issues, MYH offers long term support to its clients and befriending, as well as referral to mainstream support services if required, by first building the confidence of young Muslim clients to access those services.

The success of MYH is evident in the way it has struggled to meet the rising demand for its services. MYH deals with 5,000 enquiries a year on a 54-hour week and this is just a fraction of the attempted calls made to the Helpline. Nevertheless, the Helpline data although limited, is the only source of information on the myriad of social and mental health issues faced by Muslim youth in the UK. Given that MYH has succeeded where mainstream services have failed to reach young Muslims (roughly half of all its callers are male, a significant contrast to mainstream helpline services which receive significantly higher calls from females) it was felt that an analysis of the Helpline data would reveal much about not just the profile of issues facing the lives of young Muslims, but also a deeper understanding of how faith and culturally sensitive service provision might be extended or adopted by mainstream service providers to engage hard to reach Muslim youth in their services.

1.1 Research Aims

1. To highlight the sociological and psychological issues facing young British Muslims and their impact on the mental health of this sector of society.
2. To develop an understanding of young Muslim clients' and volunteers' experiences of the MYH model of faith sensitive service delivery and identify features of good practice.
3. To highlight areas of concern and challenges in service provision to Muslim youth and possible ways forward for policy makers, service providers and Muslim communities.

2. SETTING THE SCENE

2.1 Young British Muslims

British Muslims are ethnically diverse, have a very young age profile and are a rapidly growing population. In recent decades they have become more 'visible' as a minority group and are increasingly finding themselves the subject of intense scrutiny on the part of policy makers and the media, keen to thrash out the debates around issues of multi-culturalism, segregation, identity and radicalisation. Young British Muslims are the nexus of what are being portrayed as antithetical systems – between their homes and communities and wider British society; with 'competing' values, expectations and social mores. This distancing is exacerbated by economic deprivation and compounded by the rise in prejudice and Islamophobia, which is both feared and experienced by Muslims, socially and institutionally.

Muslims in Britain tend to be concentrated in inner-city 'deprived' areas. From the 2001 Census and other data, a picture is emerging of British Muslims outstripping all other faith groups in levels of unemployment, economic inactivity, ill health and poor housing conditions. It is therefore unsurprising to learn that many of Britain's Muslims live in communities experiencing feelings of marginalisation, and are at higher risk of crime, mental health problems and drug abuse.

For most young people, the process of negotiating their place in the world, and forming their identity is difficult. However, occupying this politically, socially and economically marginalised front line position can add further pressure and make this process more troublesome and difficult to navigate. For young British Muslims, finding a safe space in which to form their identity can be very difficult. The public arena is perceived by many young British Muslims as a space in which Islam is frequently misrepresented, and where they see themselves portrayed as alien or an even dangerous presence in society. As a consequence of this understanding of how they are perceived, many young British Muslims do not feel comfortable accessing mainstream support services, for fear of being misunderstood or discriminated against. Meanwhile, 'community' spaces come with their own problems. Many young British Muslims feel uncomfortable expressing themselves openly or seeking support from within their communities for fear of being judged and misunderstood by elders who they perceive as being largely unable to empathise with the issues that they are experiencing (Peace Direct report 2006).

It is clear from recent reports (Peace Direct report 2006) – 'Young Muslims Speak' and the British Muslim Research Centre report (Ali 2005) that, for many British Muslims, 'religion' is a key aspect of their identity, which they want to ground in the context of their religious and cultural heritage. This needs to be taken into consideration when making provision for the safe spaces needed by young people in order to explore their identity within peer networks, as well as, in the provision of information, advice and guidance if they encounter difficulties.

2.2 Demographics

2.2.1 Age, Gender and Ethnicity

According to the 2001 Census¹, there are 1.6 million Muslims living in Britain², 46 per cent of whom were born in the UK. While Christians are the largest faith group, constituting 71.6 per cent of the population, at 2.7 per cent, the British Muslim population is the largest minority faith group.

The British Muslim population is ethnically diverse. While three quarters of British Muslims are of South Asian origin³, the remaining quarter includes Arab, Afghani, Iranian, Turkish, Kurdish, Kosovan, North African and Somali Muslims. Six per cent of Muslims are Black African, there is also a significant 'White British' Muslim population. The vast majority are Sunni, but there is also a sizeable number of Shia⁴ Muslims. It is worth noting that even within these overarching categories there is great diversity in sub groups as well as the range and extent of the practise of faith.

Muslims have the youngest age profile of all the faith communities in the UK. At the time of the 2001 census, 34 per cent of Muslims were under age 16. ONS data from 2001 shows households headed by a Muslim were the most likely to contain children, with 63 per cent containing at least one dependent child⁴, and a quarter containing three or more children⁵.

2.2.2 Education

Amongst those pupils of the ethnic origins most represented in the British Muslim population (Pakistani and Bangladeshi) there is a sustained record of academic underachievement, although there have been rapid and significant improvements in recent years. The Pupil Level Annual Schools' Census 2003 (Richardson, 2004) shows that just 42 per cent of Pakistanis and 46 per cent of Bangladeshis achieved five A* – C grades at GCSE, compared to the national average of 50 per cent, and the most current data shows the numbers of Muslims of working age with no qualifications as 30 per cent, more than 10 per cent ahead of the next faith group (Sikhs).

The total number of Muslim graduates is around 150,000 – about 2 per cent of the total graduate population (Shaikh, 2007). Shaikh et al. suggest that while the uptake in BME communities into Higher Education courses is high, these numbers make a dramatic decrease when it comes to actual graduates, suggesting a significantly higher drop out rate when compared to the average intake of students.

2.2.3 Employment

Both male (14 per cent) and female (15 per cent) Muslims of working age are more likely to be

¹ Office of National Statistics- All comparative statistics are drawn from this source unless otherwise stated.

² Although some put the current figure closer to 2,000,000

³ 43 per cent Pakistani, 16 per cent Bangladeshi, eight per cent Indian and six per cent of other Asian background.

⁴ Compared with around a quarter of Jewish and 27 per cent of Christian households.

⁵ Compared with 14 per cent of Sikh, 7 per cent of Hindu and 5 per cent of Christian households.

unemployed than members of any other faith group in Britain⁶. Among young Muslims (aged 16 to 24), 28 per cent were unemployed. This compares with only 11 per cent of Christians of the same age. Furthermore, Muslims have the highest rate of economic inactivity of any religious group at 52 per cent⁷. Thirty-five per cent of Muslim households have no adults in employment; double the national average, which is additionally worrying as it provides young Muslims with no 'working' role model (Ali 2005).

Worryingly, even among Pakistani graduates with first class and upper-second class degrees, the unemployment rate (14 per cent) is higher than that of their White counterparts (6 per cent) (Connors et al., 2004).

Muslims are often employed in the lowest paid sectors of the labour force. Forty per cent of Muslim men are employed in the distribution, hotel and restaurant industry, compared with 17 per cent of Christian men (ONS). At 40 per cent, Muslim men, are more likely, than Christian men, to be in an unskilled job, and amongst the least likely to be in a managerial or professional position. Bangladeshis are the least likely graduates to enter the top three occupational groups – professional, assistant professional and managerial (Connors et al., 2004).

2.2.4 Health

The young age profile of British Muslims has a significant effect upon the way the statistics on health and disability are read. When statistics are adjusted to reflect comparative age profiles of other groups, the percentages are high, 13 per cent of Muslim males and 16 per cent of Muslim females describing their health as 'not good'. These are the highest rates of ill health reported by a faith group in the 2001 Census. Further, Muslims reported the highest rates of disability, with almost a quarter of Muslim females, and one in five (21 per cent) Muslim males reported having a disability.

2.2.5 Mental Health

Though figures for the numbers of people from specific faith groups suffering from mental health issues are scarce, findings such as the high levels of substance misuse (Wanigaratne et al., 2003) and self-harming behaviours (Thompson & Bhugra, 2002) in young people from South Asian backgrounds⁸ are likely to encompass Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, the vast majority of whom are Muslim. There is also ample research, which attests to the gap between mainstream mental health service provision and the needs of black and minority ethnic communities, who remain mistrustful of services (*Breaking the Circles of Fear*, 2002 report by the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health). This tension seems to be borne out in low referral rates of Pakistani Muslims to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The Department of Health's programme, Delivering Race Equality, acknowledges the gap between

⁶ This is over three times the figure for Christian men which stands at 4 per cent, and almost four times the rate for Christian women (also 4 per cent) and is still considerably higher than for men and women in the other religious groups (between 5 and 11 per cent for men and 5 and 8 per cent for women).

⁷ Ethnic Minority Employment Division, Department for Work and Pensions (2004). Economic inactivity is defined as not available for work and/or not actively seeking work. Reasons include being a student, being disabled, or looking after the family and home. The Office of National Statistics shows data that suggests Muslim women were considerably more likely than other women to be economically inactive. 68 per cent (two out of three) women of working age were economically inactive compared with no more than a third of women of working age in each of the other groups.

⁸ The most prevalent ethnic background among British Muslims.

the experiences of White and BME populations in their use of mental health services and advocates an action plan focusing on three target areas to develop more equitable services: appropriate and responsive services, engaged communities and better information.

The complex interrelations between the distinctive social and societal pressures that Young British Muslims face and the impact it is having on their mental health is a topic that is being discussed more and more, often on the basis of (as yet) anecdotal evidence gleaned from communities which are experiencing these problems on the ground. Anecdotally, young British Muslims are not currently confident that mainstream services will be able to understand their religious and cultural needs and contexts.

In providing opportunities for engaging young people in the planning and delivery of services, there is a better chance of providing what they need. A number of organisations, like Muslim Youth Helpline, are beginning to use 'service user led' concepts. Unfortunately, the number of BME and Muslim organisations involved in this process is relatively low. Issues of community taboo around mental health, and fear of being misunderstood and discriminated against play their role. It is therefore all the more vital to reach out to these groups and improve their chances of being part of the process of delivery of services, which are inevitably going to affect them. Encouraging BME and minority faith applicants into the sector, as peer supporters and as professionals will be vital, and should ensure that the barrier between 'them and us' perceived by so many of the service users is eroded.

For these reasons, MYH has made peer-led services a foundational principle. This feeling of ownership and involvement is key to the way the service is perceived by its users, and hence the success of the organisation at filling that gap left by community and mainstream support services.

3. ABOUT MUSLIM YOUTH HELPLINE

The Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH) is a registered charity, which delivers pioneering faith and culturally sensitive peer support services to young British Muslims aged 16 to 25 years of age across a range of BME communities across the UK.

The services of Muslim Youth Helpline are designed to reduce the isolation of young Muslims in the UK. Since its inception it has been run by young British Muslims, for young British Muslims. By recruiting volunteers from within the community to deliver our services, we aim to build the capacity of the Muslim community to tackle its own problems, promote active citizens and train future mentors, role models and leaders. By engaging the community we serve in the delivery of our services, we are able to offer a support service that meets the distinctive needs of our young British Muslim clients, as well as challenge the taboos that surround the issues we deal with from within the community.

3.1 Muslim Youth Helpline

Our core service is free and confidential faith and culturally sensitive listening and support available nationally via the telephone, the internet, in the form of an 'msn style' one-on-one chatroom, and via e-mail. The Helpline service also offers a face-to-face befriending service across Greater London. The service uses young male and female volunteers trained in basic counselling skills to respond to client enquiries. Helpline volunteers respond to telephone calls from vulnerable and distressed young Muslims, listen to their concerns in a non-judgmental, non-chastising manner, reassure them by offering support and exploring feasible options and, where necessary, make referrals to specialist agencies.

