

# Written evidence submitted by Muslim Engagement and Development

## The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

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### A Submission from Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)

June 2020

#### MEND's contribution to the inquiry

This submission from Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) to the Education Committee's inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services seeks to explore both the short term and longer-term implications of the outbreak of COVID-19 on the education of children, particularly those from BAME backgrounds and Muslim communities.

MEND is a community-funded organisation that seeks to encourage political, civic, and social engagement within British Muslim communities through empowering British Muslims to interact with political and media institutions effectively. Our approach to achieving this involves a combination of community engagement (through education, community events, local campaigns to encourage voting etc.) and advocacy work (involving victim support, submissions to parliamentary inquiries, media analysis, election resources, briefings etc.).

Considering MEND's expertise in racial and religious equalities, we feel that we can provide valuable insights into the potential impacts of the current pandemic and the unintended consequences of accompanying governmental responses. As such, MEND hopes that our recommendations may provide guidance to the Government and the Department for Education in developing a meaningful strategy to navigate the current crisis.

The Education Committee is inviting evidence on a range of issues, with two key issues to which MEND believes our expertise can make a valuable contribution:

1. The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment.
2. The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)

#### Understanding the needs of British Muslim students

Muslims have the youngest age profile of all religious groups in the UK,<sup>1</sup> with 33% aged fifteen or under and 48% below the age of twenty-five.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Muslims account for 9% of babies and toddlers aged 0-4 years old.<sup>3</sup> The Census 2011 indicates that the overall Muslim population in England and Wales is 4.8%, while the Muslim youth population between 18-24 constitutes 6.2% of the general youth population within that age category.

As such, Muslim youth have a huge potential to contribute positively to Britain's socio-economic life in the coming decades, particularly considering the creativity, innovation, and dynamism that is traditionally associated with younger generations. However, at the same time, policies and issues surrounding youth and schools will necessarily have a disproportionate impact upon Muslim communities due to their overrepresentation within young age demographics.

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<sup>1</sup> "Ethnicity and religion by age," Office for National Statistics, accessed June 07, 2017, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/ethnicityandreligionbyage>.

<sup>2</sup> "British Muslims in Numbers A Demographic, Socio-economic and Health profile of Muslims in Britain drawing on the 2011 Census," Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), accessed June 07, 2017, <http://www.mcb.org.uk/muslimstatistics/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ami Sedghi, "Is it true there is a startling rise in the birthrate of British Muslims?," The Guardian, January 10, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/jan/10/rise-british-muslim-birthrate-the-times-census>.

Therefore, policy development and implementation must be sensitive to the needs of Muslim families.<sup>4</sup> The introduction of policies that has been necessitated by the current pandemic are of no exception. Due regard must be paid to the potential for untested strategies to disproportionately impact Muslim communities.

### **The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment.**

Students who were due to sit their final GCSE, AS, or A-Level exams this summer have been told that their results – which may determine the sixth form, college, or university into which they will gain entry - will now rest with the predicted grades issued by their teachers that are predicated upon their assessment of the students' performance in class thus far.<sup>5</sup>

However, as Nick Hillman, the director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, stated when discussing the unreliability of predicted grades: “predictions are just very, very flaky, and sometimes people game the system. They're intentionally wrong.”<sup>6</sup>

In particular, the implementation of this policy requires safeguards against the disadvantaging of vulnerable groups, especially with regards to the potential infiltration of unconscious biases into how grades are calculated.

Unconscious bias amongst teachers based in stereotypes has been shown to hinder the development of students from minority backgrounds. As observed by the Social Mobility Commission regarding Muslim students, “low expectations by some teachers, including placing Muslims students in lower or middle sets, and a lack of encouragement to take challenging subjects, have a negative impact on the confidence of young Muslims which in turn limits their educational aspirations and attainment.”<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, as existing studies have indicated, unconscious biases held by teaching professionals can result in students from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds being predicted lower grades than they are perhaps capable of achieving. As observed by Professor Kalwant Bhopal, the director of Birmingham University's Centre for Research in Race and Education, “there's a lot of evidence to show that there are stereotypes around particular types of students, so their predicted grades are lower, and when they do the exam they do better than their predicted grade...students who are from white, middle-class, affluent backgrounds will do very well from these predicted grades, especially those from private schools.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, studies have demonstrated that roughly 1,000 high-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds have their grades under-predicted each year.<sup>9</sup>