Maintaining a high quality, non-judgmental and non-directional service is utterly essential to the effectiveness of our service. The majority of our Helpline volunteers are between 18 and 28 years of age. Before volunteering for the Muslim Youth Helpline, all candidates are required to submit a formal application, attend a selection interview and complete a course in Support Skills. Each helpline worker is expected to undergo a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check before embarking on shifts. Each Helpline Worker is expected to complete a 74-hour training course in telephone and e-mail support skills along with more specialised training in the issues MYH deals with prior to starting with us. To maintain and improve the quality of service we provide to our clients, we ensure Helpline volunteers attend regular update training sessions.

Helpline volunteers are required to attend one three-hour shift on a weekly basis as well as maintain a commitment to remain with the Helpline for a minimum of 12 months. All shifts are monitored by a Helpline Supervisor who is responsible for monitoring the quality standard of the service. MYH is continually developing policies and practices to ensure that the helpline provides a highly efficient and professional service.

Young people contact the Muslim Youth Helpline on a wide-range of social issues, particularly those that are regarded as taboo within the community, such as relationships, homosexuality and mental health problems, that require a culturally and faith-sensitive response. The Helpline also receives letters from inmates at youth offending institutes across the country. To date, the Helpline has responded to over 15,000 enquiries.

3.2 muslimyouth.net

In October 2004 MYH launched muslimyouth.net which aims to utilise the anonymity of the internet to support young Muslims in educating and informing each other about social problems, provide access to referral agencies and encourage the development of peer-support networks. The site seeks to encourage open and honest discussion about contemporary social challenges affecting young Muslims and allow young people to share experiences and support one another.

The site invites young volunteers to research and write articles on a range of different issues from citizenship and identity, to mental health and relationships. The site hosts a discussion forum, a live chatroom and a support services database listing services in different areas. Since the launch of muslimyouth.net, the site has attracted over 350,000 visitors and currently has over 3,000 registered users who actively engage with each other and debate and discuss current and topical issues. In December 2004, just two months after its launch, muslimyouth.net was awarded the Purple Youth Silver Award for best Support Site for young people. In March 2007 muslimyouth.net won the Malcolm X Young Person's Award for Excellence for its inaugural project: The Ramadan Prison Campaign.

3.3 The Prison Campaign

In 2004, muslimyouth.net launched its inaugural Prison Campaign, which was designed to reach out and provide support for young Muslims in prison whilst encouraging the community to support the rehabilitation of Muslim ex-offenders upon their release. The Prison Campaign profiles the lives of youth offenders through articles and diaries and encourages young people to send messages of support and sponsor gift packages for British Muslim prisoners. The campaign is now run on an annual basis, and sends 2,500 gift boxes to prisoners every year during the month of Ramadan. Hundreds of prisoners write back to the Helpline to access our support or request visits.

3.4 Principles and Ethos

The core principles MYH is committed to are:

3.4.1 ... Non-judgmental, non-directional peer support

It is our firm belief that peer-support is the most effective way of reaching out to young Muslims in distress. Many young Muslims are reluctant to access support from within the Muslim community because of traditional community attitudes, which result in many issues being treated as taboo. The resulting feeling of isolation is exacerbated by the unwillingness of young British Muslims to seek support from mainstream services for fear of being discriminated against or misunderstood. For example, a young Muslim girl who is in a pre-marital relationship and has become pregnant is unlikely to be able to turn to her family for advice and support. Indeed, the very revelation may even put her and her partner's lives at risk. Equally, a young Muslim boy who is tackling an addiction to drugs is unlikely to be able to seek empathy and support from his family.

These social pressures create a culture of silence that surrounds the issues that young people face, including, and perhaps especially the issues that are intimately connected to the particular religious and cultural context of young British Muslims. This leaves many young people suffering alone and in silence. Our non-judgmental non-directional peer support

services create safe spaces in which young people are able to talk about problems that they have probably never before been able to reveal. We never advise clients, we listen. We simply help clients to explore the options that they see as open to them and support them in making their own decisions.

3.4.2 ... Engaging and empowering young volunteers as leaders

The key to our success to date has been our ability to unlock the potential of people previously not thought to be capable of tackling their own social problems. In the last five years we have proven that young people's passion, enthusiasm and drive really can be harnessed to instigate genuine social change. Our model of action emancipates us from the attitude of deference to experts, be they parents, community elders or the government. This freedom allows us, and encourages others by example, to act directly to change the situation on the ground.

3.4.3 ... Support the emergence of a strong British Muslim identity

A clear vision and a single achievable common purpose: seeking to improve the social condition of Muslim youth has allowed MYH to bring together young British Muslims from all backgrounds. The Gordian knot of sectarian and ethnic divisions that has so stifled the British Muslim community in the past was cut in pursuit of this common purpose. Our ability to galvanise the support and commitment of both Sunni and Shia' in equal measure, with Pakistani, Somali, Bangladeshi, Iraqi, Moroccan, and so many others is an achievement, which has in itself served as a powerful recruiting sergeant. We seek to demonstrate to other young people that British Muslim identity requires us to take ownership of the society in which we live, leave our cultural and religious prejudices and intolerance behind and in doing so, take part in tackling the social problems that face us.

3.4.4 ... Confronting the root causes of disaffection with cultural sensitivity

Muslim Youth Helpline and its sister project muslimyouth.net are dealing directly with the fallout of sustained religious discrimination and the negative media portrayal of British Muslims. These social challenges are contributing to a frustrated, alienated and confused collective psyche among young British Muslims. By challenging social disadvantage and addressing the related mental health and anxiety problems, our goal is to empower young Muslims to engage constructively and democratically in their local communities. Social action channels these frustrations in a positive and constructive way. It can help foster a sense of self worth and purpose among those who may be angry and disillusioned. In engaging young people in voluntary work and putting them in leading roles across the organisation, MYH has made sure that young British Muslims are able to be part of the solution rather than, as is so often the case, being told they are part of the problem.

3.4.5 ... Improving the lives of young British Muslims

Ultimately our goal is to provide welfare services to young British Muslims. There is overwhelming statistical evidence demonstrating that British Muslims are economically disadvantaged, politically underrepresented and socially marginalised. As we have discussed above, if you are young British and Muslim you are likely to be underachieving in school, you are three times more likely to be in prison and you are likely to live on average in one of the most overcrowded homes in Britain. The impact of this kind of social disadvantage is likely to be echoed in higher rates of mental health problems, self harm and long term illness amongst Muslims. These are the people we are committed to supporting and empowering.

4. METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out in two phases using quantitative and qualitative methods to try and ensure a representative overview of the concerns facing young British Muslims, as well as an opportunity for helpline clients and volunteers to describe their experiences in their own words.

4.1 Quantitative Data Collection

The data collected for the quantitative aspect of this research was derived from the MYH Electronic Logging System (ELS). The system records information regarding: date and time of call; name of the helpline worker who took the call; client details - age, gender, ethnicity; enquiry details - the primary and secondary nature of the concern; and notes for each contact. Whilst the personal details are asked directly of the client, the enquiry details are recorded and categorised according to a choice of the helpline worker. The 'notes' field is an open field where the helpline worker records an account of their conversation and any interventions made. For the purposes of this research all enquiries recorded during the period January 2006 – December 2006 on the ELS were audited. Tables of demographics and the breakdown of concerns clients called about are presented in the quantitative analysis section.

A sub-sample of cases representing the top five concerns clients called about were also analysed, to highlight a more detailed picture of the sociological and psychological issues involved. Case studies, which have been disguised and altered to ensure confidentiality, are presented on page 30 of the report and provide snapshots illustrating the intricacies and complexities of concerns clients call about and the responses of helpline volunteers.

4.2 Qualitative Data Collection

The second phase of the research involved gathering qualitative data. It involved semi-structured open-ended interviews with helpline clients (refer to appendix 1) and volunteers (refer to appendix 2). The interviews provide an opportunity for their voices, experiences and views to be heard.

4.2.1 Helpline Client Interviews

We decided to interview helpline clients over the telephone in order to preserve client trust in our commitment to their confidentiality, and if they wish, their anonymity in their interactions with MYH. This also made it logistically easier given the geographical distribution of clients. Interviews were carried out over a period of four weeks. Helpline volunteers were given a statement to read to all clients at the end of each call during the two-week period; explaining the research, its purpose and asking if an independent researcher could call them back to interview them. The telephone numbers of clients and convenient times to call were logged and one of the researchers would call back to conduct the interview. Interviews lasted on average between twenty and thirty minutes. In order to ensure confidentiality it was not possible to record the interviews, thus clients' responses were hand recorded verbatim by the researchers.

Ten interviews with helpline clients were conducted. Recruiting clients proved difficult for a number of reasons: as many clients were reluctant to give out their contact number and be interviewed, also helpline volunteers were reluctant at times to request participation in research where they felt it was insensitive and overstepped the boundaries of the support and counselling they were providing. Nonetheless the data obtained was rich and provides some insightful findings, which were categorised and analysed for cross cutting themes and are presented in the qualitative analysis section.

4.2.2 Helpline Worker Interviews

Ten helpline volunteers who had been working various lengths of time at MYH (some from its inception, six years ago, others who joined a few months ago) were interviewed face to face by one of the researchers. Interviews lasted on average thirty minutes to an hour. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and then categorised and analysed for cross cutting themes and are presented in the qualitative section.



5. DATA ANALYSIS

5.1 Quantitative Data

Over the period of one year, from January 2006 to December 2006, a total number of 5,057 enquires were taken by Muslim Youth Helpline, 4,261 of which were telephone enquiries, with 493 e-mails and the remainder of enquiries coming through letters, internet counselling, befriending and a small number of 'unrecorded' (under ten). The telephone calls reflected a total of 1,398 clients. Some of these clients would have called only once or would be short-term clients for a few weeks to months, whilst others were regular long-term clients who have been calling over a number of years. As an indicator, the range of the number of times clients called between January 2006 and December 2006 was between 1 and 352.

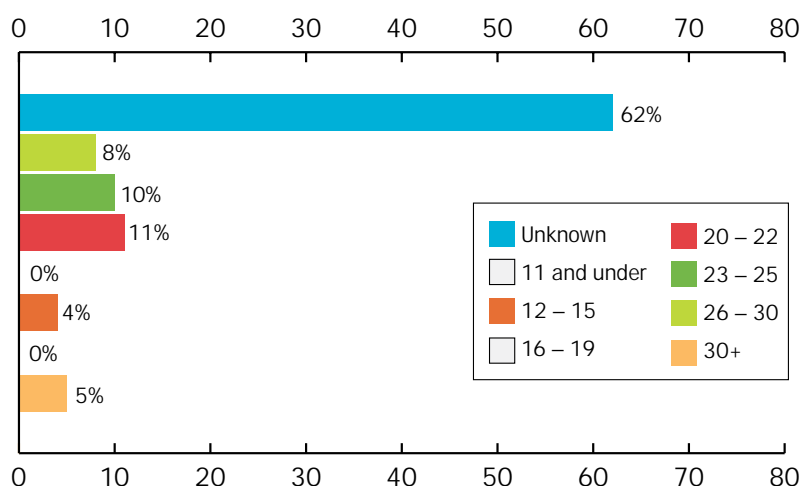
The actual number of people trying to get through to the helpline, however, far outstrips the 5,057 enquiries taken. For example, according to the breakdown of statistics from an MYH phone bill for February 2007, in that one month alone 1,200 calls were attempted, only 200 of which were answered. Thus, approximately only 16 per cent of potential calls could be responded to due to limitations in resources, timing and staffing.

The demographic profile of clients and the nature of their concerns are presented in the tables below. Case studies of longer-term clients, which are illustrative of the top five concerns, are presented to illustrate the detail and complexity of the cases MYH deals with. They also give an indication of the way helpline volunteers responded to and dealt with these cases.

Inevitably, for a confidential service dealing with deeply personal issues, there was a high proportion (almost 50 per cent) of 'Unknowns' recorded in data fields. This may be due to clients' reluctance to disclose personal information, or a Helpline Volunteer not asking for such information where they felt it inappropriate. While attempts are constantly undertaken to improve recording of data at MYH, this is a problem common to many helplines, given the priority placed on confidentiality and sensitivity to the client needs.

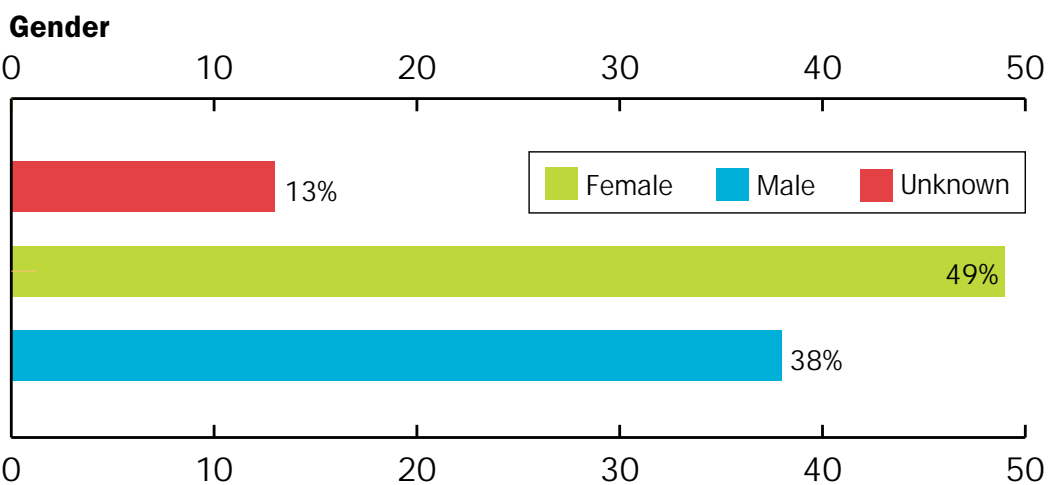
5.1.1 Client Profiles

Age



Age band	Number	per cent
Unknown	744	53
11 and under	2	0.1
12 - 15	39	3
16 - 19	219	16
20 - 22	123	9
23 - 25	110	8
26 - 30	103	7
30+	58	4
Total	1,398	100

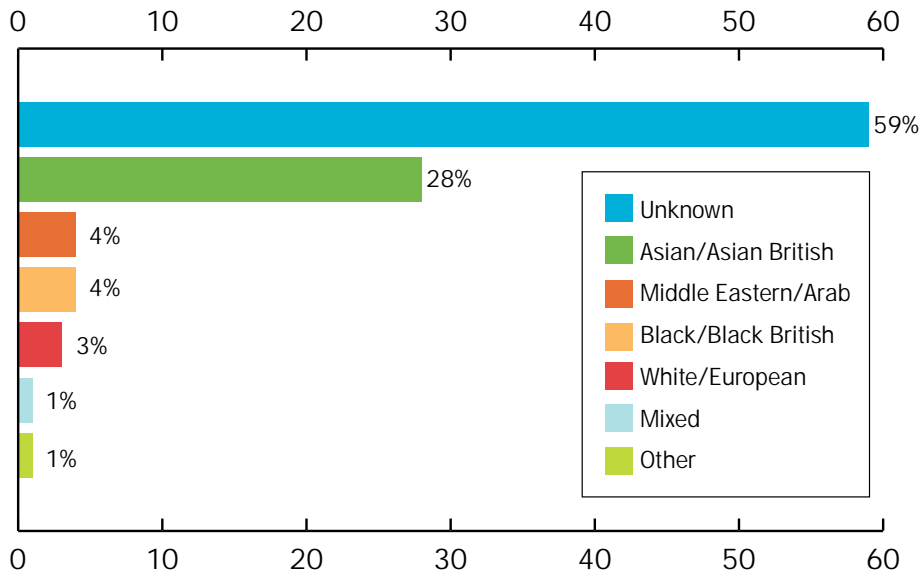
Out of the 47 per cent known recoded ages, the largest age band accessing MYH services was the 16 to 19-year-olds at 16 per cent. This is likely to be reflective of current publicity drives and advertising campaigns which target schools, youth clubs, youth offending institutes, and further and higher education colleges. Almost a quarter of clients fall into the 20 to 30 age group.



Gender	Number	per cent
Female	682	49
Male	525	38
Unknown	191	13
Total	1,398	100

The gender split for calls was 49 per cent female and 38 per cent male. This is encouraging and surprising as it indicates a relatively large number of young British Muslim males accessing MYH support services in comparison to the relatively low uptake of mental health services by the general male population.

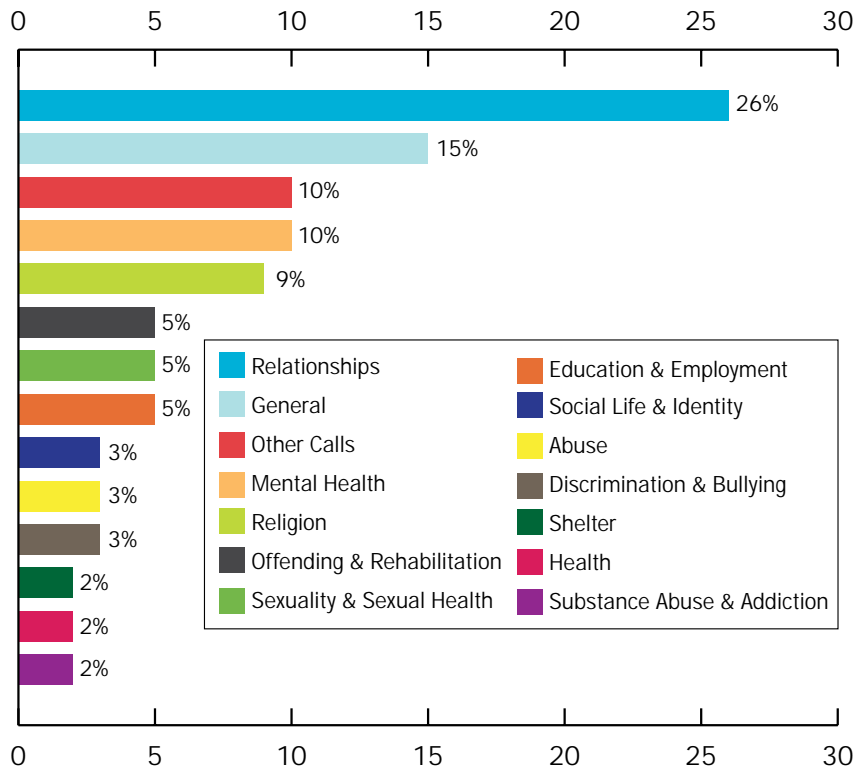
Ethnicity



Ethnic Background	Number	per cent
Unknown	832	59
Asian/Asian British	387	28
Middle Eastern/Arab	58	4
Black/Black British	55	4
White/European	35	3
Mixed	17	1
Other	14	1
Total	1398	100

Out of the 40 per cent known recorded ethnicities, Asian/Asian British represented the highest proportion of clients at 68 per cent, followed by Middle Eastern/Arab at 10 per cent and Black/Black British at 10 per cent. This is roughly proportionate to the general make up of the Muslim community in which the largest ethnic group is Asian, more specifically from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds.

5.1.2 Client Concerns

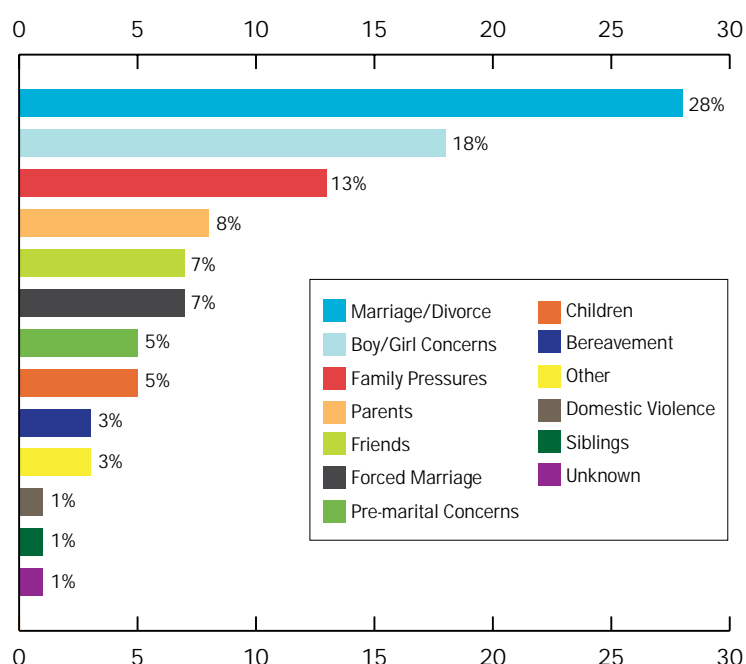


Concern Category	Number	per cent
Relationships	377	26.6
General	210	14.8
Other Calls	147	10.4
Mental Health	142	10.0
Religion	121	8.6
Offending & Rehabilitation	77	5.4
Sexuality & Sexual Health	75	5.3
Education & Employment	70	4.9
Social Life & Identity	43	3.0
Abuse	42	3.0
Discrimination & Bullying	36	2.5
Shelter	27	1.9
Health	24	1.7
Substance Abuse & Addiction	24	1.7
Total	1,398	100

Out of the 1,398 clients that called up the helpline, the top five concerns were categorised by helpline volunteers as relating to: relationships – 26.6 per cent, mental health – 10 per cent, religion – 8.6 per cent, offending and rehabilitation – 5.4 per cent and sexuality and sexual health - 5.3 per cent. These are quite closely followed by education and employment at 4.9

per cent. It is interesting to note that substance abuse and discrimination and bullying feature much less in the recorded concern categories than may be expected for an equivalent age sample of young people from the general population. It does need to be pointed out, however, that most client calls span a number of categories and the primary category recorded is as classified by the helpline worker. Each of the concern categories that clients called about are sub-divided into further categories, a more detailed breakdown of which is given in the following tables.

Relationships



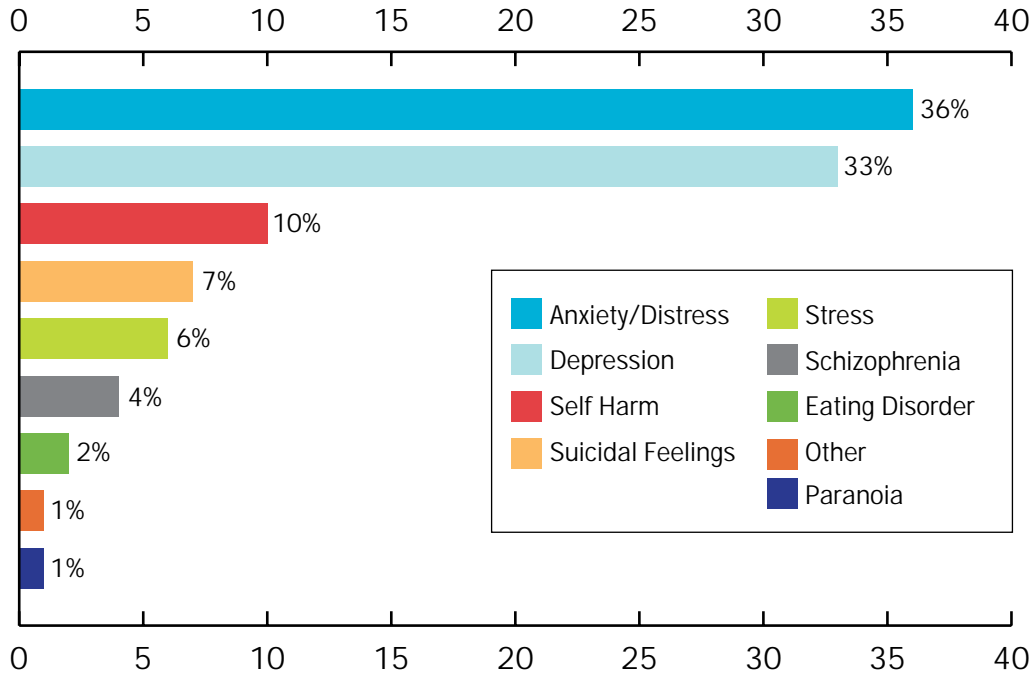
Relationship Concerns Breakdown	Number	per cent
Marriage/Divorce	106	28.1
Boy/Girl Concerns	66	17.5
Family Pressures	50	13.3
Parents	31	8.2
Friends	26	6.9
Forced Marriage	26	6.9
Pre-marital Concerns	20	5.3
Children	18	4.8
Bereavement	12	3.2
Other	12	3.2
Domestic Violence	5	1.3
Siblings	3	0.8
Unknown	2	0.5
Total	377	100

The major concerns within relationships tended to be about marriage and divorce at 28.1 per cent or 'boy- girl' relationships at 17.5 per cent, followed next by family pressures at 13.3 per cent and concern about relationships with parents at 8.2 per cent. Forced marriage concerns totalled 6.9 per cent of concerns.