As explained by the current acting director of the Runnymede Trust, Dr Zubaida Haque, “This is about preventing a gross injustice... Because of the unprecedented pressures of the coronavirus outbreak, combined with an assessment system that has not been tested before, there is a real risk that structural inequalities which already disadvantage students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as well as BAME students, could be made much worse”.<sup>10</sup>

### **The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)**

Muslims have been shown to suffer from the highest levels of overcrowding<sup>11</sup> and remain concentrated in some of the most deprived local authorities, with 46% of Muslims living in the 10% most deprived districts in England and Wales.<sup>12</sup> Overcrowding is a particularly important factor in the

<sup>4</sup> Open Society Institute, “Muslims in the UK: Policies for Engaged Citizens,” Open Society Foundations, 2005, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/muslims-uk-policies-engaged-citizens>.

<sup>5</sup> Turner, Camilla. 2020. “Teachers Warned Over 'Unconscious Bias' Amid Fears That Ethnic Minority Children Will Get The Wrong Grades”. *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/04/30/teachers-warned-unconscious-bias-amid-fears-ethnic-minority/>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/fears-that-cancelling-exams-will-hit-black-and-poor-pupils-worst>

<sup>7</sup> “The Social Mobility Challenges Faced By Young Muslims”. 2017. *Assets.Publishing.Service.Gov.Uk*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/642220/Young\\_Muslims\\_SMC.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/642220/Young_Muslims_SMC.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/fears-that-cancelling-exams-will-hit-black-and-poor-pupils-worst>

<sup>9</sup> Wyness, G (2016), ‘Predicted grades: accuracy and impact’, University and College Union, London

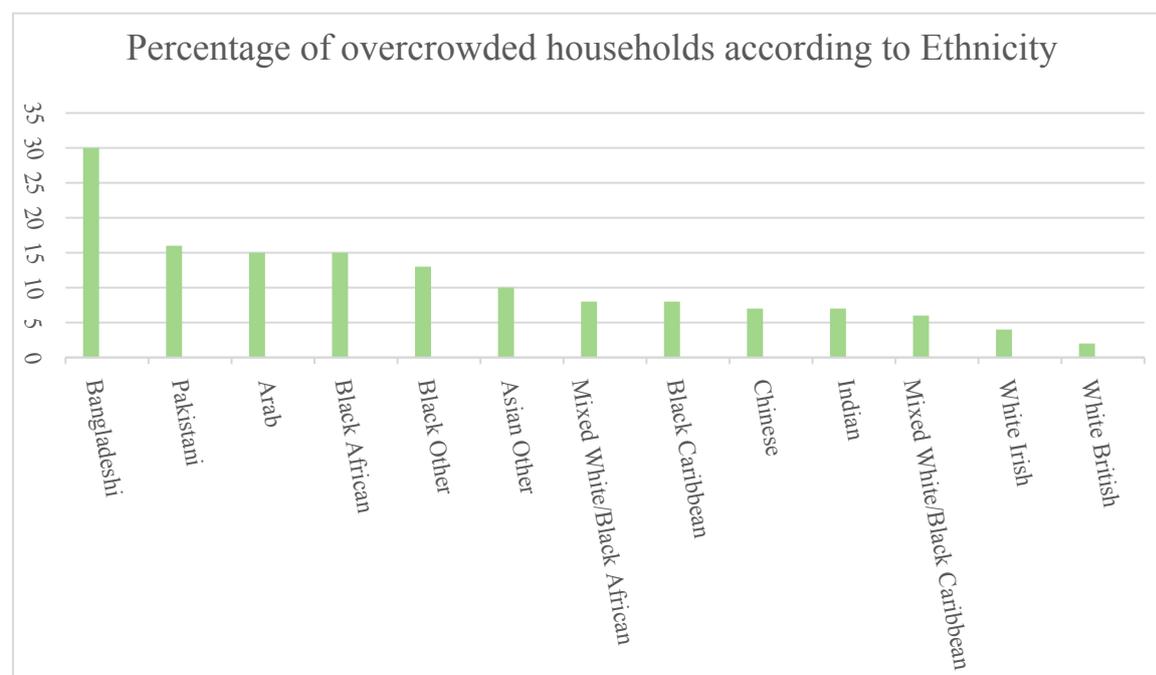
<sup>10</sup> <https://blog.royalhistosoc.org/2020/04/06/race-update-5-grade-predictions-and-assessment-during-covid-19/>

<sup>11</sup> “Race Disparity Audit Summary Findings from the Ethnicity Facts and Figures website”, *Cabinet Office*, October 2017 (revised March 2018), accessed 15.05.2018, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/686071/Revised\\_RDA\\_report\\_March\\_2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/686071/Revised_RDA_report_March_2018.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> ‘2011 Census Data On Nomis’, 2011 Census - Nomis - Official Labour Market Statistics, accessed May 12, 2017, <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011>.

ability for children to study at home prior to the current COVID-19 crisis. However, in light of the pandemic we currently face, it is inevitable that children will find it increasingly difficult to achieve an optimal environment to focus on their studies.