Whilst it would be expected that relationships with the opposite sex would feature highly in the list of concerns for young people, in the case of young British Muslims case studies illustrate how they are additionally having to work out how to conduct relationships within changing cultural practices; negotiating their own, parental, community and social expectations, which can be at variance with one another.

In most British Muslim cultures (and in most non Western cultures) the concept of self and self-esteem is sociocentric and heavily rooted in familial and community relationships, as opposed to egocentric or individual focused. Within these cultural systems parents are given a prominent hierarchical position. Obedience and duty are prominent themes, which connect people to collectives and communities, and hence change at an individual level is less acceptable and more hazardous, frequently leading to feelings of guilt and shame. Underlying these cultural orientations are religious beliefs, which for many become fused with culture and become difficult to change even when the ethical purposes behind them become distorted.

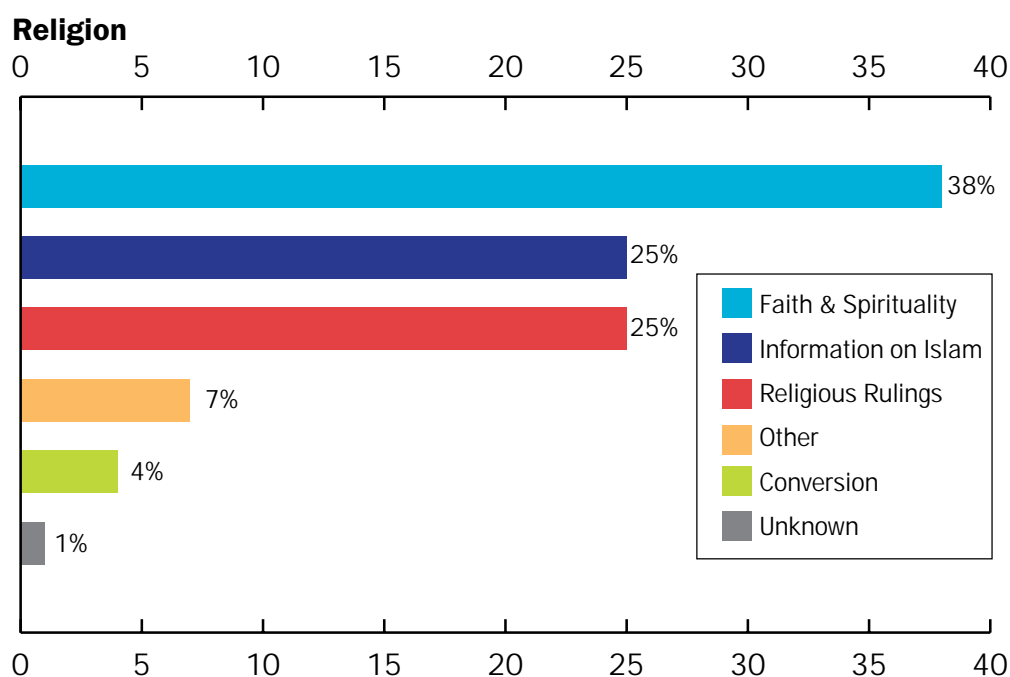
Mental Health



Mental Health Concerns Breakdown	Number	per cent
Anxiety/Distress	50	35.2
Depression	47	33.1
Self Harm	14	9.9
Suicidal Feelings	10	7.0

Stress	9	6.3
Schizophrenia	5	3.5
Eating Disorder	3	2.1
Other	2	2.1
Paranoia	2	2.1
Total	142	100

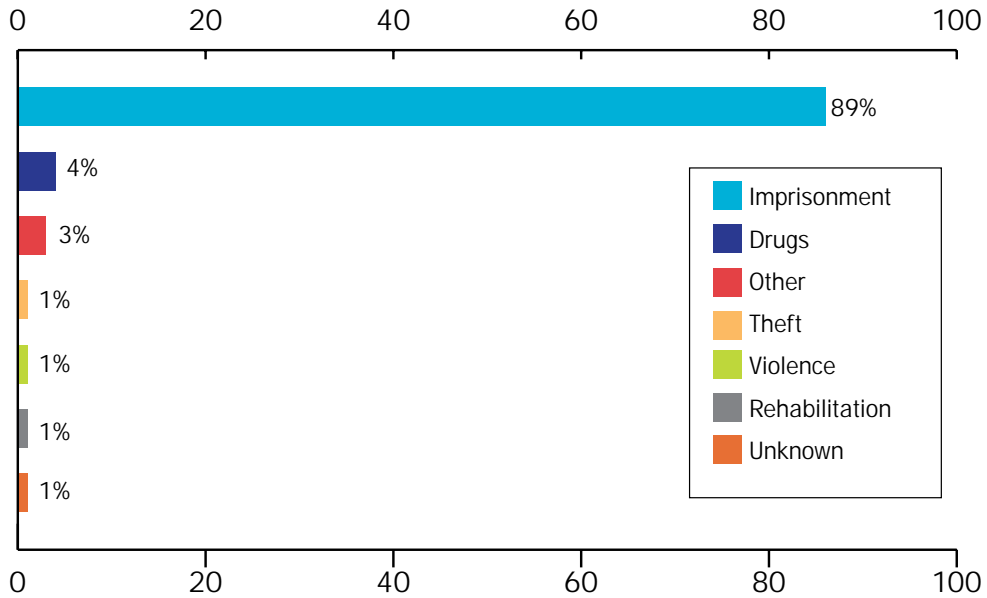
Within the Mental Health category, anxiety and distress was the most frequently discussed concern at 35.2 per cent, followed closely by depression at 33.1 per cent. Self-harm and suicidal feelings together totalled nearly 17 per cent of calls.



Religion concerns Breakdown	Number	per cent
Faith & Spirituality	46	38
Information on Islam	30	25
Religious Rulings	30	25
Other	9	7
Conversion	5	4
Unknown	1	1
Total	121	100

In calls where religion was the dominant issue, the most common concerns related to faith and spirituality followed by callers seeking information on Islam and religious rulings. MYH policy is non-directive and therefore we do not provide any religious rulings. If clients require religious advice, they are referred on to scholars from a database.

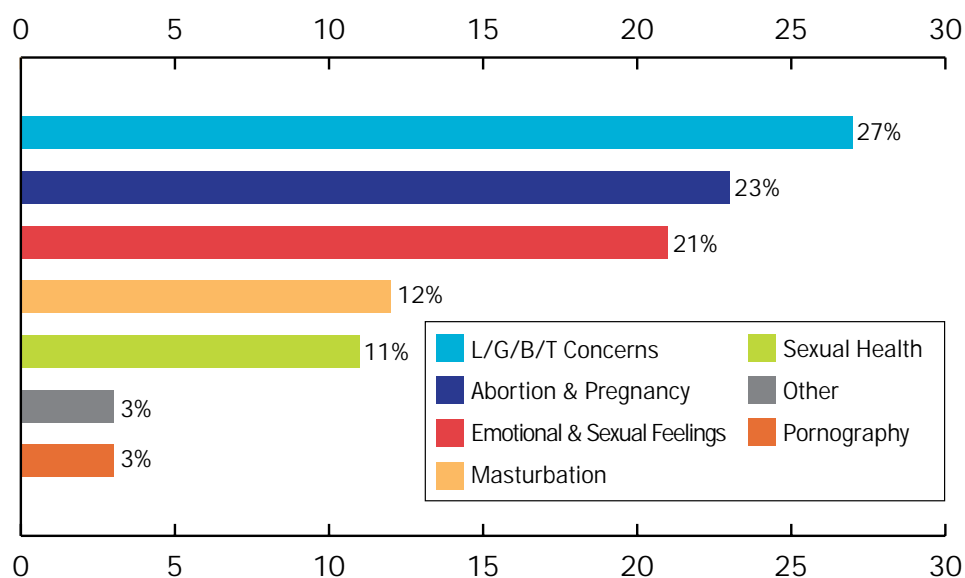
Offending and Rehabilitation



Offending & Rehabilitation Concerns Breakdown	Number	per cent
Imprisonment	68	88
Drugs	3	4
Other	2	3
Theft	1	1
Violence	1	1
Rehabilitation	1	1
Unknown	1	1
Total	77	100

Within the offending and rehabilitation category, 88 per cent of calls concerned imprisonment. The high number of calls in relation to imprisonment may reflect the impact of the annual MYH Prison Campaign. As part of the campaign MYH sends gift packs to young Muslims in prisons and young offenders institutions with letters of support and information about the Helpline. Consequently MYH is well known amongst prison teams and Muslim inmates. Calls regarding offending and rehabilitation peaked in November, following the dispatch of these gift packs, either thanking MYH or requesting further information about support services for prison clients.

Sexuality and Sexual Health



Sexuality & Sexual Health Concerns Breakdown	Number	per cent
L/G/B/T Concerns	21	28.0
Abortion & Pregnancy	17	22.7
Emotional & Sexual Feelings	16	21.3
Masturbation	9	12.0
Sexual Health	8	10.7
Other	2	2.7
Pornography	2	2.7
Total	75	100

Lesbian, gay and bisexuality concerns constituted 28 per cent of calls related to sexuality and sexual health, followed fairly closely by 22.7 per cent concerns relating to abortion and pregnancy and 21.3 per cent to emotional and sexual feelings.

5.1.3 Client Concerns by Gender

It is interesting to note that a slightly different picture emerges of the top five concern categories if the data is broken down by gender.

For males the top five concerns (not including the general and other categories) in descending order are: relationships, offending and rehabilitation, religion, mental health, and sexuality and sexual health. Whereas for females the top five concerns (not including the general and other categories) in descending order are: relationships, mental health, religion, education and employment, and abuse. Whilst relationships and mental health feature highly for both genders, offending and rehabilitation features as a much higher concern for males. It is one of the lowest concern categories for females. Abuse and 'education and employment' feature more highly as concerns for females than for males.

5.2 Case Studies

*All names have been changed in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

RELATIONSHIPS

Nadia is a 23-year-old woman who has been contacting MYH since 2004. She is in a physically and emotionally abusive relationship with her boyfriend, who has been imprisoned for GBH and drug dealing. Nadia was married at the age of 17 to a relative from Pakistan against her wishes. When she came back to the UK a year later she refused to support her husband's application for a visa and ran away from her family. Since then she has been estranged from her family and living in hostels. She has little social and emotional support. Her sense of self-worth is very low and because she feels desperate for some love and attention she is highly vulnerable to getting into relationships in which she feels taken advantage of. She is aware that her current relationship is harmful for her but finds it hard to leave her partner who has been physically violent towards her. She has also not been able to protect herself sexually and has got pregnant on a couple of occasions

and had terminations; about which she feels terribly guilty as she believes this is frowned upon in Islam. Her health is poor; she feels alienated from her family and community and has little motivation and hope. She often begins the conversation by saying 'I just need someone to talk to ...'