According to government statistics, Bangladeshi and Pakistani households are the most likely to suffer overcrowding, with 30% and 16% of households being overcrowded respectively, in comparison to just 2% of White British households.<sup>13</sup>



*"Overcrowded Households". 2019. Ethnicity-Facts-Figures.Service.Gov.Uk. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/housing/housing-conditions/overcrowded-households/latest>.*

Furthermore, research published in 2016 by the Runnymede Trust and Women's Budget Group (WBG) has shown that BAME groups have suffered disproportionately from the policies of fiscal austerity pushed forward by the Government since 2010.<sup>14</sup> As Omar Khan, director of Runnymede Trust, noted, "changes to tax credits and other welfare payments will hit minority ethnic Britons harder than their white compatriots".<sup>15</sup>

The link between the overrepresentation of BAME communities in deprived areas and access to educational resources is thus an issue that must be considered. Particularly in light of the current need to access lessons online, amenities like a laptop for each child and reliable Wi-Fi are beyond the means of many families.

### Conclusions and recommendations

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Muslim children already faced significant challenges in terms of their education. From being bullied explicitly regarding their faith, to being stigmatised and reported to the PREVENT strategy for views they may hold, and to being interminably questioned on their apparent divergence from (thus far ill-defined) "British Values", Muslim children are struggling to navigate this complex maze. Meanwhile, controversies such as the alleged "Trojan Horse" affair and Amanda Spielman's proposals as Chief Inspector of Ofsted to question schoolgirls who wear the hijab highlight the obsessive scrutiny and problematisation of Muslims within the sphere of education. The impacts of these experiences can be long-term, damaging their ability to achieve success in the employment sphere and inhibiting their participation in wider civic society and the political arena.

<sup>13</sup> "Overcrowded Households". 2019. *Ethnicity-Facts-Figures.Service.Gov.Uk*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/housing/housing-conditions/overcrowded-households/latest>.

<sup>14</sup> "New research shows that poverty, ethnicity and gender magnify the impact of austerity on BME women", *Women's Budget Group*, accessed 17.05.2018, <http://wbg.org.uk/news/new-research-shows-poverty-ethnicity-gender-magnify-impact-austerity-bme-women/>

<sup>15</sup> "Black & Asian Women Pay Highest Price for Austerity", *Runnymede Trust*, December 16, 2016, accessed 17.05.2018, <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/black-asian-women-pay-highest-price-for-austerity>

However, in the context of the current crisis, additional challenges have arisen, and it is essential that Government responses reflect the differing needs of communities and take care not compound existing difficulties these communities may face.

MEND thus humbly suggests both the following short-term and long-term recommendations:

*Immediate recommendations:*

- The Government must ensure that plans regarding the examinations and grades awarded to students take account of the potential infiltration of unconscious bias.
- The Government thoroughly examines the impacts of deprivation on the ability of children to progress with their studies, particularly during the lockdown period and propose strategies to provide additional support to such families.

*Long-term recommendations:*

- In light of the inevitable economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government must learn the lessons of previous austerity measures and ensure that any further strategies do not further exacerbate the disproportionate burdens of economic measures on BAME communities.
- The Department of Education must prioritise measures to address unconscious bias within teaching, including through increasing the diversity of teaching staff at every level of leadership and governance, as well as through proactive strategies to support and nurture BAME staff to reach their potential.

### **How MEND can assist parliamentarians, policymakers, and community stakeholders**

- Providing briefings, information, analysis, and expertise on issues impacting Muslim communities.
- Arranging opportunities for parliamentarians, policymakers, and community stakeholders to engage with their local Muslim communities.
- Conducting research within Muslim communities.
- Connecting parliamentarians, policymakers, and community stakeholders to other local stakeholders.

**If MEND can be of any assistance to your work, please feel free to contact**

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