MYH has provided a listening ear to Nadia and has been a source of support. Speaking to other young Muslims gives her a sense of connection with her community and an alternative frame of reference. By encouraging her to get involved in other activities and develop other sources of self-worth, which are constructed in the form of an action plan, she feels better able to manage the volatile relationship she is in. She has also talked about her family and the loss of her father and the protection she felt from him. The issue of self-protection has become a central theme in the work.



MENTAL HEALTH

Shahida is in her early 20s and is of Bengali origin. She was sexually abused by a cousin when she was a child. She blames herself and feels a great deal of hatred towards herself, which manifests itself in self-harm. She tried to talk to her family about the abuse she suffered, but they dealt with it by brushing it under the carpet and feared for the honour of the family and her marriage prospects if this was to get out in the extended family or community. Since then Shahida's behaviour has become more out of control and, in anger, she slapped her aunt and tried to run away. Her GP has referred her to a psychiatrist as he thinks she may be suffering from psychotic symptoms. However, her family are reluctant for her to get help, as they fear that the secret will come out and their cultural concerns, such as the importance of honour will not be understood. They think Shahida is possessed and have tried to take her to a spiritual healer.

Shahida has been labelled as someone with mental illness or spiritual possession. There is no

acknowledgment of her sexual abuse and the injustice she has suffered. Talking to MYH facilitated her disclosing the abuse and gave her a sense of acknowledgment. Volunteers stressed to her that the sexual abuse was not her fault. Shahida was able to see the link between her experiences and her cutting as a way of relieving her distress. She would often call the helpline when she was about to cut herself. MYH explored cultural and family dynamics with her and whether there were any family members who were likely to support her, or were able to talk to her parents about the effect of the abuse on her. It was also suggested to her that MYH may be able to find her a Bengali counsellor who could mediate between her and her family. Shahida was encouraged to seek psychological help and the stigma around mental illness was decreased for her by experiencing, through her calls to MYH, that talking to someone was helpful. MYH offered her the befriending service if she wanted some support in going to see a psychiatrist or psychologist.

RELIGION

Ahmed is an Iraqi man in his early 20s. He first called MYH to talk about his lack of self-confidence and being bullied at college. It transpired that he also had difficult relationships with his family. His parents and older brother were verbally aggressive towards him and often put him down. Ahmed did not feel that he could be independent or 'grow up'. He felt extremely guilty about a number of things and felt he was a bad Muslim for shouting back at his parents, or when he viewed pornographic images on the Internet. He felt that when he did something he thought was haram (impermissible in his religion) it wiped out all the good things he did. His sense of debilitation and frustration in expressing himself was embodied in his breathing difficulties.

Talking to MYH allowed Ahmed to be honest and express his feelings without being judged as a bad Muslim. By exploring the impact his parents' and brother's behaviour toward him has had on his self confidence, Ahmed was better able to understand his anger and think about ways he could make a stand for himself without being aggressive or feeling guilty. Through his conversations with MYH, Ahmed was able to question his black and white view of sin and reward, and this allowed him to reframe his sense of being a British Muslim in terms of a journey and constant personal struggle. This allowed Ahmed to accept his conflicting feelings and work towards constructive objectives by taking small steps. He also began to talk about relationships and his own sexuality as part of his 'growing up'.



SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL HEALTH

Zaid is a 16-year-old in an all boys' school. He called the Helpline because he was worried about having sexual feelings for boys. Previously he had been attracted

to girls, but recently he had been feeling attracted to a boy in his class who is openly gay. Zaid questioned why homosexuality was haram (impermissible). He felt angry with Allah for not 'allowing' him what he wanted. He would sometimes talk about not wanting to feel attracted to this boy, and at other times talked about how he enjoyed the feeling. Zaid also talked about racism at school and bullying that he had suffered. All of these issues were beginning to affect Zaid's performance at school and his grades and self-confidence were declining. He had not talked to anyone in his family about these issues. He loved his parents but feared disappointing them and did not feel able to talk to them about his

sexuality. He had an especially difficult relationship with his father, who he did not see as a good role model.

MYH provided a confidential safe space for Zaid to talk about his conflicting sexual feelings, which he otherwise experienced as taboo in the Muslim community, as well as the racism he experienced. MYH was able to discuss homosexuality with him without judging him and acknowledged the cultural and familial conflicts that Zaid may face. Talking to someone seemed to decrease Zaid's anxiety and helped him work through his questions and find some clarity. MYH also helped him to set goals for himself so that his schoolwork did not suffer.

OFFENDING AND REHABILITATION

Yusuf is a 22-year-old of Indo-Pak descent and has recently been given a ten-year custodial sentence for selling drugs. At the age of 17 Yusuf dropped out of college as he felt he had no prospects, and was not doing well and didn't have the support he required. He wanted money and characterises himself as already on the brink of gang life. He could see the fast cars and the money to be made and wanted to be like the 'big boys' and fit in. He was also under a lot of pressure as the eldest son coming from a poverty stricken home, where his father worked as a taxi driver and his mother was depressed. He could see those around him doing well including his cousins, and he felt despairing of his situation and selling drugs seemed an easy option for him at the time.

Yusuf found out about MYH when he first received a gift box as part of the Prison Campaign. He has been in contact with MYH since. It is his first prison sentence and he is finding it difficult to keep going. He feels a real sense of shame for having brought his family's reputation into disrepute. He wrote the following letter to MYH to ask for assistance.

I'm feeling very lonely & very depressed. I know it is bad and wrong but I feel really suicidal. I'm really scared that I will do something bad whether it is tonight or another night. I've been inside for two months now, the first month I could hardly eat or

drink. I continually hear voices in my head telling me to cut. I know it's wrong and I feel guilty but it helps. It calms me down, cos I'm going mental in here. It is so hard. I don't know anymore. I've had enough. Please get in touch as soon as possible. I would be so grateful if you'd write to me but hopefully maybe even visit me in prison.

In further contacts with MYH Yusuf highlighted his concerns over never being able to live a normal life again and how he had become used to a reputation and money. He is concerned about how he will cope when, and if (given his suicidal feelings), he gets out of prison. Yusuf feels incredibly displaced from society and he opened up to helpline volunteers about how he never felt he was accepted, or that he belonged in society because he was different. Part of the reason he says he ended up pushing drugs was because it gave him a sense of control and made him a 'somebody'. MYH has responded to his letters by encouraging and empowering him, including highlighting the opportunity open to him to return to study and go to university, and also exploring possibilities open to him in terms of making an honest living and making his family proud of him, while at the same time being sensitive of the cultural framework from which his community is judging him. Helpline volunteers continue to provide emotional support for Yusuf and have arranged befriending for him.

5.3 Qualitative Data: Interviews

In total ten helpline clients were interviewed, six of whom were female and four of whom were male. Their age range was 17 to 24 and they came from different ethnic groups.

Ten helpline volunteers were also interviewed, six of whom were female and four of whom were male. Their age range was between 20 and 26 years, and they had all worked varying lengths of time at the helpline, from three months to six years. Three were now supervisors and six were helpline workers. They came from a range of ethnic backgrounds, including Somalian, Jamaican, Indian, Pakistani, Bengali and Iraqi.

The data from helpline clients and volunteers interviews have been organised around common linking, and partly overlapping, themes that cut across the interviews. The data could be organised in different ways, but we have chosen to focus on these themes as they highlight the key features of practice that seem to be engaging for young Muslims. The five themes identified are identity and 'Muslimness', recognition and acceptance, belonging and empowerment, Islam and identity as a dynamic process, and occupying marginal spaces. Helpline clients and volunteers data are presented alongside one another, as the themes resonate and cut across both samples and identify key issues in service delivery for young Muslims, although be it from different angles.

5.3.1 Identity and 'Muslimness'

For the majority of the clients interviewed, as well as for helpline volunteers, Islam was not a separate part of their identity, but integral and interwoven into all other issues and aspects of their lives. This recognition of and empathy with their faith identity was an important reason why clients found it easier to access support through MYH.

As one client put it:

"The fact that it is run by Muslims made it more helpful, because they had an understanding of culture and faith ... Islam is part of everything, day-to-day life. Part of me all the time." Nadir 22 years

For the helpline volunteers, 'Muslimness' was also a significant factor in wanting to work at MYH.

"The Muslim ummah (community) is one body so when part of it aches you are expected to help the other part of the body. So generally as a Muslim when you can offer your services to help other Muslims you should always be there. Also as a Muslim you can deal with issues related to Islam and you can relate to them and their experiences better." Bilal 26 years

This sense among both clients and helpline volunteers that Islam was an important and valued aspect of their identity did not refer to 'Islam' as a conscious theological framework, but rather was apparent on three different levels: language, a shared context and understanding, and as a meaningful ethical framework.

- (i) Language: the language used by clients was interspersed with religious imagery and metaphors. Clients used language loaded with religious connotations, referring to 'darkness and light', or their struggles with 'journeys' and finding the 'right path'⁹.

⁹The 'sirat al-mustaqeem' (lit: 'the straight path'), for example, is a Qur'anic motif. And whilst the concept of a 'path' does not deny the validity of multiple interpretations, it does re-enforce the imagery of the moral parameters emphasised by faith.

"I just wanted someone to listen to me and help me find the right road to go down."

Sarah 23 years

Other clients spoke in terms of religious concepts of moral strength or weakness, and evaluated their feelings in terms of religious 'rights and wrongs'. When asked, "What went through your mind before you called the helpline?" One client said,

"Bad things. Evil things – depression and anxiety. I felt like a loser." **Amar 22 years**

Helpline volunteers are able to respond to clients' uses of language and to explore these concepts more deeply, and while this kind of sensitivity is not exclusive to Muslim/Muslim interactions, it is perhaps more instinctive because of the shared background. Clients valued the feeling that they were talking to someone who could relate to them if they expressed themselves by referring to religious terms and metaphors, and some felt that this would not be the case in mainstream support services.

- (ii) Clients and helpline volunteers also equated Islam with their social and cultural context. Religion and culture were often conflated and used interchangeably or, at times, with one (in most cases religion) over riding the other. In this sense, an individual's reference to Islam may also be thought of as a social identity or 'Muslimness'.

One client when asked, "Why it was important to them to speak to a Muslim and what role Islam played in their life," said,

"... because sometimes I have arguments with relatives, like my mum, and it's that cultural understanding that helps ... It helps basically because I come from a Muslim family and the fact that MYH understand that point of view." **Aysha 18 years**

- (iii) Interviews with helpline volunteers reveal that many were trying to understand Islam as a more coherent meaningful and ethical framework in response to clients' questions. Conversations with clients led them to consider their boundaries and their own identity. One worker felt that clients were:

"Seeking support but within an Islamic understanding so they're seeking support and also protection – support for the issue they are going through but protection from actually aggravating the issue by doing something un-Islamic. So by being understanding of Islam from their perspective you can kind of provide support yet bear in mind what boundaries might be too much for somebody to cross and whatever and then alleviate that concern. Islam offers a higher degree of compassion and objectivity in dealing with somebody. At counselling courses you are taught to be objective and disregard your prejudices, but I have never felt that is honest or realistic. And being Muslim you are taught to recognise that, not disregard your subjectivities, but you recognise it. My subjectivity is from the perspective that I believe in Allah and that Allah is the creator of everybody and we are all creations of Allah. I then see everybody as a creation of Allah as opposed to necessarily their activities, so whether somebody is un-Islamic or non-Islamic it doesn't matter to me, as I owe them a certain duty of concern because they are the creation of Allah. I would expect that I have to give them what I would expect for myself, and that is respect and compassion and mercy and patience for whatever they are going through, and what other basis would you treat somebody better or fairly?" **Umar 27 years**

Islam was thus significant on a number of levels – language, the inherent understanding of cultures infused by Islam, as well as in terms of ethics. Understanding and talking about all of these levels simultaneously enabled both helpline volunteers and clients to feel that they were approaching the issues holistically, in a way that cohered with their own sense of their identity rather than having to fragment and compartmentalise life experiences.

While it is possible that some clients avoid raising issues that they feel would not be acceptable to a ‘Muslim’ youth helpline, the large number of calls addressing issues that are otherwise taboo in Muslim communities suggests this is not the case for many clients. For some clients, the gender of a helpline worker made a difference to the extent to which they felt able to discuss very sensitive issues. The majority of the clients interviewed said that the non-judgmental ethos of MYH ensures that there were no issues that they did not feel able to discuss.

5.3.2 Recognition and Acceptance

Identity is in part developed through the eyes of the ‘other’, and at the heart of this experience of human subjectivity is recognition by an ‘other’ (Ewing 1997). Lack of positive recognition can lead to a sense of alienation as well as poor self-esteem and often underlies the dynamic of racism. Both clients and Helpline volunteers alluded to the sense of a lack of acceptance or belonging that they felt at times from mainstream society, as well as from within Muslim communities. Recognition and acceptance, not just in terms of their difficulties, but also their ethnicity and religion were pivotal for clients.

One client, who had been in prison, was asked, ‘what were you expecting/hoping for?’ He responded:

“Support or help from Muslims. X (mainstream support organisation) came to see me but not everyone understands the Pakistani and Muslim culture and I needed to speak to someone who does. I was on suicide watch and really desperate to speak to someone ... I had never spoken about these things. I wasn’t sure a Muslim organisation would listen or understand. First, I called another Muslim organisation (Y) – they were not very helpful and were judgmental. I was brought up in a way that problems don’t go out of yourself or your home. You have to keep it all in. Muslims don’t listen. I was scared.”

Zain 24 years

This client’s experience also identifies the importance of who it is doing the ‘recognising’; in this case, it was crucial that the ‘other’ was sensitive to his faith and cultural needs. Receiving recognition through the eyes of another Muslim, around issues that are often contentious amongst Muslims, seemed significant and allowed the holding together of contradictory issues in a way that enabled growth and solutions to emerge without creating splits and fragmentation. This kind of ‘listening’ and non-judgmentalness however, is not always forthcoming by Muslim organisations, as the client suggests.

A helpline worker highlighted the assumption of a shared experience of ‘Muslimness’ in the British context, which cut across cultural and ethnic boundaries, and enabled empathy and understanding, or recognition:

“Ultimately people have called more often that not because they are Muslim. They are putting aside every other factor in life and assuming that because you are Muslim you are going to understand where they are coming from. They don’t know whether the

other person on the phone is going to be British or from any other ethnic background. I think all British Muslims have the same thing. They are all facing similar problems. No matter how religious or non-religious they are. Irrespective of how straight and narrow they are. The most non religious still have a pulling force that says I'm a Muslim and I need to talk to someone who understands who I am and what I'm going through."
Eman 23 years

5.3.3 Belonging and Empowerment

Although a sense of belonging may be seen as anchoring in one regard, in another it also enables empowerment and self-authorship. For example, the process of 'recognition' can foster a sense of belonging. For clients, this often focused around the idea of seeking support from within the Muslim community; something they had not previously felt able to do. It was important for many of the helpline volunteers that MYH was a Muslim organisation. For many, the idea of actively working together with other Muslims to meet the needs of their peers gives them a sense of solidarity and empowerment. As one Helpline Worker put it:

"I wanted to work in a Muslim organisation. When I came to the interview and realised what it was about I was really glad and wanted to be a part of it. I was really glad an organisation like this exists. The fact that they were dealing with issues that elders wanted to sweep under the carpet and wanted to avoid as a community."
Zahira 22 years

The sense of standing together to deal with issues that would otherwise be swept under the carpet is empowering, both in terms of a collective identity for young British Muslims, but also for individual volunteers. The impact that the experience of volunteering at the organisation can have is attested to by a helpline supervisor:

"In terms of volunteers – seeing people who work here six months or a year later it is amazing to see how people grow with the organisation. I have seen it change the person's life. It gives them a different perspective talking to clients and makes them see things differently. Also, you feel like you have done something useful, like you have joined their story. It gives you confidence and a sense of worth and skills that are useful for life."
Eman 23 years

It is clear from clients' accounts that the recognition and belonging that they felt having been supported through a difficult time by other young Muslims at MYH enabled change and development in other aspects of their lives from driving tests, to volunteering to taking up educational courses, to religious practice. For example,

"We talked about many good things – it helped me to calm down and not hurt people. MYH helped bridge my relationship with Islam – I'm not scared of nothing, I feel I got to draw a bridge between me and success. Now I believe in myself. I can pass my driving test, I can learn more surahs (verses from the Qur'an), I can get a job and do anything. I can practise. Islam made me a stronger person."
Shahid 21 years

Whilst the empowerment was often linked in one word to Islam it was also no doubt linked to less tangible processes such as being able to talk and explore options. The Helpline Worker is not there to tell a client what he or she should do, but to discuss what he or she could do in a supportive way. The choice always has to be the clients' own, as one worker comments,

“You set targets that they need to meet because you mutually agreed upon them and then they get just towards the end and they go back to the bottom of the stairs again. So it is slightly frustrating but you just have to be patient and know that when they get there it will work because they will have made that decision on their own.”
Humaira 23 years

Wenger suggests that identity is the richest resource that we have and that through the shared process of participation – giving, taking, sharing – ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ is enabled and identities can be thought of as ‘identities of participation’ (Wenger 2007). For clients, this participation is the act of discussing issues that are contentious in their communities, and often causing a great deal of personal anguish, hearing an empathetic and supportive response from their peers, and making their own choices about their situation. This positive experience stands in contrast both to the experience within the community, usually one of silence or fear of recrimination, and the experience with mainstream support services, where young British Muslims fear being misunderstood or discriminated against. For helpline volunteers, there is a feeling of participating in the client’s journey towards making choices for themselves, as well as their participation in an organisation that is changing the way the British Muslim community deals with contentious issues.

5.3.4 Islam and Identity as a Dynamic Process

Contrary to the conventional perception of Islam as a monolithic system with static, rigid concepts, throughout the interviews there were hints of movement, change and an evolving understanding of self, society, Islam and what it is to be a Muslim. For example, one client reflected on how keeping things quiet was the norm in his culture and initially he equated this with being Muslim, but he came to acknowledge that he has found it useful to talk and be more open and feels that it has not undermined his sense of being a Muslim. In fact, he advocates more opportunities for young Muslims to speak.

“Muslims don’t have anyone else to speak to. There may be things like Samaritans but that’s difficult. There are certain things in childhood that always stay taboo in any culture but Muslims need more help in this ... I would have kept things quiet my whole life – I already did for 20 years – if I couldn’t speak to MYH.”
Zain 24 years

This process of questioning what being a Muslim means to him and how this is changing simultaneously with his changing view of himself and his life is one that many clients are engaging with to a greater or lesser extent in their interactions with MYH. Given the importance of Islam in the concepts of self-identity of young British Muslims, which we have discussed above, this is perhaps unsurprising. However, it is a broader question, which mainstream support services, will struggle to tackle either directly or indirectly. The opportunity for young British Muslims to explore issues with their peers is a context in which questions of religious concepts, practice and the client’s sense of themselves as a Muslim are already at the table, even if they are not being directly addressed. Clients are not ‘hiding’ a part of themselves and dealing with an issue in their everyday lives in a compartmentalised way, more often they are approaching the Helpline as a young Muslim with a problem.

This understanding of the role of Islam and Muslim identity in relation to an individual’s everyday life and difficulties also creates a sense of a learning process and self development for helpline volunteers, and was commented on in relation to the training they received which was often referred to by terms such as ‘eye opening’.

“The interview had an impact – it made me think about things I hadn’t thought about before. I was so amazed they were dealing with these issues. The training had an impact too. The techniques were simple but effective, such as asking open questions. Being trained around sensitive topics, such as families, abuse was new. It made me realise how much I didn’t know and had to learn.”

Yusuf 19 years

MYH is not a guidance service, and helpline volunteers remain non-directional, and crucially, non-judgmental on questions of religious ‘rights and wrongs’. This in itself encourages clients to discuss issues that are often taboo amongst Muslims. As one Helpline Worker explains,

“I generally try to come across very polite and decent and whether I understand the issues or not there’s that focus on Akhlaq (character) in helping someone and I think when people feel that support ... when they feel that support they engage more, and they want more, and they trust you more, because you’ve not jumped down their throat. You basically display good character which is directed from Islam – although I do not say it ...”

Umar 27 years

Jacobson, in her study on religion and identity among British Pakistani youth (Jacobson 1998), argues that religious identity and adherence to a clearly defined set of absolute, universal values served as an ‘anchor’ to help keep Muslim youth grounded amidst the ambivalence engendered by their minority status and the complex malleability of contemporary identity politics. However, there is a sense from many clients that at times of crisis, when thoughts, feelings and options may come into conflict with what might at first seem a monolithic Islam, there is an evolving and changing understanding of the demands and precepts of the religion and what it means to be a Muslim. For both clients and Helpline volunteers, this sense of Islam as a dynamic process is rarely explicit, but is a crucial tool in understanding both their context and choices, and their self-development.

5.3.5 Occupying Marginal Spaces

The majority of helpline users and volunteers thought that the service they received or provided at MYH was somehow distinctive because of the empathy the service was able to provide. One client said,

“The fact that she [the Helpline Worker] was a Muslim helped, she knew where I was coming from and worries I had.”

Sadia 20 years

Helpline volunteers also thought that there were distinctive features to their work, and that faith could be used positively rather than be a barrier, which leads to further alienation.

“I think it’s kind of like a pioneering kind of example, showing what can work. And it can inform other agencies of things, which can work and can be an example to the community as well: that you can be professional, structured and remain true to your faith and help. Really, you can really help, and to, like, you know, maybe we can be an example, that you can focus on faith and it’s not a inhibitor – it doesn’t push people away, it’s not a barrier for engaging people. You don’t need to be discriminatory and you don’t need to be like a closet venture. You know, it can really be a social initiative, which helps socially.”

Umar 27 years

One helpline worker commented on the similarities and differences between the helpline and mainstream services in the following way.

“In some ways we meet the same needs as other helplines, listening, being empathic, providing options, empowering, sign posting. Then there is this extra added layer of understanding them. We will understand differently to other services because we understand their cultural and religious background. And in terms of options in some ways we provide wider options which take into account spirituality and community.”

Rehana 24 years

Most Helpline volunteers did refer clients to other mainstream specialist services when it was deemed appropriate, such as housing or mental health. Indeed, for some clients MYH had acted as a bridge and enabled them to engage with and trust mainstream services, as one client explains

“Originally it was quite difficult. It’s about trust. Eventually I did open up – that says enough. The fact that it’s stayed confidential has meant a lot and that I could trust and open up. I wouldn’t have even been able to come to X (mainstream service/ unit) if MYH hadn’t helped me open up. It is hard to speak because I was known in the community and was involved in community projects.”

Zain 24 years

However, some Helpline volunteers expressed doubts about the lack of awareness displayed by mainstream services about the faith and cultural sensitivities of Muslim clients. This is supported by The Sainsbury Centre report, on the provision of community mental health services within a multi-faith context – *Keeping Faith* (1997), which found faith was not recognised by providers of mental health services despite its significance in many people’s lives. A rationalistic worldview was predominant in training programmes and models practised by psychiatrists, psychologist and psychotherapists. Although there was some emphasis placed on cultural differences, religious beliefs and the spiritual dimension that were integral to and underpin culture were excluded and pathologised. The report recommended that in multi-faith areas, faith should be engaged with, as it was likely to have a major impact on the levels of effectiveness in caring for people suffering from metal distress.

The frustrations and anxiety about reliance on understanding and back up from mainstream services was mirrored by frustration with Muslim communities and lack of support infrastructure from within. Scholars and imams were often spoken about as critical sources of support, and the need for dialogue and collaboration was highlighted. However, there was some scepticism about the willingness of figures within the older generation of the British Muslim community to engage with support services that dealt with contentious issues, as well as their capacity to grasp some of the challenges facing the younger generation of British Muslims. Others felt that the community, as such, simply did not have the organisational skills or resources to support the younger generation. One Helpline Worker, as he tried to explain the needs of young British Muslims highlighted the extent of issues and the failings involved.

“The community is broken – I feel the big issue is that we don’t have a Muslim community really so there are no support mechanisms which should exist to help people out when they are down so someone goes from sadness with a real issue to depression because that real issue is not dealt with adequately ...”

Heena 25 years

Thus MYH could be seen as bridging the gap between mainstream support services and the

community, for a younger generation of British Muslims who have a distinctive identity which does not cohere completely with either. This calls for services that respond to and understand this identity, and crucially, that do not seek to 'solve' it by pushing it into either camp. Helpline volunteers were keen to highlight the need for the support of both sides of this 'gap' feeling that there was an urgent need to collaborate to provide to the needs of young Muslims and to develop equitable support services that they could confidently refer to and work with.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 The Sociological and Psychological Issues Facing Young British Muslims and their Impact on Mental Health

Young British Muslims are a heterogeneous and ethnically diverse group that face similar challenges to all other young people as they traverse an important developmental stage of their life, in which they are gaining greater autonomy and making important life affecting changes. In the case of young British Muslims, these processes are further complicated by social disadvantage, alienation and discrimination from wider society, which can increase psychological vulnerability (Nazroo, 1999).

For British Muslim young people, this social disadvantage and psychological vulnerability is further compounded by being a minority in a majority context and the challenges of rapid social and cultural change that accompany migration. The vast majority of young British Muslims are second or third generation from migrant communities, with some being first generation unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers. Migration inevitably takes time to adjust to, as successive generations lay roots and find ways of applying and integrating their cultural and religious beliefs in their new context. Communities, families and individuals can come under considerable strain and pressure as they make these adjustments. In order to truly understand the psychological challenges being faced by young British Muslims, one must recognise the importance of these interconnected levels for the individual. This nature of interaction with the world places immense value on the role that communities and values place in shaping social pressures, values and identity. This is especially so amongst communities of non-western cultural origins, among whom a sociocentric, or relational notion of self and worldview is emphasised.

This was apparent in the large number of calls (over a quarter) made to MYH about relationship concerns during the period examined. Issues of lifestyle choice, choice of subjects taken at school, careers pursued and marriage partners chosen were all frequently intertwined with questions of identity, negotiating inter-generational relationships and questioning cultural and religious boundaries established by communities. Culture and religion were considered the crucial threads that ran between and tied young people to their families and communities, and were not just part of their external world but also their internal world, and were thus integral to young people's sense of self and purpose.

For a significant majority of the clients we interviewed, religion featured as a higher context marker, or guiding principle, than culture and was even used to contest cultural practices in some instances. Religion was the third highest category of concern that young Muslims called MYH about. In a considerable number of these calls young people were requesting religious guidance and rulings regarding the issues they were facing, however, MYH is a strictly non-directional support service, meaning that it will never offer religious guidance or answer questions about religious practise or doctrine. Nonetheless, it was clear that for many clients Islam serves a dual purpose; to act as an identity anchor and as a means for establishing parameters amidst competing values. Yet Islamic identity has also been used by clients as a possible means of challenging authority and as a vehicle for change.

The crossroads between differing and competing value systems is difficult terrain to negotiate. The pitfalls of this journey are manifested in relationship breakdowns and symptoms of anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation amongst young people. Mental health featured as the second highest category that Muslim young people called MYH about, but

relatively little data is available on the mental health of young Muslims or the high rates of divorce and family breakdown that we have otherwise observed in our work.

Other more specific issues, which also remain un-researched and largely neglected in terms of service provision are offending and rehabilitation, sexuality and sexual abuse. The prominence of calls regarding offending and rehabilitation – the fourth largest category of concern that young people called about – is most likely a reflection of the organisation's Prison Campaign. Through this campaign we have become acutely aware of the gross over representation of Muslim men in UK prisons; currently at 10 per cent in comparison to the general population size of Muslims at 2 per cent. This sub-population seems to be especially at risk and disconnected from support services.

Similarly, calls to MYH from sexual abuse victims highlight unmet needs and gross under-reporting and a lack of support. A recent report by the NSPCC highlighted the low uptake of services by young Asians and identified the notion of 'honour' as a key barrier to them accessing services (NSPCC, 2007). Abuse featured amongst the top five concerns that young females called about, and was a recurrent theme especially amongst long-term clients at MYH.

Sexuality, more generally featured as the fifth largest category of concerns that young Muslims called MYH about, clearly indicating that sexuality remains a taboo in communities. Without avenues for discussing how to manage feelings and desires, young people are left highly vulnerable and prone to deep feelings of shame and guilt.

Thus, there are numerous sociological and psychological issues facing young Muslims. These vary to some extent across gender, with offending and rehabilitation being a greater concern for young males and sexuality and abuse being a greater concern for young females. Overall though, the young people that called the helpline stressed that in order to feel understood and for solutions to be meaningful to them the support they received needed to be grounded within their contexts. There is a severe shortage of services within the statutory and community sectors that can fulfil this need. Consequently, young Muslims are being left to their own devices to deal with highly difficult and complex issues. From the MYH data and interviews with clients and volunteers, religion appears to be for them a key aspect of identity that can anchor and build bridges in a way that seems helpful to young people in negotiating and integrating the different terrains of their lives.

6.2 Features of Good Practice from the MYH Faith Sensitive Model of Service Delivery

The Open Society Institute report, *Muslims in the UK: Policies for Engaged Citizens* (2005), recommended that the Government recognises Muslims as a social group with a distinct identity for the purposes of legal and political decision making, and that discrimination is combated in the public and private sector. This has crucial implications for the delivery of services to British Muslims as a distinctive group, not simply in terms of combating discrimination, but also in the positive sense of acknowledging their distinctive needs.

However, there are currently few services operating within the public sector that see faith as a distinctive marker that affects the way they tailor their services, and although there are now more faith-sensitive services appearing in the community sector, the gap between statutory and community services often remains un-bridged. Young British Muslims caught 'between systems' are further discouraged from seeking support, as the Social Exclusion Action Plan

(Cabinet Office 2006) has pointed out “it is not only individuals that can be described as chaotic but, at times, so are the services they need to use.” Looking at how service providers can work on these problems when engaging young people will be crucial if effective support is to be delivered. Features of the MYH peer-led support service delivery model are illuminating in this context.

MYH is run by young Muslims for young Muslims. Both the helpline clients and volunteers are therefore likely to have some shared experiences and be relatively ‘experience near’ to one another. The open-ended interviews provided an opportunity to hear their voices and identify the defining features of a faith and culturally sensitive support service. For both clients and volunteers, Islam was a significant aspect of their identity. It featured heavily in conversations, and was interwoven into the contextual backdrop of their lives, despite the fact that religious guidance or answers to questions of religious doctrine are never given. Faith was also explicitly evoked in terms of understanding self, relationships and finding solutions to the challenges they were facing, although again solutions were explored within a religious context that was defined and driven by the client alone.

For clients it was important that the infusion of Islam within their lives be recognised in the support they were offered. Many felt that they could not get this form of understanding from mainstream services. This comes to the heart of defining a service which is not ‘faith-based’ ie driven and defined by religious doctrine, but ‘faith-sensitive’ – one which is able to adapt itself to the unique personal context of the client. For some, this sensitivity came in the form of talking to another Muslim who ‘spoke the same language’ ie a language that referred to Islam and Islamic terminology, but for others, the solutions that emerged also needed to be coherent within the Islamic framework. This is not to imply that the lives of young Muslims are coherent, there were many contradictions and inconsistencies in the issues that clients called about and in their identities, but they still felt that a support service that was able to empathise with them in terms of religion and culture was of vital importance to them.

Whilst Islam often seemed to be the anchoring point, many people also used it as a platform of values to push against. The non-judgmental and supportive environment created by the helpline volunteers appears to allow clients to delve into a space for reflection, growth and change, which could bypass paralysing feelings of guilt and shame, and move beyond some of the more stifling religious and cultural prejudices. It is important to note that guilt and shame featured heavily for many of our clients and there was a pervasive belief that things should not be talked about outside of family, or in some cases not be talked about at all, for fear of the impact on family honour.

For many young Muslims, religion, culture and family are closely intertwined, as religion and culture in the British Muslim context are primarily mediated through family. This renders religion and culture with an emotional dynamic that is closely attached to these relationships. The helpline provided a sense of recognition and belonging, and clients could take for granted that they would be ‘understood’, provided a holding and containment which allowed questioning and exploration that is all too often foreclosed in families. Out of this a change that felt coherent with existing belief systems and connected to familial and personal contexts could emerge.

Islam and clients’ relationship with God, or in more general terms, to something ‘better’ or ‘higher’ was an important motivating and empowering factor. In order to empower clients it was vital that volunteers remained non-directional and that clients held the choice to explore the options that they perceived to be before them and decide what was best themselves. Volunteers simply acted as a sounding board allowing clients to explore these options, make

informed choices and to take responsibility for their decisions. The fact that they were talking to and being 'witnessed' by another Muslim offered an important validation in terms of identity. Many, but not all clients expressed that it was important for them that their choices fitted within the framework of Islam. This, however, posed a greater challenge for volunteers.

For volunteers also, MYH provided a place of belonging and recognition. Many had initially joined because they wanted to be part of a British Muslim organisation that was doing pioneering work. Once there though, they described a sense of their 'eyes being opened' and themselves 'opening up' in terms of the training and ensuing work. The bringing together of Islam and being a Muslim within a British social context and the practical day-to-day issues that people faced has been challenging and stretching for the volunteers and organisation. As in the case of clients, volunteers responded differently to this challenge. For some their shared experience and identity as a Muslim was sufficient to help them connect to clients, whereas for others, there was more of a conscious attempt to find coherence between their own identities, their support work and Islamic concepts. For them, the ethical parameters of what they felt they could provide support for came more to the fore as they questioned and tried to formulate a practice that was rooted in Islam. Thus for both clients and volunteers, Islam held different meanings as a personal, social and ethical identity. To omit it, however, from conversations and support work is to deny a significant part of young Muslims' experiences. Many young Muslims felt that they had to make that compromise when interfacing with mainstream organisations who they felt were not fully able to understand or appreciate their cultural and religious beliefs.

The key defining features of MYH as a faith and culturally sensitive support service that is engaging for young Muslims therefore, appear to be both that Islam is recognised as an integral part of young Muslims' lives, be it in terms of the language used, an understanding of cultural context, and/or religious framework; and that young Muslims are talking to other young Muslim volunteers, which offers them a sense of belonging, from which they feel safe to explore their options. Islam is understood as a dynamic process, as opposed to rigid ideology, with layers of meaning. By taking a non-judgmental stance and by taking the risk to allow young people to ask questions that venture into the margins, the support offered by MYH can facilitate growth and maturity as young people search for the answers to their questions and take responsibility for their own lives.

At the heart of MYH's effectiveness as a service provider dealing with conflicting religious and contemporary social pressures, lies a core commitment to a flexible 'values based' as opposed to a 'law based' approach to Islam. In the ethos and practice of the helpline Islam is, therefore, a dynamic and evolving process or journey of self-development that does not force young British Muslims to compartmentalise their lives or fragment their identities. For this reason the toleration of different viewpoints and open debate is essential in order to prevent the organisation from becoming monolithic and stagnant. However, this is difficult work and to be sustained requires dialogue, support and collaboration with Muslim communities, the statutory sector and policy makers.

6.3 Areas of Concern and Challenges in Service Provision to Muslim Youth

In the current socio-political climate the spotlight is glaring on young British Muslims. Political rhetoric linking Islam to terrorism and media portrayals demonising Islam are in danger of widening this gap between young British Muslims and wider society, and leaving them alone with the task of reconciling their national, faith and ethnic identities. The Peace Direct report, *Young Muslims Speak*, found that young British Muslims wanted to ground their identity in their cultural and religious context, but this is likely to become problematic when that identity is increasingly pitched as adverse to Britishness. By virtue of growing up in Britain, for young Muslims the Islam that emerges will need to be a British Islam which provides a link to the past but also can deal with the challenges of the contemporary modern context. Negotiating identities that can encompass these complexities is a difficult process and young British Muslims are in need of support to achieve this. This has been echoed by the Muslim Youth Work Foundation, set up in 2006, which has argued for the need for Muslim youth work and the provision of safe spaces for young British Muslims to explore personal, social, spiritual and political choices (Khan, 2006). Policy makers and service providers, as well as the Muslim community, each share some responsibility for thinking about how best this provision can be made.

Policy makers need to acknowledge the sociological disadvantage and increasing Islamophobia suffered by British Muslims and its potential alienating and psychological impacts on young people. Unless counter balanced, the preventing extremism agenda is in danger of further pathologising young British Muslims and overly placing the focus on security as opposed to tackling the underlying issues and providing channels of support. Islam is a highly significant part of young British Muslim identity and the exclusion of it from the public realm and from service provision can fuel fragmented and destabilised identities, which are as a result more vulnerable to misguidance. Thus, there is an urgent need for faith-sensitive services – those which recognise faith as a key determinant of British Muslim identity and seek to understand and empathise with the different impact this notion has for different people. In the first instance in order to empower the community, courageous policies are needed that support British Muslim led initiatives and build capacity within communities as well as knowledge and models of practice. These developments can then be integrated by encouraging joint partnerships and better links between statutory and community sectors.

The engagement of young British Muslims with mainstream services remains poor. This has been interpreted by some policy makers as self-imposed segregation. An argument that is not upheld when one considers that over the period of one year, five thousand young Muslims called MYH in the part time hours it operates, which clearly indicates that young Muslims are willing, and making efforts, to access support if they feel the support service is able to meet their needs. The critical factor that emerges from interviews with clients is that they want services to recognise and empathise with their cultural and religious beliefs, and from within this context their challenges and difficulties can be better understood. Religion and spiritual beliefs for young British Muslims are an important motivating factor and source of empowerment. Services need to be able to work with these rather than exclude them from their models of practice.

The separation of faith identity from the public sphere has heavily influenced western models of counselling, which consequently fail to recognise the role of faith identity for clients. This chasm is further entrenched for Muslims by increasing Islamophobia and stereotypes of Islam, which not only influence perceptions of Muslims by non-Muslims but also increase the

fear that Muslims have of not being understood by non-Muslims. In practice, this means that many mainstream services are not able to reach out to young Muslims and practitioners are not sufficiently prepared or competent to be sensitive to, and work with, the beliefs that young Muslims present with. Where mainstream services do attempt to bridge this gap, it is often in a tokenistic form of appointing a link or community development worker, who single handed is put in the impossible position of representing religion or culture and is invariably limited in what they can achieve unless there is a genuine commitment for change in the organisation from the top down. This divide between the Muslim community and mainstream support services is failing an already vulnerable group of young Muslims.

The lack of appropriate services and a failure to address the needs of young Muslims does not apply to mainstream services alone, but also extends to the community sector. There is a non-existent support infrastructure for young Muslims within community settings and a severe shortage of safe spaces where they can explore their identities without fear of being judged. There is a prevalent attitude of avoiding difficult issues and closing down conversations by taking a rigid, rules based approach to Islam. We believe that genuine responsibility in young people can only be fostered by giving them some room to explore within a values based approach to Islam. There needs to be more debate within the community about issues such as sexual abuse and family honour, so that people can rethink the values underlying their approach to such things. This crucially requires the support of scholars and Imams and the religious validation they can offer. They are in a key position to be able to use their authority to act as bridges between the first and second generations. Young people are often the instigators of social change, but they need the support of families and communities to ease rather than impede this process.

MYH is one example of a model that has been highly successful in engaging young British Muslims as volunteers and clients. A critical factor in this venture was that the service was conceived and set up by young British Muslims themselves. Six years later many young people have been mobilised and empowered through their encounters with MYH. The organisation has served as a nurturing base for self-exploration and self-authorship of a socially valuable identity that can encompass faith. The 'belonging' and 'recognition' it offers has enabled a 'becoming', which can otherwise be stifled by rigid assumptions without and within the community that constrain development. This has only been possible though by MYH taking the risks and engaging with difficult and taboo subjects and by operating at the margins. The approach taken to Islam has been of a process of learning that attempts to attend to grounded real life issues in an ethical way.

The work of MYH is still evolving and there is still much development needed. For example, we do not currently have the capacity for face-to-face counselling and are therefore limited in the services that we can offer to long term or chronic clients. We would also like to establish better links and partnerships with mainstream services and other community organisations, building greater confidence and establishing referral pathways. MYH, like other community organisations, occupies an invaluable space between mainstream sectors and the disengaged hard to reach sectors of the community. It can act as a barometer for social pains and issues and thereby raise awareness of deeper policy level and practise-based changes that are required, as well as lead change. We hope in the future to be able to conduct more research on some of the issues raised in this report, such as on intergenerational and marital relationships, sexual abuse, offending and rehabilitation etc. and to raise more awareness of the issues facing young Muslims both in the community and wider society. We strongly believe that young British Muslims have a vital contribution to make to their communities and British society and need to be given opportunities to take leading roles in developing and shaping solutions.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Ways Forward for Policy Makers, Service Providers and Muslim Communities

Policy Makers

It is critical that the government's proposed single equality bill includes a duty on public authorities to promote equality and tackle discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. Such a public sector duty will be crucial in supporting the development of faith-sensitive models of practice that can meet the needs of young British Muslims.

It will also be critical in moving public authorities in addressing the overwhelming policy knowledge gap that exists in relation to British Muslim communities. More data and research on issues like family relationships, changing patterns of marriage and marital breakdown, factors that contribute to the high rates of offending, attitudes towards sexual abuse, is urgently needed to inform a long term strategic response to the issues facing British Muslim communities.

The focus on the need to foster community cohesion and development of projects that develop bridging capital across ethnic and faith groups that has emerged from the government's Commission on Cohesion and Integration¹⁰ should not prevent courageous policy-making which supports community led initiatives that are targeted at particular communities where they meet a genuine need.

Policy makers need to take a broader approach to the preventing extremism agenda, which understands the challenges facing young British Muslims and engages them, rather than alienating and pathologising them further.

Service Providers

Mainstream service providers must begin using faith as a key identity indicator and meaningful framework if they are to properly respond to the welfare needs of young British Muslims.

Services and models of practice that understand the socio-cultural, faith and psychological dimensions of the lives of Muslim young people and that can support them in negotiating the different terrains of their lives need to be developed.

Creative outreach strategies for engaging hard to reach clients, such as those who have suffered sexual abuse or have been involved in offending, that are sensitive to cultural barriers and can work with notions such as family honour and shame are needed.

More user involvement is essential if mainstream services are to make themselves more responsive to the specific needs of young British Muslims. Currently user involvement models tend to focus on individual users, as opposed to communities. User involvement needs to gain the sanction of communities as well as address concerns of individual users. Community led

¹⁰ http://www.integrationandcohesion.org.uk/Our_final_report.aspx

organisations may be an effective intermediary and entry point for building trust with young British Muslims.

Joint partnerships and better referral pathways need to be developed between statutory services and Muslim community organisations. This may take the form of joint working with clients (the increasing collaboration between the Health Authorities and Social Services when it comes to dealing with elderly patients – the Single Assessment Process – may be a useful model to emulate). Knowledge partnerships need to be created between statutory services and specialist faith-sensitive Muslim support services through sharing experiences and knowledge through formal and informal learning via exchanges, secondments and joint projects. Statutory services may need to change practices and develop more flexible ways of working to facilitate this.

Muslim Communities

Muslim communities need to develop a more inclusive 'values-based' rather than a 'rules-based' approach to providing information, advice and guidance to their young people if they are to deal effectively with the complexities and confusions in young people's lives and begin to reverse the process of isolation and inter-generational conflict.

Community infra structures need to be supported that can facilitate public conversations and community-led preventative outreach campaigns (such as addressing sexual abuse, exploring what relationships mean, highlighting the effects of mental health issues), raising awareness of the sociological and psychological issues facing young British Muslims, which break silences and guilt surrounding taboo subjects and challenge cultural notions such as honour, are urgently required.

Joint partnerships and collaboration needs to be developed between different sectors of the community, including, across generations, genders and with scholars and Imams, to support holistic change, rather than increasing the divisions between different sectors of communities.

A body of Muslim scholars, who are able and willing to engage and tackle social and psychological issues facing young British Muslims, is required to support and validate practical interventions.



8. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Helpline User interview schedule

How did you hear about MYH?

How long was it before you first heard of the helpline and called the helpline?

Did you get through easily – how many times did you try before you got through?

What made you call the helpline? (NB Without going into too much detail)

What went through your mind before you called?

What were your fears?

What were you expecting/hoping for?

Have your expectations changed over the time you have been calling the helpline?

What was it like when you spoke to the helpline worker?

Did it help you?

How did it help?

Is there anyone else amongst your family and friends that you could have talked to about the kind of things that were troubling you?

Did you contact any other services or ask anyone else for help?

No – What stopped you?

Is there anything that would have made it easier for you, or made you want to access help?

Was it important to you that the helpline was a service for 'Muslims' and/or run by Muslims?

Why was this important to you?

If Yes – What role does Islam play in your life and in the difficulties you face?

Was there anything you didn't feel able or couldn't talk to the helpline worker about?

Who would you talk to about this kind of thing?

Did the helpline worker refer or signpost you on to anyone else?

If they did, would you have concerns about being referred on?

Have you ever made a complaint?

If yes, were you satisfied with the way it was dealt with?

Is there anything else the helpline could have done that you would have found helpful, or ways that we could improve our service?

(eg Face to face counselling)

Have you ever used other facilities at MYH – Internet counselling, befriending?

AGE:

LOCATION:

ETHNICITY:

Appendix 2: Helpline Worker interview schedule

Where did you first hear about MYH?

What made you want to join MYH?

As a young Muslim what sources of support have you had in your own life?
What experiences of support have you had?

What do you think are the needs of young Muslims growing up in the UK?

In what ways do you think Islam or being a Muslim is relevant in your work at MYH?

What qualities do you think make a good helpline worker?

What impact did the training you received have on you?

Do you feel sufficiently supported in your work?
If no, what more is needed?

How does Islam inform or feature in your telephone counselling?

Can you give an example of the kinds of issues a client may call with and how you have responded?

Can you give an example of issues or situations that a client may call with that you would find difficult to deal with or wouldn't feel able to respond to?

What role do you think MYH as an organisation has to play in providing support for young Muslims?

Do you think other mainstream services can meet the needs of young Muslims?

How often do you signpost/refer clients to other agencies?
For example, who have you referred to?

Do you feel supported enough by other agencies or feel confident to refer clients to other agencies? (What more would be needed?)

In what ways could things be improved or developed in the service you offer?
a) For you as an adviser?
b) For clients?

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